

THE PRIEST IN SELECTED WORKS FROM LA COMEDIE HUMAINE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A study of the life and works of Honoré de Balzac could be an exercise in paradoxes. Nowhere is this more apparent, perhaps, than in relation to Balzac and religion. Few people ever attribute religious feeling to him. Many consider him a godless writer detailing the lives of godless households. The innumerable favorable references to religion in La Comédie humaine, contrasting at times with a cynical attitude toward religion in his works and in his life, have led some critics to dismiss them as indifferent gestures as inconsequential as tipping one's hat on passing a church. There may be some truth in this attitude; but, as is often the case in the polarization of ideas and attitudes, the truth usually lies somewhere between.

From his extensive writings, it appears that there were three distinct elements in Balzac's religion. The first was a mysticism, developed early in youth, probably at school. The latter statement is supported quite extensively in Louis Lambert, a work with autobiographical overtones that reflects a mysticism which owed a great deal to the eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher

Swedenborg, who was quite popular in the early nineteenth century.

The second element is an opposition to bigotry and intolerance, perhaps best disclosed in Jésus-Christ en Flandre and Le Curé de Tours in which he is quite emphatic toward those Christians who use the authority of the Church to persecute or to disrupt normal human relations.

It is in the third element of Balzac's religion that the contrast lies, for it is undeniably true that, although Balzac himself was far from a practicing Catholic and was often critical of various aspects of the Church, he strongly defended the institutional life and authority of the Catholic Church. This paradox is often overlooked by those who see him only as a nominal Catholic with little interest in the spirit of religion.

Balzac assigned himself the prodigious task of being "le secrétaire de la société française."<sup>1</sup> The world he revealed reflected the essential features of a world which had evolved from the Roman empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic empire. This world was peopled with

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<sup>1</sup>Gaëtan Picon, Balzac par lui-même (Bourges: Editions du Seuil, 1956), p. 10.

priests, soldiers, women, artists, peasants, the bourgeoisie--the essential inhabitants of the France of his time.

An initial interest, on the part of the writer of this thesis, in the general scope of La Comédie humaine led to a more particular one in Balzac's portrayal of one member of French society--the priest. From this interest emerged the subject for this paper: the priest in selected works from La Comédie humaine. For, as Paul Franche stated in Le Prêtre dans le roman français: "A vrai dire, le prêtre constitue dans la société un élément important; il y remplit une mission, il y exerce une influence; il y a, par conséquent, ses partisans et ses adversaires, comme la religion dont il est le ministre et le porte-voix."<sup>2</sup>

The organization of this thesis, therefore, will consist of a biographical study, incorporating experiences and influences that may have contributed to Balzac's religious attitudes and ideas, followed by four chapters devoted to the discussion of the portrayal of specific priests in La Comédie humaine. The works of Balzac on which this study is based include: Le Curé de Tours and

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<sup>2</sup>Paul Franche, Le Prêtre dans le roman français (Paris: Perrin et Compagnie, 1902), p. 19.

Le Lys dans la Vallée from SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE PROVINCE;  
César Birotteau and Le Père Goriot from SCÈNES DE LA VIE  
PARISIENNE; Les Paysans, Le Curé de village, and Le Médecin  
de campagne from SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE CAMPAGNE; Louis  
Lambert and Jésus-Christ en Flandre from ÉTUDES  
PHILOSOPHIQUES.

Within each discussion will be an attempt to point out the essential characteristics of each priest, as well as a brief résumé of each story, and to relate these characters and events to Balzac's own life and philosophy.

The conclusions will summarize the main points of the discussion and will try to make some observations regarding Balzac's portrayal of the Catholic priest in his works.



## CHAPTER II

### BIOGRAPHY

Honoré de Balzac was born at Tours, May 20, 1799. His father, Bernard-François Balzac, an ambitious civil servant who, through his own industry, had bridged the gap between the lower and middle class, was an administrator of army supplies. At the age of fifty-one, Bernard-François married a girl thirty-two years his junior--Laure Sallambier, the daughter of a bourgeoisie family of drapers and manufacturers of brocade.

To some extent, it might be said that Honoré inherited his incessant drive and his expansive interest from his father. A member of the Freemasons, a great reader of the Bible, Bernard-François was also a student of the papacy, of Catholic schisms and heresies, and of Chinese civilization.<sup>3</sup> Politically, he was a supporter of the Empire. Throughout his entire life he showed a great adeptness at being able to withstand the numerous political tempests in such a way that he always managed to emerge on the winning side. A disciple of Rousseau, Bernard-François lived a life of healthy moderation, a statement

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<sup>3</sup>André Maurois, Prométhée, ou la Vie de Balzac (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1965), p. 11.

that never could be ascribed to his son. A favorite expression of the elder Balzac was: "Je suis beau comme un marbre et fort comme un arbre."<sup>4</sup>

Madame Balzac was a cold woman, undemonstrative in her affection for her children, of whom there were five: Louis-Daniel, who died shortly after birth; Honoré; Laure; Laurance; and Henri, a love-child. Influenced by the death of the child fed at her own breast, Madame Balzac placed Honoré, and later his sister Laure, out to nurse, an action that Honoré could never forgive his mother and which prompted him to write in Le Lys dans la vallée:<sup>5</sup>

Mis en nourrice à la campagne, oublié par ma famille pendant trois ans, quand je revins à la maison paternelle, j'y comptai pour si peu de chose, que j'y subissais la compassion des gens.

This traumatic experience, shared by his sister Laure, was to contribute to a close relationship between the two. She was the member of his family who was closest

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Honoré de Balzac, Le Lys dans la vallée (Paris: Librairie Paul Ollendorff, ca. 1900), pp. 3-4. The extracts cited from Balzac's works, except for Le Medecin de campagne, are all drawn from the Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac, published by the Librairie Paul Ollendorff (Paris, ca. 1900). Hereafter, the name of the novel and page of each quotation cited from Balzac's works will be found following the quotation in the body of the thesis.

to him and who was the major recipient of both his love and his confidences.

At the age of eight, Honoré entered the Collège de Vendôme, one of the most Spartan schools in France. Founded by the Oratorians, the school, in 1807, was still suffering the effects of the attacks on the religious orders made during the revolutionary period. Students, once they entered, never returned home until their studies were completed. Holidays were spent at school. For many students, it must have been difficult to adapt to such a system, but to Honoré, who had never really felt received in his own family, there was neither shock nor adaptation.

Balzac's feelings toward his infancy and youth are reflected in two novels which have autobiographical aspects: Le Lys dans la vallée and Louis Lambert. It is perhaps in the former that Balzac most succinctly expressed his feelings: "Mon enfance a été comme une longue maladie" (Le Lys dans la vallée, p. 77).

Honoré's religion during these formative years revolved around a deep interest in mysticism, primarily as promulgated by Swedenborg. Added to this was an indifferent attitude toward religion inherited from his father, plus the popularity of irreligion among the school boys. As Maurois noted, "L'irreligion était, au collège

de Vendôme, parmi les élèves, plus qu'une habitude: un objet d'émulation."<sup>6</sup>

In 1813, at the age of fourteen, Honoré was seriously suffering from a lethargy caused by too much reading, too much confinement, and too little activity. Alarmed by his thin and sickly appearance, the Oratorians wrote to Madame Balzac, who immediately withdrew her son from school. Change of environment, fresh air, and intimate contact with his family soon restored Honoré's natural vitality.

The first several months following his return, Honoré was under the careful scrutiny of his mother who was deeply concerned about both his physical and spiritual welfare. Attempting to make amends for her husband's religious indifference and her own moral laxity, she was most frequent in her attendance at the cathedral, where she took Honoré, who became familiar with the old houses surrounding the church, the beautiful flying buttresses, and the petty quarrels of the priests with the aged spinsters who rented them lodgings. The results of this experience were later reflected in Le Curé de Tours.

In 1816, having finished his studies at the Lycée Charlemagne in Paris, where the family then lived, Honoré

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<sup>6</sup>Maurois, op. cit., p. 22.

was apprenticed to a notary. This experience as a notary, too, would later serve him in his writing, the career he finally chose for himself in 1819, at the age of twenty. His family, although they would have much preferred that he seek his fortune in a more acceptable profession, agreed to give Honoré the opportunity to pursue his literary interests.

As will be observed, Balzac was no ordinary man. This was true even in his method of writing. Dressed in a white house-gown that resembled a monk's habit, and armed with a pot of especially strong coffee, he would set himself to writing, often completing a work in a matter of days. During this time, Balzac would often seclude himself from everyone, sleeping little and writing all night, fortified by the coffee-stimulant and his bursting passion to tell the story at hand.

The years from 1820 to 1832 were marked with the vicissitudes of the life of one seeking success in letters, love, and living. Balzac's manner in everything he did, whether in financial operations, in society, in dress, in personal fame or fortune, was always on a grand scale. Short, broad-shouldered, pre-maturely pot-bellied, unkempt, and with a penchant for extravagant dress, distinctive canes, and expensive gloves, Balzac could hardly go unnoticed. When he entered a room, "un orage, un ouragan, une tornade

électrique envahissait la pièce."<sup>7</sup> His penetrating eyes, however, which could captivate or castigate, would hold him in good stead, particularly with the ladies. The awareness of the power that his eyes wielded came early in Balzac's life and is reflected in Louis Lambert:

Cette œillade causait sans doute une commotion au maître, qui blessé par cette silencieuse épigramme, voulut désapprendre à l'écolier ce regard fulgurant. La première fois que le Père se formalisa de ce dédaigneux rayonnement qui l'atteignit comme un éclair, il dit. . . :

--Si vous me regardez encore ainsi, Lambert, vous allez recevoir une fêrule! (Louis Lambert, p. 35)

Perhaps it is noteworthy that one of the most satisfying statues of Balzac, that by Rodin, shows only a head moulded, with the figure left in the rough, like a primitive god rising out of chaos.<sup>8</sup>

At about the age of twenty, Balzac fell in love with Madame Laure de Berny, who was twenty-two years older than he. Madame de Berny's role in Balzac's life, as mistress and mother, critic and counselor, was to last until her death sixteen years later and was to provide the basis for Le Lys dans la vallée, published shortly before her death. As Louis Lambert was the school-boy

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>8</sup>Edward James Oliver, Balzac, the European (London: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 9.

Balzac, so Félix de Vandenesse was the young Balzac enraptured by his first love. The twenty-year-old Félix, too, fell in love with a woman twice his age. Edward Oliver observed: "Le Lys dans la vallée is poignantly true both in its description of the first idyllic love of Félix for his Henriette and in his parting from her to find fame and more delusive love in Paris."<sup>9</sup> This novel illustrates well the ambiguous and paradoxical qualities of Balzac in his person and in his writing. Primarily attempting to explain to Madame Eveline Hanska the part that Laure de Berny had played in his life and to show what a devoted lover he was, while also explaining away anything she may have heard of his life in Paris with other women, Balzac also used the opportunity to portray the character of Laure de Berny:

Elle fut non pas la bien aimée, mais la plus aimée; . . . elle devint ce qu'était la Béatrix du florentin, la Laure sans tache du poète vénitien, la mère des grandes pensées, la cause inconnue des résolutions qui sauvent, le soutien de l'avenir, la lumière qui brille dans l'obscurité comme le lys dans les feuillages sombres. . . . Elle m'a donné cette constance à la Coligny pour vaincre les vainqueurs, pour renaître de la défaite, pour lasser les plus forts lutteurs (Le Lys dans la vallée, pp. 167-68).

Madame Henriette de Mortsauf, the heroine of Le Lys dans la vallée, was, therefore, a reflection of what Madame Laure de Berny was to Balzac.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 54-55.

Fame finally began to come to Balzac about 1829. As is true of many authors, however, Balzac, during his own lifetime, enjoyed greater recognition outside his own country than within. In fact, it was this appreciation of his talents and interest in him as a writer that prompted the Polish countess Madame Eveline Hanska to write to Balzac. Her initial letter, signed "l'Etrangère," was mailed in Odessa in February, 1832, originating a relationship that was to culminate in marriage eighteen years later.

Madame Hanska was to be an important influence for the remainder of Balzac's life. Although she did not have the qualities of literary criticism of Laure de Berny, she was at least a source of inspiration and motivation. Perhaps the greatest influence Madame Hanska exerted, directly or indirectly, was in relation to religion.

Madame Hanska appeared in Balzac's life about the time that he was writing Le Médecin de campagne. Although Balzac was never to be a church-going Catholic, yet his attitude toward religion and the Church was beginning to synthesize. In Le Médecin de campagne, along with an insistence on the social role of the Church, Balzac gave emphasis to its inspiration to individuals,



particularly in redeeming broken lives. In relation to Le Médecin de campagne, Pierre Abraham wrote:<sup>10</sup>

Pour la première fois--seul exemple, croyons-nous, dans la Comédie humaine,--nous allons assister à une projection dans le futur de ses vœux ou de ses craintes. Le Médecin de campagne, écrit a trente-trois ans, à l'âge du Christ et dans l'atmosphère de l'Imitation, va nous montrer sous l'aspect d'un homme de cinquante ans un personnage en qui nous allons être amenés à reconnaître certains points communs avec Balzac.

The allusion to the Imitation of Christ by Saint Thomas à Kempis is neither accidental nor idealistic. Balzac himself referred to Le Médecin de campagne as a romanticized Imitation of Christ,<sup>11</sup> and, coincidentally, about the time of the publication of the novel, Madame Hanska sent Balzac a copy of the Imitation.

The courtship of Balzac and Madame Hanska was one of letters. Perhaps through flattery, perhaps through sincerity, Balzac was to write that her religious habits and her piety were the qualities of soul he most admired.<sup>12</sup> Impressed by the fact that his "Etrangère" was a countess, Balzac was driven by a desire to please her in any way he could. Le Curé de village was his response to her request that he write about "le prêtre catholique."

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<sup>10</sup>Pierre Abraham, Créatures chez Balzac (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1931), pp. 58-59.

<sup>11</sup>Maurois, op. cit., p. 228.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 516.

As the possibility of marriage became more and more imminent, Balzac's productivity increased proportionately in his attempt to pay off his debts and not to appear as a fortune hunter. Yet, it is true that in the final years preceding their marriage, as Madame Hanska provided him more and more with financial assistance, his literary output dwindled. Another fact that cannot be overlooked, however, is that his health, gradually impaired by his extraordinary manner of living, was slowly deteriorating.

After eighteen years marked by extended separations, frequent letters, the long-awaited death of an elderly husband, and a seemingly interminable delay in making wedding arrangements, including obtaining permission from the Czar, the marriage finally took place in Russia on March 14, 1850, in the parish church of Saint Barbara at Berdichev. By this time, however, Balzac's health had greatly deteriorated, and he had scarcely returned with his bride to Paris before he succumbed, "épuisé par le travail," on August 18, having received the last sacraments of the Church.

The tragically ironic ending to Balzac's life was befitting of one of his own novels. How often had he written of the dreams of love, wealth, and happiness pursued by a man throughout his life only to have them elude him at the moment when they seemed to be within

his grasp! How often had he written of people of passion  
grown more temperate who sought the consolations of the  
Church and the sacraments on their deathbed!

## CHAPTER III

### ABBÉ BIROTTEAU -- ABBÉ TROUBERT

Balzac's aim in writing La Comédie humaine was to show that society, like the animal kingdom, has its species, distinguishable according to condition, profession or trade, and habitat. Accordingly, Le Curé de Tours, which is to be found in Les Célibataires, treats of two types of celibates--priests and old maids. These are further differentiated; the good but weak of each species succumb to the powerful and vindictive. The wounded vanity of an old maid, Mademoiselle Gamard; the vengeance of an ambitious abbé, the abbé Troubert; and the stupidity and love of comfort of another abbé, the abbé Birotteau, are the themes of the story.

Abbé François Birotteau was vicar of the cathedral Saint-Gatien in Tours. A good but simple man, he was preoccupied with a love of material comforts. This desire for physical comfort went so far as a dislike of getting his feet wet. As Balzac described the abbé:

Entre toutes les petites misères de la vie humaine, celle pour laquelle le bon prêtre éprouvait le plus d'aversion était le subit arrosement de ses souliers à larges agrafes d'argent et l'immersion de leurs semelles (Le Curé de Tours, p. 215).

Nevertheless, when the story opened, Abbé Birotteau, returning in a heavy rain from an evening at the most

fashionable salon in Tours, that of Madame de Listomère, was oblivious that his feet were getting wet. He had been lucky at whist; but, more importantly, his friends had assured him that he would soon be the new canon of the cathedral. Abbé Birotteau had two goals in life:

Etre le pensionnaire de M<sup>lle</sup> Gamard et devenir chanoine furent les deux plus grandes affaires de sa vie; et peut-être résumant-elles exactement l'ambition d'un prêtre, qui, se considérant comme en voyage vers l'éternité, ne peut souhaiter en ce monde qu'un bon gîte, une bonne table, des vêtements propres, des souliers à agrafes d'argent, choses suffisantes pour les besoins de la bête, et un canonicat pour satisfaire l'amour-propre . . . (Le Curé de Tours, p. 218).

He had already attained the first goal and was residing at Mademoiselle Gamard's; achieving the goal of being canon seemed imminent.

Birotteau was unaware that he had fallen in disfavor with Mademoiselle Gamard, who, for some time, had been trying to make life miserable for him. A consciousness of her hostile feelings was finally to begin to take form in Birotteau's mind that very night. Arriving at the rooming house in the pouring rain, Abbé Birotteau discovered the gate to be locked and was forced to ring three times before he gained entrance. This petit malheur might have been overlooked were it not for three other successive "événements, imperceptibles pour tout autre, mais qui, pour lui, constituèrent quatre catastrophes" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 228): his candlestick was not in

the kitchen where he had left it, but had been returned to his room; he had to search for his slippers which were normally on the rug by his bed; there was no fire burning in the fireplace in his room. Reflecting on these catastrophes, Abbé Birotteau finally recognized "les signes d'une persécution sourde exercée sur lui depuis environ trois mois par M<sup>lle</sup> Gamard" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 229). Anyone less simple or less naïve would have immediately been aware of Mademoiselle Gamard's change in attitude. The simple vicar's "sins" against the vengeful old maid were unknown to him. Someone as unobservant as he, who seldom saw beyond his own little world, would scarcely be one given to flattery, although he was most content with his lodgings and manner of living. Nor would he recognize the vain desire of Mademoiselle Gamard to be the mistress of a popular salon of Tours, a goal never to be achieved as long as Birotteau frequented and thus abetted the success of the salon of Madame de Listomère.

Having finally realized Mademoiselle Gamard's animosity toward him, although he did not understand it, Abbé Birotteau found his once-peaceful life to be a monstrous nightmare. By nature gentle, desirous of no unpleasantries, the abbé was so unnerved by the cat-and-mouse game in which he was being forced to participate

that his health became affected. Not until he discovered "une perte de huit lignes dans le circonférence de son mollet" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 261), did he act, or react. Then, accentuating his naïveté, he went first to complain to his fellow boarder, the abbé Troubert, not realizing that in Troubert he had an adversary more powerful and more malevolent than in Mademoiselle Gamard.

Receiving little comfort from Troubert, Abbé Birotteau decided that perhaps a few days of separation might help the situation and, hopefully, relieve or extinguish the hatred Mademoiselle Gamard obviously, but inexplicably, bore him. Thus, he decided to spend several days at the country estate of Madame de Listomère, as was his habit in the autumn. Unfortunately, the unsuspecting vicar unwittingly aided the plotting Mademoiselle Gamard. On the tenth day of Birotteau's stay in the country, Mademoiselle Gamard's lawyer appeared and implied that the abbé's absence indicated a desire on his part not to continue residing at Mademoiselle Gamard's. Such a thought, of course, was farthest from Birotteau's mind. However, realizing that to continue to live under such unbearable conditions was impossible, the abbé signed a paper to the effect that he voluntarily gave up his residence. The coup de grâce was yet to come.

Returning the next day to oversee the moving of his furnishings, particularly the expensive and exclusive set of books and paintings that he had inherited from the late abbé Chapeloud, his friend and predecessor at Mademoiselle Gamard's, Birotteau was overwhelmed by three shattering discoveries: first, Abbé Troubert was already installed in his apartment; second, he, Birotteau, when he first took up lodgings with Mademoiselle Gamard, had unwittingly signed his furnishings over to her in the event of his death or his voluntary departure; third, and perhaps the most cruel blow, another priest had been named canon.

The final phases of the story delineate more the role of Abbé Troubert. Physically statuesque, Troubert, by the end of the story, seems to be monumental.

The Listomère family, by befriending the abbé Birotteau, had put themselves in danger of suffering severe consequences. The power of the secret but omniscient Congrégation, of which Troubert was a member, revealed itself. Suddenly Madame de Listomère's nephew discovered he was in danger of losing his commission in the navy; her brother-in-law's imminent peership strangely fell into jeopardy. Cognizant of the family's precarious position, Madame de Listomère persuaded Abbé Birotteau, who had moved to her home, to find lodgings elsewhere



and to give up the lawsuit he had instigated to regain his furnishings, particularly the paintings which had been discovered to be of some value.

Birotteau's misery grew from day to day. Mademoiselle Gamard's health began to fail and the victimized abbé was blamed: "Birotteau tuait sa bienfaitrice" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 297). Tragically, Birotteau himself was now broken in health and in spirit. The final blow followed the death of Madame de Listomère, who bequeathed a small amount of money to the impoverished vicar. Troubert, again through the hidden powers of the Congrégation, forced her nephew, the Baron de Listomère, to contest the will, and, consequently, deprive the abbé of his small inheritance.

At the end of the story, Abbé Troubert was appointed bishop of Troyes, while Birotteau, a skeleton of his former self, was transferred to a curate at the edge of the city, far from his friends, with cold, damp living-quarters.

Paul Louis, in Les Types sociaux chez Balzac et Zola, perhaps best described Abbé Birotteau:<sup>13</sup>

Son horizon est étroit, et pourvu que son existence reste régulière jusqu'à la monotonie et qu'il ait

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<sup>13</sup>Paul Louis, Les Types sociaux chez Balzac et Zola (Paris: Aux Editeurs Associes, 1925), p. 157.

ses aises, il s'estime le plus heureux des ecclésiastiques: il ne bouleverse rien autour de lui et l'ordre normal des choses lui apparaît admirable.

Balzac, himself, described him as one "dont la bonté allait jusqu'à la bêtise" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 23).

Without a doubt, however, Birotteau was innately kind, honest, generous, and trusting. The latter virtue was perhaps best shown in his initial relationship with Abbé Troubert. Although his friend the abbé Chapeloud had warned him to beware of Troubert, the innocent and trusting Birotteau unwittingly revealed the activities of and the participants in the Listomère salon to the secret representative of the Congrégation. Moreover, it was to Troubert that the vicar first turned, fruitlessly, when he finally voiced a complaint against Mademoiselle Gamard.

The abbé Birotteau's virtues are not only obvious in Le Curé de Tours, but also can be seen in the two other novels in which he appears: Le Lys dans la vallée and César Birotteau. In the former, as the confessor of Madame de Mortsauf, he is described as "l'un de ces hommes que Dieu a marqués comme siens en les revêtant de douceur, de simplicité, en leur accordant la patience et la miséricorde" (Le Lys dans la vallée, p. 342). In the latter novel, the abbé's brother César, the central

figure of the story, doomed to financial disaster himself by his own naïveté, solicited help from the abbé. In response he received one thousand francs, four hundred of which had been borrowed from Madame de Listomère, the remainder, the abbé said, was "tout ce que je possède dans le monde" (César Birotteau, p. 326). Furthermore, the abbé stated that the money need not be repaid.

The abbé Birotteau and his brother César had very much in common. Naïveté was a family trait; unfortunately, so was a desire for material comfort. It was the combination of the two that caused César to extend himself too far financially and thus bring on his own ruination. Charles Affron, writing in Patterns of Failure in LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE, discussed the causes of failure among the various characters in La Comédie humaine. He contrasted those who were failures with the perspicaciously successful characters, such as a Vautrin or a Rastignac. Affron observed that Balzac was intolerant of the man, blind to reality, who meekly succumbed to his destiny through the mistaken assessment of his life. Furthermore, he stated:<sup>14</sup>

The sin of the blind man lies in his lack of congruity with the needs of reality, in his unwillingness to

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<sup>14</sup>Charles Affron, Patterns of Failure in LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 41.

rid himself of useless ideals such as probity and trust, and especially, in his ignorance of the constant flow of deception that governs the actions of his opponents.

The brothers Birotteau were certainly blind to the deception of others. Whether, in their innate goodness and honesty, they would have been capable of shedding "useless ideals such as probity and trust" is, perhaps, a moot question. However, their unsatiated materialism, perhaps as much as anything else, contributed to their respective downfalls. Almost all of the abbé Birotteau's misères related in some way to material discomfort, for example, the four "catastrophes": the locked gate, the candlestick, the slippers, and the fire. Furthermore, leaving Mademoiselle Gamard's lodgings did not really disturb him as much as the subsequent loss of his furniture, library, and paintings.

This inordinate attachment to material things was seen rather markedly as Abbé Birotteau took inventory of his inheritance shortly after the abbé Chapeloud's death:

L'abbé Birotteau passa les premiers jours de son deuil à vérifier les ouvrages de sa bibliothèque, à se servir de ses meubles, à les examiner, en disant d'un ton qui, malheureusement, n'a pu être noté:  
"Pauvre Chapeloud!" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 224)

Thus is reflected the abbé's conflicting emotions of joy in his inheritance mixed with the grief over the death of his friend.

In considering the character of Abbé Birotteau, perhaps one might make an analogy with the classical tragic hero. For the Greeks, the tragic hero was doomed because he possessed some trait that made him incongruent with the order of things. The inevitability of the hero's fate is one of the strongest links to the audience, and the macabre fascination that rivets one's attention to the victim is a taste Balzac tries to satisfy.<sup>15</sup> The failure of Abbé Birotteau, of his brother César, and of almost every tragic figure in La Comédie humaine is a failure to interpret correctly the forces with which he had to contend, the forces that controlled his life. In the case of the abbé Birotteau, these forces were primarily found in the character of Mademoiselle Gamard and of Abbé Troubert, both of whom he trusted.

In keeping with his analogy of La comédie humaine and the animal kingdom,<sup>16</sup> Balzac often used animal imagery to describe Birotteau. Two such comparisons made to describe the poor victimized vicar are agneau and ciron.

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<sup>15</sup>Affron, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>cf. p. 16.

Paul Franche's illustration of this concept is quite vivid:<sup>17</sup>

Bien entendu, la pauvre mouche innocente et bourdonnante qu'est l'abbé Birotteau ne manque pas de tomber dans le piège, corps et biens, et il est mangé à toutes les sauces: sauce cléricale, sauce vieille fille, sauce bourgeoisie.

The latter remark, "sauce bourgeoisie," is an allusion to Birotteau's friends, such as the family Listomère, who abandoned him through fear of Abbé Troubert.

Obviously, Abbé Troubert's characteristics are made clearer when seen in contrast to those of Abbé Birotteau. The candid, expansive Birotteau was a perfect foil for the mysterious, silent Troubert. Significantly, Troubert occupied only a small part of the story, the latter part. But his role was one of total dominance, not only of the life of Abbé Birotteau, but also of everyone else. As Birotteau faded more and more into miserable oblivion, Troubert emerged proportionately stronger and more powerful.

The contrast of the two priests was emphasized equally in their physical appearances:

Troubert, grand et sec, avait un teint jaune et bilieux, tandis que le vicaire était ce qu'on appelle familièrement grassouillet. Ronde et rougeaude, la figure de Birotteau peignait une bonhomie sans idées; tandis que celle de Troubert, longue et creusée par

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<sup>17</sup>Franche, op. cit., pp. 114-15.

des rides profondes, contractait en certains moments une expression pleine d'ironie ou de dédain. . . . Il parlait rarement et ne riait jamais. Quand il lui arrivait d'être agréablement ému, il lui échappait un sourire faible qui se perdait dans les plis de son visage (Le Curé de Tours, pp. 244-45).

To summarize the contrast, one might describe Troubert as saturnine, Birotteau as sanguine. When one looked at the abbé Troubert, one would feel a chill permeate his body. A look at the abbé Birotteau would evoke a smile.

The most marked contrast, however, lay in their basic character. As the abbé Birotteau was simple, kind, and sincere, the abbé Troubert was vain, hypocritical, vengeful, and ambitious. His vanity was revealed most pointedly in the interview between him and Madame de Listomère. The latter went to see Troubert to ward off impending disaster to her family because of their sympathies toward Abbé Birotteau. Troubert had never been invited to the Listomère saloon, a fact of which he was acutely aware. When Madame de Listomère coyly invited him to her home, he stroked his chin, a sign she had been told would indicate she had succeeded in appealing to his vanity.

Troubert's hypocrisy was manifest. In the same interview with Madame de Listomère, Balzac portrayed

this hypocrisy by writing both the stated words as well as the actual thoughts of the two adversaries:

---Monsieur votre neveu n'est-il pas allé à Paris? (Vous avez eu là de mes nouvelles, pensait-il. Je puis vous écraser, vous qui m'avez méprisé. Vous venez capituler.)

---Oui, Monsieur; je vous remercie de l'intérêt que vous prenez à lui. Il retourne ce soir à Paris, il est mandé par le ministre, qui est parfait pour nous, et voudrait ne pas lui voir quitter le service. (Jésuite, tu ne nous écraseras pas, pensait-elle, et ta plaisanterie est comprise) (Le Curé de Tours, p. 299).

Troubert's power was well understood by Madame de Listomère although no direct reference to it had ever been made.

The hypocrisy of the abbé Troubert was also shown when Birotteau came to him for advice; Troubert professed to have noticed nothing, although in reality he was quite aware of Mademoiselle Gamard's covert campaign. And, finally, at Mademoiselle Gamard's funeral, after giving a pompous eulogy, Troubert betrayed his actual feelings of contempt and hatred for the old maid when he made a revealing gesture with the holy-water sprinkler as he blessed the woman's grave. Those who had thought all along that Troubert held little, if any, affection for Mademoiselle Gamard found their suspicions confirmed by the scornful gesture.

Why was Abbé Troubert vengeful? What did he have against the poor, simple Abbé Birotteau? Primarily, his



hatred of Birotteau had been transferred from a hatred of Abbé Chapeloud. Secondly, there was an element of jealousy in Troubert. The humble, ignorant Abbé Birotteau was a central figure in the salon of Madame de Listomère, a salon to which Troubert had never been invited. Furthermore, the insignificant vicar, Birotteau, enjoyed a richly-decorated, comfortable apartment while the ambitious Troubert resided in quarters much less in keeping with either his position or his ambition.

Troubert's greatest malice lay in his unscrupulous ambition. He did not permit anything nor any one to stand in his way. In connection with this was his role in relation to the Congrégation:

La position du chanoine au milieu du sénat femelle qui faisait si subtilement la police de la province et sa capacité personnelle l'avaient fait choisir par la Congrégation, entre tous les ecclésiastiques de la ville, pour être le proconsul inconnu de la Touraine. Archevêque, général, préfet, grands et petits étaient sous son occulte domination (Le Curé de Tours, p. 290).

The Congrégation was a mysterious and powerful group of hierarchy and nobility who, in the early nineteenth century, wielded an undisputed influence over the lives of everyone, particularly the people of the provinces.

A totality of vice, a monomanie, is typical of Balzacian characters. Each of the major characters of Le Curé de Tours--Mademoiselle Gamard, Abbé Birotteau,

and Abbé Troubert--were monomaniacs. The old maid had a ruling passion to have a salon rivaling that of Madame de Listomère. This passion was in harmony with her character in the pettiness of its object and in the sentiments of egoism and envy which inspired it.<sup>18</sup> The abbé Birotteau's obsessive desire for physical comfort ruled his life and brought on his misery. The totality of the abbé Troubert's vices is seen in relation to his ambition and also in his vengeance. In the interview between him and Madame de Listomère, the latter asked one small favor for the beleaguered abbé Birotteau--that he might have the portrait of his beloved friend the abbé Chapeloud. Although Troubert had hated Chapeloud perhaps more than he hated anyone else, he refused the request. Another example of his total vengeance was revealed in his causing the abbé Birotteau to be deprived of his token inheritance from Madame de Listomère. The essence of this total disdain was perhaps most effectively expressed at the end of the story. Troubert, now Bishop of Troyes, was in the process of leaving Tours for his new bishopric. As he passed the miserable, skeletal form of the abbé Birotteau, "l'évêque lança sur sa victime un

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<sup>18</sup>Edwin Preston Dargan, W. L. Crain and others, Studies in Balzac's Realism (New York: Russell and Russell, 1932), p. 115.

regard de mépris et de pitié; puis il consentit à l'oublier, et passa" (Le Curé de Tours, p. 307). This final contrast of the two priests is perhaps the most striking of all.

What was Balzac trying to show by his depiction of the abbé Birotteau and the abbé Troubert? For one thing, "l'idéalisme religieux de Balzac n'a jamais pu tolérer les imperfections humaines chez les prêtres de son temps."<sup>19</sup> In addition, it is to be remembered that Balzac was primarily a realist. To say that he conceived of all priests as Birotteaus or as Trouberts would be as inaccurate as to say that there were no priests like the two abbés. Alongside his saintly priests, who will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this paper, appear the Birotteaus and the Trouberts. Pierre Bertault, discussing Balzac and religion, observed that priestly failings did not go unnoticed by Balzac. Bertault stated:<sup>20</sup>

Leur avarice, leur amour du bien-être ont suscité mille plaisanteries de la part de Balzac. Cures, chanoines, évêques, cardinaux, humbles messires en leurs presbytères ou princes en leurs palais, ils sont amis du confort. Ils ont la meilleure cuisinière, les meilleurs chevaux. Qu'il s'agisse de recettes culinaires, de fauteuils, de linge, de meubles, de souliers, etc., adressez-vous à la cure ou à l'évêché:

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<sup>19</sup>Geoffroy Atkinson, Les Idées de Balzac d'après LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE (Genève: Droz, 1949), Vol. III, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup>Pierre Bertault, Balzac et la religion (Paris: Boivin et Compagnie, 1942), p. 249.

tant y a qu'en toute chose, pour rencontrer le modèle du bon, du beau, du commode, du parfait, il faut avoir recours aux gens d'Église.

The contrast in priestly characters, the good and the bad, the weak and the strong, underlines Balzac's attempt to depict society as he observed it.

It must also be remembered that Le Curé de Tours is but a small part of La Comédie humaine; it only represents a small phase of reality. One must look further in La Comédie humaine to find an approximate universality, not only of priests but of society as well.

## CHAPTER IV

### ABBÉ BROSSETTE

There is an old French proverb--the more something changes, the more it remains the same--the significance of which can be seen in Les Paysans. This novel concerns itself with a serious social problem of the early nineteenth century--the continued struggles of the French peasantry.

During the reign of Louis XVIII, an electoral law was passed that gave the franchise to any Frenchman over thirty years of age, not otherwise disqualified, who paid three hundred francs in direct taxes. No one could be elected to office unless he were over forty and paid one thousand francs in direct taxes.<sup>21</sup> Thus it can be seen that the well-to-do bourgeoisie, who had profited most by the Revolution, were afforded at least limited access to power. But the peasantry, although they enjoyed the right to own property, were prohibited from achieving that goal by their continuous enslavement to poverty; or, if they were fortunate to own small farms, were held back by the jealous bourgeoisie.

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<sup>21</sup>Albert Léon Guérard, French Civilization in the Nineteenth Century (New York: The Century Company, 1914), p. 95.

Balzac, the secretary of the society of his time, paid numerous extended visits in the provinces, especially Brittany, Touraine, and Provence. Ever the meticulous observer of men and manners, he was quick to perceive the unrest of the peasantry, their generally unsatiated thirst for land, and the numerous links between them and the petty bourgeoisie of the countryside. Therein lay the main ingredients for the plot of a novel--an agitation for land marked by ruthless disregard for life, indifference to all considerations of gratitude or justice, and secret alliances against the upper class.

As is true in many of his works, Balzac had ambivalent feelings toward the situation he delineated. Sympathetic with the lot of the continuously oppressed peasant, Balzac, however, objected strongly to philanthropy that encouraged indolence and deceit. Moreover, he disliked even more the parceling of the French countryside. His sentiments are well reflected in the dedication of Les Paysans:

Au milieu du vertige démocratique auquel s'adonnent tant d'écrivains aveugles, n'est-il pas urgent de peindre enfin ce paysan qui rend le Code inapplicable, en faisant arriver la propriété à quelque chose qui est et qui n'est pas? Vous allez voir cet infatigable sapeur, ce rongeur qui morcelle 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. Cet élément insocial créé par la Révolution absorbera quelque jour la bourgeoisie,

comme la bourgeoisie a dévoré la noblesse (Les Paysans, Dédicace, ii).

Balzac aimed to portray the principal types of the peasantry, a class most often neglected by writers, and to set in relief the problems relating to this particular class of society.

The Château des Aigues, an imaginary estate in Burgundy, was, in 1799, the time of the Directoire, the property of a former opera singer, Mademoiselle Sophie Laguerre. Declining in years and having wearied of her life in the city, Mademoiselle Laguerre had retired to the country, "oubliée comme beaucoup de charmantes vieilles filles qui s'en vont expier à la campagne leur jeunesse adorée, et qui remplacent leur amour perdu par un autre, l'homme par la nature" (Les Paysans, p. 13). Mademoiselle Laguerre enjoyed her final years in the peace and tranquility provided by country life. The peasants, moved by her beauty, her lovely voice, and most particularly by her lack of attention to the affairs of her estate, thus permitting them freedom to glean, to poach, to take firewood at will, "la prennent pour un ange" (Les Paysans, p. 15). For many reasons, therefore, they were duly grieved at her death and the transfer of her property to other hands.

By 1823, during the Restoration, the château and its properties were acquired by the Count de Montcornet, a successful general in the army of the Empire. The count was a giant of a man with a choleric temperament to match his stature. Moreover, his military life and position had accustomed him to a belief that everyone was his subordinate; he looked upon his wishes as mandates for others.

Gaubertin, the overseer of the Aigues, had held this same position under Mademoiselle Laguerre. His was an enviable position; for not only was there power and prestige innate to the job, but Mademoiselle Laguerre's indifferent attention to the administration of her estate had afforded Gaubertin the opportunity to pursue profitable and illegal sidelines, such as poaching, as well as diverting money from rents. The arrival of Montcornet as proprietor of the Aigues did not disturb Gaubertin, for, mistakenly, he assumed that the general would pay no more attention than Mademoiselle Laguerre had to the operations of a large estate. General Montcornet, however, was most interested in the management of his property. On discovering that he was being cheated and robbed, the general dismissed Gaubertin. With little knowledge of country matters or people, the general had made a grave mistake, not so much in dismissing the overseer as in the humiliating manner



in which it was done--an outright dismissal accentuated by a few cracks of a horsewhip. Montcornet should have parted with his steward on some pretext--the obligation of rewarding an old comrade, for example (Les Paysans, p. 132). Although both Gaubertin and Montcornet would have known differently, the opportunity for a graceful departure would have been afforded Gaubertin. As it was, driven ignominiously from his post, Gaubertin retired to the village, thirsting for vengeance. Surrounded by friends and relatives who shared his contempt, the humiliated Gaubertin devoted himself to the task of annoying Montcornet and raising up enemies in sufficient force to compel the general to sell the Aigues.

The choleric Montcornet, having rashly discharged his steward, suddenly found himself in need of naming a successor. However, the general's need was equal to, if not outweighed by, Gaubertin's desire to have a man of his own choosing succeed him. Working behind the scenes, Gaubertin accomplished this goal and effected the appointment of his cousin, a man no less devious than he but more adept in tact and duplicity. Consequently, the general, unknowingly, still had an enemy in his camp.

Gaubertin was not the only one who reaped the benefits of Mademoiselle Laguerre's laxity. The people of the countryside were accustomed to glean the fields

of the Aigues and to collect firewood with impunity on the estate's vast woodlands, although the law permitted this privilege only to the poor and destitute. The general, on discovering the people's illegal habits, insisted that the custom be stopped. To ensure the observance of the laws protecting his property, Montcornet appointed one of his former officers, Michaud, to serve as forester or guard. An honest, devoted, innately kind man, Michaud soon discovered himself forced to pursue and arrest old women and young girls whom he would find gleaning or collecting firewood.

Finally, the loyal Michaud was murdered, but the assailant was never detected because no one would expose him. The obstinate General Montcornet, who insisted that he had never lost a battle nor ever retreated, continued to pursue his singular goal. A network of covert interests surrounded him, however. The hydra-headed attacks by the enemy were irrepressible. The general was soon forced to capitulate, and the estate was sold to a local usurer who kept the vineyard for himself, sold the woodlands to Gaubertin, and disposed of the remaining land by selling it to a group who in turn sold the property by lots.

At the beginning of the story, an old peasant, Fourchon, who, perhaps more than anyone else, lived freely off the general's estate, made some astute and clairvoyant

observations about the sorry life of the peasants.

Responding to a claim by a guest of Montcornet that the peasant was the cause of his own misery, that he was free to amass savings, to buy property, to be his own master, Fourchon stated:

J'ai vu l'ancien temps et je vois le nouveau, . . . l'enseigne est changée, c'est vrai, mais le vin est toujours le même! Aujourd'hui n'est que le cadet d'hier (Les Paysans, p. 102).

The ancestral nobleman no longer resided in the château, as before the Revolution, but his departure had ameliorated very little the lot of the peasant. Deprived of the franchise by circumstances, the peasant was destined to a life of unrewarding toil, "que ce soit pour un seigneur ou pour l'impôt" (Les Paysans, p. 102). Neither the proprietorship of Mademoiselle Laguerre nor that of General Montcornet had altered the cruel reality of life for the peasant.

Continuing his discourse on the restrictive life to which the peasant was subjected, Fourchon stated:

Ce que nous avons de mieux à faire est donc de rester dans nos communes, où nous sommes parqués comme des moutons par la force des choses, comme nous l'étions par les seigneurs. Et je me moque de ce qui m'y cloue! Cloué par la loi de la nécessité, cloué par celle de la seigneurie, on est toujours condamné à perpétuité à remuer la terre. . . . Vous 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 (Les Paysans, pp. 103-04).

Such a clear expression of the peasant's condition and attitude should have been a forewarning to the general. Ironically, Montcornet, on hearing Fourchon's statement, commented: "Voilà ce qui s'appelle une déclaration de guerre" (Les Paysans, p. 104), and yet Fourchon's warning was least heeded by the general himself.

Involved in the middle of this intrigue was the abbé Brossette, the village priest. Although he came from a fine bourgeoisie family, the abbé was content with his humble position in this remote valley of Burgundy:

Servir était sa devise, servir l'Église et la monarchie sur le point le plus menacé, servir au dernier rang, comme un soldat qui se sent destiné, tôt ou tard, au généralat, par son désir de bien faire et par son courage (Les Paysans, pp. 112-13).

The abbé, in his humble way, pursued with courage and conviction his role as counselor and spiritual leader.

A vivid example of a devoted, conscientious, honest priest, the abbé Brossette was confronted with a monumental task, for the spiritual well-being of the peasants was as impoverished as their physical state. He recognized that these people, to whose welfare he had devoted his life, were equally capable of killing him as well as anyone else. He explained:

Je suis un paria; on m'espionne comme l'ennemi commun; je suis forcé d'ouvrir à tout moment les yeux et les oreilles de la prudence pour éviter les pièges qu'on me tend, afin de se débarrasser de moi. . . . J'en

suis . . . à me demander s'ils ne me tireront pas un coup de fusil (Les Paysans, pp. 111-12).

The realization of the little esteem his parishioners had for him, as well as the danger to which he was exposed, however, did not deter him from his goal of helping the people.

Abbé Brossette had the unique distinction of being the only one who viewed the situation in its proper perspective. Shortly after the general assumed control of his estate, the abbé clairvoyantly advised him:

Mais, ici, vous êtes dans des circonstances exceptionnelles, et, si votre bienfaisance ne marche pas accompagnée de la réflexion, vous courez risque de solder vos ennemis (Les Paysans, pp. 93-94).

His foreshadowing of what was to come fell on deaf ears; the general failed to heed the warning.

Recognizing that the roots of the problem lay in faults of those in each level of society--the rich, the bourgeoisie, and the peasantry--Abbé Brossette attempted to effect a change in each.

The peasants were held down, not only by the restrictive taxes and laws, but perhaps even more so by the petty bourgeoisie who, allied by marital or conspiratorial ties, controlled the destiny of the people of the entire area, from the lowliest peasant to Montcornet. Abbé Brossette, realizing that the bourgeoisie used the law to suit their own purposes, observed: "La religion peut

seule réparer tant de maux, la loi me semble impuissante . . ." (Les Paysans, p. 230). However, his efforts to bring religion and education to the people met with firm resistance. His plans to bring in a Christian Brother to educate the children were rejected by the powerful, unprincipled bourgeoisie. As one of them candidly remarked: "Si les paysans savaient lire et écrire, que deviendrions-nous?" (Les Paysans, p. 179)

Working directly with the peasants was perhaps the least successful of his efforts, for he was completely rebuffed. Mass was poorly attended, sermons went unheard or unheeded. In spite of constant rejection, however, Abbé Brossette gave a third of his income to the poor, led a life of deprivation equal to those who spurned him, and continued to pursue his goal; for, as he observed: "On ne déserte pas plus la cause de Dieu que celle d'un empereur!" (Les Paysans, p. 102)

The efforts of Abbé Brossette to enlist the Count and Madame de Montcornet to his cause were also poorly received. He tried to convince the general and his wife to set aside their stubborn manner and selfish interests and to work for the welfare of the peasants. In attempting to win Madame de Montcornet to this line of thinking, the abbé pleaded:

Il ne s'agit pas de nous, Madame, mais de l'avenir. Si nous sommes institués pour dire aux pauvres: "Sachez être pauvres!" nous devons dire aux riches: "Sachez être riches!" c'est-à-dire: "Soyez intelligents dans la bienfaisance, pieux et dignes de la place que Dieu vous assigne!" (Les Paysans, p. 253)

The abbé recognized that if a peaceful life was to be achieved, every level of society would have to recognize and assume its moral responsibilities.

Abbé Brossette was an impartial arbiter. He attempted to effect a change in all the adversaries. He advised the Montcornets not to continue the practice of Mademoiselle Laguierre of overlooking the thievery of the peasants, for he explained:

Si vous continuez l'égoïsme de la cantatrice qui, certes, a causé par sa nonchalance le mal dont l'étendue vous effraye, vous reverrez les échafauds où sont morts vos prédécesseurs pour les fautes de leurs pères (Les Paysans, p. 253).

He obviously felt that Mademoiselle Laguierre's laxity had contributed to the entrenchment of bad habits among the peasants. Abbé Brossette suggested to Madame de Montcornet that she and her husband might do good as obscurely and inostentatiously as others did evil. Only through charitable, selfless acts would improvement come. Abbé Brossette decried to Madame Montcornet:

Si, dans chaque commune, trois êtres voulaient le bien, la France, notre beau pays, serait sauvés de l'abîme où nous courons, et où nous entraîne une irréligieuse indifférence à tout ce qui n'est pas nous! Changez d'abord, changez vos mœurs, et vous changerez alors vos lois (Les Paysans, pp. 253-54).

It was his realistic belief that the responsibility for the welfare of all lay in action on the part of everyone. "Voilà des prières en action qui plaisent à Dieu" (Les Paysans, p. 253). Unfortunately, Madame de Montcornet's response was a fatal "Nous verrons!" (Les Paysans, p. 254) As the abbé sadly walked away from this unsuccessful interview, he said to himself:

Mon Dieu! si votre volonté sainte est de déchaîner les pauvres comme un torrent pour transformer les sociétés, je comprends alors que vous abandonniez les riches à leur aveuglement! (Les Paysans, p. 254)

His own efforts to enlighten the Montcornets and to avert an inundation of retaliatory acts on the part of the peasants were frustrated at every turn.

Abbé Brossette was a failure, but not in the sense that Abbé Birotteau was a failure. A good and humble priest, true to his vocation, Abbé Brossette failed to resolve the problem, and thus achieve the goal he had expressed to Madame Montcornet: "Je ne me chauffe qu'à l'idée de sauver cette vallée, de la reconquérir à Dieu!" (Les Paysans, p. 253) Trying to sow the seeds of charity and selflessness in order to reap a harvest of peace and well-being for all, the abbé Brossette suffered the misfortune of having his seeds of wisdom fall on rocky ground.

Balzac portrayed the abbé Brossette in a sympathetic manner. The abbé seemed to be the only person with vision



in a mass of blind people. His charity, his sincerity, his devotion, his perception were all admirable characteristics. All the frustrations inherent in the situation seemed to be embodied in Abbé Brossette. At the end of the story, nothing was resolved. The peasantry were no better off; the bourgeoisie had no less power and were no more principled. There was a new owner residing in the château, but there were no new opportunities for the peasants.

In writing Les Paysans, Balzac was particularly concerned in reflecting the problems of provincial life and their inherent complexities. Each level of society had contributed in some way to the difficult situation, but it was at the feet of the bourgeoisie that Balzac placed most of the blame. Geoffroy Atkinson, discussing this idea that Balzac held the bourgeoisie most responsible for the unhappy state of the peasants, stated:<sup>22</sup>

Cette société qui cherche à s'enrichir, sans penser aux principes religieux de bonté et de charité, l'auteur la trouve moralement détestable. Et il la rend responsable de la chute morale de bien des jeunes gens, qui abandonnent les vertus enseignées dans une famille chrétienne.

The efforts of Christian teaching were thwarted by the égoïsme of the self-centered.

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<sup>22</sup>Atkinson, op. cit., p. 116.

## CHAPTER V

### ABBÉ JANVIER

Le Médecin de campagne, quite obviously, centers around the life of a country doctor. As has been noted, Le Médecin de campagne is a reflection of Balzac's wishes, if not his beliefs, for society.<sup>23</sup> Prior to writing this story, Balzac had drawn on past observations and experiences as sources for his novels.<sup>24</sup> In Le Médecin de campagne, he projected his social ideas and his concept of a good and admirable life.

Dr. Benassis was of medium height, but broad in chest and shoulders. It has already been observed that Louis Lambert and Félix de Vandenesse were mirrors of Balzac as a youth and as a young man.<sup>25</sup> It is no mere coincidence that the admirable Dr. Benassis bore a physical resemblance to his creator. At the time he wrote this story, in 1833, Balzac was nurturing political aspirations. He considered presenting himself as a candidate in the parliamentary elections. His friends, however, dissuaded him from such a venture. Nevertheless, Dr. Benassis was

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<sup>23</sup>cf., p. 13.

<sup>24</sup>Abraham, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>cf., p. 11.

Balzac's porte-parole, expounding his political and religious beliefs.

Dr. Benassis lived a life of dedication in a small village near Grenoble. His reputation had spread beyond the remote countryside in which he lived to the extent that General Genestas, a former officer in Napoleon's army, was prompted to come to the village to seek the doctor's curative powers for his sickly son. In the course of the general's brief stay, the doctor's life's story was revealed.

As a young man, Benassis was a typical example of the innocent youth from the provinces who, on arriving in the worldly city of Paris, abandoned his Christian upbringing and yielded to the temptations afforded him by his sudden independence and the sinful society in which he found himself. After several years as a carefree libertine, he suddenly had his wastrel life laid bare before him. The awakening came in the form of a letter from his former mistress whom he had deserted two years previously. From the letter, written on her deathbed, the young Benassis discovered the existence of a son, hitherto unknown to him. Too late to prevent the young woman's death, the remorseful Benassis renounced his licentious life and warmly assumed his responsibilities as a father. Taking the child into his home, Benassis

provided his son with a comfortable living and the best of tutors. The subsequent joy the boy provided him sustained his life for nearly twelve years. Then, two severe tragedies befell him. He had grown to love a young girl, the daughter of a strict Jansenist family. Her parents, on discovering the sinful past of their daughter's suitor, forbade the marriage to which they had previously agreed.

The second and equally severe misfortune was the death of his son, who during all his twelve years had suffered precarious health. The double tragedy left Benassis in a state of deep depression. Like Hamlet, he considered and then rejected suicide because of its moral interdiction as well as its mysterious and unknown consequences. He resolved to pursue a life of dedication and reparation. He debated with himself as to what career would be most efficacious. As he explained to General Genastas:<sup>26</sup>

Quand je me décidai religieusement à cette vie d'obscure résignation, j'ai longtemps hésité à me faire curé, médecin de campagne ou juge de paix. Ce n'est pas sans raison, mon cher monsieur, que l'on assemble proverbialement les trois robes noires, le prêtre, l'homme de loi, le médecin: l'un panse les plaies de l'âme, l'autre celles de la bourse, le dernier celles du corps; ils représentent la société dans ses trois principaux termes d'existence: la conscience, le domaine, la santé. Jadis le premier, puis le

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<sup>26</sup>Honoré de Balzac, Le Médecin de campagne, ed. Félicien Marceau (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1960), p. 62.

second, furent tout l'État. Ceux qui nous ont précédés sur la terre pensaient, avec raison peut-être, que le prêtre, disposant des idées, devait être tout le gouvernement: il fut alors roi, pontife et juge; mais alors tout était croyance et conscience. Aujourd'hui tout est changé, prenons notre époque telle qu'elle est (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 62).

Having decided, then, that society had changed, that people were less receptive to the influence of the Church or the government, he arrived at his decision to concentrate his efforts to help mankind through the practice of medicine.

On finishing his studies, Dr. Benassis sought a place that would provide him the opportunity to purge his soul as well as relieve the sufferings of others. He chanced upon a remote village which seemed to meet his needs. Unique to this village, which was hidden away in a valley of the Alps, was a small colony of people who suffered from cretinism, a chronic disease characterized by physical deformity, dwarfism, and idiocy. Ignorance and a superstitious belief that the malady was a sign of good fortune had prompted the perpetuation of the condition.

According to Dr. Benassis, favorable conditions for the spread of the disease were prevalent--the air was stagnant; the hamlet lay in a valley, and the sunlight only fell on the mountain-top; the valley itself profited little from the sun. Furthermore, marriages among the unfortunate people were not forbidden by law.

Dr. Benassis set for himself the primary task of freeing the valley from the physical and mental contagion originating from cretinism. He first sought and attained the post of mayor. Secondly, with the cooperation of the prefect of the department, he had several of the cretins removed, by night, to an asylum. The inhabitants of the valley, when they discovered what the doctor had done, became aroused against him. The village priest, an uneducated man, joined his voice in protest against the doctor. Relating his experience to General Genestas, Dr. Benassis explained:

Aussitôt que cet acte d'humanité fut connu, je devins en horreur à toute la population. Le curé prêcha contre moi. Malgré mes efforts pour expliquer aux meilleures têtes du bourg combien était importante l'expulsion de ces crétins, malgré les soins que je rendais aux malades du pays, on me tira un coup de fusil au coin d'un bois. J'allai voir l'évêque de Grenoble et lui demandai le changement du curé. Monseigneur fut assez bon pour me permettre de choisir un prêtre qui pût s'associer à mes œuvres et j'eus le bonheur de rencontrer un de ces êtres qui semblent tombés du ciel (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 28).

An innate fear of the unknown, combined with a resignation to their suffering, had prompted the uneducated inhabitants to resist the efforts of Dr. Benassis. Thus, it was not until Abbé Janvier arrived that Dr. Benassis was able to make any progress in his plans.

Working together, the two saintly men accomplished incredible gains. By educating the people somewhat about

the dreadful disease of cretinism, by appealing to their parsimonious instincts in showing them the cost of supporting the afflicted sufferers; and, finally, by building new homes in a healthier part of the valley, Dr. Benassis and Abbé Janvier were eventually able to succeed in their efforts to eliminate the disease of cretinism from the valley.

On achieving their primary goal, then, Dr. Benassis and Abbé Janvier found less and less opposition to their efforts to effect their secondary goal--an improvement in the life of the people. The introduction of irrigation, the resultant fertility of the previously barren land, the establishment of a durable road that provided important communication with the highway to Grenoble, the development of artisans' skills which prompted the birth and growth of valuable industry--all these changes contributed to the growth of the valley from an area with only seven hundred inhabitants to one with more than two thousand. The secret to the success of Dr. Benassis and the abbé Janvier lay in their basic aim to develop to the utmost the capabilities of this remote corner of the earth, to inspire its people with a recognition of their own worth and abilities, and to encourage them to help themselves. The results were almost spectacular.

General Genestas, having little difficulty in confirming that Dr. Benassis's reputation was well founded, departed from the village after having arranged to have his sickly son placed under the doctor's care. Shortly thereafter, the young boy arrived in the village and began to follow a regimen that included fresh air, physical activity, careful diet, and, most importantly, camaraderie with the doctor. Effective results were almost instantaneous.

Eight months later, a sad, but healthy, young boy wrote a doleful letter to his father announcing the death by heart attack of Dr. Benassis. The General sadly returned to the village to get his son. After visiting the grave of the revered doctor, General Genestas announced to Abbé Janvier that on his retirement from the army he would return to finish his days among the people in the now-saddened village.

The character of a person, in life or in literature, is revealed by what he does, by what he says, and by what others say about him. It is by the latter two means that the abbé Janvier's character is discovered, for no specific actions are attributed to him. The activist in the story is Dr. Benassis.

That the abbé Janvier was a man who immediately inspired admiration and respect was reflected when General Genestas was first introduced to the priest: "La figure



du prêtre absorba l'attention du militaire par l'expression d'une beauté morale dont les séductions étaient irrésistibles" (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 143). A closer scrutiny revealed a man slight in stature but strong in virtue:

Sa petite taille, sa maigreur, son attitude, annonçaient une grande faiblesse physique; mais sa physionomie, toujours placide, attestait la profonde paix intérieure du chrétien et la force qu'engendre la chasteté de l'âme. Ses yeux, où semblait se refléter le ciel, trahissaient l'inépuisable foyer de charité qui consumait son cœur. Ses gestes, rares et naturels, étaient ceux d'un homme modeste, ses mouvements avaient la pudique simplicité de ceux des jeunes filles. Sa vue inspirait le respect et le désir vague d'entrer dans son intimité (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 143).

Abbé Janvier's physical appearance contrasted quite dramatically with that of the doctor. However, in character, in spirituality, in moral integrity, and in selfless charity, they complemented each other equally dramatically. A humble priest, the abbé Janvier worked quietly and subtly, seconding the charitable works of Dr. Benassis.

In a conversation with General Genestas, Abbé Janvier showed a realistic assessment of life and religion. First of all, he denied that to be devoutly religious implied fanaticism. Secondly, he acknowledged that daily attendance at mass was not a measure of devotion. For, as he stated: "Travailler, c'est prier. La pratique rapporte la connaissance des principes religieux qui font vivre les sociétés" (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 148).

Abbé Janvier realistically recognized that if the peasants assisted at daily mass, few fields would be cultivated nor would the needs of society be served.

In this same exchange, Genestas asked the curé how patriotism, then, fitted into his scheme of life.

The abbé responded:

Le patriotisme . . . n'inspire que des sentiments passagers, la religion les rend durables. Le patriotisme est un oubli momentané de l'intérêt personnel, tandis que le christianisme est un système complet d'opposition aux tendances dépravées de l'homme (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 148).

General Genestas had only to look at the vicissitudes of Napoleon's popularity to appreciate the significance of the abbé's words.

Abbé Janvier was quite adamant in his belief that ritual was not the most important aspect of religion.

He stated his position quite humbly but forcibly:

Tout en me soumettant à la discipline ecclésiastique et à la pensée de mes supérieurs, je crois que, pendant longtemps, nous devrions être moins exigeants sur les questions du culte, et tâcher de ranimer le sentiment religieux au cœur des régions moyennes, là où l'on discute le christianisme au lieu d'en pratiquer les maximes. Le philosophisme du riche a été d'un bien fatal exemple pour le pauvre, et a causé de trop longs interrègnes dans le royaume de Dieu. Ce que nous gagnons aujourd'hui sur nos ouailles dépend entièrement de notre influence personnelle, n'est-ce pas un malheur que la foi d'une Commune soit due à la considération qu'y obtient un homme? Lorsque le christianisme aura fécondé de nouveau l'ordre social, en imprégnant toutes les classes de ses doctrines conservatrices, son culte ne sera plus alors mis en question (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 147).

The validity of his beliefs was borne out by the influence that the abbé and Dr. Benassis wielded in the valley. Certainly, these men were vivid examples of the efficacy of actualizing Christian principles. This fact was acknowledged by M. Cambon, a timber merchant and one of the leading townsmen. He stated:

Vous avez réussi, Monsieur le curé. . . . Je puis juger des changements que vous avez produits dans les esprits, en comparant l'état actuel de la Commune à son état passé (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 146).

On hearing the abbé Janvier express his philosophy and on learning of his efficacious efforts to carry out this philosophy, one has little difficulty in agreeing with Dr. Benassis that here was a man "que personne ne peut se défendre d'aimer" (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 143).

Abbé Janvier was a humble man with the singular ambition of bringing joy and happiness to his people. That he recognized the pitfalls of wealth and power is reflected in his statement:

En effet, le prêtre a-t-il des propriétés privilégiées, il semble oppresseur; l'État le paie-t-il, il est un fonctionnaire, il doit son temps, son cœur, sa vie; les citoyens lui font un devoir de ses vertus, et sa bienfaisance, tarie dans le principe du libre arbitre, se dessèche dans son cœur. Mais que le prêtre soit pauvre, qu'il soit volontairement prêtre, sans autre appui que Dieu, sans autre fortune que le cœur des fidèles, il redevient le missionnaire de l'Amérique, il s'institue apôtre, il est le prince du bien. Enfin, il ne règne que par le dénûment et il succombe par l'opulence (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 151).

This belief, that a priest's only ambition should be the welfare of his people, was the raison d'être of the abbé Janvier.

As has been previously observed, Balzac wrote Le Médecin de campagne at a time when he was experiencing political ambitions<sup>27</sup> and also at a time when he was greatly influenced by the Imitation of Christ by St. Thomas à Kempis.<sup>28</sup> Balzac looked upon his story as a great accomplishment; Maurois noted that Balzac described the work as "l'Évangile en action."<sup>29</sup> A combination of the two influences, therefore, is reflected in Le Médecin de campagne. The novel contains little action, but much philosophical and political expounding. Dr. Benassis explained his political beliefs at great length to General Genestas. The doctor expressed his opposition to universal suffrage, his opposition to the abolition of the peerage, and his belief in what he described as social superiorities--the superiority of the thinker, the superiority of the politician, and the superiority of wealth.

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<sup>27</sup>cf. p. 46.

<sup>28</sup>cf. p. 13.

<sup>29</sup>Maurois, op. cit., p. 234.

The first edition of Le Médecin de campagne had on its frontispiece an engraving of Saint Christopher.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, Dr. Benassis and Abbé Janvier were Christ-bearers in the truest sense of the expression.

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<sup>30</sup>Guyon, op. cit., p. 632.

## CHAPTER VI

### ABBÉ BONNET

Among the supériorités sociales to whom Balzac assigned the task of regenerating life in the provinces, the country priest seems to have been placed in the primary position.<sup>31</sup> Three novels that attest to this fact are Les Paysans, Le Médecin de campagne, and Le Curé de village. According to Jean Charles-Brun, these three novels "sont les plus hautement expressifs de l'idéal que Balzac se trace du prêtre et de la mission qu'il lui propose dans la société."<sup>32</sup> As Abbé Janvier pointed out, Christianity is a system completely in opposition to the depraved tendencies of mankind.<sup>33</sup> The role of the priest, according to Balzac, was to seek out this depravation in whatever form it manifested itself and to work for its eradication. Although the spiritual welfare of the people was of essence the priest's primary concern, he could not dissociate himself from involvement in the temporal welfare of his parishioners.

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<sup>31</sup>Calippe, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>32</sup>Charles-Brun, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>33</sup>cf. p. 54.

Having promised Madame Hanska to write about le prêtre catholique, in 1841 Balzac fulfilled this commitment in writing Le Curé de village. But this novel was no mere exercise to please a beloved one. In Le Curé de village, Balzac more clearly delineated ideas that he had touched on in previous works. Charles Calippe, in discussing Balzac's social beliefs, stated:<sup>34</sup>

Le Curé de village est, au point de vue de l'œuvre et des résultats, la contre-partie des Paysans et le complément du Médecin de campagne. Le curé des montagnes dauphinoises qui met des paroles et ses œuvres en harmonie avec l'entreprise sociale du médecin; le curé bourguignon qui rêve une amélioration des paysans par les châtelains et qui, faute d'avoir obtenu ce concours réputé nécessaire, échoue dans son ministre: l'abbé Janyier et l'abbé Brossette sont, en des milieux différents et dans les situations opposées, des esquisses et comme des préparations de l'abbé Bonnet, le curé limousin. Ils sont l'ébauche: il est le portrait.

The abbé Bonnet, then, is Madame Hanska's Catholic priest; but even more so, he is Balzac's Catholic priest.

The first part of Le Curé de village is centered around Véronique Graslin, the only daughter of a wealthy ironmonger. As a young girl, Véronique was forced into a mariage de raison with the wealthiest banker in Limoges, a man thirty years older than she. Having grown to detest her repulsive and miserly husband, Véronique became involved in a secret love affair with a pottery-worker, Jean-François

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<sup>34</sup>Calippe, op. cit., p. 72.

Tascheron. The love affair was secret to everyone, including the reader. The affair is never described nor explained; one witnesses only its effects and consequences.

Tascheron was arrested and found guilty of robbery and murder. Surprised in the act of stealing money buried by the town miser, Tascheron had subsequently killed the old man and his servant-girl who had come to her master's assistance. Circumstantial evidence led the police to Tascheron, who was captured as he was about to catch a stage that would have taken him out of the province and to freedom. Prior to perpetrating the double crime, Jean-François Tascheron had led an exemplary life. The son of an honest, pious family who lived in the remote township of Montégnac, Jean-François had come to Limoges and had sought his fortune with integrity and industry. It was speculated that his unusual breach of character, committing robbery and murder, could only have been prompted by a desire to escape to America with a woman he loved, a woman not free to marry, e.g., one already married, and a woman who was accustomed to a comfortable manner of living, thus the need for a great deal of money. Tascheron never revealed the truth, and the speculation remained that, speculation.

Tascheron was brought to trial, found guilty, and condemned to death. When sentence was passed, Jean-François



broke from character for the second and last time in his life. He flew into a blind rage, threatened violence indiscriminately to all, and more or less acted with the ferocity of a wild beast. He was subdued and led to jail where he was confined in a straight jacket until his passion subsided. Whenever anyone, including the chaplain, came near Tascheron, he broke out in a stormy rage. The police were most concerned to learn the identity of his accomplice and to recover the money, hitherto unretrieved. It was, however, Tascheron's apparent lack of repentance, his refusal to make his peace with God, that caused the greatest concern among the religious of Limoges, including the bishop. Failing in every attempt to communicate with the prisoner, the priests finally arrived at the decision to send for the curé of Montégnac, the abbé Bonnet. A young aide to the bishop, Abbé Gabriel Rastignac, was dispatched to the village to bring Abbé Bonnet to Limoges. The action had its hoped-for results. Abbé Bonnet came to Limoges and was received by Tascheron, who responded to the priest's counsel and made his peace with God. Jean-François went to his death kissing the feet of the crucifix.

A few years later, the husband of Madame Graslin purchased an estate in Montégnac, partly to acquit himself of an unfulfilled clause in his marriage contract, but

primarily to carry out a sound financial investment. Shortly thereafter, M. Graslin's health failed him and he died. Madame Graslin disposed of her affairs in Limoges and retired to Montégnac with her young son and her widowed mother.

From the time of her marriage, Madame Graslin's life had never been happy. Innocent and naïve, she had entered into marriage with idealistic ideas fostered by her earlier reading of romantic novels. Her youthful dreams were shattered by an avaricious old man who had seen the marriage as an astute financial accomplishment as well as a source of companionship during his old age. The death of her husband had not relieved Madame Graslin of her misery. A guilty conscience replaced her former miserable boredom.

Residence in Montégnac placed Madame Graslin under the spiritual care of Abbé Bonnet. He was quick to recognize that the lady was suffering from an illness not of the body, but of the soul. He remarked to Madame Graslin: "Je croyais, Madame . . . que vous n'aviez que de la mélancolie; mais, je vois . . . c'est du désespoir. Ce sentiment n'est ni chrétien ni catholique" (Le Curé de village, p. 180). He admonished the young widow that she had no right to judge herself, to condemn herself for whatever reason. Moreover, he said: "Tout est

rachetable" (Le Curé de village, p. 185). He lifted her from the depths of despair in suggesting to her a life of repentance by good works. He explained: "Vos prières doivent être des travaux" (Le Curé de village, p. 185). From that moment on, Madame Graslin devoted herself, with the abbé's assistance, to the amelioration of the impoverished countryside. Rivers were diverted, farming productivity increased, profit was extracted from the previously untouched timberlands. Catholicism and philanthropic works wrought a transformation on the materially impoverished Montégnac countryside as well as on the spiritually impoverished soul of Madame Graslin. Complete peace was not hers, however, until, at her own insistence, Madame Graslin made a public confession on her deathbed of her affair with Tascheron.

Of all the priests in La Comédie humaine, Abbé Bonnet is, perhaps, the most exemplar. Paul Louis stated:<sup>35</sup>

Balzac nous présente Bonnet sous des traits qui doivent, à ses yeux, lui valoir une sympathie indiscutée: extérieur déplaisant mais visage passionné, un homme de la primitive chrétienté; on sent que si l'écrivain avait été prêtre, il eût voulu ressembler à celui-ci, et, en tous cas, qu'il lui prête ses propres inclinaisons.

Whereas other priests, such as the abbé Brossette, discussed in chapter IV, or the abbé Janvier, discussed in chapter V,

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<sup>35</sup>Louis, op. cit., p. 155.

were admirable men who followed well their sacerdotal calling, the abbé Bonnet embodied all the qualities that, in Balzac's eyes, made up the perfect priest.

When Abbé Bonnet first came to Montégnac, he encountered a situation comparable to that faced by Abbé Brossette, namely a peasantry infamous for its mauvais moeurs. Out of one hundred accused who were brought to trial in the department of Limousin, fifty of them came from the Montégnac area. Two years after the abbé Bonnet arrived in the township, Montégnac lost its unfavorable reputation. This drastic change "fut attribué généralement à l'influence que M. Bonnet exerçait sur cette commune, jadis le foyer des mauvais sujets qui désolèrent la contrée" (Le Curé de village, p. 73). The abbé Bonnet succeeded where the abbé Brossette had failed; he had reached the hearts of his people.

Abbé Rastignac, the young aide commissioned to solicit Abbé Bonnet's assistance in the Tascheron affair, was in unfamiliar territory in the provinces. Prior to meeting Abbé Bonnet, young Rastignac imagined him to be short and stout; a rough working-man, almost like one of the peasants himself. The reality was far from what he imagined. He met a man with the following physical characteristics:

De petite taille et débile en apparence, M. Bonnet frappait tout d'abord par le visage passionné qu'on suppose à l'apôtre: une figure presque triangulaire . . . . Dans cette figure, endolorie par un teint jaune comme la cire d'un cierge, éclataient deux yeux d'un bleu lumineux de foi, brûlant d'espérance vive. . . . La chevelure châtain, rare, fine et lisse sur la tête, annonçait un tempérament pauvre, soutenu seulement par un régime sobre. La volonté faisait toute la force de cet homme. . . . Les gens à qui les miracles de la pensée, de la foi, de l'art, sont connus pouvaient seuls adorer ce regard enflammé du martyr, cette pâleur de la constance et cette voix de l'amour qui distinguait le curé Bonnet (Le curé de village, pp. 127-28).

Although the abbé Bonnet's appearance was far from prepossessing, there was an element of mute eloquence that captured the attention of the beholder.

The abbé Rastignac was to learn a great deal from this humble country priest. Commenting on the poor state of the abbé Bonnet's church, Rastignac received the reply:

Hélas! Monsieur, je n'ai pas le courage d'y dépenser des sommes qui peuvent secourir les pauvres. Les pauvres sont l'église. . . . Les pauvres rendent alors ce qu'ils ont à l'église! N'avez-vous pas vu, Monsieur, les clous qui sont de distance en distance dans les murs? ils servent à y fixer une espèce de treillage en fil de fer où les femmes attachent des bouquets. L'église est alors en entier revêtue de fleurs qui restent fleuries jusqu'au soir. Ma pauvre église, que vous trouvez si nue, est parée comme une mariée, elle embaume, le sol est jonché de feuillages au milieu desquels on laisse, pour le passage du saint sacrement, un chemin de roses effeuillées. Dans cette journée, je ne craindrais pas les pompes de Saint-Pierre de Rome. Le saint-père a son or; moi, j'ai mes fleurs: à chacun son miracle. Ah! Monsieur, le bourg de Montégnac est pauvre, mais il est catholique. Autrefois, on y dépouillait les passants; aujourd'hui, le voyageur peut y laisser tomber un sac plein d'écus, il le retrouverait chez lui (Le Curé de village, pp. 139-40).

The abbé Bonnet's vivid response reflected not only his simplicity, but also his realistic sense of values.

Perhaps the most impressive statement the abbé Bonnet made to Abbé Rastignac was in relation to his vocation. Asked by the young curé how he happened to have embraced l'état ecclésiastique, Abbé Bonnet replied:

Je n'ai point vu d'état dans la prêtrise. . . . Je ne comprends pas qu'on devienne prêtre par des raisons autres que les indéfinissables puissances de la vocation (Le Curé de village, p. 143).

Having distinguished between position and vocation in relation to the priesthood, Abbé Bonnet went on to explain:

Je voulus panser les plaies du pauvre dans un coin de terre ignoré, puis prouver par mon exemple, si Dieu daignait bénir mes efforts, que la religion catholique, prise dans ses œuvres humaines, est la seule vraie, la seule bonne et belle puissance civilisatrice (Le Curé de village, pp. 145-46).

Abbé Bonnet had looked for his out-of-the-way corner.

On hearing of the deplorable state of the Montégnac commune, the newly-ordained curé had said to himself: "Voilà ta vigne!" (Le Curé de village, p. 146) Here he had come, then, to Montégnac, and here he had worked. Acknowledging that progress had been made, he remarked to Abbé Rastignac:

Il ne suffit pas de moraliser les gens que j'ai trouvés dans un état affreux de sentiments impies, je veux mourir au milieu d'une génération entièrement convaincue (Le Curé de village, p. 142).

The Abbé Bonnet's simple but humble ambition dramatically contrasted with that of the young abbé Rastignac.

The abbé Bonnet, in his conversation with Abbé Rastignac, had mentioned that at least one way of achieving his goals as a priest lay in his own good example. That he felt people in positions of influence were responsible for their example was reflected in his statement to Madame Graslin: "Comment voulez-vous que les masses deviennent religieuses et obéissent, elles voient l'irréligion et l'indiscipline au-dessus d'elles" (Le Curé de village, p. 288).

Abbé Bonnet's successes as a spiritual counselor were manifest. His ability to reach the embittered Tascheron was no mere happenstance. It has been noted that Abbé Bonnet had led an entire commune to change its erring ways. His successful efforts to bring peace of soul to individuals was dramatically shown to Madame Graslin one day when she chanced upon Farrabesche, a guardian of her woodlands. Conversing with him, she learned of his memorable experience. Ten years previously, Farrabesche had been a member of a gang that had roamed, robbed, and murdered at will. The abbé Bonnet, on his arrival in the commune, had sought out Farrabesche and convinced him to surrender himself to the authorities. As Farrabesche explained to Madame Graslin:

Madame, la parole et la voix de cet homme m'ont dompté  
 . . . Il était, me dit-il, le nouveau curé de  
 Montégnac, j'étais son paroissien, il m'aimait, il

me savait seulement égaré et non encore perdu; il ne voulait pas me trahir, mais me sauver; il m'a dit enfin de ces choses qui vous agitent jusqu'au fond de l'âme (Le Curé de village, p. 236).

The supplications of the curé were successful. Farrabesche surrendered, and, through the intercession of Abbé Bonnet, received a sentence of only ten years. Having atoned for his crimes, Farrabesche returned to Montégnac where he lived a respectable and respected life.

The testimonial of Farrabesche was the moving force that Madame Graslin needed. Up to that moment, although the curé had suspected her heavy burden of conscience, she had never relieved her soul of its sin. Having been inspired by Farrabesche, Madame Graslin went to the abbé Bonnet and said: "Je suis dès aujourd'hui votre pénitente, monsieur le curé. J'irai demain vous faire une confession générale" (Le Curé de village, p. 239). Through these words Madame Graslin revealed that her inner struggles were about to end. The following day she went to the abbé, and in the sacrament of penance she confessed her role in the Tascheron affair.

The abbé Bonnet had told Madame Graslin that work could be her prayers. He was even specific in what she could do. Showing her the valley that profited only slightly by the river that passed through it, Abbé Bonnet suggested that it would be easy to increase the volume



of the water by diverting several little streams in the forest into the river. By the wise distribution of the water through irrigation ditches, the entire plain could be brought into cultivation. Madame Graslin agreed to his suggestions and proceeded to put his plans into action. It was no mere coincidence that water was to be the means by which Madame Graslin might regenerate the country. Balzac was quite aware of the symbol of water as a regenerating force. Just as the valley would gain rebirth through her efforts, so too Madame Graslin would be born again through her reparatory acts. The valley's renewal would be her means of resurrection.<sup>36</sup> Showing Madame Graslin the dry, arid plain, Abbé Bonnet said:

Vous verrez un jour la vie, la joie, le mouvement, là où règne le silence, là où le regard s'attriste de l'infécondité. Ne sera-ce pas une belle prière? (Le Curé de village, pp. 188-89)

The abbé was speaking of the countryside, but could not his words have been applied to Madame Graslin's soul?

Mention should be made of the four other priests who appear in Le Curé de village: the abbé Rastignac, the abbé Dutheil, the abbé de Grancour, and the Bishop of Limoges. It has already been noted that the abbé Rastignac was an aide to the bishop, and it was he who

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<sup>36</sup>Picon, op. cit., p. 123.

went to procure the aid of Abbé Bonnet. An insight into Rastignac's character is gained in considering two statements he made on this occasion. The first was his comment on the nudity of the village church. To him it reflected a lack of devotion or piety on the part of the people. Abbé Bonnet pointed out to him that money which might have been spent on decorating the church was much more wisely spent on the needs of the poor. The church and its parishoners were poor, but they were sincere and devout.

The second of Rastignac's revealing statements was in his referring to the priesthood as a position rather than a vocation. It was a most appropriate word for someone such as Rastignac to use. A most fitting description of the abbé Gabriel Rastignac is the following:

A la fois commensal et favori du prélat, ce jeune homme était le frère cadet du baron de Rastignac, que des liens de famille et d'affection attachaient à l'évêque de Limoges. Au fait des raisons de fortune qui vouaient ce jeune homme à l'Église, l'évêque l'avait pris comme secrétaire particulier, pour lui donner le temps d'attendre une occasion d'avancement. L'abbé Gabriel portait un nom qui le destinait aux plus hautes dignités de l'Église (Le Curé de village, p. 98).

The young abbé played his role well. At the end of the story he was appointed to a bishopric.

The abbé Dutheil was one of the vicars-general of the diocese and also was the confessor of Madame Graslin

when she lived in Limoges. He was of the nature of Abbé Bonnet, but he suffered the unwarranted misfortune of having his merits unrecognized. In fact, he had the singular distinction of being well received by the people but scorned and held in contempt by his priestly colleagues. His true worth of character is reflected in the following descriptive passage:

Ce prêtre éminent offrait la réunion d'une grande modestie chrétienne et d'un grand caractère. Sans orgueil ni ambition, il restait à son poste en y accomplissant ses devoirs au milieu des périls (Le Curé de village, p. 54).

He was not exactly persecuted; his learning and virtues were too well known. He suffered from the jealousy of his peers who were challenged by Abbé Dutheil's virtue and wisdom. It was the abbé Dutheil, much to the chagrin of the other priests, who resolved the dilemma of Tascheron's impiety by suggesting that Abbé Bonnet be summoned.

The abbé de Grancour was the other vicar-general. He was careful not to commit himself in any way that might cost him favor with the bishop. The abbé de Grancour had neither friends nor enemies. As far as Abbé Dutheil was concerned, "l'abbé de Grancour croyait au mérite de son collègue, il en reconnaissait les talents, il admettait secrètement sa doctrine et la condamnait publiquement; car il était de ces gens que la supériorité

attire et intimide, qui la haïssent et qui néanmoins la cultivent" (Le Curé de village, p. 56).

The Bishop of Limoges was one of the few bishops whose character was delineated in La Comédie humaine.

As Paul Louis pointed out:<sup>37</sup>

L'évêque de Limoges est un prélat politique, assez souple et ondoyant, qui craint les affaires bruyantes et qui n'aime guère à compliquer son existence. C'est une sorte de fonctionnaire, toujours ballotté entre plusieurs considérations et qui discerne toutes les difficultés de son état.

One has the feeling that, in the Tascheron affair, the bishop was not so much concerned about Tascheron dying without the sacraments as he was concerned about the scandal such an event would cause.

In no other of his novels, not even in Le Lys dans la vallée nor in Le Médecin de campagne, did Balzac manifest so strongly his religious views. André Maurois summed up this fact in stating:<sup>38</sup>

Il ne croit pas à la vérité littérale des dogmes, mais pense que la charité de prêtres comme l'abbé Bonnet fait renaître à l'espérance des êtres qui, se croyant perdus sans remède, s'endurcissaient. Une âme sacerdotale très humble, toute pétrie d'amour, de dévouement et de charité, a le pouvoir de relever les plus coupables, à la seule condition que ceux-ci apportent leur collaboration dans le sacrifice.

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<sup>37</sup>Louis, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>38</sup>Maurois, op. cit., p. 408.

Nowhere else did Balzac make such conclusive demonstration of the power that could be deployed by a priest who was literally an apostle.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS

The Catholic priest, for Balzac, was not an inactive ecclesiastic who spent his time at the foot of the altar praying for a miracle to happen. He was, rather, a man of action, whether properly motivated or not. In fact, Balzac seemed to have only contempt for anyone, such as the abbé Birotteau, who sat back and waited for things to happen, hoping that his desires would be fulfilled but doing nothing to assure such an eventuality. Even the abbé Troubert, although his deeds were self-serving and were done covertly and surreptitiously, was not one to stand by idly.

Paul Franche, writing of the priest in the French novel, said of Balzac's priests:<sup>39</sup>

Ils vivent, en un mot. C'est bien le prêtre tel qu'il le faut en nos temps troublés, socialisant, en même temps qu'il christianise; s'intéressant aux besoins matériels, aux misères, soignant les corps pour arriver aux âmes, aidant enfin le donnez-nous notre pain de tous les jours. . . .

The Balzacian priest entered into the heart of the problems faced by his people: for example, the abbé Brossette who recognized the problems centered around the peasants' extreme attachment to the land; the abbé Janvier who collaborated with Dr. Benassis

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<sup>39</sup>Franche, op. cit., pp. 117-18.

to eliminate from the valley the disease of cretinism that marked the area and worked to bring a better way of life to the inhabitants of the region through social progress; the abbé Bonnet who restored virtue and respectability to his villagers and who brought about the regeneration of the countryside. The two unadmirable priests in this study, the abbé Birotteau and the abbé Troubert, were self-centered. The former's goal in life was physical comfort, the latter's goal was a prominent position in the Church's hierarchy.

Balzac's priests of action transferred this principle to their counselees. One can not fail to see the recurring idea of prayer through action. Abbé Brossette admonished the peasants: "Dieu bénit le travail" (Les Paysans, p. 99). Abbé Janvier explained to General Genestas: "Travailler, c'est prier" (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 148). Abbé Bonnet said to Madame Graslin: "Vos prières doivent être des travaux" (Le Curé de village, p. 185). Perhaps one could draw a parallel to Balzac's life. His characters, who seem to have a need for action, appear to be driven by his own restless energy. Work as a means of purgation-- could this not have been, consciously or unconsciously, a personal tenet? Certainly, there have been few writers who worked as exhaustively as he. A point of fact to support this conclusion can be found in his working attire--

a gown resembling a monk's habit. It was almost a fetish with him to be dressed in such a manner when he worked. He had the gowns specially made. Balzac was unorthodox in so many aspects of his life. Could not this have been another?

A point of similarity among Balzac's priests relates to their physiognomy. The saintly priests were usually ugly, thin, and emaciated. "Pour Balzac, la laideur et la sainteté ont contracté mariage."<sup>40</sup> This ugliness can generally be ascribed to a life of sacrifice and self-denial. The lack of physical beauty, however, was usually overcome by a gentle warmth in the eyes that reflected a saintly character. If one was momentarily repulsed by the priest's visage, any aversion was erased after the first glance in the clergyman's saintly eyes. One's initial impression, then, of such priests, is usually favorable, and is most often proved to be a correct judgment.

Balzac was a romantic as well as a realist. An interesting observation that can be made is that the more elaborately delineated priests are found in works from SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE CAMPAGNE and SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE PROVINCE. In most instances, Balzac is quite sympathetic

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<sup>40</sup>Bertault, op. cit., note, p. 239.



toward these priests. Perhaps one might conclude that this favorable portrayal reflected an idyllic attitude.

It seems that Balzac's chief criticisms of the Catholic Church were threefold: a disapproval of worldliness among the clergy, a great dislike for the Jansenist element in the French church, and an objection to an emphasis on cult rather than on the actualizing of Christian principles. The first criticism, a disapproval of worldliness among the clergy, is most expressly reflected in Le Curé de Tours, but it recurs, sometimes subtly and sometimes pointedly, throughout La Comédie humaine. For example, one has the impression that Abbé Gabriel Rastignac was not as Machiavellian as Abbé Troubert, but the two were pursuing the same goals by different routes. Also, in Le Père Goriot there was at least a suggestion of a worldliness that should have been inconsistent with a priestly vocation. Old Goriot died penniless and was refused burial services by several priests because there was no money for a stipend. Finally, a young curé agreed to perform minimal services compensatory to the nominal sum proffered.

Balzac's abhorrence of the Jansenist element in the French church was not so clearly defined as his other criticisms. It appeared, however, deliberate on his part to portray as Jansenist the family who rejected

Benassis as a suitor. Having once accepted him, the family showed its lack of Christian charity, its puritanical attitude, in not forgiving Benassis of his youthful mistakes of the past. It was pointed irony on Balzac's part that the rejected suitor proved to be an exceptional person, a Christian in the true sense of the word.

The third criticism, an objection to an emphasis on cult rather than the actualizing of Christian principles, is reflected more positively than negatively. It is inherent to the philosophy: travailler, c'est prier. It is characteristic of Balzac that when a religious crisis occurred, such as in Le Médecin de campagne and Le Curé de village, he did not send his character off to a monastery or to a convent, as a more romantic writer might have done. Rather, Balzac acknowledged the need of penance, but he urged the character to practice his religion in the world.

Finally, Balzac looked upon religion as a necessary force in society. Above everything else, Balzac believed in authority. For that reason he was both a monarchist and an admirer of Napoleon. Balzac felt that the authority found in the Catholic Church and in the monarchy or the Empire complemented each other and made for social order. Dr. Benassis, Balzac's porte-parole, most clearly presented this attitude:

Ce qui a fait la force du catholicisme, ce qui l'a si profondément enraciné dans les mœurs, c'est précisément l'éclat avec lequel il apparaît dans les circonstances graves de la vie pour les environner de pompes naïvement touchantes, si grandes, lorsque le prêtre se met à la hauteur de sa mission et qu'il sait accorder son office avec la sublimité de la morale chrétienne. Autrefois je considérais la religion catholique comme un amas de préjugés et de superstitions habilement exploités desquels une civilisation intelligente devait faire justice; 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 et leur donner une forme durable (Le Médecin de campagne, p. 79).

Thus it can be seen that Balzac's attitude toward Catholicism developed during the course of his career from a vague hostility at the beginning to a fairly emphatic adherence at the end. It is the religion of La Comédie humaine which has the best claim to be the religion of Balzac.<sup>41</sup> Although he was never ostensibly to present himself as a practicing Catholic, it appears that Balzac felt that the Church was necessary for others, if not for him, and for the good of society.

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<sup>41</sup>Oliver, op. cit., p. 120.

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