

“Writing Visual History into *La Comédie humaine*: Balzac and the Napoleonic Myth.”

It would be an understatement to say that Napoleon Bonaparte, who appears in 32 of Balzac's novels, occupies a dominant role in *La Comédie humaine*. In this study dedicated to the vast narrative space that Napoleon assumes in Balzac's *œuvre*, we will consider how the Napoleonic legacy is integral to Balzac's modern historical vision. While much critical attention has been paid separately to Balzac's approach to history and to the frequency with which Napoleon appears under the author's pen, it is the ideological intersection offered by these two questions that merits further analysis.

Aside from the momentous events that comprised his reign, Napoleon equally fulfilled an important ideological role in nineteenth-century France, serving both as "heir" and "executor" of the Revolution of 1789.<sup>1</sup> Napoleon derived his power not from a royal birthright or the past, but from the present, and the accomplishments of his own person alone. Furthermore, his rule was considered legitimate to the degree to which it distanced him from the former ruling power of the Ancien régime; given that Napoleon held no position in the Jacobin government, nor did he partake in voting for the Louis XVI's death in 1793, he was viewed as an untainted source of authority, rather than a constant reminder to the nation of its patricidal guilt.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Napoleon's leadership did not act further to alienate France from its severed history, but established a reparative link between past and present. In addition to Napoleon's official role in history, we also consider his literary and mythical roles, tied to the Napoleonic myth.

Whether conceived as a propagandist measure constructed by royalist opposition or created by the Emperor himself, the mythical component seems to have been built into Napoleon's reign from its very beginning. Napoleon himself commissioned painters such

as Jacques Louis David and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, among others, to portray the mythical qualities he sought to attach to his person; one has but to observe David's romanticized image of *Napoleon at Saint-Bernard* (1800), his finger extended toward heaven, in order to envision not only a commander of men, but of Destiny itself. While the Napoleonic myth began to more fully take shape at the Empire's fall in 1815, Napoleon's death in 1821 was the serendipitous event that validated his legacy for the literary world; he ceased to be a mere mortal with an extraordinary destiny and was transformed into a Romantic symbol *par excellence* who leagued the Romantic generation a solitary genius and "a master of literary energy" who inspired countless romanticized biographies, poems, short stories, as well as works of art. (In 1831 there was a Diorama (a recently invented technology) to view, "The Tomb of Napoleon at Sainte-Hélène"; in the theater season 1830-31, 29 plays were performed about Napoleon alone).<sup>3</sup> However, it was under the July monarchy regime (1830-1848), the time during which Balzac composed the bulk of his literary *œuvre*, that the Napoleonic myth reached the apex of its popularity.

The social and political unrest stemming from a general desire to remake the social hierarchy, reclaim the rights and liberties forged by the Revolution and written into law during the Empire, finally irrupted in July of 1830 when Charles X's increasingly rigid and ultra royalist regime came to an end. When Louis-Philippe was then crowned "King of the French" and his government did not fulfill the broad based reforms that had been anticipated by the Republicans, 1830 came to represent a "deception" commingled with nostalgia for the fallen Emperor. However, in the interest of asserting its own

legitimacy, the July monarchy chose to acknowledge the nationalistic cult of Napoleon, sponsoring numerous art competitions in his honor.<sup>4</sup>

The collective national identity forged through the identification of national heroes and their images was sanctioned by the regime as a means to legitimize both its own authority, and prescribe its particular version of history.<sup>5</sup> When Louis-Philippe transformed Versailles into a museum in 1834, the *Salle du Sacre* dedicated to Napoleon portrayed him not as a legitimate ruler of France, but as a military leader. Raffet's *The Master's Eye* (1833) is but one example demonstrating the politically dictated scope of Napoleon's historical role. This point was further solidified when, in 1840, Louis-Philippe ordered the return of Napoleon's ashes from Sainte-Hélène, holding a national funeral in his honor before delivering his remains to their final resting place under the dome of the Hôtel des Invalides.

Given his century's new approach to history; this is, the idea of presenting a “stable vision” of the past (via the arts, theater and new visual technologies), how might we begin to form a context for understanding Napoleon's presence both as a mythical and a real historical figure in *La Comédie humaine*? For Balzac, Napoleon represented an important source of literary inspiration as well as a personal myth, identifying him as a kindred will, and inscribing him into his literary ambitions to become the *Napoleon of letters*. He has been famously quoted as saying “What Napoleon accomplished with his sword, I will do with my pen.”<sup>6</sup> Well-versed in the romanticized accounts about Napoleon's life and military career, it is clear that Balzac drew inspiration from visual sources as well. In his short story *Le Colonel Chabert* (1832), one of several narratives treating to the theme of social reintegration of Napoleon's imperial guard in Restoration

France, we see how Balzac's portrait of the imperial officer is comprised of a series of military still-life images documenting the homecoming of a soldier buried in a common grave following the battle at Eylau.<sup>7</sup> Balzac's colorful description of the battle scene, often believed to have been inspired by *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau* (1808) by the Baron Gros, invites us to consider the contribution that visual images may have had in shaping Balzac's portrayal of Napoleon in his work.<sup>8</sup>

The commercialization of the art world enabled the reproduction and circulation of images beyond the walls of the Salon, thus giving shut-ins like Balzac access to the latest in the art world.<sup>9</sup> For example we see parallels between Bellangé's *Look Here Father* (1835), where the artist captures the divine and paternal status that Napoleon held among much of the peasant, artisan, and bourgeois population, and Balzac's novel *Le Médecin de campagne* (1832), treating a similar theme. Charlet's *Napoleon in Bivouac* (1822) recalls a remarkable scene from *Une Ténébreuse affaire* (1841) where Laurence de Cinq-Cigne encounters Napoleon, "l'homme de fer," in his bivouac on the eve of the battle of Iéna. Making use of certain clichés or representative shortcuts provided by artistic example, Balzac often evokes Napoleon's presence in his work by a gesture, a word or a pose. In doing so, Balzac blends the portrait of Napoleon with the portraits of his fictive characters. Given this point, it remains to be explored *why* Napoleon acts as a focal point in Balzac's historical assessment of his century.

Our reading of Napoleon's presence in *La Comédie humaine* ultimately relates to the ambition of Balzac's historical novel -- to fill in the "gaps" left by history in layering together the real and the imaginary in order to create "true history," or an alternative to official history.<sup>10</sup> One could argue that Napoleon's real and mythical roles, in actuality,

attempted to do just that – to aid in bridging the historical void left by the revolution. However, given the successive regime changes that followed his reign, it is my view that Balzac, in metonymically extending Napoleon’s shadow over his *Comédie humaine*, seeks a facet to textually express the social and historical baggage mounted by Napoleon’s legacy in post-revolutionary France.

The most compelling narrative demonstrating this point appears in *The Colonel Chabert*. In the metonymic and metaphoric development of death and rebirth produced by successive still-life images documenting the return of a soldier buried in a common grave during the Polish campaign, the Colonel Chabert is at once a physical persona incarnating Balzac's historical metaphor for the grave or the historical past, while at the same time becomes a narrative device that underlines the “plot of the tomb” permeating the textual atmosphere of *La Comédie humaine*.<sup>11</sup>

In our first introduction to Chabert, an ex-imperial colonel assimilated to a “carrick,” a weathered, outmoded overcoat comprised of several overlapping cloaks, Balzac opposes the past, to the Restoration's political agenda to keep history (including its national heroes) buried (21).<sup>12</sup> This is accomplished in a two-fold manner: the physical description of the scene; the various levels of discourse produced by its actors. The atmosphere in Derville's law office is suffocating; Chabert is confronted by a hodge-podge of legal forms, putrid odors, and filthy windows that obscure any view of the exterior world from within. Aside from the mocking jabs directed at his person by the young law clerks, the narrative interweaving of legal, military, and royal discourses are suggestive of the workings of the Restoration society: where physical acts are superseded by paper ones, and where royal authority has been contaminated by legal practice and

rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> Balzac indicates that the face of politics may appear changed, but is in fact still operating according to a battle plan devised on the part of the individual and his hidden desires. In order to reclaim his past identity Chabert, this former man of action under the Empire, must learn to fight a different kind of battle from that to which he was previously accustomed, or otherwise submit himself to a second burial.

In the second scene, the narrative of death is also shown to be authoritative, but in a way divergent from the law or from history. During his interview with his lawyer Derville, the colonel provides his own account of the events following his death on the battlefield. Compared to a wax figure, a cadaver, an actor in a history play, as well as to a work of art, Chabert enacts his textual resurrection in the recounting of his death -- an act that invalidates both historical and judicial documentation surrounding the event.<sup>14</sup> Struck on the head by the saber of a Russian soldier, the colonel is pronounced dead shortly thereafter, and his body is placed into a mass grave. He remains buried until he regains consciousness, calls for help, and is miraculously rescued by a peasant couple, an event he compares to being reborn from his mother's womb (49). The image of rebirth initiates the reader into the theme of new beginnings. However, pending the arrival of documented proof that would corroborate his return from the dead, the ex-colonel is asked to vacillate between life and death.

The opposition between life and death finds its repetition in the construction and dissolution of images, thereby allowing the text's metaphor to become more "readable."<sup>15</sup> The first image is that of Paris itself. As Derville sets off to inform Chabert of the impossibility of his case going to trial against his ex-wife (she who inherited his fortune and has since remarried into the upper echelons of Restoration society), the reader is

given access to a physical description of Chabert's surroundings. The house where he resides, constructed from remnants of former structures, reaffirms the Restoration's desire to dismantle the past, in order to render it unrecognizable (much like Chabert's claim to his identity). The theme of ruin is further developed by the structure's interior: bulletins of the *Great Army* cover the table, a respectable silence reigns announcing "the empire" exercised by Chabert over his "ranks" (the proprietor, his wife, and their two sons) (70). The ramshackle domicile restages the Empire's fall – failed military exploits met with "le vrai silence du tombeau" (47). With the arrival of Derville, the representative of the judicial world, the imperial imagery disappears, thus insinuating the theme of death into the narrative. At the same time, this architectural metaphor concedes the fragile coexistence of Imperial and Restoration France.

This narrative tension is resolved in the fourth still-life image of the novella, where the Colonel Chabert, restored to a vision of his former glory, appears as would a high ranking officer of the Legion of Honor. Dressed in his military garb, with one hand tucked into his vest, Balzac indicates that Chabert becomes a readable image to the Restoration society (104). At the same time, figures like Chabert have no place within it; they are subjects of art and heroes in historical volumes. Chabert is an "unwelcomed ghost in this new society that refuses to recognize the elevated status attained by a child of the Revolution [. . .]." <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the potential for resurrecting the social status of the ex-colonel ultimately becomes a simulacrum offering a commentary on the shift in the historical and political climate of nineteenth-century France. Marked by his Napoleonic ties, Chabert is not a generative social force and, at the story's conclusion, must return underground, so to speak.

In our examination of Balzac's approach to history, understood in conjunction with the Napoleonic legacy, we have attempted to outline both the social and political events that gave rise to Napoleon's mythic persona as revealed within *La Comédie humaine*. This is to say, that in serving as a key element in the development of the author's modern vision, Napoleon becomes the pivot upon which Balzac spins his views on revolution,<sup>17</sup> paternity, social hierarchy, as well as his sense of historical destiny.<sup>18</sup> In his evocation of Napoleon both as a real historical figure, and as a mythical persona evoked either directly *or* indirectly in his narrative, Balzac metonymically connects his contemporary fictional universe to the historical past, and in the process, creates an overriding historical verity: he who made History becomes a key element of history in *La Comédie humaine*. This equation achieves two critical results. First, the imbedding of Napoleon's portrait within his narrative allows Balzac to use myth as a source of unity. Second, commenting on society's efforts to construct a stable vision of the past and its heroes, Balzac reminds us of society's historical porousness in that Napoleon's narrative presence serves as a political commentary magnifying the absence of a strong ruling power in post-revolutionary France. Therefore, the rewriting of the gravestone text of history will serve as Napoleon's ultimate legacy to the next generation, and ultimate challenge to the author of the contemporary historical novel.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1.
- <sup>2</sup> See Marthe Robert, *Roman des origines*, 239.
- <sup>3</sup> See Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics*, 146; See also Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past*, 113.
- <sup>4</sup> See Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics*, 160.
- <sup>5</sup> See Jean Tulard, *Le mythe de Napoléon*, 43.
- <sup>6</sup> See Albert Thibaudet, *French Literature*, 199.
- <sup>7</sup> The battle of Eylau led by Napoleon against the Russians in the winter of 1807 could not really be considered a victory for either side; the French lost 18,000 men, whereas the Russians lost 25,000.
- <sup>8</sup> Bonard asserts that the idea for *Le Colonel Chabert* came from Gros' painting. The right arm of the half-buried man in the center forefront of the painting creates as a converging line that leads the spectator's eye to the painting's focal point: Napoleon on his white horse greeting his troops. See *La Peinture dans la création balzacienne*, 94.
- <sup>9</sup> See Jean Adhémar, *The Artist and Writer in France*, 153.
- <sup>10</sup> In her study *Balzac au pluriel*, Nicole Mozet states that Balzac had two conceptions of history, that of official history, and that of "l'histoire véritable [qui] est celle des coulisses, des souterrains et des tombes anonymes" (50).
- <sup>11</sup> This expression is attributed to Janet Beizer's work *Family Plots*.
- <sup>12</sup> Chabert is also repeatedly referred to as "le défunt" and "le feu colonel." The expression "le prétendu colonel" is also employed to reiterate that Chabert tries to reclaim his identity against the legal authority of a death certificate.
- <sup>13</sup> See Graham Good, "The Colonel Chabert: A Masquerade with Documents," 857.
- <sup>14</sup> See Caroline Eades, "Le Colonel Chabert: récit romanesque et récits filmiques," 332.
- <sup>15</sup> See Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process," 59.
- <sup>16</sup> See Ruth Amossy, "Fathers and Sons in *Old Goriot*," 47.
- <sup>17</sup> See Ronnie Butler, *Balzac and the French Revolution*, 53.
- <sup>18</sup> See Pierre Laubriet, "La légende et le mythe napoléoniens chez Balzac," 298.

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