A man of honor—Balzac's Le Colonel Chabert

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The year 2000 marks the 150th anniversary of the death of one of France's greatest and most prolific writers, Honoré de Balzac. Born 10 years after the start of the French Revolution, in 1799, his life spanned the first half of the nineteenth century. And what a tumultuous life, mirroring that of the times! His brilliant circle of friends, colleagues and rivals included the novelists George Sand and Victor Hugo. He struggled all his life to be accepted as a legitimate writer, as a representative of his age.

Balzac set about to describe all the different layers of the turbulent society in which he lived. In 20 years of frenetic work, from 1829 to his death in 1850, he wrote some 90 novels, numerous short stories and reviews, five plays, in addition to the Rabelaisian les Contes drolatiques *[Droll Tales]. Balzac united his contemporary work into la Comédie humaine. "I have carried an entire society in my head," he said famously of the 2,500 characters richly depicted in his novels.*

He died with countless unwritten books still fulminating in his fertile but exhausted mind. One cannot hope to understand French bourgeois society of the early nineteenth century, in all its complexity, without becoming acquainted with Balzac's characters.

The short story Le Colonel Chabert *was first written in 1832, soon after the July 1830 revolution which installed the "bourgeois" King Louis Philippe d'Orléans. It went through several transformations to produce in 1844, just four years before the fall Louis Philippe in the February 1848 Revolution, one of Balzac's most endearing characters, the "dead" Colonel Chabert.*

What does an honorable man do in times when dishonor rules supreme? How does a courageous and self-sacrificing person live when these very qualities are reviled, when corruption, ruthlessness and money buy power and social position?

Perhaps you think we are speaking about the year 2000—perhaps we are! But this small novel by Honoré de Balzac is set 200 years ago in the early 1800s, after the fall of Napoleon at Waterloo, when the old aristocrats and the new bourgeoisie created by the French Revolution joined forces at the top of society to enrich themselves at the expense of an impoverished people.

The conflict between the social layer of the nouveau riches represented by the Countess Ferraud, and that of the poor classes to which our former Count Chabert has sunk, forms the basis of this human tragedy. A supporter of the Napoleonic era, Balzac constantly reminds us that, "since 1815, the principle of Money has replaced that of Honor." [*Melmoth reconcilié*]

The story opens about 1817 with an unknown man seeking an appointment—apparently for the fifth time—at the law offices of Maître Derville. Dressed in an outmoded coat and dirty cravat, pale and hungry, he resembles a cadaver more than a living man. When he doffs his hat, the greasy wig comes off, revealing a bald skull horribly rent by a deep scar running from the back of his head all the way to his right eye.

Subjected to taunts and treated like an unwanted pauper, he is told in jest to return at one o'clock in the morning for an appointment with the lawyer. As he leaves, the clerk asks his name.

"Chabert," the man replies simply.

"The colonel who died in the battle of Eylau?" asks the clerk sarcastically, remembering the famous name.

"Himself," replies Chabert simply, and leaves.

In the early hours of the morning, as the clerk is laying out the next day's cases, he is surprised to receive the same macabre figure into the law offices. The young and brilliant lawyer Derville returns to his office from the company of high society, still dressed in ballroom attire. As with the author Balzac, the night exists for Derville to accomplish his most concentrated work. There in the semi-darkness waits a man, as still as death, his body hidden in the shadows, his head seemingly detached, "like a Rembrandt portrait outside of its frame."

Derville agrees to listen to the tale of the man who describes himself as Colonel Chabert, "the one who died at Eylau," now some 10 years past.

The famous Colonel Chabert was once Napoleon's beloved commander, the savior of the Battle of Eylau in East Prussia in 1807. Chabert's regiment led a cavalry charge against the Russian onslaught and turned the tide of battle for Napoleon. Chabert himself was cut down with a saber thrust to the head, pinned under his horse while 1,500 French cavalry commanded by Murat thundered over his body, and buried in a mass grave with the thousands of other victims of that bloody battle. The well-known story of this hero's death had been published in the famous *Victoires et Conquêtes*, chronicles of the French civil wars and revolutions from 1792 through 1815.

But, recounts the survivor, Chabert did not die. Thrown into a mass grave, buried deep down, he regained consciousness to a profound darkness and silence, punctuated by the moans of the living dead. He seized upon an arm bone and slowly, painfully, worked his way up through the rotting mass, emerging naked onto a snowy and deserted battlefield. Rescued by a poor peasant family, he hovered for months between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness.

On regaining his senses, he resolved to reverse his death decree in far off France and reclaim his name and property. But official society had no use for a dead soldier. Only the poor and former comrades-in-arms aided him as he roamed penniless and nameless from place to place.

Like Odysseus, he wandered for 10 years. But unlike Odysseus' wife Penelope, Chabert's wife did not remain true to him.

She returned his letters as fraudulent and labeled him an imposter. Formerly a woman of the streets, elevated by Count Chabert to the status of Countess, his wife used his lands and fortune to marry into the aristocracy. In this she was encouraged by the Emperor Napoleon, who was eager for a reconciliation between the new elements created by the Revolution and the old aristocracy.

After a two-year stay in a Stuttgart prison for the insane, Chabert met his former sergeant Boutin, himself now a cast-off. Boutin had just returned from China to which he fled after escaping prison in Siberia, on the heels of Napoleon's horrific Russian campaign. Boutin set out for Paris to contact the Countess Chabert, but was killed with the French forces defeated in Napoleon's last battle at Waterloo in 1815.

These soldiers from the lower classes were the human force whose sacrifice carried the Revolution in France and through Europe. Having destroyed the feudal system and secured the new order, they were now cast aside into the graveyards of Europe and the slums of Paris, physically

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mutilated and unwanted, progenitors of the future Jean Val Jean of *Les Misérables*.

"...[We] rolled over the globe as stones are carried by the storms of the Ocean from one shore to the other. Between us two, we saw Egypt, Syria, Spain, Russia, Holland, Germany, Italy, Dalmatia, England, China, Tartary and Siberia; the only places we had not been were India and America !" says Chabert to Derville. "What do you want ! Our sun has set ; we are all in the Cold now."

Derville is the first official in post-Napoleonic society who has dared to recognize the Colonel. Chabert is overcome by his expression of sympathy; it is like emerging out of the grave once again!

"I was buried under the dead; but now I am buried under the living, under certificates and deeds, under the whole of society, which wants me to return back under the earth!"

In one of the most moving scenes of the book, the lawyer Derville ventures into the slums of Saint Marceau, the poorest section at the outskirts of Paris. Taking his coach through the filthy rutted lanes, he arrives at a broken-down building, made entirely of second-hand materials and poorly built, where Chabert is lodged with the cows, goats, rabbits and impoverished family of a former regimental soldier turned milkman, Vergniaud. There the Colonel lives in a single room with a dirt floor and a straw bed. A pipe and a copy of *Les Bulletins de la Grande Armée* are his only furnishings.

Derville is shocked. How could Chabert—the man who determined the outcome of the Battle of Eylau—live like this? Vergniaud is a "vieux *égyptien*", Chabert explains, a veteran of Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns. "Not only are those who came back all a bit like brothers, but Vergniaud was then in my regiment, we shared water in the desert."

"I have done wrong to no man," Chabert says. "I have never rejected anyone, and I sleep soundly."

As Derville leaves, Vergniaud begs him for a small loan to buy clothes and furnishings for the Colonel. "I would sell myself rather than see him [go without cigars]!" exclaims Vergniaud. Not long after, we learn that Vergniaud has gone broke, lost his home, and hired himself out as a poor cab driver.

Some years later, Victor Hugo wrote about the slums of the Marché-aux-Chevaux in *Les Misérables*. He drew on the same source as Balzac, *Le Tableau de Paris*, a social critique published by Louis Sébastien Mercier between 1781 and 1788, just before the outbreak of the Revolution.

"In this quarter live the poorest, the most unruly, the most undisciplined population of Paris," Sébastien wrote. There is more money in one single house in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré than in all of the Faubourg Saint-Marcel ... put together."

Foreshadowing the events of the coming French Revolution, Sébastien wrote, "The people in this faubourg are meaner, more volatile, more quarrelsome and more ready to mutiny than in any of the other quarters [of Paris]. The police are reluctant to push this populace too hard; they humor them, because they are capable of carrying out the greatest excesses."

Taking his leave, Derville drives to the fashionable and aristocratic Faubourg Saint-Germain, where the Count and Countess Ferraud have built a luxurious house with Chabert's fortune.

These social forces are the polar opposite of those he has just left. Here Balzac in his careful observations could be describing our modern-day extremes of wealth. Who has not been shocked when driving a short distance from the slums of the inner cities to the world of the wealthy suburbs?

Rich after her husband's death, favored by Napoleon who granted her a handsome pension, the countess made out so well that she soon had an income of 40,000 pounds a year. Following Napoleon's defeat in 1815, her new husband was embraced by the victorious aristocracy, while she gloried in her acceptance into high society. "All her vanities as well as her passions were gratified by this marriage. She was going to become *a woman of standing*."

Under the new laws her second husband was given back income-producing lands confiscated by the Revolution. His all-consuming ambition now became to obtain the highest position in the land, a peerage.

To help him climb the ladder, the Count Ferraud engages a corrupt secretary named Delbecq, a former lawyer versed in criminal activities. The Countess keeps a close watch on her husband's secretary. So unscrupulous is this crook at exploiting the movement of the Stock Market and the soaring property values in Paris during the Restoration, that within three years he triples the Countess' fortune. Delbecq's price is to be awarded an official position in a provincial town, which will enable him to marry a rich heiress and thereby assure his own fortune and political career.

But now, in the midst of her triumph, a moral cancer assails the Countess. All her wealth cannot hide the fact that she has no social standing; her low birth stands between her husband and the peerage. In a veiled threat, the Count Ferraud speaks of the divorce of Talleyrand from his mistress, to whom that famous government minister was married in 1802 on Napoleon's orders. What woman could pardon such an expression of regret, which contains the seeds of her repudiation?

And if it were to become known that the Countess's first husband was still alive! She must defeat him at all costs! There are many such society women in Paris, Balzac explains, who bury their dark and monstrous secrets deep within their hearts and continue on with their seemingly gay life.

Here we must pause to consider the character of the lawyer Derville. Balzac gives Derville the role of commentator on and arbiter of the new society. Although a part of that society, Derville is yet critical of it, and able to admire the honesty of the old soldier. Although the Countess's lawyer, he still seeks to effect an advantageous settlement for Chabert and even advances him money.

It is his intimate knowledge of the respective social positions of the Count and Countess Ferraud which allows him to discover in their weaknesses a sure bargaining tool. "Are lawyers not, in a way, statesmen charged with private business?" asks Balzac, reflecting on Derville's role.

Balzac was trained as a law clerk, destined for a career in law, and his stories abound in both good and bad lawyers. More than just the presence of lawyers as characters, the law is the framework within which the new society can be understood, where human relations are replaced by laws, contracts and inhuman ties, and justice for the poor is criminalization and perpetual imprisonment.

As the story progresses, the desire for resurrection on the part of the colonel is overcome by the cruel machinations of the Countess. Sensing that the colonel still loves her, she inveigles him to her country home, treats him tenderly, softens his heart with her young children, and uses her secretary Delbecq to trick him into signing papers renouncing forever his name Chabert.

In the end Chabert revolts and runs off in disgust without signing the false papers, but also without getting a penny of his fortune from his wife.

He disappears, "like a stone thrown down a pit falls, from ledge to ledge, to land among the tattered filth which mixes in the streets of Paris." Condemned as a vagabond to the perpetual prison for vagrants Saint Denis, some time later Chabert is recognized by Derville.

"Did you not insist on an income for yourself?" asks Derville in surprise. "I was suddenly struck with a disease," replies Chabert, "the disgust of humanity. When I think that Napoleon is on Sainte-Helene, everything else on earth doesn't matter."

Twenty years later, passing by the terrible Hôpital de Bicêtre, which houses together the criminally insane, the violent, the indigent and the impoverished elderly in cruel conditions of semi-starvation, Derville again encounters the former Colonel Chabert, who has by now been reduced to a

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broken-down and half mad relic.

"Not Chabert, not Chabert," cries the man. "My name is Hyacinth. I'm not a man. I'm Number 164, Room Seven."

"What a Destiny," exclaims Derville, who is now a judge. "He was born in the Hospice for Orphans and he came back to die in the Hospice for the Elderly, after having meanwhile helped Napoleon to conquer Egypt and Europe."

Himself stricken with a disgust for society, Derville decides to retire to the country with his wife.

Balzac was not, in a politically-conventional sense, a man of progressive views. After the July 1830 revolution, he became a *monarchiste légitimiste*, a supporter of the restored Bourbon King Louis XVIII. He longed for a strong dictator and the security of the old religion, without the injustices of the old order.

But it is necessary to examine Balzac's life and art in the appropriate historical context. He despised the bourgeois social order that emerged from the decay of the Napoleonic regime and its aftermath. However idealized his view of the pre-revolutionary past, Balzac carefully observed the physical conditions, actions, thoughts and social relations of the new classes in the developing bourgeois society of the early 1800s.

In his sympathy with the dispossessed, and his hatred of a society based on competition and greed, he foreshadows the great social critics who followed him, especially Victor Hugo and Emile Zola.

The French Revolution of 1789-99 was inspired and carried out by extreme revolutionary thinkers dedicated to the perfectibility of the human condition, to equality among men. "Liberty, Fraternity and Equality" was the slogan of the French Revolution.

But the overthrow of the aristocracy by the lower classes "soon revealed itself as exclusively the victory of a small part of this 'estate,' as the conquest of political power by the socially privileged section of it, i.e., the propertied bourgeoisie..." rather than by the masses as a whole, wrote Friedrich Engels in his work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. A new social differentiation now took place, based not on birth, but on money.

"The development of industry upon a capitalistic basis made poverty and misery of the working masses conditions of existence of society. Cash payment became more and more, in Carlyle's phrase, the sole nexus between man and man.... Oppression by force was replaced by corruption; the sword, as the first social lever, by gold."

Balzac despised the bourgeois regime of King Louis Philippe d'Orléans, whose ascension to the throne in 1830 prompted the corrupt financial swindler Lafitte to comment gleefully, "From now on the bankers will rule."

There is no doubt that the writings of Balzac left an indelible impression upon another great observer of French politics—Karl Marx. It is well-known that Marx studied Balzac's works intensely, and the influence of the old novelist is easily detected in Marx's own devastating portrayal of the regime of Louis Philippe:

"The July monarchy was nothing but a joint-stock company for the exploitation of France's national wealth, the dividends of which were divided among ministers, bankers, 240,000 voters and their adherents...

"...[A]n unbridled assertion of unhealthy and dissolute appetites manifested itself, particularly at the top of bourgeois society - lusts wherein wealth derived from gambling naturally seeks its satisfaction, where pleasure becomes debauched, where money, filth and blood commingle. The finance aristocracy, in its mode of acquisition as well as in its pleasures, is nothing but the rebirth of the lumpen proletariat on the heights of bourgeois society."

Yes, we could be speaking about the year 2000.

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