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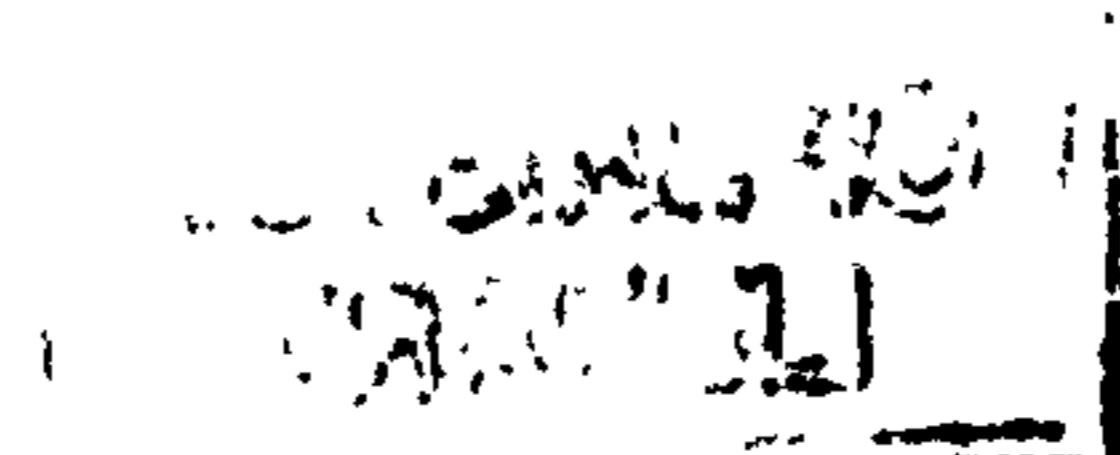
**The Representation of Provincial Life in Balzac's *Comédie
humaine***

Andrew John Watts

**A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with
the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Faculty of Arts**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of French provincial life in Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, written from 1829-47. As a novelist, Balzac established a literary bridge between the anti-provincial satires popularized by Molière, and the rediscovery and revalorization of the provinces during the July Monarchy. While his work perpetuated familiar stereotypes of provincial life, from monotony and backwardness to comfort and wholesome simplicity, it also succeeded in transcending them. Displaying a profound sensitivity to historical change, Balzac invested the provincial theme with an updated ideology. Fearing that centralization and the onset of the railway age would destroy the traditional identities of the provinces, he took it upon himself to stand guardian over them. At a time when local erudite societies were working to protect ancient buildings and monuments from destruction, Balzac voiced his frustration at the decline of France's once-vibrant provincial towns. Even his native Tours, the town that occupies a place at the centre of his literary output, is shown to suffer the consequences of political neglect. In his unfinished series of *Contes drolatiques*, published from 1832-37 and set mostly in medieval times, Balzac lauds the prestige of Tours as an international centre of the silk-weaving trade. In *La Comédie humaine*, however, nineteenth-century Tours appears as a provincial town like any other, a place of boredom, suffering, and mediocrity. This study probes the multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives with which Balzac constructed his fictional provinces. It reveals him as a sociologist, striving to achieve a total vision of provincial France, and engaging with questions of contemporary relevance to small town and countryside, from rural poverty and depopulation, to the arrival of Parisian capitalism. Equally, the thesis views him as a classifier, a writer who drew inspiration from the natural historians, Buffon, Cuvier, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and whose interest in questions of regional difference and identity helped to transform provincial literature into a dynamic, flexible genre.

Keywords: Balzac, provinces, town, countryside, peasantry, Touraine, history, novel, fiction, realism, France, nineteenth century.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, whose love has shown that true comfort is found only in the provinces.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the thesis has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The thesis has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:

Andrew Watts

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19-11-04

Table of Contents

Abbreviations	6
Introduction	8
1. Honoré de Balzac: Provincial Novelist	27
2. Provincial Identities	78
3. Touraine: The First Province	127
4. Experiences of Provincial Life	178
5. The Interrelationship of Paris and the Provinces	229
6. New Provinces	281
Conclusion.....	339
Bibliography	356

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used throughout the thesis. All references to Balzac's fictional and journalistic output are parenthesized in the text. References to his general correspondence and letters to Madame Hanska are given in the footnotes.

Dates of publication for individual works by Balzac are given on first citation, and correspond to those established by Stéphane Vachon, in *Les Travaux et les jours d'Honoré de Balzac: chronologie de la création balzacienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Presses du CNRS; Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1992).

AB *L'Année balzacienne*

CH Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976-81)

Corr. Honoré de Balzac, *Correspondance*, ed. by Roger Pierrot, 5 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1960-69)

- LH* Honoré de Balzac, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, ed. by Roger Pierrot, 2 vols (Paris: Laffont, Bouquins, 1990)
- OC* *Œuvres complètes de Honoré de Balzac*, ed. by Marcel Bouteron and Henri Longnon, 40 vols (Paris: Conard, 1912-40)
- OD* Honoré de Balzac, *Œuvres diverses*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, Roland Chollet and René Guise, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1990-)
- PR* Honoré de Balzac, *Premiers romans*, ed. by André Lorant, 2 vols (Paris: Laffont, Bouquins, 1999)
- RHLF* *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*

Introduction

Il n'est aucun pays plus injuste que la France envers ses grands hommes, ses gloires contemporaines, ni plus dédaigneux des magnificences qu'elle possède. [...] Le Français court admirer le Rhin, la Suisse, l'Italie, sans savoir que la France a, dans les départements des Basses-Alpes, de l'Isère et du Haut-Rhin, tout autant de Suisse que la Suisse, que la vallée du Rhône est bien supérieure au cours du Rhin, trop vanté, que Marseille et Toulon sont l'Italie plus l'Afrique, et que la Bretagne a des sites incomparables (*CH*, XII, p. 629).

Thus wrote an exasperated Balzac in January 1847, in his unfinished novel, *Mademoiselle du Vissard*. This plea for greater recognition of the beautiful diversity of France may seem out of place in the work of a novelist who, as much as Stendhal or Flaubert, is responsible for the image of the provinces as places of boredom and mediocrity. The statement is even more surprising, however, when one considers the extent to which it reveals a shift in literary attitudes towards small town and countryside. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the provinces were still a favourite object of ridicule for writers and dramatists, who, for two hundred years, at least, had delighted in mocking all that was not Parisian. For those native to the provinces, the resultant feeling of inferiority was pervasive. In *René* (1802), Chateaubriand could not even bring himself to name Brittany as his birthplace, dismissing the region without further reference as 'une province reculée'.¹ The ideological chasm separating Balzac's confident declaration from this embarrassed reluctance to acknowledge one's provincial origins is striking, and an

¹ François-René de Chateaubriand, *René*, in *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*, ed. by Maurice Regard, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), I, 101-46 (p. 119).

important measure of the evolution of provincial literature during this period. From being the unmentionables of French prose fiction, within half a century the provinces were elevated to a more prestigious status, becoming picturesque rivals to some of the most celebrated natural sights in Europe.

One of the aims of this thesis is to explore the way in which Balzac's own representation of provincial France established a vital literary bridge between the satirical tradition popularized by Molière, and the progressive rediscovery and revalorization of the provinces during the July Monarchy. Having embarked on his career in the 1820s, Balzac occupies a place at the very heart of a transitional phase in provincial literature. A Tourangeau by birth, and a man who travelled extensively, he can be credited with building a multifaceted portrait of the provinces. Written between 1829 and 1847, his *Comédie humaine* is unique in both its historical and geographical dimensions, stretching from the Brittany of *Les Chouans* (1829) to the Charente of *Illusions perdues* (1837-43), and spanning the period from the Revolution to the reign of Louis-Philippe. Equally, it was Balzac who confronted the difficulties that had to be overcome in order for the genre to evolve, capturing the imagination of readers who still favoured the exoticism of foreign shores, and whose knowledge of provincial characters had hitherto been restricted to the stupidity of a Pourceaugnac, or the pretentiousness of a Comtesse d'Escarbagnas.

The extent to which Balzac succeeded in this task has often been crudely undervalued, an injustice for which his contemporaries must take much of the blame. Many of his first critics refused to acknowledge his contribution to the genre, preferring instead to pour scorn on not only his artistic, but also his

personal shortcomings. For some, he was an immoral novelist who possessed no real understanding of rural life. ‘Cet auteur’, read one anonymous broadside in *La Gazette de France*, following the serialization of *Les Paysans* (1844), ‘ne connaît ni la campagne, ni ses habitans, ni leurs usages, ni leurs mœurs, ni leurs idées, ni leur langage.’ The assault continued with the accusation that Balzac had modelled his peasants on ‘[des] rustres de faubourg ou de banlieue, tout imprégnés de la fange des villes, parlant un jargon étrange que nulle oreille n’a jamais entendu au village’.² For others, his grasp of the problems affecting rural communities was nothing short of laughable. ‘Le tout vous apprend comme [...] on fait pousser des choux, des vignes, des fabriques, des moulins, et courir des routes, là où la veille il n’y avait que des ronces et du sable,’ scoffed Alfred Desessarts, after reading the theories of rural regeneration outlined in *Le Médecin de campagne* (1833). ‘On voit que le journal des *Connaissances inutiles* a trouvé son Homère.’³ The damage to Balzac’s reputation as a provincial novelist was done, and since then, one can say without fear of exaggeration that it has only partially recovered.

This thesis starts out from the recognition that Balzac’s provinces are a much more intricate literary construct than was assumed during his lifetime. The project is based on the argument that *La Comédie humaine* contains a celebration of provincial life in keeping with the more widespread defence of regional culture seen during the July Monarchy. While not denying that Balzac’s provinces are blighted by what he describes in *La Muse du département* (1843) as ‘l’horticulture des vulgarités’ (*CH*, IV, p. 652), I intend

² This comment on *Les Paysans*, the first part of which had reached the end of its serialization in December 1844, is cited by Thierry Bodin, ‘L’accueil aux *Paysans*: de l’anathème à la gloire’, *AB* (1977), 241-266 (pp. 249-250).

³ Alfred Desessarts, ‘*Le Médecin de campagne*; par de Balzac’, *La France littéraire*, 9 (1833), 412-14 (p. 414).

to examine the positive aspects of a setting that nurtures men of talent such as Rastignac, and comforts others whom Paris has damaged, such as Raphaël de Valentin or Madame de Beauséant. This discussion will present Balzac as a figure who was acutely sensitive to the changes impacting upon his society, and who gave Rousseau's nostalgia for country over city an updated rationale. Ever the visionary, he predicted that the ongoing drive towards centralization would destroy the last-remaining charm of France's once-vibrant market towns, instilling in readers of *Béatrix* (1839-45) the fear that 'ces cités [...] ne se verront plus que dans cette iconographie littéraire' (*CH*, II, p. 638), and assuming responsibility for the task of recording them through the medium of the novel. Taking it upon himself to stand guardian over the provinces, he also appeared as a political novelist, joining in the contemporary debate on the state of the provincial economy, and engaging with issues as broad as landownership, and as narrow as the 1827 Forest Code. Alongside agronomists and social reformers such as Charles Fourier and Mathieu de Dombasle, he argued that agriculture could make France a world economic power, if only the country would realize the untapped potential of its vast expanses of fallow land. By displaying such commitment to the provincial cause, Balzac would reveal himself as a writer of great critical versatility, rather than as one who simply extolled the virtues of provincial life for the mere sake of doing so.

Any claim to establish a new perspective on the provinces of *La Comédie humaine* must be made, however, within the framework of existing scholarship. The theme of provincial life in Balzac has been approached and analysed in various ways, though certainly not with the framework that the

present thesis uses. Among the earliest monographs on the subject was Jared Wenger's *The Province and the Provinces in the Work of Honoré de Balzac* (1937), a study that sought to reconcile the geographical diversity of Balzac's provinces with a view of provincial life therein as a unified sociological system. Taking his lead from the novelist's prefatory writings, Wenger considers Balzac's early ambition to reveal a France with which many of his first readers were unfamiliar, beginning with *Les Chouans*, and the description of Fougères as 'le site le plus pittoresque peut-être de ces belles contrées' (*CH*, VIII, p. 899). The American critic makes a number of important observations on the way in which Balzac's fictional provinces evolved during the course of his career, and how in the 1840s they were almost engulfed by his growing obsession with Paris. In spite of its contribution to the field, Wenger's methodical approach nevertheless betrays several weaknesses. He seems uncertain, for example, in handling his primary corpus, acknowledging, with apparent reluctance, the value of 'eight or ten'⁴ early works to his discussion. Elsewhere, by contrast, he seems all too willing to take Balzac's theoretical writings at face value. The novelist's reference in the 'Avant-propos' (1842), to the *Scènes de la vie de province* (1833-37) as representing 'l'âge des passions, des calculs, des intérêts et de l'ambition' (*CH*, I, p. 18), for example, is seen as an invitation to reduce his provinces to a pseudo-scientific structure in which monotony leads to gossip, mediocrity leads to avarice, with the whole giving rise to hatred, jealousy, and petty scandal. The promise of evaluating the geographical diversity of *La Comédie humaine* also remains largely unfulfilled, as Wenger restricts himself to the task of listing street-

⁴ Jared Wenger, *The Province and the Provinces in the Work of Honoré de Balzac* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1937), p. 20.

names, before offering the over-simplified conclusion that Balzac's interest was not in 'Norman life, or Touraine life, or Champagne life, but provincial life' (p. 65).

The study that has established the critical benchmark for scholarly discussion of Balzac's provinces is Nicole Mozet's *La Ville de province dans l'œuvre de Balzac* (1982). According to Mozet, it was at the beginning of the July Monarchy that the small town emerged and crystallized as a literary space. Analysing the way in which this new setting contributed to the development of the genre, she argues that Balzac had a crucial role in challenging the anti-provincial satire still beloved of his contemporaries, and encouraging a more serious treatment of the provincial theme. His achievement, she says, was to have taken the provinces into a realist domain, one in which the names of small towns and villages would no longer be obscured by rows of asterisks, as they had been in prose fiction of the eighteenth century. To settings such as Angoulême and Issoudun he gave a more complete, and more complex, literary identity. As the traditional academic disciplines of geography and archaeology began to appeal to a wider public, Balzac turned to using maps, plans, and guidebooks as standard aids to the writing process. On the basis of this research, he was able to invest his fictional towns with such detailed topographies that he often seemed to be examining them 'avec autant de sérieux que s'il entreprenait les fouilles de Babylone'.⁵ The point is one of several with which Mozet has advanced our understanding of Balzac's provinces. It was she, for instance, who formulated the most cogent argument to date on their ideological duality. For her, the

⁵ Nicole Mozet, *La Ville de province dans l'œuvre de Balzac: l'espace romanesque: fantasmes et idéologie* (Paris: CDU-SEDES, 1982), p. 287.

small towns of *La Comédie humaine* are historical artefacts in their own right. In the Guérande of *Béatrix*, ‘les rues sont ce qu’elles étaient il y a quatre cents ans’ (*CH*, II, p. 639), making this a world as protective as it is frustrating. By the same token, it was Mozet who established the maternal centrality of Touraine, ‘lieu d’origine et terre nourricière’ (p. 39), within Balzac’s output. That these ideas are so often taken for granted is indicative of the extent to which they have shaped our conception of his provinces, and of his fictional universe more generally.

At the same time, however, Mozet’s is only one approach to Balzac’s provinces, an approach in which she sees the small towns of *La Comédie humaine* as highly individualized constructs, and in which the emphasis is less on provincial life than on the novelist’s use of archaeological description as a springboard for his creative imagination. In the most substantial section of her study, Mozet’s interest is in ‘l’inscription de la ville dans la fiction’ (p. 137), probing the links between the geography and topography of Balzac’s small towns, and the provincial themes with which he, as a novelist, was experimenting. Thus, Mozet considers the description of a walled Sancerre, in *La Muse du département*, as foreshadowing the isolation of the talented Dinah de La Baudraye, while in her reading of *Le Cabinet des antiques* (1839), she argues that the house of the former Intendant, Chesnel, with its ‘jardinet de province’ (*CH*, IV, p. 1027), is made deliberately to appear fragile, emphasizing the powerlessness of the old aristocracy to resist the threat of an ambitious bourgeoisie. There can be no doubt that Mozet makes a convincing case for Balzac’s sensitivity to the new literary possibilities of the small-town

setting. An approach as narrow as this nevertheless leaves much still to be said on the wider representation of provincial life in the novelist's work.

In addition to Nicole Mozet's monograph on the small town, other readers have focused their attention on Balzac's treatment of the peasantry. The first of these studies was Marc Blanchard's *La Campagne et ses habitants dans l'œuvre de Honoré de Balzac*, in 1931. In a dense and sometimes pessimistic evaluation, Blanchard builds an image of Balzac as a novelist '[qui] a connu la campagne [...] en Parisien surchauffé, assoiffé d'air pur et de verdure mais jamais en travailleur, en habitant, même en témoin direct'.⁶ He accuses his depiction of rural life of often descending into banal generalization. The landscape of Franche-Comté, in *Albert Savarus* (1842), he points out, is described as 'plein d'accidents sublimes' (*CH*, I, p. 987), while elsewhere, the specificities of regional culture receive scant treatment. The 'parler gouailleux' (*CH*, IX, p. 92) of the innkeeper, Tonsard, in *Les Paysans*, tells us little about language and dialect in Burgundy, while the citing of details such as 'chinchoire', 'ce petit cône en corne de bœuf dans lequel les Bretons mettent le tabac' (*CH*, VIII, p. 999), hardly defines the life led by the fictional Marche-à-terre and his comrades, in *Les Chouans*. What this study does bring out, however, is the way in which Balzac endowed his peasant characters with their own psychology. In *La Comédie humaine*, the people of the countryside are no longer seen in one-dimensional terms, idealized as they were by Rousseau, or corrupted by Restif de La Bretonne. Instead, they are granted a social and political conscience, becoming locked in a struggle for 'la possession du sol que la loi féodale leur interdisait depuis douze cents ans'

⁶ Marc Blanchard, *La Campagne et ses habitants dans l'œuvre de Honoré de Balzac: étude des idées de Balzac sur la grande propriété* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980; first published 1931), p. 469.

(*CH*, IX, p. 126), the central theme of *Les Paysans*. After Blanchard saw this as confirmation that Balzac had properly introduced ‘les classes rurales dans notre littérature’ (p. 160), Marie-Caroline Vanbremeersch has, most recently, developed the idea of the Balzacian peasant as a hybrid, ‘rejetant les stigmates de sa sauvagerie originelle [pour devenir] propriétaire et petit-bourgeois’.⁷ Though Balzac represented the violent appetites of a primitive underclass in *Les Chouans* and *Les Paysans*, Vanbremeersch suggests that, more often, he shows the peasant seizing the opportunities presented by modernity to improve his social status, an impoverished boy such as Pierre Graslin, in *Le Curé de village* (1841), rising to become an influential banker and landowner, ‘le pivot de toute la machine financière du Limousin’ (*CH*, IX, p. 658).

The present thesis draws on each of these approaches, and owes much to the findings of several generations of Balzac scholars. At the same time, however, the project has a specific focus and an originality of its own. One important reason for which my study makes a major contribution to the field is the ambitious scope of its primary corpus. While focusing on a core of texts from the *Scènes de la vie de province, de campagne* (1845-55), and *de la vie privée* (1830-32), a conscious effort has been made to seek new perspectives in early works such as *Sténie* (1819-22) and *Wann-Chlore* (1825), and in unfinished novels such as *Un caractère de femme* (1848) and *Un grand homme de Paris en province* (1842-44), a little-known inversion of the second part of *Illusions perdues*. Significantly, the thesis also includes Balzac’s journalistic output, ranging across texts such as the ‘Lettres d’un provincial sur le système suivi’, two pieces of fictional correspondence from September

⁷ Marie-Caroline Vanbremeersch, *Sociologie d’une représentation romanesque: les paysans dans cinq romans balzaciens* (Paris and Montreal: L’Harmattan, 1997), pp. 28-29.

1830, in which the novelist signals his frustration at the failure of the recently installed July Monarchy to engage in a serious exploration of the French regional identities.

The most significant development here, however, is that of approach. Unlike the work carried out by Wenger and Mozet, I do not simply acknowledge the fragmented and sometimes contradictory nature of Balzac's provinces; rather, my aim is to track the progress of that fragmentation, and to catch a novelist in the task of breaking down the seventeenth-century satirical tradition. I demonstrate the way in which Balzac observed the historical forces that were shaping nineteenth-century French society, processing them through a creative consciousness that used literary convention as fuel for innovation, and emerging with a more dynamic view of provincial life than had ever been seen before. As a methodological basis for this study, I consider Balzac as both a totalizer and a classifier. In an age of geographical and archaeological exploration, the author of *La Comédie humaine* drew inspiration from the natural historians, Buffon, Cuvier, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and frequently compared his work to theirs. From their attempts to classify the species of the animal kingdom, he developed his famous conception of early-nineteenth-century society as populated with 'autant d'hommes différents qu'il y a de variétés en zoologie'. The differences between a soldier, a labourer, and a businessman, he would go on to declare in the 'Avant-propos', are 'aussi considérables que celles qui distinguent le loup, le lion, l'âne' (CH, I, p. 8). Equally, he saw in natural history an attempt to situate birds, mammals, and reptiles within the evolutionary cycle, a total vision that could be adapted for understanding the forces that were shaping post-revolutionary France. Only

through cataloguing the component parts does one understand the whole, or as Balzac explained in *La Recherche de l'absolu* (1834), 'une mosaïque révèle toute une société, comme un squelette d'ichthyosaure sous-entend toute une création' (*CH*, x, p. 658).

This desire to classify and totalize, to explain difference as well as uniformity, is an indispensable part of Balzac's representation of the provinces. He can be seen wrestling with questions of regional difference and identity, while simultaneously seeking to portray the typicality of provincial life, recounting what he described in the 'Avant-propos' as 'l'histoire oubliée par tant d'historiens, celle des mœurs' (*CH*, I, p. 11). By extending this analogy still further, Balzac can be situated at the crossroads of two literary movements. His total vision of provincial life can be compared, on the one hand, with an attitude still prevalent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when in the theatre as in the novel the provinces were simply the provinces, and many writers were reluctant to examine the differences between them. On the other, he can be seen engaged in a serious exploration of the provinces, celebrating their diversity, debating the political and economic issues affecting them, and in so doing, taking the genre to new heights of complexity and flexibility.

This thesis reveals Balzac as a novelist who assembled a composite portrait of provincial life that both reflected and transcended the varied and constantly evolving historical circumstances through which he lived. From his earliest literary efforts, he engaged himself in the task of assembling the tiles from which this mosaic of provincial life would be constructed. He began gathering the first pieces around 1820, when his return to Touraine, through

Sténie, reintroduced him to the places he remembered from his childhood, the city's cathedral, Saint-Gatien, and the dangerous waters of the Loire. He would find others in Brittany in 1828, where many still remembered the guerrilla war waged by the Chouans, some thirty years before. As this mosaic spread gradually outwards, it would be subjected to the increasing pressure of historical change, giving rise to tension, contradiction, and new perspectives on the provincial theme. The Revolution of 1830, the rise of Parisian capitalism, the neglect of the agricultural economy, industrialization and the onset of the railway age - all of this would encourage Balzac to deconstruct, while on occasions perpetuating, the stereotypical view of the provinces as places of boredom and mediocrity, endowing them with a rich diversity that makes his achievement as a novelist seem even more remarkable.

This argument is pursued through six chapters. The first chapter, 'Honoré de Balzac: Provincial Novelist', reviews Balzac's personal connection with the provinces, and explores the reasons for which he was drawn to the smaller towns of western France, ignoring larger centres such as Lyons and Toulouse. I also trace the development of the theme of provincial life in French literature, and the ideological tensions that emerged within the genre during the Restoration, when both Walter Scott (*Waverley*, 1814) and Eugène Scribe (*Le Nouveau Pourceaugnac*, 1817) struck telling blows against the Molièresque tradition. This chapter illustrates Balzac's determination to reflect these literary developments, and his willingness to engage with historical change in his treatment of the provincial theme. At a time when local historians such as Arcisse de Caumont, in Normandy, were calling for ancient monuments and buildings to be protected, Balzac responded with a celebration

of the historic charm of France's small provincial towns. This theme co-exists in his work with a more familiar attitude of contempt for the backwardness and mediocrity of their inhabitants.

In the second chapter, 'Provincial Identities', I shall examine Balzac's multifaceted representation of provincial life within its contemporary context of growing sensitivity to regional difference, when works such as Abel Hugo's *France pittoresque* (1835) fuelled the trend for exhaustive studies of regional life, embracing aspects as diverse as local history and geography. The first part of this chapter examines the literary techniques with which Balzac constructed his fictional provinces, and in particular, his use of maps, plans, and guidebooks. I proceed then to examine his treatment of regional difference, and the creative difficulties that often forced him to lapse into the vocabulary of exoticism, likening Brittany to the planes of the American West, and the waters of the Indre to those of the Ganges. In the literature of the 1830s, an increasing awareness of regional difference had begun to emerge alongside a more established notion of the provinces as a uniform whole. This is most evident in the little-known series of 'Lettres sur la province', published in *Le Voleur* in 1830 and 1831. This chapter shows Balzac responding to, and working through this tension in his own literary output. In *Béatrix*, most notably, he can be seen to produce a particularized study of Breton character and behaviour, while simultaneously incorporating this into a broader ideological conception of French provincial life.

In 'Touraine: The First Province', I explore the way in which Touraine is one of the most developed, but also one of the most unstable, of Balzac's provinces, it further illustrating the ideological tensions within his treatment of

the provincial theme. From his early novels, *Sténie* and *Wann-Chlore*, through the unfinished *Contes drolatiques* (1832-37), and finally, in the Tourangeau novels of *La Comédie humaine*, Touraine is associated with maternal comfort and childhood innocence, but also with violence and suffering. These dual and multiple identities are developed in Balzac's representation of actual Tourangeau settings which exerted a powerful influence on his imagination, and which explain why Touraine is the most personal, and most privileged element, in his composite portrait of provincial life. Foremost among these is the Cloître Saint-Gatien, a shadowy corner of Tours that both torments and soothes. In this chapter, I will argue that these contrasting 'versions' of Touraine are vital to understanding Balzac's political vision of provincial France. In his depiction of Tours, he engages once again with the theme of historical change, lamenting the painful decline of Tours from an international silk-weaving capital in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to a desolate provincial outpost under the Bourbon Restoration.

The fourth chapter, 'Experiences of Provincial Life', examines the heterogeneity of Balzac's provinces beyond his native Touraine, demonstrating that his treatment of provincial life has dimensions other than the purely geographical. Applying another evolutionary principle from the 'Avant-propos', which says 'l'animal est un principe qui prend sa forme extérieure [...] dans les milieux où il est appelé à se développer' (*CH*, I, p. 8), Balzac's provincials can be seen as products of their regional environment, of history, and of the social class to which they belong. In Félix Grandet, we see a businessman whose experience of life in Anjou is linked inextricably to the varied circumstances of Revolution, Consulate, Empire, and Restoration. The

progress of Grandet's career provides further evidence of Balzac's profound sensitivity to the influence of historical circumstance, as he continues to subvert the notion of the provinces as places of dull routine. In the second section, I move on to *Les Chouans*, a novel in which Balzac, inspired by Brittany's war against the First Republic, is seen working to classify the region's unique identity, while at the same time condemning the peasantry for its primitive superstitions. The final section of this chapter reveals class as the variable which endows Balzac's representation of provincial life with some of its most richly contrasting perspectives, from a vulnerable peasantry drawn to crime as its only means of survival, to an aristocracy determined to ignore the loss of its former privileges. The chapter as a whole stands as confirmation of the fundamental diversity of Balzac's provinces, the novelist building a mosaic that was not only wide, but layered to a height sufficient to ensure the positive future development of the genre.

These varied experiences of provincial life must be set within the context of the relationship between the provinces and Paris. This is the aim of chapter five. While recognizing that Balzac was one in a long line of writers to establish the duality of the provinces as places of both cultural mediocrity and wholesome simplicity, this chapter examines the way in which Paris is a constant presence in his reworking of their literary identity. I begin by arguing that he narrates the confusion of the city from a provincial perspective while also catering for the satirical tastes of Parisian readers, who since the seventeenth century had looked down on provincials as criminals and carriers of disease. The chapter illustrates the difficulty of attempting to classify the Parisian and provincial identities, with Balzac both reinforcing and subverting

contemporary perceptions of life in city and countryside. The second section extends this discussion into a re-reading of the Parisian experiences of Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré, two characters who, with mixed results, endure a process of 'deprovincialization', their contrasting fortunes linked to their ability to break the maternal bond with their native Midi. Arguing that Balzac both perpetuates and manipulates the *idée reçue* of a brilliant but monstrous Paris, the final section examines the attitudes and behaviour of Parisians in the provinces. His story of a travelling salesman, in *L'Illustre Gaudissart* (1833), is especially important as another example of his sensitivity to historical change, this time in documenting the changing nature of the relationship between country and city, and the spread of Parisian capitalism.

The final chapter, 'New Provinces', returns to Balzac's celebration of provincial life in *Le Médecin de campagne* and *Le Curé de village*, novels in which the existing potential of the countryside, its strength of community spirit and the energy of a robust peasantry, is harnessed to support the social and economic regeneration of two impoverished villages. The chapter illustrates once again Balzac's ability in employing the realities of his historical moment to challenge the satirical tradition. Taking his inspiration from the contemporary debate on the neglect of France's agricultural economy, in these supposedly utopian novels he argues for greater understanding of the provinces at the level of region, village, and individual. As a complement to this discussion of change and renewal in Balzac's provinces, I also analyse the extent to which his treatment of the provincial theme had evolved by the end of his career. In *Modeste Mignon* (1844-45), the

last provincial novel he completed before his death in 1850, we witness the emergence of a very different kind of small town, in the form of the cosmopolitan port of Le Havre. Taking a number of other, unfinished works from the late 1840s, including *Le Député d'Arcis* (1847-54) and *Les Méfaits d'un procureur du Roi* (1847), I ask whether Balzac's awareness of historical change and regional difference enabled him to make a definitive break with the satirical tradition, leaving the inheritors of his substantial legacy with new models of small town and countryside, and a new breed of provincial characters.

These chapters seek to re-evaluate the nature of Balzac's provinces as a literary construct. They reveal Balzac as a novelist who was always alert to the changes pervading his society, and who felt the weight of a long-established tradition of mocking the provinces. The originality of this thesis is that it views this one, instantly recognizable Balzac as the inspiration for many different, and sometimes contradictory representations of the provincial theme, in which the one-dimensional celebration or condemnation of the provinces serves merely as a point of creative departure. Thus, in the first chapter, we see a Balzac who paradoxically asserted the satirical tradition while simultaneously weakening it. This was the novelist who took the growing revalorization of the provinces in the 1830s, and refracted it through the lens of his own literary enterprise, adding to it a political vision of the provinces in decline. In the second chapter, we catch Balzac attempting to make sense of the fragmentary nature of French provincial life, striving to build a sociological conception of provincial life as a whole, but also confronting the difficulty of rendering regional difference. In chapter three, we find another

Balzac, one who used his intimate knowledge of Touraine to create the centrepiece in his provincial mosaic, investing the nostalgia for the provinces as a maternal space with a new and entirely personal dynamic. He celebrates the prestige of a region whose silk-weaving industry was once part of the global economy, while also lamenting the gradual erosion of the Tourangeau identity, one that survives only in isolated corners such as Vouvray, with its population of storytellers and practical jokers. In chapter four, we reveal that Balzac was not only sensitive to regional difference, but that he was actively inspired by the diversity of provincial France. In this, the forces of historical change again have a central role, as the novelist extends his vision from the Revolution to the July Monarchy, using this chronological sweep to mine new perspectives on the provincial theme, from the rise of the bourgeois landowner, to the threat posed by industrial capitalism to longstanding provincial crafts.

The final chapters in the thesis show Balzac adding further elements to his composite portrait of provincial life. In chapters five and six, he can be seen extolling the virtues of city and countryside, before taking these stereotypes and using them as yet another springboard for his creative imagination. Still engaging with historical realities such as rural poverty and provincial migration to Paris, and still using these as a route through which to challenge the satirical tradition, Balzac demonstrates that not all provincials should be cast out of the capital as worthless, just as in the depths of the countryside, peasants are more than mere savages. A young man such as Rastignac, in *Le Père Goriot* (1835), can now win a place in the upper echelons of Parisian society through wielding superior intelligence. In the same way, the peasants

who work under the guidance of Dr Benassis, in *Le Médecin de campagne*, can raise themselves out of a cycle of crushing poverty. In bringing together these many tiles within Balzac's mosaic of provincial life, this thesis makes the significant and original claim that his provinces are as diverse, and as evolutionary, as the animal kingdom itself.

CHAPTER ONE

Honoré de Balzac: Provincial Novelist

‘Le voyage m’agrandit les idées.’¹

Balzac from Aix-en-Provence (1832)

Honoré de Balzac was born in Tours, in the heart of the Loire Valley. The fact may seem to us a simple one, though a general reader, encountering the great novelist for the first time, could well be forgiven for mistaking him for a Parisian. The error would be unsurprising, not merely because Paris is the setting for some of the most celebrated of the ninety-four novels and short stories which make up *La Comédie humaine*, but because the city holds such an evident fascination for their author. This is Paris the ‘monstrueuse merveille’ (*CH*, v, p. 795) of *Ferragus* (1834), the ‘véritable océan’ (*CH*, III, p. 59) of *Le Père Goriot*, a place of hidden depths and infinite possibilities which captured Balzac’s imagination from the moment he arrived there with his family in 1814.² For the wide-eyed adolescent, ‘transplanted’ from his native Touraine,³ the date marked the beginning of his enduring love affair with the capital, a love that in subsequent years would be cemented by the

¹ *Corr.*, I, p. 129 (23 September 1832).

² Bernard-François Balssa moved his family to Paris in November 1814, following his appointment to a post in the military commissariat. They lived at number forty, Rue du Temple, in the Marais. Once fashionable with aristocrats and high-class courtesans, the district was by this time the principal home of the shop-keeping class.

³ For Balzac, ‘transplantation’ to Paris is the best way for the Tourangeau to realize his potential. This idea is made explicit in his 1833 novella, *L’Illustre Gaudissart*, in which the narrator declares: ‘Transplantez le Tourangeau, ses qualités se développent et produisent de grandes choses’ (*CH*, IV, p. 576).

lectures of Cousin, Villemain, and Guizot at the Sorbonne;⁴ by his reading of Romantic literature – Byron, Goethe, and Walter Scott – that arrived from every corner of Europe during the first quarter of the century; and by his walks through the city’s bustling streets, filling his lungs with an air that he described to Madame Hanska in 1843 as ‘un air qu’on ne retrouve nulle part, un air plein d’idées, plein d’amusements, plein d’esprit, saturé de plaisirs et de drôleries, puis une grandeur, une indépendance, qui élèvent l’âme’.⁵ This was, of course, the early nineteenth century, a time when many of Balzac’s contemporaries were being lured to the ‘antheap of Paris’⁶ by the irresistible promise of wealth, success, and that concomitant of the two – power. Then, as today, talented men and women like the fictional Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues*, and Dinah de La Baudraye in *La Muse du département*, saw Paris as their only escape from a life of endless provincial mediocrity. This vision was one that Balzac shared. And yet, for all that he was, as Hippolyte Taine argued, ‘parisien de mœurs, d’esprit, d’inclination’,⁷ for all that his *Scènes de la vie parisienne* (1834-35) ‘brillent par leur éclat incomparable et

⁴ Though he was registered at the École de Droit, Balzac often attended lectures in history, economics, and philosophy at the Sorbonne. In 1858, eight years after her brother’s death, Laure Surville recalled ‘l’enthousiasme que lui causaient les éloquentes improvisations des Villemain, des Guizot, des Cousin’ (Madame L. Surville (née de Balzac), *Balzac: sa vie et ses œuvres d’après sa correspondance* (Paris: Jaccottet, Bourdillat, 1858), p. 28).

⁵ *LH*, I, p. 638 (22 January 1843).

⁶ Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; repr. 1991), II: *From the First Empire to the Second Empire: 1799-1871*, p. 11. The onset of industrialization meant that Paris underwent significant demographic growth during the first half of the nineteenth century. The census of 1801 recorded some 547,000 inhabitants for the city. This figure continued to rise thereafter, with the Parisian population numbering 622,000 in 1811, 713,000 in 1818, and more than 800,000 at the beginning of 1830 (G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1955; repr. 1999), p. 237). For further information on the demographic contribution made by the provinces to the growth of Paris, see Louis Chevalier, *La Formation de la population parisienne au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), pp. 161-70.

⁷ Hippolyte Taine, ‘Balzac’, in *Nouveaux essais de critique et d’histoire*, 7th edn (Paris: Hachette, 1901), pp. 1-94 (p. 5).

la variété de leurs couleurs',⁸ Balzac's attachment to provincial France was as strong as the emotional, intellectual, and financial ties which bound him to Paris. The aim of the present chapter is to consider the relevance of the provinces to Balzac's life and literary career. The chapter comprises three sections. In the first, I sketch the biographical links between Balzac and provincial France, and situate his provincial writings within the context of renewed interest in the social and historical diversity of France during the 1820s and 30s. In the second, I trace the origins of the theme of provincial life in French literature, focusing on the ideological tensions that emerged within the genre during the Restoration period. In the final section, I demonstrate Balzac's sensitivity to this cultural and literary revalorization of provincial France, arguing that his treatment of the provinces is torn between a celebration of their natural charm and contempt for their backwardness.

Balzac and Provincial France: Exploration and Preservation

'Tourangeau d'origine, parisien d'adoption',⁹ Balzac never sought to hide his provincial roots. On the contrary, he viewed them as a distinction of which he and his family could be proud. He gave the reason for this attitude in 1836, in the 'Historique du procès auquel à donné lieu *Le Lys dans la vallée*', in which he told how his father 'se glorifiait d'être de la race conquise, d'une famille qui avait résisté en Auvergne à l'invasion, et d'où sont sortis les Entragues' (*CH*, ix, p. 929). Since 1831, Balzac had steadfastly refused to comment on

⁸ Norah W. Stevenson, *Paris dans la 'Comédie humaine' de Balzac* (Paris: Courville, 1938), p. 7.

⁹ Nicolas Bourgeois, *Balzac: historien français et écrivain régionaliste* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1925), p. 72.

his self-ennoblement, and the addition of the aristocratic 'de' to his name. When finally he broke his silence, it was to claim a connection between his family and an extinct line of fifteenth-century noblemen, the Balzacs d'Entragues.

The true quality of Balzac's blood was not noble, however, but plebeian. His father came from a hamlet near Albi, in southern France. An ambitious, energetic boy, the young Bernard-François Balssa had watched over cattle before asking the local priest to teach him how to read and write. He rose to prominence under the pre-revolutionary administration, becoming Secretary to the King's Council in 1776. In order to escape the bloodshed of the Terror, he secured a transfer to military provisions, and in 1795, was posted to Tours. Two years later, he married Laure Sallambier, the couple quickly establishing themselves as respected members of the city's new bourgeoisie.¹⁰ Honoré, their second son, was born on 20 May 1799,¹¹ and it was here, in the idyllic surroundings of the Loire Valley, that he spent the early part of his childhood. At the age of eight, he began a miserable incarceration as a boarder at Vendôme's Oratorian College. The experience nevertheless failed to damage the affection that he felt for the place of his birth. Throughout his life, Balzac continued to love Touraine with an intensity that finds its clearest expression in the words of Félix de Vandenesse, in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1836). 'Ne me demandez plus pourquoi j'aime la Touraine!' he writes to Natalie de Manerville. 'Je ne l'aime ni comme on aime son berceau, ni comme on aime

¹⁰ For the remarkable career of Bernard-François Balssa, see Jean-Louis Déga, *La Vie prodigieuse de Bernard-François Balssa (père d'Honoré de Balzac): aux sources historiques de la 'Comédie humaine'* (Rodez: Subervie, 1998).

¹¹ Honoré was born exactly one year after the couple's first child, Louis-Daniel, who lived for only thirty-three days. See Horace Hennion, 'Louis-Daniel Balzac', *Le Courrier balzacien*, 8-9 (November 1950), 159-60.

une oasis dans le désert; je l'aime comme un artiste aime l'art' (*CH*, IX, p. 988). For Balzac, Touraine evoked similar thoughts of happiness and fulfilment, and a mere glance at his correspondence is sufficient to confirm the place that the region occupied in his heart. 'Oh! si vous saviez ce que c'est que la Touraine!' he exclaimed in a letter to Victor Ratier, owner of *La Silhouette*, in July 1830:

On y oublie tout. [...] J'en suis arrivé à regarder la gloire, la Chambre, la politique, l'avenir, la littérature, comme de véritables boulettes à tuer les chiens errants et sans domicile, et que je dis: "La vertu, le bonheur, la vie, c'est six cents francs de rente au bord de la Loire."¹²

Even after he had declared himself a citizen of the 'métropole intellectuelle'¹³ in 1837, Balzac would often exchange the harsh world of Paris for the maternal comfort of Touraine, seeking rest, the solitude most conducive to writing, and an escape from the ever-pressing demands of his creditors. At the Château de Saché, home of his mother's lover, Jean de Margonne,¹⁴ and at La Grenadière, a rented house on the right bank of the Loire, he conceived and wrote some of his finest works, including *Le Lys dans la vallée*, *Louis Lambert* (1832), and *La Recherche de l'absolu*, and great Parisian dramas such as *Le Père Goriot*, *César Birotteau* (1837), and *Illusions perdues*. Thus, Touraine was no 'accident' or 'mere stage'¹⁵ in Balzac's life as it had been in

¹² *Corr.*, I, p. 461 (21 July 1830).

¹³ *LH*, I, p. 404 (1 September 1837).

¹⁴ Jean de Margonne was the father of Balzac's scapegrace brother, Henry. The novelist was aware of Henry's paternity, which he confirmed in a letter to Madame Hanska in 1848: 'M. M[argonne] est le père de Henry' (*LH*, II, p. 872; 19 June 1848). In his last will and testament, Jean de Margonne bequeathed 200,000 francs to Henry, who was himself already dead. Henry died in the Comoro Islands on 11 March 1858, and Monsieur de Margonne in Paris, on 2 May. Further information on Henry de Balzac is provided by Madeleine Fargeaud and Roger Pierrot in their article, 'Henry le trop aimé', *AB* (1961), 29-66.

¹⁵ Gérard Bauër, 'Balzac and his province', *Living Age*, 317 (1923), 173-76 (p. 176).

that of his father. It was a cherished home to which he returned time and again, 'la terre privilégiée à laquelle [...] il est resté indéfectiblement attaché.'¹⁶

Balzac's knowledge of provincial France was not limited, though, to the terrestrial paradise of the Garden of France.¹⁷ Upon the retirement of Bernard-François in 1819, the family moved to Villeparisis, a coaching stop on the road to Meaux. Honoré had already escaped to Paris, but was recalled by his parents in December 1820. One of earliest literary efforts, a five-act tragedy called *Cromwell* (1820), had been declared worthless,¹⁸ forcing him to trade the capital for what was then a dusty town of only five hundred inhabitants. Villeparisis provided the aspirant writer with his first adult experience of provincial life. It was here, also, that he met the woman who would become his mistress and mentor: Laure de Berny. On numerous occasions between 1829 and 1835, Balzac visited Madame de Berny at her country house, La Bouleaunière, a retreat on the edge of the forest at Fontainebleau which, like Saché, allowed him to work without distraction.¹⁹ After 1820, there were also visits to Bayeux, the marital home of his sister, Laure Surville, as well as trips to Alençon and Rheims, in connection with his ill-starred printing business.

These journeys undoubtedly gave Balzac a taste for travel, though in reality it was not until after 1830, and his arrival on the literary stage with *Les*

¹⁶ Paul Métadier, *Balzac en Touraine* (Paris: Hachette, 1968), p. 37.

¹⁷ The concept of Touraine as a terrestrial paradise is an established one in the study of Balzac's life and work. In her article, 'A propos d'une thèse sur la province balzacienne: quelques problèmes de méthode', *AB* (1981), 169-90, Nicole Mozet states: 'La Touraine fut très tôt pour Balzac une terre paradisiaque, dominée par le mirage de l'Unité perdue, dans lequel il est difficile de ne pas reconnaître la figure de la Mère' (p. 176).

¹⁸ The damning verdict on *Cromwell* came from Andrieux, a professor at the Collège de France, who advised the Balzacs that their son should do 'quoi que ce soit, excepté de la littérature' (Surville, *Balzac: sa vie et ses œuvres*, p. 64). See also the letter from Andrieux to Madame Balzac (*Corr.*, I, pp. 84-85; 22 September 1820).

¹⁹ Balzac stayed at La Bouleaunière for the last time in October 1835. Madame de Berny died on 27 July 1836, having asked Balzac to cease his visits, and to write her no more letters.

Chouans, that he began to travel more extensively, both within France and beyond, to Switzerland, Sardinia, Italy, Austria, Germany, and the Ukraine. The motivation for these trips was often the pursuit of a romantic adventure or business proposition, or simply a desire to spend time with friends such as Zulma Carraud,²⁰ who lived at La Poudrerie, near Angoulême, and then at Frapesle, near Issoudun. Even with these reasons in mind, though, the list of Balzac's journeys is bewildering enough to suggest, as Rémy Montalée does, that 'tout lui fut occasion et prétexte'.²¹ This is the 'open-air Balzac'²² whom readers are so often inclined to forget, and a man whose need of travel appears to have been so obsessive that Dr Cabanès termed it 'une sorte de "manie ambulatoire", quelque peu pathologique'.²³ The image of Balzac as one of the first tourists of the nineteenth century strikes an obvious and immediate contrast with that of the 'Parisian' novelist who locked himself in a darkened room for weeks on end, drinking vast quantities of black coffee as he toiled over his manuscripts.

To confirm the extent of Balzac's familiarity with provincial France, there would seem little need to look beyond *La Comédie humaine* itself. The view is supported by even the briefest survey of his labyrinthine œuvre, as the reader is transported from Flanders in *La Recherche de l'absolu*, to Champagne in *Le Député d'Arcis*, then onwards to Burgundy in the unfinished novel, *Les*

²⁰ The wife of an army captain, Zulma Carraud was also a friend of Laure Surville. Balzac first met her in 1819, though it was not until later that their friendship blossomed. Throughout the rest of Balzac's life, she remained both a trusted friend and a reliable critic. See also Thierry Bodin, 'Balzac et Zulma Carraud: du nouveau sur leurs relations', *AB* (1969), 303-06.

²¹ Rémy Montalée, *En lisant Balzac* (Paris: Figuière, 1925), p. 68.

²² Henry James, 'Honoré de Balzac', in *French Poets and Novelists* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1878), pp. 84-150 (p. 95).

²³ Dr. Cabanès, *Balzac ignoré*, 2nd edn (Paris: Albin Michel, 1928), p. 64. This at a time when journeys were longer and more difficult than they are today. In 1815, the journey from Paris to Toulouse required four-and-a-half days by stagecoach and three days by mail-coach. The same journey would take longer (eight days in all) if the stagecoach stopped overnight. (Jean Fourcassié, *Toulouse: une ville à l'époque romantique* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 4).

Paysans. But the geographical boundaries of Balzac's work extend further still, to Franche-Comté in *Albert Savarus*, Auvergne and Savoy in *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), and Dauphiné in *Le Médecin de campagne*. There is Provence, with the outskirts of Marseilles in *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1842), and Bordeaux in *Le Contrat de mariage* (1835). There is Berry, with Sancerre and Issoudun in *La Muse du département* and *La Rabouilleuse* (1842) respectively; Charente, with Angoulême in *Illusions perdues*; Normandy in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, *La Vieille Fille* (1837), *La Femme abandonnée* (1833), and *Modeste Mignon*. Then, of course, there is the Touraine of *Le Lys dans la vallée*, *La Femme de trente ans* (1834), and a number of other stories that I shall consider in chapter three. Nor can we neglect to mention Brittany, since it features in *Les Chouans* and *Béatrix*. Indeed, the sum total of Balzac's work forms such an extensive geography of France that many of his compatriots will wonder of him, as André Le Breton has, 'y a-t-il une de nos provinces qu'il ne connaisse?'²⁴

The answer implied here is that there is not, though it would be foolish to assume that Balzac, for all his remarkable powers of observation, was omniscient. 'Il est génial,' we are warned, 'mais il ne sait pas tout.'²⁵ For while it may be true that he had visited many of the small towns and provinces described in his novels (sometimes years before conceiving the ideas for the stories themselves²⁶), this alone does not make his literary output an instant

²⁴ André Le Breton, *Balzac: l'homme et l'œuvre* (Paris: Boivin, [n. d.]), p. 141.

²⁵ Bernard Guyon, 'La province dans l'œuvre romanesque de Balzac', in *La Province dans le roman: actes du huitième congrès international stendhalien, Nantes, 27-29 mai 1971*, ed. by Alain Chantreau (Nantes: Société nantaise d'études littéraires, 1978), pp. 117-27 (p. 124).

²⁶ The question of whether or not Balzac visited some of the locations described in his work remains the source of much critical debate. Doubts surrounding his visit to Saumur (the setting for *Eugénie Grandet* (1833)) are an indication of the extent to which these discussions have been pursued. See for example Nicole Mozet, 'Quand Balzac est-il allé à Saumur?', in *Balzac au pluriel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), pp. 65-68.

precursor of Michelet's famous *Tableau de la France* (1833), or even an equivalent of Stendhal's *Mémoires d'un touriste* (1838). In fact, the lacunae in his project are numerous enough to render any such comparisons wholly inaccurate. *La Comédie humaine* contains not one work set in Lyons, France's second city. There is nothing on Strasbourg either, or on Toulouse and Montpellier. With the exception of Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Le Havre, all of France's large provincial centres are conspicuous by their absence. In such an ambitious enterprise, one that was little more than half-complete at the death of its author,²⁷ clearly there are likely to be errors and omissions, and if Balzac does not honour Strasbourg or Toulouse with a fictional treatment, then there remains the very practical possibility that he had neither the time nor the inclination to do so. To declare ourselves satisfied with this explanation would nevertheless be quite wrong, since the places that Balzac ignored were not insignificant hamlets. These were large towns and cities that had come to play a vital role in the cultural, political, and economic development of the country, so much so that by the end of the Restoration, they could boast 'une vie de société relativement brillante'.²⁸ The reason for the omission of these important provincial centres warrants further investigation. Balzac was, after all, the novelist who, in the 'Avant-propos', appointed himself the 'secretary' of nineteenth-century French society (*CH*, I, p. 11), and who strove to achieve a total vision of the place and period in which he lived. Why, then, did he reject

²⁷ For an impression of how *La Comédie humaine* might have looked had Balzac lived to complete it, see Ferdinand Brunetière, *Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Nelson and Calmann-Lévy, 1913), pp. 78-82. Brunetière bases his list on the findings of Vicomte Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, *Histoire des œuvres de H. de Balzac*, 3rd edn (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1888).

²⁸ Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 265. The geographical lacunae in *La Comédie humaine* do not escape the attention of this historian, who adds that 'la province de Balzac ne dépasse pas, au sud, Bordeaux et Angoulême'.

thriving towns and cities such as Lyons and Marseilles in favour of rural backwaters such as Saumur and Issoudun?

Part of the answer lies in Balzac's own knowledge of the provinces, which, despite claims to the contrary,²⁹ was far from complete. He was better acquainted with the small, conservative towns of western France – Alençon, Guérande, Bayeux, Issoudun, and Angoulême – than he was with the more vibrant centres of the south, and it was principally this confidence that led him to favour them as settings for his work. Though convenient, the idea that lack of knowledge restricted the geographical scope of Balzac's writings is, however, flawed. In fact, there is a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that ignorance was never an obstacle in the mind of a writer who, on more than one occasion, was prepared to research the precise details of the settings he had chosen. Laure Surville, for instance, in her affectionate (and for this reason, sometimes unreliable) biography of 1858, recalled the trips that her brother made 'dans l'intérieur de la France, partout où il plaçait ses personnages pour décrire fidèlement les villes ou les campagnes où il les faisait vivre'.³⁰ The truth was somewhat different, since formal research trips were never a part of Balzac's method as they would be for Realist writers in the second half of the century. Both Zola and Flaubert visited the settings of their novels before (and sometimes during) the preparation of their manuscripts. Flaubert spent two months in Tunis for *Salammbô* (1862), while Zola visited the mines of Anzin in 1884, as research for *Germinal* (1885). By contrast, Balzac travelled only twice with the specific intention of researching a setting, to Fougères for *Les*

²⁹ Bourgeois, *Balzac: historien français*, p. 72.

³⁰ Surville, *Balzac: sa vie et ses œuvres*, pp. 107-08.

Chouans, in 1828, and to Arcis-sur-Aube for *Le Député d'Arcis*, in 1842.³¹ For the remainder, he employed the simplest of research techniques. If he had not visited a town himself, or if he had visited it and forgotten certain details, then maps and guidebooks, or friends and relatives, could provide him with the information he required.³² The most famous example of this practical approach concerns his checking of the topography of Angoulême, for *Illusions perdues*. In a letter of 1836 to Zulma Carraud, he writes: 'Je voudrais savoir le nom de la rue par laquelle vous arriviez sur la place du Mûrier [...]. Si le commandant [Zulma's husband] me fait un plan grossier, ce n'en sera que mieux.'³³ Balzac received, by return of post, a plan of the town, and a full description of the area surrounding the Place du Mûrier, the eventual setting for the Séchard printing house. The use that he made of such topographical information, and of other factual documents, is a question to which I shall return in chapter two. The point to be made here is that in cases where Balzac was unfamiliar with a given town, there was rarely a shortage of sources from which the information could be gleaned. That he undertook such careful research suggests, in turn, that his avoidance of France's large provincial centres was not a matter of simple neglect on his part, but a conscious creative decision with its own rationale.

Balzac's preference for small towns and villages can be attributed to his desire to explore the hidden diversity, or otherness, of the provinces, reflecting

³¹ Even in this second instance, the motivation seems to have been less literary than romantic, with Balzac assuring Madame Hanska, 'j'y mets la scène du roman que je fais pour vous aller voir' (*LH*, I, p. 593; 12 July 1842).

³² Apart from the indications given in his correspondence and manuscripts, it is difficult to be certain about the sources of factual information that Balzac used. His notes are scant, unlike those of Zola and Flaubert. Cf. Gustave Flaubert, *Carnets de travail*, ed. by Pierre-Marc de Biasi (Paris: Balland, 1988) and Émile Zola, *Carnets d'enquête*, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Plon, 1987). Jacqueline Boudard makes an interesting case for Balzac's possible use of guidebooks in the composition of *La Peau de chagrin* ('Les lacs de la campagne romaine ont-ils inspiré Balzac?', *AB* (1995), 409-16).

³³ *Corr.*, III, p. 109 (26 June 1836).

a movement that had already begun to gather pace while he was still embroiled in the business of printing and type founding. In the 1820s, France had borne witness to a surge of interest in its regions, in their histories and monuments, in their architectural styles, and in the socio-cultural practices of their inhabitants. The seeds of this curiosity were sown by the Revolution, in which provincial France had been a volatile participant. In 1789, when the provinces of the Ancien Régime were divided into eighty-three new administrative departments, local opposition had been fierce. Angered by the determination of the National Assembly to remove their long-established privileges, provincialists in Normandy and Maine, Poitou and Berry, Burgundy and the Nivernais, swarmed in violent protest. These tensions spilled over again in the summer of 1793, when federalist notables rose up against what they saw as the dictatorial administration in Paris, and called for a devolution of power. Though ruthlessly suppressed, these insurrections would live long in the memory of a Parisian elite that already looked upon the provinces as a dangerous, archaic force. To assuage their fears in the wake of the Napoleonic adventure, the city's educated classes began to demand knowledge of a France that, because of its poor roads and slow transport, was still unfamiliar to them:

[Elles avaient] soif de comprendre la résistance à la raison manifestée durant la Révolution, l'attachement insolite, agaçant ou tout simplement émouvant aux croyances, aux superstitions, aux préjugés, à l'antique calendrier, aux anciennes mesures, aux patois.³⁴

It was this ambition to discover the uncharted depths of the provinces that was the impetus behind works such as Nodier, Taylor, and Cailleux's *Voyages*

³⁴ Alain Corbin, 'Paris-Province', in *Les Lieux de mémoire (Les France)*, ed. by Pierre Nora, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), I: *Conflits et partages*, pp. 777-823 (p. 790).

pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France. Appearing in twenty-three volumes between 1820 and 1863, this series of travel-books was illustrated with more than three thousand drawings and lithographs.

As well as satisfying the demands of its inquisitive Parisian readers, Taylor and Nodier's project also marked the beginning of a sustained drive towards preserving the country's historical heritage, a task that continued under the July Monarchy. When Louis-Philippe came to the throne in 1830, one of his first acts was to create the post of Inspector-General of Historic Monuments, held most famously by Prosper Mérimée.³⁵ A man better known for his short fiction than for his architectural expertise, the punctilious Mérimée proved in the event to be an inspired choice. Between 1834 and his nomination as a senator in 1853, he made eighteen trips through the provinces, assessing claims on the funds allocated to him, and supervising numerous repair and restoration projects. Often forced to battle against the resistance of small-town authorities, Mérimée never ceased to be shocked at the state of neglect into which some of France's most important historical monuments had fallen. 'Quelques-uns les verront disparaître d'un œil indifférent,' he complained in 1836, 'et diront [...] que, pourvu que nous ayons des canaux et des chemins de fer, il importe peu que tous les ouvrages d'art périssent.'³⁶ Among the sites at which he succeeded in averting this threat were the châteaux of Blois and Chinon, the Palace of the Popes at Avignon, and the Roman theatres at Orange and Arles.

³⁵ For a biographical account of Prosper Mérimée's work as Inspector-General of Historic Monuments, see for example A. W. Raitt, *Prosper Mérimée* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970), pp. 137-54.

³⁶ Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d'un voyage dans l'ouest de la France*, in *Notes de voyages*, ed. by Pierre-Marie Auzas (Paris: Hachette, 1971), 247-449 (p. 448).

At the same time as Parisian writers and administrators were seeking to further their understanding of the provinces, so too were provincials cultivating an interest in their own regions. At the forefront of this movement was Arcisse de Caumont, who in 1824 founded the Antiquarian Society of Normandy. A keen archaeologist, Caumont belonged to a provincial nobility that had lost much of its landed property during the Revolution. With the return of the monarchy, his class went in search of both financial and psychological compensation, attempting to 'reprendre possession, comme symboliquement, de ses territoires et des privilèges locaux, à travers la connaissance de la géographie, de l'art ou de l'archéologie'.³⁷ The effort invested by Caumont in the study of Norman history, and in the protection of the region's ancient monuments, many of which dated back to the Middle Ages, provided a model for archaeological societies throughout the country. The Antiquarians of Western France were established in 1834, followed by the Antiquarians of Picardy in 1836. Indeed, so popular was the interest in regional history during this period that Balzac incorporated a fictional archaeologist into his novel, *Pierrette* (1840). The enthusiastic amateur, Desfondrilles, 'plus archéologue que magistrat' (*CH*, IV, p. 64), is shown in conversation with Denis Rogron, a middle-aged bachelor whose ignorance of his native town's past appears to know no bounds. 'Ne savez-vous donc pas', asks the magistrate, 'que toute cette partie de Provins est bâtie sur des cryptes?' (*CH*, IV, p. 65). Alarmed at the discovery, Rogron and his sister spend the next six days discussing the tombs that lie beneath the streets of the Old Town, while Desfondrilles resumes work on the 'grand ouvrage archéologique dans lequel il compte expliquer ces

³⁷ Françoise Bercé, 'Arcisse de Caumont et les sociétés savantes', in *Les Lieux de mémoire (La Nation)*, ed. by Pierre Nora, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), II, pp. 533-67 (p. 535).

singulières constructions' (*CH*, IV, pp. 65-66). The episode makes for an amusing reflection of a contemporary context, though it should be noted that not all 'sociétés savantes' were formed for the research of historical subjects. This was a golden age for regional societies of all kinds, their number increasing from eighty-three in 1810 to two hundred and sixty in 1846.³⁸ A significant portion of these came together to debate matters relating to local agriculture. Others met to discuss and offer prizes for new works of literature, while some, such as the *Académie des sciences, belles lettres et arts de Besançon*, excluded nothing from their range of activities, preferring instead to champion 'un idéal encyclopédique hérité du temps des Lumières'.³⁹ The flourishing of these intellectual societies was a resounding statement that the life of provincial France was deserving of consideration, and preservation.

The sentiment was one to which novelists would respond, albeit at their own pace. In the prose fiction of the eighteenth century, provincial France had repeatedly been ignored in favour of more exotic settings, the South America of *Candide* (1759), for example, the Mauritius of *Paul et Virginie* (1787), or the Italy of Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807). Even in those texts in which the provinces were featured, the small-town settings were often identified only by an initial letter, or their full names disguised by a row of asterisks. A case in point is Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731), in which the adventures of the young protagonist, des Grieux, are stretched as far as New Orleans, while the name of the small French town in which he is born is withheld: 'J'avais dix-sept ans, et j'achevais mes études de philosophie à Amiens, où mes parents, qui sont d'une

³⁸ Jean Chaline, *Sociabilité et érudition: les sociétés savantes en France: dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles* (Paris: CTHS, 1995), pp. 36-37.

³⁹ Chaline, *Sociabilité et érudition*, p. 42.

des meilleures maisons de P., m'avaient envoyé.'⁴⁰ Quite apart from their crude realist device of obscuring names to protect the identity of the 'actual' figures concerned, the underlying suggestion is that these eighteenth-century writers saw the provinces as unmentionable, and provincialism itself as a reason for shame. This attitude prevailed until the eve of the July Monarchy, when the newfound appreciation of regional culture encouraged novelists to re-evaluate the exoticism so beloved of their predecessors, and focus their attention once again on France.

The most striking barometer of this contemporary mood was Jules Janin's article, 'La Ville de Saint-Étienne', which appeared in the *Revue de Paris* in August 1829. Here, the journalist who later was so vociferous in his criticism of Balzac, takes to an ironic extreme the idea that the small towns of France are beautiful in their own right, and that they, too, should receive literary attention. 'Il existe à cent lieues de la chaussée d'Antin', he declares, 'une ville de forgerons et de charbonniers [...] toujours entourée de fumée et de poussière.'⁴¹ Saint-Étienne is a centre of heavy industry, a town whose furnaces are used to melt the iron for tools, rifles, and cutlery. This production dominates local life. The townsfolk have no interest in cultural pursuits such as music or the theatre, while the town itself 'n'a pour se distraire ni assises, ni la cour d'un préfet, ni aristocratie orgueilleuse et ruinée [...]; en un mot, rien de ce qui fait le charme d'une ville de province' (p. 319). What Saint-Étienne does have, though, is an exoticism of its own, 'de l'or comme dans un conte des *Mille et une Nuits*' (p. 319), and a railway line that is 'une des merveilles du monde' (p. 328). To describe a French provincial town in such vivid terms,

⁴⁰ Abbé Prévost, *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, ed. by Frédéric Deloffre and Raymond Picard (Paris: Garnier, 1965), p. 17.

⁴¹ Jules Janin, 'La Ville de Saint-Étienne (Loire)', *Revue de Paris*, 5 (1829), 319-31 (p. 319).

with a detailed evocation of its economy and society, was unprecedented in 1829, and whether by accident or design, Janin 'a[vait] fait subir à la prose littéraire une mutation essentielle'.⁴² The fact was not lost on Charles Nodier, who, in a response published the following month, lauded Janin as the first exponent of a new descriptive mode. 'Je suis sûr d'avoir vu Saint-Étienne,' declared the librarian of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, in a piece entitled 'Du style topographique'. '[Je suis sûr] d'avoir parcouru ses rues noires et retentissantes, à la lueur des forges et au bruit des marteaux.'⁴³ It was an unexaggerated assessment of the advance made by Janin in writing the provinces. The small town had been given a literary identity that embraced its social, cultural, and economic characteristics.

Balzac's own interest in the provinces must be set within this context of what Nicole Mozet sees as anti-exoticism, but what I would suggest is a reattribution of the exotic to provincial France.⁴⁴ In his 1832 novella, *Voyage de Paris à Java*, he gives a clear indication that he was sensitive to the movement of rediscovery and revalorization of the provinces. Tired of reading the travel memoirs of foreign diplomats and merchants, '[des explorateurs qui] m'ont toujours paru être de grands charlatans' (*OD*, II, p. 1144), the narrator of this hallucinatory tale resolves to undertake a journey of his own. Declaring himself to have nothing in common with the 'voyageurs vulgaires' of the day, he makes minimal preparations for a trek through the Orient: 'Je partais avec mon habit, une paire de rasoirs, six chemises et quelques légers bagages, comme si j'allais visiter un voisin' (*OD*, II, p. 1143). After a long sea voyage,

⁴² Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 31.

⁴³ Charles Nodier, 'Du style topographique', *Revue de Paris*, 6 (1829), 241-45 (p. 244).

⁴⁴ Nicole Mozet, 'Yvetot vaut Constantinople: littérature et géographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle', *Romantisme*, 35 (1982), 91-114 (pp. 102-04).

he reaches Java, where he marvels at exotic animals and the deadly upas, a tree that grows in the ash of an extinct volcano. Except there has been no journey at all, or at least, not in the physical sense. As if waking from a dream, the narrator reveals that he strayed no further than Angoulême, where he heard these descriptions of the island from a local gentleman, 'en qui j'avais rencontré un second tome tout vivant de Sindbad le Marin' (*OD*, II, p. 1171). The only 'neighbour' he has visited is a small provincial town, a setting in which he discovers imaginative riches to rival the attraction of foreign shores.

For Balzac, France boasted a wealth that was more valuable still, sites of historic importance and physical beauty that he declared it his intention to record. Writing in the preface to *Une fille d'Ève* (1839), he outlined his intentions as author:

Il veut peindre le pays tout en peignant les hommes, raconter les plus beaux sites et les principales villes de la France aux étrangers, constater l'état des constructions anciennes et modernes au dix-neuvième siècle [...]. Il y a dans son histoire la peinture archéologique de maisons qui existaient dans Paris et auxquelles on ne voudrait pas croire en 1850, s'il ne les dépeignait pas d'après nature. Il en sera de même pour quelques coins de province (*CH*, II, p. 267).

This desire to document the provinces was so strong that, according to Fernand Baldensperger, Balzac had once thought of writing a series of picturesque novels, a project that would have seen him trail around the towns and provinces of France, transferring their defining characteristics to the printed page. Baldensperger claims that it was shortly after the publication of *Les Chouans*, in 1829, that Balzac first considered this career as a travelling writer '[qui] s'installerait, quelques mois durant, dans chacune des régions de la

France, se mettrait au courant du grand fait significatif qui l'illustra, et donnerait ainsi ses lettres de noblesse fictive à cette Province si menacée par l'unité nationale'.⁴⁵ In fact, long before he made his trip to Fougères in 1828, Balzac had begun work on an *Histoire de France pittoresque*, though the novels in this abortive collection were conceived as pieces of historical fiction rather than as studies of regional life. *L'Excommunié* (1824-25), for instance, is a story set in the 1380s, during the struggle between the Armagnacs and the Bourguignons, while *Le Roi des merciers* (1828) begins in 1539, during the Ghentish rebellion against Charles V. If Balzac abandoned the idea of becoming 'un spécialiste ambulante',⁴⁶ then there is nevertheless evidence to suggest that at least some of this ambition survived in *La Comédie humaine*. Taking small towns such as Guérande, in *Béatrix*, 'villes complètement en dehors du mouvement social' (*CH*, II, p. 637), he offers himself as a guide to the most isolated and unfamiliar corners of the country. 'J'ai tâché de donner une idée des différentes contrées de notre beau pays' (*CH*, I, p. 18), he adds in the 'Avant-propos' of 1842. Just as Sir Walter Scott had introduced readers to the Highlands of Scotland, so Balzac would reveal to them the hidden treasures of provincial France.

At first glance, the argument is convincing. In his treatment of the provinces, Balzac favoured small towns over larger ones because he, too, wished to document and preserve a France that was little known. But should the novelist be taken at his word? Are we really to believe that, before the onset of the French railway revolution, his first readers would have been more familiar with Toulouse and Montpellier than with Provins and Issoudun? And

⁴⁵ Fernand Baldensperger, *Orientations étrangères chez Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Champion, 1927), pp. 65-66.

⁴⁶ Baldensperger, *Orientations étrangères*, p. 65.

in light of these doubts, are we right to insist that his ultimate aim was to make mimetic copies of France's small towns and villages for the pleasure and instruction of his readership? To answer the last of these questions in the affirmative is tempting, not least because of the numerous readers who have tried already to trace Balzac's footsteps across France. Often bristling with regional pride, the Comte de Contades, Étienne Aubrée, and Maurice Serval are but a few of those who have set out to identify the actual models for the towns, villages, streets, and landscapes described in *La Comédie humaine*.⁴⁷ They have argued endlessly over which of the houses in the main street at Saumur belonged to Eugénie Grandet, just as they have ventured down the narrow Rue de la Psalette in search of the home of Sophie Gamard, the malicious spinster of *Le Curé de Tours* (1832). Sure in the belief that *La Comédie humaine* is a guide to the provinces, they have granted themselves licence to praise Balzac for his exactitude, and scorn him for his errors. In his analysis of *Les Chouans*, for instance, Étienne Aubrée points to a number of topographical markers which show the description of the Breton landscape to be flawed. The opening section, in which military conscripts are shown climbing La Pèlerine, is inaccurate, writes Aubrée, 'car le château de Fougères ne peut dominer aucun panorama, aucune route importante'.⁴⁸ The castle, which in the novel occupies '[une] position qui la rendait jadis une des clés de la Bretagne' (*CH*, VIII, p. 912), must, therefore, have been raised above its actual height.

⁴⁷ Comte G. de Contades, *Balzac alençonnais* (Alençon: Renaut-de Broise, 1888); Étienne Aubrée, *Balzac à Fougères: 'Les Chouans'* (Paris: Perrin, 1939); Maurice Serval, *Autour d'Eugénie Grandet* (Paris: Champion, 1924).

⁴⁸ Aubrée, *Balzac à Fougères*, p. 36.

What, though, is the real value of this kind of scholarship? In truth, the borders of Balzac's fictional provinces are fluid, and the details of his fictional towns rarely correspond to those of their actual counterparts. The example of Douai, in *La Recherche de l'absolu*, serves to place this argument beyond doubt. In the fictive text, the house of the tormented alchemist, Balthazar Claës, is presented as 'une maison dont [...] les détails ont, plus que ceux d'aucun autre logis, gardé le caractère des vieilles constructions flamandes' (*CH*, x, p. 657). In reality, Balzac had not even been to Douai, and borrowed this 'typically Flemish' architecture from a house in the Rue Briçonnet, in his native Tours. The inescapable conclusion is that his *Comédie humaine* is neither a reliable source of topographical or architectural information, nor an accurate guide to the small towns and villages of France.

This finding would no doubt have met with the approval of those regional novelists who, at the end of the nineteenth century, began to condemn Balzac's exploration of provincial France as a sham. Among the first dissenting voices was that of the Angevin novelist, René Bazin, who claimed that his great predecessor had no real understanding of the factors, social, economic or otherwise, that distinguished one town or region from another. 'Je récuse Balzac,' he argued, with much over-simplification, 'parce que tout le monde sait qu'il quittait fort peu Paris [...]. Cet aïeul du réalisme étudiait donc la province principalement dans sa très riche imagination.'⁴⁹ The observation that Balzac was not a regional novelist in the strictest sense of the term is justified. A genuine regional novelist should, after all, focus his or her attention on one province, as George Sand did in the 1840s, with her touching stories of

⁴⁹ René Bazin, 'La province dans le roman', in *Questions littéraires et sociales* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1906), pp. 113-40 (p. 125).

Berrichon life. This, of course, eliminates Balzac at the first hurdle, since his work features not one, but a broad spectrum of towns and provinces, each populated with a range of provincial characters. The second reason for which the title must be withheld is that the choice of small-town or regional setting appears to have been of no more than secondary importance in his fiction. 'Dans le véritable roman régionaliste', explains Roland Desné, 'la part de la région loin d'être accessoire à la nature du roman lui est essentielle. Non pas décor mais substrat.'⁵⁰ How can Balzac be praised for his portrait of Flanders when he is seen to have transposed the architectural features of a house in Old Tours? The implications of such a shift are obvious: 'Si l'auteur peut ainsi déplacer les lieux, c'est que les lieux n'importent pas directement à la substance du roman.'⁵¹

If Balzac cannot be considered a regionalist novelist, however, this does not mean that he had no interest in the multiplicity of ways in which provincial life was lived. This much is clear from his correspondence. As early as 1821, he was badgering his sister for information about her marital home, Bayeux. 'Ah çà!' he exclaims in a letter written in June of that year, 'écris-moi bien ce que c'est qu'une ville qui se nomme Bayeux, si on y est comme ailleurs? S'il y a des hommes, des femmes, des maisons, l'habillement, le parler, le costume, les usages...'⁵² Equally, in *La Comédie humaine*, he shows a determination to investigate the contrasting identities of the provinces. Here, Angoulême is not Issoudun, just as Touraine is distinguished from Brittany. Each setting is

⁵⁰ Roland Desné, 'Rendre justice au roman régionaliste', *Europe*, 398 (June 1962), 147-55 (p. 149). In formulating this definition, Desné acknowledges his debt to G. Roger, *Situation du roman régionaliste français* (Paris: Silvaire, 1951).

⁵¹ Desné, 'Rendre justice au roman régionaliste', p. 148.

⁵² *Corr.*, I, p. 95 (2 June 1821).

unique within its creator's vast 'anthropologie de la province française'.⁵³ At a time when writers and historians were exploring the forgotten corners of France, this fictional mapping was as important to the revalorization of the provinces as the actual drive towards cataloguing small towns and preserving their historic monuments.

Balzac's determination to investigate and classify the otherness of provincial France was not, however, the sole reason for his focusing on the country's small towns and villages. Alongside this fictional journey was his wish to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the provincial setting. Already in his early works, Balzac had begun experimenting with provincial themes and characters. His first novel, *Sténie*, had depicted the return of a young man to mother Touraine. In a series of pseudonymous efforts during that decade, Balzac attempted a number of other sketches of provincial life, most notably in *Annette et le criminel* (1824), in which the small town of Valence is scandalized by the marriage of the respectable bourgeois heroine and the murderous pirate, Argow. Not until 1833, though, did he decide to engage in a more systematic study of provincial character and behaviour. In the four years since he completed *Les Chouans*, he had churned out dozens of short fictions, so many that his friend, Sophie Gay, saw fit to crown him 'le roi de la nouvelle'.⁵⁴ He showed himself to be an accomplished exponent of the genre, with a distinct aptitude for portraying dramas of everyday life. He specialized in stories of domestic turmoil, adopting the melodramatic device of the enigma to probe what he describes in *Le Père Goriot* as the 'secrètes infortunes' (*CH*, III, p. 50) concealed behind closed doors. The stories which became typical of

⁵³ Gérard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation', in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 71-99 (p. 80).

⁵⁴ *Corr.*, I, p. 641 (1 January 1832).

his output were those such as *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* (1830), a tale of marital disappointment in which a young girl from a family of cloth-merchants finds herself unable to adjust to her artist husband's Bohemian temperament. In others, the tone was darker still, and pointed to an individualism that he saw as slowly eroding the foundations of French society. Such is the central theme of *Le Colonel Chabert* (1835), in which a Napoleonic officer thought killed at Eylau returns to Paris to reclaim his wife and fortune, only to discover that he has lost both, and stands no chance of regaining either. For these hidden dramas of contemporary life, the provinces were an obvious foil. The small town, where jealousies and hatreds lurk beneath an apparently untroubled surface, appealed to Balzac's imagination as a rich dramatic resource, a point he underscored in the 1833 preface to *Eugénie Grandet*:

Il se rencontre au fond des provinces quelques têtes dignes d'une étude sérieuse, des caractères pleins d'originalité, des existences tranquilles à la superficie, et que ravagent secrètement de tumultueuses passions [...]. Si tout arrive à Paris, tout passe en province: là, ni relief, ni saillie; mais là, des drames dans le silence (*CH*, III, p. 1025).

The factors that brought Balzac's attention to this subject are less clear. For Bernard Guyon, the answer is to be found in the Balzacian process of creation by contrast. In 1833, Balzac had written the first of his *Scènes de la vie parisienne*, and so needed the provinces as a complement.⁵⁵ While the argument is valid, some influence must nevertheless be attributed to his literary peers. At the outset of the July Monarchy, a host of French writers were working to earn recognition as novelists of provincial life. These included

⁵⁵ Bernard Guyon, 'Balzac "invente" les *Scènes de la Vie de province*', *Mercure de France*, 333 (July 1958), 465-93 (p. 473).

Auguste Ricard, Raymond Brückner, Paul de Kock, and men with whom Balzac was in regular contact, such as Samuel-Henry Berthoud.⁵⁶ It was the latter who, in January 1833, published *Le Régent de rhétorique*, a novel set in Flanders, and accompanied by a preface in which the author stated his intention to evoke ‘cette vie de province de nos jours [...]: avec sa froideur, sa tristesse, sa monotonie et ses tracassières agitations’.⁵⁷ Originally, Berthoud had planned to incorporate this text into a volume entitled *Histoire de province*. The project was thwarted by the reluctance of his publisher, though significantly its title would not be wasted. Eight months later, the first chapter of *Eugénie Grandet* appeared in the press, bearing the name of Berthoud’s unrealized project as its sub-title. Even without Berthoud, though, it is unlikely that a novelist who strove to present a total vision of contemporary France would have ignored the provinces for long. ‘Amoureux de difficultés à vaincre,’ Balzac could not resist engaging with a theme that Félix Davin, writing in the Introduction to the *Études de mœurs* (1835), described as ‘le plus simple en apparence, le plus négligé de tous jusqu’à ce jour, mais le plus harmonieux, le plus riche en demi-teintes, la vie de province’ (*CH*, I, p. 1146).

Provincial Life as a Literary Theme

In spite of the suggestion that his predecessors had failed to pay sufficient attention to the provinces, provincial themes and characters were a part of French literary tradition long before Balzac exploited them. The theme of

⁵⁶ The most extensive discussion of the friendship between Balzac and Samuel-Henry Berthoud is contained in Madeleine Fargeaud’s article, ‘Dans le sillage des grands Romantiques: Samuel-Henry Berthoud’, *AB* (1962), 213-43.

⁵⁷ S. Henry Berthoud, *Le Régent de rhétorique: mœurs flamandes* (Paris: Souverain, 1833), p. 2.

provincial life was popularized by the dramatists of the seventeenth century, at a time when Paris was asserting its prestige and dominance over the rest of the country. When Colbert took over as prime minister in 1661, his immediate ambition was to make the city a new Rome, a source of law, order, and cultural greatness upon which other cities would strive to model themselves.⁵⁸ It was also during the second half of the seventeenth century that Paris became the focus of a renewed drive towards centralization, one that deprived the provinces of some of their most energetic noblemen. The pattern of the Ancien Régime was set, and in the eighteenth century, as Paris continued to grow in size and splendour, much of provincial France was left to stagnate. Worst affected were rural communities of less than two thousand inhabitants. In 1715, these towns, villages, and hamlets were home to some nineteen million Frenchmen, four-fifths of the total population, yet their customs and their economies remained firmly locked in the past. Outside Paris, as Pierre Goubert observes, France was for the most part ‘un assemblage de provinces rurales, aux mentalités traditionnelles, aux techniques archaïques, à la monnaie longtemps rare, aux liaisons difficiles, où la quête du pain quotidien demeure l’essentiel’.⁵⁹ The contrast with life in Paris could not have been more striking. The capital was basking in the glory of the Age of Enlightenment, the return of the royal court from Versailles⁶⁰ confirming it as the centre of high culture and polite society. The salons of Madame de

⁵⁸ For the development of the French capital during this period, see for example Orest Ranum, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism: An Essay* (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 252-92.

⁵⁹ Pierre Goubert, *L’Ancien régime*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969), I: *La Société*, p. 69.

⁶⁰ The royal court returned to Paris in 1715, upon the death of Louis XIV. There it remained until 1723, when Louis XV decided to transfer it back to Versailles. The eight years in which the court was based in Paris were an acknowledgement and confirmation of the city’s status as a capital of culture and social refinement. As Pierre Gaxotte has underlined, in the clearest possible terms, ‘la Ville l’emporte sur le palais des champs’ (*Paris au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Arthaud, 1968), p. 10).

Lambert, Madame du Deffand, and Madame de Graffigny adopted the manners and refinement of the court, becoming forums in which writers mingled with the nobility. A seemingly endless round of balls, dinners, and concerts attracted visitors from throughout the world. The magnetism of Paris was irresistible to Nicolai Karamzin, a Russian author who passed through France in 1789:

‘There it is,’ I thought. ‘There is the city which for so many centuries has been the model for all Europe, the fount of taste and fashion; the city whose name is pronounced with reverence by the learned and unlearned, philosophers and fops, artists and fools, in Europe and Asia, in America and Africa, whose name became known to me almost together with my own; the city about which I have read so much in novels, have so often dreamed, so often thought! There it is! I see it and soon shall be in it!’⁶¹

As a direct consequence of the growth and prestige of Paris, the provinces were cast in the role of ‘inferior other’. Not even the provincial capitals of Bordeaux, Toulouse, Dijon, or Rennes could compete with her appeal, despite being important centres of cultural and intellectual activity in their own right.⁶² The writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected this state of affairs in a generally predictable fashion; indeed, the immortal line from Gresset’s comedy, *Le Méchant* (1745), is sufficient to describe the prevailing attitude: ‘Elle avait de beaux yeux pour des yeux de

⁶¹ Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveller: 1789-1790: An Account of a Young Russian Gentleman's Tour through Germany, Switzerland, France, and England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 179.

⁶² Montesquieu read a number of scientific papers at the Bordeaux Academy, founding a prize for anatomy there in 1717. In 1786, the Marquis de Méjanès bequeathed to Aix-en-Provence one of the richest libraries in Europe (E. N. Williams, *The Ancien Régime in Europe: Government and Society in the Major States: 1648-1789*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 203).

province.’⁶³ A cruel joke, these words were, in fact, a popular distortion of a line from Molière.⁶⁴ The great comic dramatist of the seventeenth century had long since established the benchmark for the exploitation of the provincial theme. It was he who gave new prominence to provincial characters, and he who initiated the fashion for deriding them. His plays ‘abound in satirical thrusts at the pretensions and antiquated opinions prevalent in the provinces’,⁶⁵ mocking all that is not Parisian, and lauding the capital as a glittering, unrivalled beacon of human excellence. The provincial is nothing more than a figure of fun, a clumsy buffoon such as Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, who arrives in Paris from Limoges, only to be puzzled by the reactions of the people who pass him in the street. ‘Hé bien, quoi? qu’est-ce? qu’y a-t-il?’ he asks. ‘Au diantre soit la sotte ville, et les sottes gens qui y sont! Ne pouvoir faire un pas sans trouver des nigauds qui vous regardent et se mettent à rire.’⁶⁶ There seems to be no end to Molière’s contempt for the provinces and their inhabitants. In his comedy of 1659, he ridicules the affected ‘Précieuses’ for their desire to imitate Parisian fashions, while in *La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas* (1671), he sneers at a woman whose stay in Paris has not given her the expected aura of sophistication. ‘Le mal que j’y trouve,’ she despairs, when her neighbours in Angoulême refuse to flatter her, ‘c’est

⁶³ J.-B.-L. Gresset, *Le Méchant*, in *Œuvres complètes de Gresset*, 2 vols (Paris: Furne, 1830), II, 127-251 (III.9, p. 199).

⁶⁴ Molière, *La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971), II, 947-72 (I.5, p. 966). All subsequent references to works by Molière are to this edition.

⁶⁵ Simon Davies, *Paris and the Provinces in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1982), p. 6. This is the most complete study to date on the development of the provincial theme during the eighteenth century.

⁶⁶ Molière, *M. de Pourceaugnac*, II, 585-638 (I.3, p. 597).

qu'ils veulent en savoir autant que moi, qui ai été deux mois à Paris, et vu toute la cour.⁶⁷

Such was the success of Molière and his fellow dramatists in pouring scorn on the provinces that, as the seventeenth century wore on, other writers began to follow their example. In his *Caractères* (1688), La Bruyère gave a scathing indictment of provincial life upon which many future works would be modelled:

J'approche d'une petite ville, et je suis déjà sur une hauteur d'où je la découvre. Elle est située à mi-côte; une rivière baigne ses murs, et coule ensuite dans une belle prairie; elle a une forêt épaisse qui la couvre des vents froids et de l'aquilon. Je la vois dans un jour si favorable, que je compte ses tours et ses clochers; elle me paroît peinte sur le penchant de la colline. Je me récrie, et je dis: 'Quel plaisir de vivre sous un si beau ciel et dans ce séjour si délicieux!' Je descends dans la ville, où je n'ai pas couché deux nuits, que je ressemble à ceux qui l'habitent: j'en veux sortir.

Il y a une chose que l'on n'a point vue sous le ciel, et que selon toutes les apparences on ne verra jamais: c'est une petite ville qui n'est divisée en aucuns partis; où les familles sont unies, et où les cousins se voient avec confiance; où un mariage n'engendre point une guerre civile; où la querelle des rangs ne se réveille pas à tous moments par l'offrande, l'encens et le pain bénit, par les processions et par les obsèques; d'où l'on a banni les *caquets*, le mensonge et la médisance; où l'on voit parler ensemble le bailli et le président, les élus et les assesseurs; où le doyen vit bien avec ses chanoines; où les chanoines ne dédaignent pas les chapelains, et où ceux-ci souffrent les chantres.⁶⁸

The contrasting themes of provincial small-mindedness and Parisian superiority would remain embedded in the theatrical tradition of the eighteenth century. As provincial themes spread to the novel, however, there began to appear some exceptions to the general trend. Foremost among these

⁶⁷ Molière, *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas*, I.2, p. 961.

⁶⁸ Jean de La Bruyère, *Les Caractères, ou les Mœurs de ce siècle* ('De la société et de la conversation'), in *Œuvres de La Bruyère*, ed. by M. G. Servois, 3 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1865), I, 215-45 (pp. 233-34).

was Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). This story of forbidden love between a married woman, Julie de Wolmar, and her children's tutor, Saint-Preux, contained an idealized picture of a happy, prosperous countryside which struck a direct contrast with the mass of literature that had formerly contrived 'de ne connaître la province que pour en persifler les ridicules'.⁶⁹ That Rousseau wished to break this literary habit is clear from his second preface to the novel, in which he complains:

Les gens du bel air, les femmes à la mode, les grands, les militaires, voilà les acteurs de tous vos romans. [...] Les Contes, les Romans, les Pièces de Théâtre, tout tire sur les Provinciaux; tout tourne en dérision la simplicité des mœurs rustiques; tout prêche les manières et les plaisirs du grand monde: c'est une honte de ne les pas connoître; c'est un malheur de ne les pas goûter. Qui sait de combien de filous et de filles publiques l'attrait de ces plaisirs imaginaires peuple Paris de jour en jour? [...] Il importe au bonheur des hommes qu'on tâche d'arrêter ce torrent de maximes empoisonnées.⁷⁰

In spite of its wide distribution, appearing in seventy-two editions between 1761 and 1800, Rousseau's novel nevertheless did little to subdue the contempt with which the writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century still viewed the provinces. In the theatre, it seemed that the satirical tradition had emerged intact with Picard's *La Petite Ville* (1801), a play in which small-town life was once again reduced to 'la morgue des hommes, les prétensions des femmes, les haines des familles, le regret de ne pas être à Paris, les petites ambitions, les grandes querelles sur des riens...'.⁷¹ The

⁶⁹ Édouard Estaunié, *Roman et province*, 6th edn (Marseille: Laffont, 1943), p. 55.

⁷⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-95), II (1961), 1-793 (pp. 19-20). All subsequent references to works by Rousseau are to this edition.

⁷¹ L.-B. Picard, *La Petite Ville*, in *Œuvres de L.-B. Picard*, 10 vols (Paris: Barba, 1821), III, 131-239 (I.3, p. 141).

established format of finding nothing but boredom and ignorance in the provinces survived into the Restoration, when the popularity of ‘codes’ and ‘physiologies’ offered another medium through which to emphasize the provincial defects of bad manners and general ignorance. The authors of these guides delighted in ‘advising’ provincials intent on visiting Paris, while missing no opportunity to portray the kind of behaviour that they should seek to avoid. Typical of the genre was Rousset’s *Code parisien* (1829), in which the provincial is shown as an awkward figure in the city’s streets:

Il existe chez le provincial et l’étranger une prévention qui refroidit quelquefois en eux le désir de visiter Paris. A les entendre, il y a conspiration contre eux, contre leur bonne foi, leur enthousiasme et leur crédulité; il semblerait que tous les Parisiens les attendent à la cour des messageries ou dans celle des postes pour mettre à contribution et rançonner impitoyablement l’ignorance du nouveau débarqué. Cette opinion, généralement répandue, influe beaucoup sur la conduite et sur les habitudes de l’étranger et du provincial, dès qu’ils ont mis le pied sur le pavé de l’antique Lutèce; de là l’air embarrassé, craintif, soupçonneux, qu’on remarque chez ces hôtes passagers; partout ils croient avoir affaire à des fripons où à des mauvais plaisans.⁷²

In none of these guides do the authors attempt a serious analysis of provincial behaviour. Instead, they revert to familiar stereotypes of the kind found in Montigny’s *Le Provincial à Paris* (1825), in which provincials are accused of knowing neither how to dress, nor how to recognize the subtleties of Parisian wit. Indeed, the only thing that they can do with any competence is eat. Provincials love nothing more, reports Montigny, than receiving visitors and adding ‘un plat ou deux à l’ordinaire du ménage’.⁷³ Evidently, though their

⁷² Ch. Rousset, *Code parisien: manuel complet du provincial et de l’étranger à Paris* (Paris: Dénain, 1829), pp. 31-32.

⁷³ L. Montigny, *Le Provincial à Paris: esquisses de mœurs parisiennes*, 3 vols (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825), I, p. 259.

stated aim was to instruct, these guides showed little understanding of, and little willingness to explore, the real practices and preoccupations of provincial life.

In the plays of the Restoration, the extent of Parisian ignorance regarding the provinces threatened to become a standing joke. In *Le Voyage à Dieppe* (1821) by Wafflard and Fulgence,⁷⁴ the action centres on Monsieur d'Herbelin, a retired Parisian shopkeeper who is obsessed with the 'idée délicate de voir un port de mer'.⁷⁵ When Herbelin's friend, Dumontel, offers to help him fulfil this ambition, the unsuspecting bourgeois cannot disguise his excitement, and sets about packing clothes, maps, his journal, even a telescope. So meticulous are his preparations that the practical joke is made to seem increasingly cruel. Dumontel has arranged for a carriage to take Herbelin and his wife on nothing more than a nocturnal tour of the villages around the capital. After racing through Meudon, Sèvres, Neuilly, Saint-Denis, and Vincennes, the exhausted couple are taken to a house in the Marais, in the mistaken belief that they have arrived in Dieppe. The next morning, Herbelin rises early and surveys the scene from his window. 'Quel air pur on respire ici!' he exclaims, 'que cela semble bon! comme on doit se bien porter! quelle différence avec l'air épais de la capitale...' (II.6, p. 38). The joke is stretched endlessly until Herbelin leaves the house for a walk, and discovers, to his fury, that he is in the Rue Charlot.

⁷⁴ This play, commercially one of the most successful of the Restoration and July Monarchy, was one with which Balzac was clearly familiar. He mentions the possibility of taking Madame Hanska and her daughter to see the long-running production on 6 July 1845 (*Corr.*, v, p. 28; 24 June 1845).

⁷⁵ MM. Wafflard and Fulgence, *Le Voyage à Dieppe: comédie en trois actes, représentée sur le second Théâtre Français, par les comédiens du roi, le 1er mars 1821* (Paris: Barba, 1821), I.5, p. 6.

As a measure of the capital's willingness to laugh at its own unfamiliarity with the provinces, *Le Voyage à Dieppe* is important in revealing some of the inconsistencies that had begun to appear in literary treatments of the provincial theme. With Paris waking to the realization that it knew precious little about the provinces, the latter were at last being given a voice with which to refute the satire that had been heaped upon them. In his 1817 play, *Le Nouveau Pourceaugnac*, Eugène Scribe revisited Molière's earlier creation in the person of Ernest de Rouffignac, a young cavalry officer who is engaged to be married to his colonel's daughter. Unlike the original, however, in which Pourceaugnac is forced to return, defeated, to Limoges, his fictional descendant is equal to the attempts to tarnish his reputation and send him home in disgrace. 'Mon colonel,' he tells Monsieur de Verseuil, 'je suis un de ces provinciaux sur le compte desquels on cherche toujours à se divertir. Dans ce moment-ci, ces messieurs s'amusaient à mes dépens.'⁷⁶ The provincial who finally takes revenge against his Parisian tormentors had taken more than a century to arrive on the stage. This reversal may have been inevitable, but its implications were nonetheless significant: Scribe's play sounded the first death knell of a seventeenth-century tradition that would continue to dominate literary representations of the provinces until Stendhal's more complex treatment of provincial life in *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830).⁷⁷

Indeed, if the provincial theme was to continue to break with its satirical roots, it required a more flexible genre than theatrical vaudeville. In the novel,

⁷⁶ MM. Scribe and Delestre-Poirson, *Le Nouveau Pourceaugnac: comédie-vaudeville en un acte; représentée, pour la première fois, sur le Théâtre du Vaudeville, le 18 février 1817*, 4th edn (Paris: Barba, 1827), 1.20, p. 37.

⁷⁷ Stendhal's own contribution to the theme of provincial life has been subject to recent analysis. See Cécile Meynard, 'La vie de province selon Stendhal, ou récit "pur et simple de ce qui se voit tous les jours en province"', *L'Année Stendhal*, 4 (2000), 107-26.

it found a medium that could be used to present society with a varied, detailed, and most importantly, balanced image of itself. This growing awareness of the novel's flexibility was due in no small measure to the influence of Sir Walter Scott. In few countries did Scott's novels enjoy greater favour than in France during the early 1820s. The first translation of *Waverley*, a story of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, appeared in Paris in 1816, enchanting readers who were soon hungry for more novels in a series that won widespread acclaim. 'Du Walter Scott! Du Walter Scott!' cried one reviewer. 'Hâtez-vous, Messieurs...Accourez, achetez, mauvais ou bon, qu'importe! Sir Walter Scott y a mis son nom, cela suffit...et vivent l'Angleterre et les Anglais [*sic*]!'⁷⁸ But what impact did Sir Walter Scott and his 'Waverley Novels' have on the attitude of novelists towards the provinces? Any discussion of the influence of one writer on another can, of course, lead to somewhat vague pronouncements, though in this instance, the ground is more certain. The obvious point to be made is that Scott's novels contain a wealth of rural Scotch characters. What is significant about these characters, however, is that they are not designed to amuse the reader. Neither is their Scotland a place of primitivism. In fact, quite the opposite is true of *Waverley*, in which the Highlanders are fighting to preserve a way of life, a cultural tradition that is threatened with extinction. These provincial characters are not buffoons or, as some might have it, savages. These are men of loyalty and honour, men like Evan Dhu, whose trial for high treason brings from him an explicit declaration that he will lay down his own life, and the lives of five of his fellow clansmen, in exchange for that of their chieftain. He tells the judge at Carlisle:

⁷⁸ This enthusiastic review is cited by Louis Maigron, *Le Roman historique à l'époque romantique: essai sur l'influence de Walter Scott* (Paris: Champion, 1912), p. 52.

If your excellent honour, and the honourable Court, would let Vich Ian Vohr go free just this once [...] the very best of his clan will be willing to be justified in his stead; and if you'll just let me gae down to Glennaquoich, I'll fetch them up to ye mysel, to head or hang, and you may begin wi' me the very first man.⁷⁹

The novels of Sir Walter Scott thus exposed both writers and the reading public in France to a more balanced view of the provinces. Moreover, their innovative use of dialogue and description at last provided French novelists with what Nicole Mozet has termed 'les outils romanesques indispensables'⁸⁰ for a serious treatment of the provincial theme. The importance of this contribution was reflected in the comments of one reviewer, in 1825:

Walter Scott fait une révolution, non seulement dans le roman, mais dans toute la littérature. A quoi faut-il attribuer le succès colossal obtenu par l'écrivain qui, dans la plupart de ses ouvrages, s'est borné à peindre un coin de son pays ignoré de presque toute l'Europe? à la *réalité* des paysages, des lieux, des caractères, des mœurs, des personnages dont il a tracé le tableau. [...] Walter Scott s'est fait le contemporain des époques qu'il a décrites; aucune passion, aucun préjugé ne le préoccupe.⁸¹

Building on the example of Scott's realism, the provincial theme in France now entered a critical phase in its development, a phase in which Balzac would take a decisive role.

⁷⁹ Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 447.

⁸⁰ Mozet, 'A propos d'une thèse', p. 173.

⁸¹ J.-Jph. V...e., 'De la réalité en littérature', *Le Mercure du dix-neuvième siècle*, 11 (1825), 502-09 (p. 508).

Balzac's Provinces: Between Celebration and Contempt

The most appropriate manner in which to assess Balzac's contribution to this fast-evolving theme of provincial life is to begin to explore his fictional provinces for ourselves. In this final section, I argue that his work displays an ideological tension, born of the cultural and literary developments of the period, between the desire to celebrate the natural charm of the provinces, and the temptation to condemn their backwardness. As a means of initiating this discussion, it is useful to adopt the role of the traveller, a perspective with which Balzac himself was familiar, and one that his narrator often employs when introducing a provincial setting. Appearing on the horizon as if framed by the window of a carriage, the small towns and villages of *La Comédie humaine* are 'nearly always pictured in their natural setting',⁸² and bathed in picturesque beauty. In the opening description of Provins, in *Pierrette*, our eyes meet with a place that is described as 'une des plus charmantes villes de France' (*CH*, IV, p. 47):

Tout à coup vous voyez à vos pieds une ville arrosée par deux rivières: au bas du rocher s'étale une vallée verte, pleine de lignes heureuses, d'horizons fuyants. [...] Le château, la vieille ville et ses anciens remparts sont étagés sur la colline. La jeune ville s'étale en bas. Il y a le haut et le bas Provins: d'abord, une ville aérée, à rues rapides, à beaux aspects, environnée de chemins creux, ravinés [...], dominée par les ruines imposantes du château; puis une ville à moulins, arrosée par la Voulzie et le Durteint, deux rivières de Brie, menues, lentes et profondes (*CH*, IV, pp. 47-48).

The captivating portrait is extended by the declaration that Provins boasts a rich history. In the twelfth century, the town was an important regional capital.

⁸² Samuel Rogers, *Balzac and the Novel* (New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 62.

It was here, says the fictional Doctor Martener, that the counts of Champagne had their court: 'En ce temps la civilisation, la joie, la poésie, l'élégance, les femmes, enfin, toutes les splendeurs sociales n'étaient pas exclusivement à Paris' (*CH*, IV, p. 65). This favourable impression is soon modified, however, when we descend into the streets, and see for ourselves that much of the town's former grandeur has disappeared. 'Il ne nous reste de Provins que le parfum de notre gloire historique,' adds a despairing Martener, 'celui de nos roses, et une sous-préfecture' (*CH*, IV, p. 65). The doctor's pride in his town's glorious past is indicative of an emerging regional consciousness, as well as an interest in local history, which I have shown already to be characteristic of the period in which Balzac was writing. What the case of Provins also illustrates, however, is an authorial vision of the small town in decline. The pattern is repeated throughout *La Comédie humaine*, in which the seemingly unspoilt towns of France have retained nothing but the memory of their economic and political importance. Amidst their crumbling monuments and cold, grey houses, they appear in the early nineteenth century as the most inhospitable of places, 'where the grass grows in the streets, where the passage of a stranger brings grotesquely eager faces to the window, where one or two impotently pretentious salons, night after night, exhibit a collection of human fossils'.⁸³ Taking their glorious past and using it to strike a painful contrast with the present, he portrays these once-thriving towns as desolate outposts in which only spying, gossip, petty scandal, and cruel pranks can relieve the monotony of daily life. But is this how Balzac really intended his provinces to be seen? And if so, for what reason? Are we merely in the company of a writer with an

⁸³ James, *French Poets*, p. 131.

acute case of what he described in his essay, 'La Femme de province' (1841),⁸⁴ as 'parisiénisme' (*CH*, IV, p. 1384), or one who calculated his writing to include an act of personal vengeance against the provinces in which he was born?

The nature of life in his fictional provinces would suggest, certainly, that Balzac paints a negative, not to say contemptuous, portrait of the small town and its inhabitants. As portrayed in *La Comédie humaine*, provincial life has a dull regularity, where nothing ever happens, and nothing ever changes. In *Eugénie Grandet*, Madame Grandet and her daughter sit at the window attending to their needlework, 'sans voir dans cette rue silencieuse plus d'un passant par heure' (*CH*, III, p. 1058). 'Depuis quinze ans,' says the narrator, 'toutes les journées de la mère et de la fille s'étaient paisiblement écoulées à cette place, dans un travail constant, à compter du mois d'avril jusqu'au mois de novembre' (*CH*, III, p. 1041). All that there is to look forward to is a game of cards in the evening with their neighbours. The most exciting event is the arrival of the stagecoach. It comes as no surprise that the burden of this existence is often too much to bear. Some, like Lucien de Rubempré, in *Illusions perdues*, escape to Paris. The budding poet's only chance of fulfilment, concludes Madame de Bargeton, lies not in the provinces, but in the brilliant world of the capital: 'Là, cher, est la vie des gens supérieurs. On ne se trouve à l'aise qu'avec ses pairs, partout ailleurs on souffre' (*CH*, V, p. 249). For those who are left behind, such damning words can have a terrible

⁸⁴ Later incorporated into *La Muse du département*, this essay first appeared in Curmer's *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-42). Curmer had paid Balzac the sum of 400 francs on 23 November 1839, 'pour prix d'un type intitulé *La Femme de province*'. Balzac, for his part, had agreed to wait four years before exercising 'le droit de l'insérer dans les *Scènes de la vie de province* et jamais détaché' (*Corr.*, III, p. 762; 23 November 1839). In the event, he waited only three-and-a-half years, making substantial changes to the original text in order to incorporate it into the story of Dinah de La Baudraye.

resonance. Athanase Granson, the misunderstood genius of *La Vieille Fille*, sees but one route out of the provinces: he drowns himself at night in the dark waters of the Sarthe.

Others have the will to find less drastic antidotes to the unvarying rhythm of provincial life. In *La Rabouilleuse*, the Chevaliers de la Désœuvrance are a band of young men whose boredom leads them to play a series of practical jokes on the unsuspecting inhabitants of Issoudun. Most of their pranks (changing round shop-signs, ringing doorbells and then running away) are harmless enough, though some, such as rebuilding a grain merchant's cart at the top of a hill before smashing it to pieces in front of a packed town square, are nothing short of cruel. Far from insisting on the monotony of provincial life for the mere sake of doing so, however, Balzac turns the theme to his advantage, and uses it to formulate a serious comment on the state of the provinces. The Chevaliers de la Désœuvrance are of particular interest in this respect. For Romain Guignard, the inclusion of this band of bourgeois delinquents is 'un des traits par lesquels Balzac a marqué son œuvre d'une étonnante singularité locale'.⁸⁵ That may be so, but what would seem more significant is the complaint that Balzac uses these characters to make. Under the leadership of the Napoleonic veteran, Maxence Gilet, the Chevaliers are, like many young men throughout the provinces, frustrated by the lack of opportunities for training and worldly advancement, and trapped in a setting that is otherwise stagnant:

⁸⁵ Romain Guignard, *Balzac et Issoudun* (Paris: Galignant, 1949), p. 82.

Dans une ville ainsi constituée, sans aucune activité même commerciale, sans goût pour les arts, sans occupations savantes, où chacun reste dans son intérieur, il devait arriver et il arriva, sous la Restauration, en 1816, quand la guerre eut cessé, que, parmi les jeunes gens de la ville, plusieurs n'eurent aucune carrière à suivre, et ne surent que faire en attendant leur mariage ou la succession de leurs parents (*CH*, IV, p. 365).

The fact that Balzac takes the literary stereotype of the provinces as places of dull routine, and then uses that stereotype to indict the failings of the Restoration, demonstrates that the monotony of his small towns should not be viewed in simple terms. Elsewhere, monotony is employed as a technical device for throwing into relief the hidden dramas of small-town life. For it is precisely because provincial life is monotonous that even minor changes to the routine become sources of high drama, a technique that Maurice Bardèche has called 'la promotion dramatique des personnages et des faits'.⁸⁶ In other words, it is because Balzac's provincials are said to go through the same routine every day of their waking lives that 'tout incident dans leur existence, toute idée nouvelle dans le trottement de leur manège mental, ridant cette mare immobile, deviennent aussitôt un événement plein de signification'.⁸⁷ In the 1833 preface to *Eugénie Grandet*, Balzac defines the objective of his provincial writings as being to tell 'le récit pur et simple de ce qui se voit tous les jours en province' (*CH*, III, p. 1026). In fact, he achieves the opposite, and concentrates on exceptions to the norm.

The opening pages of *Le Curé de Tours* provide one of the best illustrations of this technique. The Abbé Birotteau is left standing out in the rain when he returns home from an evening in the company of his friends, the

⁸⁶ Maurice Bardèche, *Une lecture de Balzac* (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1964), p.351.

⁸⁷ Bardèche, *Une lecture de Balzac*, p. 351.

Listomères. When the servant, Marianne, finally lets him in, her excuse for the delay is that she had already retired to bed. The pristine state of her dress, however, suggests to the normally unobservant priest that she is lying. His suspicions are aroused further when he discovers that his candle has not been brought down from his room, that his fire has been allowed to go out, and that his slippers are not in their usual place. 'Il se livra soudain à de très grandes réflexions sur ces quatre événements, imperceptibles pour tout autre, mais qui, pour lui, constituaient quatre catastrophes. Il s'agissait évidemment de la perte entière de son bonheur' (*CH*, IV, p. 190). As the narrative unfolds, he is proven right, for these are the first signs that he has offended his landlady, Mademoiselle Gamard, and that she is about to initiate a terrible revenge that will see him banished from Saint-Gatien to a parish on the other side of the Loire. This technique of minor incidents foreshadowing a crisis is recurrent in Balzac's provinces, and is an illustration of the subtle nature of his realism. Though he is most often remembered for his protractedness in description, Balzac was capable of taking an economical approach to creating both drama, and the monotony that bounds a moment of crisis.

As well as subverting familiar stereotypes, however, he was equally capable of perpetuating them, most notably in his treatment of the small town as being a place without privacy. According to Balzac, the walls of a provincial house are made of glass, and nothing can remain hidden behind them for long: 'L'existence, en quelque sorte claustrale, que mènent les habitants d'une petite ville crée en eux une habitude d'analyser et d'expliquer les actions d'autrui' (*CH*, X, p. 1109). The most obvious manifestations of this tendency are spying and gossip, both of which are endemic in Balzac's

provinces. Indeed, it is upon these twin pillars that the short story, *Le Réquisitionnaire* (1831), is constructed. The inhabitants of Carentan are quick to spot that Madame de Dey has ordered a rabbit from the market, a simple purchase that sends the town into a fit of wild speculation. Similarly, in *La Vieille Fille*, the rumour that du Bousquier has impregnated the young laundrymaid, Suzanne, convinces Rose Cormon that he will satisfy her longing for children. The rumour nevertheless proves unfounded, and it is only after her marriage that a devastated Rose learns that ‘ce grand citoyen, si libéral au-dehors, si bonhomme, animé de tant d’amour pour son pays, est despote au logis et parfaitement dénué d’amour conjugal’ (*CH*, IV, p. 929). The confident bourgeois is impotent, a condition that only the local rumour-mill could reverse.

Elsewhere in *La Comédie humaine*, gossip reaches levels of ‘vigorous omnipotence’.⁸⁸ In *La Rabouilleuse*, the townsfolk of Issoudun decide, on the basis of circumstantial evidence and what they perceive to be his strange appearance, that Joseph Bridau must be guilty of the attempted murder of Max Gilet. Add to this their irrational dislike of all things Parisian, and the consequences can be fatal: only the intervention of the magistrate saves the innocent and bewildered artist from a lynching at the hands of the mob. So powerful is the rumour-mill that ‘convicts’ Joseph Bridau that this provincial grapevine has its own name in Berry: the *disettes*. These carry the story of Fario’s broken cart throughout the region, and are skilfully manipulated by Joseph’s brother, Philippe, who arrives in Issoudun to wrestle his uncle’s fortune from the grip of Gilet and the seductive Flore Brazier. ‘Après avoir

⁸⁸ Jared Wenger, *The Province and the Provinces*, p. 35.

obtenu sa place, Philippe, au fait des *disettes* du pays, voulut dérober le plus possible la connaissance de certaines choses à la ville' (CH, IV, p. 478). He rents a house on the edge of the Faubourg Saint-Paterne, where he can practise his swordsmanship in secret. A similar tactic sees him introduce himself to Jean-Jacques Rouget in clothes that are shabby and torn, lulling his rivals into a false sense of security, and stopping the *disettes* long enough for him to win his uncle's trust.

In addition to spying and gossip, the stultifying atmosphere of the small town has the consequence of making provincials resistant to any kind of change. In the Issoudun of *La Rabouilleuse*, the locals possess 'une horreur profonde pour toute espèce de changement, même pour celui qui leur paraît utile à leurs intérêts' (CH, IV, p. 361). It is out of stubborn traditionalism that they refuse to adopt the improvements in cattle-breeding and wine-making that have proved so successful in other parts of the country. Their motto, says the narrator, is '*faire comme faisaient nos pères, ne rien innover*' (CH, IV, p. 360). They even succeed in having a road diverted away from the town for fear that it would mean a rise in the price of chickens. Such resistance can have serious implications, for without links to the larger centres of commercial and industrial activity, the small towns of *La Comédie humaine* are isolated. Their traditional crafts as yet untouched by the Industrial Revolution, Balzac's provincials are thus faced with a stark choice: embrace change, or sink into oblivion. This is the decision with which Benassis is faced in *Le Médecin de campagne*, as he obtains the funds needed to retrieve a poverty-stricken village from the brink of self-destruction. Within a matter of weeks, he transforms the

ramshackle group of hovels into a thriving community, an achievement that begins, significantly, with the building of a road:

En six semaines, le bourg s'accrut de trois cents habitants. [...] Les charrons, les terrassiers, les compagnons, les manouvriers affluaient. Le chemin de Grenoble était couvert de charrettes, d'allants et venants. [...] La circulation de l'argent faisait naître chez tout le monde le désir d'en gagner, l'apathie avait cessé, le bourg s'était réveillé (*CH*, IX, pp. 419-420).

Alas, not all of the small towns in *La Comédie humaine* have such a patient benefactor to reverse their terrible decline. The rest, like the Issoudun of *La Rabouilleuse*, a stagnant town '[qui] aurait engourdi Napoléon' (*CH*, IV, p. 363), remain locked in a downward spiral, and the politician within the novelist is in no doubt where to lay the blame for their plight: at the door of a bourgeois administration that has abandoned the provinces and continued to encourage the development of Paris at their expense. The somnolence of the provinces is, Balzac warns, with a somewhat apocalyptic vision, 'l'état [...] qui attend toute la France et même Paris, si la Bourgeoisie continue à rester maîtresse de la politique extérieure et intérieure de notre pays' (*CH*, IV, p. 364). As if his accusations of relentless social-climbing and false sophistication were not enough, Balzac decides that as a class, the bourgeoisie is also responsible for the state of neglect into which much of provincial France has fallen.

The evidence presented above would seem to support the view that Balzac's treatment of provincial life is, at the very least, deeply unflattering. His small towns are places of permanent mediocrity, populated mostly with calculating couples, malicious spinsters, and (in a last swipe at their

stagnation), misers like Hochon, who in *La Rabouilleuse*, eats his spoiled fruit first. That said, it should not be assumed that Balzac's work displays an automatic hatred of all things provincial. On the contrary, the novelist gives substantive reasons for the decline of the small provincial town, and draws attention to its plight. The relentless pursuit of centralization, he complains in the preface to *Le Cabinet des antiques*, has sucked the lifeblood out of the provinces: 'L'Aristocratie, l'Industrie, le Talent sont éternellement attirés vers Paris, qui engloutit ainsi les capacités nées sur tous les points du royaume [...] et dessèche l'intelligence nationale à son profit' (*CH*, IV, p. 959). According to Balzac, the result of this trend is that many towns have been deprived of the financial and intellectual resources needed for their regeneration. This willingness to explain the state of the provinces in rational terms is confirmed by his treatment of their inhabitants. Implementing the theory that Man conditions, and is conditioned by, his environment, Balzac argues that the provincial who spies on his neighbours, gossips and hoards his money, does so because the setting in which he lives is devoid of any other interest. And without the funds or the inspiration to change this environment for the better, how can provincial life ever be different? It is an argument that would surely meet with the approval of historians and Marxist critics like Pierre Barbéris, for whom the image of the small town in decline corresponds to a verifiable reality. For Barbéris, it was Balzac who created 'le roman de la province [...] retardataire, sous-développée, frustratrice'.⁸⁹ Moreover, his enquiries have seen him establish a link between the fictional provinces of *La Comédie humaine*, and the provinces as they appear in the work of an early-nineteenth-

⁸⁹ Pierre Barbéris, 'Balzac, le Baron Charles Dupin et les statistiques', *AB* (1966), 67-83 (p. 76).

century statistician, Charles Dupin. In 1827, Dupin published his *Forces productives et commerciales de la France*, in which he revealed the existence of an economic divide between the most active provinces of France, and those he deemed to be comparatively stagnant. Using an array of statistical data, he postulated that the most backward regions were Brittany, the Loire Valley basin, Auvergne, and the Massif Central – the very same regions in which (without a trace of coincidence, argues Barbéris) Balzac set most of his stories of provincial life.

Reliance on extratextual sources, as a means of confirming that Balzac's portrait of small-town life is a wholly negative one, can nevertheless lead to judgements that are as biased as the seventeenth-century satirical tradition itself. Indeed, for all that Barbéris might protest, the most valuable keys to understanding the fictional provinces of *La Comédie humaine* are not to be found in any one book of statistical data, but in the conception of Balzac as a novelist who engaged more widely with the process of historical change. Might it be possible to argue, for instance, that in the midst of a social and literary revalorization of the provinces, Balzac's aim was to record the historic charm of the small towns and villages of France, and to leave a permanent record of this fast-disappearing setting for future generations? Equally, if this guardianship of the provinces was indeed a part of his enterprise, would it not also seem logical that his provinces and their inhabitants have other qualities worth protecting? A closer examination of his work is telling in this respect, since it shows the provinces to be characterized by much more than sad mediocrity. These are places of wholesome simplicity, where warmth and generosity are combined with an abundance of natural resources to make for a

contented way of life. There is even happiness to be found in the otherwise dull routine, as we are told in *La Vieille Fille*:

Certaines gens, parlant beaucoup de poésie et n'y entendant rien, déblatèrent contre les mœurs de province [...]. Si le retour exact et journalier des mêmes pas dans un même sentier n'est pas le bonheur, il le joue si bien que les gens amenés par les orages d'une vie agitée à réfléchir sur les bienfaits du calme diront que là était le bonheur (*CH*, IV, p. 853).

Rarely has this positive view of provincial life in *La Comédie humaine* been acknowledged, much less discussed. The fact represents a startling critical oversight, one that demands urgent rectification.

First among the advantages of living in the provinces, as represented by Balzac, is the wealth of, and proximity to, natural resources. The fruits of the soil are ones that Balzac's provincials are quick to harvest. This is demonstrated in *Eugénie Grandet*, in which Félix Grandet owns thirteen farms, and is said to cultivate more than a hundred acres of land. The resultant availability of fresh produce surprises his nephew, who is used to the artificial luxury of Parisian foodstuffs: 'Oh! des œufs frais, dit Charles qui semblable aux gens habitués au luxe ne pensait déjà plus à son perdreau. Mais c'est délicieux, si vous aviez du beurre?' (*CH*, III, p. 1088). It also ensures that, despite the austere domestic regime, no one in the Grandet household is ever ill. Indeed, the abundance of rural produce leads us to another feature of Balzac's provinces, namely, their association with physical well-being. Those characters such as Félix Grandet and his servant, Nanon, have a certain robustness for having spent all their lives in the countryside. Although Nanon, for instance, is fifty-nine when she marries Cornoiller, we are told that she

would pass for forty, and there is even speculation among the townsfolk that she could still bear children. 'Elle s'est conservée dans de la saumure, sous votre respect' (*CH*, III, p. 1177), adds the salt merchant, in a deliberate pun on the town's name, and an unwitting reference to the capacity of the provinces for preserving their inhabitants in good health. These same natural resources also have an important role in preventing economic stagnation. Vineyards are a source of employment for carpenters, coopers, and blacksmiths, while in the Angoulême of *Illusions perdues*, a range of economic activities are clustered along the banks of the Charente, from tanneries and warehouses, to the famous paper mills and a naval weapons plant.

To the wealth of the land can be added wealth in human resources. The small towns of *La Comédie humaine* produce talented individuals such as the poet Lucien de Rubempré, and his brother-in-law David Séchard who, in *Illusions perdues*, invents a new method of manufacturing paper. Similarly, in *Modeste Mignon*, the eponymous heroine is a sophisticated young woman who sings and composes music, who reads the works of Byron, Goethe, and Schiller, and who, to confirm the intellectual distance that separates her from her neighbours, is made to speak three languages. These characters of energy and ambition could not be further removed from the provincial caricatures of seventeenth-century theatre, and it should be noted that not all of them have to head for Paris in order to find personal fulfilment. This much is certainly true of Félix Grandet, who, as I shall demonstrate in chapter four, revels in his status in Saumur. His fortune is a source of personal pride, and he parts with no sum that he cannot recoup, or that does not hold the promise of a subsequent profit. 'Financièrement parlant,' observes the narrator, 'M.

Grandet tenait du tigre et du boa: il savait se coucher, se blottir, envisager longtemps sa proie' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). His strategy in outwitting his late brother's Parisian creditors is a classic illustration of his refusal to be defeated in matters of business, and shows that the provinces can more than match the capital for guile and cunning. It is but another illustration of the balance that Balzac brings to the provincial theme. Where there are characters like Grandet, who show a malevolent streak, there are other provincials whose qualities are of the most admirable and disinterested kind. These include the loyalty of servants such as Nanon, who rewards her master with a lifetime of unstinting service and unshakeable commitment: 'elle se levait au jour, se couchait tard [...]; défendait, comme un chien fidèle, le bien de son maître; enfin, pleine d'une confiance aveugle en lui, elle obéissait sans murmure à ses fantaisies les plus saugrenues' (*CH*, III, p. 1042). Alongside her stand selfless individuals such as the Abbé Bonnet, the priest who initiates the spiritual redemption of Véronique Graslin, in *Le Curé de village*; pure-hearted characters such as Monsieur de Bongrand, who honours his vow to protect the orphaned Ursule Mirouët; devoted friends such as Jacques Brigaut, who watches over his childhood friend, Pierrette, until her death. All of these characters are evidence of Balzac's determination to treat the provinces with neither prejudice nor unwarranted contempt.

In this chapter, I have sketched the portrait of a novelist who, throughout his life, never strayed far from the small towns and rural pastures that he remembered from his childhood, or that he visited during his numerous trips across France and Europe. I have also shown that Balzac's most vital journeys

were through his own imagination. His depiction of small towns such as Angoulême, Issoudun, and Tours, may not always correspond to an external reality, but this is of little consequence. At a time when writers and historians, from Prosper Mérimée to Arcisse de Caumont, were documenting and seeking to preserve the country's provincial heritage, Balzac's fictional attempts to explore the provinces played a vital role in the establishment of their literary identity. The theme of provincial life had, by the time of the Restoration, reached a pivotal stage in its development. The satirical tradition inherited from the seventeenth century remained strong, and was perpetuated by the many 'codes' and 'physiologies' that appeared during the 1820s. Though stating their aim as being to instruct, the authors of these guides showed a scant knowledge of the provinces, and little desire to engage in serious analysis of provincial mores. Alongside them, however, another literary current had begun to emerge; in the theatre, with plays such as Scribe's *Le Nouveau Pourceaugnac*; in journals, with Janin's article 'La Ville de Saint-Étienne'; and in novels such as those of Sir Walter Scott, which offered readers a more balanced image of rural life than had been present in the works of either Molière or Rousseau. A novelist who came to the provincial theme principally out of interest in its dramatic possibilities, Balzac displayed a notable sensitivity to these contrasting movements, using the literature of the past as a springboard for his own creative imagination. He is faithful to the established literary conception of the provinces as places of monotony and mediocrity, just as in *Illusions perdues*, he recognizes the magnetism of Paris, with its 'robe d'or, la tête ceinte de pierreries royales, les bras ouverts aux talents' (*CH*, v, p. 250). What he also succeeds in demonstrating, however, is

that there is 'une autre France que celle de Paris. C'est cette France, un peu méconnue, c'est cette vie provinciale [...] qui garde des traits communs de fidélité, de labeur, de patience, d'économie.'⁹⁰ For him, the provinces are places of inescapable charm, and have a superiority of their own. He tells their story as one of historical decline, and invests it with a political vision that is uniquely his. The July Monarchy may have despatched Mérimée into the remotest corners of the country, but, for Balzac, this was not enough to reverse their state of backwardness and economic underdevelopment. As a novelist, he took it upon himself to defend the French provinces. In chapter two, I shall continue to examine this Balzacian vision, in which an acknowledgement of regional difference and identity co-exists with a scientific ambition to define the typicality of provincial life.

⁹⁰ Charles-Brun, 'Le régionalisme dans le roman', in *Le Roman social en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Giard & Brière, 1910), pp. 282-319 (p. 293).

CHAPTER TWO

Provincial Identities

‘Ce qu’il y a de plus étranger en France, pour les Français, c’est la France.’¹

Modeste Mignon

‘Mon ouvrage a sa géographie comme il a sa généalogie et ses familles, ses lieux et ses choses, ses personnes et ses faits’ (*CH*, I, pp. 18-19). Thus wrote Balzac in the ‘Avant-propos’ of 1842. The confident declaration is a reminder of the distances that readers of *La Comédie humaine* are made to travel on a fictional journey that spans seventeen provinces and twenty-two small towns.² In this vast fresco of nineteenth-century French society, the provinces appear as a mosaic in which each setting, Angoulême or Issoudun, Brittany or Touraine, has a ‘physionomie’,³ or identity, of its own.⁴ In the same way as Buffon, Cuvier, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire classified the species of the animal kingdom, so Balzac strove to classify the small towns and provinces of France, and to reflect the multiplicity of ways in which provincial life was lived. In

¹ *CH*, I, p. 635.

² The calculation is made by Wenger, *The Province and the Provinces*, pp. 50-51.

³ Balzac’s frequent use of this term, in his pseudo-scientific descriptions of both people and places, is a borrowing from the work of the Swiss physiognomist, Johann-Kaspar Lavater. In the novel, *Ce que regrettent les femmes*, 2 vols (Paris: Werdet, 1834), Balzac’s secretary, Félix Davin, argues that every town has a distinct ‘physionomie’: ‘Ce que Lavater a dit de la physionomie dans ses rapports avec le caractère et les passions n’est pas moins applicable aux villes qu’aux individus: l’aspect d’une ville, sa physionomie extérieure la révéleront complètement à des yeux attentifs et une heure ou deux d’observation philosophique suffiront pour en surprendre l’histoire, l’esprit, les mœurs, la spécialité tout entière’ (II, pp. 120-21).

⁴ Cf. Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac: une mythologie réaliste* (Paris: Larousse, 1971). ‘La France de Balzac est une France profondément différenciée et surtout divisée, cassée, non pas réalisée en chacun de ses points ou de ses éléments, mais renvoyée, à partir d’une unité entrevue, à autant d’irréconciliables fragments’ (p. 176).

Albert Savarus, he recalls the history of Besançon, where the Romans 'ont dépensé des sommes immenses pour avoir d'excellentes eaux' (*CH*, I, p. 984). Elsewhere, he offers himself as a topographer, informing us, in *La Vieille Fille*, that the main street at Alençon has two names, the Rue Saint-Blaise or the Rue de la Porte-de-Séez, according to the direction from which the visitor enters the town (*CH*, IV, p. 891). His curiosity also extends to local customs such as the 'douzain', the collection of gold coins that Eugénie Grandet receives as her dowry, 'un antique usage encore en vigueur et saintement conservé dans quelques pays situés au centre de la France' (*CH*, III, p. 1045).

In chapter one, I set this interest in regional life within the context of the post-revolutionary period, when a Parisian elite began to demand knowledge of a country about which it knew so little. This curiosity intensified during the July Monarchy, when legitimist notables refused to swear allegiance to Louis-Philippe, retiring instead to their country estates, from whence they began their calls for a decentralized administration.⁵ In the years that followed, these partisans of provincial government encouraged a new exploration of the provinces, their histories and cultures, and a reconsideration of the French regional identities. Among those who sought to capture the contemporary mood was Abel Hugo. In 1835, Hugo published the three volumes of his *France pittoresque*, in which he declared that 'l'étude de la patrie est un devoir pour tout citoyen'.⁶ He had spent eight years compiling this exhaustive study, in which every region, its history, its geographical and topographical characteristics, its industries, was documented. In fiction, too, there began to

⁵ A.-J. Tudesq, 'La décentralisation et la droite en France au dix-neuvième siècle', in *La Décentralisation: colloque d'histoire par la Faculté des Lettres d'Aix* (Aix-en-Provence: Ophrys, 1964), pp. 55-67 (p. 58).

⁶ A. Hugo, *France pittoresque ou description pittoresque, topographique et statistique des départements et colonies de la France*, 3 vols (Paris: Delloye, 1835), I, p. i.

emerge a new sensitivity to regional difference. In his *Mémoires d'un touriste*, Stendhal acknowledged that France was made up of 'sept ou huit grandes divisions', in which he included, somewhat stereotypically, 'la généreuse Alsace, Paris et son cercle égoïste de quatre-vingts lieues de diamètre, la Bretagne dévote et courageuse, et la Normandie civilisée'.⁷ This chapter considers the way in which the contemporary interest in regional identity is refracted through *La Comédie humaine*, in which it competes with a vision of provincial France as a unified sociological whole. I begin by examining Balzac's determination to create identities for his fictional towns and provinces, before asking whether it is possible to see his work as containing one definition of provincialism. Finally, I analyse the contrast between province and region in *Béatrix*, a novel in which Balzac's total vision of provincial life co-exists with a particularized study of Brittany and the Breton character.

Town, Province, Pays: Regional Identities in Balzac's Work

Among the towns and provinces depicted in *La Comédie humaine*, there are many, such as Alençon and Normandy, which share their names with actual places that can be pinpointed on a map.⁸ This simple fact will come as no surprise to those who are familiar with the popular image of Balzac as the faithful and omniscient historian of his times. After all, it was the great

⁷ Stendhal, *Mémoires d'un touriste*, in *Voyages en France*, ed. by V. del Litto (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992), 1-418 (p. 51).

⁸ For a geographical tour of Balzac's provinces, see for example Amédée Ponceau, *Paysages et destins balzaciens* (Paris: Éditions du Myrte, 1950) and Georges Jacques, *Paysages et structures dans 'La Comédie humaine'* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1975).

novelist himself who, in the preface to *Une fille d'Ève*, declared his ambition to reveal the hidden treasures of provincial France to an international readership. Nor is it surprising, then, that some readers have attempted to trace his footsteps. As was indicated in chapter one, a combination of regional pride and biographical speculation has seen these patient investigators trail around the provinces comparing 'la réalité décrite dans le roman à une réalité extérieure à lui, puisque accessible par d'autres voies'.⁹ They have done so in the belief that Balzac did indeed strive to make good his claims, and to represent actual French towns and provinces in his work, or as Henry James concluded in the preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1876), 'if it was a question of Saumur, of Limoges, of Guérande, he [Balzac] "did" Saumur, did Limoges, did Guérande.'¹⁰ Accordingly, the French novelist has been praised for his exactitude, and (more often, it seems) chided for his errors. The description that opens *Les Chouans* has been dismissed as inaccurate, since the fictional castle at Fougères is raised above its actual height. Similarly, in the description of the house of Balthazar Claës, in *La Recherche de l'absolu*, readers have complained at the transposition of regional detail from Tours to Douai. If these fictional settings are not mimetic copies of actual places, therefore, then how are they given the appearance of truth, and invested with their own unique identities? Like an illusionist on the stage, Balzac was protective of the techniques with which he constructed his provincial settings and, in the preface to *La Peau de chagrin*, deliberately encouraged his readers to believe that the best evocations of place required almost supernatural abilities:

⁹ Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon, *Critique du roman: essai sur 'La Modification' de Michel Butor* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 102.

¹⁰ Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, reprinted in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction*, ed. by William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 259-70 (pp. 263-64).

[L'homme de génie] va, en esprit, à travers les espaces, aussi facilement que les choses, jadis observées, renaissent fidèlement en lui [...]. Il a réellement vu le monde, ou son âme le lui a révélé intuitivement. Ainsi, le peintre le plus chaud, le plus exact de Florence, n'a jamais été à Florence (*CH*, x, p. 53).

To laud Balzac's ability in describing the provinces as 'genius' or 'second sight' would of course be quite reductive. In this section, I shall examine how the reader is persuaded to visualize, and to pretend belief in the provincial settings encountered in *La Comédie humaine*. I shall also consider what Balzac's method reveals about his approach to the theme of provincial life, before investigating how his towns and provinces are distinguished from one another.

The first stage of this discussion demands an overview of the practical strategies with which Balzac created his illusion of place. He did so using two main techniques: first, the weaving of factual information into the fabric of his text, and second, the detailed notation of the setting that he wished to evoke. The extent to which Balzac made use of factual material is an indication of what Philippe Dufour has termed 'un besoin de s'assurer du réel'.¹¹ His frequent recourse to factual material also explains the preoccupation of some readers with uncovering the actual models for the people and places that he features in his writing. In the same way as he took the names of his characters from shop-signs and electoral registers,¹² the features of his provincial settings were often based on those of actual places. Although the research trip was

¹¹ Philippe Dufour, *Le Réalisme de Balzac à Proust* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p. 123.

¹² Cf. Léon Gozlan, *Balzac en pantoufles* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001; first published 1856), pp. 107-12. In an amusing passage, Gozlan describes being dragged through the streets of Paris in search of a name for one of Balzac's characters. Eventually, and with his exhausted friend trailing behind, Balzac found what he had been looking for: 'Marcas! Mon héros s'appellera Marcas' (p. 110).

never an established part of Balzac's method, it has been well documented that he would glean information on his settings from books, maps and plans, or from friends and relatives. 'Remettez au porteur le plan d'Issoudun,' he instructed the archaeologist, Armand Pérémé in 1842, before inviting him to dinner to check his portrait of the town for *La Rabouilleuse*.¹³ This use of factual documents and sources became common practice among the realist writers of the nineteenth century; indeed, by the end of the period, Jules Verne had expressed a preference for the factual document over personal experience.¹⁴ It was Balzac, though, who ultimately was credited with pioneering the technique, as the Goncourt brothers recorded in their *Journal* on 24 October 1864:

Le roman, depuis Balzac, n'a plus rien de commun avec ce que nos pères entendaient par ce roman. Le roman actuel se fait avec des *documents*, racontés ou relevés d'après nature, comme l'histoire se fait avec des documents écrits.¹⁵

The influence of factual sources on the provincial settings of *La Comédie humaine* is reflected most clearly in the topographical characteristics that Balzac attributes to a number of his small towns. In *La Rabouilleuse*, for example, Issoudun has its famous 'Tour blanche', a château, and a Café militaire, as well as named streets and squares such as the Rue Basse and the Place de la Misère. The narrator also refers to the Faubourg de Rome, and the Faubourg Saint-Paterne, where Philippe Bridau prepares for his final

¹³ *Corr.*, IV, pp. 489-90 (September? 1842).

¹⁴ 'Un bon livre sur les coutumes et mœurs d'un pays ne peut être écrit qu'après des années de séjour,' Verne argued, 'alors que moi, au mieux, je ne pourrais y effectuer qu'un rapide voyage' ('Jules Verne is dead', *The Evening Post* (Chicago), 25 March 1905, cited by Daniel Compère, *Jules Verne écrivain* (Geneva: Droz, 1991), p. 45).

¹⁵ Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. by Robert Ricatte, 4 vols (Paris: Fasquelle and Flammarion, 1956), II, p. 96.

confrontation with Maxence Gilet. Angoulême, in *Illusions perdues*, is developed with even greater topographical precision. In the High Town, there is a medieval prison and a Palais de Justice which, we are told, is still under construction in 1822. The streets are named, and in accordance with the information provided by Zulma Carraud, the Séchard printing house is situated in the Place du Mûrier. The route to L'Houmeau, 'une ville industrielle et riche, une seconde Angoulême que jaloussa la ville haute' (*CH*, v, p. 151), takes in the Promenade de Beaulieu, the Rue du Minage and (depending on the path one chooses to take) either the Porte Sainte-Pierre or the Porte Palet.

This determination to incorporate authentic detail into his work was the motivation for Balzac's trip to the Breton town of Fougères in 1828, where he researched the setting for the historical novel *Les Chouans*. He spent six weeks as the guest of his father's old friend, General de Pommereul, and each morning during his visit, he 'went charging off with his notebook, walking up to farmhouses and cottages, chatting with the peasants [...]. He scribbled down anecdotes and regionalisms, and turned out to be an excellent investigative reporter.'¹⁶ He was delighted to learn that 'un oribus' was a local term for a resin candle, and that 'un pichet' was a cider jug.¹⁷ The completed novel, moreover, would include references to the animal skins worn by the Chouan guerrillas, and to dishes such as the 'galette de sarrasin' (black buckwheat cake), all of which, the narrator assures us, is characteristic of the region. Those who have argued about whether or not such details are indeed

¹⁶ Graham Robb, *Balzac* (London: Picador, 1994; repr. Papermac, 1995), p. 149. For additional information on Balzac's research in Brittany, see for example Raymond Lebègue, 'La documentation de Balzac pour *Les Chouans*', in *Congrès d'histoire littéraire, Balzac et la Touraine: congrès d'histoire littéraire tenu à Tours du 28 au 31 mai 1949* (Tours: [n. pub.], 1949), pp. 151-54.

¹⁷ R. du Pontavice de Heussey, *Balzac en Bretagne: cinq lettres inédites de l'auteur des 'Chouans'* (Rennes: Caillièrre, 1885), pp. 25-26.

authentic have nevertheless missed the point. True, with its abundance of local colour, *Les Chouans* contains elements of the picturesque which some of the novel's first readers would have recognized as features of Breton life. However, in failing to restrict their discussions to the novel itself, commentators have examined neither the textual role of this factual information, nor the impact on the modern reader of what is presented as authentic detail. For regardless of whether Balzac himself believed that he was transferring the characteristics of actual provinces to the pages of his work, the importance of these details is not that the reader should recognize the 'galette de sarrasin' as a Breton dish, nor that he can confirm it as such by referring to an extratextual source of his own. The citation of factual details instead serves to establish the narrator as a source of knowledge in whom the reader can trust. 'The novelist', argues Michael Irwin, 'has an interest in asserting his qualifications to tell a story.'¹⁸ The range of information that Balzac incorporates into his descriptions of the provinces is a show of knowledge calculated to encourage a pretence of belief in the reader. This intention is evident in the statements with which he introduces his catalogues of topographical and historical data, such as 'peut-être est-il nécessaire, dans l'intérêt de ceux qui ne connaissent pas Le Havre, d'en dire un mot' (*CH*, I, p. 473), in *Modeste Mignon*, and 'il est nécessaire de tracer en peu de mots un tableau de cette ville' (*CH*, IV, p. 358), with reference to Issoudun, in *La Rabouilleuse*. The strength of the narrative voice and the facts that it claims to relate are thus a means of strengthening the illusion of place. As Suzanne Jean Bérard has confirmed, the Balzacian narrator 'conte avec tant de sérieux,

¹⁸ Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 8.

accumule si bien les détails, les citations, les références, les dates, les généalogies, que nous finissons par nous prendre à son jeu'.¹⁹

The suggestion that Balzac does not merely cite facts in isolation, but accumulates them within his narrative, brings us to the second technique with which he concretizes his provinces: description. In keeping with his penchant for evoking the precise details of his settings, Balzac is rarely content to stop at the name of a town, or of the region to which it belongs. On the contrary, he more often feels compelled to describe the site in terms of its geographical, topographical, and historical characteristics.²⁰ His favoured technique here is that of the sequential opening description, which begins with a general portrait of the town, before leading us through its streets, and depositing us, finally, in front of the house in which the characters are waiting. The description of Saumur, in *Eugénie Grandet*, contains a number of these elements, as the narrator accompanies us along 'la rue montueuse qui mène au château, par le haut de la ville' (*CH*, III, p. 1027), and past the houses with the 'énormes madriers dont les bouts sont taillés en figures bizarres et qui couronnent d'un bas-relief noir le rez-de-chaussée' (*CH*, III, p. 1028). After a discussion of the local economy, we arrive at the door of Félix Grandet, 'la maison pleine de mélancolie où se sont accomplis les événements de cette histoire' (*CH*, III, p. 1030). The tone of the description also has special importance. This is not, as Percy Lubbock believed, an account 'as plain and straightforward as an

¹⁹ Suzanne Jean Bérard, *La Genèse d'un roman de Balzac: 'Illusions perdues'*, 2 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961), II: *Du manuscrit à l'édition*, p. 314.

²⁰ Sébastien Velut underlines that, despite Balzac's interest in geography and topography, 'aucune figure de géographe ne prend place dans la galerie des personnages de *La Comédie humaine* qui compte pourtant des savants, mais ils sont médecins comme Bianchon ou naturalistes, comme dans l'ébauche de *Entre savants*' ('Balzac et les discours géographiques', unpublished conference paper presented at 'Balzac géographe (II: Territoires)', Université François Rabelais, Tours, 5-6 June 2003, p. 2).

inventory', in which 'no attempt is made to insinuate the impression of the place'.²¹ The description is imbued with the atmosphere of the small town, and is consistent with the drama that follows. The monastic silence of the street, 'peu fréquentée, chaude en été, froide en hiver, obscure en quelques endroits' (*CH*, III, p. 1027), and the houses, 'noires et silencieuses' (*CH*, III, p. 1030), prepare us for the cold manoeuvres with which Félix Grandet ruins his daughter's hopes of a loving marriage. The objective narrator thus forms part of the illusion, a fact of which we should be aware when considering variations of this technique. The Issoudun of *La Rabouilleuse*, for example, is also described in terms of its geographical, topographical, and historical characteristics, but without narrowing the focus towards a single dwelling. Balzac traces the history of the town to Roman times, and even includes an expression of gratitude to the friend who supplied him with information about the site:

N'en déplaise à Paris, Issoudun est une des plus vieilles villes de France. [...] En effet, des fouilles récemment opérées par un savant archéologue de cette ville, M. Armand Pérémé, ont fait découvrir sous la célèbre tour d'Issoudun une basilique du cinquième siècle, la seule probablement qui existe en France (*CH*, IV, p. 358).

The narrator proceeds then to step forward through the ages, to a time when the town boasted a population of between sixteen and seventeen thousand inhabitants, and to the reign of Louis XIV, when it was still known as 'une ville d'élégance, de beau langage et de bonne société' (*CH*, IV, p. 360). The positive tone with which the narrator describes Issoudun's glorious past strikes an evident contrast with the town's sterile present. In 1822, it boasts nothing

²¹ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Cape, 1921; repr. 1968), p. 221.

more than a 'funeste et funèbre tranquillité' (*CH*, IV, p. 363). Is appropriate use of tone, however, the sole common denominator between these two descriptive strategies?

At first sight, the care with which Balzac evokes the houses of Saumur, and the history of Issoudun, would appear to validate the observation that he had a 'love of old-town scenes for their own sake'.²² Margaret Shenfield's claim that these descriptive passages have no basis in the functional or ideological needs of representation is nevertheless somewhat simplistic. For Balzac, describing a town and its buildings is not a slavish or superfluous exercise; it is an act of preservation that once again reveals his sensitivity to historical change. In the 1830s, the progressive destruction of France's architectural heritage drew cries of outrage, not merely from historians such as François Guizot and Augustin Thierry, but also from creative artists such as Victor Hugo. In an article entitled 'Guerre aux démolisseurs!', which appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on 1 March 1832, an exasperated Hugo called for an end to the 'vandalism' of the country's ancient buildings and monuments, from Notre-Dame to the ramparts of Toulouse:

Il n'y a peut-être pas en France, à l'heure qu'il est, une seule ville, pas un seul chef-lieu d'arrondissement, pas un seul chef-lieu de canton, où il ne se médite, où il ne se commence, où il ne s'achève la destruction de quelque monument historique national.²³

Balzac joined in this debate with similar expressions of sadness at the disappearance of France's provincial past. In reference to Nemours, in *Ursule*

²² Margaret Shenfield, 'Town and Townscape in Dickens' Novels and Balzac's *Comédie humaine*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Victoria University, Manchester, 1973), p. 38.

²³ Victor Hugo, 'Guerre aux démolisseurs!' in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Massin, 18 vols (Paris: Le Club français du livre, 1967-70), iv.1 (1967), pp. 499-509 (p. 499).

Mirouët (1842), he remarks that ‘depuis 1830, on a malheureusement bâti plusieurs maisons’, a development he sees as threatening the ‘gracieuse originalité’ (*CH*, III, p. 769) of the town. Similarly, in *La Rabouilleuse*, his narrator is astonished that ‘la charmante église de Saint-Paterne [...], un des plus jolis *specimen* [*sic*] d’église romane que possédât la France, a péri sans que personne ait pris le dessin du portail’ (*CH*, IV, p. 365). Faced with the progressive destruction of these architectural treasures, the detailed description becomes a substitute for the visual image: ‘elle peut seule conserver une existence scientifique à ce qui est matériellement détruit.’²⁴

As well as offering themselves as historical documents, Balzac’s descriptions of the provincial towns are also invested with a sense of scientific precision and apparent completeness that implores the reader to trust the discourse. The technique is, in this respect, further evidence of Balzac’s admiration for Buffon, Cuvier, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and their determination, both to classify, and to achieve a total vision. He recognizes the influence of these natural historians in the ‘Avant-propos’, where he credits Buffon with having recorded ‘dans un livre l’ensemble de la zoologie’, and where he states his own desire to write ‘une œuvre de ce genre [...] pour la Société’ (*CH*, I, p. 8). Furthermore, it is a technique that enables him to use a range of textual strategies, each of which is designed to bolster the illusion. There is the didacticism of the narrative voice: the reader is provided with information about a given town, and told how to interpret it. There are also implicit appeals to the reader’s own experience with the persistent formula ‘une de ces [maisons, villes]’, a device which encourages the reader to collude

²⁴ Philippe Bruneau, ‘Balzac et l’archéologie’, *AB* (1983), 15-50 (p. 29).

with the narrator in recognizing a certain kind of place or person.²⁵ As an insight into Balzac's construction of his provincial settings, these strategies show a novelist reconciling his historical ambitions with the demands of the realist mode. None, though, can explain the essence of his fictional provinces, nor bring us closer to appreciating their diversity. 'La France balzacienne', warns Nicole Mozet, 'est moins répétitive que ne le laisse entendre la critique.'²⁶ The objection is a pertinent one when we consider that in *La Comédie humaine*, there are some small towns where not one street is named, and which are almost devoid of topographical and historical detail. The Bayeux of *La Femme abandonnée*, for instance, appears as no more than '[une] jolie ville située à deux lieues de la mer' (*CH*, II, p. 463). Nor do these strategies encourage us to take account of the development of the provincial theme over the course of Balzac's career, or of the differences that exist between his fictional towns and provinces.

A more conclusive measure of the Balzacian sensitivity to regional difference is to be found in his discussion of the socio-cultural characteristics of individual towns and provinces. Writing in the Introduction to the *Études de mœurs au dix-neuvième siècle* in 1835, Félix Davin suggested that Balzac possessed a unique awareness of the factors that distinguished one town or region from another: 'Comment a-t-il pu être habitant de Saumur et de Douai, chouan à Fougères et vieille fille à Issoudun [*sic*]? [...] M. de Balzac doit procéder par intuition, cet attribut le plus rare de l'esprit humain' (*CH*, I, pp.

²⁵ Cf. Juliette Grange, *Balzac: l'argent, la prose, les anges* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), pp. 55-56.

²⁶ Nicole Mozet, 'La province balzacienne confrontée au temps de la civilisation', in *Paris <> Province: topographies littéraires du dix-neuvième siècle: actes du colloque de Rouen, 19 et 20 mars 1999*, ed. by Amélie Djourachkovitch and Yvan Leclerc (Rouen: Université de Rouen, 2000), pp. 59-71 (p. 68).

1155-56). Davin's recourse to vague pronouncements on 'intuition' and 'second sight' is unfortunate, not least because his employer's ideas on regional identity seem, at first glance, to be wholly unoriginal. In the Flanders of *Le Recherche de l'absolu*, the people take as their defining characteristics 'la réflexion, l'ordre, le sentiment du devoir, les trois principales expressions du caractère flamand' (CH, x, p. 726). In times past, says Balzac, this population, 'exista de par la pipe et la bière' (CH, x, p. 660). Elsewhere, he assures us that the women of Auvergne are beautiful, and that the men, such as Bourgeat, the selfless water-carrier of *La Messe de l'athée* (1837), have a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for hard work. In their failure to be specific, such remarks often prove irritating, and could easily be dismissed as another 'concession faite à l'exigence de vraisemblance'.²⁷ At the same time, however, it is clear that Balzac's work includes a sustained consideration of regional identity, in which the difficulty experienced by early-nineteenth-century writers in conceiving of the provinces is evident.

In struggling to account for regional difference, Balzac most often depicts the provinces as both geographically isolated and economically backward. In the Brittany of *Les Chouans*, for example, his narrator writes as if describing a primitive race, not Franks or Gauls, but Celts: 'La Bretagne est, de toute la France, le pays où les mœurs gauloises ont laissé les plus fortes empreintes' (CH, VIII, p. 917). The Chouan guerrillas are shown to possess distinctive features. With their dark skin and black hair, they recall the Native American

²⁷ Pierre Demarolle, 'Ville, pays, région: repères pour une géographie du roman français', in *Du provincialisme au régionalisme: [actes du] Festival d'Histoire de Montbrison, 28 septembre au 2 octobre 1988* (Montbrison: La Ville de Montbrison, 1989), pp. 91-96 (p. 92).

Indians in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper.²⁸ Their innate characteristics include ‘une incroyable férocité, un entêtement brutal, mais aussi la foi du serment’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 918), features derived from their living in a region in which the Parisian reader would find ‘l’absence complète de nos lois, de nos mœurs, de notre habillement, de nos monnaies nouvelles, de notre langage’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 918). This view of the Bretons as savages would later find a voice in the writings of Auguste Romieu:²⁹ ‘La Basse-Bretagne,’ wrote the sub-prefect of Quimperlé (Finistère), ‘est une contrée à part, qui n’est plus la France. Exceptez-en les villes, le reste devrait être soumis à une sorte de régime colonial.’³⁰ For Balzac, the primitiveness of the Bretons is a direct consequence of the region’s isolation: ‘Là point de villages. Les constructions précaires que l’on nomme des logis sont clairsemées à travers la contrée. Chaque famille y vit comme dans un désert’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 919). The landscape is dotted with lakes and marshes, while the high hedgerows and dirt tracks make this the perfect terrain for a guerrilla war. It is this backwardness, precisely, that is responsible for producing men such as Marche-à-terre, the Chouan whose ‘grossièreté’ marks him out as ‘le génie même de la Bretagne’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 916), and who appears as a bestial figure throughout the novel.

This same notion that the provinces are distant recurs in Balzac’s treatment of Touraine. In his early novel, *Sténie*, the problem of defining a regional identity is evident in a passage that shows less a rejection of the

²⁸ Jean Balcou, ‘Les Bretons, ce sont nos Indiens’, in *Ouest et romantismes: actes du colloque des 6, 7, 8 et 9 décembre 1990*, ed. by Georges Cesbron, 2 vols (Angers: Presses de l’Université d’Angers, 1991), I, pp. 43-51. In his analysis of *Les Chouans*, Balcou agrees that ‘l’orientation indienne du récit est surtout venue de Cooper’ (p. 45). The intertextual presence of the American novelist is a point to which I shall return in chapter four.

²⁹ For information on the biographical links between Balzac and Romieu, see for example Jean-Hervé Donnard, *Balzac: les réalités économiques et sociales dans ‘La Comédie humaine’* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961), pp. 345-47.

³⁰ Auguste Romieu, ‘La Basse-Bretagne’, *Revue de Paris*, 30 (1831), 145-54 (p. 153).

exotic than a reattribution of exoticism to provincial France. 'Si tu connaissais la Touraine,' writes del-Ryès to his friend, Vanehrs, 'tu partagerais mon enthousiasme. [...] En effet, si de vastes forêts la bordaient de leurs colonnades antiques, ce serait l'Ohio, le Meschacebé' (*OD*, I, p. 722). There are other examples in which Balzac portrayed his native Loire Valley as being as far away from Paris as it was possible to be. The fragment entitled 'Une vue de Touraine', first published in 1830, depicted the region as being trapped in a distant past, its winegrowers living in the most archaic conditions, in houses 'creusées dans le roc et réunies par de dangereux escaliers taillés à même la pierre' (*CH*, II, p. 1053). This bleak picture of underdevelopment in the provinces is startling, and were it not for the evidence of the contemporary statistician, Charles Dupin, it would be tempting to accuse Balzac of wilful exaggeration. In 1827, Dupin had confirmed not only that much of provincial France was backward, but that one region, in particular, was more backward than most. Writing in his *Forces productives et commerciales de la France*, he declared: 'Cette partie obscure, où seulement le deux cent vingt-neuvième de l'espèce humaine fréquente les écoles [...]; on l'appelle le jardin de la France: c'est la Touraine.'³¹ If the region is backward, then its inhabitants nevertheless live in a blissful state of savagery. For Balzac, Touraine is a maternal province that heals the wounds of worldly disappointment, and if its inhabitants are stupid, then the novelist at least excuses them this defect.³² In *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, he even digresses from his narrative to sing the region's praises:

³¹ Baron Charles Dupin, *Forces productives et commerciales de la France*, 2 vols (Paris: Bachelier, 1827), II, p. 250.

³² 'Je pardonne bien aux habitants d'être bêtes, ils sont si heureux! Or, vous savez que les gens qui jouissent beaucoup sont naturellement stupides' (*Corr.*, I, p. 461; 21 July 1830).

Allez dans cette Turquie de la France, vous y resterez paresseux, oisif, heureux. Fussiez-vous ambitieux comme l'était Napoléon, ou poète comme l'était Byron, une force inouïe, invincible vous obligerait à garder vos poésies pour vous, et à convertir en rêves vos projets ambitieux (*CH*, IV, p. 576).

No other province in Balzac's work is indulged in this manner, though whether there are limits to his patience is a question I reserve for chapter three, and a full discussion of the Tourangeau theme.

While frequently lapsing into the vocabulary of exoticism to distinguish between provinces, Balzac's attitude towards the survival of regional difference is ambiguous. Applying the ideas inherited from his father, and developed in his discussions with his brother-in-law, the canal engineer Eugène Surville, he often argues that a strong sense of regional identity can serve as an obstacle to progress and economic development in the provinces.³³

The view is expressed in *Sténie*, in which Jacob del-Ryès writes:

J'ai remarqué que ce sentiment si vif pour les lieux de notre naissance était un grand obstacle au progrès des belles institutions que nous attendons impatiemment et que la philosophie du dernier siècle a redemandé au nom du genre humain. [...] Chez nous, un Français est gascon, parisien ou normand avant d'être français. Nous perpétons cette idée en nous moquant des dialectes français, des coutumes de ces provinces. Elle est incroyable la puissance de cette habitude qui nous fait tenir aux usages de notre pays (*OD*, I, p. 725).

The words are those of an authoritarian Balzac who advocated modernization of the provinces through strong central government. Elsewhere in his writing, however, there is a second Balzac who claims that progress is to be found, not in the elimination of regional identities, but in a greater understanding of the

³³ For the possible influence on Balzac of his brother-in-law, see for example Anne-Marie Meininger, 'Eugène Surville: modèle reparaissant de *La Comédie humaine*', *AB* (1963), 195-250.

provinces, and of the way in which their individual characteristics can be harnessed for the good of the nation. In his two 'Lettres d'un provincial sur le système suivi', which appeared in *Le Temps* in September 1830, he blames the recently installed July Monarchy for its failure to bridge the gap between Paris and the provinces. The argument is formulated in the first letter, on 13 September, in which a fictional provincial writes to the newspaper to complain about the conduct of his region's new sub-prefect: 'C'est un homme de sens et d'esprit, qui n'a que l'inconvénient d'être tout à fait étranger à notre pays, et qui m'a même confessé n'avoir appris le nom de notre petite ville que par *Le Moniteur*' (OD, II, p. 785). Balzac returned to this assault two months later in his 'Lettres sur Paris' (1830-31). The author of the sixth letter, dated 25 November 1830, is a fictional inhabitant of Chinon, who laments at the apparent reluctance of the Parisian government to recognize what the provinces have to offer:

C'est l'agriculture, monsieur, qu'il s'agirait d'encourager... L'industrie, elle, peut se rendre en Amérique, dans les Indes, au Pérou, à Calcutta; mais nous autres, nous restons là... Nous produisons toujours les mêmes denrées, et il n'y a pas à dire, nous ne pouvons pas appliquer à la culture d'autres machines que celles en usage (OD, II, p. 903).

Seen in this perspective, the contrast between *Sténie* and the 'Lettres sur Paris' is evidence of a dual voice in Balzac's treatment of the provinces. Excessive attachment to one's *pays* is condemned as an obstacle to progress, though, equally, Parisian indifference to the provinces is indicted as a barrier to national prosperity. Pierre Barbéris summarizes this argument in the following terms: 'C'est un scandale de voir les villageois résister au "progrès", mais

c'est aussi un scandale de voir la capitale faire payer la note à cette immense réserve de bon sens que constituent les départements.'³⁴ Though resistant to change, the provinces should not simply be dismissed as backward; rather, the administrators of the new regime should seek to engage them in a more constructive debate, one that views regional difference as a possible source of economic regeneration.

The Essence of Provincialism

With a decade separating *Eugénie Grandet* and *Modeste Mignon*, the last provincial novel completed during his lifetime, it is clear that Balzac's treatment of French provincial life will offer numerous variations in setting, character and theme. Irrespective of the vigour with which we might defend this assertion, however, it contradicts Balzac's own claim, in *La Femme abandonnée*, that 'toutes les petites villes se ressemblent' (*CH*, II, p. 463).³⁵

The wide spectrum of his work is packed with such generalizations, a fact which seems to indicate that, alongside his exploration of regional difference, these basic truths are intended to form 'une théorie synthétique découvrant sous le disparate des phénomènes une unité intelligible'.³⁶ To suggest that Balzac reduced the complexities of provincial life to a set of theoretical assumptions would itself be an over-simplification; his provinces are too diverse for us to lock them into such a system. From these generalizations

³⁴ Pierre Barbéris, 'Trois moments de la politique balzacienne: 1830, 1839, 1848: pages retrouvées et textes inédits', *AB* (1965), 253-90 (p. 280).

³⁵ The claim was not an accidental one. In his unfinished novel, *Les Héritiers Boirouge* (1836), Balzac declares: 'En quelque ville de province que vous alliez, changez les noms, vous retrouverez les choses' (*CH*, XII, p. 389).

³⁶ Jeanne-Marie Bourdet, 'La petite ville de province dans *La Comédie humaine*', *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), 15-26 (p. 17).

nevertheless emerges what we might term his basic conception, or total vision, of provincial life. Like Stendhal, who described Verrières, in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, as 'le type des villes de province',³⁷ Balzac was as interested in defining the essence of provincialism as he was in the peculiarities of individual towns and provinces.

At the basis of this definition is the boredom and frustration of provincial life. 'La vie de province', he tells us in his essay, 'La Femme de province', 'est l'ennui organisé, l'ennui déguisé sous mille formes; enfin l'ennui est le fond de la langue.' For the women who live in this setting devoid of interest and entertainment, there is scant relief in gossip and the household chores: 'on se jette avec désespoir dans les confitures et dans les lessives, dans l'économie domestique [...], dans la broderie des fichus, dans les soins de la maternité, dans les intrigues de petite ville' (*CH*, IV, p. 1380). Nor do the evenings offer a break from routine, as the provincial joins his neighbours for a game of cards or backgammon, the same faces gathered in the same salons, night after night. The scene is one which recurs throughout *La Comédie humaine*, from *Eugénie Grandet*, where the Cruchots and the des Grassins are embroiled in a daily battle for Eugénie's hand, to *La Vieille Fille*, where those who gather in the home of Mademoiselle Cormon seem almost too familiar with the format of their social evenings:

³⁷ Stendhal, 'Appendice sur *Le Rouge et le Noir*', in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, ed. by Henri Martineau (Paris: Garnier, 1960), pp. 509-27 (p. 516).

Toutes ces personnes se connaissaient si bien, les habitudes étaient si familièrement patriarcales, que, si, par hasard, le vieil abbé de Sponde était sous le couvert, et Mlle Cormon dans sa chambre, ni Pérotte, la femme de chambre, ni Jacquelin le domestique, ni la cuisinière ne les avertissaient. Le premier venu en attendait un second; puis, quand les habitués étaient en nombre pour un piquet, pour un whist ou un boston, ils commençaient sans attendre l'abbé de Sponde ou Mademoiselle (*CH*, IV, p. 852).

In *La Muse du département*, the narrator is even more explicit in his disdain for the dull routines of provincial life, as these are presented as having remained unchanged since time immemorial:

On joue aux cartes le soir, on danse pendant douze années avec les mêmes personnes, dans les mêmes salons, aux mêmes époques. Cette belle vie est entremêlée de promenades solennelles sur le Mail, de visites d'étiquette entre femmes qui vous demandent où vous achetez vos étoffes. La conversation est bornée au sud de l'intelligence par les observations cachées au fond de l'eau dormante de la vie de province, au nord par les mariages sur le tapis, à l'ouest par les jalousies, à l'est par les petits mots piquants (*CH*, IV, p. 669).

This notion of dull routine is reflected in the dreariness of the small town itself, and in an atmosphere that is created, in part, with metaphor. Balzac's fondness for comparing his characters to animals is well known, and if the function of such metaphors is that '[ils] aident à peindre les créatures balzaciennes, à nous les faire voir',³⁸ then a similar principle can be applied to his provincial towns, and our impression of them as places in which dramatic events are the exception rather than the rule. To build what he describes in *Le Député d'Arcis* as 'le silence profond dans lequel est ensevelie cette petite ville et qui règne dans son endroit le plus vivant' (*CH*, VIII, p. 759), Balzac often compares the streets of his small towns to cloisters and the houses to

³⁸ Léon-François Hoffmann, 'Les métaphores animales dans *Le Père Goriot*', *AB* (1963), 91-105 (p. 99).

monasteries. Indeed, in *Eugénie Grandet*, the streets of Saumur 'sont si tranquilles qu'un étranger les croirait inhabitées' (CH, III, p. 1027). Even the provincial, in *La Muse du département*, is said to go about his business with 'une régularité monastique' (CH, IV, p. 633).

While the image of monasticism brings together the ideas of silence and routine, Balzac completes the picture with an active demonstration of how this lethargic setting affects those who are born or who spend even a short time in the provinces. The approach is another borrowing from the first theories of evolution, and is adapted to show that 'non seulement les organes de l'homme se modifient d'après les lieux où ils se développent, mais aussi son esprit, reçoit les suggestions de la nature, pauvre ou fertile, grandiose ou déprimante, qui l'entoure'.³⁹

The strength of this relationship between the individual and his provincial environment is confirmed in *La Femme abandonnée*, in which Balzac continues the story of Madame de Beauséant, following her rejection by the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto in *Le Père Goriot*.⁴⁰ One of the innovations of the *Scènes de la vie privée* to which this novella belongs, as Pierre Barbéris has noted, is their use of setting: 'c'est le quotidien, c'est le familier qui accèdent à la poésie, à la signification.'⁴¹ Here, it is the daily routine of the provinces that is invested with meaning, as the Parisian, Gaston de Nueil, is sent to Normandy to recover from a bout of illness. The countryside offers him what Paris cannot: 'une nourriture douce, un air froid et l'absence totale de

³⁹ Joan Yvonne Dangelzer, *La Description du milieu dans le roman français de Balzac à Zola* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980; first published 1938), pp. 19-20.

⁴⁰ The fact that *La Femme abandonnée* was a continuation of Madame de Beauséant's story would not become clear until 1835, and the publication of *Le Père Goriot*.

⁴¹ Pierre Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973; repr. with epilogue ('Balzac aujourd'hui?') Kimé, 1999), p. 153.

sensations extrêmes' (*CH*, II, p. 463). Upon his arrival, the young aristocrat is accorded a respectful welcome by his cousin, Madame de Sainte-Sevère, who introduces him to her social circle. He quickly becomes acquainted with 'les gens que cette société exclusive regardait comme étant toute la ville' (*CH*, II, p. 463), from those families whose nobility 'inconnue à cinquante lieues plus loin, passe, dans le département, pour incontestable' (*CH*, II, pp. 463-64), to the rich gentlemen who sit around 'discussing' politics and arranging marriages 'en rapport avec les généalogies qu'ils savent par cœur' (*CH*, II, p. 465). At first, the Baron de Nueil is fascinated by this gallery of provincial characters:

[II] commença par s'amuser de ces personnages; il en dessina, pour ainsi dire, les figures sur son album dans la sapide vérité de leurs physionomies anguleuses, crochues, ridées, dans la plaisante originalité de leurs costumes et de leurs tics; il se délecta des *normanismes* [*sic*] de leur idiome, du fruste de leurs idées et de leurs caractères (*CH*, II, p. 467).

His initial enthusiasm is soon dampened, however, when the slow repetitiveness of provincial life begins to take hold of him. Tired of seeing the same faces, of watching their games and listening to their idle chatter, the young man falls into a state 'qui n'est encore ni l'ennui, ni le dégoût, mais qui en comporte presque tous les effets' (*CH*, II, p. 467). The sameness of this existence threatens to envelop him, as the narrator warns that 'si rien ne le tire de ce monde, il [l'individu] en adopte insensiblement les usages, et se fait à son vide qui le gagne et l'annule' (*CH*, II, p. 467). The dull monotony of the provinces can thus corrode even the will of a Parisian, a fact that stands as an illustration of its pervasiveness. But it is not merely routine which induces

such apathy; in Paris, one might have the same friends and meet in the same salons without becoming so bored. The reason for which the capital becomes such a distant memory for Gaston de Nueil is because, in the provinces, he is surrounded by examples of intellectual mediocrity.

The figures whom the young baron meets in the salons of Bayeux are presented as completely lacking in sophistication. The women believe themselves to be elegantly dressed in a bonnet and a shawl, while their husbands are content to spend the evening playing cards. This unfavourable portrait is confirmed by the narrator, who declares that 'la somme d'intelligence amassée dans toutes ces têtes se compose d'une certaine quantité d'idées anciennes auxquelles se mêlent quelques pensées nouvelles qui se brassent en commun tous les soirs' (*CH*, II, p. 466). As portrayed by Balzac, these provincials are quite incapable of holding a serious discussion on matters of politics, religion, or literature, and so it comes as no surprise when their guest seeks out the more enlightened company of a fellow Parisian, in the alluring form of Madame de Beauséant.

This charge of intellectual mediocrity is one that the author frequently levels at his provinces, distant as they are from Paris, where it seems that fresh ideas can be plucked from the air. 'Elles vous sourient au coin d'une rue,' he tells us in *La Muse du département*, 'elles s'élancent sous une roue de cabriolet avec un jet de boue!' (*CH*, IV, p. 787). He laments at the delight with which the provincial spreads a rumour, and shows him to be ignorant of everything from fashion and style, to the latest developments in medical science. The provinces are shown to be so backward in their thinking that in the Angoulême of *Illusions perdues*, 'le thé se vendait encore chez les

apothicaires, comme une drogue contre les indigestions' (*CH*, v, p. 173). Such narrow-mindedness is ingrained in the provinces of *La Comédie humaine*, and the sad fact is that 'les provinciaux [...], entourés de gens de la même étroitesse de vue, n'auront jamais plus d'esprit qu'à leur naissance'.⁴² If Balzac shows the provinces to be wanting in intellectual refinement, however, he does so with as much empathy as disdain, and demonstrates how the provinces and their inhabitants are starved of the most basic education. The theme is expressed in *Le Curé de Tours*, in the ridiculous mealtime conversations between Mademoiselle Gamard and her lodger, Birotteau:

Ils parlaient de la Presse sans connaître le nombre des journaux, sans avoir la moindre idée de ce qu'était cet instrument moderne. Enfin, M. Birotteau écoutait avec attention Mlle Gamard, quand elle disait qu'un homme nourri d'un œuf chaque matin devait infailliblement mourir à la fin de l'année et que cela s'était vu; qu'un petit pain mollet, mangé sans boire pendant quelques jours, guérissait de la sciatique; que tous les ouvriers qui avaient travaillé à la démolition de l'abbaye Saint-Martin étaient morts dans l'espace de six mois; que certain préfet avait fait tout son possible, sous Bonaparte, pour ruiner les tours de Saint-Gatien, et mille autres contes absurdes (*CH*, IV, p. 205).

The scene is a comical one, though the credulity, not to say ignorance, of Birotteau and his landlady are evidence of Balzac's sensitivity to another historical reality of provincial life. Prior to the introduction, in 1833, of Guizot's charter of primary education, many districts were without schools and colleges, and access to formal teaching was severely restricted. This situation had reached a significant low under the Restoration, when the

⁴² Stevenson, *Paris dans la 'Comédie humaine'*, p. 95.

proportion of military conscripts found to be illiterate was in some departments as high as eighty-one per cent.⁴³

Throughout *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac places similar limitations on the provincial intellect, and offers an even greater number of generalizations on this theme. The narrator of *La Vieille Fille* is particularly forthcoming in this regard, stating that the monotony of his existence makes the provincial indifferent to his surroundings:

En province, personne ne fait attention à une jolie vue, soit que chacun soit blasé, soit défaut de poésie dans l'âme. S'il existe en province un mail, un plan, une promenade d'où se découvre une riche perspective, c'est l'endroit où personne ne va (*CH*, IV, p. 911).

According to Balzac, only those of talent and poetic sensibility, such as Athanase Granson, are able to appreciate the natural beauty of the countryside. Indeed, in *La Vieille Fille*, it is a further illustration of provincial small-mindedness that those who see Athanase contemplating the River Sarthe immediately assume there to be something wrong with him.

This example is also significant insofar as it reveals an approach which Balzac uses to underline the mediocrity of his provinces: he shows the pain and frustration of the talented individual at having to live in a setting which can neither accept nor understand him. This scenario is applied to both male and female characters. In *La Muse du département*, it is a superior woman, Dinah Piédefer, who is made to suffer the inadequacies of her provincial surroundings. Dinah is a woman of bourgeois origins who has succeeded in marrying into the minor nobility of Sancerre. At twenty-seven years her

⁴³ Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 266.

senior, however, Monsieur de La Baudraye has little in common with his wife, and is too avaricious to allow her the means to travel to Paris. As a result, Dinah seeks consolation in intellectual pursuits, writing poetry, and founding a literary society. She is beautiful, and reads widely, ‘jusqu’à des livres de médecine, de statistique, de science, de jurisprudence’ (*CH*, IV, p. 644). Her apparent desire to rival Madame de Staël and George Sand is nevertheless the source of some amusement for Balzac, and it is clear that he feels ‘une sorte de jubilation à railler cette spirituelle de province’.⁴⁴ Equally, though, his interest is in revealing how the provinces restrict the development of her personality. The beginning of the novel sees Dinah endowed with an iron-willed determination that is in keeping with her maiden name (pied-de-fer). Her disappointment in marriage has not distracted her from a desire to improve herself and, it may be said, those around her. The narrator tells us that Madame de La Baudraye ‘se refusa net au clabaudage des petites nouvelles, à cette médisance de bas étage qui fait le fond de la langue en province’. Her salon provides a forum for serious discussion, ‘une espèce d’oasis où l’on faisait trêve à la vie de province’ (*CH*, IV, p. 641), while the mere sight of her in the street, with her grace of movement and the elegance of her dress, inspires both fear and admiration. Her creator is, however, no less determined to underline the futility of swimming against the provincial tide, and in *La Muse du département*, portrays what Per Nykrog has termed ‘une lutte entre le “mouvement” dans un esprit qui veut vivre, et la “résistance” d’un milieu lourdement inerte’.⁴⁵ The frustrations of small-town life for the superior

⁴⁴ Lucette Besson, ‘L’école des femmes selon Balzac’, *Le Courrier balzacien*, 83 (2001), 3-21 (p. 12).

⁴⁵ Per Nykrog, *La Pensée de Balzac dans la ‘Comédie humaine’* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965), p. 183.

woman were ones with which Balzac was familiar. In a letter of 1835, his friend, Zulma Carraud, described the feeling in painfully striking terms:

Le vulgarisme s'étend sur moi, comme la tache d'huile, et je ne puis y porter remède. Tout ce qui est commun dans les manières et dans l'expression me révolte encore et m'irrite à un haut degré [...]. J'abhorre ne m'entretenir que des faits, (et quels faits, bon Dieu! que ceux qui occupent la ville d'Issoudun!) et ceux qui vivent avec moi ne veulent mettre aucune idée en commun. Ajoutez à cela le manque de lecture et vous arriverez à mon inévitable crétinisation.⁴⁶

This knowledge would not be wasted on Balzac, who portrays Dinah de La Baudraye as suffering for having more talent and for being more beautiful than those around her. The women of Sancerre, 'constamment blessées par la priorité que Dinah sut s'attribuer en fait de modes' (*CH*, IV, p. 641), desert her salon, cruelly nicknaming her the 'Sapho de Saint-Satur' (*CH*, IV, p. 642). Their revenge is to accuse Dinah of wishing to keep only the company of men, with the result that 'pas une de ses démarches, même la plus indifférente, ne passait sans être critiquée, ou dénaturée' (*CH*, IV, p. 643). Her attempt at forming a literary society also fails, since by the second year, its members are engaged in more orthodox provincial pursuits: 'on y jouait aux dominos, au billard, à la bouillotte, en buvant du vin chaud sucré, du punch et des liqueurs' (*CH*, IV, p. 646). And, in a final authorial indictment of the mediocrity of her surroundings, Dinah, too, is made to lose some of her outward sophistication, as she makes do with one dress instead of six, and one hat instead of four. Though she does not realize it, the superior woman is herself reduced to 'une femme de province' (*CH*, IV, p. 652). This is her punishment for rebelling against the reality noted in *La Vieille Fille*: 'En province il n'est pas permis

⁴⁶ *Corr.*, II, pp. 663-64 (19 April 1835).

d'être original: c'est avoir des idées incomprises par les autres, et l'on y veut l'égalité de l'esprit aussi bien que l'égalité des mœurs' (*CH*, IV, p. 864). Her experience demonstrates that neither intelligence nor sophistication can broaden the narrow horizons of the provincial setting.

The suffering with which the provinces of *La Comédie humaine* are so often associated is not, however, restricted to those characters with intelligence and refinement. It also afflicts those who possess neither. The theme is illustrated in *Pierrette*, a novel in which Balzac returns to a discussion of celibacy as 'un état contraire à la société' (*CH*, IV, p. 21). Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis Rogron are brother and sister, former haberdashers who have sold their business in the Rue Saint-Denis, and retired to what was planned as a life of ease and comfort in their native Provins. The small town of their birth nestles in a lush valley on the borders of Champagne, and appears to the reader as a picturesque setting, charming in its preservation of ancient ramparts and cobbled streets. And it is this charm, precisely, which has established the town as a maternal space to which its 'children' long to return:

Cette ville, avec ses souvenirs historiques, la mélancolie de ses ruines, la gaieté de sa vallée, ses délicieuses ravines pleines de haies échevelées et de fleurs, sa rivière crénelée de jardins, excite si bien l'amour de ses enfants, qu'ils se conduisent comme les Auvergnats, les Savoyards et les Français: s'ils sortent de Provins pour aller chercher fortune, ils y reviennent toujours. Le proverbe: Mourir au gîte, fait pour les lapins et les gens fidèles, semble être la devise des Provinois (*CH*, IV, p. 48).

Like their regional compatriots, the Rogrons have no greater ambition than to return home. 'S'ils avaient été très doués,' suggests Takao Kashiwagi, 'ils auraient fait leur chemin à Paris, ils l'auraient conquis comme de grands

hommes de province.’⁴⁷ Their failure to reach the pinnacle of Parisian society does not, however, devalue the Rogrons’s achievement. Possessing neither money nor talent, they have had to work hard to scrape together their small fortune, an experience that leaves them increasingly exhausted and nostalgic for home: ‘Le frère et la sœur commençaient à trouver l’atmosphère de la rue Saint-Denis malsaine; et l’odeur des boues de la Halle leur faisait désirer le parfum des roses de Provins’ (*CH*, IV, p. 49). Yet their native town proves to be the most unwelcoming of mothers, revealing what Nicole Mozet describes as ‘l’ambiguïté fondamentale de la province balzacienne’, a setting that is ‘à la fois paradis et enfer’.⁴⁸ The Rogrons had wished for nothing more than to renovate their late father’s house, transforming it into a miniature palace in which to entertain the local bourgeoisie. Their disappointment is nevertheless assured when they are once again confronted with the image of Paris, in the form of the beautiful Madame Tiphaine, ‘la reine de la ville’ (*CH*, IV, p. 52), and the wife of the Président du Tribunal. The image is one with which the brother and sister cannot compete. In the company of Madame Tiphaine and her circle, Denis Rogron is unable to engage in intelligent conversation, while Sylvie’s refusal to play cards with good grace is a serious shortcoming in a salon where ‘chacun savait s’y tenir et y parler de manière à être agréable à tous’ (*CH*, IV, p. 55). Their subsequent exclusion is a bitter blow, particularly to the old maid ‘[qui] se crut l’objet de la jalousie de tout ce monde’ (*CH*, IV, p. 57). Thus denied the social pleasures which both had craved on their return from the capital, the Rogrons are excluded from the legitimist salon because of their inability to conform to the standards that Paris has set.

⁴⁷ Takao Kashiwagi, *La Trilogie des ‘Célibataires’ d’Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Nizet, 1983), p. 103.

⁴⁸ Nicole Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 214.

Balzac, for his part, has little sympathy with the Rogrons, and describes them in a manner that is entirely in keeping with his general contempt for the celibate.⁴⁹ Denis Rogron is an old bachelor of the somewhat ridiculous variety, while Sylvie stands out as a ruthless portrait of an old maid. Her ugliness 'eût fait fuir le plus déterminé des Cosaques de 1815' (*CH*, IV, pp. 45-46), a statement that is reinforced with an abundance of animal metaphors. After closing her shutters at night, we see her disappear back into bedroom 'par un mouvement semblable à celui d'une tortue qui cache sa tête après l'avoir sortie de sa carapace' (*CH*, IV, p. 33), and Madame Tiphaine cannot help but notice her 'pattes de homard' and 'voix d'hyène enrhumée' (*CH*, IV, p. 56). And yet, Balzac is not content merely to point a mocking finger at Sylvie, and to make the beautiful Madame Tiphaine a natural target for her jealousy. Instead, he links her behaviour to the provinces, and demonstrates how the narrowness of this setting exacerbates the hatred that the old maid feels.

Unable to establish a salon of her own, and with no family to which to devote herself, Sylvie Rogron can find no positive outlet in the provinces for her energies. In a final attempt to win favour with the Tiphaines, she even agrees to provide a home for her cousin, Pierrette, a Breton orphan whose grandparents can no longer afford to keep her. When this move fails, it is the innocent Pierrette who falls victim to the extremes of emotion for which the spinsters of *La Comédie humaine* have an inordinate capacity. Sylvie cannot tolerate the fact that the angelic child is welcome to play with the Tiphaine

⁴⁹ The pessimistic tone of *Pierrette* owes much to Balzac's contemporaneous involvement in the Peytel Affair. A former journalist turned solicitor, Sébastien Peytel was sentenced to death at Bourg assizes in August 1839, having been found guilty of murdering his wife and their manservant. Balzac blamed his friend's conviction on 'ces implacables haines de petite ville qui ont agi dans l'Instruction' (Honoré de Balzac, 'Lettre sur le procès de Peytel, notaire à Belley' (1839), in Pierre Antoine Perrod, *L'Affaire Peytel* (Paris: Hachette, 1958), pp. 533-72 (p. 548)).

children, while she herself is condemned to 'une vie solitaire et sans occupation' (*CH*, IV, p. 62). At first, her anger manifests itself in waspish remarks. 'Pour un rien, elle [Pierrette] était appelée bête et stupide, sottie et maladroite' (*CH*, IV, p. 88). Later, the child is forced into the role of servant, which in turn aggravates her delicate health. This nagging cruelty is raised to more terrible heights after the old maid has agreed to marry Colonel Gouraud, and convinces herself that Pierrette is encouraging his affection. In a fit of rage, Sylvie attempts to prise what she thinks is a love-letter from the child's hand. Unaware that the letter is from Pierrette's friend, Brigaut, 'elle prit le bras de Pierrette et se mit à frapper le poing sur l'appui de la fenêtre, sur le marbre de la cheminée, comme quand on veut casser une noix pour en avoir le fruit' (*CH*, IV, p. 137). This distressing scene hastens Pierrette's death, and serves to underline the cruelty of which the provincial woman is capable in a setting that denies her personal fulfilment.

The Provins of *Pierrette* thus appears as a place of bitter rivalries, cruelty, and suffering. Add to this the constant intrusion of Paris, and the novel stands as a meeting-place for those themes that are most representative of the provincial setting. The relative proximity of Provins to the capital nevertheless disguises another recurrent characteristic of Balzac's provinces: their isolation. In a strongly centralized country, he tells us in *La Muse du département*, one in which 'les gens de talent, les artistes, les hommes supérieurs, tout coq à plumes éclatantes s'envole à Paris' (*CH*, IV, p. 652),⁵⁰ his small towns often appear as museum pieces, where values and traditions have remained unchanged for centuries. This argument is illustrated in *Le Cabinet des*

⁵⁰ For a discussion of Balzac's views on centralization, see for example Bernard Guyon, 'Balzac et le problème de la centralisation', in *De Ronsard à Breton: hommages à Marcel Raymond* (Paris: Corti, 1967), pp. 169-78.

antiques, and in Balzac's portrait of an old aristocracy struggling to come to terms with a new century. The title of the novel is the nickname given to the salon of the Marquis d'Esgrignon, a man whose pride in his noble blood is unshakeable. Descended from Carol, 'un des plus puissants chefs venus jadis du Nord pour conquérir et féodaliser les Gaules (*CH*, IV, p. 966), the Marquis was separated from most of his property by the Revolution of 1789, but refused to emigrate. This determined stance drew admiration from his neighbours. 'Le respect qu'il avait inspiré aux gens de la campagne préserva sa tête de l'échafaud' (*CH*, IV, p. 967), and when he emerged from hiding, the Marquis was able to move into a house which was once part of his estate, and which his former steward, the loyal Chesnel, had bought in his own name. Nevertheless, when we meet him in 1800, the Marquis d'Esgrignon is shown to have learned little from the loss of his former privileges, or from having been spared the guillotine. His indifference to the passage of time is demonstrated by his breaking of his watch at the hour of his wife's death, and it is this same indifference that encourages him to re-establish his salon, 'ce petit faubourg Saint-Germain de province' (*CH*, IV, p. 974). Even in his dress, he maintains the style of the eighteenth century, wearing a gold-embroidered waistcoat, and 'un habit bleu à grandes basques, à pans retroussés et fleurdelisés, singulier costume qu'avait adopté le Roi' (*CH*, IV, p. 997). But it is especially his attitudes that stand out as being those of a bygone age. 'Les d'Esgrignon portent d'or à deux bandes de gueules,' he tells Chesnel, 'et rien, depuis neuf cents ans, n'a changé dans leur écusson; il est tel que le premier jour' (*CH*, IV, p. 971). He is quite oblivious to the fact that noble blood is no longer the distinction that it once was, and that under the Restoration, wealth

and talent have become the most valuable prerequisites for social advancement. The Marquis d'Esgrignon can thus be described as 'un vivant anachronisme',⁵¹ a survivor of his country's absolutist past, and one whom the provinces are responsible for having preserved intact.

The small town of Alençon protects the Marquis from the bloodshed of the Terror, and in so doing, isolates him from the realities of historical change.⁵² This fact does not escape the attention of Félicien Marceau. 'Dans leur province, le milieu étroit où ils vivent,' he asks, including both the d'Esgrignon and the du Guénic of *Béatrix* in his remarks, 'qui pourrait leur dire que le roi qui revient n'est pas exactement celui pour qui ils ont bataillé?'⁵³ As this reference to a 'milieu étroit' suggests, it is not simply because of his 'opiniâtreté de Franc' (*CH*, IV, p. 969) that the Marquis continues to speak of 'la taille' instead of 'les impôts', or that he insists on wearing a coat decorated with the Fleur-de-Lys. Safe in Normandy, he has kept his distance from the tumultuous events that during his lifetime have redrawn the socio-political map of France. It is precisely because of the cloistered nature of his existence that he has remained both convinced of his superiority, and proud of the House '[qui] s'était conservée au fond de sa province comme les pieux charbonnés de quelque pont de César se conservent au fond d'un fleuve' (*CH*, IV, p. 966). Significantly, Balzac does not punish the Marquis for his outmoded beliefs, and allows him to die in total ignorance of the machinations of du Croisier [Bousquier], which bring the noble family to its knees. Instead, he underlines how, in perpetuating such doctrines, the

⁵¹ Jean Forest, *L'Aristocratie balzacienne* (Paris: Corti, 1972), p. 161.

⁵² The narrator does not name Alençon directly, though as a loose sequel to *La Vieille Fille*, we can assume that *Le Cabinet des antiques* takes the same town as its setting.

⁵³ Félicien Marceau, *Balzac et son monde*, rev. edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 480.

isolation of the provinces can have a detrimental effect on the development of the next generation, here represented by the Marquis's son. Victurnien d'Esgrignon is moulded in the image of his father:

Le dogme de sa suprématie fut inculqué au comte Victurnien dès qu'une idée put lui entrer dans la cervelle. Hors le Roi, tous les seigneurs du royaume étaient ses égaux. Au-dessous de la noblesse, il n'y avait pour lui que des inférieurs [...], des ennemis vaincus, conquis, desquels il ne fallait faire aucun compte (*CH*, IV, p. 986).

He learns to ride and to shoot, and does both with aplomb. Yet this aristocratic education fails to equip him for a useful career, and sets him even more at odds with the world than his father. The Marquis does not realize that 'on entrainait ni dans la marine ni dans l'armée comme jadis; que, pour devenir sous-lieutenant de cavalerie sans passer par les Écoles spéciales, il fallait servir dans les Pages' (*CH*, IV, p. 1001). He educates his son in the ideas of the Ancien Régime, and encourages him to believe that his title alone will be enough to secure him a prestigious post. The result is that Victurnien 'voyait dans sa noblesse un marchepied bon à l'élever au-dessus des autres hommes' (*CH*, IV, p. 1006). The son nevertheless differs from his father in one crucial respect: he is exposed to Paris, and therefore forced to acknowledge the real nature of France under the Restoration.

In the capital, Victurnien realizes for himself that 'son éducation, quelque belle et pieuse qu'elle fût, avait le défaut de l'avoir trop isolé, de lui avoir caché le train de la vie à son époque, qui, certes, n'était pas le train d'une ville de province' (*CH*, IV, p. 1006). Clutching a letter of recommendation from his father, he presents himself to the Duc de Lenoncourt, whom he assumes will hand him a role in the service of the King. The Duke, however, cannot help

but smile as he reads the Marquis d'Esgrignon's letter. The moment marks the beginning of Victurnien's Parisian education, as he realizes that 'il y avait plus de soixante lieues entre le Cabinet des Antiques et les Tuileries; il y avait une distance de plusieurs siècles' (CH, IV, p. 1007). Like Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues*, Victurnien goes up to Paris filled with dreams of glory, only to discover that he is ill prepared for the challenges of this monstrous city. The small town of Alençon, with its silent streets and age-old traditions, have blinded him to the real nature of a changing world, and might therefore be considered the real source of his failure. After the effects of his lavish spending have stretched Chesnel's resources to the limit, and threatened the Maison d'Esgrignon with ruin, a disillusioned Victurnien crashes back down to the provinces, and is forced to marry the daughter of the wealthy du Croisier. There are, declares Philippe Berthier, few themes more Balzacian than this: 'un jeune homme pur sorti des entrailles de sa province profonde, façonné par les valeurs de vieille roche et qui, montant à Paris pour s'y faire son destin, affronte au monde tel qu'il est.'⁵⁴ This theme of the young provincial who undergoes his *Bildung* in Paris is one to which I shall return later in the thesis.

If Balzac's total vision of provincial France is built on the thematic pillars of mediocrity and suffering, his provinces are also endowed, however, with a set of contrasting, and wholly positive, features. Isolated, both small town and countryside are shown to be immune to the greed and duplicity that are endemic in Paris. Unaffected by what he condemns in *La Peau de chagrin* as 'cette maladie humaine que nous nommons la civilisation' (CH, x, p. 142),

⁵⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *La Vieille Fille, Le Cabinet des antiques*, ed. by Philippe Berthier (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 36.

they are a setting in which the values of hard work and integrity have survived. The moral goodness of the provinces forms the backdrop for the Parisian drama in *Le Père Goriot*. After Eugène de Rastignac has arrived in the capital from the Midi, he receives a letter from his mother. 'Crois-en le cœur de ta mère,' she writes, warning him not to succumb to the temptations of the city. 'Les voies tortueuses ne mènent à rien de grand. La patience et la résignation doivent être les vertus des jeunes gens qui sont dans ta position' (*CH*, III, pp. 126-27). In this, as in other positive aspects of Balzacian provincialism, the influence of Rousseau is obvious. Balzac was a fervent admirer of the work of the Genevan philosopher, and any analysis of his treatment of French provincial life must acknowledge 'la profondeur de l'imprégnation rousseauiste'.⁵⁵ In the scenes depicting the grape-harvest in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, the Rousseauist model is much in evidence, as the countryside is shown to be both happy and prosperous: 'Les fruits sont tous mûrs. La moisson est faite, le pain devient moins cher, et cette abondance rend la vie heureuse' (*CH*, IX, p. 1059). Like Clarens, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the home of Madame de Mortsauf is a seemingly idyllic rural community. Amongst the vines, 'les rangs sont confondus: femmes, enfants, maîtres et gens, tout le monde participe à la divine cueillette' (*CH*, IX, pp. 1059-60). At the end of their day of toil, the peasants are permitted to eat at the same table as their masters. The atmosphere even quells the madness of Monsieur de Mortsauf, and after he has joined in the harvest, we learn that 'pour la première fois depuis longtemps, le comte n'eut ni maussaderie, ni cruauté' (*CH*, IX, p. 1061).

⁵⁵ Raymond Trousson, *Balzac: disciple et juge de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva: Droz, 1983), p. 123.

The improvement in the mental health of Monsieur de Mortsauf points to another feature of the provinces, namely their capacity for healing.⁵⁶ In *La Peau de chagrin*, the ailing Raphaël de Valentin is advised to visit the baths at Aix. After killing a man in a duel, he flees to Mont-Dore, in Auvergne, where he lodges with a family of peasants. It appears the perfect setting in which to rid himself of the sense of a curse:

La santé débordait dans cette nature plantureuse, la vieillesse et l'enfance y étaient belles; enfin il y avait dans tous ces types d'existence un laisser-aller primordial, une routine de bonheur qui donnait un démenti à nos capucinades philosophiques (*CH*, X, p. 279).

Living with a peasant family at the foot of the mountains, Raphaël finds, if not a cure for his ills, then a brief respite, 'la vie de l'enfance, la vie paresseuse, la vie du sauvage': 'Ainsi vécut Raphaël pendant plusieurs jours, sans soins, sans désirs, éprouvant un mieux sensible, un bien-être extraordinaire, qui calma ses inquiétudes, apaisa ses souffrances' (*CH*, X, p. 282). Like the peasants themselves, Raphaël lives in harmonious rhythm with his natural surroundings, in a state of contentment that recalls Rousseau's *Émile* (1762): 'Ce n'est que dans cet état primitif que l'équilibre du pouvoir et du désir se rencontre, et que l'homme n'est pas malheureux.'⁵⁷ For the young Marquis, however, the simplicity of provincial life becomes more than he can stand. Accustomed to Paris, where Nature is hidden and people change their attitudes

⁵⁶ On this point, see also Derek P. Scales, 'Balzac and Nature', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 16 (1979), 68-79 (pp. 75-76).

⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, in *Œuvres complètes*, IV (1969), 239-877 (p. 304).

‘comme un laquais prend un habit de livrée’,⁵⁸ the peasants reveal themselves to be too honest. ‘Le terrible: *Frère, il faut mourir*, des trappistes, semblait constamment écrit dans les yeux des paysans avec lesquels vivait Raphaël’ (*CH*, x, p. 285). He grows weary of their pity, and longs to return to Paris. ‘Cette incapacité à supporter les sentiments naturels’, argues Linda Rudich, ‘montre à quel point l’homme civilisé a dû se créer une seconde nature pour survivre dans une société où on se conserve qu’en se défendant contre autrui.’⁵⁹ The provinces may offer comfort in the short term, but Balzac, this time subverting a more positive provincial stereotype, warns that not even this natural way of life is entirely uncomplicated.⁶⁰

Provincial/Regional Tensions

It was not merely to contemporary regionalism and seventeenth-century provincialism, however, that Balzac would have to be sensitive. His task would be to reconcile these movements during a period in which they came into direct contact. French provincial literature of the 1830s reveals a constant tension between the desire to explore the regional identities, and the survival

⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Œuvres complètes*, II, p. 234. Cf. Ronald Grimsley, ‘Rousseau’s Paris’, in *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Paul Fritz and David Williams (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), pp. 3-18.

⁵⁹ Linda Rudich, ‘Une interprétation de *La Peau de chagrin*’, *AB* (1971), 205-33 (p. 228).

⁶⁰ For the reaction of provincial readers to *La Peau de chagrin*, see for example Pierre Barbéris, ‘L’accueil de la critique aux premières grandes œuvres de Balzac (1831-1832)’, *AB* (1968), 165-95 (pp. 182-89). Of the most interesting reactions was that of Charles de Bernard, who reviewed the novel in the *Gazette de Franche-Comté* on 13 August 1831. Balzac thanked Bernard for his praise (*Corr.*, I, pp. 570-72; August 1831), the latter replying with what Barbéris terms a ‘véritable manifeste d’un mal du siècle provincial’ (‘L’accueil de la critique’, 1968, p. 183). In this letter of 16 October 1831, Bernard writes: ‘Votre philosophie mi-parti Byron et Rabelais me charme plus que je n’oserais l’avouer dans notre province prude et bigote; car il vous faut savoir que nous avons parmi nos abonnés force curés et douairières, d’autre part la Franche-Comté passe encore aujourd’hui (pure calomnie j’espère) pour la Bétie de la France. Vous comprendrez donc que nous sommes ici quelque peu bridés et que nous ne pouvons guère comme vous le faites à Paris livrer au public l’intime de nos sentiments et de nos croyances’ (*Corr.*, I, p. 599).

of the seventeenth-century satirical notion of the provinces as an undifferentiated whole. This tension is illustrated particularly well by the series of 'Lettres sur la province', which appeared in *Le Voleur* between December 1830 and February 1831, during the publication of Balzac's own 'Lettres sur Paris'. The stated aim of these four letters was to record contrasting regional reactions to the very recent July Revolution. This interest, however, blends gradually into a more general discussion of small-town behaviour, one in which a familiar satire on provincial life co-exists with a plea for greater understanding of the socio-economic problems impacting upon large areas of the countryside. Signed 'L'Observateur provincial', the first letter, published on 15 December 1830,⁶¹ has its author making a stop in Mortagne, where he takes up his pen to record the strength of local opinion on the events of the previous summer. 'Vous êtes sans doute persuadé comme moi', he tells his readers, 'qu'il n'est si mince village que ne fournisse une mine abondante d'observations'.

Acknowledging that no two regions are alike, he goes on to state that the larger towns of southern France, such as Aix and Marseilles, are on the brink of unleashing another White Terror. The Dauphinois, for their part, are said to have blindly embraced the same kind of liberalism as the people of Languedoc, while 'le département des Basses-Alpes', we are told, 'est généralement partisan d'une monarchie représentative assez forte pour contenir tous les extrêmes'. At first sight, this discussion of regional difference seems little more than an excuse to mock 'les effrayantes diversités et

⁶¹ L'Observateur provincial, 'Lettre sur la province', in *Le Voleur: revue de la littérature, des sciences, des arts, des tribunaux et des théâtres*, 15 December 1830. Each of the four letters appears on the front page of the newspaper.

ignorances provinciales',⁶² and a means of amusing a Parisian readership. The question is more complex, however, because in the first 'Lettre', an attempt is also made to discuss regional problems in anything but satirical terms. In the Alps and Var, for instance, the preoccupation is said to be less with the politics of the new regime than with its ability to respond to the needs of the local economy. In these mountainous areas, reports the 'Observateur', 'on se plaint très sérieusement du mauvais état des routes, et tout ministère qui ne songera pas à les faire réparer [...] n'aura pas par-là de nombreux amis'. In choosing to dwell on the subject of rural roads, the fictional author identifies both a regional grievance, and a problem of national proportions. During the July Monarchy, the state of the provincial road network provoked fierce debate, with agronomists such as Adrien de Gasparin condemning rough dirt tracks as 'une des plaies de l'agriculture moderne'.⁶³ The fact that the 'Observateur' is sensitive to this contemporary debate is significant, his comments indicating a serious, rather than satirical, engagement with the socio-economic problems of rural France. What the reference to the road network also signals, however, is a lapse in focus. Having begun his first letter with an attempt to distinguish between the politics of the southern departments, he ends with a general remark on rural poverty. 'Les malheureux de Paris sont occupés', he complains, in a tone of evident frustration. 'Mais le gouvernement voudra-t-il comprendre qu'il est encore des Français, sans pain, jusqu'au plus profond de nos campagnes?' The question is admirable insofar as it draws attention to the

⁶² Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle: contribution à une physiologie du monde moderne*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), II: 1830-1833: *une expérience de l'absurde: de la prise de conscience à l'expression*, p. 851.

⁶³ M. de Gasparin, *Recueil de mémoires d'agriculture et d'économie rurale*, 3 vols (Paris: Huzard, 1829-41), I: *Guide du propriétaire de biens ruraux affermés*, p. 215.

plight of rural people, but in regional terms, there is an obvious failure to be specific.

In the edition of 25 December 1830, the 'Observateur' returns, albeit briefly, to the theme of regional difference. Turning his attention to the field of artistic and cultural endeavour, he argues that some towns and regions are anything but underdeveloped. He readily admits to enjoying the articles of Samuel-Henry Berthoud, in the *Gazette de Cambrai*, and proclaims Nantes to be 'l'Edimbourg de la France'. He also lauds the founders of 'ces agréables recueils littéraires' such as the *Revue de l'Ouest* and *L'Ami de la Charte*, regional reviews that appeared in ever-increasing numbers during the 1830s:

Honneur aux jeunes hommes qui ont le courage de se distinguer sous le toit qui les a vus naître, en dépit des étroites jalousies, du commérage et de tous les étouffoirs de leur pays. Honneur à eux! Ils ont commencé l'œuvre de *décentralisation* qu'achevera la loi communale et départementale.

This optimism, and the author's declaration that there is 'de l'avenir littéraire pour les provinces', nevertheless proves to be short-lived. Instead, he proceeds to underline the dominance of Paris, and the damage that this continues to cause to provincial France. In his third letter, on 5 February 1831, he asks whether the provinces really are equipped to satisfy the ambitions of their most talented inhabitants. Answering with a resounding negative, he claims that Paris, 'en isolant les provinces, leur a enlevé l'énergie de leurs facultés'. Within its contemporary context, the remark was pertinent, as the neglect of the provincial education sector confirms. No new universities were established outside of Paris during the Restoration, meaning that most provincials who sought to gain an education were forced to undertake their studies in the

capital. Between 1809 and 1839, the proportion of medical students residing in Paris, but originating in the provinces, reached ninety-two per cent, the only other faculties of Medicine being at Strasbourg and Montpellier.⁶⁴ This migration, we are told, has turned provincial France into an intellectual wasteland, where those left behind are incapable of thinking for themselves. The provincial may subscribe to Parisian newspapers, but he does so only because reading is 'une habitude imposée par la nécessité de remplir quelques-unes des longues heures de la journée'. No new opinions are formed in a provincial household, only ones that the master has gleaned from the newspaper, and that he recites in the company of his neighbours, 'avec la certitude de ne point rencontrer de contradicteurs'. Here, there is no room for original thought: 'Là, le mot d'artiste est un mot vil ou sans signification. Là, artiste veut dire comédien, et comédien est toujours synonyme d'histrion'. Any literature produced in this barren territory is, consequently, nothing more than imitation:

C'est encore la littérature académique, la littérature pâle et blême de l'empire, sans originalité et sans énergie dans les pensées, travaillant et suant pour acquérir une détestable uniformité, et prenant pour du génie une certaine correction mathématique qui s'assouplit à un certain arrangement de phrases, sous le niveau de la médiocrité. Les jeunes gens qui font des vers imitent la poésie de Delille et de Dorat, et ces esprits serviles, pauvres d'idées et d'inspirations, ne soupçonnent guère d'autre immoralité que la gloire assez équivoque que dispense à ses abonnés le journal du département.

In the fourth letter, on 25 February 1831, the 'Observateur' abandons himself entirely to the familiar stereotypes of provincial life. In the depths of

⁶⁴ Jean-Claude Caron, *Généralisations romantiques: les étudiants de Paris et le Quartier Latin (1814-1851)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1991), p. 61.

provincial France, he exclaims, there is 'rien de spontané ni d'original; rien qui révèle une pensée féconde'. There is no diversity of opinions as there is in Paris. Political allegiances are decided, not in response to events on the national stage, but on the basis of local rivalries and intrigues: 'Dupré s'est jeté dans l'opposition, parce que madame Alice est libérale. Boislin est ministériel, depuis qu'il hante des fonctionnaires. Armand, le roturier, veut une révolution, parce que Saint-Alban, le noble, veut une restauration.' While stating his intention to reveal 'ces divisions intestines de la province', the author fails to pursue his discussion of regional difference, and contents himself instead with a generalized indictment of small-town behaviour. The themes are familiar, as he ranges from the 'deux passions [qui] font toute la vie de province [...], l'envie et la médisance', to the danger of living within the narrow confines of the provinces, where 'un coup de langue est un trait mortel'. As an illustration of the rising tension within provincial theme, the value of the 'Lettres sur la province' is nevertheless incontestable. Though their unnamed author yields to the temptation of satirical cliché, he begins with an overt acknowledgement of regional difference, and attempts a serious discussion of the economic underdevelopment of provincial France, subjects that would receive extensive treatment in the provincial literature of the 1830s.

In Balzac's own work, there is much evidence of a similar tension between regional difference and provincial uniformity. The contrast finds its most obvious expression in *Béatrix*. A novel published in two parts, in 1839 and 1845, the text is best known as a crude fictional representation of the

affair between Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult.⁶⁵ It is also, however, a work in which the notion of provincial life in general co-exists with a study of Brittany and the Breton temperament in particular. In preparing his manuscript for *Béatrix*, Balzac was careful not to use the formulation 'ville de province'.⁶⁶ If he hoped to distinguish his setting, Guérande, from other provincial towns in *La Comédie humaine*, the differences are nevertheless minor. At the fictional Hôtel du Guénic, the routines of provincial life have remained unchanged for years. Evenings are centred around a game of cards that itself becomes a symbol of provincial resistance to change: 'La mouche triompha des jeux modernes comme triomphaient partout les choses anciennes sur les nouvelles en Bretagne' (*CH*, II, p. 672). The setting is populated with familiar types: Charlotte de Kergarouët, whom the narrator scorns for having 'le parler bref et décidé des filles de province', and her mother, the Vicountess, 'le type de la provinciale', a woman who is described as 'grande, sèche, flétrie, pleine de prétentions' (*CH*, II, p. 760). The town also has its woman of talent, Félicité des Touches, who knows only too well the frustrations of provincial life. As a young woman, 'la médiocrité du monde de province l'ennuyait' (*CH*, II, p. 691), leading her to seek consolation in writing, and ultimately, an outlet for her talents in Paris.⁶⁷ Writing novels under the pseudonym of Camille Maupin, Félicité is condemned for a talent that her provincial compatriots fail to understand or appreciate. Instead, when Calyste du Guénic begins to visit her

⁶⁵ For a recent account of the relationship between Liszt and Marie d'Agoult, and the reflection of their affair in *Béatrix*, see Richard Bolster, *Marie d'Agoult: The Rebel Countess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 176, 193, 198, and 208.

⁶⁶ Apparently a deliberate omission on Balzac's part. In his manuscript, he removes a comparison to other French provincial towns: 'Ces différents caractères se retrouvent plus ou moins à Issoudun la grande ville du Berry' (*CH*, II, p. 1462).

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between Paris and the provinces in this novel, see for example Aline Mura, *Béatrix, ou la Logique des contraires* (Paris: Champion, 1997), pp. 23-36.

home, the locals are outraged at what they perceive as the corruption of one of their young seigneurs by ‘une femme de mœurs équivoques, occupée de théâtre, hantant les comédiens et les comédiennes, mangeant sa fortune avec des folliculaires, des peintres, des musiciens, la société du diable, enfin!’ (*CH*, II, p. 676). In short, with their longstanding routines, their boredom and mediocrity, and the local opinion of the capital as a place of moral perdition, the provinces of *Béatrix* appear wholly unexceptional within Balzac’s literary output.

It is the novel’s portrait of Brittany that marks it out for special consideration, as Balzac extends his vision beyond familiar provincial stereotypes, and works towards a particularized study of the Breton character. The portrait focuses on Guérande, a town that is isolated in both time and space. ‘Enceinte de ses puissantes murailles’ (*CH*, II, p. 639), it appears on the horizon as a medieval fortress that continues to resist the march of progress and civilization.⁶⁸ The narrator reminds us, however, that the town has remained locked in the past, not for reasons of political neglect, but because of the strength of the Breton identity. This is a town that is ‘essentiellement bretonne, catholique fervente, silencieuse, recueillie, où les idées nouvelles ont peu d’accès’ (*CH*, II, p. 640). The locals have a stubborn pride in preserving their town, and of the houses in which they live, we learn that ‘nulle d’elles n’a senti sur sa façade le marteau de l’architecte, le pinceau du badigeonneur, ni faibli sous le poids d’un étage ajouté’ (*CH*, II, p. 639). This resistance to change is reflected in the Baron du Guénic, who stands as the living

⁶⁸ For a discussion of this novel’s treatment of Brittany as reflecting contemporary interest in the Middle Ages, see for example Isabelle Durand-Le Guern, ‘Province et passé: la représentation de la Bretagne dans *Béatrix*’, in Djourachkovitch and Leclerc, eds., *Paris <> Province*, pp. 83-96.

representation of this ancient province. 'En lui,' we are told, 'le granit breton s'était fait homme' (*CH*, II, p. 651).

The text is one in which the adjective 'breton' is recurrent, and it is clear that, for Balzac, the word has connotations that the reader is expected to recognize. It is synonymous with loyalty, but also with primitive passion. Though noble and handsome, Calyste du Guénic retains an underlying savagery that is characteristic of Balzac's Bretons, and it is 'la furie bretonne de son amour' (*CH*, II, p. 776) that leads him to push Béatrix from the cliff during their walk at Le Croisic. Far from being a condemnation of provincial underdevelopment, however, *Béatrix* is a novel that valorizes the Breton identity. The Breton characters may possess a degree of primitivism, but they are also able to express their regional identity with words rather than violence. When the Vicomtesse de Kergarouët begins to tell stories which mock the stupidity of the 'savages' of Saint-Nazaire, Félicité gives a cold riposte: 'J'aime la Bretagne, madame [...], je suis née à Guérande' (*CH*, II, p. 763). Even the servant, Gasselin, is sufficiently articulate to describe Brittany as 'le plus beau pays du monde' (*CH*, II, p. 758). For Balzac, meanwhile, the western province becomes the focal point of a reflection on the state of post-revolutionary society. The town and province are backward, socially and economically stagnant, but here, at least, there is a place for religion, morality, and hierarchy, in stark contrast to society outside its borders, where 'les mœurs changent tous les dix ans' (*CH*, II, p. 650). This nostalgia for the past is expressed by Sabine de Grandlieu, whose return to Brittany with her new husband sees her delight in playing 'le rôle d'une châtelaine adorée de ses vassaux comme si la révolution de 1830 et celle de 1789 n'avaient jamais

abattu de bannières' (*CH*, II, pp. 850-51). 'Ah! la noble et sublime Bretagne, quel pays de croyance et de religion!' she continues in a letter to her mother in Paris. 'Mais le progrès la guette, on y fait des ponts, des routes; les idées viendront, et adieu le sublime' (*CH*, II, p. 851). This region, more than any other, demands modernization, though the novelist leaves us in no doubt that the price of progress will be the loss of the unique Breton identity.

This chapter has investigated the tension between regionalism and provincialism in Balzac's work. From this analysis it is clear that *La Comédie humaine* contains a rigorous exploration of town and regional identity. Many of the novelist's small towns have geographical and topographical identities, thus mirroring the contemporary work of classification and totalization in the field of natural history, and confirming his own determination to record these settings through the medium of the novel. His treatment of the socio-cultural characteristics of various regions is more complex. Frequent recourse to the language of exoticism suggests a difficulty in describing the provinces as a literary object, and often restricts him to an evocation of provincial backwardness. The Bretons are 'savages' like those in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, while in Touraine, there is a similar resistance to progress that is detrimental to the region's social and economic development. These attempts to render the geographical diversity of France must be contrasted with Balzac's interest in the patterns of behaviour that were common to all small towns. He treats the provinces as places of monotony and frustration, but also as a setting in which individuals find shelter from the world, and the chance to heal the wounds that it has inflicted. In this second section, I

highlighted the difficulty of defining the 'essence' of Balzac's provinces, conceding that while the chronological span of his provincial novels may be too wide to enable us to formulate any one definition, there is an obvious and recurrent model of provincial behaviour. This should not detract, however, from the realization that Balzac's treatment of the provinces is rich in tension and contradiction, most notably between the desire to move towards a regionalistic image of provincial France, and the persistence of the satirical tradition, which viewed the provinces as a uniform whole. I will proceed now to consider a similar set of contradictions within the region that occupies a place at the centre of his work: Touraine.

CHAPTER THREE

Touraine: The First Province

‘Ô patrie! Honte à qui n’admirerait pas ma joyeuse, ma belle, ma brave
Touraine.’¹

Les Deux Amis

In spite of his miserable childhood incarceration at Vendôme’s Oratorian College, Balzac reserved for Touraine an affection that was one of the defining characteristics of his life. Between 1823 and 1848, he returned to his native province on at least nineteen occasions, sometimes staying for several months.² From his room at the Château de Saché, he would contemplate the Tourangeau countryside before setting out to tread familiar paths between Saint-Cyr, Vouvray, and Azay-le-Rideau. In July 1830, as the fever of revolution swept through Paris, he was at La Grenadière with Madame de Berny, basking in a comfort that, he mused, ‘me fait l’effet d’un pâté de foie gras où l’on est jusqu’au menton’.³ These moments of delicious respite were first among the reasons for which Balzac preserved his connection with the place of his birth. When the pressure of work became too much to bear, or his health began to fail, his first thought was to ‘revenir dans la *cara patria* [pour] [s]e reposer comme un enfant sur le sein de sa mère’.⁴ His paternal roots were

¹ *CH*, xii, p. 667. An unfinished novel from 1830.

² For a record of Balzac’s visits to Touraine, see Pierre Citron’s ‘Chronologie de la vie et de l’œuvre de Balzac’, in *CH*, i, pp. LXXVI-CXVII. To this list it might be possible to add a visit to Tours in 1825, with the Duchesse d’Abrantès (Cf. *Corr.*, i, p. 265; 1825?).

³ *Corr.*, i, p. 461 (21 July 1830).

⁴ *LH*, i, p. 348 (23 November 1836).

in the Albigeois region, but Balzac made his maternal bond with Touraine. This was the place to which he turned in moments of crisis, and that he linked repeatedly with the most important events in his life. When he was considering a career in politics in 1832, it was the vacant seat at Chinon that he identified as the safest route to elected office.⁵ As he dreamed of marriage, it was to Touraine that he brought Madame Hanska, in 1845 and 1846. As he dragged his feet through the mud of crowded city streets, he longed to acquire a property on the banks of the Loire.⁶

Though he cherished his ties with Touraine, Balzac also recognized, however, that it was his 'transplantation' to Paris that had enabled him to distinguish himself from his fellow Tourangeaux. In contrast to his regional compatriots, whom he described in 1823 as 'bien mols et lâches',⁷ he possessed stocks of energy and ambition that his visits to Touraine were used to replenish. For him, a stay in this restorative province was an opportunity to work without distraction.⁸ At Saché, he conceived and/or wrote some of his finest novels, including *Louis Lambert*, *Le Lys dans la vallée*, *La Recherche*

⁵ Ultimately, Balzac did not stand for election at Chinon. Among those to warn him of the strong possibility of failure was Jean de Margonne, who wrote in 1832: 'j'ai vu dans quelques journaux que vos amis vous portent à la députation de Chinon, mais je crains qu'ils ne connaissent pas bien l'opinion des électeurs de l'arrondissement' (*Corr.*, I, p. 729; 31 May 1832).

⁶ At various intervals, Balzac considered purchasing either La Grenadière or the Château de Moncontour. He finally gave up on La Grenadière in November 1836, after the death of Madame de Berny: 'La Grenadière m'a échappé; mais le cruel événement qui a pesé sur moi cette année m'a désintéressé de cette pauvre chaumière. Je ne saurais plus l'habiter' (*LH*, I, p. 351; 23 November 1836). The Château de Moncontour was pursued with greater enthusiasm. 'Tu vas sauter de joie,' he told Madame Hanska in June 1846. 'Moncontour est à vendre. Ce rêve de 30 ans de ma vie va se réaliser, ou peut se réaliser. [...] Si n[ous] avons Moncontour, tous mes plans seraient changés. Je ne meublerais pas si richement l'appartement de Paris, nous attendrions; je réunirais tous mes efforts sur le château de Moncontour, car on peut l'habiter toujours' (*LH*, II, pp. 201-02; 10 June 1846). In spite of this rather pathetic plea, Madame Hanska balked at the price of 80,000 francs, and Balzac's hopes of owning a property in Touraine were extinguished for the last time.

⁷ *Corr.*, I, p. 222 (July or August 1823?).

⁸ Cf. Honoré de Balzac, *La Touraine et les Tourangeaux*, ed. by Marcel Girard (Chambray-lès-Tours: CLD, 1998), pp. 12-13.

de l'absolu, and *Le Père Goriot*. Indeed, it was here, in June 1836, that he started work on a novel he lauded as 'l'œuvre capitale dans l'œuvre'.⁹ Later, and with obvious delight, he told Eveline of his progress:

En 8 jours, j'avais inventé, composé les *Illusions perdues*, et j'en avais écrit LE TIERS. [...] Toutes mes facultés étaient tendues, j'écrivais 15 heures par jour, je me levais avec le soleil et, j'allais jusqu'à l'heure du dîner, sans prendre autre chose que du café à l'eau.¹⁰

Even when he was away from Touraine, the region was a constant source of inspiration. In *Le Curé de Tours* (written in Saint-Firmin, in April 1832), *La Grenadière* (1833) (Angoulême, August 1832), and *L'Illustre Gaudissart* (Paris, November 1832), Balzac added to a collection of stories that leads us to wonder, as Philippe Bertault has, 's'il n'avait pas eu l'intention de grouper, dans le cadre de la Touraine, plusieurs romans qui eussent pu s'intituler *Scènes tourangelles*'.¹¹ This chapter aims to explore the unique status of Touraine in Balzac's treatment of provincial France, especially in his work before 1836. I demonstrate that, as a novelist, Balzac produced three distinct but interlocking representations of his native Touraine, making this the most privileged, but also the most unstable, region in his fictional mosaic of French provincial life. Tracing the origins of this Tourangeau theme in three of his early novels, *Sténie*, *Le Centenaire* (1822), and *Wann-Chlore*, I reveal how the young Balzac experimented with provincial themes that he would go on to develop later in his career. I pursue this analysis through the Touraine of *Les Contes drolatiques*, the unfinished series of tales in which the region and its

⁹ *LH*, I, p. 650 (2 March 1843).

¹⁰ *LH*, I, p. 331 (13 July-22 August 1836).

¹¹ Philippe Bertault, 'Le cycle tourangeau de *La Comédie humaine*', *Au Jardin de la France*, 3 (Spring 1949), 7-14 (p. 12).

inhabitants are described with Rabelaisian verve. The second half of the chapter is devoted to *La Comédie humaine*, and to an explanation of the contrast between Balzac's eulogistic portrait of the Tourangeau countryside, and his vision of early-nineteenth-century Tours as a small town in decline.

Touraine in Balzac's Early Works: *Sténie*, *Le Centenaire*, and *Wann-Chlore*

Touraine and Tourangeaux characters occupy an important place in Balzac's earliest literary efforts, which date from the period 1819-25, before his foray into the business of printing and type founding. His first attempt at novel-writing was *Sténie, ou les Erreurs philosophiques*. Abandoned in 1822, this epistolary novel remained unpublished for over a century, until 1936. The other novels that belong to this category of early works are those that were written under the pseudonyms of Horace de Saint-Aubin, and Lord R'Hoone. Though generally regarded as mediocre,¹² these texts are indispensable to our understanding of the Balzacian canon, and of the contrastive development of the Tourangeau theme therein. In 1940, Maurice Bardèche acknowledged that, even with their grammatical errors and streams of exclamatives, these works were part of an apprenticeship that saw Balzac familiarize himself with the literary traditions upon which he would build later in his career.¹³ In 1965,

¹² A view that Balzac himself did much to encourage. Writing to his sister, Laure, in April 1822, he explained that he had not sent her a copy of *L'Héritière de Birague* (1822) 'parce que c'est une véritable *cochonnerie* littéraire'. His frustration at churning out popular rather than serious novels is clear in a letter which continues: 'Je regrette bien de sacrifier la fleur de mes idées à des absurdités, je sens dans ma tête quelque chose et si j'étais tranquille sur ma fortune [...], je travaillerais à des choses solides' (*Corr.*, I, pp. 158-59; 2 April 1822).

¹³ Maurice Bardèche, *Balzac romancier: la formation de l'art du roman chez Balzac jusqu'à la publication du 'Père Goriot': 1820-1835* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1967; first published 1940), pp. 53-234.

Pierre Barbéris made an even more convincing case for the early works when he described them as 'la lointaine préfiguration de certains grands romans de la maturité'.¹⁴ The objective here is to plot a course between these two markers, analysing the foundations of the Tourangeau theme in *Sténie*, *Le Centenaire*, and *Wann-Chlore*, three texts which can, with justification, be defined as 'le premier cycle balzacien de la Touraine'.¹⁵

With its Tourangeau setting, and with Tourangeaux as its main protagonists, the first in this series of works deserves special attention. *Sténie* is the painful story of a love that society's conventions have obstructed. In a narrative that draws heavily on the Romantic tradition, Jacob (Job) del-Ryès returns to Touraine, where he is reunited with his childhood friend, Stéphanie (Sténie) de Formosand. The two were raised by the same nurse in the small village of Saint-Cyr, where they forged the strongest of bonds. 'C'était ma femme, j'étais son mari,' explains del-Ryès. 'La mère même de Stéphanie n'emmenait jamais sa fille sans moi, et sitôt que l'on nous séparait les gémissements de la colombe à qui l'on tue sa compagne commençaient' (*OD*, I, p. 738). They are thrown together again years later, when Job saves Sténie's cousins from drowning in the Loire. As he drags the two men onto the opposite bank, the mere sight of his 'sœur de lait' is sufficient to ignite Job's passion, and immediately, he dispatches his manservant to search the town for her. 'A peine l'ai-je vue', he cries, 'déjà elle m'occupe tout entier, déjà s'imprime en mon âme une trace ineffaçable!' (*OD*, I, p. 741). The incident also reminds Sténie of her feelings for Job, 'ce frère si tendrement aimé' (*OD*, I, p. 749), though while she longs to act on them, there is a complication: she

¹⁴ Pierre Barbéris, *Aux sources de Balzac: les romans de jeunesse* (Paris: Bibliophiles de l'Originale, 1965), p. 6.

¹⁵ Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle*, I, p. 532 n. 1.

is engaged to be married to Monsieur de Plancksey, a tedious man who is not as rich a prize as Sténie's mother believes him to be. The novel's action appears, then, to be entirely uncomplicated, but what of its depiction of Touraine?

The opening letter of the novel, from del-Ryès to his friend, Vanehrs, is written in a state of euphoria that we might imagine Balzac to have experienced for himself, upon returning to Touraine for the first time since 1814.¹⁶ This letter, dated 29 May 18.., is a celebration of the region in all its facets. As the stagecoach speeds through the countryside, del-Ryès sees his native province as a cradle, a maternal space where the individual can forget his worldly troubles. He reports his feelings to Vanehrs in the following terms:

A mesure que j'approchais de ma douce patrie, ton image, ton amitié, mes regrets, mes pensées pâlissaient devant elle et les souvenirs de mon enfance! [...] Oui, tout disparut lorsque j'aperçus les bords de la Loire et les collines de la Touraine' (*OD*, I, pp. 721-22).

The impression is of a return, not merely to his birthplace, but to the unspoilt simplicities of life.¹⁷ This same feeling would later be echoed in *Illusions perdues*, where Lucien, having failed to make his career in Paris, heads back to Angoulême on foot. After walking for five days, he arrives, exhausted, at a

¹⁶ The date of composition of this first letter, and the question of whether Balzac is describing his own return to Touraine, is contentious. Although he began preparing his manuscript in 1819, Balzac did not return to Touraine until the Autumn of 1821, after the ill-fated marriage of his sister, Laurence. It is possible that he had decided on a Tourangeau setting for the novel before making this trip, an idea with which Nicole Mozet would seem to agree when she argues that there is 'rien de tel [...] que l'éloignement pour faire travailler la mémoire' (*La Ville de province*, p. 43). An alternative view is that the visit of 1821 was an inspirational one. 'De ce séjour semblent témoigner telles pages sur Tours et Saint-Cyr,' claims Nadine Satiat. 'Non qu'il [Balzac] eût été incapable d'évoquer Tours de mémoire. Mais il semble qu'il faisait alors passer presque aussitôt la substance de sa vie dans ses écrits' (*Balzac, ou la Fureur d'écrire* (Paris: Hachette, 1999), p. 69).

¹⁷ The comparison with the work of Rousseau is, once again, inviting. On this point, see for example Raymond Trousson, 'L'imitation de Rousseau dans *Sténie*', *AB* (1985), 193-209.

house outside Mansle. 'Ma bonne femme,' he says to the miller's wife, 'je suis bien fatigué, j'ai la fièvre, et n'ai que trois francs; voulez-vous me nourrir de pain bis et de lait, me coucher sur la paille pendant une semaine?' (*CH*, v, p. 553). As Nicole Mozet has observed, both of these episodes stand as further evidence of the comfort that is to be found in the provinces, which rarely hesitate to take their children back to the maternal bosom.¹⁸ In *Sténie*, however, we also see Balzac challenging the stereotype of the provinces as a setting to which only broken men return, and engaging in an open celebration of rural nostalgia. For, unlike Lucien, del-Ryès does not return to Touraine with a heavy heart. On the contrary, his joy at seeing his homeland again grows with every turn of the wheels. This, for him, is 'l'Indostan de la France', a place like no other, and one where he is completely at ease: 'mon âme est plus en harmonie avec tes sites charmants où règne non pas l'audace, le grandiose, mais la bonté naïve de la nature; je suis chez moi' (*OD*, I, p. 722). The maternal qualities of Touraine, and the association of this province with childhood and innocence, are reinforced by the recurrent motif of purity. 'L'air pur, un ciel d'Italie, une bienfaisance générale pour tout ce qui regarde la nature [...], en font un séjour délicieux. Le langage y est sonore, et d'une pureté semblable à celle du ciel' (*OD*, I, p. 725).¹⁹ It is these conditions which make the Tourangeaux idle. The inhabitants of this province 'sont en général, lâches, sans énergie', but even then, neither Balzac nor del-Ryès can bring himself to pour scorn on his compatriots. 'C'est la tranquillité de l'Indien sur les bords de l'Indus' (*OD*, I, p. 725), a statement which underlines that, for

¹⁸ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁹ For evidence that these characteristics of Touraine and Tourangeau life are more than a matter of regional pride, see for example Michel Laurencin, *La Vie quotidienne en Touraine au temps de Balzac* (Paris: Hachette, 1980), pp. 33-34.

both the author and his fictional spokesman, this Touraine is, on the surface at least, a paradise on Earth.

The effusive tone of del-Ryès's opening letter is extended to his description of the region's capital. 'Tu as ri de mon exclamation,' he writes, apparently pre-empting Vanehrs's response to the portrait of his homeland. 'Portes-en la peine, car voici la description de Tours' (*OD*, I, p. 722). In turn, the town receives equal praise, as the reader is told first of its history. 'On la dit fondée par Turnus,' we learn of the old town, where Job composes his letter, and where the crows, '[qui ont] peut-être mangé des Sarrasins à leur défaite sous Charles-Martel' (*OD*, I, p. 722), still nest in the towers of the cathedral. As well as these living monuments to the past, the town also has its bustling districts. The banks of the Loire are filled with sailors who navigate this immense river, which flows past the town in what Job describes as 'un canal taillé par un architecte' (*OD*, I, p. 723). This juxtaposition of the natural and the man-made is no accident. The town itself has a circular shape, a fact which might be seen as an indication that it, too, has maternal qualities: 'La ville est ronde et son côté septentrional a le plus bel aspect qui soit au monde, il balance celui de Naples' (*OD*, I, p. 723).²⁰ At first sight, the closeness of this relationship between Tours and its natural surroundings is linked to the stone bridge, an arterial route over the Loire, and the beginning of the Rue Royale, which divides the town along a north-south axis. This actual landmark was completed in 1778, and with its fifteen arches, was an impressive sight that Balzac eagerly transferred to his fiction. Here, the reader might expect one of

²⁰ For an alternative perspective on the roundness of Tours in *Sténie*, see for example Nicole Mozet, *La Ville de province*, pp. 43-44. While acknowledging the maternal symbolism of Balzac's Tours, Mozet also views the shape of the fictional city as suggesting that 'elle est décrite de l'intérieur, par quelqu'un qui la connaît totalement et globalement' (p. 43).

those protracted descriptions for which the author of *La Comédie humaine* is so often remembered. Instead, Balzac chooses for the bridge a more subtle, thematic function. 'C'est de cette place, de ce pont', we are told, 'que l'on jouit du plus beau point de vue, à quelqu'endroit que l'on se mette' (*OD*, I, p. 723). The view from the bridge appears to take in the whole region, as Job's gaze settles on one picturesque site after another:

On aperçoit, autre image, les ruines de l'abbaye de Marmoutiers auxquelles il ne manque pour être admirées que d'être en Suisse. Enfin, la tour pointue de Roche-Carbon se dessine comme un fantôme sur le paysage charmant que présente[nt] les alentours de Vouvray; toujours la verdure, la Loire, les gais vignobles, et des touffes d'arbres d'autant plus agréables qu'elles sont rares (*OD*, I, p. 724).

That the rest of the province is so accessible might be seen as a direct result of the town's circular shape, which blends it with its surroundings. Seen in this perspective, Tours invites comparison with Thomas Hardy's Casterbridge, a town as 'compact as a box of dominoes', where the 'farmer's boy could sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office-window of the town-clerk'.²¹ The comparison between the squareness of Casterbridge, which exposes the town to the fields, and the roundness of Tours, which brings the whole region into view, is a provocative one. But is Tours as close to the countryside as the view from the bridge suggests? Or is this same view merely a tantalizing glimpse of a province that is quite distinct from its capital? Part of the answer lies at the end of this descriptive passage: 'Alors la vue se perd dans un lointain bleuâtre qui vous laisse encore à désirer' (*OD*, I, p. 724). As

²¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 27 and p. 89.

readers, we want to see more of this beautiful Touraine, though instead, we are made to feel frustrated at what we cannot see from a bridge that, paradoxically, separates the town from the rest of the region.²²

The role of the bridge in dividing Tours and Touraine is confirmed by the nature of life in the town, which reveals there to be less cause for celebrating the region's capital than Job's initial enthusiasm would suggest. In *Sténie*, Tours is a provincial town in the satirical mould, revealing an early ideological split in Balzac's treatment of his native province. The first indication of this is del-Ryès's remark to Vanehrs, after he has saved Sténie's cousins from drowning in the Loire. Though seriously ill as a result of his plunge into the icy water, Job is desperate to establish where his 'sister' lives. 'Mon médecin même garde le silence quand je le questionne,' he complains. 'Dans une petite ville il me semble que tout se sait' (*OD*, I, p. 741). Vanehrs, for his part, is even more explicit in his indictment of small-town life. Following del-Ryès's arrival in Tours, he warns him not to venture into local society, for generally, he says, 'elle est [...] d'un esprit très méchant et caustique'. His letter continues: 'Dans une capitale toutes les nuances se fondent et dans une ville peu considérable de province les plus petits traits tranchent; tout est à jour; et par cette raison les haines y sont plus vives' (*OD*, I, p. 728). A thematic fragment '[qui] annonce ou prépare ce qui se trouvera réalisé plus tard dans d'autres ouvrages',²³ the warning introduces the idea that there are no secrets in a small town, that it can be a spiteful community, and finally, that life in the provinces is the polar opposite of life in Paris. What is also significant,

²² On the Saint-Symphorien bridge and its role in dividing Balzac's fictional Tours, see also Honoré de Balzac, *La Grenadière et autres récits tourangeaux de 1832*, ed. by Nicole Mozet (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 1999), pp. 8-9.

²³ Albert Prioult, *Balzac avant 'La Comédie humaine' (1818-1829): contribution à l'étude de la genèse de son œuvre* (Paris: Courville, 1936), p. 58.

however, is that it is Vanehrs who formulates the stronger argument against the defects of small-town life. In a further, early illustration of Balzac's fractured perspective on the provinces, Vanehrs stands as a distant and entirely dispassionate witness to del-Ryès's return to Touraine. When he replies to the fervent description with which their correspondence begins, he even accuses his friend of excessive regional pride: 'un autre se serait moqué de ton exclamation où tu respire un air plus pur quand peut-être la diligence produisait un nuage de poussière peu romantique, mais je connais seul ton âme' (*OD*, I, p. 733).

These contrasting perspectives are important insofar as they reveal del-Ryès's attachment to his native province to be an entirely personal one. The strength of his bond with Touraine is the most obvious factor that the character has in common with his creator, and it should be noted, in passing, that Balzac's own attachment to the province was just as personal. The argument has particular resonance when Job's eulogy on Touraine is compared to Stendhal's *Mémoires d'un touriste*, in which the narrator shows a marked disdain for both the region and its capital. 'Je cherchais de tous mes regards la belle Touraine,' he writes, on 22 June 1837. 'J'étais destiné à ne pas le trouver, cette belle Touraine n'existe pas.'²⁴ Although Balzac's sensuous descriptions of the region encourage us to think otherwise, it is clear that not all contemporary writers looked upon the Garden of France with the same affection.

If his characters adopt contrasting attitudes towards Touraine, then similarly, Balzac's treatment of the region is not always an unadulterated

²⁴ Stendhal, *Mémoires d'un touriste*, in *Voyages en France*, p. 201.

celebration of his native province. In the early works, both Tours and Touraine are places of surface and depth, appearance and reality, where maternal comfort is threatened by acts of emotional and physical violence. These shadows haunt del-Ryès as he wanders through Saint-Cyr '[pour] visiter tous les sentiers témoins de [ses] premiers pas' (*OD*, I, p. 736). The village, and the abandoned cottage of his former nurse, Manon-Viel, hold his earliest memories, and witnessed the birth of his enduring relationship with Sténie. Alongside these recollections of a carefree past, however, are more painful memories of the day that Sténie was beaten by Manon's alcoholic husband. After breaking a bottle of brandy and tricking his 'sister' into taking the blame, the young Job had stood outside the cottage, listening as Sténie received an undeserved punishment. 'Je pleure involontairement', he reveals, 'quand je pense aux meurtrissures, aux marques noires que je vis à ma sœur' (*OD*, I, p. 738). Acts of physical violence such as this are, in fact, rare in the Touraine of Balzac's early works. Elsewhere, the novelist invests his first Tourangeaux characters with the capacity to love and hate in equal measure. In *Le Centenaire*,²⁵ for example, the people of Tours are shown as united in their admiration for the silk dyer, Lamanel, whose generosity and good humour 'lui ont concilié l'estime de toute la ville, l'amour de beaucoup de personnes, et une grande popularité' (*PR*, I, p. 864). When Lamanel's daughter, Fanny, is murdered, however, this passive population quickly turns into a baying mob. Descending on the Place Saint-Étienne, the crowd is determined to smash its way into the house of the homicidal creature: 'la

²⁵ The eponymous creature introduces an element of the fantastic into the provinces of Balzac's early work. On this point, see for example André Lorant, '*Le Centenaire*', *AB* (1986), 59-87 and Moïse Le Yaouanc, '*Melmoth et les romans du jeune Balzac*', in *Balzac and the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by D. G. Charlton, J. Gaudon, and Anthony R. Pugh (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), pp. 35-45.

foule, se poussant par un mouvement de vague sur cette maison, produisait un effort tel, que ceux qui se trouvaient les plus près de l'habitation couraient risque d'être écrasés' (*PR*, I, p. 884). When stirred to anger, the normally carefree Tourangeaux are not afraid to employ violence as the instrument of justice.

The duality of a Touraine that is 'violence autant que mollesse'²⁶ extends to the regional environment, which seems as dangerous as it is protective.²⁷ First among the settings that illustrate this contrast is the Loire. In *Sténie*, the river appears first as an unstable space in which lies the threat of death. Two men are nearly drowned in its waters, and as del-Ryès dives in to rescue them, he observes that the riverbed is formed of 'des sables mouvants très dangereux' (*OD*, I, p. 740) which make it impossible for him to reach the bank on which Sténie is standing. At the same time, the Loire is the setting for a moment of emotional violence, the effects of which are more lasting than those of a mere boating accident. Allowed to catch sight of one another, but prevented from actually meeting, the childhood friends find in the dangerous waters both the agent and expression of an adult passion. This rich symbolism of the Loire²⁸ is made explicit by Sténie herself, who later describes her feelings on seeing the naked Job plunge into the water. 'Ne me parle plus de mon innocence,' she instructs her confidante, Madame Radthye. 'Sa céleste pureté dès longtemps m'a quitté; depuis le jour où Job traversa les flots, je ne fus plus qu'une modification de mon bien-aimé' (*OD*, I, p. 842). This loss of

²⁶ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 46.

²⁷ For these contrasts in the Tourangeau environment, see also Owen Heathcote, 'The work of memory: sexuality, violence and writing in Balzac's Touraine', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 3 (2003), 15-29 (pp. 17-19).

²⁸ For the symbolism of water in Balzac, see for example Jean-Luc Steinmetz, 'L'eau dans *La Comédie humaine*', *AB* (1969), 3-29.

innocence can be contrasted with the role of the Loire in *Wann-Chlore*, where the banks of the river are a shelter that encourages the characters to share their innermost doubts and fears. Unaware that her maid, Eugénie, is really Horace Landon's wife, Chlora takes her lover for a walk alongside the great river. Only here does she find the courage to confide in Landon, and to seek 'la cause de cette douce teinte de tristesse qui voilait leur amour, comme souvent au milieu d'un jour d'été le soleil s'enveloppe de nuages' (*PR*, II, p. 918). Like Touraine itself, the Loire is associated with safety and maternal comfort, but also with the threat of violence and death.

This unstable Touraine manifests itself in another setting that makes its debut in the early works. The actual Cloître Saint-Gatien is a corner of Tours which lies immediately to the north of the cathedral, and which, according to Balzac in his 1832 fragment *Le Prêtre catholique*, 'est presque toujours dans l'ombre que le monument projette' (*CH*, XII, p. 795). Few settings could have fired his imagination more than this area in the shadows of the cathedral, with its promise of hidden drama:

Cet endroit de la ville est tellement solitaire qu'il n'y passe pas dix personnes par jour, en exceptant les fêtes, dont la solennité amène toute la population à Saint-Gatien. Si parfois un prêtre, un passant ou quelques séminaristes appelés à la cathédrale traversent le cloître, le bruit de leurs pas est répété par les nombreux échos de l'édifice, qui révèlent toute la profondeur du silence. Le froid humide que répandent les grandes ombres change l'atmosphère et lui donne, même pendant l'été, la fraîcheur des caveaux; aussi, dans cette enceinte, toutes les crêtes de mur sont noires, et les feuillages des arbres d'un vert pâle. Le silence, le froid et l'obscurité, principales causes de la terreur, existent toujours là (*CH*, XII, pp. 795-96).

In both *Sténie* and *Wann-Chlore*, the Cloître is home to women whose lives are shrouded in doubt and unhappiness, and who seek to hide themselves from

prying provincial eyes. For Chlora, trapped between a bigamous marriage and social disgrace, the area provides 'une double enceinte de paix et de silence', a barrier behind which reigns an 'effrayante solitude' (*PR*, II, p. 906). A protective space, the Cloître is also infused, however, with the smell of death. 'Là elle s'est ensevelie!' exclaims Landon as he contemplates the house of his ill-fated love, wishing that 'du sein de la cathédrale des chants autres que ceux d'une messe mortuaire fussent arrivés à son oreille' (*PR*, II, p. 907). This same tension between the promise of comfort and the presence of death affects Stéphanie de Formosand, for whom the shadow of the cathedral, in *Sténie*, is also the shadow cast over her heart by her impending marriage to Monsieur de Plancksey. The dark, forbidding atmosphere of the site is revealed by del-Ryès, who tells Vanehrs:

Elle demeure dans le cloître Saint-Gatien; la rue est sombre... Ce sont de grands bâtiments affreux, déserts... affreux, te dis-je, et... la nuit n'était pas belle. Le ciel était couvert de gros nuages noirs. En allant je ne les remarquais pas, dans ma joie!... Il tonne maintenant (*OD*, I, p. 764).

The sound of thunder completes the sombre portrait of Job's visit to Sténie's home on the eve of her wedding. Compelled to venture into the dark streets of the Cloître, he too is made to experience the duality of this enigmatic setting. As Pierre Barbéris has argued, this part of the fictional Tours seems to attract 'ceux qui cherchent le calme, la retraite, l'oubli [tandis qu'il] repousse ceux qui veulent la vie, la joie, le bonheur.'²⁹ Faced with the prospect of losing Sténie, Job comes to the Cloître to relieve his anguish. And in turn, the Cloître repels him because what he wants above all else is comfort. Seen in this

²⁹ Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle*, I, p. 462.

perspective, the narrow streets around the cathedral are a microcosm of a Tours that, in Balzac's earliest works, 'est à la fois maternante et dévorante, séductrice et mortifère',³⁰ a place in which familiar stereotypes and familiar settings are exploited as a rich source of creative inspiration. In the next section, I shall examine the evolution of this fictional town and its province in a set of tales that Balzac conceived as a tribute to the good humour of his Tourangeaux compatriots.

The Rabelaisian Province: Touraine in *Les Contes drolatiques*

The theme of Touraine is inseparable from Balzac's unfinished series, *Les Cent Contes drolatiques*. Although his ambition was to write a hundred of these bawdy tales, only thirty were ever published.³¹ These appeared in three groups of ten (or 'dixains') in April 1832, July 1833, and December 1837. Allegedly 'collected in the monasteries of Touraine', the *Contes* are set mostly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and are written in a curious pastiche of Middle French.³² A total of thirteen stories take place in Touraine, while others unfold in locations as diverse as Paris, Madrid, and Sicily. Of the thirty

³⁰ Nicole Mozet, 'Ma mère la ville: Tours en Balzacie', *Corps écrit*, 29 (1989), 81-85 (p. 85).

³¹ Many of their first readers thought *Les Contes drolatiques* an affront to public decency. 'Nous espérons gagner nos indulgences de carême en critiquant sévèrement cette *débauche d'esprit* de M. de Balzac', cried the *Revue de Paris* in 1832, shortly after the publication of the *Premier Dixain* (cited by Raymond Massant in *L'Œuvre de Balzac*, ed. by Albert Béguin, Jean A. Ducourneau and Henri Evans, 16 vols (Paris: Le Club français du livre, Formes et reflets, 1949-55), XIII (1952), p. 9). Also offended was George Sand, who in her autobiography, recalled an argument she had with Balzac as a result of her refusal to listen to extracts from his book of 'obscene' tales: 'Je lui jetai presque son livre au nez. Je me souviens que, comme je le traitais de gros indécant, il me traita de prude et sortit en me criant sur l'escalier: "vous n'êtes qu'une bête!"' (George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, in *Œuvres autobiographiques*, ed. by Georges Lubin, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1970-71), II, p. 202).

³² This language, part pastiche and part authorial invention, is one of the reasons for which *Les Contes drolatiques* have received scant critical consideration. Cf. Francis Bar, 'Archaïsme et originalité dans les *Contes drolatiques* de Balzac', *AB* (1971), 189-203.

tales, only six contain no Tourangeaux characters,³³ a fact which immediately confirms their relevance to this discussion. As well as presenting Balzac with an opportunity to exhibit his native Touraine, however, the *Contes* were conceived in defence of both a national, and a Tourangeau, tradition. Writing in February 1830, in an article entitled ‘Complaintes satiriques sur les mœurs du temps présent’, Balzac had expressed frustration at the gradual disappearance of a line of robust comic literature. ‘Le rire’, he declared, ‘est un besoin en France, et [...] le public demande à sortir des catacombes où le mènent, de cadavre en cadavre, peintres, poètes et prosateurs’ (*OD*, II, p. 743). He chided his countrymen for having been too willing to adopt English fashions and, worst of all, English reserve. It was to this state of affairs, precisely, that *Les Contes drolatiques* were a response. Indeed, were the Prologue to the *Premier Dixain* not written in Balzac’s own Middle French, then the argument begun in the ‘Complaintes satiriques’ might be seen to continue in seamless fashion:

Aussy, comme le rire est un privilège octroyé seulement à l’homme [...], ai-je creu chose patriotique en dyable de publier une dragme de joyeulsetez par ce tems où l’ennuy tombe comme une pluie fine qui mouille, nous perce à la longue, et va dissolvant nos anciennes coustumes’ (*OD*, I, p. 8).

Balzac’s intention was to provoke laughter, just as the works of Molière and Rabelais had done before him. In 1836, in the ‘Historique du procès auquel a donné lieu *Le Lys dans la vallée*’, he denied that they were an overt pastiche. This collection of tales was, he maintained, ‘la plus originalement conçue de

³³ For a tabular overview of *Les Contes drolatiques*, their geographical and historical settings, and their Tourangeaux characters, see Mozet, *La Ville de province*, pp. 66-67.

cette époque' (*CH*, IX, p. 956). In spite of these protestations, the influence of Rabelais on the language and content of the *Contes* is undeniable. From the moment we read the cover, which warns that the stories contained within are for 'l'esbattement des pantagruelistes et non aultres' (*OD*, I, p. XXXI), Rabelais never disappears from view. In the Prologue to the *Premier Dixain*, he is 'nostre bon maistre [...], auquel nous debvons tous oster nostre bonnet en signe de révérence et honneur' (*OD*, I, p. 9). In one tale, entitled 'Le Prosne du ioyeux curé de Meudon', he even appears as the main character. For Balzac, Rabelais was a 'digne compatriote, esterne honneur de Tourayne' (*OD*, I, p. 7), and a man who embodied what Balzac lauds in *L'Illustre Gaudissart* as the 'esprit ardent, artiste, poétique, voluptueux' (*CH*, IV, p. 576) of the region. As well as favouring Touraine as a setting, therefore, the *Contes* were born of a desire to celebrate a writer who personified the Tourangeau spirit. How does this celebration of the regional temperament manifest itself in the stories themselves?

The first observation to be made regarding the Touraine 'drolatique' is that it is a province in which the Balzacian narrator shows immense pride. According to the Prologue to the *Premier Dixain*, he has no other desire than be a 'bon Tourangeaud, et entretenir en joye les amples lippées des gens fameulx de ce mignon et plantureulx pays' (*OD*, I, p. 7). Throughout his work, the name of the region is consistently paired with eulogistic adjectives; it is 'la gaye Tourayne', '[le] noble païs de Tourraine' (*OD*, I, p. 251), and '[nostre] païs de Tourayne, laquelle est bonne fille' (*OD*, I, p. 153). Among the streets and houses of the town, and in the countryside, where there nestles an abundance of small villages, from Saint-Cyr to Semblançay and Thilouze, he

finds the evidence upon which this favourable opinion is based. He points to the smiling and easygoing nature of the Tourangeau, a trait which extends to priests such as the vicar of Azay-le-Rideau, ‘ung beau curé, quarré, frais, touiours bennissant, hennissant; aymant mieulx les nopces et baptesmes que les trespassemens; bon raillard, relligieux en l’ecclise, homme partout’ (*OD*, I, p. 136). He entices the reader with women such as La Tascherette, the silk dyer’s wife, whose beauty is so alluring that ‘les mignons ne lui manquoyent point’ (*OD*, I, p. 143). As a further measure of his pride in the region, he does not praise the people alone. To his remarks on the blue sky and the purity of the language, seen in *Sténie*, Balzac adds references to the glorious châteaux of Plessis-les-Tours, Montcontour, Azay-le-Rideau and Rochecorbon, around which, in ‘Le Péché vesniel’, ‘fourmilloyent de beaulx domaines, moulins, futayes avecque moissons de redevances de toutes sortes’ (*OD*, I, p. 26). Nor does he neglect the region’s famous inns and restaurants, such as the Trois Barbeaulx, ‘[qui] estoit iadis à Tours l’endroit de la ville où se faisoyt la meilleure chiere’ (*OD*, I, p. 163). The narrator’s love of Touraine is clear, but what are the factors to which this enthusiasm can be attributed?

One possibility is that, with their animated turn of phrase, *Les Contes drolatiques* presented Balzac with a means of expressing his innermost affection for Touraine without having to pay heed to the artistic constraints of producing a realist novel. Marie-Claire Bichard-Thomine, for instance, has suggested that Balzac saw the writing of the *Contes* as an exercise in literary escapism: ‘A l’écriture laborieuse, titanique de *La Comédie humaine* s’oppose une écriture pour le plaisir: opposition du sérieux et du ludique, de l’énorme et du bref, de la contrainte des *Études de mœurs* et de la liberté du

rire.’³⁴ Within the texts themselves, there is much evidence to support this view that the *Contes* were a personal, cathartic work.³⁵ Foremost among this material is the description, unique in Balzac’s work, of the actual street in which he was born. A burst of adjectives in the feminine emphasizes the maternal status of the Rue Royale:

C’est une rue toujours neufve, touiours royalle, touiours impériale, une rue patriotique, une rue à deux trottoirs, une rue ouverte des deux bouts, bien percée, une rue si large que iamais nul n’y a crié: “gare!” [...]; une rue bien pavée, bien bastie, bien lavée, propre comme ung mirouère, populeuse, silencieuse à ses heures, coquette, bien coiffée de nuict par ses iolys toicts bleus; brief, c’est une rue où ie suys né, c’est la royne des rues, toujours entre la terre et le ciel, une rue à fontaine, une rue à laquelle rien ne manque pour estre celebrée parmy les rues! Et de faict, c’est la vraye rue, la seule rue de Tours (*OD*, I, pp. 148-49).

While escapism and sentiment played an important role in the composition of *Les Contes drolatiques*, to view this homage to Touraine as nothing more than authorial patriotism³⁶ would nevertheless be an over-simplification. Even in his correspondence, where Balzac had even greater freedom to reveal his innermost thoughts, the native province is not always painted in such rhapsodic terms.³⁷ The fact is one that leads us to consider whether authorial

³⁴ Marie-Claire Bichard-Thomine, ‘Le projet des *Contes drolatiques* d’après leurs prologues’, *AB* (1995), 151-64 (p. 162).

³⁵ On this point, see also the recent article by Scott Lee, ‘Retour à Tours: *Les Contes drolatiques* ou la lettre des origines’, in *Réflexions sur l’auto-réflexivité balzacienne*, ed. by Andrew Oliver and Stéphane Vachon (Toronto: Centre d’études du dix-neuvième siècle Joseph Sablé, 2002), pp. 181-88.

³⁶ The status of the first-person narrator in *Les Contes drolatiques* is especially problematic. ‘En introduisant dans son récit un *je* incongru et anachronique,’ argues Nicole Mozet, ‘Balzac avoue, affiche que c’est aussi de lui qu’il parle lorsqu’il évoque la Touraine’ (Honoré de Balzac, *La Grenadière et autres récits tourangeaux de 1832*, p. 23). For a more extensive discussion of the narrative voice of the *Contes*, see for example Éric Bordas, ‘L’ordre du temps drolatique’, in *Balzac dans l’histoire*, ed. by Nicole Mozet and Paule Petitier (Paris: SEDES, 2001), pp. 209-21.

³⁷ Balzac’s irritation during a visit to Saché in 1832 confirms that, for him, Touraine was not immune to the defects of provincial life. ‘Ici, je suis gêné par la vie de château,’ he told Zulma Carraud. ‘Il y a du monde, il faut s’habiller à heure fixe, et cela semblerait étrange, à des gens

pride in Touraine is of less importance in the *Contes* than Balzac's determination to offer another perspective on the changing nature of provincial life.

The argument gains credibility by association with the period in which most of the Tourangeaux stories are set. This is not the early nineteenth century, when the dominance of Paris was depriving the provinces of their most energetic inhabitants. These are the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Touraine was home to the kings of France, and Tours itself was a city of prestige and prosperity. The period between 1440 and 1520 saw the region's capital acquire a key role in deciding the country's industrial, political, and religious affairs. Much of the credit for establishing Tours as such an important centre lay with Louis XI. Having purchased the Château du Plessis in 1463, it was he who brought spinners and weavers to the city from Lyons. Their rich fabrics, most notably silk, would later be exported to England, and the royal court at Windsor.³⁸ After his death in 1483, Touraine remained the chosen residence of the monarch, a status of which Tours was a notable beneficiary. In fact, as Bernard Chevalier has rightly observed, the city would be confirmed as 'le lieu d'élection de tous les grands événements nationaux'.³⁹ It was here that the *États généraux* met in 1484, and here, also, that the clergy held two national councils, in 1493 and 1510. Foreign embassies relocated to the city, a final indication, if one were needed, that Touraine was the political heart of the kingdom. Add these historical facts to his unbridled affection for

de province, de rester sans dîner pour suivre une idée. Ils m'en ont déjà bien étranglé avec leur cloche!' (*Corr.*, II, p. 48; 10 July 1832).

³⁸ For the role of Louis XI in the prosperity of Tours, see Eugène Pépin, *Histoire de Touraine* (Paris: Boivin, 1935), pp. 138-41 and Bernard Chevalier, *Histoire de Tours* (Toulouse: Privat, 1985), especially pp. 135-39.

³⁹ Bernard Chevalier, *Histoire de Tours*, p. 129.

the region, and it is hardly surprising that the narrator of the *Contes* bristles with pride. Are we to assume, though, that his self-knowledge was complete? Does he have as much reason to be proud of his native province as he thinks?

What is clear is that, in *Les Contes drolatiques*, Tours is a vibrant city, where the streets are teeming with life. Balzac focuses his attention on the old town, the western part of the city around Saint-Martin, and the church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Écrignoles. Here, there is ample evidence to support Nicole Mozet's conclusion that 'l'espace urbain drolatique [...] est doué d'un certain nombre de propriétés que l'on ne retrouvera à aucun degré dans aucune des villes de province de *La Comédie humaine*'.⁴⁰ There are fairs and markets which draw crowds from across the region, and which present opportunities for both mischief and merriment. The young scoundrels of 'Les Trois Clercqs de Saint-Nicholas' know this only too well, setting off after a hearty breakfast, and heading straight for the fairs, '[où ils] tailloyent en plein drap sur les becsjaunes et aultres, robbant, prenant, jouant, perdant; despendant les escripteaux ou enseignes et les changeant' (*OD*, I, p. 164).⁴¹ As meeting-places, the streets of this Tours hold a wealth of possibilities for amorous adventures. Jacques de Beausne, in 'Comment fust basti le chasteau d'Azay', embroils himself in one such episode, catching sight of a beautiful noblewoman, and following her home 'par ung escheveau meslé de petites ruelles' (*OD*, I, p. 196). His reward for doing so is to be doused with water, narrowly avoiding the porcelain jug that falls into the street with it, and illustrating that the Tours 'drolatique' can be a dangerous place in which to live. This reference to the streets is also significant, for in the *Contes*, these are

⁴⁰ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, pp. 68-69.

⁴¹ The prank of changing round shop-signs can be seen in *La Rabouilleuse*, where it is a favourite game for the Chevaliers de la Désœuvrance (*CH*, IV, p. 366).

often narrow, enabling even the king and his mistress, in 'Les Joyeulsetez du roy Loys le unziesme', to watch the reaction of an aged spinster at finding a hanged man in her bed.⁴² Yet the question of the narrator's pride still remains unanswered. What themes ultimately define the Tours of *Les Contes drolatiques*, and what is it about life in the city that the narrator believes to be so comical?

The answer is neatly encapsulated by 'L'Apostrophe', the tale of a laundress who marries a silk dyer from Tours. In one of the most representative of the Tourangeau *Contes*, *La Tascherette*, as she is known to the people of the town, is an attractive young woman who catches the eye of Carandas, 'ung fabricant de mécaniques à soeries, lequel estoit petist de taille, bossu, pour toute sa vie, et plein de meschanterie' (*OD*, I, p. 144). This theme, desire, recurs throughout the *Contes*, and provides a natural focus of dramatic interest. This is not, however, a work of realist fiction, in which the reader might expect to match the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists against his or her own experience of life. This is a universe in which such situations become farcical, and can have amusingly violent consequences. The promise of laughter comes into view in 'L'Apostrophe' when the narrator concedes that 'ceste grande amour dudict bossu ne se rebutta de rien, et devint si fort poizante à la taincturière, qu'elle se résolust de la guarir par mille mauvais tours' (*OD*, I, p. 144). *La Tascherette* resolves to 'cure' the hunchback by subjecting him to a series of practical jokes, schemes that are consistent with the playful nature of the Tourangeaux, but which are, as such,

⁴² It is from this tale that the name 'Mortsauf' is derived, in reference to the hanged man who is brought back to life. The name would be used, of course, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, where Monsieur de Chessel tells Félix that Monsieur de Mortsauf is 'le représentant d'une famille historique en Touraine, dont la fortune date de Louis XI, et dont le nom indique l'aventure à laquelle il doit ses armes et son illustration' (*CH*, IX, pp. 989-90).

edged with cruelty. She invites Carandas to a midnight assignation, only to have him flee from her waking husband. The result is a desperate escape through those dangerous streets, as the hunchback 'saulta fort mal par dessus la chaisne tendue au bout de la rue, et tumba dans le trou punais que, lors, les eschevins n'avoient poinct faict encore remplacer par une vanne à descharger les boues en Loire' (*OD*, I, p. 145).

The hunchback's desire for La Tascherette, who is said to be 'pimpante et appetissante comme une pomme par ung iour de grande chaleur' (*OD*, I, p. 145), nevertheless remains undiminished. Accepting a second invitation, Carandas joins her for a bountiful dinner that is really intended for Taschereau, whose arrival forces the hunchback to take refuge in the laundry basket. There, he struggles for breath as he listens to the couple enjoying their meal with a bottle of Vouvray: 'Il estoit parmy des linges, serré comme une sardine dans ung poinçon, et n'avoit de l'air que comme les barbeaux ont du soleil au fond de l'eaue' (*OD*, I, p. 146). This, the violence that characterizes the 'Tours drolatique', often has a cartoon-strip quality. The narrator's jaunty tone suggests that Carandas will emerge from the basket blue in the face and clutching his throat, and so it proves. At the same time, though, it should be noted that not all of this violence is so tame. Knowing that he has been tricked, Carandas swears revenge on the former laundress. 'Je mangerois de sa chair,' he spits. 'Dà, je feroys cuire l'un de ses tettins et le croquerois, mesme sans saulce' (*OD*, I, p. 147). The nature of the threat may itself be somewhat comical, but the words are delivered with genuine menace, and could not be more at odds with the narrator's assurance that 'cette ville est rieuse, rigolleuse, amoureuse, fresche, fleurie, parfumée mieux que toutes les aultres

viles du monde' (*OD*, I, p. 148). Although the place and its people are described with Rabelaisian abandon, this Tours can be a quite wicked town, where extremes of desire are capable of producing extremes of hatred.

This final tale in the *Premier Dixain* also reveals a number of themes that are characteristic, not merely of Tours, but of Touraine as a whole. Among these themes, as I have intimated already, is eroticism. In the *Contes*, the carefree nature of the people of Touraine lends itself to adultery, and to sexual encounters that present-day readers, as much as their nineteenth-century predecessors, may find morally distasteful. 'L'Apostrophe' is no exception, as La Tascherette becomes involved in an adulterous affair with a young priest. Every weekend on the eve of the sabbath, she leaves Tours and heads for La Grenadière. Her lover the priest follows, crossing the Loire in a boat 'pour aller tennir chauld à la taincturière et lui calmer ses phantaisies, afin qu'elle dormist bien pendant la nuict, ouvraige auquel s'entendent bien les jeunes gars' (*OD*, I, p. 150). The scenario seems designed to satisfy the tastes of a male readership, though closer analysis reveals Balzac's attitude to be complex. Here, the power to control the affair lies with the woman: it is the priest, and not La Tascherette, who follows, and he who sleeps in her marital bed. The dyer's wife is, in this respect, typical of the women of *Les Contes drolatiques*, '[qui] n'ont cesse de rappeler qu'elles ont aussi un corps qui éprouve des désirs', and who manage their lives and loves 'pour obtenir le plaisir avec l'homme de leur choix ou pour échapper aux sollicitations des hommes qui les dégoûtent'.⁴³ Moreover, the crossing of the Loire is used to highlight something other than the balance of power between the sexes. It also

⁴³ Véronique Bui, "L'escrivoire à double goddet": *Les Contes drolatiques* envers de *La Comédie humaine* et endroit du désir féminin', in *Envers balzaciens*, ed. by Andrea del Lungo and Alexandre Péraud (Poitiers: La Licorne, 2001), pp. 233-44 (p. 238).

demonstrates the thematic unity of this 'Touraine drolatique'. In the *Contes*, as Roland Chollet and Nicole Mozet have observed, 'il n'y a pas d'hiatus entre la ville et la campagne environnante' (*OD*, I, p. 1839). The basic features of Tourangeau life, be it the happy, carefree temperament of the people, their practical jokes, or their lusty behaviour, are unchanged across the region. The briefest review of the *Contes* is sufficient to confirm this hypothesis. At the Château de Rochecorbon, at Azay-le-Rideau, or in the Rue Royale at Tours, the same combinations of farce, violence and eroticism are prevalent, and linked to the spirited disposition of the region's inhabitants.

In their peregrinations through this fictional Touraine, readers will also notice that it contains a strong element of the fantastic. Further evidence of this is provided by 'L'Apostrophe', when the hunchback informs Taschereau that he has been cuckolded. With his burning desire for revenge, the malevolent Carandas proposes a solution. 'Mon bon voisin,' he tells the husband, 'i'ay rapporté de Flandres une espée empoisonnée, laquelle occit net quiconque, pourvu qu'elle luy fasse une esgratigneure; or, dès que vous en aurez tant seulement touchié vostre gouge et son concubin, ils mourront' (*OD*, I, p. 151). The fact that it is Carandas who dies by the sword does not alter the significance of this episode. The Touraine of *Les Contes drolatiques* sees Balzac exercise his taste for the fantastic in literature, drawing on the example of E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose own 'contes' achieved notable popularity in France during the July Monarchy.⁴⁴ More importantly, however, *Les Contes drolatiques* see Balzac once again demonstrating his awareness of historical change, plunging backwards into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and

⁴⁴ For the possible influence of Hoffmann on Balzac, see for example Marie-Claude Amblard, *L'Œuvre fantastique de Balzac: sources et philosophie* (Paris: Didier, 1972), pp. 119-26.

channelling the prestige of an internationally recognized Touraine into a multifaceted celebration of a laughing, if sometimes threatening, province. The point is an appropriate one on which to leave *Les Contes drolatiques*, and proceed to the representation of Touraine in *La Comédie humaine*. Which Tourangeaux themes did Balzac transfer from his other works to the monumental enterprise with which he is most often associated, and which are absent? How would his vision of provincial France under the July Monarchy be refracted through this next Touraine?

Tours and Touraine in *La Comédie humaine*

The representation of Touraine, and of the Tourangeaux, reaches its most advanced stage of development in *La Comédie humaine*. At the heart of this literary enterprise lies a series of works upon which readers have bestowed the title, the 'Cycle de la Touraine'. Among these works are celebrated novels such as *La Femme de trente ans*, *Le Curé de Tours*, and *Le Lys dans la vallée*. To these must be added shorter works, including 'La Grande Bretèche' (1832), *La Grenadière*, and finally, *L'Illustre Gaudissart*. All of these Tourangeaux stories were written between 1830 and 1835. Narrowing the focus still further also reveals that, of the six novels and short stories listed here, four were written in 1832, the same year in which Balzac completed the *Premier Dixain* of *Contes drolatiques*. Thus, it is clear that, in 1832, Touraine absorbed a significant portion of his creative energy. The reason is biographical. In the wake of his conversion to Legitimism, Balzac had reached a personal impasse. The constant tussles with editors, his debts, and the temptation of a political

career had seen him become disillusioned with the demands that writing placed upon him. As the burden became increasingly difficult to bear, he poured out his distress to Zulma Carraud. 'J'ai, pendant un mois, à ne pas quitter ma table, où je jette ma vie comme un alchimiste son or dans un creuset,'⁴⁵ he wrote in January 1832. The situation had hardly improved by July, when he famously complained that he had become 'un galérien de plume et d'encre, un vrai marchand d'idées'.⁴⁶ A crisis-point had been reached, as Anne Ubersfeld explains:

En cet été 1832, Balzac, talonné par les difficultés financières, par la peur de perdre sa vie, par l'envie passionnée du bonheur [...], cherche au prix d'une angoisse qu'il dissimule à peine, à trouver sa voie, à donner à son existence sa signification.⁴⁷

A vital part of finding this direction, and of stabilizing his fragile mental state, was to be found in the rediscovery of his native province. The writing of these stories was intended to be as therapeutic as an actual visit to Touraine, which he also undertook in June.⁴⁸

The portrait of Touraine which forms such an indispensable element of *La Comédie humaine* is not, however, as restricted as the period in which Balzac wrote most of his Tourangeaux novels. The presence of the region can be felt across the whole work, with its natives appearing in categories as different as the *Scènes de la vie privée* and the *Études philosophiques* (1834-40). The perfumer, César Birotteau, leaves Tours at the age of fourteen, but as he strives to make his career in the harsh world of the capital, his thoughts often

⁴⁵ *Corr.*, I, p. 661 (22 January 1832).

⁴⁶ *Corr.*, II, p. 35 (2 July 1832).

⁴⁷ Anne Ubersfeld, 'La crise de 1831-1833 dans la vie et l'œuvre de Balzac', *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), 55-68 (p. 60).

⁴⁸ Cf. Robb, *Balzac*, p. 202.

turn to his homeland: 'Le soir, il pleurait en pensant à la Touraine où le paysan travaille à son aise, où le maçon pose sa pierre en douze temps, où la paresse est sagement mêlée au labeur' (*CH*, VI, p. 55). Elsewhere, we meet Tourangeaux characters who, though reluctant to suffer the emotional trauma of 'transplantation', show at least a willingness to travel when the need arises. This is true of the shrewd Monsieur de Bourbonne, 'le planteur de peupliers [qui a] vingt-six mille livres de rentes en bonnes terres de Touraine' (*CH*, II, p. 152 and p. 154), who, in *Madame Firmiani* (1832), comes to the Faubourg Saint-Germain out of concern for his lovelorn nephew, Octave de Camps. Away from the apathy-inducing climate of their native province, these men are worthy ambassadors for Touraine. And yet, it is not merely the dispersal of such characters that ensures that the region is rarely far from view. Throughout *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac makes frequent reference to the region, identifying what he describes as authentic dishes, items of clothing, and prominent local families. When Agathe Bridau and her son, Joseph, arrive in Issoudun, in *La Rabouilleuse*, their first meal ends with a serving of 'le fameux fromage mou de la Touraine et du Berry, fait avec du lait de chèvre' (*CH*, IV, p. 427). Here, in Berry, not even a special porcelain dish, used for cooking omelettes, escapes association with Touraine, where 'le cagnard s'appelle un cauquemarre' (*CH*, IV, p. 401). Likewise, in the Normandy of *Béatrix*, the narrator discloses Camille Maupin's real name and cannot resist adding that 'cette famille n'a rien de commun avec les des Touches de Touraine, auxquels appartient l'ambassadeur du Régent' (*CH*, II, p. 688). All seems to point to the conclusion that Balzac was determined to rectify the opinion he expressed in *Sur Catherine de Médicis* (1844), in which Touraine

is described as 'une province qu'on n'admire jamais assez' (*CH*, XI, p. 233).

Apart from the novels that he sets in the region, there can be observed what Jean Chaillet has called 'une sorte de "contamination" tourangelle de son œuvre',⁴⁹ with reminders of Touraine appearing at often unexpected intervals.

The region makes its first appearance in *La Femme de trente ans*. The story of Julie d'Aiglemont was assembled from a series of short fictions published in the press between 1831 and 1834.⁵⁰ These told of women who sought consolation for their marital disappointments in the arms of other men, and were greeted, rather predictably, with accusations of immorality. In 1851, Jules Jolly argued that *La Femme de trente ans* could exert a corrosive influence on French society, undermining the status of the family as its most vital supporting pillar.⁵¹ Clearly, these stories, and the novel into which they were ultimately and rather crudely made were, for some, a source of outrage. In stark contrast, the reaction of many female readers was wholly positive. Balzac's statement that 'une femme de trente ans a d'irrésistibles attraits' (*CH*, II, p. 1128), endowing her with a superiority over her younger rivals, won him the affection of women throughout Europe. Even Sainte-Beuve was forced to concede, in his 'Causerie' of 2 September 1850, that Balzac was the inventor of 'la théorie de la femme de trente ans'. 'C'est là une de ses découvertes les plus réelles dans l'ordre du roman intime,' he continued. 'La clef de son immense succès était tout entière dans ce premier petit chef-d'œuvre.'⁵² And

⁴⁹ Jean Chaillet, 'Le cycle de la Touraine', in *L'Œuvre de Balzac*, VI (1950), I-XXXI (p. IV).

⁵⁰ For a clarification of the complex genesis of *La Femme de trente ans*, see Stéphane Vachon, 'La "même histoire" d'une femme de trente ans: "J'ai corrigé l'édition qui sert de manuscrit"', in *Balzac: 'La Femme de trente ans': "une vivante énigme"*, ed. by José-Luis Diaz (Paris: SEDES, 1993), pp. 5-16.

⁵¹ Jules Jolly, *De l'influence de la littérature et du théâtre sur l'esprit public et les mœurs pendant les vingt dernières années* (Paris: Amyot, 1851), pp. 36-39.

⁵² C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, 'M. de Balzac', in *Causeries du Lundi*, 5th edn, 3 vols (Paris: Garnier, [n. d.]), II, pp. 443-63 (p. 446).

indeed, given that *La Femme de trente ans* has such a famous centre of thematic interest, it is not surprising to find that the novel's treatment of Touraine has been somewhat neglected. The need to reverse this state of affairs is pressing, not least because the first fragment of the novel to be published (in *La Silhouette*, on 11 February 1830) was precisely 'Une vue de Touraine'. Later incorporated into *Le Rendez-vous (Premières Fautes)* (1832), this short piece is especially significant as an illustration of Balzac's skill in rendering a Tourangeau landscape, and as such, can be employed to contradict Geneviève Delattre's claim that 'il ne sera jamais aussi grand paysagiste que lorsqu'il décrira non pas un paysage, mais Paris'.⁵³

Like the opening letter from Jacob del-Ryès in *Sténie*, 'Une vue de Touraine' describes a journey into the heart of the province. The historical setting is March 1814. Victor d'Aiglemont, an officer in Napoleon's army, has been handed the task of carrying the Emperor's orders to '[le] maréchal Soult, qui avait à défendre la France de l'invasion faite par les Anglais dans le Béarn' (*CH*, II, p. 1057). To ensure the safety of his wife during his absence, Victor arranges for her to stay in Tours with his elderly aunt, the Countess de Listomère-Landon.⁵⁴ Having departed from Amboise, Julie and her husband are within sight of the town when, just as the sun is rising, their carriage breaks down on the Pont de la Cise. For Balzac, the actual Pont de la Cise was a gateway to his beloved homeland; from here, he could reach both Saché and La Grenadière. This choice of directions is reflected in *La Femme de trente ans*, where the stopping of the d'Aiglemonts's carriage is used to offer a

⁵³ Geneviève Delattre, *Les Opinions littéraires de Balzac* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), p. 327.

⁵⁴ The name 'Landon' is a borrowing from *Wann-Chlore*. The Countess de Listomère-Landon should not be confused with Madame de Listomère, in *Le Curé de Tours*.

panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. The textual device is one that Balzac makes little attempt to disguise, as he informs the reader: 'par un effet du hasard, les deux personnes qui se trouvaient dans la calèche eurent le loisir de contempler à leur réveil un des plus beaux sites que puissent présenter les séduisantes rives de la Loire' (*CH*, II, p. 1052). The choice of the verb 'présenter' is appropriate, for in this episode, it is less a case of the characters being introduced to the setting than the setting being introduced to them:

A sa droite, le voyageur embrasse d'un regard toutes les sinuosités de la Cise, qui se roule, comme un serpent argenté, dans l'herbe des prairies auxquelles les premières pousses du printemps donnaient alors les couleurs de l'émeraude. A gauche, la Loire apparaît dans toute sa magnificence (*CH*, II, p. 1052).

The sense of wonder that the narrator expects his unnamed traveller to experience takes in a combination of sun and water, 'les scintillements du soleil' making a brilliant surface of 'les vastes nappes que déploie cette majestueuse rivière' (*CH*, II, p. 1052). The image is deliberate, for it is clear that, in this Touraine, the traveller could be forgiven for thinking that he had arrived in a mythical kingdom, where the distant capital rises into the clouds like King Arthur's Camelot:

A travers le tendre feuillage des îles, au fond du tableau, Tours semble, comme Venise, sortir du sein des eaux. Les campaniles de sa vieille cathédrale s'élancent dans les airs, où ils se confondaient alors avec les créations fantastiques de quelques nuages blanchâtres (*CH*, II, pp. 1052-53).

Along the banks of the Loire, from Tours to Vouvray, winegrowers live in picturesque poverty, their houses carved in the rock standing as further

confirmation of the region's maternal qualities: 'Le pauvre est enseveli dans cette demeure éternelle comme la Nature. Logé sous son héritage, il l'entend fructifier, son vignoble est son toit [...], il s'y loge et s'y nourrit comme un enfant dans le sein de sa mère' (*OD*, I, p. 723). Elsewhere, the scene explodes into colour, a symphony of blue, green, and white disturbed only by the reference to 'une jeune fille à jupon rouge [qui] court à son jardin' (*CH*, II, p. 1053). As Jean Chaillet observes, the final impression is of 'un climat sentimental plein de joie, de jeunesse, et de paix',⁵⁵ a striking introduction to the Touraine of *La Comédie humaine*, and a portrait which, according to the narrator, shows the region 'dans toute sa gloire' (*CH*, II, p. 1054).

The passage is not, however, the unadulterated celebration of Touraine that it first appears to be. The 'prolixes concerts' of the birds overhead and 'le chant monotone d'un gardeur de chèvres' (*CH*, II, p. 1053) add a trace of melancholy that extends to and is developed in the character of Julie d'Aiglemont. Just as the dispassionate observations of Vanehrs, in *Sténie*, reveal del-Ryès's love of Touraine to be entirely personal, Julie's waking reaction to her surroundings demonstrates that the beauty of the region truly does lie in the eye of the beholder. For her, married life has been nothing more than 'une longue douleur' (*CH*, II, p. 1065), and though the window of her carriage makes a perfect frame for this stunning regional portrait, she is in no emotional state to appreciate the fact. Instead, she commits what is arguably a Balzacian sin: 'Elle examina d'un œil indifférent les campagnes du Cher, la Loire et ses îles, Tours et les longs rochers de Vouvray; puis, sans vouloir regarder la ravissante vallée de la Cise, elle se rejeta promptement dans le fond

⁵⁵ Jean Chaillet, 'La couleur dans les paysages tourangeaux de Balzac', in *Congrès d'histoire littéraire, Balzac et la Touraine*, pp. 77-83 (p. 79).

de la calèche' (*CH*, II, p. 1054). When asked by her husband what she thinks of the setting, she replies with no enthusiasm that it is 'admirable' (*CH*, II, p. 1054). Her feelings change, however, when she falls in love with Sir Arthur Ormond (later Lord Grenville), an Englishman whom Napoleon has detained,⁵⁶ and who has used his time in France to acquire an extensive knowledge of anatomy and medicine. A meeting with Victor d'Aiglemont ends with Lord Grenville consenting to treat Julie, who, after giving birth, is 'atteinte d'une inflammation assez ordinairement mortelle' (*CH*, II, p. 1075). The relationship between Julie and her 'amant-médecin'⁵⁷ blossoms, and during a walk in the countryside, they are presented with the same view that Julie had seen from her carriage, some five years before. This time, her reaction could not be more different. Filled with love, she declares: 'je voudrais rester toujours ici. Peut-on jamais se lasser d'admirer cette belle vallée?' As we might expect in the case of a Tourangeau landscape, the opportunity to insert his own appraisal of the site is one that Balzac is anxious not to waste. 'Ils admirèrent en silence le paysage et les beautés de cette nature harmonieuse,' he declares. 'Le murmure des eaux, la pureté de l'air et du ciel, tout s'accordait avec les pensées qui vinrent en foule dans leurs cœurs aimants et jeunes' (*CH*, II, p. 1087). The parallel between the setting and the feelings of those who contemplate it is drawn in unoriginal, romanticized terms. Indeed, with the possible exception of the purity of the air and sky, there would seem to be nothing here that is peculiar to Touraine. Even Félix Davin's special reference to these contrasting scenes, in the Introduction to the *Études*

⁵⁶ For the role of English characters in Balzac's Touraine, see Nicole Mozet, 'Les personnages anglais et la Touraine dans l'œuvre de Balzac', *AB* (1970), 129-46.

⁵⁷ Ruth Amossy, 'La figuration du féminin dans *La Femme de trente ans*', in Diaz, ed., *Balzac: 'La Femme de trente ans'*, pp. 41-54 (p. 53).

de mœurs, fails to shed new light on the question. ‘Si l’influence de la pensée et des sentiments a été démontrée,’ he asks, ‘n’est-ce pas dans la peinture de ce ravissant paysage de Touraine, vu par Julie d’Aiglemont, à deux reprises différentes?’ (*CH*, I, p. 1165).

The importance of these contrasting reactions to Touraine lies not in the similarities between Jacob del-Ryès and Julie d’Aiglemont, but in what separates them. The former’s love of Touraine is derived from his patriotism, while the latter has no such attachment. To feel an affinity with Touraine when one is not a Tourangeau, therefore, requires a joyful state of heart that heightens poetic sensibility. It should also be noted that, in *La Femme de trente ans*, Julie d’Aiglemont’s newfound affection for Touraine is applied explicitly only to the countryside. What is the role of Tours itself in this novel? The observations to be made in this regard are twofold. First, there is the way in which Tours is a protective prison for Julie, a place in which she is made to reside in order to ensure her safety. Second, there is the personality of the Countess de Listomère-Landon, a caring woman who devines the true reason for Julie d’Aiglemont’s sadness, and with whom Julie finds that ‘un mois suffit pour établir entre elles une éternelle amitié’ (*CH*, II, p. 1060). The final analysis nevertheless confirms that, here, neither Tours nor its inhabitants are described in detail.

A more complete portrait of the town is found, by contrast, in *Le Curé de Tours*, a novella that shared its month of composition with the appearance of the *Premier Dixain*, in April 1832. Originally classified as a *Scène de la vie privée*, its subsequent shift to the *Scènes de la vie de province* was apparently justified by the fact that this is a ‘sombre tale of apparently petty jealousies

and vindictiveness'⁵⁸ which unravels within the narrow confines of a small provincial town. The story tells of a domestic conflict between the priest, François Birotteau, and his landlady, Sophie Gamard, an old maid who is aided and abetted in removing Birotteau from his cherished apartment by the sinister Abbé Troubert. The Tours in which these characters live bears little similarity, however, to the bustling town of *Les Contes drolatiques*. In *La Comédie humaine*, the region's capital is portrayed as 'une des villes les moins littéraires de France' (*CH*, IV, p. 182), a place of cold houses and silent streets that is utterly at odds with its actual equivalent. In the early nineteenth century, Tours was still an important regional centre. Indeed, as Michel Laurencin suggests, 'dans cette Touraine de la première moitié du dix-neuvième siècle, la ville de Tours [...] est comme la plupart des grandes villes de province le lieu obligé des contacts, des décisions, le cœur qui imprime un certain rythme à tout le département.'⁵⁹ The silk industry continued to underpin the local economy, and in 1815, the city hosted three trade fairs. The city was well served by public transport. Every day, several coaches would leave for Paris, Bordeaux, Angers and La Rochelle. As a base for the Fourth Military Division, it also had an additional population of around two thousand soldiers to consume its resources.⁶⁰ And yet, these aspects play no part in *Le Curé de Tours*. The city may not have changed, but Balzac's perspective clearly has. The only part of the city he deems worthy of praise is the bridge over the Loire. In *Sténie*, Jacob del-Ryès ends the first of his letters to Vanehrs with the declaration: 'Je te quitte pour aller voir le magnifique pont de Tours,

⁵⁸ Geoff Woollen, *Balzac: 'Le Curé de Tours'* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1988; repr. with corrections 1991), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Laurencin, *La Vie quotidienne en Touraine*, p. 239.

⁶⁰ For further information on the state of Tours during the early nineteenth century, see for example Bernard Chevalier, *Histoire de Tours*, pp. 256-72.

ouvrage digne des Romains, il t'en arrivera quelque jour une description exacte' (*OD*, I, p. 727). A decade later, in *Le Curé de Tours*, the promise that Balzac had made through del-Ryès is kept, with the narrator asserting that 'ce pont, un des plus beaux monuments de l'architecture française, a dix-neuf pieds de long, et les deux places qui le terminent à chaque bout sont absolument pareilles' (*CH*, IV, p. 242).

The bridge apart, there are no enthusiastic references to the town itself, and no global description of the site. As Nicole Mozet has indicated, 'aucune activité économique n'est évoquée, pas même la vigne; rien ne bouge sur la Loire' (*CH*, IV, p. 176). The reason for these omissions is, first of all, dramatic. Not wishing to defeat his own purpose of evoking those hidden domestic dramas to which he referred later, in the preface to *Eugénie Grandet*, Balzac focuses his attention once again on a dark corner of the town, previously evoked in both *Sténie* and *Wann-Chlore*: the Cloître Saint-Gatien. This reappearing setting, being 'l'endroit le plus désert, le plus sombre et le plus éloigné du centre qu'il y ait à Tours' (*CH*, IV, p. 199), is once again perfectly matched with the cruel domestic drama that unfolds there. The proximity of Mademoiselle Gamard's house to the imposing cathedral makes for a dreary atmosphere from the outset: 'cette maison se trouve continuellement dans les ombres projetées par cette grande cathédrale sur laquelle le temps a jeté son manteau noir' (*CH*, IV, p. 183). What, though, of the relationship between the Cloître Saint-Gatien and its inhabitants? And what of the novella's treatment of Tours, more generally, as 'le prototype de la ville de province balzacienne'?⁶¹

⁶¹ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 90.

A number of unflattering references to the nature of provincial life remind us that in this *Scène de la vie de province*, the contemporary reality of Tours is sacrificed to Balzac's determination to fit the site into his vision of provincial France as a unified sociological whole. The narrator himself suggests that his story lacks few elements for it to be considered 'une peinture achevée de la vie béotienne des provinciaux' (*CH*, IV, p. 205), and certainly, it is not difficult for the reader to pinpoint those characteristics which make the scandal surrounding François Birotteau 'une tempête dans un verre d'eau' (*CH*, IV, p. 227). The basis of the drama is to be found in the tactless priest's decision to abandon the salon of Mademoiselle Gamard. Just as Birotteau had, for twelve years, coveted the apartment of his friend, Chapeloud, Sophie Gamard's dream 'était de rendre son salon le point d'une réunion vers laquelle chaque soir un certain nombre de personnes se dirigeassent *avec plaisir*' (*CH*, IV, p. 196). Indeed, the reader may well sympathize with her when Birotteau returns to the houses of the old aristocracy from which she is excluded, and which leave her with too few players for a game of boston. Her private fury engenders a cruel response that sends a shockwave through the town, dividing it into opposing camps. Like all spinsters, she also has an inordinate capacity for hatred, and takes pleasure in the scheme that separates Birotteau from his precious apartment: 'Elles égratignent à la manière des chats. Puis, non seulement elles blessent, mais elles éprouvent du plaisir à blesser, et à faire voir à leur victime qu'elles l'ont blessé' (*CH*, IV, p. 191).⁶² The emotional

⁶² Balzac's apparent contempt for the state of celibacy provoked anger among many female readers, who wrote to him to voice their objections. 'C'est au nom de toutes les vieilles filles de ma province, et à la tête de ce troupeau si maltraité par vous,' read one letter of 1832, after the publication of *Le Curé de Tours*, 'que je viens réclamer contre l'injuste et redoutable arrêt, que vous avez prononcé avec tant d'esprit et de malice contre les célibataires femelles'

anguish that she inflicts on Birotteau is extreme, and the fact that it is linked to her spinsterhood points to another aspect of provincial life outlined in this novella.

It is no coincidence that, in *Le Curé de Tours*, six of the protagonists are unmarried. A constant feeling of emptiness forces these characters to seek an outlet for their energies, and validates Léon-François Hoffmann's opinion that 'en tant que caractéristique de la vie provinciale sous la Restauration, la stérilité est donc inscrite dans la structure même du roman'.⁶³ Even Madame de Listomère and her circle, whom we might praise for their attempts to protect the unwordly priest, only become interested in his case because '[ils] commençaient à s'ennuyer de leur séjour à la campagne' (*CH*, IV, p. 215). A similar channelling of the celibate's energies is applied to Birotteau himself. 'Être le pensionnaire de Mlle Gamard et devenir chanoine furent les deux grandes affaires de sa vie' (*CH*, IV, p. 183). He aspires to promotion at the cathedral, but, prior to that, he had longed to inherit Chapeloud's apartment, with its bookcase filled with rare ecclesiastic works, its comfortable bed, and iris-scented linen. 'Il avait été impossible à l'abbé Birotteau d'étouffer ce désir' (*CH*, IV, p. 184), says the narrator, before confirming that 'l'appartement de Chapeloud devint pour lui l'objet d'une monomanie secrète' (*CH*, IV, p. 186). This behaviour, so inappropriate in one who should be immune to the clamour for material goods, is an obvious illustration of the manner in which the emptiness of the celibate, when combined with the barrenness of the provinces, can produce dangerous extremes of emotion.

(*Lettres de femmes adressées à Honoré de Balzac: première série (1832-1836)*, ed. by Marcel Bouteron (Paris: La Cité des Livres, Les Cahiers balzaciens (3), 1924), pp. 5-6).

⁶³ Léon-François Hoffmann, 'Éros en filigrane: *Le Curé de Tours*', *AB* (1967), 89-105 (p. 92).

A place of scandal, jealousy and hatred, the town described in *Le Curé de Tours* is thus 'provincial' in ways that might even have shocked Vanehrs, whom we have heard allude to such characteristics in *Sténie*. And yet, for all that this fictional Tours matches Balzac's total vision of provincial France, we also see the novelist working through and outside this sociological model to produce a setting with a unique regional identity. In *Le Curé de Tours*, the cathedral city is evoked with a second layer of meaning that sees the behaviour of its inhabitants closely aligned with their Tourangeaux surroundings.

Like that of Sophie Gamard, the personality of François Birotteau is in harmony with the Cloître Saint-Gatien in which he finally comes to live. The ageing priest is selfish, and thinks of his own comfort before thinking of others. For him, the Cloître is a paradise from which he cannot bear to be separated: 'De même que, pour vivre, un arbre doit retrouver à toute heure les mêmes suc, et toujours avoir ses chevelus dans le même terrain, Birotteau devait toujours trotter dans Saint-Gatien' (*CH*, IV, p. 226). That said, it is more than a love of the quiet provincial life that defines Birotteau's character. The cause of his plight and ultimate exile to Saint-Symphorien, a parish on the other side of the Loire, is his embodiment of Touraine itself. In this region, we are told in *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, 'la mollesse de l'air, la beauté du climat, une certaine facilité d'existence et la bonhomie des mœurs y étouffent bientôt le sentiment des arts, y rétrécissent le plus vaste cœur, y corrodent la plus tenace des volontés' (*CH*, IV, p. 576). His comfortable apartment in the Rue de la Psalette is the true summit of his ambition. Finding his slippers in their usual place, sleeping in a warm bed, and spending his evenings in the homes of

Madame de Listomère, Mademoiselle Salomon, and Mademoiselle Merlin de La Blotière; these are 'choses suffisantes pour les besoins de la bête' (*CH*, IV, p. 183). His Tourangeau character explains his childlike simplicity, and is, therefore, the factor to which Mademoiselle Gamard's desire for revenge can be traced. 'Ce roman', agrees Nicole Mozet, 'est construit d'après le portrait-robot du Tourangeau selon Balzac; le caractère du Tourangeau, sa sensualité, sa paresse, expliquent le misérable destin de François Birotteau' (*CH*, IV, p. 168).

The view that *Le Curé de Tours* is built on a study of the Tourangeau character as much as on a global portrait of provincial life gathers credibility in the story of the Abbé Troubert.⁶⁴ The Machiavellian priest is another celibate who channels his energies into a sole ambition, though what this might be remains for much of the novella an enigma. Through a statement that is designed to arouse the reader's interest, the narrator indicates that 'plusieurs personnes avaient pu d'abord le croire absorbé par une haute et profonde ambition' (*CH*, IV, p. 201). Only when the Listomères make the mistake of crossing Troubert does the reader discover that this 'simple vicaire général' is in fact 'le personnage le plus important de la province où il représente la Congrégation' (*CH*, IV, p. 232). To facilitate his rise within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Troubert is a member of what is presented here as a secret society, a tentacular arm of the Catholic Church, the supposed existence of which provoked fierce parliamentary debate between 1826 and 1830.⁶⁵ In contrast to

⁶⁴ For information on the genesis of this character, see for example Nicole Mozet, 'Le personnage de Troubert et la genèse du *Curé de Tours*', *AB* (1970), 149-54.

⁶⁵ Although the existence of the *Congrégation* has been authenticated, the real nature of its activities, and the extent of its influence, are unclear even today. For Philip Spencer, it 'seems [...] that the Congregation itself was entirely innocent, but that alongside it there existed a shadow organization, the Society of Banners, whose secret purpose was to promote by all

Birotteau, and in another illustration of the duality of the setting, Troubert, who is described as 'cette immense pensée' (*CH*, IV, p. 245), views the Cloître Saint-Gatien as stagnant. For him, personal fulfilment is to be found in, or rather derived from, Paris. He sits up at night, no doubt engaged in correspondence with his masters in the capital, who have chosen him 'pour être le proconsul inconnu de la Touraine', and who discharge the power which ensures that 'archevêque, général, préfet, grands et petits étaient sous son occulte domination' (*CH*, IV, p. 232). Troubert's power can, of course, be read as a further comment on the progress of centralization. According to Balzac's vision of the provinces in decline, Tours is no longer the prestigious seat of power it was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in *Les Contes drolatiques*. In the nineteenth century, the balance has shifted back towards Paris, the city to which the King has returned. Troubert's experience, however, is set within the context, not merely of a universal reality of provincial life, but of a specifically Tourangeau theme. In *Le Curé de Tours*, Tours is a setting in which aspirations are born but rarely achieved or sustained. It is because he looks beyond the narrow confines of the Cloître Saint-Gatien that Troubert wins his promotion to the rank of Bishop of Troyes. He exchanges the laziness endemic in his native province for worldly achievement, and for this he is admired, with an epilogue that compares him to both Hildebrandt and Alexander VI. 'Descartes, Rabelais et d'autres génies ont pris naissance dans

possible means the cause of Bourbon legitimacy' (*Politics of Belief in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 27). D. W. Brogan, however, believes that the *Congrégation* shared many of its members with the *Chevaliers de la Foi*, a right-wing brand of freemasonry founded in 1809 which, whilst it had no clandestine role in government or politics, was still a potent force: 'Its support was worth having, or even the merest report of its support. Balzac's abbé Troubert was able to triumph in Tours because he was thought to be an agent of the Congregation' (D. W. Brogan, *The French Nation from Napoleon to Pétain: 1814-1940* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), p. 29).

ces vallées fertiles' (*OD*, I, p. 725). To the great Tourangeaux whom Balzac lists in *Sténie* must surely be added the name of the fictional Abbé Troubert.

Troubert nevertheless remains an exception, since in *La Comédie humaine*, neither Tours nor its inhabitants are celebrated in the same way as the surrounding countryside. Indeed, it is generally possible to apply Nicole Mozet's formula, which says that, in these works, a reference to Touraine should be interpreted as a reference to 'l'ensemble de la province MOINS la ville'.⁶⁶ Outside its capital, and beyond the bridge over the Loire, Touraine is evoked with love and passionate admiration.⁶⁷ The region itself is vaunted in *La Grenadière*, a short story from 1833, which takes its title from the beloved house on the right bank of the Loire where Balzac spent the summer of 1830 with Madame de Berny. The fictive action brings the dying Lady Brandon to this idyllic property, which appears as a microcosm of the surrounding province: 'Elle est, au cœur de la Touraine, une petite Touraine où toutes les fleurs, tous les fruits, toutes les beautés de ce pays sont complètement représentés' (*CH*, II, pp. 423-24). The setting is immediately associated with happiness and an escape from the world, a proud narrator declaring that 'personne n'y reste sans y sentir l'atmosphère du bonheur, sans y comprendre toute une vie tranquille, dénuée d'ambition, de soins. La rêverie est dans l'air et dans le murmure des flots' (*CH*, II, p. 424). This house is imbued with all the happiness that Balzac himself experienced under its roof.

⁶⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Lys dans la vallée*, ed. by Nicole Mozet (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1972), p. 25.

⁶⁷ The exception is 'La Grande Bretèche', a dark tale set in Vendôme, where the fictional Monsieur de Merret has his wife's Spanish lover, Férédia, bricked up alive inside a closet. Balzac wrote 'La Grande Bretèche' as an act of vengeance against his mother, who took a Spanish lover of her own while he was at Vendôme's Oratorian College. The name of this actual lover was Hérédia, and it is the first four letters of his surname that are scratched out in the manuscript (*CH*, III, p. 1516, n. 2).

That said, it is its role as a protective retreat that truly characterizes the fictional Grenadière, and that is indicative of Balzac's ability to combine a positive provincial stereotype with his own celebration of the Tourangeau identity. Situated on the other side of the bridge, and hidden behind a curtain of vegetation which includes 'les lauriers-roses de l'Italie et les jasmins des Açores' (*CH*, II, p. 424), the house and its garden are impenetrable to prying eyes. Although Lady Brandon's arrival ignites the curiosity of the locals, 'habituées à observer en province tout ce qui semble devoir animer la sphère étroite où elles vivent' (*CH*, II, p. 425), the narrator confirms that 'personne ne put obtenir de renseignements certains sur le rang que l'inconnue occupait dans le monde, ni sur sa fortune, ni même sur son état véritable' (*CH*, II, p. 427). The house and its garden create an oasis for this mother, and for her two children, '[qui] trottaient à travers le clos, grimpaient sur les terrasses, [et] couraient après les lézards.' Furthermore, because it encompasses the features of 'cette douce Touraine' (*CH*, II, p. 431), this oasis is an exceptional one, soothing those who come to inhabit it. A woman who has suffered the social disgrace of bearing two illegitimate children, Lady Brandon is afraid of what the future holds for them after her death. As she struggles against the onset of tuberculosis, her physical pain is exacerbated by the mental anguish that she hides behind her 'faux sourire' (*CH*, II, p. 426). Nevertheless, it remains difficult to concur with Corinne Ménage, when she draws the conclusion that the opening, eulogistic portrait of Touraine 'ne trouve pas de véritable prolongement dans le corps du texte'.⁶⁸ The Tourangeau setting is indispensable to the pace and progression of the narrative. No other province

⁶⁸ Corinne Ménage, 'Balzac paysagiste: *La Grenadière*', *AB* (1982), 257-71 (p. 269).

but Touraine could be credited with extending the short idyll that Lady Brandon has with her children before she dies: 'depuis le commencement de l'automne, si beau, si brillant en Touraine, et dont les bienfaisantes influences, les raisins, les bons fruits devaient prolonger la vie de cette mère au-delà du terme fixé par les ravages d'un mal inconnu' (*CH*, II, p. 436). No other region could have eased her passage into death, a final indication that, of all the provinces within his mosaic of French provincial life, Balzac's Touraine is invested with unique attributes.

As portrayed by Balzac, the people of this 'Touraine MOINS la ville' are also deserving of praise. At first glance, the interest of *L'Illustre Gaudissart* appears to lie less in its Tourangeau setting than in its indictment of provincial backwardness. As early as 1823, in *La Dernière Fée*, Balzac had complained that 'il y a en France des endroits reculés, des petits villages enfoncés dans les terres, loin des routes, où l'on vit dans une profonde ignorance des choses, de ce monde' (*PR*, II, pp. 24-25). This is the context in which, a decade later, he set the tale of a travelling salesman, a wordslinger who has travelled throughout France selling hats, dresses, and other prestigious *Articles-Paris*. As he works his way through the central expanses of the country, where 'les têtes deviennent singulièrement plus dures, et conséquemment les millions infiniment plus rares' (*CH*, IV, p. 573), Gaudissart knows that his skills and reputation will be severely tested. This does not dissuade him, however, from chancing his luck in Touraine, 'la véritable abbaye de Thélème' (*CH*, IV, p. 576), where the 'esprit conteur, rusé [et] goguenard' (*CH*, IV, p. 576) brings him crashing down to earth. Here, the people are no less stubborn or backward than those Gaudissart has encountered elsewhere in the provinces, but with

one crucial difference. The dyer, Monsieur Vernier, warns him that this is ‘un pays où jamais une idée nouvelle ne prendra’ (*CH*, IV, p. 581), though what he does not reveal is that the people of this region have a specialism of their own: practical jokes. In an episode that could easily have been transferred from *Les Contes drolatiques*, Gaudissart is sent to the house of a madman, Margaritis, where each has what he believes to be a rational conversation, but on quite different topics. Upon discovering that he has been tricked, the furious salesman returns to the home of Vernier, ‘qu’il trouva dans sa salle, riant avec des voisins auxquels il racontait déjà l’histoire’ (*CH*, IV, p. 595). The episode illustrates that, whilst the Tourangeaux are provincials, with a stubborn attitude to match, their regional traits of laziness and carefree humour can sometimes work in their favour. Their ability to score a victory over Paris (the economic implications of which I shall discuss in chapter five) is arguably the highest accolade that Balzac bestows upon his regional compatriots.

The highest accolade that he could bestow upon the region as a whole was *Le Lys dans la vallée*, a novel whose representation of Touraine is so well known as to warrant only a few additional remarks. It is here, of course, that Balzac’s love of his native province is formulated in the clearest possible terms. What is important in the context of this discussion, however, is that this is a novel in which he returns to his exploration of Touraine’s multifaceted identity, while at the same time connecting *Le Lys dans la vallée* to his wider body of Tourangeau work. He does so through the eyes of his protagonist, Félix de Vandenesse, ‘[un] enfant de la Touraine à qui la Touraine était inconnue’ (*CH*, IX, p. 993), and a young man whose rediscovery of his native province is evoked in the most strikingly poetic manner. In the ‘Historique du

procès auquel a donné lieu *Le Lys dans la vallée*, Balzac stated his intention to broach 'la grande question du paysage en littérature' (*CH*, IX, p. 922). In reality, he does much more, building on the argument launched in *La Grenadière*, and establishing Touraine as a province that exists in total harmony with its inhabitants.

Arriving at the rim of the 'magnifique coupe d'émeraude' (*CH*, IX, p. 987) that is the Indre Valley, Félix de Vandenesse is certain that the beautiful, and as yet unnamed woman from the ball at Tours, could live nowhere else: 'Si cette femme, la fleur de son sexe, habite un lieu dans le monde, ce lieu, le voici!' (*CH*, IX, p. 987). The description that follows derives much of its power from the fact that the setting is made to speak for Félix, intoxicated as he is with a love the like of which he has never experienced before: 'L'amour infini [...], je le trouvais exprimé par ce long ruban d'eau qui ruisselle au soleil entre deux rives vertes, par ces lignes de peupliers qui parent de leurs dentelles mobiles ce val d'amour' (*CH*, IX, p. 987). There is, however, much more than a pathetic fallacy at stake here. This is not merely a setting that reflects, momentarily, the feelings of those who enter its midst. This is an 'intelligent' setting that changes with them; 'elle [la vallée] n'est pas un simple objet de contemplation ou un but de promenade, elle vit avec ceux qui l'habitent, comme émue des mêmes sentiments.'⁶⁹ Thus, as Félix associates the site with intense desire, the valley is progressively eroticized. Even the river has feminine qualities, '[et] se roule par des mouvements de serpent' (*CH*, IX, p. 987). Later, when he returns to Clochegourde to be at Henriette's bedside, and is a witness to her death, he contemplates '[une] vallée jaunie

⁶⁹ Jacques Borel, *'Le Lys dans la vallée' et les sources profondes de la création balzacienne* (Paris: Corti, 1961), p. 88.

dont le deuil répondait alors comme en toute occasion aux sentiments qui [l]'agitaient' (*CH*, IX, p. 1197). A poem on Touraine, with its blue skies, brilliant summers and plentiful harvests, this idealized setting stands, quite clearly, as the most complete and eulogistic expression of the Tourangeau theme in Balzac's work. Equally, while he sets the region apart from his other provinces, he confers upon Touraine qualities that extend his more general theories of provincial behaviour. Every small town and province in *La Comédie humaine* conditions its inhabitants, be it the Provins that provokes hatred and jealousy in Sylvie Rogron, in *Pierrette*, or the Normandy that induces a vegetative state in Gaston du Nueil, in *La Femme abandonnée*. Only Touraine, however, is granted the intelligent flexibility to respond to the thoughts and feelings of those who enter its midst.

Aside from its representation of a Touraine that is placed both within and beyond the provinces of *La Comédie humaine*, *Le Lys dans la vallée* must also be seen as a centrepiece in what is, both textually and thematically, an interlocking portrait of the region. In Félix de Vandenesse and Henriette de Mortsauf, Balzac created a loving but fragile couple in the mould of Jacob del-Ryès and Sténie, or of Landon and Wann-Chlore. Also important to note is the fact that the novel hinges on a moment of eroticism and sexual violence which bears the hallmarks of the 'drolatique'. This moment comes during the ball at Tours, during which Félix is overcome with passion for the beautiful woman sitting next to him: 'Après m'être assuré que personne ne me voyait, je me plongai dans le dos comme un enfant qui se jette dans le sein de sa mère, et je baisai toutes ces épaules en y roulant ma tête' (*CH*, IX, p. 984). Little does he suspect the emotional impact that his kisses had when he opens his letter from

Henriette, written a short while before her death. ‘Vous souvenez-vous encore aujourd’hui de vos baisers?’ she asks. ‘Ils ont dominé ma vie, ils ont sillonné mon âme; l’ardeur de votre sang a réveillé l’ardeur du mien; votre jeunesse a pénétré ma jeunesse, vos désirs sont entrés dans mon cœur’ (CH, IX, p. 1215). Feminized, eroticized, vivified, the Touraine of *La Comédie humaine* is associated, finally, with the preservation of cherished memories.

In this chapter, I have analysed three distinct but interlocking representations of Touraine in Balzac’s work. This Tourangeau theme has its origins in his earliest literary efforts. In 1820, when his experience of provincial France was limited to the region in which he was born, Balzac had little choice but to mine the dramatic resources of a Touraine that he knew intimately. Through the fictional agent of Jacob del-Ryès, in *Sténie*, he returns to a homeland that he had not seen since 1814. At first sight, this Touraine provokes feelings of joy and euphoria. A province ‘[qui] paraît beau même à ceux qui ont de plus belles patries’ (OD, I, p. 722), the first appearance of Touraine in Balzac’s work is as a maternal space. The roundness of the region’s capital offers a womb-like comfort, to Job, who rediscovers the memories of a carefree childhood, and to Wann-Chlore, who finds solitude in the shadows of the Cloître Saint-Gatien.

From the inception of his literary career, however, Balzac was also experimenting with the concept of an unstable Touraine on which there is no single perspective. The waters of the Loire and the streets around the cathedral are as dangerous as they are comforting, while beneath the calmness of Tours lurk the defects that are common to all provincial towns: boredom, small-

mindedness and a love of scandal. Locked in a terminal decline, this nineteenth-century Tours strikes an immediate contrast with *Les Contes drolatiques*, where the town is teeming with life. In a cathartic celebration of the laughing Tourangeau spirit, Balzac shifts his own narrative perspective to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Touraine was the home of royalty, a centre of the international silk trade, and the political heartland from which France conducted its relations with the outside world. This prestige is a source of pride for the Tourangeaux, a fact which ensures that both Tours and Touraine are places of merriment. This Tours, it seems, could not be further removed from that of *La Comédie humaine*. In the realist enterprise, Tours is a provincial town whose networks of tittle-tattlers are said in *Le Curé de Tours* to operate like 'les vaisseaux capillaires d'une plante' (CH, IV, p. 227), and the atmosphere is so stultifying that ambitious men such as Troubert long to escape. While there are contrasting 'versions' of Tours and Touraine in Balzac's work, the paradox of these settings is that their instability is constant. Balzac's Touraine is a place of same and other that can ease the discomfort of a dying Lady Brandon, but constitute a living death for a Birotteau, when he is forced to cross the demarcation line that is the bridge over the Loire. Touraine is the province that dominates Balzac's work, and the one whose influence can be felt in the most distant corners of his fictional universe. It was by resisting the lure of Touraine, however, that Balzac escaped from becoming a regional novelist. After 1836, and the completion of *Le Lys dans la vallée*, the inspiration of Touraine was, for the most part, exhausted. Henceforth, he would have to uncover new provinces in which to exercise his fertile imagination, beginning with the Charente of *Illusions perdues* in 1837, and

ending with the Belley of *Un caractère de femme* in 1848. As a result, Touraine became the lost paradise of his fictional world. In chapter four, I shall examine Balzac's attempts to reflect the diversity of France beyond the borders of his native province.

CHAPTER FOUR

Experiences of Provincial Life

‘La Province [...] nous offre, comme l’humanité, mille visages différents.’¹

François Mauriac

In his 1841 essay, ‘La Femme de province’, Balzac expressed the fear that ‘l’aplatissement des mœurs sera[it] la conséquence forcée de la centralisation’ (*CH*, IV, p. 1387). The prediction was one to which the second half of the nineteenth century would lend credibility. The growth of the French railway network, which increased the total length of its tracks from 541 kilometres in 1842 to 5930 kilometres in 1848,² heralded an era of unprecedented social mobility and cultural change that threatened the traditional identities of the provinces. Before the onset of this revolution, however, France was still a country of exceptional diversity. In 1830, when the stagecoach took five days to reach Bordeaux from Paris, it was not uncommon for a Frenchman to spend his whole life in the village in which he was born.³ The result of such isolation

¹ François Mauriac, *La Province* (Paris: Hachette, 1926), p. 18.

² Jocelyne George, *Paris-Province de la Révolution à la mondialisation* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), p. 77. Significantly, there are no trains seen passing through the provinces of *La Comédie humaine*. The only reference to the provincial rail network is in *Le Député d’Arcis*, where the townsfolk, speculating on the identity of the stranger who has entered their midst, conclude that he (Maxime de Trailles) must be ‘le directeur des chemins de fer de Paris à Lyon, ou de Paris à Dijon, ou de Montereau à Troyes’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 790). Although the first part of *Modeste Mignon* was not published until 1844, it would appear that the railway age came too late for it to receive a sustained treatment in Balzac’s provincial writings. Another possible reason for the omission is the novelist’s failed investment in the Northern Railway Company: the value of his shares fell from 817 francs in 1845 to 313 francs in 1848. For a biographical account of Balzac’s business activities and investments, see for example René Bouvier, *Balzac: homme d’affaires* (Paris: Champion, 1930).

³ In Émile Guillaumin’s novel, *La Vie d’un simple* (1904), the narrator, Tiennon, is born in 1823 into a peasant family. He reflects on his childhood in the Bourbonnais, and admits that

was regional difference. In Brittany, Provence, and Béarn, millions continued to speak the Breton, Provençal or Basque languages, while throughout the rest of the country, many rural people still communicated in patois. Each region had its own feasts and festivals, songs and dances, customs and proverbs, while variations in economic conditions were no less pronounced. In 1827, the statistician, Charles Dupin, drew an imaginary line from Saint-Malo to Geneva, and divided France into an impoverished south and a prosperous north; 'deux populations', he wrote, 'qui diffèrent plus entre elles [...], que la France prise en masse ne diffère des trois royaumes britanniques.'⁴ All of these factors meant that travel could be the most disorientating of activities, as Prosper Mérimée discovered in 1834, when he arrived in Avignon: 'il me sembla que je venais de quitter la France [...]: langage, costume, aspect du pays, tout paraît étrange à qui vient du centre de la France. Je me croyais au milieu d'une ville espagnole.'⁵ In chapter two, I considered the determination with which Balzac sought to explain and illustrate regional difference, through his innovative use of maps and guidebooks, but also through discussion of the socio-cultural characteristics of individual provinces. The aim of this chapter is to investigate further the contrasting ways, or experiences, of provincial life in Balzac's work, and in so doing, to reveal his provinces as a layered structure, the diversity of which is as much social and historical as it is geographical. I wish to demonstrate that three interlocking variables will condition the attitudes and behaviour of the provincial towards and within his

'dans nos campagnes, on n'avait pas la moindre notion de l'extérieur. Au-delà des limites du canton, au-delà des distances connues, c'étaient des pays mystérieux qu'on s'imaginait dangereux et peuplés de barbares' (Paris: Stock, 1943), p. 59.

⁴ Dupin, *Forces productives*, II, p. 249.

⁵ Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d'un voyage dans le Midi de la France*, in *Notes de voyages*, 33-245 (p. 97).

native environment. The first of these variables is historical circumstance as seen through Félix Grandet, a character whose status in small-town society is inseparable from the events of Revolution, Empire, and Restoration. The variable of history links in turn with that of the regional environment, here represented by the Brittany of *Les Chouans*, where the armies of the First Republic are embroiled in a bloody guerrilla war with local peasants. The final section takes the variable of social class, and argues that, with their distinct narrative voices, Balzac's fictional aristocrats, bourgeois, and peasants each offer a new perspective of the provincial setting.

History in the Provinces: Félix Grandet

As active participants in the social and political upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the provinces were rich in material for the historian in Balzac.⁶ In 1793, it was provincial France that pushed the country to the brink of becoming a federal republic. Expelled from the Convention, the Girondins sought to establish an alternative chamber at Bourges, while in Languedoc, provincialists moved to form a 'République du Midi', underlining their point that France was now composed of eighty-three administrative departments, and not just Paris. Elsewhere, in Vendée, a rebellion against a national levy of military conscripts escalated into a civil war in which some two hundred thousand were killed on both sides. Only with the arrival of Napoleon was the country restored to a semblance of order.

⁶ For an analysis of Balzac as a factual historian, see for example Louis Chevalier, 'La Comédie humaine: document d'histoire', *Revue historique*, 232 (1964), 27-48 and Gilbert Sigaux, 'Balzac enfant et père du Siècle', in *Balzac*, ed. by Jules Bertaut (Paris: Hachette, 1959), pp. 65-93.

Bonaparte believed the reactionary provinces to be such a threat to national stability that, in February 1800, he created a new prefectoral corps. In the provinces, the role of the prefect was to act as a representative of the First Consul, and of a centralized government that was determined to ‘stem the tendency towards disintegration’⁷ that had seized hold of France and French life. Not even this reorganization of the administrative structure could shackle the regional will for long, however. Again, in 1830, the provinces completed the work of a Parisian revolution, as liberal deputies from across France influenced the decision to appoint Louis-Philippe d’Orléans as King.⁸ In view of their role in shaping the society in which he lived, it is thus curious that Balzac should set the provinces at a distance from the events of Revolution, Empire, and Restoration. This distance is reflected in the words of Félix de Vandenesse, who is at Clochegourde, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, when he learns of ‘les désastres de Waterloo, la fuite de Napoléon, la marche des alliés sur Paris et le retour probable des Bourbons’. ‘Ces événements’, he recalls, in a manner which emphasizes his detachment, ‘ne furent rien pour nous. [...] La grande nouvelle pour nous fut: “Vous aurez de la glace!”’ (*CH*, IX, p. 1100).

To argue that the tides of historical change do not wash into the provinces of *La Comédie humaine* would nevertheless be quite wrong. In 1840, Balzac had insisted that the historical novelist should strive to enter ‘le milieu social, au lieu de se placer dans la haute région des faits politiques’.⁹ Accordingly, his preference was for demonstrating the impact of historical change on the

⁷ Brian Chapman, *The Prefects and Provincial France* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), p. 17.

⁸ For the role of the provinces in the 1830 Revolution, see for example Pamela Pilbeam, ‘The “Three Glorious Days”: The Revolution of 1830 in Provincial France’, *The Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), 831-44.

⁹ Honoré de Balzac, ‘Lettres sur la littérature, le théâtre et les arts’, in *OC*, XL: *Œuvres diverses (1836-1848)*, pp. 271-95 (p. 286).

individual, rather than describing it in abstract terms. A character such as du Bousquier, for instance, in *La Vieille Fille*, may be a striving, energetic man, but his biography reveals that he could not have made his fortune without legislation passed under the Directory. The laws of 28 ventôse and 6 floréal enabled him to confiscate ‘des biens d’émigrés pour les acheter et les revendre’ (*CH*, IV, p. 827), and to make a substantial profit as a result. Similarly, in *Le Député d’Arcis*, Beauvisage builds a successful textile business on the basis of his gamble on the price of cotton, which in 1814 ‘dépendait du triomphe ou de la défaite de l’empereur Napoléon’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 751). These two examples are sufficient to confirm that, while the small towns and villages of *La Comédie humaine* often appear as museum pieces, depositories for the customs and traditions of the past, their most ambitious inhabitants can also be seen to exploit the opportunities with which historical circumstance presents them.

This much is true of Félix Grandet, whose experience of provincial life, in *Eugénie Grandet*, deserves special consideration. At first glance, Grandet appears to be an unusual character through whom to explore the impact of historical change on the provincial personality. For the most part, he would seem only to personify avarice, a recurrent provincial defect which, for Balzac, represented one of the most difficult obstacles to economic progress. ‘Pour la province,’ he complained in *La Vieille Fille*, ‘la richesse des nations consiste moins dans l’active rotation de l’argent que dans un stérile entassement’ (*CH*, IV, p. 914). To interpret Grandet’s attitudes and behaviour as betraying a similarly unproductive financial philosophy would not be inaccurate. Indeed, the view of this character as a miser is one that Balzac

himself did much to encourage. A decade after completing the novel, he boasted to Madame Hanska: 'Molière avait fait *l'Avarice* dans Harpagon; moi, j'ai fait un avare avec le père Grandet.'¹⁰ The validity of this comparison with *L'Avare* (1668), and with the miser, Harpagon, is revealed in the most basic similarities between the two characters. Like his comic counterpart, Grandet is obsessed with amassing and preserving a hoard of gold. He has his hair cut once a year, regulates the use of fire, candles, bread, and sugar in his unwelcoming home, and is generous only with rotten fruit that farmers would otherwise feed to their pigs. He is slow and deliberate in his movements, as if trying, says the narrator, to conserve muscular energy (*CH*, III, p. 1035). Even on his deathbed, he can think only of precious metal, snatching the gilt crucifix held to his dying lips, and reminding his daughter, with grim ambiguity: 'Aie bien soin de tout. Tu me rendras compte de ça là-bas' (*CH*, III, p. 1175). It is here, though, that any similarity with Harpagon ends. For Grandet is neither a comic character, nor a nineteenth-century Harpagon. In fact, as Pierre-Georges Castex has shown in his important article on the historical realism of Grandet's career, 'les ressemblances très superficielles entre les deux personnages cachent en réalité des projets tout différents'¹¹ on the part of their creators. The contrast in authorial intentions is revealed by Balzac's original manuscript, in which, according to Castex, there are more than fifty instances of the nouns 'bonhomme', 'tonnelier', 'maître de la maison', and 'vigneron' having been substituted for 'avare'. How do these variants encourage us to re-examine Balzac's portrait of Félix Grandet? And

¹⁰ *LH*, I, p. 768 (1 January 1844).

¹¹ Pierre-Georges Castex, 'L'ascension de Monsieur Grandet', *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), 247-63 (p. 248).

what role can we attribute to historical change in moulding the latter's experience of provincial life?

The first point to be made is that Grandet is less a caricature of the miser than a successful businessman and a member of the land-owning bourgeoisie. His vineyard produces between seven and eight hundred puncheons of wine every year, and since it is he who manufactures the barrels in which his vintage is stored, '[il] pouvait [...] attendre le moment de livrer son poinçon à deux cents francs quand les petits propriétaires donnaient le leur à cinq louis' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). He is a supplier of fruit and vegetables, harvesting 'une telle quantité qu'il en faisait vendre une grande partie au marché' (*CH*, III, p. 1034). Even before the Restoration, he owns so much land in the district that 'les plus habiles calculateurs de Saumur estimaient les biens territoriaux du bonhomme à pres de quatre millions' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). In short, Grandet can be described, with Samuel de Sacy's term, as 'un Nucingen rural',¹² an uncompromising example of agrarian individualism. To begin to establish the influence of historical events on the development of his career, however, it is first necessary to return to the opening pages of the novel, and to the description of Saumur. Along the silent main street, the past is shown inscribed in the ancient houses, their doors studded with nails arranged in curious, indecipherable patterns. 'Tantôt un protestant y a signé sa foi,' we are told, 'tantôt un ligueur y a maudit Henri IV. [...] L'Histoire de France est là tout entière' (*CH*, III, p. 1028). The statement serves to confirm the small town as a place in which the past is preserved intact, as Nicole Mozet has argued: 'La province [...] est pour Balzac une sorte de musée immense, où l'on peut

¹² Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*, ed. by Samuel S. de Sacy (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 11.

rencontrer des êtres et des choses, des façons de vivre et de penser qui sont d'un autre âge' (*CH*, III, p. 1020). The relevance of this historical museum to the formation of Grandet's character becomes clearer still when we notice that the description of Saumur precedes the biographical account of his career. For if Félix Grandet is not simply a miser, then nor is he simply a businessman. On the contrary, Balzac shows him to be the living embodiment of recent French history, tracing his rise through Revolution, Consulate, Empire, and Restoration, but also revealing his determination to 'prendre le vent de l'Histoire'¹³ as the single most important factor in conditioning his interaction with the provincial setting.

The opening line of Grandet's biography informs us that '[il] jouissait à Saumur d'une réputation dont les causes et les effets ne seront pas entièrement compris par les personnes qui n'ont point, peu ou prou, vécu en province' (*CH*, III, p. 1030). In addressing his discourse to '[un lecteur] dont la perception est [...] sélective',¹⁴ one who has little or no experience of provincial life, the narrator reinforces the distance between the provinces and the Parisian reader whom he believes to be in need of guidance. In truth, direct experience of the provinces is not a prerequisite for understanding the size of Grandet's reputation in Saumur, and throughout Anjou. At the most basic level, it is his personal and financial acumen which ensures that 'personne ne le voyait passer sans éprouver un sentiment d'admiration mélangé de respect et de terreur' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). He is held in such high esteem that his fortune is the object of 'un orgueil patriotique' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). His immense wealth

¹³ Pierre-Georges Castex, 'Le témoignage historique de Balzac', in *Horizons romantiques* (Paris: Corti, 1983), pp. 153-67 (p. 161).

¹⁴ Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon, *Balzac: la littérature réfléchie: discours et autoreprésentations* (Montreal: Paragraphes, 2002), p. 127.

has even convinced others to observe his behaviour and to use it as a model in their own affairs. As a result, the mere action of pulling on his gloves is enough to send a shockwave through the town: 'L'hiver sera rude, disait-on, le père Grandet a mis ses gants fourrés: il faut vendanger' (*CH*, III, p. 1034). To suggest that the old cooper's neighbours respect him 'justement parce qu'il est capable de les tromper'¹⁵ would therefore be an over-simplification. The respect that he commands is the direct result of achievements that would have been impossible without the intervention of historical circumstance. Grandet begins his career in 1789 with an advantage over some fifty-three per cent of his fellow countrymen: he is literate.¹⁶ A master cooper who is described as 'fort à son aise, sachant lire, écrire et compter' (*CH*, III, p. 1030), his honest profession secures for him a favourable marriage, and it is with his wife's dowry that he is able to buy property confiscated during the Revolution, including 'les plus beaux vignobles de l'arrondissement, une vieille abbaye et quelques métairies' (*CH*, III, p. 1030-31). Balzac had a longstanding interest in the fortunes of those who invested in nationalized property. In *La Dernière Fée*, he had introduced the character, Grandvani, who becomes mayor of his village 'parce qu'il eut le bon sens d'acheter les biens de l'Église pendant la Révolution' (*PR*, II, p. 36). As portrayed by Balzac, the sale of confiscated lands is, for those who were willing to speculate, 'une occasion exceptionnelle de faire fortune, de grimper dans l'échelle sociale'.¹⁷ This willingness brings

¹⁵ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 148.

¹⁶ Gérard Cholvy, 'Société, genres de vie et mentalités dans les campagnes françaises de 1815 à 1880', *L'Information historique*, 36 (1974), 155-66 (p. 161). F. W. J. Hemmings believes the figure to have been higher still: 'at the start of the Revolution perhaps two-thirds of the population were illiterate in the sense that they could not sign their names' (*Culture and Society in France: 1789-1848* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), p. 96).

¹⁷ René-Alexandre Courteix, 'Idéologie et politique: les biens nationaux dans *La Comédie humaine*', *AB* (1990), 203-20 (p. 205).

with it substantial rewards, as both Grandet and his fictional predecessor, Grandvani, discover.

The most tangible evidence of Grandet's success is the fortune of seventeen million francs that he bequeaths to his daughter, Eugénie. For the old cooper himself, however, the purchase of nationalized property quickly enhances his social status: 'Les habitants de Saumur étant peu révolutionnaires, le père Grandet passa pour un homme hardi, un républicain, un patriote, pour un esprit qui donnait dans les nouvelles idées' (*CH*, III, p. 1031). That Grandet commands such respect is not surprising. After all, the purchase of nationalized property was a brave investment that often led to reprisals, as Georges Lefebvre has indicated: 'La campagne contre-révolutionnaire, qui a été si vive partout et, en outre, dans certaines provinces, la prédication religieuse ont sûrement écarté plus d'une personne des adjudications.'¹⁸ True, Grandet has bought land that once belonged to the Church, but he is also careful to protect 'les ci-devant et empêcha de tout son pouvoir la vente des biens des émigrés' (*CH*, III, p. 1031). He is determined to have the best of both provincial worlds, an attitude confirmed by his keeping the Republican armies supplied with wine. More than that, his activities during the Revolution are indicative of an ability to manage his own experience of provincial life, a talent that he carries forward to the next stage of his career. Under the Consulate, he becomes mayor of Saumur, and wastes no time in abusing the position for his own benefit. His house and other properties are 'très avantageusement cadastrés' (*CH*, III, p. 1031), meaning that he is subjected to only negligible taxation. In what might be considered another act

¹⁸ Georges Lefebvre, *Études sur la Révolution française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 230.

of self-interest, he also has a series of roads built around his land, a deed which exempts him from criticism only because the road is for Balzac a symbol of economic development in the otherwise isolated provinces.

By contrast, under the Empire, he is the victim rather than the instigator of change. In an active demonstration of Napoleon's suspicion of provincial France, Grandet is removed from the post of mayor because '[il] passait pour avoir porté le bonnet rouge' (*CH*, III, p. 1031). In Balzac's recounting of this episode, we might expect his Bonapartist instincts to come to the fore, and for him to praise what Pierre Laubriet calls the 'pouvoirs quasi-magiques'¹⁹ with which Napoleon restructured the national administration. Instead, he continues to focus on Grandet, outlining the ways in which his fictional creation can turn even the intricacies of a new regime to his advantage. A lack of credit facilities and the parlous state of the imperial economy enables Grandet to use the notary, Cruchot, to lend 'l'argent nécessaire à l'achat d'un domaine, mais à onze pour cent' (*CH*, III, p. 1033). This rate of interest became standard during the Restoration,²⁰ but when applied to the earlier period of the Napoleonic Empire, it further illustrates Grandet's hard and opportunistic approach to business. This, quite clearly, is a man who can retain his superiority over his neighbours without even having to venture outside his own home.

The result is that, with the arrival of the Bourbon Restoration, Grandet could not be more secure in his provincial environment. In 1818, he purchases the Froidfond estate, 'remarquable par son parc, son admirable château, ses fermes, rivière, étangs, forêts' (*CH*, III, p. 1038). Acquiring the estate for a fraction of its true value of three million francs, he benefits from the

¹⁹ Pierre Laubriet, 'La légende et le mythe napoléoniens chez Balzac', *AB* (1968), 285-301 (p. 293).

²⁰ Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 232.

impoverishment of 'le jeune marquis de Froidfond [qui fut] obligé de réaliser ses capitaux' (CH, III, p. 1038). The purchase points towards the bourgeoisie's undermining of the old nobility, which, despite the return of some of its unsold property and the granting of an indemnity to the émigrés in 1823, could not recapture its position at the head of French society. The same trend can be observed throughout the provinces of *La Comédie humaine*. In the Nemours of *Ursule Mirouët*, the lands that belong to the Marquis du Rouvre are 'criblés d'hypothèques [et] guettés par les bourgeois' (CH, III, p. 781). Similarly, in *La Muse du département*, Monsieur de La Baudraye displays a relentless '*passion de la terre, passion dévorante, passion exclusive*' (CH, IV, p. 639). From his legitimist standpoint, Balzac often finds this acquisitiveness distasteful, and mocks it in ruthless fashion. In *Eugénie Grandet*, the nephew of Monsieur Cruchot purchases the Bonfons estate, and with it some ridiculous pretensions: 'ce jeune homme avait joint au nom de Cruchot celui de Bonfons, et travaillait à faire prévaloir Bonfons sur Cruchot' (CH, III, p. 1036). This self-important attitude strikes an immediate contrast with Félix Grandet. For him, there is no victory to be savoured in purchasing Froidfond, and he has no ambition to call himself the lord of the manor: 'Après avoir jeté sur sa propriété le coup d'œil du maître, il revint à Saumur, certain d'avoir placé ses fonds à cinq' (CH, III, p. 1038). The purchase is nonetheless significant, since it reveals land as one of the few forms of investment available to Balzac's most energetic provincials. Although Restoration France had its industrial centres, such as Lyons for silk, Troyes for hosiery, and Saint-Étienne for coal and iron, elsewhere the main activities were still linked to agriculture and landownership. An ambitious man such as Grandet, therefore, makes his land

work for him. He extracts maximum advantage from the rich natural resources in his possession, receiving eggs, butter, and other household provisions from his tenant farmers, and growing poplars on the marshy banks of the Loire. Increasingly, though, the Restoration sees him look outside the provinces for opportunities to further his achievements and extend his power base.

The government bond, a financial product introduced in 1817, allows him to do so. Travelling to Angers under the cover of darkness, his cart loaded with barrels of gold, Grandet's objective is to return with 'la somme nécessaire à l'achat de ses rentes après l'avoir grossie de l'agio' (*CH*, III, p. 1121). He purchases bonds for 80 francs and sells them when their value has risen to 115 francs. At first sight, it is tempting to dismiss these figures as nothing more than Barthesian 'détails inutiles',²¹ a means by which the fictional narrator pretends knowledge. In fact, Grandet's interest in government bonds raises two important considerations. First is that he must overcome the traditional resistance of the provinces to investment: 'Il concevait enfin la rente, placement pour lequel les gens de province manifestent une répugnance invincible' (*CH*, III, p. 1150). The second factor concerns not the character, but his creator. In Grandet's determination to invest repeatedly in government bonds, Balzac recognizes an energy and enthusiasm that might one day reverse the somnolent state of the provinces. As Pierre Barbéris observes, 'l'intérêt de cette retombée provinciale n'en est pas moins évident: la rente est plus libre; la rente libère; la rente est symbole

²¹ Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', in *Littérature et réalité*, ed. by Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 81-90 (p. 82). Cf. Jean-Luc Seylaz, 'Une scène de Balzac: le transport de l'or dans *Eugénie Grandet*', *AB* (1980), 61-67 (p. 61).

d'une mobilité, de possibilités nouvelles.'²² This view is confirmed in *Les Employés* (1838), where the Minister states that an upturn in the economic development of the provinces is dependent on free movement of capital: '[il faut] animer le mouvement de l'argent dont l'immobilité devient, en France surtout, funeste par suite des habitudes avaricieuses et profondément illogiques de la province qui enfouit des tas d'or' (*CH*, VII, p. 1114). An improvement in the economic fortunes of his surroundings is not, however, uppermost in Grandet's thoughts. Under the Restoration, he is forced to cast his gaze beyond the provinces, though ultimately, it is the stagnation of this setting that combines with historical circumstance to make his career. 'Nul doute qu'il n'y eût été glorieusement utile à la France,' declares the narrator. 'Néanmoins, peut-être aussi serait-il également probable que, sorti de Saumur, le bonhomme n'aurait fait qu'une pauvre figure' (*CH*, III, p. 1110). Rooted in his province but superior to it, Grandet embraces historical change as the one factor that can enhance his experience of provincial life.

The Formative Province: Brittany in *Les Chouans*

The second factor that can be seen to determine the Balzacian experience of provincial life is the region in which the individual is born. There is substantial evidence to support this claim in *Les Chouans*, the first novel signed with Balzac's own name, and the text upon which this section will focus. Set in

²² Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 246. Cf. Per Nykrog, *La Pensée de Balzac*. Balzac's association of money with energy is undisputed. Nykrog extends the comparison, however, by likening the flow of money in Balzacian society to the flow of blood in the human body: 'La circulation de l'argent et le réseau du système de communications deviennent ainsi, dans l'intuition de Balzac, les artères suivies par rayonnement de la Pensée sociale, les moyens qui assurent la cohésion des grandes unités géographiques. La métaphore de "l'argent sang du corps social" se présente automatiquement à l'esprit' (p. 200).

1799, *Les Chouans* tells the story of the Breton peasants, fiercely loyal to Throne and Altar, who waged a bloody guerrilla war against the armies of the First Republic. This subject, which Balzac admitted had fallen into his hands ‘par le hasard le plus pur’,²³ appears at first sight to have been more important than the Breton setting. Here was simply an opportunity for him to apply the method of the historical novel, learned from Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, to the madness of post-revolutionary France. Although the novel was born of a fortuitous discovery, and the appeal of Brittany mainly historical, we must nevertheless acknowledge Balzac’s deeper interest in the Breton identity. After reading Jean-Julien Savary’s *Guerres des Vendéens et des Chouans* (1824-27), he became fascinated by the socio-cultural nature of the western insurgency, this war between a modern republic and ‘la vie sauvage et l’esprit superstitieux’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 918) of the Chouans.²⁴ In order to portray this conflict, he also recognized the need to explore, not merely the historical basis of the uprising, but the Breton setting in terms of its social, political, and economic characteristics. It was for this reason that, in September 1828, he travelled to Fougères, where for six weeks, he was the guest of Gilbert de Pommereul. The novel, he assured the son of his father’s old friend, ‘n’exige aucune recherche, si ce n’est celle des localités’.²⁵ The details of this trip have

²³ *Corr.*, I, p. 336 (1 September 1828). Balzac conceived the idea for *Les Chouans* while researching another historical novel, *Le Capitaine des Boutefeux* (1828). For a brief outline of Balzac’s historical fictions up to 1828, see for example René Guise, ‘Balzac et le roman historique: notes sur quelques projets’, *RHLF*, 75 (1975), 353-72.

²⁴ Bernard Guyon makes a convincing case for Balzac’s interest in the socio-cultural nature of the western uprising: ‘Le conflit qui met aux prises les bandes des Chouans et les armées de la République n’est pas seulement aux yeux de Balzac une lutte entre deux systèmes ou deux régimes politiques; il est aussi, il est même essentiellement un conflit social, un épisode particulièrement marquant de la lutte éternelle où s’affrontent d’une part, les lumières, la science, le progrès; de l’autre, l’ignorance, la superstition, le fanatisme; la lutte en un mot entre la Civilisation et la Sauvagerie’ (*La Pensée politique et sociale de Balzac*, 2nd edn (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969), p. 264).

²⁵ *Corr.*, I, p. 336 (1 September 1828).

been well documented, and in chapter two, I noted the enthusiasm with which Balzac carried out his enquiries. The young novelist's fictional portrayal of a region he described as 'plus curieuse à observer que ne l'est le Canada' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918) has, however, received less attention. In this section, I shall endeavour to situate Balzac's treatment of Brittany within the context of the region's reappearance on the literary scene in the late eighteenth century. More importantly, I shall probe the ways in which this fictional Brittany, 'tout imprégné[e] d'une réflexion sur l'Histoire',²⁶ moulds the character and behaviour of its fictional inhabitants, marking them with an indelible experience of provincial life.

The publication of *Les Chouans*, in March 1829, coincided with a period of growing interest in Breton history and culture. The seeds of this curiosity were sown in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, when Napoleon sought to reinforce his imperial ambitions by encouraging an exploration of the Celtic origins of the French people. In his *Origines gauloises*, in 1796, La Tour d'Auvergne argued that the Celts once ruled a vast empire stretching from Brittany to Moscow, while in 1798 Jacques Cambry revisited the image of a Celtic Brittany in his *Voyage dans le Finistère*. These two works foreshadowed the outbreak of 'celtomanie' in the early nineteenth century, when the 'sensibilité nouvelle au passé breton'²⁷ was cemented by the foundation of the Académie celtique in 1805. In evoking a Brittany that is utterly different to the rest of France, Balzac's novel is both a reflection and a

²⁶ Mozet, *Balzac au pluriel*, p. 250.

²⁷ Jean-Yves Guimar, *Le Bretonisme: les historiens bretons au dix-neuvième siècle* (Mayenne: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Bretagne, 1987), p. 25.

refraction of this movement.²⁸ Taking the side of progress and civilization, Balzac's narrator warns the reader to expect a region that is trapped in the past, its customs and practices unchanged for centuries: 'Là, les coutumes féodales sont encore respectées. Là, les antiquaires retrouvent debout les monuments des Druides. Là, le génie de la civilisation moderne s'effraie de pénétrer à travers d'immenses forêts primordiales' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918). In this way, the novelist pushes his fictional Bretons into the social and historical distance, placing them on the furthest edge of the reader's imagination. There are no roads and canals to link this province with the outside world; it is, in a striking example of Balzacian imagery, 'un charbon glacé qui resterait obscur et noir au sein d'un brillant foyer' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918).

This isolation is so severe that it extends into the region itself. The deep ditches, intraversable marshland, and the high hedgerows, 'qui font, de chaque champ, une citadelle' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918), mean that the Breton people lead solitary lives: 'Les seules réunions connues sont les assemblées éphémères que le dimanche ou les fêtes de la religion consacrent à la paroisse' (*CH*, VIII, p. 919). The consequence of these geographical disadvantages, as Balzac merely confirms, is impoverishment. At the end of the eighteenth century, the state of Brittany's economy was parlous. When the English agronomist, Arthur Young, travelled through Guingamp, Morlaix, and Quimper in 1788, he was shocked by the plight of the region's inhabitants, and by their archaic methods of agriculture: 'One third of what I have seen of this province', he reported,

²⁸ For an overview of the 'celtomanie' that surrounded the publication of *Les Chouans*, see for example Raymond Lebègue, 'Esquisse d'une étude sur Balzac et la Bretagne', *RHLF*, 50 (1950), 234-40.

'seems uncultivated and nearly all of it in misery.'²⁹ In *Les Chouans*, Balzac uses a fictional stranger to provide an equally candid statement on the poverty of the western countryside.³⁰ Through the eyes of Marie de Verneuil, a beautiful spy sent to ensnare the royalist Marquis de Montauran, we are shown the Breton landscape, with pitiful sights such as the farmhouse '[qu']elle avait prise pour une étable' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1096). The hovel belonging to Galop-chopine contains little more than a ramshackle bed and some crude wooden chairs, and leads Marie to wonder 's'il était possible que des êtres humains vécussent dans cette fange organisée' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1098). Viewed from the Parisian perspective of comfort and sophistication, the scene leaves no doubt as to the wretched conditions in which the Breton peasant is forced to live.

As well as seeking to render 'l'esprit d'une époque' (*CH*, VIII, p. 897), it is clear that Balzac's ambition in *Les Chouans* was to highlight an urgent need for the social and economic modernization of Brittany. In the preface to the 1829 edition, in a statement that further illustrates his defence of the provinces, he voices the hope that his work will encourage a reversal of the region's plight: 'Puisse cet ouvrage rendre efficaces les vœux formés par tous les amis du pays pour l'amélioration physique et morale de la Bretagne!' (*CH*, VIII, p. 899). Before Brittany can be helped, however, he also declares that it must help itself. The stubbornness of the Breton people, he continues, is a regional trait, 'un des plus puissants obstacles à l'accomplissement des plus généreux projets' (*CH*, VIII, p. 899), and a barrier that the State must break

²⁹ Arthur Young, *Travels in France during the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789*, ed. by Constantia Maxwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 109.

³⁰ The economic life of Brittany had hardly improved by the time Balzac visited the province in 1828. According to Armand Rébillon, 'les progrès économiques ne commencèrent à se dessiner assez nettement en Bretagne [...] que sous la Monarchie de Juillet' (*Histoire de Bretagne* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1957), p. 197).

down. Reinforcing the point that progress and civilization flow from the centre, his preface draws on the example of the Duc d'Aiguillon, who was appointed Governor of Brittany in 1753. To bring the region into the fold of French life, d'Aiguillon resolved to improve its social and economic infrastructure, 'de lui donner du pain en introduisant la culture du blé, d'y tracer des chemins, des canaux, d'y faire parler le français' (*CH*, VIII, p. 900). Linking towns and ports in a bid to stimulate local industry, he increased the total length of Brittany's roads from forty to eight hundred leagues. He oversaw the construction of a new port at Lannion, and enlisted the help of engineers from the *École des Ponts-et-Chaussées*.³¹ His schemes were ambitious, though they were never fully implemented. A local nobleman, La Chalotais, accused the royal governor of abusing his power and misappropriating public funds. In order to defuse the ensuing crisis, d'Aiguillon was recalled. For Balzac, the case demonstrates that the 'étroit patriotisme de localité' of men such as La Chalotais damages the provinces. This resistance to change, 'si funeste au progrès des lumières' (*CH*, VIII, p. 900), sealed Brittany in a state of backwardness from which it has since failed to escape.

In exploring the underdevelopment of this western province, Balzac's attention is drawn irresistibly to the kind of individuals that it produces. Throughout the novel, he argues that there is an organic link between 'ce singulier pays' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1112) and its inhabitants. At the most basic level, he demonstrates that the harsh landscape, with its deep ditches and waterlogged roads, is an active partner in the royalist struggle. The Breton

³¹ Alain Lozac'h, 'L'œuvre du Duc d'Aiguillon', <http://histoire.bretagne.free.fr/aiguillon.htm> (21 July 2004).

countryside feeds the local appetite for war, as Marie de Verneuil is made to realize when she crosses the fields on foot:

Mlle de Verneuil comprit alors la guerre des Chouans. En parcourant ces routes elle put mieux apprécier l'état de ces campagnes qui, vues d'un point élevé, lui avaient paru si ravissantes; mais dans lesquelles il faut s'enfoncer pour en concevoir et les dangers et les inextricables difficultés (*CH*, VIII, p. 1113).

If this formidable landscape forms part of the reason for which the Breton peasants have given themselves over to violent rebellion, the Balzacian interdependence of setting and character means that this is not a matter of one merely reflecting the other. Instead, Balzac experiments with his 'oyster-and-shell' theory, and probes the way in which a regional setting, rather than an artificial environment such as Madame Vauquer's boarding house, actively conditions those who live within its confines. This question of how Brittany, in particular, determined the behaviour of its inhabitants had preoccupied him for some months before the trip to Fougères. In May 1828, he had been working on *Tableaux d'une vie privée*,³² an unfinished drama which begins in 1788, and ends with the Minister of Police, Fouché, asking why 'la république ne peut triompher dans ce pays-là'. The answer, he suggests, does not lie simply in the excessive royalism of the Bretons, but in some other element that is unique to the region: 'Nous avons abattu des royaumes, et nous ne pouvons pas brûler les haies de la Bretagne. Le sol produit là des soldats aux Bourbons, nous avons eu beau tuer tous les chefs, il s'en présente sans cesse' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1667). What is the role of Brittany in forming the peasant warriors depicted in

³² On the link between the *Tableaux de la vie privée* and *Les Chouans*, see Madeleine Fargeaud, 'Sur la route des *Chouans* et de *La Femme abandonnée*' *AB* (1962), 51-66.

Les Chouans? To what extent are they products of their native province, rather than mere victims of historical circumstance?

Part of the answer is contained in the opening scene of the novel, which brings together a cross-section of the Breton populace. The men shown climbing La Pèlerine are conscripts. Some are from the town of Fougères, wealthy artisans and bourgeois whose clothes, though unfashionable, 'annonçaient cette espèce de recherche que nous inspire un commencement de fortune ou d'éducation' (*CH*, VIII, p. 907). The majority, however, are peasants, barefoot and dressed in goatskin. So raw is their appearance that they could easily be mistaken for animals: 'Les mèches plates de leurs longs cheveux s'unissaient si habituellement aux poils de la peau de chèvre [...], qu'on pouvait facilement prendre cette peau pour la leur' (*CH*, VIII, p. 906). With hair covering their faces, the only feature that identifies them as humans is their eyes, and even these are said to shine 'comme des gouttes de rosée dans une épaisse verdure' (*CH*, VIII, p. 906). This is the peasantry from which the Chouans are recruited.³³ Animality forms the basis of their character, with the result that, in times of war, these guerrilla fighters readily transform themselves into savages. Balzac's original choice of title, *Le Dernier Chouan*, indicates that he had read Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826),³⁴ and throughout the novel, the image of the Native American Indian is recurrent. The Chouans are determined to drive out the Republican soldiers as if they

³³ It bears underlining that not all Breton peasants were Chouans.

³⁴ Cf. E. Preston Dargan, 'Balzac and Cooper: *Les Chouans*', *Modern Philology*, 13.4 (August 1915), 1-21. Although it is impossible to determine when Balzac first read the work of Cooper, his writings are rich in allusions to the American novelist. In his letter to Victor Ratier, on 21 July 1830, he describes the feelings he experienced during a trip to Brittany with Madame de Berny: 'Oh! mener une vie de Mohican, courir sur les rochers, nager en mer, respirer en plein l'air, le soleil! Oh! que j'ai conçu le sauvage!' (*Corr.*, I, p. 461; 21 July 1830). While editing *Les Chouans* in December 1843, Balzac boasted to Madame Hanska: 'Il y a là tout Cooper et tout Walter Scott, plus une passion et un *esprit* qui n'est chez aucun d'eux' (*LH*, I, p. 756; 20 December 1843).

were white colonists: 'C'étaient des Sauvages qui servaient Dieu et le Roi, à la manière dont les Mohicans font la guerre' (*CH*, VIII, p. 920). To emphasize their dismissal of the new political identity of France, the Breton peasants have even renounced their original names, each of them taking '[un] sobriquet rustique [qui] privilégie les substantifs concrets et les verbes d'action'.³⁵

The most memorable of these names belongs to Pierre Leroi, or Marche-à-terre, whose character has a solidity '[qui] le fait surgir dès l'abord comme la Bretagne personnifiée'.³⁶ The actions and appearance of the Chouan commander are conditioned by the archaic nature of his surroundings. He, too, wears 'les peaux de bique [qui] ne laissaient distinguer aucune forme humaine' (*CH*, VIII, p. 915). He speaks in 'rugissements' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1042) rather than words, and with '[des] sons rauques et gutturaux' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1017). A series of animal metaphors confirms his bestial state. When he learns that his eventual wife, Francine, is serving Marie de Verneuil, an agent of the Republic, he becomes 'une bête féroce', baring his teeth 'comme un chien qui défend son maître' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1042). Although the portrayal of Marche-à-terre seems wholly negative, it would nevertheless be wrong to assume that he is a savage, and nothing more. As an admirer of the work of Cooper, Balzac would have recalled the introduction to *The Last of the Mohicans*, in which the American novelist warned of the danger of misrepresenting the American Indian:

³⁵ Claudie Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque: Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Hugo* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 245.

³⁶ Pierre Barbéris, 'Roman historique et roman d'amour: lecture du *Dernier Chouan*', *RHLF*, 75 (1975), 289-307 (p. 299).

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character, than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. These are qualities, it is true, which do not distinguish all alike; but they are so far the predominating traits of these remarkable people as to be characteristic.³⁷

Similarly, Balzac's Marche-à-terre is not without admirable qualities. In the uncompromising warrior there remains some of the gentleness of Pierre Leroi, a dual identity with which the Chouan struggles to come to terms. In her attempt to persuade Marche-à-terre to guard Mademoiselle de Verneuil, Francine glimpses, not a murderous savage, but her former love. In a moment of playfulness, we are told that she takes his 'grosses oreilles pendantes, et les lui tordit doucement, comme si elle caressait un chat' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1042). The human animal can be provoked into violence, but equally, he can be reduced to passivity. As long as the war continues, however, it is clear that Marche-à-terre will always return to savagery. As products of a primitive Brittany, he and his comrades blend seamlessly into their natural surroundings. They are not simply masters of their terrain, but an extension of it, giving them a crucial advantage over the Republican troops. Prior to the ambush at La Vivetière, the Chouans are seen hiding in the bushes, so embedded in their environment that Francine herself doubts what she sees:

³⁷ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1953; repr. 1964), p. 7.

Francine attribua d'abord sa vision aux imparfaites configurations que produisait la lumière de la lune, à travers les feuillages; mais bientôt une seconde tête se montra; puis d'autres apparurent encore dans le lointain. Les petits arbustes de la berge se courbèrent et se relevèrent avec violence. Francine vit alors cette longue haie insensiblement agitée comme un de ces grands serpents indiens aux formes fabuleuses. Puis, çà et là, dans les genêts et les hautes épines, plusieurs points lumineux brillèrent et se déplacèrent. En redoublant d'attention, l'amante de Marche-à-terre crut reconnaître la première des figures noires qui allaient au sein de ce mouvant rivage (*CH*, VIII, p. 1040).

Elsewhere, the undergrowth seems ally to the Breton cause, protecting the natives but sparing few of the invaders. In one raid on Hulot's detachment, six men turn their fire on Marche-à-terre, '[qui], semblable à une figure fantasmagorique, [...] avait disparu derrière les fatales touffes de genêts' (*CH*, VIII, p. 932). The primitiveness of the Chouans, and their complete integration into the Breton countryside, make this a dangerous province for the most well-equipped armies.

The contrast between the Breton peasants and the Republicans is in the novel a vital thematic pillar, and another source of overlap between Balzac's treatment of regional identity and historical circumstance. The narrator's allegiance is to the 'Blues', who are the embodiment of order, patriotism, and progress.³⁸ Their commanding officer, Hulot, is presented as 'une image vivante de cette énergique République' (*CH*, VIII, p. 936), it being his task to free Brittany from '[les] antiques liens qui l'empêchent de s'avancer dans la grande voie de la civilisation moderne'.³⁹ To oppose this mission is a crime for which Balzac shows unreserved disdain, and he condemns the Breton uprising in the most explicit terms. 'Les insurrections de ces campagnes n'eurent rien

³⁸ 'Dans *Les Chouans*, Balzac a pris nettement parti pour les Bleus; cette préférence, a priori, ne devrait pas surprendre, puisque l'auteur, en 1829, ne s'était pas encore converti au légitimisme' (Donnard, *Les Réalités économiques*, p. 42).

³⁹ Guyon, *La Pensée politique*, p. 266.

de noble', he declares, 'et l'on peut dire avec assurance que si la Vendée fit du brigandage une guerre, la Bretagne fit de la guerre un brigandage' (*CH*, VIII, p. 919). Balzac presents the behaviour of the Bretons in this conflict as a product of their innate savagery. 'Les événements de cette lutte intestine', he continues, 'contractèrent quelque chose de la sauvage âpreté qu'ont les mœurs en ces contrées' (*CH*, VIII, p. 919). Two episodes can be used to support this assertion that the Bretons wage a primitive war for a primitive province. The first of these episodes takes place at La Vivetière, the manor house in which Montauran assures Marie de Verneuil that she and her escort of Republican soldiers will be safe. The trap is set, and the Chouans launch their ambush, murdering their defenceless enemies in cold blood. Not even the officer, Gérard, escapes with his life: 'Pille-miche l'ajusta en regardant le marquis immobile, prit le silence de son chef pour un ordre, et l'adjudant-major tomba comme un arbre' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1049). The murder is ruthless, though the act which follows is more distasteful still, as Marche-à-terre runs to join Pille-miche in stripping the body of its clothes and belongings: 'Comme deux corbeaux affamés, ils eurent un débat et grognèrent sur le cadavre encore chaud' (*CH*, VIII, pp. 1049-50).

In this war of attrition, there are no depths to which the Chouans will not sink. Elsewhere, we see them torturing a local nobleman, Monsieur d'Orgemont, who has chosen to remain neutral in the conflict. Because he is 'ni un bon Chouan, ni un vrai Bleu' (*CH*, VIII, p. 955), Marche-à-terre asks for a sum in protection money. When d'Orgemont refuses, the Chouans select one of their favourite punishments. The old man is bundled down into his kitchen, and pushed towards the fire: 'puis Marche-à-terre prit un des liens du fagot, et

attacha les pieds de l'avare à la crémaillère' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1082). The Chouans see themselves as acting justly in a just war, the extent of their cruelty reflecting their commitment to the Breton cause. For Marie de Verneuil, who is hiding in the shadows of the basement kitchen, the screams extracted from the old man reveal '[une] cruauté de cannibales' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1083). Her disgust is that of a woman who seeks peace and unity for France, and whose exasperation confirms the difficulty of educating the Bretons in civilized behaviour. The rebellion against the Republic has brought out the worst in these peasants, though it is Brittany itself that is to blame for educating them in the ways of savagery.

The most shocking illustration of the Chouans's barbarity is the execution of Galope-chopine. After his wife unwittingly reveals the whereabouts of the Marquis de Montauran to a band of Counter-Chouans, Galope-chopine knows his fate: 'Garce maudite,' he cries, striking Barbette a vicious blow. 'Tu m'as tué' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1173). As he expects, Marche-à-terre and Pille-miche arrive the following morning to administer their own brand of justice. There is no trial, only sentence: 'Nous ne te demandons pas de raisons, mais ton couperet,' declares Marche-à-terre. 'Tu es jugé' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1175).⁴⁰ After Galope-chopine is forced to his knees, the reader is told, with chilling economy, that 'la tête fut tranchée d'un coup' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1177). The statement is as decisive and as impersonal as the Chouans themselves, a view echoed by Raymond Lebègue, who observes that Marche-à-terre and Pille-miche 'ne

⁴⁰ According to Suzanne Bérard, the execution of traitors was common among the Chouans. 'Le pays de Fougères était ravagé par ces bandes d'exécuteurs, et les Bonne-Bouchée, Riche-en-Gueule la Grenade, Marche-à-terre, poussés par des passions qui n'étaient souvent que la cupidité, la rancune ou la peur s'étaient fait une atroce spécialité de lier leurs victimes sur un banc et de les égorger, usant à ces fins de serpes, couteaux, haches' ('A propos des *Chouans*', *RHLF*, 56 (1956), 485-505 (p. 502)).

pèsent pas le pour et le contre. Quand ils ont pris une décision, ils l'exécutent rigoureusement, sans hésitation, sans remords'.⁴¹ The apparent ease with which they murder their comrade, and the total lack of remorse they show afterwards, is almost as disturbing as the execution itself: '[Ils] se lavèrent les mains sans aucune précipitation, dans une grande terrine pleine d'eau, reprirent leurs chapeaux, leurs carabines, et franchirent l'échelier en sifflant l'air de la ballade du Capitaine' (CH, VIII, p. 1177). And yet, it would be wrong to assert that Balzac's Chouans give no thought whatsoever to their actions. When Galope-chopine tries to delay the inevitable by asking to be confessed, Pille-miche concedes that it would be a mortal sin to send a man to his death without absolution. In the absence of a priest, a simple solution is reached: 'Confesse-moi tous tes péchés, je les redirai à un prêtre de la véritable Église, il me donnera l'absolution' (CH, VIII, p. 1176). There is a flicker of humanity in this bargain, though it is quickly extinguished. Taking Galope-chopine's lifeless head, Marche-à-terre 'sortit de la chaumière, chercha et trouva dans le grossier chambranle de la porte un grand clou auquel il tortilla les cheveux qu'il tenait' (CH, VIII, p. 1177). The action may be intended as a visual reminder of the 'têtes fichées sur des piques'⁴² during the Revolution, and a public declaration of their resolve. The greater likelihood, thinks Marie-Caroline Vanbremeersch, is that it evokes the practice, common among Breton peasants in the eighteenth century, of nailing a dead animal to the door of a house to bring bad fortune on those within. The fact that the Chouans, so named because they imitate the hoot of an owl, leave Galope-

⁴¹ Raymond Lebègue, 'L'exécution de Galope-chopine', in *Missions et démarches de la critique: Mélanges offerts au Professeur J. A. Vier* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), pp. 91-94 (p. 93).

⁴² Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque*, p. 143.

chopine's eyes open could be interpreted as a means of strengthening the curse on the treacherous household.⁴³

The behaviour of Marche-à-terre and Pille-miche in this scene indicates that savagery is not the only consequence of Brittany's isolation. As portrayed by Balzac, the Bretons are a superstitious people, and Brittany, he tells us in the preface to the 1829 edition, a region in which 'la superstition [...] remplace la morale du Christ' (*CH*, VIII, p. 899). Here, a stubborn resistance to change means that the locals continue to observe the customs and rituals of their pagan past: 'ils s'efforcent de conserver les traditions du langage et des mœurs gaéliques; aussi leur vie garde-t-elle de profonds vestiges des croyances et des pratiques superstitieuses des anciens temps' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918). This association of Brittany with paganism was, of course, an established literary theme long before Balzac exploited it. In his epic celebration of Christianity, *Les Martyrs* (1809), for instance, Chateaubriand identified Brittany as a province 'où florissait encore la religion des Druides'.⁴⁴ Following the example of his great predecessor, Balzac proceeds to explore the way in which these pagan beliefs, and superstition more generally, impact on the lives of his Breton characters. For him, evidence that the Bretons are marked by 'l'esprit superstitieux de [leurs] rudes aïeux' (*CH*, VIII, p. 918) is found in their unshakeable belief in local saints such as Saint Labre and Sainte Anne d'Auray. In moments of crisis, it is to these figures of regional veneration that the Bretons turn. Thus, in *Pierrette*, when Madame Lorrain arrives in Provins

⁴³ Marie-Caroline Vanbremeersch, *Sociologie d'une représentation romanesque*, pp. 56-57. For the sometimes curious practices of the Breton peasantry during this period, see also Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁴⁴ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Les Martyrs, ou la Triomphe de la religion chrétienne*, in *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*, II, 12-678 (p. 249).

to end the cruel imprisonment of her granddaughter, her prayers that the child can be saved are directed, not to God, but to 'sainte Anne d'Auray, la plus puissante des madones de la Bretagne' (*CH*, IV, p. 141).

In *Les Chouans*, belief in the power of the local saints is stronger still, though this does not prevent the narrator from condemning it as ridiculous. In one of their raids on the stagecoach from Mayenne, the mere mention of Sainte Anne d'Auray is enough to dissuade Marche-à-terre from robbing the last remaining passenger. The driver, Copiau, has sworn to protect this cowering traveller, and refuses to reveal his identity to the marauding bandits: 'Laisse-le donc! reprit Marche-à-terre en poussant Pille-miche par le coude, il a juré par sainte Anne d'Auray' (*CH*, VIII, p. 952). The scene quickly descends into farce when, with a series of nods and winks, Copiau exposes the unfortunate Monsieur d'Orgemont 'sans croire enfreindre ses promesses' (*CH*, VIII, p. 954). If the Balzacian narrator derides this simple-minded faith, his amusement is nevertheless tempered by the view that primitive superstition can exert a dangerous influence.

As early as 1818, Balzac had begun gathering notes for his *Discours sur l'immoralité de l'âme*, in which he would condemn 'l'épouvantable fleuve de superstitions humaines qui a tant ravagé la terre' (*OD*, I, p. 533). His treatment of Brittany sees him renew this accusation with the claim that paganism has made a sham of Breton Catholicism. The peasants of *Les Chouans* are, in the first instance, unashamedly hypocritical, their religion so empty that '[ils] sortent de la messe pour aller danser' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1089). According to Balzac, the Bretons have no understanding of the obligations of authentic Catholicism. Theirs is a religion of convenience, one they have adopted only to ensure that

‘Dieu n’abandonnera jamais la cause des Bretons’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1119). Thus assured that God is on their side, the daughters of the Chouan guerrillas can lead Republican soldiers into a fatal ambush, and feel wholly untroubled by their actions. After completing their terrible work, these provincial sirens ‘allaient en pèlerinage avec leurs pères et leurs frères demander des ruses et des absolutions à des vierges de bois vermoulu. La religion ou plutôt le fétichisme de ces créatures ignorantes désarmait le meurtre de ses remords’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 920). The narrator’s reference to ignorant ‘fetichism’ serves as a reminder of the primitive conditions in which the Bretons live, his dismissal of their worm-eaten statues reinforcing the hollow nature of their beliefs. For Marie-Pierre Le Hir, this sweeping indictment of religious hypocrisy is a crucial moment in Balzac’s portrait of Brittany. ‘True religion’, she writes, ‘never condones murder, and yet these young Breton women use theirs to plan it. Murder itself cannot fail to provoke remorse in a truly religious person, and yet remorse is foreign to them’.⁴⁵ This rather pious attempt to disassociate religion and violence is, by any historical standard, an over-simplification. The point of the argument, though, remains the same. The isolation of Brittany has perpetuated a set of archaic beliefs and superstitions, which in turn explains the failure of the Bretons to understand Catholicism in anything other than one-dimensional terms.

Yet for all their wicked deeds, might the Bretons not be considered victims of their historical and socio-cultural environment, rather than as merely the hated product of it? Although he makes no explicit statement of his

⁴⁵ Marie-Pierre Le Hir, ‘Balzac’s Bretons: racism and national identity in *Les Chouans*’, in *Peripheries of Nineteenth-Century French Studies: Views from the Edge*, ed. by Timothy Raser (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 197-216 (pp. 203-04).

position, Balzac certainly acknowledges this possibility. For him, the Chouans could be endowed with a sense of moral responsibility were they not manipulated by the interests, clerical and aristocratic, for which they are fighting. A prominent representative of these interests, which themselves reflect the damaging influence of their Breton surroundings, is the Abbé Gudin. The warrior priest sees the return of the monarchy as synonymous with a powerful Church, and cares not that he should be educating the peasants in the ways of peace and morality.⁴⁶ Instead, he relies upon a fire-and-brimstone approach to galvanize the Chouans in their fight against the Republic. In the nineteenth century, Breton priests were well known for using ‘all their descriptive powers on the invention of tortures with which to frighten their flock’,⁴⁷ and Balzac incorporates this knowledge into a fictional character who believes ‘la véhémence du débit’ to be ‘le plus puissant des arguments pour persuader ses sauvages auditeurs’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1118). At a mass held in the forest, he is seen blessing rifles, advertising the service as a shopkeeper might offer his customers one final chance of a bargain:

Pour aujourd’hui seulement nous avons le pouvoir de bénir vos fusils. Ceux qui ne profiteront pas de cette faveur, ne retrouveront pas la sainte d’Auray aussi miséricordieuse, et elle ne les écouterait plus comme elle l’a fait dans la guerre précédente (*CH*, VIII, p. 1120).

The mention of a beloved saint makes this a particularly powerful threat, as Gudin well knows. ‘Habitué à se servir de la religion comme d’un instrument’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1036), he has no compunction about fanning the flames of civil

⁴⁶ Philippe Bertault reinforces the point about Gudin: ‘Sa convoitise des riches bénéfiques et de la mitre explique son adhésion à l’insurrection, car il voit dans le retour de la royauté celui de la prédominance ecclésiastique: il est cynique: il est grotesque’ (*Balzac et la religion* (Paris: Boivin, 1942), p. 128). On this point, see also Le Hir, ‘Balzac’s Bretons’, pp. 201-2.

⁴⁷ Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind*, p. 33.

war. In 1792, enforced conscription had sparked the Vendean insurrection, which spread into four departments, and resulted in the loss of some two hundred thousand lives. Rather than avoid this emotive issue, Gudin chooses to denounce conscription in a manner designed both to exploit the historical moment, and to strike at the heart of the Breton consciousness. The Republican soldiers, he declares, ‘veulent prendre tous les paroissiens de Bretagne pour en faire des Bleus comme eux et les envoyer se battre hors de leurs paroisses, dans des pays bien éloignés où l’on court risque de mourir sans confession’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1118). In truth, we might imagine the fate of the Chouans to be of little consequence to Gudin. Applying the liberal anti-clericalism of the 1820s to the conflict of 1799, Balzac accuses the Breton clergy of ruthlessly exploiting a vulnerable people that it has a civic and moral duty to protect.

A similar criticism is applied to Alphonse de Montauran, a character on whom the pressure of historical circumstance, but also the pressure of Brittany, weighs heavily. At first, the royalist leader appears as an ‘idealized version of the nobility’.⁴⁸ He is determined to overthrow a regime ‘qui menace [...] l’ordre social d’une destruction complète’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1037), and maintains that courage and valour will be the hallmarks of his campaign. Thus, he disapproves of brigandage, and unlike the Abbé Gudin, appeals to the Chouans’s faith as a restraining influence: ‘Les défenseurs de Dieu et du Roi sont-ils donc des pillards?’ he asks, seeing Marche-à-terre and his band waiting to rob a stagecoach. ‘Nous avons à faire la guerre à la République et non aux diligences. Ceux qui désormais se rendront coupables d’attaques si

⁴⁸ Gabriel Moyal, ‘Making the Revolution private: Balzac’s *Les Chouans* and *Un épisode sous la Terreur*’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 28 (1989), 601-22 (p. 614).

honteuses ne recevront pas l'absolution' (*CH*, VIII, p. 943). These actions are in keeping with the realities of the Breton uprising. According to Donald Sutherland, 'the nobles disdained certain aspects of the guerrilla war such as the murder of isolated republican notables, the pillage of the Chouans's enemies's farms, or the robbery of stage coaches. Nor could they bear the Chouans's brutal mistreatment of wounded prisoners.'⁴⁹ However, it is not long before the Marquis is dragged down to the primitive violence of the Breton conflict. He makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he is using the Chouans for his own purposes. 'Plonger mon épée dans le ventre de la République' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1060), he retorts, when asked what it is he hopes to achieve with the peasants under his command. Throughout the action he is true to his word, encouraging the Chouans to soil their own hands with blood, while his own are kept clean. In the ambush at La Vivetière, he looks on impassively as the Republican officer, Gérard, is shot dead. Nor does he prevent Pille-miche from raping Marie de Verneuil: 'Le marquis attendait peut-être une larme; mais les yeux de la jeune fille restèrent secs et fiers. Il se retourna vivement en laissant à Pille-miche sa victime' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1053). Montauran's abandonment of his noble principles is not surprising when one considers that other characters are affected. Balzac offers subtle warnings that Brittany could drag the rest of France down into a primitive state. Two episodes are used to illustrate this thesis. In the first, we are told that Hulot 'consulta le sable de la route, à la manière des Sauvages' (*CH*, VIII, p. 924), in order to check for the recent presence of the Chouans. In the second, Marie de Verneuil savours the knowledge that she could have Montauran killed:

⁴⁹ Donald Sutherland, *The Chouans: The Social Origins of Popular Counter-Revolution in Upper Brittany: 1770-1796* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 172.

‘Semblable à un sauvage d’Amérique, elle interrogeait les fibres du visage de son ennemi lié au poteau, et brandissait le *casse-tête* avec grâce, savourant une vengeance toute innocente’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 1024). The experience of Breton life is, it seems, so pervasive that it can corrupt even the noblest of hearts.

That the traumatic events of the Chouan uprising affect its protagonists so deeply is hardly surprising. Indeed, in *Mademoiselle du Vissard*, an unfinished text abandoned in 1847 and set during the Consulate, Balzac shows that the memory of the war is still fresh. It is four years since the death of their leader, the Marquis de Montauran, but neither Marche-à-terre nor Pille-miche has forgotten their bitter struggle, just as neither has lost the capacity for violence that is a product of their Breton origins. ‘Vlà un Corentin!’ exclaims Pille-miche, immediately assuming a local pig farmer to be a spy. ‘Qui, c’en est un, [...] dit Marche-à-terre, faut le jeter pieds et poings liés à la mer, avec des cailloux dans un sac au cou’ (*CH*, XII, p. 644). It is not simply the memory of a bloody conflict that weighs on the minds of Balzac’s Bretons, though, but the memory of Brittany itself.

This point is illustrated in *Les Chouans* by the stories of two secondary characters, Francine Cottin and the unnamed son of Galope-chopine, both of whom stand as examples of the way in which Brittany shapes the lives of its inhabitants.⁵⁰ This is most obvious in the case of Francine. Having entered the service of the Parisian aristocracy, Francine has been re-educated, and seems at first to have cast off her primitive past. As maid to the elegant Mademoiselle de Verneuil, she has shed the rags of the impoverished peasant, and learned to dress elegantly. By the time she returns to Brittany, she is even

⁵⁰ For an alternative perspective on these characters, and on domestic and military service as possible solutions to the backwardness of this fictional Brittany, see Vanbremeersch, *Sociologie d’une représentation romanesque*, pp. 67-79.

said to have 'un peu oublié le bas breton' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1017), another visible indication that she has discarded the ways of the province in which she was born. And yet, ultimately, Balzac is forced to concede that not even removal from their native environment can 'civilize' the Bretons. For while Francine has acquired a veneer of sophistication during her stay in Paris, her attitudes and concerns have remained those of a Breton peasant. In her absence, she has continued to love the man she remembers as Pierre Leroi, and with property and savings to her name, she has no other desire than to marry, and to return to Brittany. 'J'ai maintenant deux cents livres de bonnes rentes,' she explains, in the hope of ending Marche-à-terre's thirst for war. 'Enfin mademoiselle m'a acheté pour cinq cents écus la grande maison à mon oncle Thomas, et j'ai deux mille livres d'économies' (*CH*, VIII, p. 998). Seen in this perspective, Francine invites comparison with those other provincials who long to return home once their Parisian careers have earned them enough money for a comfortable retirement. The Rogrons, in *Pierrette*, for instance, grow tired of the city, and indifferent to the pleasures that it has to offer: 'Pour eux, Paris était quelque chose d'étalé autour de la rue Saint-Denis' (*CH*, IV, p. 43). Like a businessman who returns from a stay in the capital, says Balzac, and who loses his temporary refinement 'dans les habitudes de la vie de province où il s'enfonce' (*CH*, IV, p. 50), Francine quickly reintegrates herself into her local community. By 1827, in the epilogue to the novel, she and her husband are seen selling cattle in the marketplace at Fougères, their inheritance too meagre to wrench them from the routines of a basic agricultural economy. In contrast to the Rogrons, however, whose life back in their native Provins is one of relative financial comfort, Francine's settling in Brittany represents a wasted

opportunity. Though she was employed only as a domestic servant, Paris had offered this young woman an escape from poverty and primitivism. That she is prepared to lose so much confirms the somewhat irrational reluctance of the Balzacian peasantry to embrace the benefits of civilization. At the same time, however, it illustrates the powerful attraction exerted by a province more backward than any other in *La Comédie humaine*, as Balzac replaces the stereotypical nostalgia for rural life with a harsher image of what lies outside Paris.

The son of Galope-chopine is a character who faces an even darker struggle to rid himself of the experience of Breton life. After the execution of her husband, Barbette gives the seven-year-old boy to the Republican army in a deliberate act of revenge: 'Prenez mon gars,' she tells Hulot, 'mais faites-en un vrai Bleu, mon bon homme, et qu'il puisse tuer beaucoup de Chuins' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1184). In the manner of an animal that leaves its young to fend for themselves, Barbette severs all emotional ties with her son, who is told that he must now make his own way in the world: 'Marche tout seul, s'écria sourdement Barbette en lui retirant la main et le poussant avec une incroyable rudesse, tu n'as plus ni père ni mère' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1178). The act that follows is intended to create an emotional scar that will prevent the child from ever forgetting the violent world of the western province. In a further illustration of the archaic practices of the Breton peasantry, he is made to place his foot in his dead father's shoe:

Ôte ton sabot, dit la mère à son fils. Mets ton pied là-dedans. Bien. Souviens-toi toujours, s'écria-t-elle d'un son de voix lugubre, du soulier de ton père, et ne t'en mets jamais un aux pieds sans te rappeler celui qui était plein d[e] sang (*CH*, VIII, p. 1179).

As the child responds to this nauseating imperative, Barbette fills him with thoughts of hatred and revenge: 'J'atteste Saint-Labre, reprit-elle, que je te voue aux Bleus. Tu seras soldat pour venger ton père' (CH, VIII, p. 1179). Placed in the care of the army, the fatherless boy thus stands as a victim of the events of 1799, but also as a victim of Brittany, the determining of his future a final measure of the region's formative power.

Class Contradictions: The Structure of Provincial Society

The third and final factor that conditions the Balzacian experience of provincial life is that of class. The variable is one that gives rise to some of the most richly contrasting, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives on provincial life in *La Comédie humaine*, as Balzac refracts established class stereotypes, the pretentiousness of the bourgeoisie, for example, or the ignorance of the peasantry, through the prism of post-revolutionary circumstance. This combination of history and stereotype is illustrated particularly well in his treatment of the aristocracy. Although he declared his 'impétinence finale en fait d'opinions légitimistes'⁵¹ in April 1833, Balzac's attitude towards the provincial nobility was hostile. He was exasperated by the arrogance with which, under the Restoration, the aristocracy had sought to regain its place at the head of French society, its members demanding the return of their confiscated properties, and using their noble blood to secure the most prestigious posts in the Administration. For Balzac, however, the provincial aristocracy has not even struggled to reverse the loss of its former

⁵¹ *Corr.*, II, p. 295 (26? April 1833).

privileges; it has simply preferred to strike Revolution and Empire from the historical record. Indebted and unproductive, it has used the geographical isolation of the provinces as an excuse to bury its collective head in the sand, and to engage in what Jean Forest terms 'la contemplation stérile d'un passé qu'elle recrée'.⁵² In chapter two, I discussed the example of the Marquis d'Esgrignon whose indifference to the passage of time is symbolized, in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, by the breaking of his watchspring at the hour of his wife's death. To this example we might add that of the Baron du Guénic, in *Béatrix*, who stands as another historical anachronism. His home is a closed world, where the furnishings 'sont tous en bois de chêne et portent au-dessus de leurs dossiers l'écusson de la famille' (*CH*, II, p. 646). On the wall hangs evidence, both of traditional aristocratic pastimes, and of a readiness to settle disputes with a duel: 'trois fusils anglais également bons pour la chasse et pour la guerre, trois sabres, deux carniers, les ustensiles du chasseur et du pêcheur accrochés à des clous' (*CH*, II, p. 646).

If Balzac reserves some sympathy for these ageing country gentlemen, he is, though, less forgiving of those who combine self-admiration and conceit with the small-mindedness that dominates the provincial setting. The most striking example is to be found in 'l'imbécillité, la méchanceté, l'inutilité des troglodytes que reçoit Mme de Bargeton',⁵³ in *Illusions perdues*. It is small wonder that this group so discourages Lucien de Rubempré, when one of its leading representatives, Monsieur de Saintot, is hapless in his role as president of the local agricultural society:

⁵² Jean Forest, *L'Aristocratie balzacienne*, p. 180.

⁵³ André Wurmser, *La Comédie inhumaine* (Paris: Club des amis du livre progressiste, 1965), p. 469.

Ignorant comme une carpe, il n'en avait pas moins écrit les articles Sucre et Eau-de-vie dans un dictionnaire d'agriculture, deux œuvres pillées en détail dans tous les articles des journaux et dans tous les anciens ouvrages où il était question de ces deux produits. Tout le département le croyait occupé d'un traité sur la culture moderne. Quoiqu'il restât enfermé pendant toute la matinée dans son cabinet, il n'avait pas encore écrit deux pages depuis douze ans (*CH*, v, p. 193).

That Astolphe de Saintot is wholly incapable of original thought merely serves to reinforce the image of an intransigent aristocracy that favours the past over the present, and the preservation of its class identity over the recognition of historical change.

To suggest that the nobility makes no positive contribution to the life of the provinces would nevertheless be erroneous. A character such as the Chevalier de Valois, for instance, in *La Vieille Fille*, brings a modicum of refinement to an otherwise dreary Alençon. He may be 'a middle-aged fop with a tradition of *galanterie* and libertinism behind him',⁵⁴ but he remembers the Ancien Régime without the bitterness of many others who lament its passing. 'Les règnes de Louis XIV et de Louis XV,' he tells Victurnien d'Esgrignon, 'ont été les adieux des plus beaux mœurs du monde' (*CH*, IV, p. 824). The Chevalier was only fifteen years old at the death of Louis le Bien-Aimé, but of this bygone age he has retained 'les manières et même quelque chose dans son costume: habit marron à boutons dorés, culotte à demi-juste en pou-de-soie et à boucles d'or, gilet blanc sans broderies, cravate serrée, sans col de chemise, souliers à boucles d'or carrées' (*CH*, IV, p. 815). As well as preserving in his outward appearance the graces of the eighteenth century, he also accepts and adapts to his impoverished circumstances. He does not

⁵⁴ Herbert J. Hunt, *Balzac's 'Comédie Humaine'* (London: Athlone Press, 1959), p. 159.

campaign for a return to the glories of the past, but possesses an innate sophistication that endears him to the local community:

M. de Valois récolta les fruits de son infortune: il eut son couvert mis dans les maisons les plus distinguées d'Alençon et fut invité à toutes les soirées. Ses talents de joueur, de conteur, d'homme aimable et de bonne compagnie furent si bien appréciés qu'il semblait que tout fût manqué si le connaisseur de la ville faisait défaut (*CH*, IV, p. 816).

A similar degree of refinement is conferred upon Madame de Bargeton, who is painfully aware of the small-mindedness of those who frequent her salon: 'Vous ignorez les préjugés des personnes qui composent ma société,' she tells Lucien, fearing the damage that the unenthusiastic reaction to his poetry may have wrought. 'Nous ne ferons pas reconnaître l'anoblissement de l'esprit à ceux qui sont l'aristocratie de l'ignorance' (*CH*, v, p. 182). The appreciation that she has for Lucien's talent is enough to distinguish her within the narrow confines of Angoulême, and is combined with an inner sophistication that, once exposed to Paris, will break through her provincial skin: 'Les goûts exquis des moindres détails, la pose et les manières copiées de Mme d'Espard révélèrent en Louise une savante étude du faubourg Saint-Germain' (*CH*, v, p. 655). This innate poise, and the relative ease with which Balzac's provincial aristocrats adapt to the demands of Parisian life, is a point to which I shall return in chapter five. Here, my concern is with their experience of the provinces, and the respect they are afforded by the small communities in which they hold court. This respect is seen in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, where the notary, Chesnel, purchases property confiscated from the Marquis d'Esgrignon so that it may one day be returned to its rightful owner. The relationship between the two characters is so strong that it is compared to

the bond formed between dog and master: 'L'attachement du marquis pour son ancien domestique constituait une passion semblable à celle que le maître a pour son chien, et qui le porterait à se battre avec qui donnerait un coup de pied à sa bête' (CH, IV, p. 999). Similarly, in the Carentan of *Le Réquisitionnaire*, at the height of the Terror, the Republican prosecutor consents to turn a blind eye to the counter-revolutionary threat posed by the suspected return of Madame de Dey's son: 'Je démontrerai, poursuivait-il d'une voix douce, la fausseté de la dénonciation par d'exactes perquisitions, et vous serez, par la nature de mon rapport, à l'abri de tous soupçons ultérieurs' (CH, X, p. 1118).

Apart from the admirable sentiments that the provincial aristocracy can inspire, for Balzac this is also 'une classe encore en possession de pouvoirs et de prestiges réels'.⁵⁵ In an attempt to profit from economic expansion under the July Monarchy, members of the old provincial nobility had become industrialists and businessmen, with interests as diverse as the Carmaux and Anzin mines, the Midi rail companies, and insurance. At the same time, some became 'agrarian capitalists, developing Languedoc wine estates and enclosing Provençal forests'.⁵⁶ Their changing role was one that Balzac was quick to recognize, and among his provincial aristocrats, there are several who can be credited with exploiting the productive potential of the countryside. Monsieur de Bourbonne, in *Le Curé de Tours*, is a nobleman in precisely this mould. He avoids the fate of the d'Ésgrignons, in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, intransigent aristocrats who, 'usés par les événements de la Révolution et de l'Empire, avaient au fond des provinces converti leur activité en idées

⁵⁵ Barbéris, *Balzac: une mythologie réaliste*, p. 178.

⁵⁶ Roger Magraw, *France: 1815-1914: The Bourgeois Century* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 79.

passionnées' (*CH*, IV, p. 978). Adopting the same approach to land management as Félix Grandet, 'il avait su arrondir les prairies d'un de ses domaines aux dépens des lais de la Loire en évitant tout procès avec l'État' (*CH*, IV, p. 216). A more prominent example of the aristocracy's role in transforming parts of the countryside is to be found in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, where behind the idyll that is Clochegourde lies the machinery of rural capitalism: 'Avec ses nouvelles acquisitions et en introduisant partout le nouveau système d'exploitation, la terre de Clochegourde [...] était susceptible de rapporter seize mille francs en écus' (*CH*, IX, p. 1064). As Tourangeaux, these aristocrats have a special place in Balzac's fictional world, though their activities reveal such a willingness to adapt that one is forced to reconsider the sterility so often associated with their class.

The experience of the aristocracy strikes a direct contrast with that of the provincial bourgeoisie. With their lawyers, landowners, public prosecutors, and industrialists, Balzac's provinces are densely populated with this increasingly dominant class. At first glance, its members are portrayed in the most unfavourable light, being both vain and hungry for wealth. 'La grande préoccupation', observes Georges Pradalié, 'est la conquête de la fortune pour soi et pour ses enfants'.⁵⁷ To ensure their rise in society, they have sought marriages with the nobility, or in the case of the bourgeois of Nemours, in *Ursule Mirouët*, with other members of their class. Here, the result is a bewildering network of family relationships that does little to create the desired aristocratic aura:

⁵⁷ Georges Pradalié, *Balzac historien: la société de la Restauration* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), p. 57.

Sous Louis XI, époque à laquelle le Tiers État a fini par faire de ses surnoms de véritables noms dont quelques-uns se mêlèrent à ceux de la Féodalité, la bourgeoisie de Nemours se composait de Minoret, de Massin, de Levraut et de Crémère. Sous Louis XIII, ces quatre familles produisaient déjà Massin-Crémère, des Levraut-Massin, des Massin-Minoret (*CH*, III, p. 782).

To the charge of vanity is added that of nepotism. In *Pierrette*, Provins is run by a bourgeoisie that has a virtual stranglehold over the local administration:

Ces trois grandes races, les Julliard, les Guépin et les Guénée, s'étendaient dans la ville comme du chiendent sur une pelouse. Le maire, M. Garceland, était gendre de M. Guépin. Le curé, M. l'abbé Pérour, était le propre frère de Mme Julliard, qui était une Pérour. Le président du Tribunal, M. Tiphaine, était le frère de Mme Guénée, qui signe née Tiphaine (*CH*, IV, p. 52).

For the provincial bourgeoisie, there is clearly strength in numbers, their dominance reinforced by family ties which mean that 'ils s'entraident avec d'autant plus d'ardeur et de confiance'.⁵⁸ And yet, while he mocks its social pretensions, Balzac recognizes the success with which the provincial bourgeoisie has managed its rise. Through a combination of hard work and personal acumen, members of his bourgeoisie have seized the opportunity to make solid careers for themselves in the provinces. This is true of Minoret-Levraut, in *Ursule Mirouët*, who makes his fortune, not from 'de grandioses et géniales spéculations comme celles de Nucingen, ni même de coups d'à-valoir comme ceux de Grandet, mais de grignotages, de conquête lente et méthodique'.⁵⁹ The postmaster uses the abolition of the 'Messageries royales' in 1817 as a means of gaining a foothold in the transport and communications

⁵⁸ Donnard, *Les Réalités économiques*, p. 344.

⁵⁹ Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 287.

business. His subsequent rise may be slow, but the stability of the provinces ensures that it is uninterrupted.

Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that Balzac admired the vitality of the bourgeoisie, which, unlike the aristocracy, was the real source of energy and improvement in the provinces. A case in point is du Bousquier, in *La Vieille Fille*. A former supplier to the armies of the Directory, he single-handedly breathes life into the lace and cotton industries of Alençon, thereby transforming the socio-economic fortunes of the Orne department. As Ronnie Butler has observed, du Bousquier's actions are portrayed as vital to the modernization of Brittany, and to linking this backward region to the rest of France: 'Alençon lui doit son association au mouvement industriel qui en fait le premier anneau par lequel la Bretagne se rattachera peut-être un jour à ce qu'on nomme la civilisation moderne' (*CH*, IV, p. 928).⁶⁰ To improve the economic situation of the provinces, it is not sufficient, however, merely to belong to the bourgeoisie: one must possess the necessary financial capital. This is illustrated by the rivalry between David Séchard and the Cointet brothers, in *Illusions perdues*. Having invented a new method of manufacturing paper, David would appear to be in prime position to exploit the increased demand for a material that permits the spread of ideas: 'Les journaux, la politique, l'immense développement de la librairie et de la littérature, celui des sciences [...], tout le mouvement social qui se déclara lorsque la Restauration parut assise allait exiger une production de papier presque décuple' (*CH*, v, p. 559). Instead, it is the Cointets who take full advantage of this hungry market, the multiplicity of their commercial activities

⁶⁰ Ronnie Butler, *Balzac and the French Revolution* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm; Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1983), p. 144.

providing them with the financial resources to do so. As heads of a growing business empire that includes printing, paper-making, and banking, '[ils] peuvent exploiter la découverte de David parce qu'ils ont les capitaux, l'infrastructure technique et les réseaux de distribution'.⁶¹ Artisans and individual producers such as David Séchard are shown to be ill equipped for a new economic context, and are condemned to disappear as their functions are integrated into the work of larger, more unscrupulous interests. This decline of old rural industries was a reality of post-Napoleonic France to which Roger Price has drawn attention:

Artisanal production continued in the main urban centres and along rivers, using water-power and local raw materials [...]. Survival was possible because isolation provided protection from competition, but failure to adopt new techniques [...] meant that once a railway network had been constructed the slow decline evident from the first decade of the nineteenth century would become more rapid save in a few favoured sectors.⁶²

For Balzac, the industrialization of the provinces, and the role of the bourgeoisie in that process, is thus double-edged. Industrial development is the basis of vibrant provincial economies, but the loss of traditional workshops, paper-mills, and tanneries of the kind to which he refers in his fictional Angoulême, is to be lamented. Thus, he shows sympathy for 'les souffrances de l'inventeur', David, but at the same time, he cannot help but celebrate the power of the bourgeois capitalist: 'Riche de plusieurs millions, nommé député, le grand Cointet est pair de France, et sera, dit-on, ministre du Commerce dans

⁶¹ Barbéris, *Balzac: une mythologie réaliste*, p. 187.

⁶² Roger Price, *An Economic History of Modern France: 1730-1914*, 2nd edn (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 126-27.

la prochaine combinaison' (*CH*, v, p. 731). For the bourgeoisie, the provinces are a route to power and influence.

Though derided for their relentless social-climbing, these figures are the power-brokers of the provinces. The wealth of landowners such as Grandet and the driving energy of the Cointets play a central role in the economic machinery of provincial life. That is not to say, however, that the bourgeoisie is secure in its dominance. For beneath this class lies the dangerous threat of a frustrated peasantry. As Balzac warns in the dedication to *Les Paysans*, 'cet élément insocial créé par la Révolution absorbera quelque jour la Bourgeoisie, comme la Bourgeoisie a dévoré la Noblesse' (*CH*, ix, p. 49). The explanation for this statement may seem unclear, not least because the peasantry, exploited, unemployed and living in the most deprived conditions, is the most vulnerable of Balzac's provincial classes. His peasants are shown to live in primitive communities such as Montégnac, in *Le Curé de village*, a place enveloped in the silence of crushing poverty: 'pas un arbre, pas un oiseau, la mort dans la plaine, le silence dans la forêt; çà et là, quelques fumées dans les chaumières du village' (*CH*, ix, p. 758). In the first half of the nineteenth century, such an image could hardly be considered an exaggeration. As the rural population increased from 23.4 million in 1811 to 26.9 million in 1841,⁶³ so too did levels of rural poverty, sparking an exodus from countryside to town. For those who were left behind, the situation was often one 'in which misery was normal, intensifying to extreme distress during the frequent

⁶³ *Histoire de la France rurale*, ed. by Georges Duby and Armand Wallon, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1975-76), III: *Apogée et crise de la civilisation paysanne*, ed. by Maurice Agulhon, Gabriel Désert and Robert Specklin, p. 60.

periods of crisis caused by poor harvests'.⁶⁴ There can be no doubting Balzac's understanding of these socio-economic realities, though there are other characteristics that he attributes to his fictional peasantry which give the lie to his somewhat apocalyptic vision of a dangerous class. For while their poverty is undeniable, his peasants are frequently kind and generous. This is illustrated in the opening pages of *Le Médecin de campagne*, where Genestas stops at a house near the roadside, to ask for a glass of milk. Outside, there are five small children at play, though the peasant woman who looks after them is not their mother. 'Faites excuse, monsieur,' she begs the Napoleonic veteran. 'C'est les enfants de l'hospice. On me donne trois francs par mois et une livre de savon pour chacun d'eux' (*CH*, IX, p. 393). Such a contribution being insufficient, it is she, therefore, who provides for their needs. This is not the only act of charity described in the novel, or in a fictional community where the peasants show disinterested concern for each other. On a tour of the valley, Benassis takes Genestas to the home of a woman whose husband has recently died. When they arrive, the two discover that she is not alone in her grief. As the good doctor explains, 'la famille restera près des enfants et de la veuve pour les aider à arranger leurs affaires et pour les consoler' (*CH*, IX, p. 453). This tender solidarity could not be further removed from the savagery depicted in *Les Chouans*, and supports the conclusion that in *Le Médecin de campagne*, at least, 'le Paysan alpin [...] est complaisant, vertueux ou digne de le devenir'.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Roger Price, *A Social History of Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 11.

⁶⁵ E. Dordan, *Le Paysan français d'après les romans du dix-neuvième siècle* (Toulouse: Imprimerie du Centre, 1923), p. 141.

Nevertheless, just as we can identify differences between Balzac's treatment of the peasantry in his novels of 1829 and 1833, it is equally possible to establish why he saw this class as the greatest threat to national stability. As a result of the sale of nationalized properties during the Revolution, peasants were encouraged to become landowners, transforming France into 'a patchwork of tiny peasant holdings, each owned by a peasant proprietor who was proud of his independence, but who had to work extremely hard to make a living from it'.⁶⁶ As represented by Balzac, this move created a 'termite' peasantry hungry for land, destroying the great aristocratic estates that were once pillars of society and the economy alike. 'Vous allez voir cet infatigable sapeur,' he warned, in the dedication of *Les Paysans*, 'ce rongeur qui morcèle et divise le sol, le partage et coupe un arpent de terre en cent morceaux, convié toujours à ce festin par une petite bourgeoisie qui fait de lui tout à la fois son auxiliaire et sa proie' (*CH*, IX, p. 49). In the novel itself, he gives a startling demonstration of this trend. Set in the Yonne of the 1820s, the work was poorly received by contemporary critics because it contradicted the traditional, Rousseauistic image of an idyllic peasantry, replacing this with 'le sombre tableau d'une paysannerie misérable, violente et sournoise, socialement dangereuse, hostile à la Restauration et en opposition constante avec les grands propriétaires fonciers'.⁶⁷ Here, the peasants are capable only of hatred for their seigneur, the Comte de Montcornet, and through their spokesman, Fourchon, whose name evokes both a tool of work and revolution, make a chilling declaration of war: 'Vous

⁶⁶ Maurice Larkin, *Man and Society in Nineteenth-Century Realism: Determinism and Literature* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 46.

⁶⁷ François Jacolin, 'Les Paysans et l'état social des campagnes de l'Yonne sous la Restauration', *AB* (1974), 133-50 (p. 133).

voulez rester les maîtres, nous serons toujours ennemis, aujourd'hui comme il y a trente ans. Vous avez tout, nous n'avons rien, vous ne pouvez pas encore prétendre à notre amitié!' (*CH*, IX, pp. 119-20). Throughout the action, they remain true to their word, showing blatant disregard for private property, and for the Forest Code of 1827. Following the example of the innkeeper, Tonsard, each of the peasants 'se demanda pourquoi ne pas prendre [...], dans la forêt des Aigues son bois pour le four, pour la cuisine et pour se chauffer l'hiver?' (*CH*, IX, pp. 91-92). Montcornet is virtually powerless to stop them from plundering wood (an increasingly valuable commodity to the growing metallurgical industry), or from sending their cattle to graze on his fallow land. Even when he employs a warden, Michaud, to patrol his forests, the latter is murdered without a trace of remorse on the part of Tonsard and his men, who return to the inn with their rifles 'et se remirent à boire jusqu'à une heure du matin' (*CH*, IX, p. 340). Their crime provides the Balzacian narrator with the opportunity to pour scorn on the lawlessness of the provinces:

Dès qu'une ville se trouve au-dessous d'un certain chiffre de population, les moyens administratifs ne sont plus les mêmes. [...] Aussi, dans la moitié de la France environ, rencontre-t-on une force d'inertie qui déjoue toute action légale, administrative et gouvernementale. [...] En dehors de certaines nécessités reconnues, toutes les dispositions législatives qui touchent aux mœurs, aux intérêts, à certains abus sont complètement abolies par un *mauvais gré* général (*CH*, IX, p. 179).

The absence of legal restraint in the countryside does nothing, however, to justify the attitudes and behaviour of a peasantry whose experience of provincial life is based on violence and immorality.

To lament the contrasts between these *Scènes de vie de campagne* would nevertheless be inappropriate in a chapter that set out to uncover further evidence of the diversity of Balzac's provinces. Through the variables of history, regional difference, and social class, I have explored the way in which Balzac constructed his mosaic of provincial life with deep, as well as broad, dimensions. What other conclusions might be drawn from this analysis? First, it should be reiterated that, in his analysis, the variables of history, region, and class are interlocking: Grandet's experience of provincial life, for instance, is linked, not merely to the changes occurring in post-revolutionary society, but to his membership of the land-owning bourgeoisie. Likewise, the primitive behaviour of the Bretons is not represented simply as the consequence of Brittany's isolation; Balzac shows that it must be set within the political and historical framework of a peasantry outraged by enforced conscription under the First Republic. In addressing the hardships of Breton life in *Les Chouans*, Balzac was not dealing with a situation long since consigned to the past. On the contrary, he was writing with the benefit of historical hindsight, warning the Restoration of the danger to national stability posed by a Brittany that was as underdeveloped in 1829 as it had been thirty years before. The most pressing conclusion, however, lies in this chapter's illustration of the fundamental diversity of Balzac's provinces. As the railway revolution and the onset of industrialization threatened to eradicate cultural difference, it was the author of *La Comédie humaine* who sparked new literary interest in the question of regional difference and identity. In so doing, his work represented a significant departure from a satirical tradition that, in the early 1830s, was as popular in the press as it had once been in theatres. Articles such as Eugène

Morisseau's 'Le Provincial', which appeared in *La Caricature* on 12 May 1831, continued to mock those rural Frenchmen who dared to visit Paris. Even their sense of regional pride met with derision: 'sa ville natale [du provincial] est [...] célèbre par la hauteur des tours gothiques de sa cathédrale, par l'accident arrivé en 1371 à un fils du roi qui s'y cassa la jambe, et par la mort d'un archevêque qui vint y finir ses vieux jours' (*OC*, xxxix, p. 373).⁶⁸ With its sensitivity to social, historical, and geographical circumstance as factors which shaped the diversity of provincial France, the Balzacian text thus stands at the beginning of a literary movement that crystallized only at the end of the nineteenth century, with the birth of the regional novel. The next chapter will examine the relationship between these multifaceted provinces and Paris.

⁶⁸ Though often attributed to Balzac, the authorship of this article, signed 'Eugène Morisseau', remains uncertain. On this point, see Roland Chollet, *Balzac journaliste: le tournant de 1830* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1983), p. 416.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Interrelationship of Paris and the Provinces

‘Paris et la province, cette antithèse sociale a fourni ses immenses
ressources.’¹

‘Avant-propos’

‘La province n’existe pas par elle-même’ (*CH*, IV, p. 1387). Thus wrote Balzac in 1841. For readers of his essay, ‘La Femme de province’, the statement was a reminder that his fictional provinces were constructed in an ever-evolving relationship with Paris, the dichotomy of the two settings endowing his work with its structural balance.² The observation was also a simple one to make, since the interrelationship of Paris and the provinces was a theme already inscribed in the social, political, and economic history of France. In the seventeenth century, the absolutism of the Ancien Régime had divided the country into opposing territories, and its aristocracy into opposing camps: ‘la noblesse vaincue par la monarchie absolue avait le sentiment d’être oubliée sur ses terres; celle qui acceptait de servir le roi vivait auprès de lui, à

¹ *CH*, I, p. 18.

² ‘Si nous faisons le compte des pages [*de La Comédie humaine*], observe Bernard Guyon, ‘nous avons l’impression qu’il y en a un peu moins pour la Province. Mais si nous cherchons tout ce qui est dit sur Paris et sur la Province dans les *Scènes de la vie privée*, nous arrivons à un équilibre parfait’ (‘La province dans l’œuvre romanesque de Balzac’, pp. 125-26). Cf. Balzac’s letter to Madame Hanska on 26 October 1834, in which he outlines the structure of his future work with remarkable clarity, reiterating his determination to achieve a total vision of contemporary society: ‘*Les Études de mœurs* représenteront tous les effets sociaux sans que ni une situation de la vie, ni une physionomie, ni un caractère d’homme ou de femme, ni une manière de vivre, ni une profession, ni une zone sociale, ni un pays français, ni quoi que ce soit de l’enfance, de la vieillesse, de l’âge mûr, de la politique, de la justice, de la guerre, ait été oublié’ (*LH*, I, p. 204). For a short evaluation of the importance of this letter, see Honoré de Balzac, *Écrits sur le roman*, ed. by Stéphane Vachon (Paris: Poche, 2000), pp. 81-82.

Versailles, puis à Paris.’³ As a literary theme, the contrast between Paris and the provinces acquired new resonance under the July Monarchy. Work on the French railway network had begun, though paradoxically, while geographical barriers were shrinking, the gulf between capital and countryside appeared to be growing wider. The first line, connecting Paris with Saint-Germain, opened on 26 August 1837, and with each subsequent line terminating in the city, Paris was confirmed in its supremacy, while the provinces faced neglect. Balzac described this imbalance with devastating economy. ‘La France au dix-neuvième siècle’, he remarked in *La Muse du département*, ‘est partagée en deux grandes zones: Paris et la province; la province jalouse de Paris, Paris ne pensant à la province que pour lui demander de l’argent’ (*CH*, IV, p. 652).

Both he and his literary peers were quick to respond to these rapidly changing circumstances.⁴ For some, it was imperative that the provinces receive fresh literary treatment before their customs, traditions, and unspoilt beauty, disappeared under miles of track. Setting themselves ‘la tâche ambitieuse [...] d’immortaliser par les mots ce que l’Histoire était en train de détruire’,⁵ many would go on to idealize the innocence and simple virtue of the provinces, while damning the monstrous growth of the capital. At the centre of this movement was George Sand, whose rustic novels, including *La Mare au diable* (1846), *François le champi* (1847), and *La Petite Fadette* (1848), painted a touching portrait of Berrichon life. In the opposite corner were those such as Eugène Sue, whose work, for the most part, celebrated the dominance of Paris over the provinces, and made the city into the stuff of

³ George, *Paris-Province*, p. 7.

⁴ For additional information on the contrasting attitudes of writers towards the railway revolution, see for example François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1997-), I: 1740-1883, pp. 100-01.

⁵ Mozet, ‘Yvetot vaut Constantinople’, pp. 91-92.

literary legend. The present chapter will situate Balzac within this context of urban greatness and rural nostalgia. I begin by analysing the way in which his treatment of Paris foreshadows the Benjaminian celebration of the 'capitale du dix-neuvième siècle',⁶ and explore the possibility that he narrates the city from a provincial perspective. In this first section, I also illustrate the difficulty of classifying the relationship between Paris and the provinces in *La Comédie humaine*, as Balzac both reinforces and subverts the *idée reçue* of a brilliant but monstrous capital. In the second section, I focus on the experiences of provincials in Paris, re-evaluating the careers of Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré, and explaining their contrasting fortunes in terms of their ability to break the maternal bond with their native Midi. The chapter concludes with a reversal of perspective, and examines the behaviour of Balzac's fictional Parisians in the provinces. *L'Illustre Gaudissart* and *La Muse du département* are of particular relevance to this discussion. In the first of these texts, the novelist provides further evidence of his sensitivity to historical change, documenting the impact of early Parisian capitalism on the provinces. In the second, we see him working both outside and through literary stereotypes, as the fictional bluestocking, Dinah de La Baudraye, is seduced, literally by Étienne Lousteau, and figuratively by the image of a glittering Paris.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Paris: capitale du dix-neuvième siècle: le livre des passages*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and trans. by Jean Lacoste (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

Parisian/Provincial Perspectives

'Ha! ha! mon garçon,' laughs Jérôme-Nicolas Séchard, in *Illusions perdues*. 'La province est la province, et Paris est Paris' (*CH*, v, p. 133). Among the dilapidated wooden presses of the printing house in Angoulême's Place du Mûrier, 'le vieil Ours' (*CH*, v, p. 128) is explaining to his son, David, why their provincial customers would never accept the latest typographical innovations from Paris: 'Il dit à son fils que les habitudes des gens de province étaient si fortement enracinées, qu'il essaierait en vain de leur donner de plus belles choses' (*CH*, v, p. 133). David has completed his apprenticeship in Paris, in the workshops of the famous printer, typographer, and type founder, Firmin Didot. He is anxious to apply some of what he has learned, but lacks the experience of his father. The old man has already experimented with printing a regional almanac, *Le Double Liégeois*, on sugar paper, only for the locals to prefer the inferior version. As Séchard recounts this experience, part of his initial statement is thus qualified: the small-mindedness of many provincials leads them to reject any kind of improvement or innovation, regardless of its benefits. What he fails to explain is the way in which Paris differs from the provinces. He expects his son to know that Paris is a place of cultural brilliance, where change is welcomed as a measure of the city's superiority. This, it seems, requires no explanation.

Old Séchard's remark is, however, curious in a novelist who more often seems determined to act as a guide to the city, as if catering for the perspective of an outsider, or even a provincial reader. Of the story told in *Le Père Goriot*, for example, he wonders, 'sera-t-elle comprise au-delà de Paris?' (*CH*, III, p.

49), before accompanying us through the streets and houses of the city, from a shabby boarding house in the Latin Quarter, to the luxurious salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.⁷ This is the Balzac who, in the course of a journey that extends across *La Comédie humaine*, introduces us to a variety of Parisian types, from uncompromising moneylenders such as Gobseck, to principled lawyers such as Derville, and embittered old maids such as Cousin Bette. Penetrating to the hidden spheres of Parisian life, he thrusts the reader into a position of dependence on the narrative voice, an authority that can decode the city and render it intelligible to those unfamiliar with its ways. Nowhere is this guide made to seem more indispensable than in the opening pages of *Ferragus*, in which Paris appears, as it might to an outsider, as a place of confusion and dangerous contrast:

Il est dans Paris certaines rues déshonorées autant que peut l'être un homme coupable d'infamie; puis il existe des rues nobles, puis des rues simplement honnêtes, puis de jeunes rues sur la moralité desquelles le public ne s'est pas encore formé d'opinion; puis des rues assassines, des rues plus vieilles, des rues estimables, des rues toujours propres, des rues toujours sales, des rues ouvrières, travailleuses, mercantiles. [...] Les rues étroites exposées au nord, où le soleil ne vient que trois ou quatre fois dans l'année, sont des rues assassines qui tuent impunément; la Justice d'aujourd'hui ne s'en mêle pas [...]. Ces observations, incompréhensibles au-delà de Paris, seront sans doute saisies [...] par ceux pour lesquels Paris est le plus délicieux des monstres (*CH*, v, pp. 793-94).

As a means of reinforcing the idea that Balzac describes Paris from an outsider's perspective, it can also be argued that his work reflects the magnetic

⁷ For studies of Balzac's Paris, in addition to Stevenson's *Paris dans la 'Comédie humaine'*, see George B. Raser, *The Heart of Balzac's Paris* (Choisy-le-Roi: Imprimerie de France, 1970); Jeannine Guichardet, *Balzac 'archéologue' de Paris* (Paris: SEDES, 1986), and Jean Ygaunin, *Paris à l'époque de Balzac et dans 'La Comédie humaine': la ville et la société* (Paris: Nizet, 1992).

appeal of the city, and its ‘inescapable pull’⁸ on the thousands of provincials who arrived there in the early nineteenth century. In the same way as Alfred de Vigny lauded Paris as ‘le pivot de la France’ and ‘l’axe du monde’,⁹ and long before Walter Benjamin condensed this body of discourse into the epithet ‘capital of the nineteenth century’, Balzac referred to Paris in *La Peau de chagrin* as ‘[la] capitale de la pensée’ (*CH*, x, p. 195), adding in his essay, ‘Paris en 1831’, that this was a city ‘sans égal dans l’Univers’ (*OC*, xxxix, p. 317).¹⁰ And yet, if the Balzacian narrator views Paris as an outsider, it would also seem possible to contend that he looks down on the provincial France from the elevated vantage point of the capital. In *Illusions perdues*, for instance, he makes disdainful references to those ‘pauvres ilotes de province, pour qui les distances sociales sont plus longues à parcourir que pour les Parisiens’ (*CH*, v, pp. 164-65). How are we to account for this shifting perspective? And how might we use it to understand the relationship between the two zones? What is certain is that, given the sheer weight of his fictional output, and the three thousand characters within it, any attempt to reduce Balzac to a single narrative perspective would be fundamentally misguided and unrealistic. By acknowledging the multiplicity of narrators operating within his texts, we might nevertheless explore the possibility that his treatment of Paris and the provinces is based on an alternating perspective, one that maintains the two settings as polar opposites. Thus, we might consider that where his fictional Paris is associated with human endeavour and achievement, this merely encourages him to define the provinces in terms of

⁸ Johannes Willms, *Paris: Capital of Europe: From the Revolution to the Belle Epoque*, trans. by Eveline L. Kanes (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1997), p. 160.

⁹ Alfred de Vigny, ‘Paris’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by François Germain and André Jarry (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986), I, 105-12 (p. 107).

¹⁰ Article signed ‘Henri B...’, and published in *La Caricature* on 10 March 1831.

their boredom and mediocrity. Similarly, where his provinces are associated with peace and wholesome simplicity, his Paris appears as a hotbed of relentless ambition and immorality.¹¹ How, though, does this alternating perspective operate in practice, and what does it reveal about his fictional representation of provincial life?

Part of the answer lies in an understanding of the historical realities with which Balzac was confronted. During the Restoration and July Monarchy, Paris remained a cultural centre without equal. Industrialization had also reached the Seine in the form of steamboats,¹² and throughout the whole city, there flowed an atmosphere of progress and intellectual excitement. Alongside this celebration of their great capital, however, Parisians were also faced with a very different image of the provinces. Between 1831 and 1846, provincial immigrants streamed into the city in numbers as high as twenty-five thousand a year, seeking, and often failing to find, gainful employment.¹³ Since the seventeenth century, Parisians had refused to extend a welcoming hand to these new arrivals, preferring instead to label them robbers, strangers, and carriers of disease.¹⁴ This unfavourable image underwent little modification in the subsequent period, for which legal archives confirm an inextricable link between provincials and crime. Throughout the eighteenth century, the figures

¹¹ Cf. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 1.

¹² The steamboat is one of the few machines to appear in *La Comédie humaine*. In *Albert Savarus*, Rosalie de Watteville loses her right arm and left leg when the boiler of the steamboat on which she is travelling explodes (*CH*, I, p. 1020).

¹³ A. Jardin and A.-J. Tudesq, *La France des notables*, 2 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1973), II: *La Vie de la nation: 1815-1848*, p. 202.

¹⁴ Official documents suggest that the authorities also shared this view. Théophraste Renaudot, who sought permission to set up a Bureau d'Adresses in the 1630s, was well aware that magistrates associated provincials with crime, and so in his application, he made certain to mention that his office would provide employment for these immigrants within one hour of their arrival, thus eliminating the principal cause of crime in Paris (Leon Bernard, *The Emerging City: Paris in the Age of Louis XIV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970), p. 286).

remained constant: only a third of the defendants brought before the Châtelet de Paris were born in the capital, while according to Arlette Farge, foreigners and provincials accounted for three-quarters of those accused of stealing food.¹⁵ All of this made for an obsessive fear and widespread condemnation of the ever-increasing population of immigrants.

As a novelist, Balzac showed himself to be adept at supporting these contemporary stereotypes of Parisian brilliance and provincial inferiority.¹⁶ For the most part, he narrates Paris as a writer who was deeply sensitive to the vibrancy that distinguished the capital from the stagnant provinces. For him, Paris is ‘un liquide en mouvement’,¹⁷ its feverish rhythm producing stunning social diversity. In ‘Les Voisins’, published in *La Caricature* on 4 November 1830, he formulates his love of this thriving city with a series of delighted exclamatives: ‘Ô civilisation! ô Paris! admirable kaléidoscope qui, toujours agité, nous montre ces quatre brimborions: l’homme, la femme, l’enfant et le vieillard sous tant de formes, que tes tableaux sont innombrables!’ (*OD*, II, p. 809). This is the Paris that Balzac describes in *Gobseck* (1830) as ‘le tourbillon du monde’ (*CH*, II, p. 994), a city where even the most ordinary of streets brings the *flâneur* into contact with ‘autant d’hommes, autant d’habits différents’, a place that is rich in the unexpected and endless in possibilities. ‘On ne fait pas deux boulevards’, he says in his 1845 ‘Histoire et physiologie des boulevards de Paris’, ‘sans rencontrer un ami ou un ennemi, un original

¹⁵ Arlette Farge, *Délinquance et criminalité: le vol d’aliments à Paris au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1974), p. 118.

¹⁶ R. Jakobson, ‘Du réalisme artistique’, in *Théorie de la littérature*, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965), pp. 98-108. Jakobson argues that the realist text must reflect and reinforce a given society’s accepted definitions of reality: ‘On appelle réaliste l’œuvre que celui qui la juge perçoit comme vraisemblable’ (p. 99).

¹⁷ Pierre Citron, *La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire*, 2 vols (Paris: Minuit, 1961), II, p. 220.

qui prête à rire ou à penser, un pauvre qui cherche un sou, un vaudevilliste qui cherche un sujet' (*OC*, XL, p. 611).

The essential diversity of Paris seems only to fuel Balzac's contempt for the provinces, a setting in which he sees no such variety of social types. In the small town, he declares in *La Muse du département*, there is only one type of woman, 'et cette pauvre femme est la femme de province' (*CH*, IV, p. 652). According to Balzac, a provincial salon, where the same 'astres secondaires' (*CH*, II, p. 465) gather night after night, as they do in the Bayeux of *La Femme abandonnée*, could never rival the sophistication of the Faubourg Saint-Germain or the Chaussée d'Antin, where the fictional Duchesse de Maufrigneuse weaves a captivating web around her many admirers. In stark contrast to her provincial counterpart, he argues, the Parisian woman is able to create and sustain an aura of beauty: 'Si une Parisienne n'a pas les hanches assez bien dessinées, son esprit inventif et l'envie de plaire lui font trouver quelque remède héroïque [...]: mais la femme de province, jamais!' (*CH*, IV, p. 655). With the exception of aristocrats such as Madame de Bargeton, to whom I shall return in due course, the provincial women of *La Comédie humaine* are as dull as the small towns in which they live: 'Mme Grandet mettait constamment une robe de levantine verdâtre, qu'elle s'était accoutumée à faire durer près d'une année' (*CH*, III, p. 1046). In the provinces, it seems, the sameness of everyday life removes any desire to strive for change or improvement.

In Paris, however, diversity is inspiring, difference attracts scrutiny, and life has a competitive edge that motivates Parisians to scale the heights of social and artistic achievement. Here, true talent draws a receptive audience,

much to the delight of Théodore de Sommervieux, when he exhibits his two paintings of *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* at the Paris Salon: ‘Des spéculateurs, des grands seigneurs couvrirent ces deux toiles de doubles napoléons, l'artiste refusa obstinément de les vendre, et refusa d'en faire des copies’ (*CH*, I, p. 54). Equally, this is a setting in which it can happen that the talented support each other in their work. The Cénacle, in *Illusions perdues*, is a forum in which young men set aside their political allegiances in pursuit of artistic excellence, ‘où l'estime et l'amitié faisaient régner la paix entre les idées et les doctrines les plus opposées’ (*CH*, v, p. 318). When compared to the selflessness of a Daniel d'Arthez or a Michel Chrestien, the belated concern of the Alençonnais for Athanase Granson, in *La Vieille Fille*, seems even more shameful: ‘La veille, le pauvre homme de génie n'avait pas un seul protecteur; le lendemain de sa mort, mille voix s'écrièrent: “Je l'aurais si bien aidé, moi!”’ (*CH*, IV, p. 918). Against this backdrop of small-mindedness, it is little wonder that Balzac raises Paris to the level of a mythical city which, he says in *Illusions perdues*, ‘se produit dans toutes les imaginations de province comme un Eldorado’ (*CH*, v, p. 250).

Throughout his work, when Balzac views the provinces from the perspective of Paris, there seems no end to the bile that he is able to vent. His appetite for underlining the superiority of progress over ignorance is so insatiable that his provincials cannot even compete on something as everyday as humour. While informing us in *La Rabouilleuse* that ‘aucune plaisanterie ne vieillit en province’ (*CH*, IV, p. 420), he reveals the Parisian to be capable of great subtlety of wit. This quality is neatly summarized by Charles Grandet, who shifts the narrative perspective back to one of complicity with the

outsider when he explains to his Saumurois cousins that in Paris, ‘on trouve moyen de vous assassiner un homme en disant: “Il a bon cœur.” Cette phrase veut dire: “Le pauvre garçon est bête comme un rhinocéros”’ (CH, III, p. 1089). The narrator takes devilish pleasure in the joke, and Charles’s hosts are amused. But does it not also suggest that Parisians have a streak of cruelty that is often lacking in provincials? And if so, what other negative facets of Parisian life can be identified, leading us to contrasting positives of provincial life?

The apparent ease with which Balzac adopts and then casts off each rhetorical persona ensures that he was not blind to the faults of the city, nor to the ways in which the simplicity of the provinces represented an escape from the conditions in which Parisians were forced to live. In this, he was no different to many of his contemporaries, for whom the filth and poverty of Paris struck an obvious contrast with the city’s reputation for cultural excellence. Throughout the Restoration and July Monarchy, this heaving metropolis remained desperately overcrowded (in 1827, the shortage of houses in Paris was estimated at 3242¹⁸), drains and sewers were often blocked, and the narrow streets were thick with mud. The sludge was so dense that it acquired a notoriety all of its own, with an article in the *Journal des Débats*, on 1 November 1826, offering the blunt appraisal that the city had never been so dirty:

¹⁸ Wilmms, *Paris: Capital of Europe*, p. 159.

Tout le monde s'épuise en conjectures pour imaginer comment on pourra traverser un ruisseau dans trois ans, si, d'ici là, on ne trouve pas le moyen de tarir et d'enlever ces fleuves de boue qui inondent et infectent nos rues.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, this lack of even the most basic sanitation led to devastating outbreaks of disease: in the spring of 1832, a cholera epidemic claimed 18,402 lives.

These are the historical realities that underpin Balzac's treatment of Paris as a modern hell, a place whose degeneracy merely accentuates the unspoilt simplicity of the countryside. In the opening pages of *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1834-35), most notably, he offers a volcanic depiction of a city that is constantly reducing itself to ash: 'Là, tout fume, tout brûle, tout bouillonne, tout flambe, s'évapore, s'éteint, se rallume, étincelle, pétille et se consume' (*CH*, v, pp. 1039-40). The person who is unfortunate enough to inhabit this inferno, he continues, is 'horrible à voir, hâve, jaune, tanné' (*CH*, v, p. 1039). For him or her, home is a tumbledown hovel of the kind located on the eastern slope of the Montagne Sainte-Genève, described in *Le Père Goriot* as 'cette illustre vallée de plâtras incessamment près de tomber et de ruisseaux noirs de boue; [...] les maisons y sont mornes, les murailles y sentent la prison' (*CH*, III, pp. 49-50). This dark, oppressive atmosphere could not be further removed from the openness of the provinces. As portrayed by Balzac, the physical beauty of provincial France is enough to take the breath of a Parisian, as it does that of Marie de Verneuil in *Les Chouans*, when she casts her gaze towards Fougères: 'Elle fut presque effrayée par la profondeur de la vallée du Nançon dont les plus hauts peupliers atteignaient à peine aux murs des jardins

¹⁹ Article cited by Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1958), pp. 238-39.

situées au-dessous de l'Escalier de la Reine' (*CH*, VIII, p. 1073). The comparison is striking, though at the same time, we must consider that it is less in his description of settings than in his treatment of their inhabitants that we find evidence of Balzac's indictment of Paris and celebration of the provinces.

An important contrast in this respect, and one that recurs throughout Balzac's work, is the opacity of an immoral Paris compared to the reassuring knowability of the honest provinces. The opposition has its roots in a further set of historical circumstances that the novelist refracted through the lens of his fictional output. As well as having to contend with the appalling squalor that surrounded them during the July Monarchy, many Parisians feared the narrow pre-Haussmann streets as hiding other, unseen dangers. Their concerns, exacerbated by Eugène Sue, with his monumental work, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43), were in truth well founded. Around the Galeries de Bois, the Quartier de la Grève, and the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, lurked the double menace of crime and prostitution, themes with which much of the urban population became increasingly obsessed.²⁰ Avid readers of the *Gazette des Tribunaux* 'readily subscribed to the notion that Paris was in the grip of a vast criminal conspiracy',²¹ with both Jews and Auvergnats singled out as the most likely ringleaders.

This conception of Paris as being riddled with crime is reflected in *La Comédie humaine*, in which city-dwellers are shown to lack the same sense of

²⁰ Cf. Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992; repr. 1995). Prendergast argues that the Haussmannization of Paris did little to dispel the fear of an 'unknown' Paris: 'Physically, the city came to seem more coherent, but socially it remained disturbingly opaque and unpredictable' (p. 9).

²¹ Richard D. E. Burton, 'The unseen seer, or Proteus in the city: aspects of a nineteenth-century Parisian myth', *French Studies*, 42 (1988), 50-68 (p. 51).

community spirit as their provincial compatriots have within their small towns and villages. In Balzac's provinces, people are intolerant of evil-doers, as the Rogrons find to their cost in *Pierrette*, when their neighbours accuse them of having 'maltraité leur cousine à dessein et de l'avoir mise en danger de mort' (*CH*, IV, p. 144). The anonymity of a vast metropolis, however, means that crimes can be committed, and their perpetrators simply disappear into the crowds. The reality is so serious, warns Balzac in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1844-47), that by mid-century Paris could be home to as many as forty thousand ex-convicts. 'Le département de la Seine et ses quinze cent mille habitants étant le seul point de la France où ces malheureux puissent se cacher,' he explains, 'Paris est, pour eux, ce qu'est la forêt vierge pour les animaux féroces' (*CH*, VI, p. 831). To survive in this harsh urban environment, declares Vautrin, in *Le Père Goriot*, people are prepared to '[se] manger les uns les autres comme des araignées dans un pot' (*CH*, III, p. 139). Parisians have no moral scruples, and so naturally, it is to the capital that the worst elements in French society come to find shelter. This is the undesirable Paris to which an exhausted Derville bids farewell without regret, in *Le Colonel Chabert*:

J'ai vu mourir un père dans un grenier, sans sou ni maille, abandonné par deux filles auxquelles il avait donné quarante mille livres de rente! J'ai vu brûler des testaments; j'ai vu des mères dépouillant leurs enfants, des maris volant leurs femmes, des femmes tuant leurs maris en se servant de l'amour qu'elles leur inspiraient pour les rendre fous ou imbéciles, afin de vivre en paix avec un amant. [...] Je ne puis vous dire tout ce que j'ai vu, car j'ai vu des crimes contre lesquels la justice est impuissante. [...]; moi, je vais vivre à la campagne avec ma femme, Paris me fait horreur (*CH*, III, p. 373).²²

²² The line recalls the ending of the fourth book of Rousseau's *Émile, ou De l'éducation*: 'Adieu, Paris; nous cherchons l'amour, le bonheur, l'innocence; nous ne serons jamais assés loin de toi' (*Œuvres complètes*, IV, p. 691).

In the provinces, the fictional lawyer, wearied by his knowledge of the immoral depths to which Parisians can sink, will find consolation in the simple virtue of those such as Nanon and Cornoiller, the maid and her gamekeeper husband, who in *Eugénie Grandet* 'n'ont assez d'esprit pour comprendre les corruptions du monde' (CH, III, p. 1199). Here, he will find women such as Armande d'Esgrignon, whose devotion to her nephew, Victurnien, in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, shames the inconstancy of the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse.²³ This is the life of innocence that Paris cannot offer, and to which, ironically, Balzac's provincials are so often blind.

Even if they do not always articulate the differences between Paris and the provinces, the fictional actors in *La Comédie humaine* nevertheless remain profoundly aware of the antithesis. For the provinces, the capital is a constant presence and source of comparison. Its influence is felt in the darkest corner of Tours, where Troubert, in *Le Curé de Tours*, aspires to a power which lies outside the narrow confines of the provincial setting: 'Les mains de cet homme étaient à Paris et ses coudes dans le cloître Saint-Gatien' (CH, IV, p. 236). Further into the countryside, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, Paris is the dark cloud that looms over Clochegourde. While Henriette is for Félix de Vandenesse an ideal and uncorruptible vision of beauty, a woman who stands in total harmony with the enchanting valley, Lady Dudley represents the unbridled passion of the city, where pleasure is given free rein: 'De retour à Paris,' says Félix, relieved at the prospect of satisfying his ardour, 'nous

²³ The two women are brought together in the closing pages of the novel, in which the Parisian aristocrat is made to recognize the emptiness of her life of pleasure: 'La duchesse avait déjà jeté son coup d'œil de femme sur la chambre de Mlle d'Esgrignon, et y avait vu l'image de la vie de cette sublime fille: vous eussiez dit de la cellule d'une religieuse, à voir cette pièce nue, froide et sans luxe. La duchesse, émue en contemplant le passé, le présent et l'avenir de cette existence, en reconnaissant le contraste inouï qu'y produisait sa présence, ne put retenir des larmes qui roulèrent sur ses joues' (CH, IV, p. 1090).

abolîmes insensiblement l'un et l'autre les lois de convenance que je m'étais imposées' (*CH*, IX, p. 1184). This example nevertheless raises a further complication, because clearly, what Félix experiences is not a provincial heaven and a Parisian hell. It is an experience of two settings which are both attractive, but for different reasons, the sensuous spirituality of Touraine appealing to him as much as the unrestrained nature of life in Paris. The suggestion is that the framework of polar opposites, in which Paris and the provinces define each other by their differences, can lead to artificial and erroneous judgements. If Parisians are elegant, it does not necessarily follow that all provincials are poorly dressed. Similarly, if Parisians are cruel, it cannot automatically be assumed that all provincials are kind. Indeed, to argue that Balzac merely followed the literary and social models with which he was presented, moulding these into simple representations of a great but dangerous city, and a backward but maternal countryside, is to deny his work its originality. A closer analysis is telling in this respect, for while he can be seen to generalize endlessly on the Parisian and provincial identities, often he is as quick to subvert the trite facility of the *idée reçue*. A character such as the Bordelais, Paul de Manerville, for instance, is used to mock the supposed brilliance of Paris. During his sojourn in the capital of intellectual endeavour, in *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, he hopes to be educated in nothing more meaningful than 'le goût du thé, l'argenterie à forme anglaise, et [...] le droit de tout mépriser autour de lui pendant le reste de ses jours' (*CH*, v, p. 1062). Clearly, Balzac's rhetoric on Paris and the provinces is variable, and for all that we attempt to classify the links between them, we must concede that city and countryside relate to one another in multiple ways. Their relationship is

atomized, with the two settings appearing, not as blocks, but as frayed patchworks. Thus, Brittany in 1799 and Touraine in 1830 are shown to have very different relationships with the capital. The first, as represented in *Les Chouans*, is struggling to resist the political will of the First Republic, while the second, in *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, is engaged in a new relationship with Paris, one that is based on the emergence of capitalism, and the travelling salesman's attempts to sell newspaper subscriptions and life insurance after the 'déménagement' (*CH*, IV, p. 566) of the July Revolution. Links between Balzac's Paris and his provinces are best observed, therefore, at the level of region, town, and individual. I shall now move on to examine the lowest of these denominators, focusing on the varied experiences of provincials in Paris.

Provincials in Paris: Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré

'Habiter Paris est un désir universel' (*CH*, VII, p. 643). In 1847, readers of *Le Cousin Pons* must have been struck by the general truth of this assertion. The increase in the Parisian population, from around eight hundred thousand inhabitants in 1830, to over a million in 1846,²⁴ was sufficient to confirm the attraction of Paris for foreigners and provincials alike. The historical factors behind the growth of the city were various. Many were attracted by its reputation for cultural and intellectual brilliance. For others, it was ambition, and the example of Napoleon, that inspired them to dream of forging a glorious career in the capital. His spectacular rise surely captured the imagination of many provincials, as it did that of Stendhal's Julien Sorel, for

²⁴ Cf. Jardin and Tudesq, *La France des notables*, II, p. 201.

whom 'Napoléon était bien l'homme envoyé de Dieu pour les jeunes Français!'²⁵ Provincials became dominant among the student population of the Latin Quarter, their families having registered them to study at the Sorbonne or the prestigious Écoles. The continued increase in the administrative functions of Paris as a capital brought politicians and civil servants in droves, while after the poor economic conditions of the period 1815-18, the construction of new markets and slaughterhouses attracted provincial labour. The Saint-Denis and Ourcq canals were also completed, and for some workers, such as those in Limoges, who spent on average three-fifths of their wages on bread,²⁶ the chance of earning more than a mere subsistence wage in Paris was too good a proposition to refuse.

These social, cultural, and economic realities were ones of which Balzac had an obvious and immediate grasp. In his essay, 'Paris en 1831', he proclaimed Paris to be the destination to which all Frenchmen aspired: 'Chacun y accourt, et chacun pour un motif particulier' (*OC*, XXXIX, p. 317). These motives are reflected in *La Comédie humaine*, where provincials each have their own reasons for 'going up' to Paris. For some, like Lucien de Rubempré, it is a determination to take their rightful place among other men of talent that propels them towards the capital. Others, like César Birotteau, head for Paris with dreams of making their fortune: 'Lorsque, à l'âge de quatorze ans César sut lire, écrire et compter, il quitta le pays, vint à Paris chercher fortune avec un louis dans sa poche' (*CH*, VI, p. 55). A third group, comprising women such as Suzanne du Val-Noble, become courtesans, exercising what is described in *Illusions perdues* as 'une certaine influence sur

²⁵ Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, p. 93.

²⁶ Peter McPhee, *A Social History of France: 1780-1880* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992; repr. 1993), p. 149.

les banquiers, les grands seigneurs et les écrivains du parti royaliste' (*CH*, v, p. 493). For each of these provincial characters, Balzac draws up a balance sheet of success and failure, showing their fortunes in Paris to depend on their personalities and decision-making skills: 'pour les faibles, Paris est toujours un tyran cruel, prêt à les dévorer et à les perdre; pour les forts, il est une maîtresse qui prodigue son amour au vainqueur qui l'écrasera s'il commet la plus petite erreur.'²⁷ In the 1843 preface to *Les Souffrances de l'inventeur*, he warns of the 'force herculéenne' (*CH*, v, p. 119) that is required to conquer Paris, and delights in the city's power to ruin those who cannot master its laws of behaviour. At the same time, he is scathing towards the capital for depriving the provinces of their valuable human resources. He laments at the loss of provincial virtue that is the price of integration, even going so far, in the 1839 preface to *Un grand homme de province à Paris*, to express the hope that his work will discourage ambitious young men from leaving their devoted provincial families 'de venir augmenter le nombre des damnés de l'enfer Parisien qui se battent à coups d'encrier' (*CH*, v, p. 116). The aim of this section is to investigate the Parisian experiences of two of Balzac's best-known provincials, Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré. From their reasons for migrating to Paris, I shall proceed to examine their initial impressions of the city, before considering the way in which Balzac manipulates the literary stereotype of the provincial in Paris. In attempting to offer a new perspective on these much-discussed characters, I also focus on the role of the provinces in shaping their careers, arguing that while Rastignac

²⁷ Stevenson, *Paris dans la 'Comédie humaine'*, p. 200.

discards his provincial virtue and conquers a new morality, Lucien's downfall is the consequence of his failure to break the maternal bond with Angoulême.

By the 1830s, the story of the ambitious youth who heads for the city, where he undergoes his *Bildung*, or education, was a well-established literary genre with which Balzac was keen to experiment. In *Le Médecin de campagne*, in 1833, he had sketched the failed Parisian experience of Benassis, who arrives from Languedoc to study medicine. At first, the aspiring doctor works assiduously, only to waste his effort by acquiring a taste for the theatre, and for wandering the city's streets and gardens. He begins to view his course of study as too slow a route to personal fulfilment, with the result that his provincial values of hard work and patient commitment gradually evaporate:

Aux cours publics, je n'écoutais plus les professeurs, qui, selon moi, radotaient. Je brisais déjà mes idoles, je devenais Parisien. Bref, je menai la vie incertaine d'un jeune homme de province qui, jeté dans la capitale, garde encore quelques sentiments vrais, croit encore à certaines règles de morale, mais qui se corrompt par les mauvais exemples (*CH*, IX, p. 543).

This theme of the provincial in Paris would receive a more extensive treatment two years later, in *Le Père Goriot*. Eugène de Rastignac's journey begins as a 'flight from provinciality',²⁸ or more precisely, as a flight from poverty. Living on a farm near Angoulême, Balzac's most famous fictional creation is an impoverished nobleman on whom the survival of his family depends. In 1815, nineteen million hectares of French land still belonged to the nobility, most of whom could boast estates of more than eight hundred and

²⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 20).

eighty hectares.²⁹ In spite of their aristocratic blood, Rastignac and his family are not so fortunate: 'Son père, sa mère, ses deux frères, ses deux sœurs, vivaient sur la petite terre de Rastignac. Ce domaine d'un revenu d'environ trois mille francs était soumis à l'incertitude qui régit le produit tout industriel de la vigne' (*CH*, III, p. 74). Consequently, Eugène is sent to Paris to study law, arriving in the capital with few assets but his good looks and family name. At first, he is captivated by the city, 'le peu de travail que veulent les premiers grades à prendre dans la Faculté' leaving him free to sample 'les délices visibles du Paris matériel' (*CH*, III, p. 74). By the end of his first year, however, he no longer merely wants to support his family. He aspires to climb the highest rungs of Parisian society, and realizes that if he is to achieve his goal, hard work and simple virtue will not be enough.

Rastignac's induction into Parisian life begins in November 1819, when he returns to the capital for his second year of study, determined to make full use of his aristocratic connections. Before his memorable audience with Madame de Beauséant, he will nevertheless experience the feelings of 'dépaysement' that one might expect of a provincial amidst the swirling confusion of Paris. As Simon Davies has indicated, in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was commonplace for writers and dramatists to poke fun at the provincial by highlighting 'the gap between Parisian and provincial manners'.³⁰ This tactic was still standard literary practice during the July Monarchy, when Morisseau's 'Le Provincial' offered a scathing 'physiology' of provincials in Paris, deriding everything from the haughty air with which they step down from the stagecoach, to their accent,

²⁹ Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 213.

³⁰ Davies, *Paris and the Provinces*, p. 36.

and apparent love of exercise: 'Pour lui [le provincial], marcher est la condition première de l'existence. Lorsqu'il se trouve à Paris, il a déjà fait, avant que personne soit levé à son hôtel, le tour des quais et des boulevards' (*OC*, XXXIX, p. 374). Although he does not mock Rastignac with the same satirical bite, Balzac does show his protagonist to make the kind of mistakes that result from his ignorance of a complex urban environment. Among these is the incident in the cab, when Rastignac asks the driver to take him to the Hôtel de Beauséant: "Lequel?" dit le cocher. Mot sublime qui confondit Eugène. Cet élégant inédit ne savait pas qu'il y avait deux hôtels de Beauséant'. His reaction to being exposed as a provincial is the same as that of Molière's Pourceaugnac: "Tout le monde aujourd'hui se moque donc de moi!" dit-il en jetant son chapeau sur les coussins de devant' (*CH*, III, p. 103).

For Balzac, though, the literary stereotype of the inexperienced provincial is little more than a point of creative departure, a basis on which he constructs his own approach to the theme of a young man struggling to master the city. What must Rastignac do in order, first, to disguise his provincialism, and second, to 'learn the language' (*CH*, III, p. 74) of Paris? For the reader, pinpointing the sources of the young man's success is not a simple task, and for this reason, critics have often been vague in their pronouncements. Although Michele Hannoosh, for example, is correct to underline that 'la ville possède ses propres lois', she is unclear in stating that the capital 'adresse à l'individu des demandes sans précédent et exige une moralité nouvelle'.³¹ Others have avoided the issue altogether. David Bellos contents himself with the conclusion that 'if it were possible to summarize adequately exactly what

³¹ Michele Hannoosh, 'La femme, la ville, le réalisme: fondements épistémologiques dans le Paris de Balzac', *Romantic Review*, 82 (1991), 127-45 (p. 127).

it is that Rastignac learns in order to survive, *Old Goriot* would not be a novel but a treatise'.³² These arguments have their own validity, but might we not find a position of compromise between them, and identify at least some elements of Rastignac's 'deprovincialization'?

At the most basic level, of course, Rastignac must learn to wear the right clothes (a point to which I shall return in reference to Lucien de Rubempré), choose his words carefully, and avoid making the kind of social errors that see him barred from the Restaud house, where he disgraces himself by mentioning the name of his friend and Anastasie's father.³³ According to Balzac, what the provincial needs in order to acquire a more extensive knowledge of Paris, however, is a guide. In *Le Père Goriot*, this function is performed first by Madame de Beauséant. It is she who enlightens Rastignac on the nature of the relationship between Goriot and his daughters, and she who initiates the replacement of provincial ignorance with a clearer understanding of Parisian mores:

Le Méridional en était à son premier calcul. Entre le boudoir bleu de Mme de Restaud et le salon rose de Mme de Beauséant, il avait fait trois années de ce *droit parisien* dont on ne parle pas, quoiqu'il constitue une haute jurisprudence sociale (*CH*, III, p. 109).

³² David Bellos, *Honoré de Balzac: 'Old Goriot'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 99.

³³ The most serious of Rastignac's social errors. 'Je viens de voir sortir de chez vous', he tells Anastasie, 'un monsieur avec lequel je suis porte à porte dans la même pension, le père Goriot' (*CH*, III, p. 101). Rastignac's error will have lasting consequences. 'The immediate effect of his innocent remark', says Christopher Prendergast, 'is like that of a bomb going off at a tea party, and its long-term effect will be that of the initiation of the hero into a total understanding of the society that he has set out to master' (*Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 74. Cf. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 129-32).

It is she, too, who warns him that the world is ‘une réunion de dupes et de fripons’ (*CH*, III, p. 117), and that he should treat his acquaintances like ‘des chevaux de poste que vous laisserez crever à chaque relais’ (*CH*, III, p. 116). The most important lesson, though, is the one that she leaves until last, a lesson which says that to succeed in this melting-pot of ambition, men from the provinces must triumph over the feminine side of Paris that has lured them with its charms:³⁴ ‘Si les femmes vous trouvent de l’esprit, du talent, les hommes le croiront, si vous ne les détrompez pas. Vous pourrez alors tout vouloir, vous aurez le pied partout’ (*CH*, III, p. 117). Later, Rastignac will receive similar advice from Vautrin, who warns him of the unpredictable nature of Parisian women, and by extension, of Paris itself: ‘Hier en haut de la roue, chez une duchesse, dit Vautrin; ce matin en bas de l’échelle, chez un escompteur: voilà les Parisiennes’ (*CH*, III, p. 87).

If Madame de Beauséant and Vautrin are among the ‘expert readers’ of *La Comédie humaine*, characters who ‘owe their skill precisely to their ability and willingness to remain both in and above the inferno’,³⁵ their understanding of the fiction of Paris is nevertheless open to question. Madame de Beauséant, first of all, will be abandoned by Ajuda-Pinto, and forced to retreat to the depths of Normandy, while in spite of Mademoiselle Michonneau’s ‘bosses de Judas’ (*CH*, III, p. 91), Vautrin will fail to notice that his fellow boarder is in fact a police spy. The next time we meet him, he, too, will have been spat out into the provinces, disguised as the priest, Carlos Herrera. The implication is that, if Rastignac had taken both of his guides at their word, he might well

³⁴ This notion of Parisian femininity was not new in 1835. In Jules Janin’s novel, *L’Âne mort et la femme guillotinée* (1829), the narrator follows the beautiful heroine, Henriette, all over the city, for which she is a metaphor.

³⁵ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California, 1994), p. 91.

have met with the same fate. Are the most valuable lessons, then, the ones that he learns for himself? This is the idea proposed by Balzac, who shows his provincial hero struggling with his own experiences and identity, rather than engaging in wholesale acceptance of the wisdom that he is offered. Seen in this perspective, Rastignac's task is not merely to conquer the morality required by Paris, but to reconcile this with the provinces that he has supposedly left behind. At the centre of this struggle are the contradictions in his southern temperament. On the one hand, he is energetic and determined, possessing what the narrator describes as 'cette ténacité méridionale qui enfante des prodiges quand elle va en ligne droite' (*CH*, III, p. 95). Far from discouraging him, the social blunders that Rastignac makes on his arrival in the city merely fill him with renewed vigour. This is the side of his southern character '[qui] se traduit par un caractère aventureux, une hardiesse innée qui accompagneront partout le jeune pensionnaire de Mme Vauquer et lui permettra d'accomplir certains gestes, d'oser certaines démarches pour réussir'.³⁶ On the other hand, he is kind and sensitive, but with an unpredictable streak of hot temper. He has 'une de ces têtes pleines de poudre qui sautent au moindre choc' (*CH*, III, p. 132), and reacts to the more reprehensible of Vautrin's schemes with disgust. 'Je ne veux penser à rien,' he says, declaring his faith in honesty rather than deceit, 'le cœur est un bon guide' (*CH*, III, p. 147). Clearly, this southern temperament can at once bolster and threaten the progress of Rastignac's career.

Part of the originality of this experience of 'deprovincialization', however, is that Balzac combines these southern traits with more conventional

³⁶ Pradalié, *Balzac historien*, p. 140.

provincial stereotypes. Indeed, for the Rastignac of *Le Père Goriot*, the greatest struggle is with his innate sense of provincial virtue. At repeated intervals in the text, we find the young man vacillating between honour and calculation, between moral right and wrong. After receiving the cynical advice of Madame de Beauséant, he is in a state of near denial about the attitude he will have to adopt if he is to succeed in Paris: 'Je veux travailler noblement, saintement; je veux travailler jour et nuit, ne devoir ma fortune qu'à mon labeur' (*CH*, III, p. 146). Similarly, he can be seen attempting to convince himself that his relationship with Delphine is based, not on a mutually advantageous lie, but on true feeling: 'Il n'y a dans cette liaison ni crime, ni rien qui puisse faire froncer le sourcil à la vertu la plus sévère' (*CH*, III, p. 216). And even when Goriot is on his deathbed, he cannot bring himself to drag Delphine from the ball to the miserable garret in the Pension Vauquer: 'Il pressentait qu'elle était capable de marcher sur le corps de son père pour aller au bal, et il n'avait ni la force de jouer le rôle d'un raisonneur, ni le courage de lui déplaire, ni la vertu de la quitter' (*CH*, III, p. 262).

Yet while these markers undoubtedly represent the progressive erosion of Rastignac's 'idées de province' (*CH*, III, p. 74), they are always set against the backdrop of his home in the Midi. The most notable illustration of this is the scene in which, needing clothes for his entry into high society, Rastignac writes to his mother and sisters to ask them for money: 'Il avait honte d'avoir écrit [cette lettre]. [...] De quelle douleur serait atteinte sa mère, si elle ne pouvait envoyer toute la somme! Ces beaux sentiments, ces effroyables sacrifices allaient lui servir d'échelon pour arriver à Delphine de Nucingen' (*CH*, III, p. 121). In one of the most significant parallels in the novel, the

young student is confronted with the painful realization that he is milking his mother and sisters for their precious savings in the same way as Anastasie and Delphine are bleeding their father of his. Compared to these greedy, self-interested Parisians, his sisters are 'des anges de beauté, de candeur' (*CH*, III, p. 164), who send their savings 'dans un bruissement d'ailes satisfaites, tout allégées par le bonheur'.³⁷ But he exploits them nonetheless, gradually distancing himself from the maternal figures who have sacrificed themselves for the sake of his career. As Goriot's coffin is lowered into the ground at Père-Lachaise, it seems that this process is complete, and that his provincial values of hard work and moral decency have been erased forever: '[Il se voyait] si loin du Rastignac venu l'année dernière à Paris, qu'en le lorgnant par un effet d'optique morale, il se demandait s'il se ressemblait en ce moment à lui-même' (*CH*, III, p. 237). His last ties with the the Midi are broken as he realizes that he must shed the scruples of his provincial past, and embrace the diabolical practices of a new world.

But is this break with the provinces a clean one? What is certain is that, for Rastignac, Paris proves to be 'the agent of liberation and a source of corruption'.³⁸ He succeeds in escaping a life of poverty on his family's smallholding near Angoulême, and succeeds also in conquering a new morality. The disturbing spectacle of Goriot's drawn-out death proves to be a cathartic experience, one that brings him to the hilltop at Père-Lachaise, and enables him to look down on the city as a young man who has mastered its harsh code of human interaction:

³⁷ Jeannine Guichardet, 'Un jeu de l'oie maléfique: l'espace parisien du *Père Goriot*', *AB* (1986), 169-89 (p. 175).

³⁸ Buckley, *Season of Youth*, p. 20.

Rastignac, resté seul, fit quelques pas vers le haut du cimetière et vit Paris tortueusement couché le long des deux rives de la Seine [...]. Ses yeux s'attachèrent presque avidement entre la colonne de la place Vendôme et le dôme des Invalides, là où vivait ce beau monde dans lequel il avait voulu pénétrer (*CH*, III, p. 290).

This ability to understand the city makes Rastignac one of Balzac's most enlightened provincials, a character who will go on to wield his newly acquired knowledge of the Parisian battlefield to reach the upper echelons of French political life. The price of gaining this new morality, however, is the loss of his provincial virtue. After *Le Père Goriot*, it seems that there is nothing left for Rastignac to learn. 'Je suis en enfer, et il faut que j'y reste' (*CH*, III, p. 268), he tells the ubiquitous Bianchon. All hope is abandoned, and there is to be no rediscovery of his impoverished but honest roots. In *La Maison Nucingen* (1838), he is shown completing his assault on the 'woman' that is Paris by continuing to exploit Delphine, and by bringing his unscrupulous talents to the attention of her husband. He proceeds to make his fortune through Nucingen's fraudulent dealings on the Stock Exchange, and finally, marries the couple's daughter. If his provincial innocence is ultimately sacrificed, some of his regional identity nevertheless remains. After completing the rites of passage in which his provincial origins were best hidden, he once again becomes 'l'homme du midi, le voluptueux, le diseur de riens, l'inoccupé Rastignac, qui peut se lever à midi parce qu'il ne s'est pas couché au moment de la crise' (*CH*, VI, p. 334). His lofty place in Parisian society secure, it seems that he can now show these southern traits without fear of contempt. In the eyes of the capital, money and power are reasons enough to ignore that Rastignac was born in the inferior 'other' that is provincial France.

This experience of Paris strikes an immediate contrast with the city in which Lucien de Rubempré twice attempts to forge a career. In the Angoulême of *Illusions perdues*, Lucien's work merely bores the members of Madame de Bargeton's salon, with the result that the frustrated young man casts his eye towards the capital. He will not be disappointed by his first impressions of Paris, which he contemplates with a sense of wonder:

Lucien, hébété par le rapide coup d'œil qu'il jeta sur Paris [...], crut n'avoir jusqu'alors joui que de la moitié de son cerveau [...]. Là tout souriait au génie. Là ni gentillâtres jaloux qui lançassent des mots piquants pour humilier l'écrivain, ni sottise indifférence pour la poésie (*CH*, v, p. 250).

Like Rastignac, he heads for the Champs-Élysées, where he is said to be 'étourdi par le luxe des chevaux, des toilettes et des livrées' (*CH*, v, p. 286).

Later, his impressions of the city are focused on the fast pace of Parisian life, a point on which he comments in a letter to his mother and sisters, shortly after his arrival.³⁹ The frenetic rhythm, he reveals, is an intellectual stimulant: 'On apprend plus de choses en conversant au café, au théâtre pendant une demi-heure qu'en province en dix ans. Ici, vraiment, tout est spectacle, comparaison et instruction' (*CH*, v, pp. 293-94). For all that Lucien may absorb, however, Balzac makes clear from the outset his career will be a 'painful exhibition of the inevitable failure of weakness',⁴⁰ and that he, unlike Sixte du Châtelet, will lack the 'pied marin' (*CH*, v, p. 265) required to navigate the Parisian sea. The

³⁹ To emphasize the point, life in Balzac's Paris is so fast that one needs superhuman strength merely to keep up. 'Faites le compte d'une de ces journées, plaisirs et travail,' writes Émile Faguet, of Lucien's Parisian experience, in *Illusions perdues*. 'Je défie qu'on n'y trouve pas, en supposant l'organisation la plus vigoureuse, et en supprimant tout sommeil, moins de soixante-dix ou quatre-vingts heures' (*Études littéraires: dix-neuvième siècle*, 25th edn (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie (formerly Librairie Lecène, Oudin), 1902), p. 420).

⁴⁰ Charles Affron, *Patterns of Failure in 'La Comédie humaine'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 77.

most obvious indication of this is the title that Balzac gave to the second part of the novel, *Un grand homme de province à Paris*. As Bernard Schilling rightly observes, the label is cruelly ironic, the pairing of the adjective 'grand' with 'de province' forming an oxymoron 'which so limits and confines greatness as to have no meaning elsewhere'.⁴¹ Lucien can pose as a man of talent in Angoulême, but his reputation is formed only in the eyes of provincial people who dismiss him without even listening to his work. What, though, distinguishes Lucien's failure from Rastignac's success? And what part do the provinces play in his downfall?

Part of the answer can be deduced from Lucien's first impressions of the capital. Among the observations that he makes upon his arrival in Paris is the state of his dress compared to the elegance of the Parisians around him. He learns that here, appearance counts for more than reality, and that if he is to succeed, he must change what others will see as the most obvious sign of social inferiority: his clothes.⁴² At the Tuileries, he compares the bright colours and elegance of the clothing worn by young men and their partners with the dull uniformity of the provinces. Seen in this perspective, the capital seems truly exotic. 'C'était tout le luxe de couleurs qui brille sur les familles ornithologiques des Indes ou de l'Amérique' (*CH*, v, p. 268). Not for long, though, are his thoughts merely about the gulf that separates Paris from his native Angoulême. During two hours spent in the gardens, Lucien turns the spotlight of comparison on himself, and in what will be revealed as a rare

⁴¹ Bernard N. Schilling, *The Hero as Failure: Balzac and the Rubempré Cycle* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 116.

⁴² The embarrassment that provincial clothing can cause in Paris is made explicit in *Z. Marcas* (1841), where Charles Rabourdin asks the tailor to dress his mysterious neighbour: 'Je vais lui dire qu'il m'est tombé de la province un oncle dont l'indifférence en matière d'habillement me fait un tort infini dans les meilleures sociétés où je cherche à me marier' (*CH*, VIII, p. 853).

moment of introspection, 'il y fit un violent retour sur lui-même et se jugea' (*CH*, v, p. 268). He notices that no man of his age is wearing a coat like his: 'S'il apercevait un homme en habit, c'était un vieillard hors la loi, quelque pauvre diable, un rentier venu du Marais, ou quelque garçon de bureau' (*CH*, v, p. 268). He sees that there are different outfits for morning and evening, that the cut of his own jacket has long since gone out of fashion, that the colour has faded around the seams, and that he is wearing the same cravat as a grocer's boy carrying a basket on his head. The shame is too much to bear, and his outfit 'si grotesquement provinciale que, pour le cacher, il boutonna brusquement son habit' (*CH*, v, p. 268).

This feeling of embarrassment will be doubled at the Opéra, the setting in which Balzac so often exposes his provincials to the glare of Parisian curiosity.⁴³ For it is here that both Lucien and Madame de Bargeton recognize the provincialism of their dress, and resolve to break with one another. Lucien, for his part, is struck by how unkempt Louise looks when set alongside the radiance of her Parisian cousin, Madame d'Espard: 'La robe et la femme étaient sans grâce ni fraîcheur, le velours était miroité comme le teint. Lucien, honteux d'avoir aimé cet os de seiche, se promet de [...] la quitter' (*CH*, v, p. 273). Louise, similarly, 'était singulièrement mortifiée du peu d'estime que la marquise faisait de la beauté de Lucien' (*CH*, v, p. 276), and concedes that he must not be as handsome as she once thought. The manner in which both are exposed as provincials destroys their mutual affection, and convinces them of the need to erase their provincial identities. As Balzac demonstrates, however,

⁴³ This same glare is felt by Dinah de La Baudraye in *La Muse du département*, when Lousteau leaves her alone in their box: 'elle se sentait trop le point de mire de tous les yeux; elle ne put cacher sa préoccupation, elle fut un peu provinciale, elle étala son mouchoir, elle fit convulsivement des gestes qu'elle s'était interdits' (*CH*, iv, p. 754).

a visit to the famous tailors, Buisson or Staub, is but the first step towards completing this transformation.

Madame de Bargeton succeeds in changing her appearance, quite literally, overnight. When Lucien sees her pass in her carriage on the Champs-Élysées, he barely recognizes the woman who looked so drab at the theatre: 'les couleurs de sa toilette étaient choisies de manière à faire valoir son teint; sa robe était délicieuse; ses cheveux arrangés gracieusement lui seyaient bien, et son chapeau d'un goût exquis était remarquable' (*CH*, v, p. 286). Moreover, it seems that she has adopted a new attitude, an understanding of Parisian society, which demands that a woman behave with coquettish refinement: 'elle jouait avec une élégante cassolette attachée à l'un des doigts de sa main droite par une petite chaîne, et montrait ainsi sa main droite fine et bien gantée sans avoir l'air de vouloir la montrer' (*CH*, v, p. 286). Aurée d'Esneval supports this interpretation, stating that Madame de Bargeton's success, reflected in the acknowledgement of the crowd as she and her cousin drive past, must be attributed, not just to her appearance, but to 'une harmonie plus complexe entre divers éléments d'ordre visuel, auditif et plus généralement sensible'.⁴⁴

How is this total transformation made possible? Among the reasons is the obvious influence of Madame d'Espard who, as a cousin by marriage, and the benchmark of Parisian beauty, provides a readily accessible model. There is also the fact that Madame de Bargeton is an aristocrat. Already, I have shown that it is only members of the nobility, such as the Chevalier de Valois and Madame Tiphaine, who bring a semblance of sophistication to Balzac's provinces, and it is their innate sense of style and grace that Madame de

⁴⁴ Aurée d'Esneval, *Balzac et la provinciale à Paris: le vice et la vertu* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1976), p. 44.

Bargeton shares. Perhaps the most convincing explanation for her instant acquisition of Parisian manners, however, is that she was at heart not a provincial at all, even though she had resided at Angoulême for thirty-six years. As Donald Adamson has indicated, Balzac's description of her as a 'grande dame' (*CH*, v, p. 166) would seem to suggest that she was superior to the closed world of the provinces, and that the small town had restricted the development of her personality. In Paris, Madame de Bargeton is able to 'se désangoulêmer' (*CH*, v, p. 262), thereby revealing her true essence: 'The woman who had been at variance with her provincial surroundings now flourishes in a congenial milieu.'⁴⁵ Changing one's clothes is, then, an important step towards acquiring the status of naturalized Parisian. For this process to be complete, it must also be accompanied, however, by a change in attitude. Thus, when Balzac tells us that Madame de Bargeton 'n'était pas reconnaissable' (*CH*, v, p. 286), or that Rastignac, in *Le Père Goriot*, 'avait dépouillé sa peau d'homme de province' (*CH*, III, p. 237), it does not mean that they have simply shed the outward signs of their provincialism, but that they have embraced the code of Parisian life, which requires men to be ruthless calculators, and women to be deliciously unattainable. Lucien is undone because, unlike Rastignac, he fails to suppress his provincial virtue, and master through superior intelligence the rules of engagement of the Parisian battlefield.

A closer analysis of Lucien's first career in the capital enables us to locate the point at which his ambitions collapse. For in several important respects, Lucien's experience of Paris is not dissimilar to that of his compatriot,

⁴⁵ Donald Adamson, *Balzac: 'Illusions perdues'* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1981), p. 30.

Rastignac, or indeed, as Daniel d'Arthez reminds him in *Illusions perdues*, to the experience of the 'mille à douze cents jeunes gens qui, tous les ans, viennent de la province à Paris' (*CH*, v, p. 310).⁴⁶ Like Rastignac, Lucien will acquire new clothes, removing the most noticeable evidence of his provincialism: 'Il acheta une jolie canne chez Verdier, des gants et des boutons de chemise chez Mme Irlande; enfin il tâcha de se mettre à la hauteur des dandies' (*CH*, v, p. 285). He, too, will be brought into contact with two guides, whose 'compétences partielles',⁴⁷ or imperfect knowledge of the Parisian milieu, forces him to assess the state of his morals. The first of these choices is hard work, embodied in d'Arthez, who maintains that 'qui veut s'élever au-dessus des hommes doit se préparer à une lutte, ne reculer devant aucune difficulté' (*CH*, v, p. 311). The second is the fast and unscrupulous route of journalism, represented by Lousteau, for whom 'travailler n'est pas le secret de la fortune en littérature, il s'agit d'exploiter le travail d'autrui' (*CH*, v, p. 346). Like Rastignac, he will also struggle with a sense of provincial virtue that others are quick to notice. He is disgusted when Lousteau uses Florine's relationship with Matifat to lever himself into the editor's chair of a weekly newspaper, and confronts the ageing hack about his evident lack of conscience. Lousteau's response, however, penetrates to the core of the provincial naivety that Lucien must leave behind if he is to conquer the capital: 'Mais, de quel pays êtes-vous donc, mon cher enfant?' (*CH*, v, p. 382).

⁴⁶ Cf. Patrick Berthier, 'Le thème du "grand homme de province à Paris" dans la presse parisienne au lendemain de 1830', in *Illusions perdues: actes du colloque de la Sorbonne des 1er et 2 décembre 2003*, ed. by José-Luis Diaz and André Guyaux (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), pp. 25-50.

⁴⁷ Marie-Claude Demay and Denis Pernot, *Étude sur le roman d'apprentissage en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Ellipses, 1995), p. 22.

The source of Lucien's failure is to be found precisely in this openness of character, for unlike Rastignac, he cannot boast 'la lucidité d'esprit, le sang-froid et le tact indispensables à tout ambitieux'.⁴⁸ It is a shortcoming that dogs his Parisian career. When he tries to find a buyer for his historical novel, he makes the mistake of revealing his desperation to the bookseller, who consequently dismisses him as another poverty-stricken student: "Et pour qui me prenez-vous?" ajouta-t-il en lui riant au nez et disparaissant dans son arrière-boutique' (*CH*, v, p. 303). A more determined man would not have capitulated so easily, but Lucien, dejected, quickly succumbs to the city's abundant temptations. To console himself after his walk through the Tuileries, he spends fifty francs on a meal at the Palais-Royal, a sum that would have lasted a month in Angoulême. He decides to take the easier and immoral option of journalism, and falls in love with the beautiful actress, Coralie. Finally, when success does come, in the form of his review of *L'Alcade dans l'embarras*, he allows his southern charm to become vanity, and writes the article mocking Madame de Bargeton and du Châtelet that instills in the couple an unquenchable thirst for revenge. These are the errors that no change of clothes would have disguised.

As Lucien's career implodes, the reader can empathize with the painful truth that the character recognizes in himself: 'Je n'ai pas des reins et des épaules à soutenir Paris' (*CH*, v, p. 325). His personality, his candour, and his vanity, are fundamentally unsuited to the demands of Parisian life. This argument can be extended still further, with the suggestion that it is Lucien's provincial past that is the real source of his Parisian failures. According to

⁴⁸ Stevenson, *Paris dans la 'Comédie humaine'*, p. 179.

Charles Affron, when Lucien leaves Angoulême to begin his assault on the capital, 'he cuts himself free from the tenuous roots that so poorly anchor him in the soft ground of true friendship and family affection.'⁴⁹ True, he leaves the town without waiting to see his sister marry David, and takes with him the funds upon which the couple depend. But how deep is this rupture with his provincial home? The problem is neatly illustrated by the uncertainty surrounding Lucien's surname. After the death of his father, it is the young poet's mother and sister who care for him, and who channel what few resources they have into supporting his literary ambitions. 'Mme Chardon et sa fille Ève', we are told, 'croyaient en Lucien comme la femme de Mahomet crut en son mari; leur dévouement à son avenir était sans bornes' (*CH*, v, p. 141). If he is to make a career for himself beyond his native Angoumois, Lucien will have to sever these maternal ties, and learn to survive without the comfort of home. His decision to leave the Midi is complicated, however, because there is a paternal bond to be broken as well.⁵⁰ In order to circulate freely within a Parisian society that is obsessed with hierarchy and distinction, Lucien resolves to use the aristocratic surname of his mother, 'de Rubempré', instead of that of his late father, the apothecary, Chardon. Lucien's attitude towards this paternal name is one of embarrassment, as we witness in the scene where he returns to the Houmeau after being mocked in the salon of Madame de Bargeton. As he passes the front of the shop where his father once

⁴⁹ Affron, *Patterns of Failure*, p. 81.

⁵⁰ On this tension between the maternal and paternal bonds that hamper the progress of Lucien's career, see also Takao Kashiwagi, 'Qu'est-ce qu'ils ont vu du haut de Paris? Sur le destin des héros balzaciens: Eugène de Rastignac et Lucien de Rubempré', in *Balzac: romancier du regard* (Saint-Genouph: Nizet, 2002), pp. 47-57 (pp. 52-55). The Japanese critic compares Lucien's need for maternal comfort to the independence of David Séchard, who loses his mother at an early age. The more inviting comparison, I believe, is with Rastignac, whose own maternal connection to the provinces, through his mother and sisters, mirrors the sacrifices that Lucien's family make on his behalf.

worked, he reads the name and feels ‘une sorte de honte’: ‘en lettres jaunes sur un fond vert: *Pharmacie de POSTEL, successeur de CHARDON*’ (*CH*, v, p. 178). This is the past of which Lucien knows he must rid himself if he is to succeed in Paris. Far from having ‘tenuous roots’, as Affron believed, therefore, Lucien has a dual connection with the provinces that he will find it too difficult to escape. First, he will be pursued by the name of his father, and by a feeling of shame that is less a ‘fantasme inconscient’⁵¹ than an ever-present obstacle to his wordly ambitions.

After the night at the Opéra, Lucien tries to see Madame de Bargeton again, but the door is slammed in his face, and it is left to Sixte du Châtelet, ‘l’homme du monde au fait de la vie parisienne’ (*CH*, v, p. 265), to explain that the gulf between Paris and the provinces is not so wide that a man can simply walk away from his past. To ostracize Lucien, all that was required was for his compatriot, Rastignac, to tell Madame de Bargeton that his name is ‘Chardon’ and not ‘de Rubempré’ (*CH*, v, p. 288). The same harsh lesson is reinforced later, when *L’Archer de Charles IX* is published under the name ‘Lucien Chardon de Rubempré’ (*CH*, v, p. 649). Likewise, in the duel with Michel Chrestien, after Lucien has rubbished Daniel d’Arthez’s novel, it is the name of the defunct father that is used to question his character: ‘Vous êtes monsieur Chardon? lui dit Michel d’un ton qui fit résonner les entrailles de Lucien comme des cordes’ (*CH*, v, p. 539). That Paris should be so preoccupied with a name can be seen as an indictment of the city’s own superficiality. What it also confirms, however, is that those ambitious men who set out to conquer the ‘female’ Paris, whether it be Eugène (‘the well-

⁵¹ Kashiwagi, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont vu du haut de Paris?’, p. 53.

born') de Rastignac, who uses his paternal name to bolster his ambition, or Lucien, who tries to hide his late father's appellation, this male bond with the provinces can be neither ignored nor discarded.

The fact that Lucien cannot cope without the maternal comfort of the provinces makes his failure inevitable. At the end of his first assault on Paris, in *Illusions perdues*, he is seen at the graveside of Coralie, before returning to the Rue de la Lune. The name of the street in which he has lived serves as a metaphor for the unrealizable nature of his dreams, and as a maternal symbol, the moon also foreshadows his return to the provinces. Accepting money from Bérénice, the maid, who prostitutes herself for twenty francs, he heads back to Angoulême. Eventually, he will reach the home of his sister, Ève, who, to reinforce the point, shares her name with God's first woman. Rastignac could exploit his mother and sisters and then leave them behind while he forged his career. Lucien can bring himself to complete only half of this undertaking. He can ask his mother for the money to buy new clothes, he can even sign promissory notes in his brother-in-law's name, but his emotional need of his family is so great that he must return to beg forgiveness. 'Par qui serais-je aimé?' he asks at the end of *Un grand homme de province à Paris*. 'Je n'ai plus que ma sœur, David et ma mère!' (*CH*, v, p. 550). The difference between the careers of the two ambitious men from the Midi is summarized by Jared Wenger, who concludes that 'Rastignac is the true cosmopolite; he has no province, no home. Lucien is, to his undoing, the true provincial'.⁵² This notion that one character simply ceases to be a provincial while the other does not is, as I have shown, an over-simplification. What is certain is that

⁵² Wenger, *The Province and the Provinces*, p. 74.

'deprovincialization' is not easily achieved, and in this failure, Lucien is not alone. On the contrary, many Balzacian provincials who 'go up' to Paris meet with disaster because they are unable to adopt the unwritten code of calculation and deceit. In *Le Cabinet des antiques*, Victurnien d'Esgrignon becomes carried away with the city's call for luxury: 'Il imita les allures de ceux à qui Paris accordait sa coûteuse attention, il sentit la nécessité d'avoir des chevaux, de belles voitures, tous les accessoires du luxe moderne' (*CH*, IV, p. 1008). Alongside him in the debtor's prison sits Savinien de Portenduère, from Nemours, another aristocrat who, in *Ursule Mirouët*, discovers that he is not 'assez fort pour la vie de Paris' (*CH*, III, p. 865). That all of these young provincials are crushed by Paris should not necessarily be seen as a celebration of the city's power, but as part of an attempt to indict the 'hypocrisy and dishonesty that Balzac thought were gradually pervading bourgeois France after 1830'.⁵³ If the provincial fails in the capital, then it is because Paris has failed to corrupt him, which in turn must be seen as a tribute to the strength of the provincial virtues of honesty and innocence. These were the qualities that Balzac hoped would survive the onset of the railway revolution, and the capital's devouring of the countryside. What, though, of the reverse process, and the experience of his fictional Parisians in the provinces?

⁵³ Raymond Giraud, *The Unheroic Hero in the Novels of Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), p. 131.

Parisians in the Provinces: Félix Gaudissart and Étienne Lousteau

In the years that followed the July Revolution, provincials continued to migrate to Paris in such numbers that one might easily overlook the human traffic that flowed in the opposite direction. This contribution of Paris to the demographic structure of the provinces took two main forms. First, many mothers who belonged to the more affluent urban classes still entrusted their children to the care of rural wet-nurses, a practice which, in 1846, resulted in the deaths of two-thirds of these infants.⁵⁴ Second, there were those naturalized Parisians who retired to the provinces at the end of their careers, a movement documented by Balzac in *Pierrette*, in which the fictional Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis Rogron sell their business in the Rue Saint-Denis to return to their native Provins. The total number of emigrants did not come close to matching the figure for provincials arriving in Paris, though the numbers involved were still considerable: Louis Chevalier has calculated that some thirty thousand individuals left Paris between 1831 and 1836.⁵⁵ It also became increasingly possible for Parisians to make shorter visits to the provinces. In 1830, the average speed of the mail-coach increased significantly, as the time to cover a kilometre went down from 8.5 to 5.75 minutes.⁵⁶ This, combined with the building of the railway network in the 1840s, gave fresh impetus to an established literary genre, the 'récit de voyage'. Parisian writers could now make their way more easily through France, recording their impressions for readers at home in the capital.

⁵⁴ McPhee, *A Social History*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses*, pp. 268-71.

⁵⁶ Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 204.

The fact that Parisians began to visit the provinces in greater numbers would have other literary implications. Sensing an opportunity to reverse the mockery that had previously targeted the figure of the provincial in Paris, writers now set about establishing a new literary type. In the 1841 volume *Le Prisme*, a supplement to *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, there appeared an article entitled 'Le Parisien en province', whose author, Moléri, made clear his intention to redress the satirical balance:

On a souvent tourné en ridicule le provincial qui vient à Paris; on s'est plu à le faire le héros des histoires les plus facétieuses, et pour tracer son portrait, on a fait choix des masques les plus grotesques. Je crois que si le provincial tenait à ne pas être en reste de bons procédés, il lui serait facile de prendre une belle revanche. Le Parisien en province n'offre pas une figure moins originale et moins amusante que celle du provincial à Paris; et s'il a été permis d'assaillir outre mesure celui-ci des traits de la satire et de la moquerie, je ne sache pas qu'il existe, en faveur de celui-là, aucun privilège qui le mette à l'abri de justes représailles.⁵⁷

Moléri proceeds to recount the story of the fictional Anacharsis Bobinard, a pompous shop assistant who leaves the 'Eden de la jeunesse pour aller habiter la positive et commerçante ville de Nantes' (p. 414). On departing Paris, the stagecoach barely reaches open countryside before Bobinard begins to voice his contempt for his new surroundings. 'Ah! qu'il était aisé de voir que ces routes, ces arbres, ce fleuve, étaient des routes de province, des arbres de province, un fleuve de province!' (p. 414). Arriving in Nantes, his mood fails to improve. There, he finds no building or monument to compare with the aesthetic beauty of Paris: 'C'étaient à chaque pas de nouvelles exclamations: que cette rue est étroite et courte! que cette place est mesquine! Où sont mes

⁵⁷ Moléri, 'Le Parisien en province', in *Le Prisme: encyclopédie morale du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Curmer, 1841), pp. 414-17 (p. 414). All subsequent references are to this edition.

tours de Notre-Dame, mon Louvre, mon Panthéon?’ (p. 415). Eventually, he resigns himself to living in this ‘misérable trou’, consoled by the thought that he is a representative of ‘le pays des lumières, du savoir-vivre, de l’élégance et du bon ton’ (p. 415), and that he can blind his neighbours with his Parisian sense of refinement. Consequently, he becomes the personification of excessive vanity and overbearing pride. He calls for a tailor, only to scoff at the clothes he is about to have made: ‘Je n’ose pas, lui dit-il avec un insolent sourire d’indulgence, vous demander que tout cela soit de bon goût; tâchez, du moins, que ce ne soit pas ridicule’ (p. 415). When he goes to the theatre, he delays his arrival until the middle of the second play, then laughs at what he sees as the hopeless inadequacy of the production: ‘Au moment où l’attention du public est le plus captivée par quelque situation pathétique, il part d’un éclat de rire’ (p. 416). He boasts of his supposed acquaintance with Thiers, Lamartine, and Alexandre Dumas, and portrays himself as a great lover who has lost count of ‘le nombre de maris qu’il a eu le désagrément de blesser au bois de Boulogne’ (p. 416). The significance of all of these traits is that they do not simply represent revenge for revenge’s sake; rather, Moléri is careful to underline his view that the distance between Paris and the provinces is shrinking, and that the perceived superiority of the capital is losing value: ‘Les communications sont si rapides et si fréquentes [...] que le provincial connaît son Paris, et sait, à quelques heures près, ce qui s’y passe, aussi promptement et aussi bien que le Parisien lui-même’ (p. 417). The result is that men such as the fictional Anacharsis Bobinard can no longer use the reputation of the capital to their advantage. Though the Parisian refuses to acknowledge it, ‘il

ne lui reste plus guère à exploiter que quelque misérable village du Jura ou des Pyrénées' (p. 417).

As a novelist and fellow contributor to *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, Balzac was as anxious as Moléri to explore the changing relationship between capital and countryside. At some point between 1842 and 1844, he had even begun work on a pendant to the second part of *Illusions perdues*, though this piece, entitled *Un grand homme de Paris en province*, sadly remained nothing more than a fragment. By April 1843, however, he had already completed the sub-category, *Les Parisiens en province*, two works in which he set out to mine the dramatic possibilities of bringing Parisian characters into contact with the small-town setting. In the first of these texts, *L'Illustre Gaudisart*, he introduces the travelling salesman, Félix Gaudissart, 'un incomparable voyageur' (*CH*, IV, p. 564) who becomes tired of selling millinery and other *Articles-Paris*, and decides that it is time to extend his range of commercial activities. Predicting that he can double, perhaps even triple his income, Gaudissart sees the new, virtual products of insurance policies and newspaper subscriptions as the future of his business, and so sets off into the provinces, confident of bamboozling 'ce rat départemental, vulgairement appelé tantôt l'abonné, tantôt l'actionnaire [...], mais partout un niais' (*CH*, IV, pp. 566-67). In the second story, *La Muse du département*, Dinah de La Baudraye is an aspiring writer, unhappily married, and 'assoiffée de bonheur'.⁵⁸ As a distraction from the mediocre company of her provincial neighbours, she invites two of Sancerre's most celebrated exports, Horace Bianchon and Étienne Lousteau, to stay at her château. Lousteau succeeds in

⁵⁸ Bernard Guyon, 'Benjamin Constant et Balzac racontent la fin d'une liaison: *Adolphe*, *Béatrix* et *La Muse du département*', *AB* (1963), 149-75 (p. 149).

seducing the virtuous Dinah, who, when she falls pregnant, flees to Paris to be with the unscrupulous hack, only for him to abandon her four years later. What is the link between these texts, and what do they reveal about the connection between Paris and the provinces in Balzac's work?

At first glance, there would seem to be little similarity between the two works. The settings and characters are different, one is a full-length novel and the other a novella, and ten years separate their respective dates of composition. Nor are the protagonists Parisians by birth. Indeed, as a travelling salesman, Gaudissart occupies a position that Balzac describes as neither Parisian nor provincial: 'Saturé des vices de Paris, il peut affecter la bonhomie de la province. N'est-il pas l'anneau qui joint le village à la capitale, quoique essentiellement il ne soit ni parisien, ni provincial? car il est voyageur' (*CH*, IV, p. 561). The link between the two works is, therefore, one that readers have struggled to identify. For Bernard Guyon, the theme of the Parisian in the provinces, 'fort important dans un récit dont le héros est un voyageur de commerce, est secondaire dans un roman qui est essentiellement une étude de la situation faite à la femme dans la société moderne'.⁵⁹ More recently, Takao Kashiwagi has suggested that it is the rise of the Parisian Press that links Gaudissart, who is in the pay of *Le Globe* and *Le Mouvement*, with 'le feuilletoniste de deuxième ordre', Lousteau.⁶⁰ What is certain is that the connection between these texts lies beyond the title of the sub-category to which they belong. The issue, however, is not whether Gaudissart and Lousteau are Parisian or provincial, or that both are involved with the

⁵⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *L'Illustre Gaudissart, La Muse du département*, ed. by Bernard Guyon (Paris: Garnier, 1970), p. XIV.

⁶⁰ Takao Kashiwagi, 'La structure et la signification des *Parisiens en province*', in *Balzac: romancier du regard*, pp. 75-86 (p. 76).

increasingly powerful newspaper business. Instead, the most reliable connection between the two characters is that both are representatives of a city that has resolved to seduce the provinces with its prestige. One of Gaudissart's tasks is to win subscribers to the *Journal des Enfants*, and it is in reference to the title of this new publication that the need to charm the provinces is made clear. 'Je consacre à l'ornement de ta chambre tous les *Enfants* que je ferai en province' (*CH*, IV, p. 569), he tells his beloved Jenny, before reassuring the angry florist that this is merely salesman-speak for collecting subscriptions. For Lousteau, the challenge is, in figurative terms, similar. He will use the brilliant reputation of Paris to stalk 'cette proie' (*CH*, IV, p. 723), Dinah, and he, too, will seduce the provinces, resulting in two children of his own. Michel Butor agrees that this theme of seduction is the common denominator that Balzac had in mind: 'Gaudissart veut convaincre la Province de lui abandonner son or, Lousteau sa voix; dans les deux cas, il s'agit d'extorquer une signature.'⁶¹

Armed only with his 'phrases préparées' (*CH*, IV, p. 562), Gaudissart is first to attempt to seduce the female provinces, and to break down the well-known reluctance of provincial people to part with their money. In the past, this would have been simple enough, but as Balzac demonstrates, during the reign of Louis-Philippe industry and commerce are changing, patterns of customer demand are shifting, and financial and intellectual products are beginning to challenge more traditional goods for a share of the provincial marketplace. This process, as Balzac predicted in *Un début dans la vie* (1844), would be accelerated by the arrival of 'les chemins de fer, [qui] dans un avenir

⁶¹ Michel Butor, 'Les Parisiens en province', in *Répertoire III* (Paris: Minuit, 1968), pp. 169-83 (p. 176).

aujourd'hui peu éloigné, doivent faire disparaître certaines industries, en modifier quelques autres' (*CH*, I, p. 733). The demand for intangible products such as life insurance increased, while the king of Parisian journalism, Émile de Girardin, established a real newspaper for children.⁶² For these products, the increasingly accessible provinces represented a vast untapped market, so much so that a comparison with the conquest of the New World is by no means fanciful:

La Province fut alors pour les capitalistes parisiens ce que devaient être l'Asie et l'Afrique au temps des conquêtes coloniales, ce qu'avait été l'Amérique pour les Conquistadors, un nouveau monde qu'ils devaient explorer, éveiller, transformer, exploiter.⁶³

With his pear-shaped body, Gaudissart is a man of the times, and is willing to reduce his commitment to the steady profitability of hats and dresses 'pour s'élancer dans les sphères les plus élevées de la spéculation parisienne' (*CH*, IV, p. 566). Attempting to exchange intangible goods for the very tangible currency of provincial gold is shown, however, to be fraught with difficulties. First among these, as Gaudissart himself concedes, is that provincial people prefer the actual to the hypothetical. 'Quand on parle de doctrines nouvelles aux gens qu'on croit susceptibles de donner dans ces *godans-là*,' he complains, referring to the paper products that he has agreed to sell, 'il semble qu'on leur parle de brûler leurs maisons' (*CH*, IV, p. 573).

As well as their innate sense of suspicion, however, in Touraine it is because of their isolation and economic underdevelopment that the people

⁶² A venture of which Balzac apparently approved. In a letter to Zulma Carraud on 8 September 1833, he assures her that her son, Ivan, 'va recevoir les n^{os} arriérés [du *Journal des Enfants*]' (*Corr.*, II, p. 359).

⁶³ Bernard Guyon, 'Balzac: héraut du capitalisme naissant', *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), 126-41 (p. 136).

reject the more sophisticated goods that Gaudissart now carries in his bag. According to Balzac, the Revolution of 1830 has done little to shake the carefree regularity of Tourangeau life. Even where its attitudes and routines are changing, they are doing so only gradually, and at a much slower pace than in Paris. The argument was one that he had touched upon previously in his 'Lettres sur Paris'. The author of the sixth letter is a fictional inhabitant of Chinon, a landowner who is not opposed to change *per se*, but who can accept innovation only in small doses. In a letter dated 25 November 1830, he makes comments on the changing nature of commerce in his district:

A nos foires, il y a dix ans, j'achetais pour quarante-cinq sous les trois rouleaux d'eau de cologne que ma femme consomme de la foire d'août à celle de mai; et, maintenant, les spéculateurs nous les apportent eux-mêmes et je ne paye plus les trois rouleaux que trente sous (*OD*, II, p. 903).

The fact that salesmen now come to the door has advantages that the Chinonais is quick to recognize. But this is change enough. To find himself staring at an insurance policy or newspaper subscription, instead of his trusty almanac, would be more than this creature of habit could bear.

This much is true of Vernier, the villager to whom Gaudissart tries to sell insurance, and who, in return, points him in the direction of the madman. In a scene that is imbued with an atmosphere of suspicion, the mere mention of a financial product is reason enough for the trap to be laid: 'Vernier le laissa continuer en l'écoutant avec un apparent intérêt qui trompa Gaudissart. Mais au seul mot de garantie Vernier avait cessé de faire attention à la rhétorique du Voyageur, il pensait à lui jouer quelque bon tour' (*CH*, IV, p. 578). Evidently, the Tourangeaux have heard enough empty Parisian promises, and are in no

mood to play the conquered nation, giving up the riches won from their land and receiving little in return. The slave that is Touraine rebels against the hated master, and is victorious. What Balzac makes clear, though, is that Parisian capitalism is seeping into the provinces, and it is finding a market. As Gaudissart reveals in a letter to his beloved Jenny, shortly before his arrival in Vouvray, his sales pitch has already generated a significant amount of business elsewhere: 'J'ai triomphé partout,' he boasts. 'L'Assurance sur les Capitaux va très bien. J'ai, de Paris à Blois, placé près de deux millions' (*CH*, IV, p. 573). If we take this compulsive braggart at his word, then it seems that a small pocket of regional resistance will do his sales figures little harm. The forces of Parisian capitalism are on the move, irrespective of the occasional obstacle. For the time being, though, Touraine remains blissfully immune to this inescapable fact of Orleanist economics.

Although Lousteau returns to Sancerre in 1835 'fatigué par seize années de luttés à Paris, usé tout autant par le plaisir que par la misère, par les travaux et les mécomptes' (*CH*, IV, p. 667), his more literal seduction of the provinces, in *La Muse du département*, is carried out with much greater ease. The elevated reputations that he and Bianchon bring with them to the small town of their birth seem incontestable:

Cette époque fut aussi le moment où les noms des deux Sancerrois atteignirent à Paris, chacun dans leur sphère, au plus haut degré l'un de la gloire, l'autre de la mode. Étienne Lousteau, l'un des collaborateurs des revues, signait le feuilleton d'un journal à huit mille abonnés (*CH*, IV, p. 632).

Even before Lousteau's arrival, however, the prestige of Paris has been sufficient to captivate the bored Dinah de La Baudraye. Already, her

childhood friend, Anna de Fontaine, has visited Sancerre, and offered her a glimpse of the capital's brilliance: 'Toutes les différences qui distinguent la Parisienne de la femme de province éclatèrent aux yeux intelligents de Dinah, elle se vit alors telle qu'elle paraissait à son amie qui la trouva méconnaissable' (*CH*, IV, p. 657). The result of this meeting is similar to that produced in Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*, who from her home in the depths of rural Normandy, conceives of Paris as a city with magical properties. For her, 'Paris' is a word 'around which fantasy and desire fluctuate in direct proportion to her feeling of local entrapment'.⁶⁴ Losing herself in reverie about the Vicomte with whom she danced at La Vaubyessard, she imagines a painful contrast between their two lives: 'Elle était à Tostes. Lui, il était à Paris, maintenant; là-bas! Comment était ce Paris? Quel nom démesuré!'⁶⁵

In contrast to Flaubert's *Emma*, however, whose aspirations lead ultimately to her destruction, Balzac shows Dinah's personality to be enhanced by her dreams of the capital. She begins to write poetry under the pseudonym of Jan Diaz, and her determination to reach above the social and intellectual plane of the provinces is reflected in her fresh radiance, 'des éclairs soudains sur le front, dans les yeux qui la rendirent plus belle qu'autrefois. Elle jetait les yeux sur Paris, elle aspirait à la gloire' (*CH*, IV, pp. 661-62). It is this fascination with the reputation of the capital that softens Dinah for the advances of Lousteau. It does not matter that in Paris he is actually viewed as a hack, 'elle voulut le connaître, elle lut ses ouvrages et se passionna pour lui' (*CH*, IV, p. 667). In truth, she yearns not for the man himself, but for the knowledge that he can provide, 'mots et faits vulgaires à

⁶⁴ Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: mœurs de province*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Garnier, 1971), p. 59.

Paris, mais tout nouveaux pour elle' (*CH*, IV, p. 701). The journalist, for his part, takes full advantage. In Dinah's salon, he reads the fragment of a novel that has been used to wrap a set of proofs sent to him at Anzy. The assembled company is enthralled, and Dinah astounded that a work so moving could simply be thrown away. By the end of the evening, Lousteau's conquest is assured, his seduction of Dinah serving to demonstrate that the most vital element Paris exports to the provinces is not its men of talent or even its literature, but its own image. And for Dinah, the part of that image which penetrates into the depths of the provinces is of an unrivalled heaven on earth. Seen in this perspective, *La Muse du département* invests the sub-division to which it belongs with a balance that reflects Balzac's wider approach to the provincial theme. Here, the stereotype of Parisian prestige is retained but also subverted, forming the basis of a drama in which even a hack such as Lousteau has appeal enough to exploit the feminine charms of the provinces. By contrast, in *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, we see a novelist combining the stereotype with his sensitivity to historical change to give a new perspective on the relationship between city and countryside, the emerging force of Parisian capitalism spreading outwards, and penetrating even the most isolated corners of Touraine.

In conclusion, Balzac's treatment of the relationship between Paris and the provinces is based on a shifting perspective. I have re-evaluated the status of the capital in *La Comédie humaine*, and demonstrated that these two zones are not uniform blocks, as they had been in the literature of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead, Balzac models his work to reflect the new social,

political, and economic circumstances of post-revolutionary France, in which Paris could not lay automatic claim to superiority over the rest of the country. Within this broad framework, his characters are endowed with a multiplicity of opinions on the Parisian/provincial contrast. For some characters, like Derville, Paris is a hell from which they long to escape. For others, such as Lucien de Rubempré and Eugène de Rastignac, the city appears as an enchanted vision, a chance to escape the mediocrity of life in the small town. Alongside these viewpoints is the Parisian perspective of the provinces. For shamed aristocrats like Madame de Beauséant, the provinces are a hiding-place, a shelter from the glare of Parisian curiosity. For a naturalized Parisian such as Lousteau or Gaudissart, they are a rich terrain that must be exploited at all costs. All serves to illustrate that neither zone is a monolith; each one is fragmented because it is looked upon with the full gamut of human attitudes and emotions. But does this make it impossible to define both a Parisian and a provincial identity in Balzac's work? In response, one must concede that there is no single identity for each of these settings; rather, there are multiple identities which swirl around established definitions of 'Parisian' and 'provincial', the former being associated with style, sophistication, intellectual brilliance, and a fast pace of life, but also selfishness, crime, and immorality, while the provinces evoke backwardness, isolation, and mediocrity, but also peace, tranquillity, health, and disinterested concern for others. To these *idées reçues*, which had been filtered through the literature of Molière, Rousseau, Mercier, and Restif de La Bretonne, Balzac added his own stamp of originality. He recognized that, with the dawn of the railway age, the arrival of capitalism, and the consequent threat to provincial cultures, Paris and the

provinces had reached a critical moment in their relationship. He could not help but celebrate the status of Paris, but at the same time, he was alarmed by the apparent obliviousness of the July Monarchy to the city's dangerous growth, and the damage that this was causing to the provinces. In my final chapter, I shall consider how Balzac's development of these ideas took him still further away from the satirical tradition, and towards a debate in which he sought to remind the Parisian administration of the wasted socio-economic potential of the countryside. His plea for a regeneration of rural society would be formulated in two 'utopian' novels, *Le Médecin de campagne* and *Le Curé de village*.

CHAPTER SIX

New Provinces

‘Fais des folies en province, fais-y même des sottises, encore mieux!’¹

Le Contrat de mariage

‘Le villageois est une nature admirable. Quand il est bête, il va de pair avec l’animal; mais quand il a des qualités, elles sont exquis; malheureusement personne ne l’observe. [...] Aussi la vie campagnarde et paysanne attend-elle un historien’ (*CH*, XII, p. 484). Thus wrote Balzac in ‘Le Père du réfractaire’, one of twelve tales he contributed to the *Contes bruns*, in 1832.² The confident statement further illustrates his determination to record the fast-disappearing ways of provincial life in a nineteenth century that witnessed significant change in the social, cultural, and economic structures of both small town and countryside. In northern France, where there was ample supply of labour and raw materials, the move towards industrialization was rapid, with textile manufacture leading the way. In the south, which could not boast the same access to coal, iron, or manpower, the railway had arrived, passing through Lyons and Bordeaux, and linking these cities to the Mediterranean coast. The French capitalist adventure had finally begun, as alongside these heavy

¹ *CH*, III, p. 531.

² This short story, which Balzac originally included in ‘Une conversation entre onze heures et minuit’ (1832), contains a sympathetic portrayal of a tenant farmer devastated by the disappearance of his son, who flees from conscription in 1813. The young man is found starved to death in the woods, ‘et avait encore entre les dents l’herbe qu’il avait essayé de manger’ (*CH*, XII, p. 485). The enraged father vents his anger by depositing the body at door of the local prefect, who in turn deprives the farmer of his livelihood: ‘Maintenant, lui et sa femme mendient leur pain’ (*CH*, XII, p. 486).

industries emerged the dual powers of finance and journalism,³ and the rise of a Parisian press that Balzac condemned as a ‘terrible puissance dont la chute est sans cesse arrêtée par la faute du pouvoir’.⁴ These developments must nevertheless be contrasted with the desperate poverty by which much of provincial France was still affected. In areas where crops often failed, starvation, disease, and death were not merely realities of everyday life, but problems for which rural people themselves had long since been blamed. In 1822, the agronomist Pierre Bigot de Morogues suggested that there was little to be gained in helping a provincial populace that did not want to help itself: ‘Aujourd’hui les habitans des pays pauvres vivent en général apathiques, fatalistes, souvent immoraux et abrutis par la misère, suite de l’ignorance où ils sont plongés.’ Any attempt to improve the lot of these savage creatures, he argued, ‘ne servirait qu’à les endurcir dans leurs mauvaises pratiques’.⁵

For the author of *La Comédie humaine*, there were other risks involved in seeking to revive backward provinces that were, by historical definition, both feudal and reactionary. As early as 1829, in *Les Chouans*, he had warned of ‘[le] danger de remuer les masses peu civilisées d’un pays’ (*CH*, VIII, p. 919). Eight years later, in *La Maison Nucingen*, he supplemented this argument with an account of the Lyons uprising of November 1831. Here, the fictional journalist, Blondet, is made to recall how the silk workers, or *canuts*, ‘ont arboré le drapeau: *Du pain ou la mort!* une de ces proclamations que le

³ For an overview of industrialization and the economy during the reign of Louis-Philippe, see for example H. A. C. Collingham with R. S. Alexander, *The July Monarchy: A Political History of France: 1830-1848* (London and New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 345-64.

⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *Monographie de la presse parisienne*, in *Œuvres complètes illustrées*, ed. by Jean A. Ducourneau, 26 vols (Paris: Bibliophiles de l’Originale, 1965-76), xxvi: *Fantaisies et œuvres historiques*, 235-97 (p. 236).

⁵ Pierre Bigot de Morogues, *Essai sur les moyens d’améliorer l’agriculture en France, particulièrement dans les provinces les moins riches et notamment en Sologne*, 2 vols (Paris: Tourneux, 1822), I, p. 1.

gouvernement aurait dû étudier, elle était produite par la cherté de la vie à Lyon. Lyon veut bâtir des théâtres et devenir une capitale, de là des octrois insensés' (*CH*, VI, p. 375). Though he accuses the Lyonnais of endangering the political stability of the country with their fiscal mismanagement, the novelist and his character nevertheless concede that the provinces do aspire to improve living and working conditions, and to cultural progress.⁶ How else, though, was this to be achieved? The aim of this final chapter is to explore the themes of change and renewal in Balzac's provinces, investigating the way in which he strove to remind the July Monarchy of the latent social and economic potential of provincial France, and advanced his own theories on how this productive capacity might be harnessed as a source of national prosperity. He launched these theories in *Le Médecin de campagne*, in which the fictional Doctor Benassis revives a poverty-stricken village by managing the existing social behaviour of its peasantry. This theme of rural regeneration is carried over into *Le Curé de village*, where religion, rather than philanthropy, is combined with the energy of the people of Limousin to irrigate the barren planes of Montégnac. The theme of change, more generally, can also be applied to Balzac's own perspective on provincial France. Through a series of late, and in some cases unfinished, novels, including *Modeste Mignon* and *Le Député d'Arcis*, I consider the extent to which, by the end of his career, he recognized the provinces as moving out of isolation, and into an age of increased openness and social mobility.

⁶ Nor does he deny Lyons its status as a capital of commerce and finance. In the sixteenth century evoked in *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, Philippe Strozzi is said to flee to 'une immense maison de commerce qu'il avait à Lyon, et qui correspondait avec des banquiers à lui à Venise, à Rome, en France et en Espagne' (*CH*, XI, p. 183).

Possible Provinces: Dauphiné in *Le Médecin de campagne*

Le Médecin de campagne was to be the first in Balzac's series of *Scènes de la vie de campagne*, and a novel that he hoped would win him a place 'à la tête des intelligences de l'Europe'.⁷ Bemoaning the shameful underdevelopment of the countryside, the work argues for social and economic improvement in a seemingly forgotten France. With this theme, the novelist had, of course, recognized what most peasants already knew: that they were trapped in a cycle of perpetual misery. In 1817, crops had failed for the second consecutive summer, and the price of wheat had doubled. Agricultural labour, meanwhile, continued to be based on toil rather than technology, a situation that could be attributed, at least in part, to a lack of proper investment: in 1816, government funds allocated to the farming sector stretched to only 1,984,000 francs, before falling further, to 1,818,000 francs, in 1825.⁸ Worse still, the aristocracy had long since lost interest in cultivating the land, preferring instead to harvest its income from tenant farmers and sharecroppers.⁹ The reign of Louis-Philippe would challenge this indifference with the establishment, in 1836, of a Ministry of Agriculture. To most rural people, though, the new official body was of little relevance. Their most pressing concern remained, quite simply, 'to produce enough food to meet the needs of their families'.¹⁰ With the majority of peasants surviving on basic cereal crops and potatoes, food

⁷ *Corr.*, II, p. 62 (20 July 1832).

⁸ Henri Sée, *Histoire économique de la France*, 2 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1951), II: *Les Temps modernes: 1789-1914*, pp. 120-21.

⁹ Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, ed. by J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). Tocqueville accuses the French aristocracy of having become indifferent to the land as early as the thirteenth century. By the time of the Revolution, he argues, 'il ne restait guère dans les campagnes que le gentilhomme que la médiocrité de sa fortune empêchait de sortir' (pp. 206-07).

¹⁰ Price, *A Social History*, p. 183.

shortages were frequent, leading to civil unrest in northern, western, and central France in 1828-29, and again, throughout the country, in 1832.

The fictional Doctor Benassis is a character through whom Balzac outlines his own theories on what should be done to reverse this wretched state of affairs, and transform agriculture into the source of national prosperity that he, like Rousseau, believed it could be. A victim of the emotional wounds inflicted by Paris, Benassis retreats to the mountains of Dauphiné, where he channels his energies into 'la plus grande des tâches: donner aux hommes un toit, du pain, et, surtout, le sentiment de sa propre efficacité'.¹¹ He succeeds in breathing new life into a village that was once consumed by poverty and disease, educating its inhabitants in the ways of hard work and moral responsibility. The enterprise seems nothing short of utopian, and indeed, during the Restoration and July Monarchy, much less ambitious schemes were entertained only by those with enough land, and capital, to be able to experiment with new agricultural practices. These rare efforts, such as those of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and the Comte d'Angeville, nevertheless caught the attention of newspaper editors, '[qui ouvraient] largement leurs colonnes aux exposés d'agronomie',¹² and it was not long before an intellectual elite joined in the debate.¹³ Balzac's novel of 1833, as we shall see, can clearly be situated within the context of this drive towards

¹¹ Pierre Barbéris, *Mythes balzaciens* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), p. 142.

¹² Donnard, *Les Réalités économiques*, p. 176. Donnard shows these schemes to have enjoyed a certain prestige. He cites the example of Monsieur de Rivière, landowner and mayor of Saint-Gilles, in Provence, who won special praise from *Le Producteur*, in 1826: 'Il faut avouer que les efforts employés à assainir une contrée entière, à délivrer des milliers de paysans et d'agriculteurs des maladies pestilentiennes qui les déciment annuellement, à répandre sur toute cette population la santé et l'abondance que procure le travail, ont une valeur philanthropique un peu plus nette que les mouvements que l'on se donne pour *parvenir*' (p. 177).

¹³ In 1824, Mathieu de Dombasle published the first of his *Annales agricoles de Roville*, in which he recommended the practice of transversal irrigation. Later, in 1837, the Saint-Simonian, Cazeaux, founded the *Compagnie industrielle et agricole d'Arcachon*, an organization which promptly set about fertilizing land in Gascony.

rural improvement. In observing his fictional philanthropist at work, I shall endeavour to deconstruct the approach with which a revitalization of the provinces is shown to be possible. The question is one that has been addressed by Bernard Guyon, who in his important article of 1964, identified technical expertise, enlightened government, and indeed, the community spirit of isolated villages, as 'les conditions d'une renaissance de la vie rurale'.¹⁴ In contrast to the tentative optimism of these earlier findings, however, I argue that the rural regeneration described in *Le Médecin de campagne* is a microcosm for Balzac's wider celebration of French provincial life. Here, the novelist can be seen engaging with the question of rural poverty, working through the stereotype of an ignorant peasantry, and suggesting, once again, that understanding regional difference is the first step towards economic progress. Equally, I demonstrate that this programme succeeds, not simply because of the existing potential of the countryside, but because of the fictional Benassis's ability to harness that potential, distilling a positive community spirit from collective resistance, and interacting with the peasantry in multiple ways.

The task of raising a bustling community from the ashes of a miserable set of hovels is one that, for Balzac, requires no small amount of energy and imagination. Though nestling in a picturesque valley at the base of the Alps, Voreppe¹⁵ is a village that, before the arrival of its benefactor, had been

¹⁴ Bernard Guyon, 'Les conditions d'une renaissance de la vie rurale d'après Balzac: *Le Médecin de campagne* et *Le Curé de village*', *AB* (1964), 239-50.

¹⁵ It should be noted that Balzac does not identify his fictional village as Voreppe, preferring instead to refer to it as a 'bourg alpin' or 'pays perdu'. According to Mireille Grare-Labouret, the omission is a deliberate one: 'Si Balzac n'a pas nommément désigné le village de Bénassis, c'est que celui-ci remplit bien la double fonction de l'utopie: c'est le pays où tout arrive à bien, l'eutopie; mais aussi le pays situé nulle part, même si Balzac le place tout à côté de Grenoble et de la Grande Chartreuse, le village perdu est un lieu de l'imaginaire et se

allowed to sink into a deplorable state of economic neglect. 'Au milieu de cette belle nature,' Benassis tells Genestas, the Napoleonic veteran who listens patiently to his narrative, 'les habitants croupissaient dans la fange et vivaient de pommes de terre et de laitage; [...] Aucun événement politique, aucune révolution n'était arrivée dans ce pays inaccessible, et complètement en dehors du mouvement social' (*CH*, IX, pp. 413-14). It takes some four years to alter this bleak outlook, and convince Benassis that his investment has borne fruit. 'Je voyais aller et venir', he says, filled with pride, 'une active population, agglomérée dans un bourg nouveau, propre, assaini, bien planté d'arbres. Chaque habitant avait la conscience de son bien-être, et toutes les figures respiraient le contentement que donne une vie utilement occupée' (*CH*, IX, p. 421). The metamorphosis is certainly remarkable, an authentic 'révolution sur cinquante kilomètres carrés'.¹⁶ But how is it brought about? A large part of the answer lies in the 'technologie douce'¹⁷ employed by Benassis, who guides the village through four stages of economic development. At the outset, it seems an impossible challenge. This corner of France has no valuable resources such coal or iron ore, and no aristocratic seigneur to finance its reconstruction. All there is left is a population of idle, illiterate peasants. The first stage in the process, therefore, has to be an exercise in social surgery. Balzac demonstrates that, if a village is to flourish, then its inhabitants must be prepared to embrace change. Those who are not must be removed. In the case of Voreppe, the stubborn are more numerous than the willing, leading Benassis to conclude that 'la société villageoise [...] était en vérité incapable de sécréter le principe

développe dans l'imaginaire' ('L'utopie dans *Le Médecin de campagne* et *Le Curé de village* d'Honoré de Balzac', *Sévriennes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, 96 (June 1979), 4-24 (p. 11)).

¹⁶ Wurmser, *La Comédie inhumaine*, p. 530.

¹⁷ The term is used by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in his introduction to *Le Médecin de campagne*, 4th edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 7.

de sa propre régénération'.¹⁸ His solution is simple. Any indolent peasants are to be transported over the border, 'du côté d'Aiguebille, en Savoie, où il s'en trouve beaucoup et où [ils] devaient être très bien traités'. The policy is deeply unpopular, but vital. With these 'malheureuses créatures' (*CH*, IX, p. 404) gone, he can reclaim their land for the village, and for craftsmen from outside the district, fresh blood whose products, he believes, will stimulate local demand. A basket weaver is brought from Grenoble, to encourage the peasants to carry their cheeses to market. There follows the building of a road, 'le plus urgent moyen de fortune' (*CH*, IX, p. 416) according to Benassis, and an initiative that delights the local timber merchant, 'car, au lieu de traîner coûteusement ses arbres à travers de mauvais sentiers, il pourrait, au moyen d'une bonne route cantonale, les transporter facilement' (*CH*, IX, p. 417). At the root of the initiatives is the age-old economic principle of supply and demand. 'Une production en exigeait une autre,' explains the good doctor. 'En peuplant le bourg, j'y créais des nécessités nouvelles, inconnues jusqu'alors à ces pauvres gens' (*CH*, IX, p. 418). The road leads to increased traffic between the village and its nearest market. This increased traffic requires more horses, which in turn brings a farrier. None of these this would have occurred without the impetus provided by new manpower.

With basic economic stability thus assured, the village is ready for a second stage of development, agriculture. To restore the soil to productivity, Benassis must secure further investment, and so combines his funds with those of Monsieur Gravier, assistant to the Prefect, '[qui] consentit à bâtir ici quatre fermes de cent arpents chacune, et promit d'avancer les sommes nécessaires

¹⁸ François-Xavier Mioche, 'Le Médecin de campagne: roman politique?', *AB* (1988), 305-19 (p. 308).

aux défrichements, à l'achat des semences, des instruments aratoires, des bestiaux, et à la confection des chemins d'exploitation' (*CH*, IX, p. 419). This agreement, and the intervention of a character who appears as something of a *deus ex machina*, is the source of the capitalist explosion that seriously undermines the realism of the second phase. After Monsieur Gravier has conquered his initial reluctance, 'assez naturelle à un citadin de province' (*CH*, IX, p. 420), to part with a donation of forty thousand francs, the village experiences an economic boom that is as sudden as it is exaggerated. As the wagons filled with people and stream into the valley, the novel begins to take on the appearance of the utopian dream that so dismayed its first readers, many of whom ridiculed Balzac for building 'le palais de Dame Tartine, et des châteaux en Espagne' (*CH*, IX, p. 363).¹⁹ On this evidence, such reactions are entirely justifiable. Yet if Voreppe is a utopian setting, it must also be seen to reflect those contemporary schools of thought that proclaimed free trade and agriculture to be the most certain route to national prosperity. Charles Fourier, in his *Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire* (1829-30) had recently highlighted the economic potential of the countryside,²⁰ lamenting that 'dans les campagnes, sur mille familles il y en a cent et plus qui n'ont pas de quoi subsister'. At least ten per cent of these families, he argued, with no small measure of idealism, could be employed in communal farms, 'où on leur procurerait à peu de frais des occupations gaies et très-productives, aux

¹⁹ In a footnote to this remark, Rose Fortassier also cites Jules Forfelier, who was scathing in his review for *L'Écho de la Jeune France*: 'Bref, voulez-vous voir l'âge d'or, allez au village de M. Benassis; les arbres y distillent le miel, les ruisseaux y roulent le lait, les rivières y charrient de l'or!... Quel rêve! Quel château d'Espagne enfantin!' (*CH*, IX, p. 363, n. 3).

²⁰ There can be no doubt that Balzac was familiar with the ideas of Charles Fourier, though the strength of this influence around the time of his writing *Le Médecin de campagne* is more difficult to determine. It was not until 1841 that he borrowed a copy of *Le Nouveau Monde industriel* from Madame Barré de Rolson, who recommended Fourier's works as being 'nécessaires à votre esprit fin et délicat' (*Corr.*, IV, p. 259; 29 March 1841).

jardins, aux étables, et à des fabriques variées à choix'.²¹ At the same time, the Saint-Simonians, whose doctrines Balzac greeted, sometimes with derision, sometimes with tolerance, were calling for economic progress based on a spirit of association and communication.²² In the midst of this intellectual debate, the realism of *Le Médecin de campagne* is threatened only momentarily. For rather than pursue a wholly unrealizable vision for the provinces, Balzac returns the village to a third stage of development, in which the concern is with more traditional rural pursuits, such as milling flour, picking fruit, and rearing poultry. The wealth that is generated from the sale of this produce gives rise to a fourth phase, in which the Voreppois demand consumer goods such as hats and shoes. The village, by now a small town, hosts its own trade fairs; a notary has received his licence to practise here, and a school ensures that 'tout le monde sait lire et écrire' (*CH*, IX, p. 427). The population has also increased still further, with three thousand homes established in the valley, and a chemist, a watchmaker, a furniture shop, and a bookseller all expected to follow within a year. When the action begins, we find this to be the most recent sub-total of the doctor's achievement. What this summary does not explain, though, is how the programme has been implemented. What skills, technical, interpersonal or otherwise, has Benassis called upon? How has he earned the respect of a suspicious peasantry, and how has he harnessed its existing qualities as the basis of his reforms?

²¹ Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire*, in *Œuvres complètes de Ch. Fourier*, 12 vols (Paris: Anthropos, 1966-68), VI (1966), p. 429.

²² Balzac's attitude towards the Saint-Simonians is one of the most controversial aspects of his social, political, and economic thought. For a more complete discussion of this topic, see for example Bruce Tolley, 'Balzac et les saint-simoniens', *AB* (1966), 49-66. For an updated analysis, see also José-Luis Diaz, 'Balzac et le saint-simonisme: la politique de l'artiste', in *Genèses du roman: Balzac et Sand*, ed. by Lucienne Frappier-Mazur (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 195-218). For the possible application and rejection of Saint-Simonian, and indeed, Fourierist, theories in *Le Médecin de campagne*, see Françoise Sylvos, 'L'utopie dans *Le Médecin de campagne*', *AB* (2003), 101-23 (pp. 107-11).

To turn such a radical vision into reality, Balzac argues that it is necessary to display the qualities, not merely of a consummate politician and an expert administrator, but of a man who is prepared to combat the savagery of a primitive population. That Benassis embodies the principles set out in his creator's 1832 essay, 'Du Gouvernement moderne', is indisputable. In this text, Balzac had voiced his exasperation at the 'constante discusssion'²³ hampering the Chamber of Deputies, and made the case for an absolutist to cut through the ever-lengthening reams of bureaucracy. At the level of small town and village, he reveals Benassis to be the man for this task. In the round table discussion in chapter three, it is he who is made to declare that 'le génie des Colbert, des Sully n'est rien s'il ne s'appuie sur la volonté qui fait les Napoléon et les Cromwell' (*CH*, IX, p. 514). Indeed, from the moment of his arrival in Voreppe, he conducts himself with the patience of a man who is unshakeable in his determination. 'Je ne m'effrayai de rien' (*CH*, IX, p. 404), he assures Genestas, revealing that not even the most hostile peasants could ever have distracted him from his mission. This stance is illustrated in his handling of the ignorant peasants whom he tries to expel from the village. Forced to deport these 'crétins' under the cover of darkness, he is prey to the violent instincts and thirst for battle that they share with the Breton guerrillas, in *Les Chouans*. 'Je trouvai devant sa chaumière', he recalls, in reference to the ambush that awaited him at the home of the last of the potential deportees, 'un rassemblement de femmes, d'enfants, de vieillards qui tous me saluèrent

²³ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Catéchisme social*, précédé de l'article 'Du Gouvernement moderne', ed. by Bernard Guyon (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1933), p. 38. In his introduction, Guyon compares the essay, 'Du Gouvernement moderne', with the discussion that takes place between Benassis, Genestas, and the Abbé Janvier, in the chapter entitled 'Le Napoléon du peuple'. This debate sees Benassis criticize the system of electoral democracy, and argue that it is practice, rather than theory, that makes for the most effective government.

par des injures accompagnées d'une grêle de pierres' (*CH*, IX, p. 405). Only by allowing this last peasant to stay does the doctor escape with his life. The defeat, though, is no more than temporary, as Balzac contends that it is the persistence of the individual, rather than the stones and insults hurled by the many, that is the most effective basis for provincial government. After he has ordered the construction of a new set of houses, Benassis gives the peasants as much time as they need to realize the advantages of leaving their crumbling hovels. 'Ah! monsieur, vos maisons ne sont point encore bâties!' (*CH*, IX, p. 406), the villagers maintain mockingly, when asked to consider moving. Six months later, and the first family is settled in its new home, an unflinching resolve having broken down the resistance of a sceptical breed. Why this patience alters the mindset of the peasants nevertheless remains unclear, and Benassis, for one, struggles to account for their behaviour: 'Quelque insalubre que puisse être sa chaumière, un paysan s'y attache beaucoup plus qu'un banquier ne tient à son hôtel' (*CH*, IX, p. 406). That their resistance endured for so long is curious indeed, and a trait which marks out this novel as 'une démonstration de la puissance d'irrationalité que portent en elles les paysanneries'.²⁴ What the text also suggests, however, is that peasants, though irrational, have a strong class-consciousness. Like those who frequent that terrible watering hole, the Grand-I-Vert, in *Les Paysans*, the people of Voreppe distrust anyone they perceive to be of a higher class. Benassis is a doctor, the very epitome of selfless devotion to others. But for the peasants, he is first and foremost a bourgeois, 'et pour eux un bourgeois est un ennemi' (*CH*, IX, p. 434). He may have moved them from their hovels, but winning

²⁴ Vanbremeersch, *Sociologie d'une représentation romanesque*, p. 109.

their trust, and convincing them to take an active role in his reforms, will take much more than time and patience.

As portrayed by Balzac, the most basic rule for gaining the confidence of the peasantry is to manage, rather than modify, its existing patterns of behaviour. To stand even the smallest chance of endowing the villagers with a sense of social responsibility, Benassis knows that he must not seek to transform them into perfect beings, always resourceful and never corrupt. 'Je n'ai point fait des idylles sur mes gens,' he proclaims, citing one of the cornerstones of his success. 'Je les ai acceptés pour ce qu'ils sont, de pauvres paysans, ni entièrement bons ni entièrement méchants' (*CH*, IX, p. 415). One of the doctor's principal assets, however, is not that he simply displays 'l'absence d'illusions sur le caractère des paysans'.²⁵ On the contrary, he has a deep understanding of peasant behaviour, and combines this knowledge with the flexibility of his intellect. These qualities are brought to the fore in the second chapter of the novel, entitled 'A travers champs'. As Benassis and Genestas ride through the valley, stopping to call on patients, they are introduced to a variety of peasant types. Each meeting presents a new set of circumstances, and with each secondary character, Benassis is shown to adopt a different interpersonal style. With the most simple-minded of his patients, for example, he is stern, and realizes within seconds whether or not his instructions have been followed. Thus, he asks one old woman, angrily, 'Vous avez donné du pain à votre mari, vous voulez donc le tuer?' before warning her: 'si vous lui faites prendre maintenant autre chose que son eau de chiendent, je ne remets pas les pieds ici' (*CH*, IX, p. 467). He is just as hard on

²⁵ Guyon, 'Les conditions d'une renaissance', p. 243.

the self-interested peasant, a dangerous type whose appetite for wealth has been whetted by the upheavals of Revolution and Empire. The usurer, Taboureau, is the personification of an ambition that Benassis feels he must control in order to retain his authority over the village. 'Sans cette fermeté,' he says, leaving Taboureau in no doubt of the legal ramifications of breaking a contract, 'tous se seraient moqués de moi. Les paysans, aussi bien que les gens du monde, finissent par mésestimer l'homme qu'ils trompent' (*CH*, IX, p. 434). Elsewhere, his abilities are confirmed as being those of an excellent judge of rural character, one who switches between severity and sympathy as required. To the hard-working, caring members of his flock, therefore, he offers the same kindness that he shows towards Gasnier, the farmer whose son has died from overwork. Benassis knows that, in most peasant families, children are viewed as an asset to be exploited, and that 'une progéniture nombreuse permet de se passer d'une main-d'œuvre salariée au moment des récoltes'.²⁶ What strengthens his transformation of Voreppe is that he can recognize exceptions to these accepted norms of rural life. He sees that Gasnier is heartbroken at the prospect of losing his second child, and so makes sure to offer words of encouragement, reminding the farmer that 'la mort ne se loge chez personne' (*CH*, IX, p. 468).

Clearly, there are reasons, other than establishing his fictional doctor's reputation, why Balzac incorporates such a variety of rural characters into his text. Most obvious is his foreshadowing of a movement that would not crystallize until after the Paris Commune, when the fear of the urban working classes turned the attention of bourgeois novelists and intellectuals towards the

²⁶ Duby and Wallon, eds., *Histoire de la France rurale*, III, p. 63.

provinces, resulting in 'une diversification des représentations idéologiques du paysan, et des catégories de perception du monde rural'.²⁷ As early as 1833, the author of the *Études de mœurs* was exploring this diversity, and cataloguing specific as well as general laws of rural behaviour. His message in doing so was obvious. If the administrators of the July Monarchy were to arrest the decline of the provincial economy, then they, too, would have to formulate a strategy that recognized the heterogeneous nature of the rural population. The fact that Doctor Benassis has consciously developed such an approach is the single most important factor in earning him the respect of those who will drive his reforms.

As well as understanding differences between rural people, Benassis also understands the differences between the types of land they live on, and how that land influences the development of their personality. He believes the valley and the mountains to produce two very different sorts of socio-cultural behaviour, and shares his evidence with Genestas, whom he takes to visit two grieving families. Their first stop is in the valley, where one of the peasant women has lost her husband. The pain of bereavement cuts deep, as she tells the doctor: 'Quand on est resté vingt-cinq ans avec un homme, il est bien dur de se quitter' (*CH*, IX, p. 444). In these lowlands, death is accepted ultimately as a part of life, and there are no funeral ceremonies or periods of mourning. 'Dans les villages,' explains Benassis, 'personne ne veut faire cette dépense, soit misère, soit économie' (*CH*, IX, p. 445).²⁸ In the mountains, by contrast,

²⁷ Rémy Ponton, 'Les images de la paysannerie dans le roman rustique à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 17-18 (1977), 62-71 (p. 62).

²⁸ That the peasants are shown to accept death so readily is hardly surprising when we consider the rate of mortality in the provinces. Throughout the nineteenth century, the figures were high, particularly in those areas where climatic conditions were harsh. Records for the village of Marlhès, in the Pilat mountains, south of Saint-Étienne, give a life expectancy of

death is viewed with anything but resignation. Here, the doctor and his companion find themselves in the middle of a distressing mourning ritual. A congregation of peasants, packed into a tiny house, chants 'Le maître est mort!' (*CH*, IX, p. 449), while the dead man's wife cuts off a lock of his hair. 'Cet acte signifie qu'elle ne se remariera pas, dit Benassis. Beaucoup de parents attendaient sa résolution' (*CH*, IX, p. 452). Why does Balzac highlight these variations in peasant behaviour? In response, it would seem clear that these contrasting attitudes towards death are further evidence of Balzac's determination to classify types of provincial behaviour, distinguishing between the people of the valleys and the mountains as a natural historian might distinguish between mammals and reptiles. Extending this argument, the mourning rituals can also be viewed as an attempt to classify Dauphiné itself, and to give the fictional province a socio-cultural identity of its own. By citing what his narrator assures us are authentic regional details, in this case local customs to do with death, Balzac creates another setting that is visibly distinct from, for example, his Brittany or his Touraine. Seen in this perspective, it was with *Le Médecin de campagne* that Balzac began to build on his conception of the socio-cultural diversity of the provinces, reflecting a movement that started to gather pace in 1833, with the publication of Michelet's *Tableau de la France*. Within the novel itself, this breaking-down of the provincial monolith is especially relevant to Benassis, who realizes that the countryside is so diverse as to defy generalization. Thus, he argues for a tailored approach to provincial government: 'Les idées qui conviennent à une contrée sont mortelles dans une autre [...]. En chaque affaire [...], il faut

34.8 years during the period 1849-53 (James R. Lehning, *The Peasants of Marllhes: Economic Development and Family Organization in Nineteenth-Century France* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), p. 58).

consulter l'esprit du pays, sa situation, ses ressources; étudier le terrain, les hommes et les choses et ne pas vouloir planter des vignes en Normandie' (*CH*, IX, pp. 431-32). For him, this awareness of regional difference has already yielded favourable results. He has convinced the mayor of a neighbouring district, whose land is too difficult to plough, to establish a vineyard. This business produces wine for which Voreppe can then exchange its corn. Equally important is that by discovering how best to manage each individual patch of land, Benassis is able to ensure that even more of his peasants are given the chance to become economically productive, and that even more of them, in turn, are endowed with a social and moral conscience.

The extent to which Benassis is central to developing this moral conscience nevertheless raises the question of whether the peasantry can ever truly assume the burden of responsibility for its own regeneration. What is clear is that, with an attitude that is as much pessimistic as it is patronizing, Balzac depicts the rural population as being in desperate need of guidance and outside expertise. The point is made through Benassis's application of 'les utiles méthodes de l'agriculture moderne' (*CH*, IX, p. 419). The fictional philanthropist encourages the practice of crop rotation, creates artificial meadowland through transversal irrigation, and oversees the establishment of six model farms. In short, he strives to make the best possible use of the land at his, and the community's, disposal. This belief in the soil as a source of wealth would become a recurrent theme in Balzac's work. In his post-1840 treatise, *Le Catéchisme social*, he complained:

La France possède autant d'hectares improductifs que l'Angleterre en a de productifs [...]. Les mettre en valeur c'est diminuer le 1/3 de l'impôt. Diminuer le 1/3 de l'impôt actuel, c'est diminuer d'1/3 le prix de la journée et c'est diminuer d'1/3 également le coût des matières brutes, le lait, la viande, etc.²⁹

The strength of Benassis' intellect is such that he could easily process similar figures for the village, while managing those agricultural innovations that are the source of a double triumph. The success of the crop rotation and irrigation schemes means, first, that the peasants respect, but also trust, their benefactor, and that they are willing to listen to his ideas. With Mother Nature firmly on his side, Benassis looks on as the villagers harvest 'une récolte en blé qui parut miraculeuse aux gens du pays, abondante comme elle devait l'être dans un terrain vierge' (*CH*, IX, p. 420). As a direct result, he is elevated to the status of '[le] bon Dieu sur terre'. 'J'en connais plusieurs ici', adds La Fosseuse, 'qui croient que leurs blés poussent mieux quand il a passé le matin le long de leur champ' (*CH*, IX, p. 485). Second, it means that the peasants have a proven example to follow, and an incentive to work for themselves.³⁰ Benassis, it is true, feels a certain frustration at having always to provide the lead in these matters. 'Tous les paysans', he protests, 'sont fils de Saint-Thomas, l'apôtre incrédule, ils veulent toujours des faits à l'appui des paroles' (*CH*, IX, p. 415). Nevertheless, if he has had to work hard to gain the confidence of the peasants, then his efforts are rewarded tenfold. The Voreppois peasant, 'docile

²⁹ Balzac, *Le Catéchisme social*, pp. 129-30.

³⁰ Madame de Mortsauf, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, also introduces the peasants to new agricultural practices: 'La comtesse avait fait cultiver par monsieur de Mortsauf une ferme composée des terres réservées, sises autour de Clochegourde, autant pour l'occuper que pour démontrer par l'évidence des faits, à ses *fermiers à moitié*, l'excellence des nouvelles méthodes' (*CH*, IX, p. 1064).

quand les événements l'ont convaincu',³¹ has become a willing collaborator in this attempt to drag his village back towards the light of civilization.

That said, exposing the village to the outside world, to its nearest urban centre, Grenoble, and to advances in engineering and science, is not without risks. For while isolation was the cause of Voreppe's backwardness, it also preserved the strong community spirit that is essential to Benassis's programme. The people of the valley have a strong collective identity when the doctor enters their midst, and I have already described the vigour with which they defend the last of the 'crétins', forming a hostile crowd, 'exaltée par les cris et l'agitation de sentiments exprimés en commun' (*CH*, IX, p. 405). At the very beginning of the novel, we are also witness to the scene in which Genestas stops to ask an old peasant woman for a glass of milk. After knocking at her door, he discovers that she is caring for children from the local poorhouse, in return for which she receives only a meagre allowance. Evidently, if this spirit were to be harnessed, then it could, without exception, be a central pillar of rural reform. On this point, Bernard Guyon observes that while Balzac's peasants are a 'torrent d'énergie qui, mal capté, mal dirigé, pourrait être un grave danger pour l'ordre social', their cohesion 'peut, au contraire [...], devenir un important facteur de progrès'.³² The problem for Benassis is that he must distill charity, collective enterprise, and religious observance from the unwanted spirit that leads only to resistance and criminal behaviour. How can the first set of elements be retained and the other eradicated? Part of the answer, at least, is to be found in that which Balzac presents as the most basic unit of an harmonious society: the family. 'Là

³¹ Dordan, *Le Paysan français*, p. 49.

³² Guyon, 'Les conditions d'une renaissance', p. 244.

commence l'action du pouvoir et de la loi,' says Benassis. 'Là, du moins doit s'apprendre l'obéissance' (*CH*, IX, p. 446). This is, of course, a familiar Balzacian theme, and in *Le Médecin de campagne*, there is renewed anger at the way in which the institution of the family is being torn apart. For the author of *La Comédie humaine*, the egalitarianism of Napoleon's Civil Code, coupled with the abolition of the *droit d'aînesse*, had unleashed a mad scramble for wealth and property, destroying those non-material values that once gave purpose and unity to the nation.³³ This post-revolutionary individualism, a trend which prefers interest to altruism, has no place in the valley that shelters Voreppe, and Benassis is determined that this should remain so. 'Au lieu d'avoir des croyances,' he sighs, lamenting the state of nineteenth-century society, 'nous avons des intérêts. Si chacun ne pense qu'à soi et n'a foi qu'en lui-même, comment voulez-vous rencontrer beaucoup de courage civil?' (*CH*, IX, p. 430). He believes that the key to creating a settled community lies in strengthening family bonds, in re-building that 'lieu de l'apprentissage social, d'inculcation des valeurs, [qui] est instance de conservation spirituelle et matérielle'.³⁴ Consequently, he is made to seize every opportunity to marry off his peasants, and to bring new families into the village. The policy reaps dividends in the case of Vigneau, whose family takes over the tilery. The previous owner had been one of the worst kinds of individualist, 'un fainéant qui n'aimait qu'à boire' (*CH*, IX, p. 471), and so to return the business to a profitable footing, Vigneau, we learn, worked day and night. His wife kept the accounts, while their mothers also worked in the

³³ For further information on the threat to the family, see Roger Fayolle, 'Notes sur la pensée politique de Balzac dans *Le Médecin de campagne* et *Le Curé de village*', *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), 303-23 (pp. 308-09).

³⁴ Gérard Gengembre, 'Balzac, Bonald et/ou la Révolution bien comprise?', *AB* (1990), 189-202 (p. 191).

factory. Their collective effort leads to prosperity, 'et l'argent, en donnant la tranquillité, a rendu la santé, l'abondance et la joie' (CH, IX, p. 472). Eventually, the tilery generates enough revenue to employ six workers, and a driver for the delivery cart. The mothers no longer have to slave at the furnace, and Vigneau's wife falls pregnant. A proud Benassis declares this to be a microcosm of his reforms, a loving family whose members are shown to work with, and for, each other. The story of Vigneau may be told with an overtone of idealism, but if this experience is indeed replicated throughout the valley, the doctor argues that there is no more solid a basis for a rural revival.

There are other aspects of Voreppe's community spirit that Benassis uses to bolster his programme. Pointing to the survival of an ancient rural tradition, Balzac gives special attention to the 'veillées', the evenings of storytelling that take place in one of the local barns. In a memorable episode entitled 'Histoire de Napoléon contée dans une grange par un vieux soldat', which first appeared in *L'Europe littéraire* in June 1833, it is the turn of the old soldier, Goguelat, to entertain the other villagers. He begins with a popular tale, before moving on to the legend of the Emperor, the battles of Eylau, Austerlitz, the ill-fated Russian campaign, and the final defeat at Waterloo. An integral part of French rural life until the 1880s, gatherings such as this were often looked upon with disapproval by parish priests, who associated them with 'des danses révoltantes, des calembours malséants et pleins de sous-entendus, des propos dangereux'.³⁵ In Balzac's Voreppe, the 'veillée' serves a policing function, preventing the peasants from roaming the fields at night, and bringing them

³⁵ This opinion is cited without further reference by Eugen Weber, in *La Fin des terroirs: la modernisation de la France rurale: 1870-1914*, trans. by Antoine Berman and Bernard Génies (Paris: Fayard/Recherches, 1983), p. 593. For the reaction of priests to regional customs and festivities, see for example McPhee, *A Social History*, p. 167.

together for a shared experience of education and laughter. This much is clear to Benassis and Genestas, who hide in the straw to watch the spectacle unfold. Casting their gaze over the audience, they notice immediately that the peasants are transfixed:

Tous ces gens attentifs, et divers dans leurs poses, exprimaient sur leurs physionomies immobiles l'entier abandon qu'ils faisaient de leur intelligence au conteur. C'était un tableau curieux où éclatait la prodigieuse influence exercée sur tous les esprits par la poésie (*CH*, IX, p. 516).

In the dimly lit surroundings of the barn, this ritual may appear primitive, but it is not immoral, and there is no threat of violence, making this the perfect tool of provincial government.

Similarly, it is because rural people are shown to be capable of sustaining their own community spirit that Benassis tolerates their religious practices. He freely admits to being incredulous at the way in which the villagers show their faith, at the way in which they kneel with their candles, 'au-dedans et au-dehors de la chaumière' (*CH*, IX, p. 403), when one of their number is nearing death. Yet at the same time, he comes to recognize that religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, can have a unifying effect:

Ici, j'en ai reconnu la nécessité politique et l'utilité morale; ici, j'en ai compris la puissance par la valeur même du mot qui l'exprime. Religion veut dire LIEN, et certes le culte, ou autrement dit la religion exprimée, constitue la seule force qui puisse relier les espèces sociales (*CH*, IX, p. 447).

The idea comes straight from the pen of a conservative Balzac, but with some reservation.³⁶ For unlike the 'veillées', provincial Catholicism does need to be managed in order to prevent it from disintegrating into prejudice and superstition. The priest entrusted with this task is the Abbé Janvier, whom Benassis credits with having given '[aux] mœurs du bourg un esprit doux et fraternel qui semble faire de la population une seule famille' (*CH*, IX, p. 423). With his hand to guide them, the peasants no longer steal wood from forests, or allow their cattle to graze on private land, abuses that the Abbé Brossette is unable to prevent in *Les Paysans*. The strength, and above all, the shared warmth of their new community spirit, means that the pursuit of social and economic progress can continue unimpeded.

That we should return to such an ideal provincial world is appropriate in a novel in which the provinces are revitalized, and which goes on to argue for the superiority of the countryside over the city. It may be, as Benassis concedes, that 'la vie de campagne tue beaucoup d'idées, mais elle affaiblit les vices et développe les vertus. En effet, moins il se trouve d'hommes agglomérés sur un point, moins il s'y rencontre de crimes, de délits, de mauvais sentiments' (*CH*, IX, p. 448). The words are an obvious reaction to the historical realities underlying the text. Every year between 1830 and 1850, forty to fifty thousand rural people were leaving their homes, many to search for employment in urban areas.³⁷ There, they formed the core of 'classes dangereuses',³⁸ and were often to be identified, with some justification, as the

³⁶ For further information on the portrayal of Catholicism in *Le Médecin de campagne*, see for example Guyon, *La Pensée politique*, pp. 645-47.

³⁷ Annie Moulin, *Les Paysans dans la société française de la Révolution à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 88.

³⁸ The 'classes dangereuses' to which Louis Chevalier refers in the title of his seminal work of 1958.

cause of civil unrest: in 1830, for example, troops had to be used on no less than three occasions to break up disturbances between provincials working on the Champ de Mars. Balzac's novel of 1833 is an attempt to demonstrate that, with guidance and commitment, these same workers could return to the countryside, and restore it to a state of economic prosperity. For the pragmatic Benassis, this transformation of the provinces is no pipe dream. All the authorities need do is act as he has done, each politician striving for improvement within his own sphere of influence:

Là où j'ai persuadé de construire un chemin de deux lieues, l'un [le Préfet] achèverait une route, l'autre un canal; là où j'ai encouragé la fabrication des chapeaux de paysan, le ministre soustrairait la France au joug industriel de l'étranger (*CH*, IX, pp. 428-29).

This fictional philanthropist makes change seem both easy and possible. But what of his own programme? Is it flawless? And is it a realistic solution to the problems faced by rural France in the 1830s?

There is evidence in the text to suggest that a programme of reform such as this one could do as much harm as good. The main difficulty lies at the very heart of a scheme in which material wealth is used to civilize the peasants, and to encourage them to embrace a new moral code. The theory may be solid enough, but the reader is left to wonder what might happen if, in practice, the scales were tipped too far, and the desire for wealth became greed. The thought has clearly crossed the doctor's mind. 'Quand [nos] mœurs seront changées,' he asks, 'quand nous serons tous de grands citoyens, ne deviendrons-nous pas [...] le peuple le plus ennuyeux [...] qu'il y aura sur la terre?' (*CH*, IX, p. 431). Added to the risk of apathy, there are other potential

problems of which he seems wholly unaware, not least the fact that his valley is thriving at the expense of many of its surrounding districts. Voreppe comes to monopolize the local marketplace, in fruit, in wood, even in milk and dairy products. Indeed, the reconstruction of the village has unleashed a commercial war in which Benassis, cast in the role of general, has fought to ensure that his products 'l'emportèrent, en un temps donné, dans les marchés sur ceux des autres communes' (*CH*, IX, p. 422). Logic dictates that not every village can monopolize its local market when the products in question are such basic rural goods, a simple economic fact which raises doubts over the possible application of Benassis's programme to the country as a whole. To point out these shortcomings, though, is perhaps churlish, for with *Le Médecin de campagne*, Balzac made a strikingly original contribution to provincial literature. His novel detailed new agricultural practices that would not receive a scientific seal of approval until 1843, when Lullin de Châteauevieux published his *Voyages agronomiques en France*. Moreover, in Benassis, he had created an intellectual who showed that a flexible approach to managing the land, combining technical expertise with an unbiased understanding of peasant behaviour, could lead the people of rural France out of misery. Other novelists, from Restif to Rousseau, had extolled the simple virtues of the countryside and called for a return to the land, but none before Balzac had shown how the rural population could take a leading role in the rebuilding of its own communities.

A Collective Enterprise: The Regeneration of Montégnaç in *Le Curé de village*

A second 'utopian' novel in which Balzac broached the theme of rural regeneration was *Le Curé de village*. Serialized in *La Presse* in 1839, and published in its complete form in 1841, this was to be a tale in which spiritual redemption leads to the revival of a once-barren landscape. At the centre of this programme is Véronique Graslin, the daughter of a provincial scrap-merchant who secures for her a marriage with the wealthiest banker in Limoges. For the girl who harbours dreams of love and romance, a result of her youthful reading of *Paul et Virginie*, married life nevertheless proves a disappointment, and within a year of her wedding, a year that usually is 'si brillante pour les jeunes femmes' (*CH*, IX, p. 668), her unhappiness begins to betray itself in her physical appearance. Embarking on a clandestine love affair, Véronique seeks consolation in the arms of Jean-François Tascheron, a young porcelain worker from the impoverished village of Montégnaç.³⁹ The two plan to elope with money stolen from Pingret, an old man, 'célèbre pour son avarice' (*CH*, IX, p. 682), who keeps his hoard buried in his garden. Their plan is derailed when Tascheron is caught in the act of thieving the gold, and kills both the old miser and his servant. After refusing to reveal the identity of his accomplice, he is executed just as Véronique is giving birth to their child. Tormented by her part in this double murder,⁴⁰ Madame Graslin goes to

³⁹ Montégnaç is another fictional setting for which readers have sought to identify the actual model. See for example R. Anthony Whelpton, 'A la recherche d'un village perdu: Montégnaç', *AB* (1963), 143-47.

⁴⁰ For an alternative perspective, see for example Alain Vaillant, who suggests that the reason for Véronique's guilt lies elsewhere: Véronique 'ne cesse d'expier dans sa chair le double crime qu'elle a commis (l'adultère, puis le refus d'avouer sa faute)', "'Cet X est la Parole": la

Montégnac to make amends. There, she works alongside the Abbé Bonnet, a benevolent priest who, 'plein d'amour pour son village' (*CH*, IX, p. 747), offers her the chance to redeem her soul by bringing prosperity back to the people and their district. Bonnet has conceived a scheme whereby the wasted waters of an underground river could be diverted, an idea that meets with the immediate approval of Véronique. Promising to irrigate the land with the tears of her repentance, she vows that 'Montégnac sera fertilisé, nous trouverons des eaux pour arroser votre plaine inculte. Comme Moïse, vous frappez un rocher, il en sortira des pleurs!' (*CH*, IX, p. 746).⁴¹ In this section, I propose to explore the role of the fictional inhabitants of Limousin in this revival, and compare their contribution to that made by the peasants of Dauphiné, in *Le Médecin de campagne*. In so doing, my objective is to consider the way in which the later novel refines the theories espoused by Benassis, and demonstrates how the economic potential of the countryside can not only be harnessed, but also sustained.

The first point to be made is that the regeneration of Montégnac, in *Le Curé de village*, is a collective enterprise, with peasants and bourgeois, Parisians and provincials, working together to revitalize the community. For this project, Madame Graslin, the chatelaine, is an obvious figurehead. As a novelist, Balzac was well aware of the power of landowners to improve both their estates and the land around them, and was scathing in reference to those who refused this task. Already, in *Le Grand Propriétaire*, the 1835 text that

littérature, ou la science mathématique de l'homme', in *Penser avec Balzac*, ed. by José-Luis Diaz and Isabelle Tournier (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 2003), pp. 107-21 (p. 116).

⁴¹ For a discussion of the link between irrigation and the theme of repentance, see for example Jacques Neefs, 'Figure dans le paysage: *Le Curé de village*', *Littérature*, 61 (February 1986), 34-48.

served as the inspiration for *Les Paysans*, he had accused the fictional Marquis de Grandlieu of allowing his estate to fall into disrepair:

Le bonhomme [...] paraissait se soucier fort peu de son château auquel il ne faisait aucune réparation, n'avait aucun goût pour les jardins, et laissait ses îles, sa prairie, se couvrir de limon, sans les convertir en un parc anglais qui eût été délicieux (*CH*, IX, p. 1265).

There is no such indifference to the possibilities of the countryside in *Le Curé de village*, with Balzac presenting the local population as being prepared to confront the most difficult of geological problems. To the east of the village, there is a chain of mountains covered in forest and vegetation, under which flows a river. To the west, there is nothing but an arid plane and stagnant marshland. With their limited expertise, Véronique, Bonnet, and the former outlaw, Farrabesche, discover how the water is escaping, but to build the dams and channels needed to irrigate the surrounding landscape, they require the assistance of an engineer, Grégoire Gérard.⁴² This task would be difficult enough without the backwardness of Montégnac being worse than that of Voreppe. 'Pour l'habitant,' we learn, 'cette nature est âpre, sauvage et sans ressources. Le sol de ces grandes plaines grises est ingrat' (*CH*, IX, p. 706). Indeed, the situation of the village is so bad that there seems no alternative but to attempt to reverse its plight, not least because 'ces jachères sociales engendrent le découragement, la paresse, la faiblesse par défaut de nourriture, et le crime quand les besoins parlent trop haut' (*CH*, IX, p. 706). These dangers

⁴² The ambitious nature of this scheme amused some contemporary critics, who viewed *Le Curé de village* as merely another utopian novel. See for example the review by J. Chaudes-Aigues, 'Le Curé de village', *Revue de Paris*, 29 (1841), 342-46: 'Il est certain qu'on achèterait aisément la moitié de la France, sinon la France toute entière, avec le pur et simple revenu des capitaux remués à la pelle dans *le Curé de Village*. Les mines du Pérou ne sont qu'une misérable charbonnerie, comparées à cela' (p. 345).

are eliminated by the success of the irrigation scheme, and by 1843, material wealth has returned to the village, which takes on the appearance of a rural idyll in the Rousseauist tradition:

Les hommes, les femmes, les enfants achevaient les plus jolis travaux de la campagne, ceux de la fenaison. [...] On entendait les rires de ceux qui jouaient, mêlés aux cris des enfants qui se poussaient sur les tas de foin (*CH*, IX, p. 847).

What social management has taken place between poverty and prosperity, and to what extent have the peasants been involved in the regeneration process?

These questions have conveniently been overlooked by readers such as Rose Fortassier, who contends that the people of Montégnac 'sont bizarrement inexistants. [...] Misérables, ils apparaissent anonymes, sans passé, sans coutumes, ni rites, ni fêtes. Ils ne jouent aucun rôle dans l'aménagement de leur coin de terre.'⁴³ Far from being absent, the peasants of *Le Curé de village* have a collective identity that is shown on Véronique's arrival in the village. Madame Graslin expresses her surprise that the locals have built a road leading up to the château, and is touched when two young girls step forward from the assembled crowd to present her with fruit and a bouquet of flowers. What is equally clear is that, rather than simply omitting the peasants, Balzac showed them involved in a reciprocal relationship with those who have conceived the programme of reform. At the centre of this interaction between the two groups is the Abbé Bonnet, and it is in his ability to manage the peasantry that the novelist is most interested. In the 1841 preface to *Le Curé*

⁴³ Rose Fortassier, 'Le Limousin vu par Balzac', *AB* (1982), 273-83 (p. 280).

de village, Balzac underlined that the actions of the eponymous priest were to form the substance of the novel:

Par quels moyens le curé Bonnet a-t-il fait d'une population mauvaise, arriérée, sans croyances, vouée aux méfaits et même au crime, une population animée du meilleur esprit, religieuse, progressive, excellente? Là, certes était le livre (*CH*, IX, p. 638).

The achievements of the selfless priest in this regard are indeed numerous. First, he has succeeded in lifting the people of Montégnac out of pauperism, and encouraged them to cater for their most basic needs themselves. Thus, the fields around the village are planted with wheat and potatoes, and there are gardens, 'pleins d'arbres fruitiers, de choux, d'oignons, de légumes' (*CH*, IX, p. 711). Like Benassis, Bonnet has a degree of agricultural expertise, or rather, as Farrabesche observes, '[il] n'est pas seulement un saint [...], c'est un savant' (*CH*, IX, p. 778). In contrast to the doctor, for whom morality is the natural result of the acquisition of material wealth, Bonnet uses religion as the means of fomenting a new moral consciousness among the peasants. In the Montégnac of times past, 'on y dépouillait les passants, aujourd'hui le voyageur peut y laisser tomber un sac d'écus, il le retrouverait chez [Monsieur Bonnet]' (*CH*, IX, p. 727). Only as a result of the commitment of its priest does the village lose this reputation for being the home of criminals: since 1816, we are told, the locals 'avaient cessé d'envoyer leur contingent aux Assises' (*CH*, IX, p. 686). According to Balzac, religion is the surest means by which the peasants can be educated in the ways of hard work and moral observance. Seen in this perspective, his fictional character invites comparison with Lamennais's conception of the country priest, and to a Catholic Church

which the latter believed should forge closer ties with the working classes, 'pour verser sur ses immenses misères les flots intarissables de la charité divine'.⁴⁴ The Abbé Bonnet describes his ambition in comparable terms: 'Je voulais les plaies du pauvre dans un coin de terre ignoré, puis prouver par mon exemple [...], que la religion catholique, prise dans ses œuvres humaines, est la seule vraie, la seule bonne et belle puissance civilisatrice' (*CH*, IX, p. 731). This is not a Troubert, who looks to Paris to satisfy his ambitions, or a Birotteau, who can think only of acquiring a comfortable new apartment. The energies of this idealized priest are devoted solely to the wellbeing of his flock.

It is by empathizing with the poor that Bonnet initiates the transformation of Montégnac, and encourages its population of former outlaws and indolent peasants to participate in the programme of reform. This capacity for building spiritual bridges with a primitive peasantry is shown in his soothing of Tascheron on the eve of his execution, and the young man's eventual repentance. 'Cette vie n'est rien en comparaison de celle qui t'attend,' declares Bonnet. 'Il faut songer à ton bonheur éternel' (*CH*, IX, p. 735). The reader's view of this anguished scene ends when Tascheron's mother and sister are asked to leave the prison cell, resulting in a shift in focalization that prevents us from seeing how the priest ultimately succeeds in saving the condemned man's soul. A stronger indication of Bonnet's relationship with the peasantry is reserved for later in the novel, and the story of Farrabesche, a former outlaw who has returned to Montégnac after serving a sentence of hard labour for murder. Farrabesche had evaded conscription in 1811, and disappeared into

⁴⁴ Félicité-Robert de Lamennais, *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Minerva, 1967), X: *Journaux, ou articles publiés dans 'Le Mémorial catholique' et 'L'Avenir'*, pp. CII-CIII.

the woods. It was said that he joined a band of robbers, *chauffeurs* who, like Marche-à-terre and his comrades in *Les Chouans*, extracted money from the wealthiest men in the district by tying them to the grate and threatening to burn their feet. His knowledge of the countryside had allowed this criminal to remain one step ahead of the authorities, and it is only Bonnet who can persuade him to give himself up, after the pair spend three days talking in the wilderness, with striking results: 'Ce gars-là, qui était la terreur du pays, est devenu doux comme une jeune fille, il s'est laissé emmener au bagne tranquillement' (*CH*, IX, p. 766). Bonnet saves his parishioner from execution, but even Farrabesche is at a loss to explain how. 'La parole et la voix de cet homme m'ont dompté' (*CH*, IX, p. 789), he reveals, in his conversations with Véronique. 'Il me savait seulement égaré, et non encore perdu; il ne voulait pas me trahir, mais me sauver' (*CH*, IX, p. 789). The Abbé Bonnet is unshakeable in his belief that the peasantry can be a force for good in the provinces, and in Farrabesche, it is shown that rural people have as much desire to improve their lot as the philanthropists who would improve it for them.

Farrabesche is an example of the robustness that is indispensable to the regeneration of Montégnac. At first sight, the former outlaw appears as a savage, possessing 'les épaules fortes, le cou rentré, très court, gros, les mains larges et velues des gens violents et capables d'abuser de ces avantages d'une nature bestiale' (*CH*, IX, p. 765). His reputation as a man who has no respect for authority, one who, time and again, has used his knowledge of the rural environment to evade capture, is firmly established in the minds of a generation of peasants, who have passed down the stories of his exploits.

Véronique's groom, Maurice Champion, summarizes the legend of Farrabesche, the delight with which he had once listened to these tales still evident: 'Farrabesche n'a pas son pareil à la course, ni à cheval. Il tue un bœuf d'un coup de poing! Il porte sept cents, dà! personne ne tire mieux que lui' (*CH*, IX, p. 768). This, however, is a text in which preconceptions about the peasantry are dismissed, both by Balzac, and by the fictional philanthropists who are determined to utilize the skills of the people of Montégnac in their programme of reform. This optimism contrasts even with that of *Le Médecin de campagne*, in which Benassis is satisfied merely to prevent some of his peasants from descending further into crime, without then considering the possibility of redirecting their energy into his schemes. In the poacher, Butifer, for instance, Benassis recognizes a savagery that cannot easily be restrained. 'J'aime mieux passer un an ou deux à vivre [...] dans les hauts,' says the young peasant, refusing to participate in the good doctor's schemes, 'que de croupir cents ans dans votre marécage' (*CH*, IX, p. 495).⁴⁵ By contrast, Farrabesche seeks to end his revolt against society, rid himself of his former reputation, and gain readmission to the community.⁴⁶ 'J'étais réfractaire, voilà tout,' he assures Véronique. 'Je n'ai jamais versé le sang d'un homme qu'à mon corps défendant' (*CH*, IX, p. 787). At the same time, he is devoted to his son, and looks on with embarrassment as Véronique notices the carved wooden toys he has made to amuse the child. Farrabesche displays a goodwill that his chatelaine is just as quick to observe. The former outlaw has already

⁴⁵ The poacher eventually consents to help Benassis in treating Adrien Genestas, though he plays no further part in the regeneration of Voreppe. At the end of the novel, it seems that only the army can civilize Butifer, who expresses his desire to enlist in Colonel Genestas's regiment: 'Depuis que M. le maire est mort, j'ai peur de moi. Ne voulait-il pas que je fusse soldat, hé bien, je ferai sa volonté' (*CH*, IX, p. 601).

⁴⁶ For a comparison of these two secondary characters, see for example Roger Fayolle, 'Butifer et Farrabesche', *AB* (1965), 191-99.

initiated his own repentance, and from his small wooden cabin, works to protect the land and those who live on it: 'Il plante dans la forêt aux places où il aperçoit la chance de faire venir un arbre; puis il émonde les arbres, il ramasse le bois mort, il fagote et tient le bois à la disposition des pauvres gens' (*CH*, IX, p. 770). After learning of these good deeds, Madame Graslin believes Farrabesche to be capable of assuming an even more prominent role in her schemes. She ensures that he marries the mother of his child, before offering this stable family the gift of farmland on the edge of the Gabou Valley. This confidence in the peasantry, and in its ability to improve both itself and its surroundings, underpins a novel in which 'les hommes réapprennent à vivre ensemble et découvrent en eux des puissances insoupçonnées de partage et d'adhésion'.⁴⁷

There is further evidence of the rural regeneration of which the peasantry is capable in the experience of the Tascherons. Jean-François Tascheron, the young man with whom Véronique has her affair, comes from a family that is a beacon of moral goodness in the Limousin countryside. They lead exemplary lives, and through them, Balzac presents the kind of idyllic provinces that he saw as being in increasing danger of extinction. 'La famille Tascheron', he declares, 'était presque la seule du pays qui eût conservé ces vieilles mœurs exemplaires et ces habitudes religieuses que les observateurs voient aujourd'hui disparaître dans les campagnes' (*CH*, IX, p. 686). The simple morality of this family, 'remarquable par sa probité, par son union, par son amour du travail' (*CH*, IX, p. 686) makes the son's crime appear all the more incomprehensible. Jean-François arrives in Limoges with no other ambition

⁴⁷ Barbéris, *Mythes balzaciens*, p. 187.

than to earn an honest wage. For two years, he follows his apprenticeship in the porcelain factory, and goes about his work with admirable competence. He cannot even be persuaded to join in the merriment of his fellow workers at the end of the day. As his landlady reveals when questioned as part of the investigation into Pingret's murder, Jean-François 'avait passé à étudier et à s'instruire le temps que les autres ouvriers donnent à la débauche ou au cabaret' (*CH*, IX, p. 686). The loss of the family reputation that is the inevitable result of the loss of their son and brother is, therefore, a devastating blow for the remaining Tascherons, and in the light of their disgrace, they see their only solution as being to emigrate. Jean-François's sister, Denise, returns the money that her brother had stolen, and promises to meet her father in Le Havre, where a ship awaits them. Their destination, like that of many utopian thinkers in early-nineteenth-century France, is Texas. America had already witnessed the arrival of Étienne Cabet and his Icarians, as well as that of a group of Fourierists, led by Victor Considérant, and it is in the footsteps of these famous settlers that the fictional Tascherons follow. What is significant about their departure, and what separates them from the failed experiments of their actual predecessors, is the way in which the members of this hard-working family channel their shame into building a new community. In a success of which the reader learns when Denise returns to Montégnac, we are told of the determination of Tascheron senior, and his founding of a village that grew into a town bearing the family name. Denise recounts 'les prospérités inouïes de Tascheronville' (*CH*, IX, p. 842). 'Nos cultures ont réussi,' she explains, 'nos produits sont magnifiques, et nous sommes riches' (*CH*, IX, pp. 842-43). This achievement, though a utopian one which mirrors,

quite deliberately, the transformation of Montégnac, confirms the resilience of a class that can recover from the most crushing blow to its emotional and financial stability. This alone makes Denise Tascheron a worthy successor to Véronique, and a woman who, through her marriage to the engineer, Gérard, unites the robustness and determination of the peasant with the technical expertise of a bourgeois engineer, trained at the *École des Ponts et Chaussées*.

The final example of the way in which the peasantry can be responsible for reviving the provincial economy is provided by Véronique herself. In the figure of Madame Graslin, Balzac creates a character who has an innate appreciation and understanding of the provincial milieu. As a young woman, her sensitivity to the countryside is revealed during her walks with her father, along the banks of the Vienne, 'où elle allait s'extasiant sur les beautés du ciel et de la campagne, sur les rouges magnificences du soleil couchant, sur les pimpantes délices des matinées trempées de rosée' (*CH*, IX, p. 655). In the wake of her marriage to Monsieur Graslin, she shows herself to be no less sensitive to her social environment. As a direct consequence of her secret affair with Tascheron, she is thrown into 'un jeu de dissimulation d'autant plus dangereux qu'il a pour cadre une petite ville de province' (*CH*, IX, p. 615). The threat of seeing her affair exposed is one that she minimizes by avoiding her immediate neighbours, and choosing instead to mix with 'quatre ou cinq femmes étrangères, venues de Paris avec leurs maris, et qui avaient en horreur le commérage des provinces' (*CH*, IX, p. 678). Adept at managing the curiosity of small-town society, and profoundly aware of the physical beauty of the fields, rivers, and valleys around Limoges, there would be no stronger candidate than Véronique for implementing change in the provinces. In

addition to these qualities, Balzac nevertheless offers further evidence of her potential, associating his character with the industry of the Auvergnat.⁴⁸ In her father, Sauviat, and in her husband, Pierre Graslin, Véronique has been shown two striking examples of what people from her region can achieve. The ambitious Sauviat, first, had rejected a life of subsistence agriculture, and identified scrap-metal as a more reliable source of income. He begins his slow rise in 1792, roaming the Auvergne countryside ‘échangeant des poteries, des plats, des assiettes, des verres [...], contre de vieux fers, des cuivres, des plombs, contre tout métal sous quelque forme qu’il se déguisât’ (*CH*, IX, p. 643). After the Revolution, he purchases a nationalized property, a château that he strips of its most valuable materials, and a transaction that, according to the narrator, makes him one of the founding members of the Bande Noire, post-revolutionary capitalists who destroyed some of France’s most ancient buildings and relics in the hope of turning a quick profit. This inventiveness, coupled with an awareness of the possibilities for social advancement that are to be found in the provinces, is an attribute that Pierre Graslin also displays. Like Sauviat, he is ‘un homme parti sans le sou de l’Auvergne’ who, having saved his once-meagre wages, ‘et aussi par d’heureuses circonstances’ (*CH*, IX, p. 656), rises to become the wealthiest banker in Limoges. Véronique could hardly have a better commercial pedigree as she sets about the task of bringing prosperity to the downtrodden people of Montégnac.

There can be little doubt, then, that Véronique has both the intellectual and personal attributes needed to reverse the economic plight of the village. The challenge for her, burdened as she is by the memory of her dead lover and

⁴⁸ For a full discussion of Auvergnat characters in Balzac’s work, see for example Albert Prioult, ‘Les Auvergnats dans *La Comédie humaine*’, *AB* (1970), 317-45.

their crime, is to harness these qualities for the collective good. In this, religion appears as the great facilitator.⁴⁹ The theme of the woman who derives unusual strength from her faith, and who can channel that spiritual conviction into any of her life's pursuits, has a long history in Balzac's work. In his 1824 novel, *Annette et le criminel*, for instance, Argow marvels at the dexterity with which his lover plays the piano, and which he recognizes as a product of her religious belief: 'L'extase qui s'emparait d'elle en priant, passait dans son jeu, et rien n'était indifférent sous ses doigts' (*PR*, II, p. 549). A similar principle is applied in *Le Curé de village*, though here Balzac shows religion faced with the sterner test of reviving a community that stands on the brink of oblivion. 'La plupart des villes modernes sont filles d'un monastère,' says the Abbé Bonnet, in an attempt to reassure Madame Graslin about the size of her task. 'Soyez à vous seule le monastère, vous pouvez recommencer ici les miracles. Vos prières doivent être des travaux' (*CH*, IX, p. 757). The results are miraculous indeed, for by channelling the strength gained from her religion, Véronique also channels the water needed to irrigate the barren planes of Montégnac, and bring about 'l'abondance, la prospérité, le bonheur pour toute une contrée' (*CH*, IX, p. 850). The achievement seems little short of utopian, though the text would indicate that it is based on more practical measures. Alongside religion, what the regeneration of Montégnac also celebrates is the energy of a woman who, though elevated to the status of 'propriétaire', retains her empathy with a peasantry into which she was born.

⁴⁹ The centrality of religion in *Le Curé de village* is made explicit by Balzac in his 1841 preface to the novel: 'si *Le Médecin de campagne* est l'application de la philanthropie moderne à la civilisation, celui-ci devait être l'application du repentir catholique. Ainsi, *Le Curé de village* devait être une œuvre supérieure à l'autre, et comme plan, comme idées, et comme exécution, la religion n'est-elle pas plus grande que la philanthropie? elle est divine, l'autre est purement humaine' (*CH*, IX, p. 637).

This understanding of the peasants and their preoccupations is suggested in Véronique's response to the Abbé Bonnet, when she indicates her willingness to participate in his reforms. 'Je suis née du peuple,' she declares, 'et veux retourner au peuple' (*CH*, IX, p. 747). Each of the relationships she forms with the villagers is marked by some aspect of this class solidarity. In Farrabesche, most notably, she encounters a peasant with whom she is able to empathize, because he, too, is a criminal, but also because she understands the precarity of his existence. The immediacy of this understanding is revealed as she listens to the stories of Farrabesche's exploits, and is told that 'il a même, dit-on, tué le voyageur qui était dans la malle de 1812'. 'Pour le voler' (*CH*, IX, p. 769), replies Véronique, no doubt reminded of the stagecoach that Tascheron was waiting to catch as he fled the scene of his crime, but also with an awareness of the desperate measures to which peasants sometimes resort in order to ensure their survival. Seen in this perspective, it is the work of memory that ensures, and will sustain, Montégnac's state of economic wellbeing. The woman who remembers her crime, and who remembers to care for those who remain trapped in her former class, passes on her mission to her son, with the instruction: 'continue, quand tu seras homme, les œuvres de ta mère' (*CH*, IX, p. 851). By 1843, the dams and irrigation channels are complete, and there is hope that this programme of rural reform, founded on the work of an energetic peasantry, both Auvergnat and Limousin, will continue long after the death of its guiding light.

Late Provinces and New Provincials: *Modeste Mignon* and Beyond

As well as demonstrating that change could be brought about in the countryside, Balzac showed his own perspective on the provinces to have evolved during the course of his career. In between the bouts of ill health that slowed his output in the 1840s, he embarked on a number of works which showed, not only that his interest in the provinces was far from exhausted, but that his treatment of the provincial theme had, in its final form, begun to move still further away from the satirical tradition. This development is clearly illustrated in *Modeste Mignon*. The last provincial novel that Balzac completed before his death remains an under-discussed work,⁵⁰ though the critical neglect from which it has suffered should not be allowed to undermine the fact that it is indispensable to our understanding of his vision of the provinces under the Restoration and July Monarchy. The importance of the novel lies, first, in Balzac's decision to situate the action in Le Havre. Throughout *La Comédie humaine*, Le Havre appears as a gateway to the wider world. Its status as a portal to the exotic is illustrated in *Gobseck*, when Derville finds in the dead moneylender's apartment 'des avis d'arrivage de marchandises consignées en son nom au Havre'. In the room adjacent to the one in which Gobseck dies, Derville finds a wealth of goods from abroad, including bales of cotton, sacks of sugar, barrels of rum, coffee, indigo, tobacco, in short, 'tout un bazar de denrées coloniales' (*CH*, II, pp. 1011-12).

⁵⁰ Among the reasons for which *Modeste Mignon* has been neglected are those summarized by Andrew Oliver, who reminds us of the main critical objections when he states that 'aucun des personnages ne fascine comme la cousine Bette, comme Grandet ou comme Vautrin; l'intrigue semble entièrement prévisible et l'on apprend peu de choses nouvelles sur la condition de la femme ou sur le fonctionnement de la société' ('(Im)Modeste Mignon: un roman balzacien en déshabillé', in Oliver and Vachon, eds., *Réflexions sur l'autoréflexivité balzacienne*, pp. 155-67 (p. 157)).

Elsewhere, in *La Rabouilleuse*, Agathe Bridau describes Le Havre as a town where 'la vie est horriblement chère' (CH, IV, p. 305), while in *César Birotteau*, du Tillet identifies the town, together with Bordeaux and Marseilles, as one of France's great commercial and financial centres (CH, VI, p. 216). Each of these references would seem to suggest that, long before Balzac conceived the idea for *Modeste Mignon*, he viewed Le Havre as the antithesis of the small provincial town, where the most established trade is in ignorance. It was not until March 1844, though, that a fortuitous discovery enabled him to set a novel in the Norman port. He had visited Le Havre in November 1843, to collect a chest of his belongings, recently shipped back from Saint Petersburg. Five months later, Madame Hanska told him of a semi-autobiographical novella she had written, about a young girl who corresponds, and falls in love, with a famous novelist. As he advised her on how best to remodel the structure of her narrative, the idea for a *Scène de la vie privée* began to form in Balzac's imagination.⁵¹ 'Il faut peindre d'abord une famille de province', he mused, as if appropriating the subject for himself, 'où il se trouve, au milieu des vulgarités de cette vie une jeune fille exaltée, romanesque, et puis par la correspondance, *transiter* vers la description d'un poète à Paris.'⁵² In this section, I shall examine the way in which this apparently banal theme heralds a change in Balzac's conception of provincial France, to which he grants new social and economic prestige.

⁵¹ For additional details of the genesis of this text, see for example Anne-Marie Meininger's introduction to *Modeste Mignon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), pp. 7-35. Meininger considers the publication in French of Goethe's correspondance with Bettina von Arnim, in 1843, as another influence on *Modeste Mignon*. Further indication of this connection are the names of characters used in Balzac's novel: Bettina Wallenrod, for Charles Mignon's wife, and Bettina-Caroline, for his daughter.

⁵² LH, I, p. 819 (1 March 1844).

At the head of the provincial family that Balzac described to Madame Hanska would be Charles Mignon, a ship-owner who, following the collapse of the world cotton market, departs for the Orient, hoping to regain his lost fortune. Within the context of *La Comédie humaine*, Mignon's story is far from unusual. Often the small provincial town is a springboard from which men begin the arduous task of rebuilding their shattered lives. In *Eugénie Grandet*, Charles heads for the Indies, desperate to reverse the damage wrought by his father's bankruptcy and suicide. Similarly, in *Le Contrat de mariage*, Paul de Manerville takes to the ocean after his Spanish wife, Natalie, and her mother, Madame Évangélista, have bled him systematically of his assets. The factor which makes Charles Mignon's career worthy of special consideration is the nature of the town he leaves behind. Following the removal of the commercial blockade imposed on continental Europe during the war with England, Le Havre became one of the world's main trading ports. In the years after 1816, 'époque à laquelle commença la prospérité du Havre' (*CH*, I, p. 473), says Balzac, the leading Parisian banks, including Rothschild and Laffitte, set up offices in the town. These bankers and businessmen themselves began to cultivate commercial monopolies, with the Hottinguers, most notably, becoming large-scale importers of cotton. In *Modeste Mignon*, there initially seems little evidence of this feverish activity. Instead, for the Mignons, there are the repetitive visits to the neighbours, 'l'inévitable whist' (*CH*, I, p. 660), and 'ce bavardage incessant qui, dans la dernière bourgade, scrute les actions les plus indifférentes' (*CH*, I, p. 530). A closer inspection nevertheless reveals this to be a town whose inhabitants have broader horizons than the narrow-mindedness of some of their number would suggest. This is a

setting in which towns, regions, and countries, are blended together to form what Nicole Mozet has already identified as a cosmopolitan populace.⁵³ Charles Mignon is from Provence, and his wife from Germany. His business partner, Dumay, is a Breton whose wife is American, while the hunchback, Butscha, is of Scandinavian descent. In establishing the biographies of these characters, Balzac also gives full expression to a gamut of regional stereotypes. As a Breton, Dumay is said to be stubborn, with an innate capacity for violence. Charles Mignon, for his part, has a hot southern temperament, his 'audace provençale' (*CH*, I, p. 484) being the principal trait on which this energetic provincial builds and rebuilds his career. It is not merely the mixed origins of these characters, however, that make Le Havre of *Modeste Mignon* a cosmopolitan town; rather, the people are cultured because they form part of a transient population, with experiences of a wider, international world. As a trading port, Le Havre had long since been known for its demographic instability. In Morlent's guidebook of 1825, it is compared to 'une colonie où chacun tâche d'arriver au temple de Plutus'. 'Les Anglais, les Allemands et les Suisses sont en majorité dans cette ville; un coup de canon tiré en mer les met en fuite; il ne reste au Havre que les naturels: la population accidentelle déserte et va chercher fortune ailleurs.'⁵⁴ Though cosmopolitan, Le Havre in the early nineteenth century was a town readily exploited by men searching for ways to fill their personal coffers, and a place to which few, it seems, had a lasting attachment.

This willingness to use Le Havre as a staging post for the pursuit of social advancement is exemplified by the career of Charles Mignon. Mignon arrives

⁵³ Mozet, 'La province balzacienne confrontée au temps de la civilisation', p. 69.

⁵⁴ M. J. Morlent, *Le Havre ancien et moderne et ses environs*, 2 vols (Le Havre: Chapelle, 1825), I, p. 244.

in Normandy in 1816, after hearing talk of the ‘brillantes destinées que la paix réservait au Havre’ (CH, I, p. 486). ‘En déployant l’activité, la prodigieuse intelligence des Provençaux’ (CH, I, p. 487), he recognizes that the town provides access to overseas markets, and to consumers whose demand for French goods is strong: ‘En écoutant la discussion de deux bourgeois [...]; il acheta pour deux cent mille francs de terrains, de maisons, et lança vers New York un navire chargé de soieries françaises achetées à bas prix’ (CH, I, pp. 486-87). Balzac tracks the economic growth of which Mignon takes advantage, and in turn, reveals foreign trade as the cause of his financial downfall. In 1826, poor harvests in France and England contributed to a sudden downturn, and it is these conditions, precisely, which impact on ‘la plus riche maison de commerce du Havre’ (CH, I, p. 487): ‘En janvier 1826, au milieu d’une fête [...], trois lettres, venues de New York, de Paris et de Londres, avaient été comme autant de coups de marteau sur le palais de verre de la Prospérité’ (CH, I, p. 488). This time, when Mignon loses his fortune, he looks not towards America, but to the East, and China. Balzac had been interested in China and the Orient since adolescence, and in October 1842, had contributed to *La Législature* an extended review of Auguste Borget’s *La Chine et les Chinois*. The choice was also a topical one, since the Opium War had broken out in 1839, when China banned the East India Company from selling the narcotic. It is by trading in opium that Mignon restores his wealth,⁵⁵

⁵⁵ In November 1830, Balzac contributed to *La Caricature* a short text entitled ‘L’Opium’, in which he described the hallucinatory properties of the drug. The unnamed protagonist joins an Englishman in consuming opium, with predictable results: ‘après avoir entendu les ravissantes voix d’Italie, avoir compris la musique par tous leurs pores, avoir éprouvé de poignantes délices, ils arrivèrent à l’enfer de l’opium... C’était des milliards de voix furieuses, des têtes qui criaient: tantôt des figures d’enfants contractées comme celles des mourants; des femmes couvertes d’horribles plaies, déchirées, plaintives; puis des hommes disloqués tirés par les cheveux’ (OD, II, pp. 815-16). Though he was fully aware of the effects of opium, it is certain that Balzac abused this substance less than he did coffee. See for example the enigmatic

as he explains in a letter to Dumay: 'J'ai fait le commerce de l'opium en gros pour des maisons de Canton, toutes dix fois plus riches que moi' (CH, I, pp. 556-57). Balzac does not, however, condemn the way in which Mignon regains his fortune. Instead, he rewards the far-sighted provincial with a château in Provence, and the right to use his late father's title. In *Modeste Mignon*, the capitalist society of the July Monarchy is already beginning to take shape, while some remnants of a more honourable past survive. Charles Mignon combines the flair for investment typical of the bourgeoisie with an old-style sense of nobility that demands he pay his debts. He recovers from the disaster of Napoleon's defeat, not in the manner of a malevolent opportunist such as Philippe Bridau, but as an energetic businessman whose experiences have taught him to look beyond the provinces, and beyond France.

The real talent in Le Havre, however, lies with Mignon's daughter, Modeste. The theme of the intelligent provincial woman and her contacts with Paris was one with which Balzac seemed especially preoccupied in the early 1840s. After *La Muse du département*, he had embarked on *Un grand homme de Paris en province*, for which he created the character, Bettina Brézac, a nineteen-year-old girl whose appetite for European literature makes her an obvious precursor of Modeste:

reference in a letter to Madame Hanska, in 1833: 'Je n'ai jamais connu l'ivresse que par un cigare que E[ugène] Sue m'a fait fumer malgré moi, et c'est ce qui m'a donné les moyens de peindre *l'ivresse aux Italiens* que vous me reprochez dans [*Le Voyage à*] *Java*' (LH, I, p. 32; End March 1833).

[Bettina] savait l'allemand, elle lut *La Messiade*, tout Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, elle dévora les œuvres de la littérature allemande, et son âme reçut alors le baptême du romanesque. Elle apprit l'anglais, devint folle de lord Byron; puis elle aborda, dans sa fureur de lecture, toute la littérature française, elle se plongea dans ce vaste océan qui commence aux fabliaux, s'enfle avec le seizième siècle des œuvres de Rabelais, de Montaigne, s'épanche au dix-septième pour déborder au dix-huitième et au dix-neuvième' (*CH*, XII, pp. 402-03).

Like Bettina Brézac, Modeste is young woman of marked intellectual ability. She sings and composes music, and, in contrast to her provincial neighbours, is said to be 'abattue devant un tableau de Raphaël, de Titien, de Rubens [...], c'est-à-dire devant le beau idéal de chaque pays' (*CH*, I, p. 500). She speaks three languages, and declares herself proud to be 'un peu allemande' (*CH*, I, p. 604). Like her fictional predecessor, she is also a voracious reader, '[et] donna pour pâture à son âme les chefs-d'œuvre modernes des trois littératures anglaise, allemande et française' (*CH*, I, p. 505). As her admiration for the genius of artistic endeavour grows, Modeste finds herself drawn towards the literature of Paris, the decisive moment occurring in the bookshop, when she catches sight of a lithograph of one of her favourite poets, Canalis. After buying the portrait, she loses herself in fantasies, picturing a Bohemian figure, 'flânant sur les quais, triste, rêveur, succombant au travail et remontant à sa mansarde, chargé de poésie' (*CH*, I, p. 512). Her experience threatens to be like that of so many provincial women in *La Comédie humaine*, who discover literature, and are promptly corrupted. In the Besançon of *Albert Savarus*, for example, we witness the effect of just such a discovery on Rosalie de Watteville. At the age of seventeen, 'Rosalie n'avait lu que les *Lettres édifiantes*, et des ouvrages sur la science héraldique' (*CH*, I, p. 923). Her literary innocence is lost when she reads a novella written by the enigmatic

lawyer, Savarus, with whom she develops an obsession, stealing his letters, and condemning him, ultimately, to a life of seclusion at the Grande Chartreuse. As represented by Balzac, the provincial woman is unable to cope with sudden exposure to a fictional world so vividly removed from the dull routines of her own life.

Modeste, however, is 'une lectrice avertie, plus que pervertie',⁵⁶ and Balzac portrays her as a woman who retains control over both her mind, and her future. 'J'ai le droit, la volonté, le pouvoir, la permission de faire mon malheur moi-même,' she declares, 'et j'en use' (*CH*, I, p. 546). The roots of this independence are to be found, once again, in the status of Le Havre. In a privilege that he had previously bestowed only on the Tourangeaux of *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, in 1833, Balzac grants his fictional Havrais the ability to understand, expose, and compete with Paris. Modeste herself is surrounded by gifted allies such as the devoted hunchback, Butscha, who, in spite of physical deformity, is said to be 'spirituel et fin autant qu'un prince qui se venge' (*CH*, I, p. 595). It is he who reveals Canalis to be an acquisitive, self-absorbed individual '[qui] avait, selon la pittoresque expression des journalistes, vidé son sac [...]; sa lyre ne possède pas sept cordes, elle n'en a qu'une' (*CH*, I, p. 516). Evidently, in Le Havre, which Maurice Regard describes as 'une ville en proie à la spéculation' (*CH*, I, p. 453), wealth is not only the money earned from finance and commerce, but the intellectual capital which repels the Parisian who would otherwise plunder the town. To the literary talent of his youngest daughter, Charles Mignon adds the practical wisdom of an

⁵⁶ Joëlle Mertès-Gleize, 'Séduite et épousée: les stéréotypes de la lecture dans *Modeste Mignon*', in *Balzac: œuvres complètes: le "moment" de 'La Comédie humaine'*, ed. by Claude Duchet and Isabelle Tournier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1993), pp. 171-88 (p. 173).

enlightened provincial, one with sufficient cunning to thwart the determination of the Baron de Canalis to carry off his hard-won riches. Allowing Modeste the freedom to choose between the poet and his secretary, Ernest de La Brière, Mignon invites the two men to the town, so that his daughter may study them at leisure. 'Tu as commencé par un poème,' he instructs her, 'tu finiras par une bucolique en essayant de surprendre le vrai caractère de ces messieurs' (*CH*, I, p. 608). The hunting party which later takes place at Rosembray serves to unmask the greed and vanity of Canalis, for whom 'la fortune est un besoin' (*CH*, I, p. 515), while confirming that his secretary, 'l'homme à vertus positives' (*CH*, I, p. 692), is interested, not in wealth or social position, but in the emotional rewards that are to be won from Le Havre. This late declaration of the small town's superiority over Paris makes *Modeste Mignon* a landmark work in Balzac's treatment of the provinces. According to Nicole Mozet, the novelist had finally, and perhaps reluctantly, accepted that France was changing, and that his attitude towards the provinces had to evolve with it: 'Après 1840, Balzac a fait son deuil de cette ancienne France dont il garda longtemps la nostalgie, fasciné malgré lui par le travail du temps.'⁵⁷ Clearly, *Modeste Mignon* reveals something of the way in which the traditional conservatism of the provinces has been shaken by the country's taking on a pivotal role in global commerce, and enjoying the international respectability conferred upon it by the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, in 1843. At the same time, the novel argues that provinces can have an active role in this development, with men such as Charles Mignon possessing both the energy and intellect to lead France on the international stage.

⁵⁷ Mozet, 'La province balzacienne confrontée au temps de la civilisation', p. 69.

If *Modeste Mignon* represents an evolution in Balzac's treatment of provincial France, there nevertheless remains the question of whether the ideological shift was coincidental, a result of Le Havre's geographical situation and status as a bustling port as much as of a change in the novelist's perspective. Indeed, there is much evidence to counter the suggestion that, with *Modeste Mignon*, a new type of provincial town had emerged within *La Comédie humaine*, and that the older, satirical themes had simply been discarded. During the latter stages of his career, Balzac seemed more concerned with filling what he perceived to be the lacunae in his depiction of nineteenth-century French society. Among the themes that continued to preoccupy him was that of the provincial election campaign. As early as *Sténie*, he had made the tedious Monsieur de Plancksey the first of his provincial characters to seek election to political office, while in both *Pierrette* and *Albert Savarus*, he had shown election fever taking hold of the small towns of Provins and Besançon respectively. His enthusiasm for this theme of provincial elections was still undiminished in 1847, when finally he published, albeit in an unfinished state, *Le Député d'Arcis*. At repeated intervals in his work, Balzac had declared his intention to reveal 'par quelles guerres intestines, au prix de quels sacrifices à la Brutus, une petite ville enfante un député!' (*CH*, VIII, p. 724).⁵⁸ In the 1839 preface to *Le Cabinet des antiques*, and throughout the first half of that year, he promised the imminent completion of the novel under one of its earlier titles, *Les Mitouflet, ou l'Élection en province*: 'Les Mitouflet, autre livre déjà fort avancé, présentera le tableau des ambitions électorales, qui amènent à Paris les riches industriels

⁵⁸ The first conception of *Le Député d'Arcis* would appear to date from between October 1834 and April 1835. For further information on the successive versions of this novel, see for example Colin Smethurst, 'Introduction à l'étude du *Député d'Arcis*', *AB* (1967), 223-40.

de la province, et montrera comment ils y retournent' (*CH*, IV, p. 960). If *Le Député d'Arcis* was conceived first as a story of failed ambition, its focus nevertheless shifted to the theme of political corruption. At first sight, the fictional Arcis-sur-Aube appears as a picturesque town, with a cosmopolitanism of its own.

La physionomie des maisons est si variée, qu'un voyageur y trouverait un spécimen des maisons de tous les pays. Ainsi, au nord, sur le bord du bassin [...], il y a une maison quasiment méridionale dont le toit plie sous la tuilerie à gouttières en usage dans l'Italie (*CH*, VIII, p. 759).

While the visitor may be seduced by the charm of this small town, however, the central government is not. In 1831, a change in the electoral law had increased the number of parliamentary constituencies from 430 to 459. These districts varied enormously in size, population, and wealth, with the smaller rural districts, where fewer votes were needed to elect a deputy, more vulnerable to corrupt pressures than the Parisian constituencies, which often had more than two thousand eligible voters.

It is to such pressures that the fictional Arcis falls victim in 1839, during an electoral campaign that, historians have confirmed, '[s'est] déroulée dans un climat d'intrigues, de pressions, voire de corruption qui déconsidéra le régime'.⁵⁹ From 1816 to 1836, the town has returned François Keller as their representative in the Chamber. When the powerful banker is elevated to the peerage, his hope is that his former position will be transferred to his son, Charles. This attempt to transform an elected office into a hereditary right is an abuse that Balzac takes it upon himself to denounce. In *Le Député d'Arcis*,

⁵⁹ Jardin and Tudesq, *La France des notables*, II, pp. 152-53.

he shows a commercial and industrial middle-class, represented by the hat-maker, Philéas Beauvisage, exercising its right to refuse this automatic succession, and put forward its own candidate. A sense of regional patriotism is awakened, as Beauvisage declares that 'Arcis ne sera plus un bourg-pourri!' (*CH*, VIII, p. 723). The subsequent nomination of the lawyer, Simon Giguet, and the meeting of sixty-seven voters in the home of his aunt, Madame Marion, does not escape the notice of central government, which responds by sending its own envoy to Arcis, in the form of Maxime de Trailles. The drama that follows is recounted from a provincial perspective,⁶⁰ as the people of Arcis work themselves into a frenzy of speculation over the identity of 'l'étranger' and 'l'inconnu' (*CH*, VIII, p. 774).⁶¹ This perspective is developed somewhat at the expense of the political theme, as Balzac reveals Simon Giguet's candidature to be bound up with small-town interests. The lawyer himself, whom the narrator mocks as having 'ce qu'on nomme en province de la dignité' (*CH*, VIII, p. 726) campaigns in the hope of securing a rich marriage with Cécile Beauvisage. The townsfolk, for their part, have little interest in Giguet's policies; they are simply content to have found a candidate to oppose the will of the Paris government. That their first concern is for themselves, and for their town, is made explicit in the words of the notary, Achille Pigoult, who argues with conviction that the Kellers have always protected the interests of Arcis. 'Où est la caisse de la maison Giguet, et quelle sera son influence dans les ministères?' he asks. 'De quel crédit jouira-t-elle sur la

⁶⁰ Balzac was acutely aware of the difficulty of investing his political subject with dramatic interest, as he conceded to Madame Hanska: 'Et si vous saviez comme il est difficile de faire des ouvrages comme *Le Député de province*, où il n'y a pas l'élément de la passion! Rendre dramatique et intéressant le jeu des intérêts!' (*LH*, I, p. 619; 21 November 1842).

⁶¹ Colin Smethurst takes up this question of perspective in his essay, 'Balzac and Stendhal: a comparison of electoral scenes', in Charlton, Gaudon and Pugh, eds., *Balzac and the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 111-21 (p. 120).

place de Paris? S'il faut faire reconstruire en pierre notre méchant pont de bois, obtiendra-t-elle du Département et de l'État les fonds nécessaires?' (*CH*, VIII, p. 738). Balzac may begin by indicting the corruption practised by Louis-Philippe's government, but his attention quickly turns to the theme of a town that, unlike others in his work, is anxious to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants, even if this means sacrificing its regional pride.

Among the other provincial novels that Balzac began to compose late in his career, many would remain mere fragments. From these it is virtually impossible to predict how his treatment of the provincial theme might have developed had his life not been cut short in 1850. In some of these stories, there is evidence of themes that had preoccupied him throughout his career. In *La Gloire des sots*, for instance, a fragment dating from after July 1844, he returns to the question of nationalized property. The character Martin is a wine merchant who makes 'pendant la Révolution, à Nemours, une rapide fortune et immense relativement au pays' (*CH*, XII, p. 405), and whose son rises, under Napoleon, to a diplomatic post in the United States. In January 1848, Balzac was also working on *Un caractère de femme*, 'le tableau d'une ville de garnison de frontière' (*CH*, v, p. 117) identified in the 1843 preface to *Les Souffrances de l'inventeur* as one of the principal lacunae in his literary output. He sketched a list of scenes for this text, in which he revealed his intention to describe the 'création du parti libéral' (*CH*, XII, p. 429) in Belley, a corner of France 'entièrement inconnu aux peintres et aux touristes' (*CH*, XII, p. 457). The piece contains echoes of familiar Balzacian themes, as the fictional Colonel Sautereau, under the surveillance of the authorities for his suspected part in Napoleon's return to power, is ordered to confinement in his

native town. Before the protagonist has even stepped down from the stagecoach, his arrival gives rise to 'mille conjectures' (*CH*, XII, p. 461), and he is quickly warned by his uncle, the Président du Tribunal, that the locals have 'la langue aussi longue que les oreilles' (*CH*, XII, p. 464). The manuscript ends before we discover the way in which this stranger disturbs the silent, monotonous existence of the townsfolk. Evidently, the theme of provincial life continued to inspire Balzac, who in turn emphasized that the provinces remained worthy of literary consideration.

Another text from 1847, *Les Méfaits d'un procureur du Roi*, was to be set in Morvan, a region whose people are described, as in *Les Paysans*, as a 'race âpre et sauvage' (*CH*, XII, p. 423). The story was to recount events in the town of Château-Chinon, following the marriage between the son of Monsieur Bongrand, and Mathilde, daughter of the famous Parisian lawyer, Derville. The text is of particular interest, for it shows that in spite of the evolution of, and contradictions within Balzac's fictional provinces, his determination to explore the positive aspects of provincialism remained intact. In the unfinished novel of 1848, Monsieur de Bongrand reserves for the recently married Portenduères the same affection he had shown Ursule Mirouët, when greed had threatened to deprive her of her rightful inheritance; for the couple, he remains 'un ami dans toute l'acception de ce mot, pour ne pas dire un père' (*CH*, XII, p. 417). In *Les Méfaits*, we also glimpse once again the striking natural beauty of provincial France. 'La Suisse est tout entière dans le département des Basses-Alpes,' we are told. 'La Provence entre Hyères et Marseille est une miniature de l'Italie et de l'Afrique réunies' (*CH*, XII, pp. 422-23). As well as confirming his obvious and profound awareness of the

diversity of the country in which he lived, Balzac's comments would seem to suggest, not a simple rejection, but rather a reattribution of the exotic to provincial France. For him, the French provinces provided as much fuel for his creative imagination as the foreign shores to which he likened them.

In spite of the survival of a rich vein of satire in Balzac's treatment of the provinces, there are nevertheless other, completed works that hold out the promise of a definitive break with the seventeenth-century theatrical tradition. Foremost among these is *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*. Alternatively titled *Le Provincial à Paris*, this series of sketches from 1846 played on the commercial success of the guides and 'codes' of Parisian life that became fashionable during the Restoration period. In 1825, Louis Montigny's own *Le Provincial à Paris* had achieved enormous popularity among the reading public by returning to what the author recognized as familiar satirical territory: 'De temps immémorial on s'est moqué à Paris, des êtres disgraciés que le ciel n'a pas fait naître sur les bords heureux de la Seine.'⁶² In *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*, Balzac threatened once again to spare the inexperienced provincial visitor no amount of ridicule. Here, he tells the story of Sylvestre Gazonal, the owner of a linen factory who comes to Paris from his home in the eastern Pyrenees, to follow a legal dispute with his local prefect. The historical setting is 1843, though at first sight, it seems that Balzac has made no advance on the satirical tradition of the past. The opening pages poke fun at the provincial who, in his small-town accent, admits to knowing 'rien de Parisse' (*CH*, VII, p. 1160). Indeed, we learn that, in the first few months of his stay, Gazonal 'fut si effrayé de la cherté de la vie et des moindres babioles, qu'il s'était tenu

⁶² Montigny, I, p. 3. For further information on the contextual link between Montigny's guide and *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*, see Anne-Marie Meininger, *CH*, VII, pp. 1121-27.

coi dans son méchant hôtel' (*CH*, VII, p. 1155). It nevertheless becomes clear that Balzac has selected this theme, not to cater for satirical tastes, nor even simply to subvert the established literary image of the ridiculous provincial. Instead we see within his work the emergence of a new kind of provincial character.

Gazonal's experience of life in Paris is altered when he is taken on a tour of the city by his cousin, Léon de Lora, and the latter's friend, Bixiou. In the space of a few hours, he is introduced to a variety of Parisian types, from the hat-seller, Vital, to the fortune-teller, Madame Fontaine. These encounters see him commit some of the errors that might be expected of the naïve provincial in Paris, though Balzac allows these mistakes to go unpunished, and instead reserves a grudging admiration for his character. Thus, when Gazonal asks a hairdresser whether he considers his trade an art, his question meets with an almost flattering riposte: 'Monsieur, vous en parlez comme un... enfant! et cependant, vous paraissez être du Midi, le pays des hommes de génie' (*CH*, VII, p. 1185). No longer is it necessary for the provincial to prove his talent, as Rastignac had to do twenty years before. The energy, ambition, and intellectual abilities of the man from the Midi are, for a new generation of Parisians, indisputable. The tour ends with Lora and Bixiou arranging for their guest to enjoy the favours of the seductive actress, Jenny Carabine. After three days in his hotel room, Gazonal announces that he has ruined himself for the girl, only for his two laughing friends to return all the promissory notes that he had signed. The experience forces the provincial to concede, once again, the superiority of the capital. 'Ah! quelle femme!...' he gasps, apparently exhausted. 'Allons, la province ne peut lutter avec Paris, je me retire à la

Trappe' (*CH*, VII, p. 1212). At the end of Balzac's career, Paris remains 'l'antichambre du Paradis' (*CH*, VII, p. 1176), and its inhabitants retain their wit and sophistication. What has changed is that, rather than abuse its brilliance to mock the provincial visitor, the city now acts as a welcoming host, and finally allows him to share the joke, as Bixiou concludes: 'Nous vous avons instruit et sauvé de la misère, régalé, et... amusé' (*CH*, VII, p. 1213). As a result of Lora and Bixiou's intervention, Gazonal can stand by and watch as ridicule and suffering are heaped on the other unwitting actors in the drama of Parisian life: 'une vieille femme à chapeau resté six mois à l'étalage' (*CH*, VII, p. 1157); 'la *marcheuse* [...] que sa mère, fausse ou vraie, a vendu' (*CH*, VII, p. 1159), and the porters who earn less money in a year 'que l'État n'en donne pour un forçat' (*CH*, VII, p. 1177). It is testimony to Balzac's development of the provincial theme that it is no longer the provincial, but the Parisian, who is the unsuspecting figure of fun. 'Dans *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*,' says Nicole Mozet, 'on a l'impression que Paris a assez de Parisiens à dévorer pour avoir besoin de se rabattre sur des victimes provinciales.'⁶³ Equally, however, the hospitality afforded Gazonal could be viewed as an acknowledgement that the provinces themselves have reached a stage of social development sufficient to command the respect of a city that, for so long, sought only to mock them. The provincial businessman is not a Molièresque buffoon, but a respected individual with an important role to play in the pursuit of economic progress.

⁶³ Mozet, *La Ville de province*, p. 282.

It is clear, then, that the themes of change and renewal are ingrained in the provinces of *La Comédie humaine*. Balzac was profoundly aware of the forward movement of nineteenth-century society. He witnessed the early impact of capitalism and industrialization, as the railways spread outwards, to the northern port of Le Havre, a commercial gateway to the rest of the world, and to southern cities such as Lyons, the country's silk-weaving capital. His achievement, however, was not simply in documenting this evolution; rather, in a century of inevitable change, his work asks whether change cannot be managed. In those corners of provincial France that industry and commerce have still to penetrate, he explores the possibility that such elements can be introduced. Arguing for greater recognition of the social and economic potential of the provinces, he balances the pessimism of *Les Chouans* and *Les Paysans* with a striking, sometimes idealistic, affirmation of the way in which rural communities can take an active role in their own regeneration. The tools with which to undertake this process of reconstruction are, as he demonstrates, already to be found in the existing resources of the countryside: an energetic peasantry that can be encouraged to take pride in extracting material prosperity from the soil.

While Balzac called for hectares of wasted land to be revitalized, I have also discussed the enthusiasm with which he continued to cultivate his treatment of the provincial theme. As he neared the end of his literary career, Balzac became increasingly conscious of that which was missing from his fictional provinces. In *Modeste Mignon*, he finally satisfied his interest in the bustling port of Le Havre. Similarly, in *Le Député d'Arcis*, he portrayed a small town gripped by the fever of an election campaign. In other, unfinished

projects such as *La Gloire des sots*, *Les Méfaits d'un procureur du Roi*, and *Un caractère de femme*, he showed that he could still combine older, satirical themes with a sense of nostalgia for the provinces as places of moral goodness and natural beauty. Even with these texts, though, it is virtually impossible to predict the way in which Balzac's vision of provincial France might have evolved. His post-1844 output does not include a novel in which he returns to Alençon, Saumur, or Angoulême, leading us to suspect the cosmopolitan town described in *Modeste Mignon* may be nothing more than an exception. If these works fail to confirm a decisive shift in ideological focus, it is clear nonetheless that his late provinces are granted new prestige, and indeed, a fragile equality with Paris. A southerner such as Gazonal, in *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*, arrives in the capital in 1845 still a provincial, but also as a businessman who can enjoy the city's pleasures without fear of ridicule. The welcoming of this industrialist stands as an acknowledgement that the provinces are as much worthy participants in the pursuit of national progress as they are indispensable to the structure of *La Comédie humaine*. In my concluding remarks, I shall outline the way in which Balzac's approach to the provincial theme served as an exemplar for the next generation of novelists, many of whom built on his achievement while, paradoxically, stating their determination to react against the Balzacian mode.

Conclusion

'Ma pauvre *Bovary* [...] souffre et pleure dans vingt villages de France à la fois.'¹

Flaubert to Louise Colet (1853)

On 26 June 1830, Balzac contributed to *La Mode* an article entitled 'De la vie de château'. In this short piece, he delivered a striking assessment of the state of the provincial theme in France. 'M. le maire, les paysans sournois, le sous-préfet, les voisins, le faubourg Saint-Germain du canton et les libéraux campagnards,' he declared, 'tous ces pantins sont morts, littérairement parlant' (*OD*, II, p. 773). In announcing the passing of these established literary types, Balzac revealed his own acute sensitivity to the evolution of the genre. At the beginning of the July Monarchy, mocking the provincial remained a fashionable pursuit in both the theatre and the press. This tradition was nevertheless being challenged, as novelists from Scott to Stendhal showed that a more complex treatment of the provinces was possible. The effects of this development continued to be felt in the half-century that followed Balzac's death, as writers enriched the genre with their own currents of social, economic, and political thought. The Second Empire signalled a return to strongly centralized government, a policy aimed at restoring France 'non

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. by Jean Bruneau, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973-97), II, p. 392 (14 August 1853).

seulement à l'obéissance mais encore à l'uniformité'.² In practice, domestic repression had the opposite effect, and made the regions more determined than ever to assert their cultural identities. Leading the counter-offensive was Frédéric Mistral, whose response to the Bonapartist regime was to found a group of Félibres, or men of free faith, who set out, in 1852, to rediscover the language of Oc, and rewrite the poetry of the Troubadours. Their activities reflected a new ideological context, 'un mouvement gigantesque de retour aux sources'³ in which writers sought to redefine the French identity through their attachment to the regions of their birth.

This movement crystallized in the wake of the Paris Commune in 1871, as young men like Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras began to question the fitness of Paris to lead France towards a more harmonious future. It was their collective voice, heard in numerous local reviews such as *La Petite Patrie* and *La Revue provinciale*, which ensured that, in the 1890s and early 1900s, 'l'enracinement, la communion intime avec un terroir sont présentés comme le plus riche et le plus enviable des patrimoines'.⁴ At last, the provinces began to express pride in their literatures, their customs and traditions, while the brilliant reputation of the capital burned on the barricades of yet another working-class revolt. The political assertion of their regional identities was fused with a renewed drive towards cultural preservation. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the growing popularity of tourism, especially, meant

² M. Agulhon, 'Conscience nationale et conscience régionale en France de 1815 à nos jours', in *Federalism: History and Current Significance* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), pp. 243-266 (p. 249).

³ Paul Claval, 'Le thème régional dans la littérature française', *L'Espace géographique*, 1 (1987), 60-73 (p. 67).

⁴ Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Écrire la France: le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), p. 17.

that the geographical dimensions of France appeared to be shrinking at an ever-faster rate: in 1899, the driving test became a legal requirement, while in 1900, the Michelin brothers published their first *Guide rouge*. The socio-cultural uniformity of which Balzac had warned in 1841 was by now a clear and present danger, sending regional novelists into a frenzy of activity. In the same way as their great predecessor had documented the distinctive architecture of Angoulême and Issoudun, now others, including Eugène Le Roy, with *Jacquou le croquant* (1899), and Louis Pergaud, with *De Goupil à Margot* (1910), set out to celebrate the diversity of their cherished *pays* before the memory of their songs, dress, and dialects was extinguished forever.

The extent to which Balzac influenced, or even determined, the subsequent course of provincial literature cannot easily be quantified. That said, a brief survey of the work of the first inheritors of his literary legacy is sufficient to confirm that his treatment of provincial life served as an exemplar, and a source of multiple inspiration. For some, Balzac's achievement was one to which they felt compelled to pay homage. In 1858, for example, Max Buchon published *En Province: scènes franc-comtoises*, while in the 1860s, Ferdinand Fabre stated his intention to fill the lacunae in *La Comédie humaine* with a series of *Scènes de la vie rustique*, set in his native Languedoc.⁵ Others saw their task as being to react against what they perceived as Balzac's contempt for provincial France, and against an image of the countryside that they viewed as 'tout à fait incomplète et par là même injuste'.⁶ This sentiment was

⁵ For further information on Fabre's project, see for example Paul Vernois, *Le Roman rustique de George Sand à Ramuz: ses tendances et son évolution (1860-1925)* (Paris: Nizet, 1962), pp. 49-51.

⁶ Bazin, *Questions littéraires et sociales*, p. 126.

born in the 1840s, with George Sand's idyllic depiction of peasant life in Berry, and continued to be felt in the early twentieth century, when regional novelists such as René Bazin delighted in exposing the inaccuracies in Balzac's confident narratives, claiming that he knew the people and places of Charente or Brittany no better than he knew those of Flanders or Provence. Irrespective of the attitudes of these writers, the Balzacian model of provincial life, in which isolation and backwardness were combined with peace and comfort, would nevertheless remain an unavoidable reference. Indeed, the model had left such an indelible mark that many, like Baudelaire, writing in *Le Corsaire-Satan* in 1848, found it almost impossible to conceive of a small town without first thinking of 'la province, cet inépuisable trésor d'éléments littéraires, ainsi que l'a triomphalement démontré notre grand H. de Balzac'.⁷

The shadow cast by the towering figure of Balzac was a problem on which the young Flaubert reflected in 1847, when he and Maxime du Camp travelled west, mostly on foot, to Brittany. Their journey is recorded in *Par les champs et par les grèves*, in which we find Flaubert in Touraine, noting his first impressions of Blois. 'Les rues [...] sont vides,' he begins, in a passage that is firmly rooted in the Balzacian tradition. 'On y sent que tous les jours doivent s'y passer pareils, qu'ils doivent y être, à cette calme monotonie, douce pourtant comme la sonnerie du cadran des églises, pleins de mélancolie savoureuse et de langueurs émouvantes.' As he toys with the small-town imagery, there is a moment when, seemingly in the very act of composition, Flaubert becomes aware that he is writing with the Balzacian model in mind. It was in the depths of this countryside, he muses, that Balzac 'a puisé ses

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, 'Les contes de Champfleury: *Chien-Caillou, Pauvre Trompette, Feu Miette*', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Seuil, L'Intégrale, 1968), pp. 271-273 (p. 271).

héroïnes'. What is unusual about this text, though, is not that the apprentice merely acknowledges a debt to his master, but that he actively considers the way in which Balzac's extraordinary originality lay in being able to extract such dramatic and vibrant stories from such unpromising material. Were small towns always this quiet, he asks, or was it Balzac who had drawn attention to the silence of their streets, and the dramas hidden behind their closed doors? 'Est-ce la poule qui a fait l'œuf, ou l'œuf qui a fait la poule? Sont-ce les livres de Balzac qui m'ont fait songer dans les rues de Blois à ce qui s'y passe ou bien est-ce ce qui s'y passe qui a causé des livres?'⁸ Flaubert offers no solution to this intriguing dilemma, though his remarks demonstrate that for him, too, *La Comédie humaine* had set a powerful literary precedent, and that any new reading, or indeed writing, of the provinces now had to contend explicitly with Balzac. What was it about the latter's representation of provincial life, then, that made such an important and enduring impact upon the genre?

The first point to be made is that Balzac stands at the forefront of a literary rediscovery of provincial France. This newfound curiosity towards the regions was a by-product of the Revolution, and the upheavals that caused a Parisian elite to demand knowledge of a country that was still unfamiliar to them. This movement of exploration gathered pace in the 1820s, when works such as Nodier, Taylor, and Cailleux's *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* reflected a surge of interest in the social, cultural, and political identities of the regions. It was during this period that provincials themselves initiated a reconsideration, and in turn revalorization, of their historical heritage, with Arcisse de Caumont's Antiquarian Society of

⁸ Gustave Flaubert and Maxime du Camp, *Par les champs et par les grèves*, in Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Bruneau and Bernard Masson, 2 vols (Paris: Seuil, L'Intégrale, 1964), II, 472-549 (p. 475).

Normandy one of a number of learned bodies founded for this purpose. By the end of the Restoration, writers of fiction were beginning to catch up with the contemporary mood. For more than a century, their own rediscovery of the provinces had been hampered by the survival of the seventeenth-century satirical tradition. Isolated attempts at extolling the virtues of the countryside, foremost among which was Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in 1761, had failed to alter the tastes of the reading and theatre-going public, which still preferred the image of the small town as a place of stultifying mediocrity, and that of the provincial as a hopelessly inept figure of fun in the streets of Paris.

This obstacle was not the only one to hamper the evolution of the genre. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was the exotic, rather than the mundane, that enjoyed a fashionable literary status. As long as novelists and their readers preferred the Mauritius of *Paul et Virginie* or the Italy of Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, there seemed no incentive to return to the comparatively banal subject of French provincial life. One of the first to suggest that the possibilities of these exotic settings had been exhausted was Jules Janin. In the *Revue de Paris* in August 1829, Janin set an ironic tone by lauding his native Saint-Étienne, an industrial town enveloped by clouds of choking dust and smoke. Finding beauty in the most unlikely corner of the provinces, his article demonstrated that the exoticism of other countries could be rejected, and reattributed to the 'other' that was provincial France. The possibility was one with which the young Balzac had already experimented. In his early novel, *Sténie*, Touraine is compared to the American state of Ohio. Later, he would make this substitution of foreign for familiar even more explicit, in his 1832 *Voyage de Paris à Java*, in which the narrator casts his

gaze in the direction of the Indre, only to be confronted with a hallucinatory vision of the Ganges: 'Les eaux de l'Indre s'étaient transformées en celles de ce vaste fleuve indien. Je pris un vieux saule pour un crocodile, et les masses de Saché pour les élégantes et sveltes constructions de l'Asie' (*OD*, II, pp. 1142-43). 'Il y avait un commencement de folie à dénaturer ainsi les belles choses de mon pays,' he continues. 'Il fallait y mettre ordre' (*OD*, II, p. 1143). For Balzac, bringing order to the transition from exotic literature would involve an unprecedented fictional journey through France, an enterprise that would continue to draw on his reserves of creative energy until the end of his career.

At first sight, it seems that Balzac should take as much responsibility as any of his literary predecessors for the perpetuation of the satirical tradition. His fictional provinces are places of endless boredom and malicious gossip. Their mediocrity frustrates the talented, encouraging some, such as Lucien de Rubempré, to escape to Paris, while condemning others, such as Athanase Granson, to death. Those who are left behind in the small town are, for the most part, sterile beings deserving of scorn. In *Le Curé de Tours*, Sophie Gamard's mealtime conversation is limited to tales of men who die from excessive consumption of eggs. Similarly, in *Illusions perdues*, Astolphe de Saintot is reputed to be preparing a book on contemporary culture, though in reality, he has written only two pages in twelve years. Far from mocking the provinces merely for the sake of doing so, however, Balzac's evocation of provincial life is underpinned with a new rationale, one in which literary stereotypes and historical reality are used to feed the novelist's creative imagination. First, monotony is used as a foil for the petty dramas that are

hidden behind the doors of the small town. Having promised, in the 1833 preface to *Eugénie Grandet*, that his work would represent only the everyday reality of provincial life, Balzac chose instead to focus on small, enigmatic changes to the dull routine. The Abbé Birotteau's failure to find his slippers in their usual place, or Eugénie Grandet's insistence on having a bowl of sugar on the breakfast table, become sources of high drama.⁹ Second, monotony serves as a basis for political comment. Applying his disgust at the corruption and self-interest of the July Monarchy to the earlier period of the Restoration,¹⁰ Balzac shows the provinces to have suffered a startling social and economic decline. Since the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire, young men such as Max Gilet and his Chevaliers de la Désœuvrance, in *La Rabouilleuse*, have been allowed to waste their lives, when their energies could have been employed in pursuit of national prosperity. Festering in the backwater of Issoudun, these bourgeois delinquents have nothing more useful to do than to wait to inherit from their parents. Elsewhere, in *Pierrette*, the town of Provins retains almost nothing of its former greatness. The cultural and economic brilliance for which the town was famous in the twelfth century, when its people could rival Parisians for social sophistication, has disappeared. The administrators of the July Monarchy may have despatched Prosper

⁹ In *Madame Bovary* (1857), Flaubert would take this approach to the monotony of provincial life a stage further, removing the element of high drama recurrent in Balzac's novels, and investing undramatic events, the coming and going of the stagecoach, or the boiling pans and ticking clock in the Bovary's kitchen, with psychological significance. Erich Auerbach summarizes the Flaubertian approach in these terms: 'The demonification of everyday social intercourse which is to be found in Balzac is certainly entirely lacking in Flaubert; life no longer surges and foams, it flows viscously and sluggishly. The essence of the happenings of ordinary contemporary life seemed to Flaubert to consist not in tempestuous actions and passions, not in demonic men and forces, but in the prolonged chronic state whose surface movement is mere empty bustle' (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 490-91).

¹⁰ For an overview of Balzac's attitude towards the July Monarchy, see for example Sharif Gemie, 'Balzac and the moral crisis of the July Monarchy', *European History Quarterly*, 19 (1989), 469-94.

Mérimée on his mission to protect the country's historic buildings and monuments, but Balzac continues to indict their ignorance of provincial France, and of the possibilities for economic renewal that are to be found therein. Even in the depths of his monotonous provinces, it would seem that the politician in the novelist is never inactive.

In condemning the decline of small-town France, Balzac also warns of the need to record, through the medium of the novel, the traditional identities of the provinces. The arrival of the railway, and the country's belated move towards industrialization, encouraged him to celebrate, and to defend, the charm of provincial France. Throughout *La Comédie humaine*, he provides evidence of the natural advantages of the provincial setting, and of the wholesome simplicity of life therein. In *La Femme abandonnée*, for example, he describes how the fresh air of Normandy enables Gaston du Nueil to recover from the debilitating effects of illness. At the same time, he reveals geographical isolation as having a positive role in shaping patterns of small-town behaviour. Though their number includes misers like Hochon, who eats his spoiled fruit first, more often the provincials of *La Comédie humaine* are faithful servants such as Nanon, in *Eugénie Grandet*, or devoted women such as Armande d'Esgrignon, in *Le Cabinet des antiques*, figures who show no sign of the greed, selfishness, and moral corruption most commonly associated with Paris. In claiming the superiority of the countryside over the capital, Balzac appears as the linear descendent of Rousseau. Though he admired the work of the Genevan philosopher, he would not restrict himself, however, to warning of what France stood to lose as a result of the onset of urbanization. For while it is evident that he sought to construct a total vision of provincial

France, an ambition reflected in his statement that all small towns are alike, it is also clear that his first move towards defending the provinces was acknowledging their diversity.

This exploration of regional difference, which in Balzac's work co-exists with the seventeenth-century satirical notion of the provinces as a uniform whole, has been, and remains, one of the most controversial aspects of his legacy. By definition, he was not a regional novelist, though this has not prevented readers from comparing his fictional towns to their actual counterparts. Others have embroiled themselves in a fierce debate over his citing of items of regional vocabulary. In 1946, one linguist carried out a two-part study of dialectal expressions in *La Comédie humaine*, concluding, somewhat dejectedly, that 'les variantes régionales n'ont pour lui [Balzac] qu'une valeur de curiosité'.¹¹ I have sought to relieve this sense of critical disappointment by arguing that comparisons, favourable or otherwise, with actual models should not be allowed to detract from the real nature of the novelist's achievement. A pioneer in the use of maps, plans, and guidebooks, Balzac's weaving of authentic local detail into his narratives indicates a new seriousness, but also a new self-consciousness in the treatment of the provincial theme, as the reader is encouraged to believe in the countryside as a literary space. By the same token, if errors and inaccuracies are discovered in his descriptions of France's small towns and villages, it does not necessarily follow that he had no genuine interest in the question of regional identity, or that 'sa campagne ne coïncide jamais avec une région précise'.¹² Instead, in

¹¹ J. Pignon, 'Les parlers régionaux dans la *Comédie humaine*', *Le français moderne*, 14 (1946), 175-200 and 265-80 (p. 280).

¹² Fausta Garavini, 'Province et rusticité: esquisse d'un malentendu', *Romantisme*, 35 (1982), 73-89 (p. 78).

Balzac we see a novelist attempting to come to terms with the fragmentary nature of nineteenth-century provincial life, building his own mosaic in the same way as the natural historians he so admired, Buffon, Cuvier, and Saint-Hilaire, had worked to classify the species of the animal kingdom. Occasionally, his comments on regional character and behaviour, the industriousness of the Auvergnat water-carrier, for example, or the Flemish sense of duty and domestic responsibility, are stereotypical, even banal. Often, he resorts to the language of exoticism, comparing the Breton guerrillas of *Les Chouans* to Mohicans and Redskins, and in so doing, revealing the intertextual presence of James Fenimore Cooper. And yet, at no point does he lose sight of the factors that distinguish one part of France from another. As viewed through the Balzacian lens, not even the maternal province of Touraine is a uniform whole. Indeed, from the shadows of the Cloître Saint-Gatien, in *Sténie* and *Wann-Chlore*, to the dangerous, vibrant streets of *Les Contes drolatiques*, and onwards to the comfort of Clochegourde, in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, Touraine is the most striking example of the multiple manifestations of the provincial theme in Balzac's work.

The fundamental diversity of these provinces leads us in turn to the problem of perspective. What was Balzac's attitude towards regional difference and provincial backwardness? How are we to reconcile his argument that the traditional identities of the provinces should be preserved, with the figure of the authoritarian novelist who, in the 'Avant-propos', declared his faith in the 'Vérités éternelles' (*CH*, I, p. 13) of Throne and Altar? How are we to account for the difference between the Balzac of 1829, who in *Les Chouans* condemned the 'sauvage âpreté' (*CH*, VIII, p. 919) of the

Bretons, with the Balzac of 1844, who described Le Havre, in *Modeste Mignon*, as having an enlightened, cosmopolitan populace? Furthermore, how are we to explain the apparent instability of his attitude towards centralization? In the 1839 preface to *Le Cabinet des antiques*, the excessive concentration of economic and intellectual resources in Paris is identified as ‘une des causes principales de la facilité avec laquelle la France change de gouvernements, de dynasties, et se révolutionne au grand détriment de sa prospérité’ (CH, IV, p. 959). By 1844, and *Les Paysans*, however, it has become ‘la centralisation, contre laquelle on déclame tant, comme on déclame en France contre tout ce qui est grand, utile et fort’ (CH, IX, p. 180). In this thesis, I have examined these variations in light of the possibility that Balzac’s creative consciousness evolved during the course of his career. From one perspective, it would seem plausible that, in the work he produced after 1840, his nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary values of paternal authority and religious observance blended into a reluctant acknowledgement that France had entered a new phase in its socio-economic development. Equally, because his provincial writings are spread both across and outside *La Comédie humaine*, from the youthful *Sténie* in the early 1820s, to the unfinished *Un caractère de femme* in 1848, we are forced to concede that the likelihood of self-contradiction will be strong.

None of these explanations, however, is as reliable as the conclusion that ambivalence and contradiction are an inevitable part of literary representation, and that any attempt to reduce Balzac to a single perspective on provincial life is fraught with hazards. Long before *La Comédie humaine* had begun to take shape, its author was acutely aware that building a fictional universe required him to draw on the varied facets of his own personality. In his *Théorie du*

conte, an under-discussed text which dates from between 1830 and the beginning of 1832, he reveals this self-consciousness through the tale of a writer who returns home, where he is confronted with 'un nombre incommensurable d'exemplaires de [s]a propre personne' (*OD*, I, p. 517). Each likeness approaches the writer's desk, the dandy, with his impertinent airs, and a man who bears close resemblance to Balzac himself, 'l'homme qui ne dort plus, l'homme dont le regard va loin', 'les lèvres jaunes de café' (*OD*, I, p. 518). As one likeness after another steps forward from the darkness, the writer is presented with a vision of his work as a mathematical formula, in which 'les cent expressions de la formule algébrique représentées par les cent moi-même [...], paraissaient vouloir sortir de leur prison, et venir un à un me conter leur formule, dont aucune ne devait ressembler aux précédentes' (*OD*, I, p. 518). A similar principle can be applied to Balzac's treatment of provincial life. Within his multiple provinces, there are multiple personas, giving rise to a cacophony of narrative voices. Thus, on the theme of change and modernization, there is a Balzac who celebrates the rise of bourgeois capitalists such as Beauvisage, in *Le Député d'Arcis*, a man who succeeds in business because he was willing to speculate on the price of cotton during the Napoleonic Wars. At the same time, however, there is another Balzac who argues that industrial development has damaged the countryside of Champagne, and that much more could be achieved by returning the land to a fertile state: 'On voit, par l'énergie industrielle que déploie un pays pour qui la nature est marâtre, quels progrès y ferait l'agriculture si l'argent consentait à commanditer le sol, qui n'est pas plus ingrat dans la Champagne qu'il ne l'est en Écosse' (*CH*, VIII, p. 750). Instead, local fortunes, 'capitiaux lentement

amassés' (*CH*, VIII, p. 750), such as those of Beauvisage are locked in hat-making and textile manufacture, condemning Arcis to remain a small town 'sans transit, sans passage, en apparence vouée à l'immobilité sociale la plus complète' (*CH*, VIII, p. 750). These shifts in Balzacian perspective ensure that neither his provinces, nor the Paris to which they are constantly compared, are a monolith; rather, their identities are both fragmented and unstable, torn between backwardness and sophistication, innocence and immorality, brilliance and mediocrity.¹³

It was with this fluid, shifting, indeed fractured, perspective that Balzac brought a sense of critical flexibility to the provincial genre. The point is neatly illustrated in *Le Médecin de campagne* and *Le Curé de village*, which together serve as a microcosm of his achievement in encouraging a serious literary consideration of French provincial life. In both texts, we see a Balzac who is sensitive to, and who engages with, the difficulties faced by rural communities. In the novel of 1833, he introduces the philanthropist, Doctor Benassis, to a miserable village in Dauphiné, where the locals survive on the most basic cereal crops, and whose regeneration is initiated by the building of a road. Later, in 1839, he set the spiritual redemption of Véronique Graslin within the similarly impoverished surroundings of Montégnac. At the outset, there would seem little reason to praise Balzac for his originality in these projects. After all, during the Restoration and July Monarchy, the parlous state of the provincial economy was a source of fierce debate between agronomists,

¹³ This shifting perspective serves further to illustrate the injustice done to Balzac by exponents of the New Novel in the 1950s. For Alain Robbe-Grillet, in particular, the nineteenth-century novel before Flaubert 'visait à imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable. Comme l'intelligibilité du monde n'était même pas mise en question, raconter ne posait pas de problème. L'écriture romanesque pouvait être innocente' (*Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 37).

social reformers, and politicians alike, from Mathieu de Dombasle, with his *Annales agricoles de Roville* (1824-37), to the theories of Fourier and Saint-Simon. These discussions were ones to which Balzac nevertheless made an important contribution. On the one hand, his work can be seen to mirror the anxiety of a monarchist who feared the peasantry as a threat to the social order, and who, as early as 1829, had warned against incurring the wrath of the rural underclass. On the other, his analysis of rural behaviour is based on the objective principle formulated in the 'Avant-propos', that 'l'homme n'est ni bon ni méchant' (CH, I, p. 12), and that within the provinces there are already the materials with which a drive to economic prosperity could be launched. At the heart of village life, he shows us a strength of community spirit that leads an old peasant woman to care for orphans from the local poorhouse. Elsewhere, when peasants such as Farrabesche have strayed into a life of crime and disregard for authority, he demonstrates that their energy and knowledge of their local environment can be harnessed as a force for good. The whole forms a plea for greater understanding of the provinces, and a warning to the Parisian administration that regional difference is an inescapable element of socio-economic progress.

Balzac had shown that the provinces could be treated with seriousness and satire, celebration and condemnation, optimism and pessimism. The one-dimensional tradition of mocking the provincial, passed down from seventeenth-century theatre, was transformed into a multifaceted theme. The figure of the provincial, viewed within a literary space that was both geographically and topographically developed, acquired a new complexity.

Though still bored by the small town and displaying a weakness for gossip, Balzac's provincials are also endowed with the most admirable human qualities, while their creator retains an awareness of the social, economic, and political circumstances affecting them, from questions of landownership and agricultural productivity, to the spread of industrial and financial capitalism. Seen in this perspective, it is unfortunate that Balzac did not live to continue his role in the evolution of the genre. As he approached the end of his career, his writings, including several unfinished fragments, seemed to promise further shifts, developments, even contradictions, in his treatment of the provinces. In some novels, it was clear that his desire to build a total yet particularized vision of the provinces remained undiminished, as he set about filling the blanks in his fictional universe, striving, as he always had, to probe the most distant and unfamiliar corners of France. In the event, he would leave a new generation of novelists to struggle with his immense literary legacy. Between their work and the representation of provincial life in *La Comédie humaine*, there would be numerous points of convergence and similarity. Thus, when Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was serialized in the *Revue de Paris* in 1856, it carried a sub-title that could not have paid clearer homage to Balzac than if it had mentioned him by name: *Mœurs de province*.¹⁴ Four years later, in *Le Malheur d'Henriette Gérard* (1860), Duranty would claim for himself the Balzacian ability to penetrate the hidden dramas of the small town. Even George Sand, whose 1851 preface to *La Mare au diable* instructed readers to

¹⁴ The sub-title was added to the manuscript, apparently by Maxime du Camp, who was at this time co-editor of the review. For Alan Raitt, the mystery does nothing to lessen its impact, since the sub-title 'is maintained in all the editions which came out in his [Flaubert's] lifetime, when if he had wanted to get rid of it, there was nothing to stop him from doing so' (*The Originality of 'Madame Bovary'* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 31).

admire the peasants of Berry 'dans ce qu'ils ont de bon et de sain',¹⁵ harboured a socialist and humanitarian agenda that brought her rustic novels closer to Balzac than she herself might have believed possible. While writing within the Balzacian tradition, these and other novelists would also make their own unique contributions to the genre. The impersonality of Flaubert, the biting irony of Duranty, the self-reflexiveness of Barbey d'Aurevilly, or the sensual attachment to the soil depicted by Zola, in *La Terre* (1887) - all of this confirms the extent to which these writers sought to rework and recast their great predecessor. That Balzac's creative and critical versatility paved the way for them to do so stands as one of the most remarkable achievements of his career.

¹⁵ George Sand, *La Mare au diable*, ed. by Léon Cellier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 30.

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