PREFACE

The contents of the present volume stand alone in the Comédie Humaine, or nearly alone; but they are very closely connected with each other. And to those who care to trace the connection of an author’s nature and his work, without which tracing—useless as it may be in some cases, and superfluous in most—it will never be possible for any one to appreciate Balzac to the full, they have an interest not inferior to that of any other portion. In one of them, moreover, Séraphita, we shall find Balzac’s most successful and brilliant essays of style as style—essays so different from his general practice, that they have raised some curious speculations. It is known that, in the early thirties, Balzac and Gautier were a good deal together, and even worked in some sort of collaboration. In one of his books, Béatrix, Balzac has printed a passage which, as it happens, is known to be Gautier’s, and there is a good deal in Séraphita which may be suspected of a similar origin.

To those who care for the story, or who are attracted to the Comédie as a varied storehouse of observation of ordinary life, this volume must seem, and, I believe, almost invariably does seem, rather dreary and repellent stuff. To others, it yields in interest to no volume of
the Comédie, though the interest may be of a peculiar and special kind. As most people who know anything at all about Balzac are aware, Louis Lambert is Balzac himself; the Traité de la Volonté was actually written, and destroyed by an irate schoolmaster; and most of the incidents brought in have more or less foundation in fact. The same, of course, cannot be said of Les Proscrits and Séraphita. But the former, while belonging in kind generally to the Études Philosophiques, connects itself on another side with the Contes Drolatiques, and with Balzac’s not rare studies of the Middle Ages. About these he seems always to have had a hankering to write, which was due partly to his lifelong cult of Sir Walter, and partly to a curious delusion that he was himself a born historical novelist. Séraphita, on the other hand, has a sort of kinship with other products of the 1830 period.

But all the books are perhaps most interesting to us, first, as showing Balzac’s specially ‘philosophic’ velleities; and secondly, as exhibiting a side of him which is apt to be overlooked—his character as a reader and a student.

The ‘philosophy’ has been rather variously judged. It has seldom been taken very seriously; but attempts have sometimes been made to discover in it anticipations of later discoveries or, to adopt a much safer word, theories. These anticipation-hunts rarely send the hunter home with an empty bag, but it is as rarely that the game is of certain quality. Indeed, if we remember that even in the widest and vaguest sense, ‘philosophy’ was practically exhausted many hundred years ago—that new philosophies are only the old ones with their
coats and trousers turned, scoured, dyed, and altered somewhat in fashion—it would be very odd if a clever man, even with no regular training or special vocation, did not anticipate more or less what others of his contemporaries are going to think. For the rest, Balzac’s philosophy is of a distinctly loose sort, and may very well have occurred to him in whole or in part when he was a studious, if irregularly studious, schoolboy. It is, indeed, very much of the kind to which schoolboys of some brains are as prone as men of riper years, and in which they are perhaps as likely to attain a result, or what looks like it.

The second bearing of these curious books is more tangible. It is certain that Balzac, unlike Dickens, his fellow voyant, and still more unlike most of the ‘realists’ who claim kindred with him, was a very great reader. In his period of production, despite the enormous expense of time which his methods of writing imposed on him, he seems to have read a great deal; in his boyhood and in the ten years of his apprenticeship he seems to have read enormously. He certainly never attained to exact scientific or scholarly knowledge of any subject by means of books. He did not know literature or history, much less philosophy, as he knew legal procedure and the theory of speculation, the signboards of Paris, and not a little of what went on inside Parisian waistcoats and under Parisian hats. But he had a vast amount of ‘fine confused’ reading, as the Swedenborgian learning of Strophita, no less than the not altogether alien lore of Sur Catherine de Medicis, shows. He was even, as not a few passages in his reviews, in his other miscellaneous writings, and in his letters show, rather
inclined to overvalue and plume himself upon this reading. Nor was it without effect, both good and bad, on his work. On the one hand, it added to that slightly undigested character which, with rare exceptions, is characteristic of him; on the other, it largely helped the appearance of variety, fulness, encyclopaedic knowledge, and interest which is the complement and atonement of this undigestedness. Balzac was really a 'full man in reading as well as thought; and of this reading fulness, the batch of books before us is perhaps the most striking example.

*Louis Lambert* appeared first (as *Notice Biographique sur L. L.*) in 1832, in the *Nouveaux Contes Philosophiques*; then in February 1833 as a small volume by itself, a good deal enlarged, and entitled *Histoire intellectuelle de L. L.*; then, with its actual dimensions, in a collection entitled *Le Livre Mystique*, published by Werder in 1835. In 1842, with *Séraphita*, but apparently (I have not seen the book) not with *Les Proscrits*, it was again published by Charpentier; and in 1846 it joined the *Comédie*. *Les Proscrits* first appeared in the *Revue de Paris* for May 1831, and was almost immediately included in the *Romans et Contes Philosophiques*. Its fortunes, after it was joined to its companions, have been told, as have those of *Séraphita*. This last appeared first in the *Revue de Paris* for June and July 1834. In 1840 it became an *Étude Philosophique* with *Les Proscrits*, *Gambara*, and *Mastinilla Doni*.

G. S.