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BALZAC AND THE SHORT-STORY

In his preface to *Argow le pirate*, otherwise known as *Annette et le criminel*,¹ Balzac writes as follows:

J'ose dire que cet ouvrage offrira de plus le mérite d'une autre difficulté vaincue, plus grande que les lecteurs ne sauraient l'imaginer, et qui ne peut être guère appréciée que par les auteurs eux-mêmes.

En général, l'on ne se tire d'affaire dans la composition d'un roman que par la multitude des personnages et la variété des situations, et l'on n'a pas beaucoup d'exemples de romans à deux ou trois personnages, restreints à une seule situation.

Dans ce genre, *Caleb Williams*, le chef-d'œuvre du célèbre Godwin, est, de notre époque, le seul ouvrage que l'on connaisse, et l'intérêt en est prodigieux. Le roman d'*Annette* ne contient, de même que dans *Williams*, que deux personnages marquants, et l'intérêt m'en a semblé assez fort, surtout au quatrième volume; mais j'en dis peut-être plus que la modestie, qui convient à un pauvre bachelier, ne le comporte; je m'arrête donc²

A fiction on this order, with only two or three characters, based upon a single situation, calls to mind the short-story, that form of brief narrative which has flourished so remarkably in the United States since Poe, and of which the evolution, in the case of English and American literature, has been so diligently studied.³ Were Balzac and his French contemporaries interested in such a form? France has an imposing short-story literature, yet little effort has

¹ Paris, E. Buisson, 1824, 4 vols. in 12. This is one of the unsigned *Œuvres de jeunesse*; cf. Lovenjoul, *Histoire des œuvres de Balzac*, 3d ed., 256.

² I, 15-16. This preface is reprinted in Lovenjoul, *op. cit.*, 450-53.

³ For definitions of the short-story, cf. Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short-Story*, New York, 1901; H. S. Canby, *The Short Story*, New York, 1902; Bliss Perry, *A Study of Prose Fiction*, Boston, 1902; Clayton Hamilton, *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, New York, 1908. The somewhat narrow limits set by Poe, whose famous dictum in a review of *Twice Told Tales* is the point of departure for most students of short-story technique, are accepted in the present discussion. Poe's remarks, in part, are as follows (*Works*, New York, Crowell, 1902, XI, 108): "A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction."

For historical studies of the form, cf. H. S. Canby, *The Short Story in English*, New York, 1909; C. S. Baldwin, *American Short Stories*, New York, 1909; C. A. Smith, *The American Short Story*, Boston, 1912.

been made to trace the sources of the *genre* in that country; the most noteworthy contribution, Professor Baldwin's, in his Introduction to *American Short Stories*,¹ is, as he himself suggests, only a general survey, "pending further discussion."² Here appears to be a promising field of investigation, practically unworked. The following inquiry into the relation of Balzac to the short-story, prompted by the above-quoted remarks from *Argow le pirate*, represents merely an initial and tentative excursion into this new territory.

The reference to *Caleb Williams*, in Balzac's preface, is significant. He is correct in ascribing to Godwin's novel the interest that rests upon a vivid presentation of one situation; from beginning to end the attention is fastened upon the relations of Williams and the man who is first his patron and then his persecutor, Falkland, and, throughout, the action is based upon the unconfessed crime of the latter. The following comment in Godwin's preface shows how he himself valued the effect of such a structure:

I felt that I had a great advantage in thus carrying back my invention from the ultimate conclusion to the first commencement of the train of adventures upon which I purposed to employ my pen. An entire unity of plot would be the infallible result; and the unity of spirit and interest in a tale truly considered gives it a powerful hold on the reader which can scarcely be generated with equal success in any other way.³

This method savors of Poe's "deliberately preconceived effect," and it is interesting to note, in passing, that Poe, in *The Philosophy of Composition*, written in 1846, refers to the structure of *Caleb Williams* and comments on the type of novel built to produce a single, vivid impression.⁴

But Balzac's novel, in spite of his ambition, is less successful than Godwin's. While its basis is the love of the bewitching Annette

¹ See note 3, p. 71.

² The following must also be mentioned: Una A. Taylor, "The Short Story in France, 1800-1900," *Edinburgh Review*, July, 1913 (the emphasis is on content, not on form, and the word short-story is not used in the narrow technical sense); W. M. Hart, "The Narrative Art of the Old French Fabliaux," *Kiltredge Anniversary Papers*, Boston, 1913 (Professor Hart establishes the fact that the *fabliaux*, in their technique, are forerunners of the short-story); J. B. Esenwein, *Studying the Short Story*, New York, 1912 (an interesting reference [p. xx] to the brief tales of Balzac); F. Brunetière, "Little French Masterpieces," Introduction to the Balzac volume, New York, 1903; Spielhagen, "Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans" (*Roman oder Novelle* ? VII), Leipzig, 1883.

³ *Caleb Williams*, London, Routledge, 1903, p. xviii. It should be stated that, while the date of *Caleb Williams* is 1794, this preface was not written until 1832 and of course could not have been known to Balzac when he wrote *Argow le pirate*.

⁴ *Works*, XIV, 193.

for a fierce but kind-hearted pirate, there are so many other characters and so many extraneous events that the impression of unity is obscured. An item worth noting, however, is the fact that Balzac occasionally feels the lack of concision and stops the narrative, in accordance with what is later his constant practice, in order to apologize to the reader.¹ One remark, at the end of the novel, where, after reporting the demise of the lovers, Balzac allows himself to discourse on the fates of the other characters, deserves quotation:

Ainsi qu'au théâtre, lorsqu'une fois le nœud d'un drame est tranché, il devient tellement impossible de réussir à intéresser, qu'on a fait une loi de cesser à l'instant; mais la curiosité des lecteurs ne seroit pas satisfaite si je n'achevois pas de donner le détail des actions du lieutenant, qui, toutes criminelles et horribles qu'elles soient, ont un genre d'intérêt pour certains lecteurs. Alors il sera loisible à celui qui ne s'intéresse qu'à Annette et au Criminel d'en rester là. Ceux qui voudront tout connaître n'auront qu'à poursuivre.²

Evidently, the author still had in mind the unity which he set out to produce.

The preface is more important than the novel. It is of considerable interest that as early as 1824—Professor Baldwin finds the first French short-story in 1836—Balzac deliberately attempts the peculiar singleness of effect which later becomes the chief *desideratum* of the short-story. Furthermore, Balzac's comprehension of the principle involved, and his discernment in selecting *Caleb Williams* as an example, are proven by the statements of Godwin and Poe concerning the unity of *Caleb Williams*, and it is clear that his remarks represent, not a vague generalization, but an opinion that is well defined.

The other compositions grouped as Balzac's *Œuvres de jeunesse*³ are in no way suggestive; they may therefore be dismissed at once and the attention directed to the products of the author's maturity. Several of his narratives of the years 1830–32 deserve notice, and the next step will be to examine these, in chronological order, and to point out whatever is of interest from the point of view of short-story technique.

¹ II, 100, 243, 250–51.

² IV, 212.

³ Cf. the following works by Lovenjoul: *Histoire des œuvres de Balzac*, 3d ed., 255–56; *Une page perdue de Balzac*, Paris, 1903, 135–67.

The first is *Une passion dans le désert* (1830). After a brief introduction, in which, apropos of wild-animal training, the tale of the old soldier is brought up, a curt sentence starts the exposition:

Lors de l'expédition entreprise dans la haute Égypte par le général Desaix, un soldat provençal, étant tombé au pouvoir des Maugrabins, fut emmené par ces Arabes dans les déserts situés au delà des cataractes du Nil.¹

By the end of the first paragraph we have been told how the soldier escapes on a horse, rides the horse to death, and finds himself helpless in the middle of the desert. This is a good beginning; we are now acquainted with the hero and the setting. In view of Poe's requirement that the very first part of the narrative be constructed with an eye to the single preconceived effect of the whole, the directness with which Balzac sets out is striking, and, even if he lack the supreme skill of the American, he achieves here, as well as in certain other cases, an able initial paragraph. Following a description of the beauty and the dreadful solitude of the desert, the despair of the soldier is put with that concision which is a prime factor in the short-story: "Le Provençal avait vingt-deux ans, il arma sa carabine."² But he postpones suicide, finds a shelter, fells a palm tree so as to put a barrier at its entrance—and at this point there is a ring of foreboding in the narrator's voice:

Quand, vers le soir, ce roi du désert tomba, le bruit de sa chute retentit au loin, et il y eut une sorte de gémissement poussé par la solitude; le soldat en frémit comme s'il eût entendu quelque voix lui prédire un malheur.³

Here Balzac is employing an accredited short-story device, suggesting the characteristic tone of the narrative and thereby intensifying the totality of effect. In the night the man awakes and discovers at his side in the cave a panther. There follows a graphic and plausible enough description of the taming of the beast. The situation during the ensuing days, when the man's impulse to plunge a knife into the creature is several times blocked by her trustfulness, is made exceedingly tense, and there is a careful ordering of the incidents with a view to bringing the suspense to a head. At length, in their games, the panther suddenly shows irritation and starts to bite and is instantly killed by her companion, who at once regrets his haste in resenting what may have been simply playfulness. The

¹ *Œuvres complètes, édition définitive*, XII, 312.

² XII, 314.

³ XII, 315.

narrative ends tersely: "Et les soldats qui avaient vu mon drapeau, et qui accoururent à mon secours, me trouvèrent tout en larmes."¹

With this dramatic close Balzac completes the requirements, and it becomes clear that at least one of his compositions possesses that harmony, resting upon a well-arranged series of incidents leading to a single decisive act, which constitutes a successful short-story. The harmony, moreover, is increased, the whole is closer knit, thanks to the fact that the soldier constantly compares the panther to womankind, and, more specifically, to a former mistress of his. Before leaving this narrative a difference in editions must be noticed. Whereas in the first edition there is the swift *dénoûment* above described, in the *édition définitive*² four extra paragraphs are inserted immediately before the final solution; here the lady, to whom the story is being told, and the narrator converse about the outcome of the adventure. The resultant heightening of the suspense becomes an irritation, and the more direct culmination in the first edition is better. Furthermore, in the first edition the final sentence of the story stands, as it should, at the end of a paragraph, and the conclusion, a kind of envoy which Balzac attaches, begins with a fresh paragraph. There is no such division in the *édition définitive*, and the finality of the narrative proper is consequently less complete.

In *Jésus-Christ en Flandre* (1831), there is added to the main narrative an account of a vision which the author has in a church near the scene of the story, but this fragment, which originally appeared separately under the title *L'Église*, and which was not appended until 1845,³ is in no way essential⁴ and may in the present consideration be wholly disregarded. The subject is a miracle: Christ saves the lives of those who have sufficient faith to walk with him across a tempestuous sea. The preparation for the single climatic moment when the miracle takes place is skilful. A feeling is created at the outset that the last traveler to board the ferry is no ordinary person—and that perhaps his joining the company for this trip, when a storm is brewing, is no ordinary event. Frequent

¹ XII, 324. In the first edition (*Revue de Paris*, December, 1830), the ending reads: "me trouvèrent tout en larmes—évanoui."

² XII, 324.

³ Cf. Lovenjoul, *op. cit.*, 177.

⁴ Cf. *Modern Language Notes*, XXIX, 20: "The last third [of *Jésus-Christ en Flandre*] is open to criticism as having hardly any connection with the plot."

repetitions of this *motif* help in holding the narrative true to its course. During the approach of the storm the reader is completely informed as to the characteristics of the passengers, so that he is ready to focus his gaze, with full appreciation, upon their behavior in face of peril. The manner in which Balzac suggests the supernatural, and his general method of presentation, call to mind what Professor Baldwin, speaking of American short-stories, terms static art. Of Poe, Professor Baldwin writes:

he gained his own peculiar triumphs in the static—in a situation developed by exquisite gradation of such infinitesimal incidents as compose *Berenice* to an intense climax of emotional suggestion, rather than in a situation developed by gradation of events to a climax of action.¹

In Balzac's tale, the climax is certainly one of action, but the preparation consists of a deliberate adjustment of the setting with an eye to the selection of such details as will emphasize the meaning of this action; there are few events before the decisive one. In other words, the static and the kinetic are combined. The subject, I think, does not lend itself to short-story treatment as readily as that of *Une passion dans le désert*, yet the structure undoubtedly warrants the classification of this narrative as an example of the type under discussion, the second to be found in Balzac by 1831.

The theme of *La grande Bretèche* (1832)² suggests that of Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846), an impeccable short-story. The unique effect, in both compositions, rests upon the narration of an act of vengeance: one man murders another by shutting him up behind a wall of solid masonry; in Poe the cause for revenge is not specified, in Balzac a husband thus punishes a lover. It must be explained at the outset that Balzac's story consists of three parts, and that for the present comparison the first two may be dismissed with a word. The interest, throughout, is in the mystery of a certain deserted house: after an introductory description sounding a note of gloom, the first part shows that the abandonment of the estate has been decreed by the will of the deceased countess, without revealing her motive, the second vaguely suggests an explanation by a reference to a Spaniard who may have been the lover, and the third

¹ P. 22.

² *La grande Bretèche* is published by Jessup and Canby, with a page of comment, in *The Book of the Short Story*, New York, 1912.

part is a complete solution. The whole is harmonious, and illustrates the possibilities of a short-story based upon a process of ratiocination, as suggested by Poe,¹ with the interest depending upon the manner in which the man who exposes the mystery accumulates and arranges his data, but it is somewhat long and detailed, with an occasional short digression. The third section, which consists of the tale of Rosalie, the maid of the countess, is more compact than the other parts, is in itself complete, and affords an excellent opportunity for comparison with the work of Poe, the master craftsman. The first and second parts contribute largely to the suspense, yet no violence is done to the structure when the third part is considered separately.

Poe's beginning illustrates admirably his principle that the initial sentence shall tend to the outbringing of the single effect of the story:

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge.²

With Balzac, the start is direct enough, but cumbersome:

La chambre que Madame de Merret occupait à la Bretèche était située au rez-de-chaussée. Un petit cabinet de quatre pieds de profondeur environ, pratiqué dans l'intérieur du mur, lui servait de garde-robe.³

It will be seen later that the closet is essential to the story, but the forced and clumsy allusion to it in the second sentence is utterly different from Poe's reference, at once casual and natural, to the niche in the wall, which, in his tale, plays the corresponding rôle. The remainder of Balzac's initial paragraph is well done: he proceeds to tell how, one evening, the husband comes home late, enters his wife's chamber, and is caused to suspect, by her manner and by a noise as if a door had been shut just before his arrival, that somebody is hidden in the closet. The action is rapid: the wife swears innocence, the husband's suspicions grow, he sends for a mason and has the closet walled up during the night, and stays with his wife constantly for several weeks. Whenever there is a sound in the closet and the wife begs for mercy, he answers—and this sentence closes the narrative: "Vous avez juré sur la croix qu'il n'y avait là personne."⁴ It is clear from a remark which Balzac makes else-

¹ *Works*, XI, 109.

² *Ibid.*, VI, 167.

³ *Œuvres*, IV, 577.

⁴ IV, 583.

where that he valued the dramatic quality of this final scene.¹ Certainly it is as effective as Poe's: "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*"²

Balzac's structure is skilful, especially at the climax, but the main part of Poe's story is in two ways superior. Poe's totality of effect is enhanced by the simplicity of the plot, which is such that there are only two characters and that the action flows steadily in a single direction and ends in a swift catastrophe. In *La grande Bretèche*, such incidents have been chosen that the introduction of several subsidiary characters is required and the *dénoûment* is less sudden, and the result, although the unity is excellent, is second to Poe's. Again, in the *Cask of Amontillado*, the unity of tone is heightened, the note of menace and the suggestion of revenge are maintained, by the introduction of such details as Montresor's drinking to the long life of Fortunato, who is to become his victim, and his reference to the family motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit*. In *La grande Bretèche* there is no such device, although Balzac uses it elsewhere.

Poe's is a better short-story. The point is that while Balzac has not been supremely successful—and no one would attempt to set him up as a rival to Poe—and while it has been necessary to lift this story bodily out of its context, yet this is a narrative which meets the requirements of the short-story type.³

A discussion of *La femme abandonnée* (1832) may well consist of a comparison with Gautier's *La morte amoureuse*, which is nearly contemporary (1836) and which is named by Professor Baldwin as a genuine short-story—and the first one in France. *La morte amoureuse* deals with the *liaison* of a priest and a female vampire; it is fantastic after the manner of Hoffmann, and herein utterly different from Balzac's composition, but it closely resembles the latter in the fact that the interest is sharply focussed upon the relation of one man and one woman. With Balzac, as with Gautier,

¹ *La muse du département*, VI, 437. In Balzac's *Lettres à l'étrangère*, II, 420, we read: "ces petites terminaisons, comme *David Séchard*, qui coûtent plus cher à l'écrivain que de bons faciles sujets neufs." Evidently Balzac feels that the bringing a story to a successful close is as difficult as it is desirable.

² VI, 175.

³ It should be added that a comparison of earlier versions of the story with the *édition définitive*, reveals in the latter several important omissions and several minor ones, particularly in the first and second parts of the story, the effect of which is greater concision.

the action begins at once: a young Parisian, convalescent, is sent to the home of a country cousin, finds the society dull, and becomes eager to make the acquaintance of Madame de Beauséant, who is living in seclusion in the neighborhood since her abandonment by her lover, Ajuda-Pinto. He is sufficiently naïve and clever to win her affection, and they live happily together for a number of years, until the man is persuaded into a marriage of expediency. The final separation is ultimately followed by the man's suicide.

La morte amoureuse is, without reservation, short-story in form, and *La femme abandonnée* is not, yet the basic narrative of the latter is just as susceptible of short-story treatment. Balzac has not attained, very likely did not seek, the necessary compactness. Much space is devoted, at the outset, to a description of provincial society life; the account is shrewd and advances the narrative in that it prepares the reader to understand how ready the bored Parisian becomes for the relief of an interesting woman, yet this last effect a modern short-story writer would have secured with much greater economy of words, and any others he would have disregarded. Occasional slighter pauses for similar Balzacian comment are open to like criticism. At the point where the *liaison* is broken, the action is not swift enough; there is a lack of the terseness essential to the short-story once the climax is passed, a terseness not unlike that required in dramatic writing and mentioned by Balzac apropos of *Argow le pirate*.¹ Here the fault lies in the subject-matter rather than in Balzac's presentation;² the turning back of this man to his mistress could be only a gradual process, whereas, in *La morte amoureuse*, a single visit to the tomb of the woman suffices to precipitate an entirely plausible catastrophe. The two stories exemplify the point made by Mr. Clayton Hamilton that the material of the short-story must be more striking than that of the novel, the short-story writer not having "sufficient time at his disposal to reveal the full human significance of the commonplace."³ And it is clear that the task of giving artistic unity to a fiction based upon the commonplace was a severe one for Balzac, for he writes in a letter to Madame

¹ See p. 000, n. 0.

² Yet the responsibility, from the short-story point of view, is still Balzac's. Cf. the quotation from Poe, p. 71, n. 3.

³ *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, p. 178.

Hanska: "Les événements sont si difficiles à coördonner, quand on veut rester *vrai*."¹ The realist is not pre-eminently fitted to construct short-stories; his *modus operandi* is frequently the reverse of that prescribed by Poe,² and the degree of unity which he attains is almost inevitably less striking. Balzac's stories become less suggestive of the type under discussion as they become more realistic, and if he were the unalloyed realist sometimes conceived, there would be less reason for studying his relation to the short-story, but there is enough of the romantic and even of the melodramatic in his writing to compel attention here.

The ending of *La femme abandonnée* is quite as successful as Gautier's; the latter writes of the vampire: "Elle se dissipa dans l'air comme une fumée, et je ne la revis plus,"³ while Balzac says: "M. de Nueil passa dans un boudoir attendant au salon, où il avait mis son fusil en revenant de la chasse, et se tua."⁴ The concision and finality of each are all they should be. In each a moral follows, and from the short-story viewpoint Gautier is superior, for in a single short paragraph, with the effect of the tale still wholly fresh, he develops the priestly injunction: "Ne regardez jamais une femme," while Balzac, for his comment upon the position of the man and the woman and the inevitable result of the man's marriage, requires five times as much space—and at such a point mere physical dimensions are significant. Here, as elsewhere in the story, the nature of the subject—soul analysis, and not romanticism after the manner of Gautier—and Balzac's love for details and explanations, block what could easily be made a successful short-story. I have considered *La femme abandonnée* at length because it is a short-story *manqué*, a near short-story, so to speak, because it suggests Gautier's expert production, and because it illustrates so aptly the conflict of the short-story and realism.

Of these four narratives, the first three, I think, are short-stories. It is upon them, and upon the preface of 1824, that an estimate of Balzac's significance in the history of the *genre* must be based. The material which follows, although in general it corroborates the impression already made, is here offered largely in the interest of completeness.

¹ *Lettres à l'étrangère*, II, 178.

² See p. 71, n. 3.

³ *Nouvelles*, Paris, Charpentier, 1871, p. 295.

⁴ III, 78.

Of the other brief tales, many appear suggestive on account of certain details, an effective beginning or ending, an adroit economy in construction, but none requires long consideration here.¹ Of the *Contes drolatiques*, the majority of which have a Rabelaisian fluidity of style remote from the short-story manner, four are clearly short-story in conception, if not in execution. These are: *La belle Impéria*, *La mye du roy*, *La pucelle de Thilouze*, *Le frère d'armes*. Yet not one of these completely satisfies; in each the effectiveness is somehow clogged, the impetus deflected, and the result is not precisely what Poe and his successors demand. This is by no means equivalent to saying that the tales would be more artistic had they been made fully to conform to these particular requirements; the type under discussion is not necessarily excellent above all others, and many a good narrative could be fitted to its conditions only by mutilation. Among the longer fictions, several written during the period of maturity, such as *Le curé de Tours*, *L'Enfant maudit*, *Ursule Mirouet*, and *Le lys dans la vallée*, possess in some degree that unity to which Balzac refers in 1824 as a *desideratum*.

La muse du département is of special interest because it is patterned upon Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*,² of which the singleness of effect is so complete. It has been seen that, in his preface to *Argow le pirate*, Balzac suggested that, of contemporary novels, *Caleb Williams* was the only one possessing the unity which he describes. He might well have mentioned *Adolphe* (1816),³ of which Constant himself says that it was written to persuade several friends "de la possibilité de donner une sorte d'intérêt à un roman dont les personnages se réduisaient à deux, et dont la situation serait toujours la même."⁴ Later, Balzac admires *Adolphe*,⁵ refers to "ces délicieux

¹ Cf. *La paix du ménage*, *Le message*, *Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, *Le cornac de Carlsruhe* (*Œuvres*, pp. 271-73).

In an album of notes by Balzac, published under the title: *Pensées, sujets, fragments* (Paris, Blaizot, 1910), are several outlines of plots which would have served for capital short-stories. Cf. pp. 77-78, 86-87 (these two outlines are found, treated as amplified anecdotes, in Balzac's *Échantillon de causerie française*, XX, pp. 300-302 and 313-15, respectively); p. 126, *L'Original*. Professor Canby, in *The Short Story*, p. 16, points out similar "motifs and suggestions for stories" in Hawthorne's *American Note-Books*.

² Cf. *Lettres à l'étrangère*, II, 126.

³ Le Breton (*Balzac*, Paris, 1905, p. 76) thinks that at this time (1824) Balzac had not read *Adolphe*.

⁴ *Adolphe*, Paris, 1864, pp. 29-30 (Préface de la troisième édition). ⁵ Cf. XXII, 517.

in-dix-huit nommés *Adolphe, Paul et Virginie*,"¹ as if approving the compactness of the story, and at length uses *Adolphe* as a model. *La muse du département* possesses only relative unity. Balzac makes a capital effort to secure the effect described in his early preface, and it is interesting that at this later point in his career (1843) he has not lost sight of the value of such a method of composition, yet the novel lacks that harmony which Constant attains by riveting the attention upon the man and the woman, by omitting physical descriptions—of which Balzac is so fond—and creating few subsidiary characters, and which makes of *Adolphe* a nearly perfect short-story, *Adolphe*, which was written twenty years before Gautier's *La morte amoureuse*.

No remarks of the weight of those in the preface to *Argow* exist in Balzac's later critical comment. One or two bear out what he said in 1824. In a review, written in 1840, of Cooper's *Lac Ontario*,² he says: "J'aime ces sujets simples, ils annoncent une grande force de conception, et sont toujours pleins de richesses."³ And in the same number of the *Revue parisienne*, he utters a criticism against complex plots and too many events in a novel,⁴ but what he champions in this case is not so much greater unity as greater attention to character study.⁵ Balzac speaks with enthusiasm of what he names the *conte*,⁶ and extols those who have excelled as *conteurs*,⁷ but as far as can be determined from the list of writers which he adds, what he prizes is simply supreme skill in narration. Certainly short-story writing, practiced as an art, requires such narrative power, but so do other forms of fiction equally estimable. Balzac's realization of the vagueness of the term *conte* may be gauged by the following remark, made apropos of *Melmoth réconcilié*: "Ce conte, pour nous servir de l'expression à la mode et sous laquelle on confond tous les travaux de l'auteur, de quelque nature qu'ils puissent être."⁸ And, as to this laxness, Balzac is not unlike his contempora-

¹ XXII, 508.

² Balzac means *The Pathfinder*, of which the simplicity of plot is striking.

³ XXIII, 585.

⁴ XXIII, 578.

⁵ Cf., however, XXIII, 733: "La loi dominatrice est l'unité dans la composition; que vous placiez cette unité, soit dans l'idée mère, soit dans le plan, sans elle il n'y a que confusion" (of *La chartreuse de Parme*).

⁶ XXII, 386; XXIII, 754; Lovenjoul, *Page perdue de Balzac*, p. 69.

⁷ *Pensées, sujets, fragments*, p. 18.

⁸ XXII, 417.

ries, for there are a number of instances where he uses the words *conte*, *nouvelle*, and *roman* without distinction.¹

The net result of this investigation is to demonstrate that Balzac took a lively interest in that kind of fiction of which the ultimate development is the short-story, and that he himself wrote several genuine short-stories. A more convincing case could be made out for Balzac, if I marshaled the material differently, offering first the negative evidence, and reserving for the end the presentation of those facts which make it necessary to set aside the verdict of Professor Baldwin that Balzac's "handling does not seem . . . directive."² But a chronological arrangement is more satisfactory, as being absolutely judicial, as emphasizing that Balzac was most interested in highly unified narrative during the early part of his career, at a time when it has been supposed the short-story was not born in France, and, incidentally, before Balzac became a deep-dyed realist, thus bearing out the view that the short-story is pre-eminently a form for the romanticist.

While it may be accepted as a matter of fact that several of Balzac's compositions have the general structure demanded of a narrator who desires "to produce a single narrative effect with the greatest economy of means that is consistent with the utmost emphasis,"³ conclusions must be less precise when the more elastic requirements, such as conciseness of style, are considered. It is sure that the clean-cut exactness of Poe contributed to the success of his tales and that Balzac's clumsiness hindered effectual compression;⁴ it is sure that Balzac did not possess the gift of epithet which so distinguished Stevenson; but we promptly reach a point where the problem becomes a matter of purely subjective literary criticism, and speculation of that nature will not settle a point in literary history.

¹ Balzac applies the term *nouvelle* to *Illusions perdues* (*Lettres à l'étrangère*, I, 337), to *Cousin Pons* (XXIV, 517), to "la fin de *Béatrix*" (*Lettres à l'étrangère*, II, 391). He calls *La peau de chagrin* a *conte* (XXI, 494), *Massimilla Doni* a *roman* (XXIV, 281).

² Pp. 32-33. With Professor Baldwin's characterization of four of Balzac's short pieces, I agree heartily.

³ Clayton Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁴ Not to mention the pressure brought to bear upon him by publishers, and his own interest in money-making. Cf. *Lettres à l'étrangère*, II, 176: "La rapidité du travail m'ôte le sens de la composition; je n'y vois plus clair, je ne sais plus ce que je fais"; *ibid.*, p. 6: "que pour avoir de l'argent pour moi, pour ma vie, il faut que j'écrive des nouvelles." Cf. Le Breton, *op. cit.*, chap. viii.

And, in any case, no one would seek to prove that Balzac was a great short-story artist; there appear to have been none in France until several decades later. But he contributed not a little to that groping after a new form which was evident before 1850. In an article on Poe in the *Revue des deux mondes* for October 15, 1846,¹ is a survey of the status of the brief narrative in France at that time, with a reference to the growing taste for compositions that are "simples, laconiques, savamment concentrées."² It is suggested that this is merely a backward swing of the pendulum, a return of such *contes* as Voltaire's *Candide*. The impression of a student of English and American short-stories would be—with due respect for the difficulty of measuring "the currents, the depths and the tideways . . . of literary forms," as Professor Bliss Perry puts it³—that the development of highly unified brief tales in France during this period is more than a matter of action and reaction, that it is the genesis of a comparatively new literary form. There is evidently no sharp dividing line, such as we have in English, in the "perpetually quoted" remarks of Poe. There is evidently a connection, in French as in English and American literature,⁴ between such novels as Balzac praises in 1824 and the short-story, and it is likely that the influence of Constant's *Adolphe*, which represents a distinct effort to concentrate, and of such narratives as *Paul et Virginie*, *Atala* and *René*, is by no means negligible. Furthermore it is probable that since the type reached maturity in France it has not been confined within the limits set by Poe, but has been handled after the manner of the German *Novelle*, wherein the stress is upon the "nature of the content," rather than upon "the story's outward form."⁵ But such opinions must remain conjectural until substantiated by minute examination of all the short-story literature of France.

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¹ There is no reason to think that Balzac was acquainted with Poe, although the first French translation of Poe appeared as early as 1846 (Lauvrière, *Poe*, Paris, 1904, p. 726). Balzac did not read English.

² P. 366.

³ *Study of Prose Fiction*, p. 331.

⁴ Cf. Canby, *The Short Story*, p. 21.

⁵ *Modern Language Notes*, XXIX, 40. Such a tendency is exemplified by Balzac in *Adieu*, which, though lacking the compression of the narratives above analyzed, achieves, as the result of developing a somewhat elaborate structure about a single nucleus, a unity quite as artistic. Another example is Balzac's *Le succube* (*Contes drolatiques*).