

In Chapter IIA the author outlines the history of the child in French literature from the Middle Ages onwards, with particular reference to those social conditions in the first half of the nineteenth century which favoured the emergence of the child in literature. This outline is necessary, although Mrs. Senn reproduces in excessive detail much of the information given by J. Calvet in his L'Enfant dans la littérature française. Moreover she goes on to declare that the flourishing of literature for children was coincidental with the desire of many Romantics to escape into the unreal. As P. Coveney has shown,¹ English literature would appear to demonstrate rather that the flourishing of children in literature is a more obvious sign of Romantic regression. Mrs. Senn appears to consider the manifestation of literature for children in various countries of prime importance, and dismisses in one sentence Rousseau's contribution to the child in literature: 'It was Rousseau's Emile (1762) which most affected ideas on education of children and also children's literature in France, England and America for the next several decades'.²

In Chapter IIB Mrs. Senn gives a fairly detailed discussion of literature for children in the nineteenth century and Balzac's contribution to it. It seems to me that the latter is of purely biographical interest and of minor importance in comparison with the Comédie humaine. Little tales like Tony sans soin or Peines de coeur d'une chatte anglaise may be delightful but their literary value is hardly on a par with, say, the tales of the brothers Grimm.

1. P. Coveney. The Image of Childhood.

2. Senn, p. 25.

In Chapter IIC Mrs. Senn answers most of the questions asked in Chapter I. Not surprisingly she finds that the child character does exist in the Comédie humaine. However the pivot of her reasoning is fallacious: '... precisely because of his claims in the Préface of the Comédie humaine one would expect to find the child character sketched in the novels and stories of Balzac, as essential to the fictional world as they are necessary to the fullness of life in the real world'.¹ In other words, the children are in the Comédie humaine because in the Avant-Propos Balzac has led us to expect them there by reason of his claim to depict the whole of society.

The superficiality of this line of argument is emphasised by the fact that Mrs. Senn fails to mention the capital importance of the Family in Balzac's ethos. As we have seen, his concern with such matters as procreation was partly motivated by his attitude to the Family rather than Society, for the former is the nucleus of the latter.

More surprisingly Mrs. Senn also answers her second question affirmatively. She believes that Balzac's portraits of children are indeed lifelike, that 'only a desire to paint a true picture, to "faire vrai", to show the reader this segment of the Comédie humaine animated the realist who is drawing the portraits'.² We have seen that Balzac is at his least original and most Rousseauist in his physical portraits of children, and Mrs. Senn does not appear to have realised that these are a tiny, insignificant contribution to the wealth of information he provides about the child psyche, its development and its continuing presence in the adult psyche.

1. p. 62.

2. p. 128.

Mrs. Senn's general attitude to physical portraits of children in the Comédie humaine is uncritically eulogistic. She says of the description of the d'Aiglemont children at play in La Femme de trente ans: 'In their rough and tumble gambols on the floor Balzac has drawn as enchanting a picture of children at play as one could find in any literature'.¹ The last phrase obviously begs the question. Sometimes she merely translates Balzac's absurdities. For instance she solemnly paraphrases him on Joseph Bridau: 'Some fatality, but a fatality which had become a habit, caused Joseph never to be able to keep his clothes clean',² without pausing to examine the transition of a fatality, which is inescapable by definition, to a habit, which can be corrected.

The author's opinion of descriptions of the young girl in the Comédie humaine parrots that of J. Bertaut in La jeune Fille dans la littérature française. The latter uses words like 'charme', 'simplicité', 'modestie', 'décence', 'réserve parfaite' and 'virginité décente et modeste' to describe the Balzacian young girl³ and claims that she only grows up when she falls in love, until when she is an 'être indécis, en marge de la société'.⁴ Likewise Mrs. Senn: 'Balzac's young girl personifies decent and modest virginity; she is everywhere the same charming creature with character still indecisive, with a simple modest attitude, the same propriety, the same perfect reserve',⁵ and Balzac's young girls 'live in a sort of limbo until they acquire a consciousness of self through ... nascent love'.⁶ These judgements are unacceptable. Many of Balzac's young girls do have the above-mentioned qualities but they are rarely indecisive. Girls like Hortense Hulot and Rosalie de Watteville are

1. p. 95.

2. p. 100.

3. J. Bertaut. La jeune Fille dans la littérature française, p. 106.4. ibid., p. 123.

5. p. 130.

6. p. 131.

impelled by an unconfessed sexual drive before they fall in love. Thus Mrs. Senn is guilty here of both plagiarism and inaccuracy.

Mrs. Senn answers her third question by claiming that Balzac's conviction that the child is father of the man is the chief article of his psychological analysis. She regards this tenet as a personal discovery of Balzac's and does not seem to realise that it was a Romantic 'idée reçue'. She does not explore the child's development and growth to adulthood, and is not aware of the peculiarly Balzacian 'homme-enfant' and 'femme-enfant'. Mrs. Senn's fundamental deficiency is that she has no clear idea of what psychology is. She considers it vaguely as comprising 'the modern analysis of reactions and relationships of youth'.¹ One is rather startled to be told that the psychological value of Louis Lambert is that 'Balzac introduced a study of the effect of reading on the fourteen year old boy'.² Her tendency to miss the point in this respect is frequent. For her H  l  ne d'Aiglemont is 'one of the best illustrations of Balzac's psychological penetration into the jealousies of childhood and the terrible results which may ensue'.³ H  l  ne is surely far more interesting as an illustration of a young girl experiencing the crisis of puberty and the ensuing subconscious repressions. Moreover the results of childhood jealousy are rarely as terrible as those depicted in La Femme de trente ans.

A fault perhaps less grave than an incomprehension of psychology, but still deplorable in a scholar, is Mrs. Senn's negligence in exploring differences in apparently similar characters. She believes that 'the later exploits of Ferdinand du Tillet are consistent with and stem from his ignoble birth and the precarious existence he led as a

1. p. 190.

2. p. 191.

3. p. 107.

child'.¹ She does not, however, mention Butscha whose birth was even more ignoble, whose existence was equally precarious, but who proved himself the honest and devoted henchman of Modeste Mignon. Similarly Mrs. Senn claims that César Birotteau's peasant origins explain his instinctive rectitude and courage in disaster,² but she does not examine why Balzac should have depicted the peasants in Les Paysans as avaricious, ruthless, self-centred and, on occasion, whining.

Mrs. Senn's lack of perception and superficiality invalidate her claim that Balzac pioneered the explanation of adult behaviour by the 'psychological process of exploring childhood'. He was a pioneer in presenting certain aspects of child psychology, but not for the reasons she provides.

Mrs. Senn answers her fourth question by affirming that most of the child characters in the Comédie humaine are not an after-thought. This is something which she could have discovered, had she wished, from the manuscripts of the novels. She claims that the child figure interested Balzac at specific periods. The first was that between 1830 - 1836, which Mrs. Senn considers his time of greatest creativity, and the second that between 1841 - 1847, when, according to her, he was attempting to correct critics' opinion that he had not sufficiently studied youth. I have found no evidence of the latter, and although I accept that one finds the greatest number of children in the Scènes de la vie privée, Scènes de la vie de province and Scènes de la vie parisienne I have found evidence of Balzac's consciousness of children and childhood throughout his work.

1. p. 180.

2. p. 144.

Mrs. Senn pays particular attention to child 'personnages de liaison', whose career she traces in the form of a sort of expansion of Lotte's Index des personnages fictifs de la Comédie humaine. Her rather lame conclusion, if it is a conclusion at all, is that 'in fifty-four per cent of the cases the childhood of the reappearing character either was the subject of the creativity of the author to the exclusion of his adult life or served to explain his actions in the period which followed his adolescenceThe inevitable conclusion is, therefore, that Balzac has a real interest in his child characters'.¹

This tendency to state the obvious reappears in force when Mrs. Senn discusses the function of minor child characters. She makes no reference to Balzac's myth of the Family but affirms - and one wonders why she found it necessary to do so - 'Family relationships are involved in the introduction of a number of non-reappearing infants, boys and girls of the Comédie humaine. Most of them are objects of the solitude or affection of their mothers or command the attention of their fathers or serve to bring out their paternal instincts (or lack of them)'.² The same, naturally, could be said of any character in the Comédie humaine, child or not. Mrs. Senn's last word on the function of minor child characters has the same bewildering ring of triumphant discovery: 'The children of the Comédie humaine represent diverse backgrounds. Peasants, villagers, petits bourgeois and haute bourgeoisie as well as offspring of the nobility, we have them all'.³

As regards her fifth problem Mrs. Senn concludes that 'Balzac's scattered references to education ... give a complete picture of the state of instruction in France under the Empire and the Restoration'⁴ although he was scarcely an original thinker in this respect.⁵ The letter

1. p. 189.

2. p. 213.

3. p. 219.

4. p. 221.

5. p. 284.

conclusion is quite correct, although it should be noted that G. Atkinson had reached it in 1949 in Les Idées de Balzac d'après la Comédie humaine. As I have shown, Balzac's picture of education is hardly 'complete' as it is presented from a Right-wing viewpoint. Mrs. Senn does not analyse the state of French instruction in the nineteenth century. She looks forward, rather than back, and sees Balzac as a forerunner of the crusade in the second part of the century against poor conditions in schools. She has not perceived the significance of the concept of 'social education' in the Comédie humaine, a concept very dear to Balzac.

Before concluding, Mrs. Senn discusses the child character subsequent to Balzac. Using J. O'Brien's concept of the 'novel of adolescence', as expounded in The Novel of Adolescence in France : the study of a literary theme, she considers that 'Balzac's influence on the twentieth century creators of novels of adolescence is most strongly seen on Mauriac, Jouhandeau or Montherlant'.¹ She proves this statement as little as her earlier hypothesis that it was probably Balzac who 'helped to waken George Sand to the existence of this problem'.² She gives no evidence of Balzac's influence on these novelists, and does not mention that among the precursors of this kind of novel one may number Senancour, Constant and Chateaubriand.

Taking the foregoing considerations into account, and in the light of Balzac's attitude to the young man studied in Chapter IV, I consider that Mrs. Senn credits Balzac with too much originality as regards the novel of male adolescence. However, concerning the young girl and only child she credits him with too little. She affirms: 'Very gradual was the evolution of the jeune fille from the plaintive and weepy sentimentalist of the Restoration, especially the type dominating the Comédie humaine

1. p. 300.

2. p. 294.

... to the nervous, capricious, willful, stubborn creature of the Second Empire, by turns amusing and despairing ... insupportable and charming, naïve and malicious, a true woman and a true child'.¹ This is pure, unacknowledged Bertaut. He had said: 'la plaintive et sentimentale pleureuse de la Restauration (va) faire place au petit être nerveux, capricieux, volontaire, entêté, amusant et désespérant, ... insupportable et délicieux, naïf et malicieux, vraie femme et vrai enfant'.² Mrs. Senn's conclusion is ill-considered as well as plagiaristic. Louise de Chaulieu and Renée de Maucombe are neither plaintive nor weepy, and Modeste Mignon is as capricious, wilful and stubborn as Mrs. Senn could wish. Moreover, as we have seen, the figure of the 'femme-enfant' was not a discovery of novelists of the Second Empire.

With equal carelessness Mrs. Senn adopts the opinion of another author that 'le Second Empire apporta le culte du fils unique'.³ She overlooks the fact that this was a cult which Balzac indicted in Le Cabinet des Antiques and Illusions perdues where the only child is spoilt as well.

I have already quoted part of Mrs. Senn's conclusion in the body of my thesis, but the whole passage is necessary to judge the value of her work: 'It was not until the coming of Balzac at a moment in French literature made propitious by Romantic interest in fairy tales, Napoleonic attention to education, and the confession literature of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, as well as the new social position of the child in France, that the juvenile character could begin to take his place as a true literary hero in such a work as Louis Lambert.

1. pp. 295 - 296.

2. J. Bertaut, op. cit., pp. 128 - 129.

3. p. 297.

Balzac, first of all, by including children in the world of the Comédie humaine made them worthy of the attention of the serious author. The child appeared as himself, not as a little adult. Nor was he patterned after a child in earlier literature. The childhood of Balzac's characters helped to explain their actions as adults, and therefore strengthened and rounded out the picture Balzac gave of ... many other reappearing characters of his novels. Moreover, the children were set in their proper social milieu and added to the completeness of the portrayal of that social background. For the first time a real psychological study of a child appeared in the literature, and in Louis Lambert a boy was the hero of the novel.¹

Mrs. Senn's view of the social and political background to the new interest in the child figure is limited. For instance education was a more crucial factor in Restoration politics than it had been in the Napoleonic era, and Mrs. Senn regards fairy tales as a conclusive indication of the Romantic ethos. Moreover she ignores movements in contemporary medicine. Her whole argument falls away when she attributes to Balzac innovations which were those of Rousseau. Many of the children in the Comédie humaine are 'patterned after a child in earlier literature', namely Emile, and the novel of that name was the first 'real psychological study of a child'. That children add to the completeness of the portrayal of society in the Comédie humaine is self-evident, and is not a characteristic peculiar to the child character. Mrs. Senn has failed to see that Balzac's contribution does not consist in the presentation of full-length child characters, of whom her main example is Louis Lambert, but rather in a clinical, often pre-Freudian awareness of children and childhood. Indeed, as we have seen, she minimises his psychological perception.

1. pp. 301 - 302.

Thus my general criticisms of Mrs. Senn's thesis are several: insubstantial conclusions, if not frequently erroneous, shaky psychological analysis and a lack of rigour in approach. The result of all this is a thin and unreliable piece of work. For example her arbitrary limitation of the end of childhood at fifteen years leads to some peculiar results. In Pierrette she discusses the Rogrons but not Pierrette herself, and in Le père Goriot she finds one child only, Christophe, ignoring the fact that one of the main themes of the novel is Eugène's 'éducation sentimentale'.

The work is unreliable because her documentation is patchy. Although it was presented in 1963 her most recent sources are dated 1959. She does not seem to have consulted L'Année balzacienne, although this began publication in 1960. From its inception it has been a compendium of the most recent research on Balzac and has offered valuable information about his home-life. The extent of the attention Mrs. Senn devotes to the latter is indicated by her remark about Félix de Vandenesse: 'The same lack of sympathy existed between Balzac and his mother'.¹

Another factor contributing to the unreliability of the thesis is Mrs. Senn's lax critical judgement. We have seen that she disregards conflicting evidence at her convenience. She appears to have a predilection for sentimentality which is manifested in her professed delight in Balzac's physical portraits and in such comments as 'Balzac gives us a touching picture of Madeleine (de Mortsauf) saying evening prayers'.² Her use of superlatives is undependable. She declares that 'Europe is the best example we have of the influence of milieu on a child.... Balzac places the blame squarely upon the society which has produced her. Here he is in accordance with the materialistic philosophy soon to be advocated by Taine'.³ It is arguable whether Europe, alias Prudence Servien, one

1. p. 245.

2. p. 168.

3. p. 62.

of Vautrin's formidable female servants in Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes is the best example. What about the 'gamins' and 'rats', many of whom are well within the age limit of fifteen which Mrs. Senn has set herself? Moreover, why look forward to Taine when the materialistic philosophy of milieu had been advocated in the eighteenth century, most notably by Montesquieu?

There can be no doubt that Mrs. Senn's thesis fails to fulfil the need for a study of the child in the Comédie humaine. She has tried to answer each of the questions she asked herself but at best her conclusions tend to be trite; at worst they are incorrect. She stands condemned by her own condemnation of Balzac who, she says, 'certainly cannot be accused of entertaining an all-absorbing interest in child psychology, considered in the modern sense of this term'.¹

1. p. 62.

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Except where otherwise stated the place of publication is Paris.
Sections C and D provide a list of most of the works I consulted for this thesis, with the omission of several which were of no interest. It will be seen that I have not placed articles in a separate section, the reason being that few proved to be of direct bearing on my subject.

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