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Ewa Szypula, *Balzac's Love Letters: Correspondence and the Literary Imagination*. Research Monographs in French Studies, 52. Cambridge: Legenda, 2016. 122 pp. £75.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-910887-18-9.

Review by Owen Heathcote, University of Bradford, UK.

Most previous analysts of Balzac's correspondence, notably of his *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, have seen the letters as an extension or an illustration of preoccupations and themes to be found in his novels. In this study, however, Szypula takes a more interesting and more original approach in that she sees the novels as additional to the letters rather than the letters as a commentary on the novels: for Szypula, the correspondence with Mme Hanska is a model—perhaps even *the* model—for the writer that is Balzac, for the conjunction between the initial anonymity of “l'étrangère” and the “blank slate” or “page blanche” of the letter forces Balzac to “create” a new character—his ideal woman, newly baptised with the name of the first woman—“Ève.” Out of the blank pages of his letters emerge, therefore, not only a new “Ève future” but the writer-creator-demiurge that is Balzac—a Balzac who openly admits he is more interested in the letters he writes than in the letters he receives. The virtually total absence of letters *from* Mme Hanska inevitably reinforces this perspective of a Balzac constantly working and re-working his own creation while faced with the seeming absence and silence of an interlocutor, or rather of an interlocutor whose interventions are felt only via the impact they have on Balzac himself. The correspondence with Mme Hanska is thus both a stimulus and a vehicle for Balzac's creative imagination.

At the same time as the letters to Mme Hanska mark a new beginning for the creative Balzac, they also, for Szypula, show Balzac repeating and recycling other “Èves,” from his avowals of devotion to Laure de Berny, who also calls herself “Ève” in her letters, to the under-studied “Évelina” in *Le Médecin de campagne*, whose self-effacement and whose silences furnish another, parallel “blank slate” on which Benassis/Balzac can write a character and a destiny. In this way, Szypula shows a Balzac whose passion for names such as Laure, Marie, and, of course Ève, Évelina and Ewa, form a constellation of literary or literal figures in Balzac's imagination, where the so-called real and the so-called imaginary overlap and coincide. Real and fictional female identities cross-fertilise one another to such an extent that it is not clear whether the “real” women in Balzac's letters are the extrapolations of his creative imagination or whether his fictional women are derived from actual experience. All these names and identities are palimpsests of each other in a process of constant working and re-working that characterizes and even defines Balzac. If there is a (lost) origin for this constant working and re-working of female creativity—and we must not forget that Balzac alludes to his (masculine) “travaux” as the product of an (effeminate) “poète” (p. 11, note 6)—then that (lost) origin can be found in his own remote, absent mother—the remote, absent mother who is both a *leitmotiv* in the correspondence and who is evoked most tellingly by Félix de Vandenesse in *Le Lys dans la vallée*. For Mme de Vandenesse's silence on receipt of Félix's impassioned letters is as much a spur to her son's constantly renewed letter-writing—as in the letter-confession that is *Le Lys* itself—as is Mme Hanska's at least initially mysterious, distant identity to the febrile correspondent that is Balzac. In the cases of both Balzac and Félix, the remoteness, inaccessibility,

or anonymity of the woman makes an essential contribution to the themes and the modes of both epistolary and literary creation.

As the book progresses, however, it emerges that the epistolary relationship between Balzac and Mme Hanska is even more complex than it appeared, in that Balzac's letters enable him to play a whole range of roles in order to seduce his lady, in order to replace or displace M. Hanski and even in order to ally himself with Ève's daughter, Anna, in a new "family." As alternately or simultaneously Mme Hanska's child, serf, jester, and "ouvrage," Balzac ostensibly gives Hanska full powers over him while in fact defining and directing that power like a stage manager. He is, at one and the same time, performer, performance, and producer in the *mise-en-scène* of their relationship. Even his repeated references to his "feminine side" can be seen as a way of diluting, disguising, and defusing his control and of detracting from the obviously adulterous nature of their liaison. In parallel fashion, the emphasis on theatrics, role-play, and gender shifts in *Séraphîta* subtly point to the possibilities of a new role and a new future for a Mme Hanska duly reborn as Comtesse Rzewuska. Szypula's fine pages on Balzac's stage-managing of the Norwegian setting of Jarvis in *Séraphîta* give further confirmation of the interplay between the letters and the fiction, with, once again, the letters providing the clue and the key to the novels.

In a final chapter, Szypula turns to Balzac as a collector--of the letters themselves and of the objects such as petals and ribbons that sometimes accompany them. The letters he receives and the objects he arranges on his desk are constantly re-read and re-viewed, thus becoming both a melancholic reminder of Mme Hanska's absence but also a spur to further letter- and novel-writing. Whilst, on occasion, the re-reading of letters offers little hope of further illumination, as in *Modeste Mignon*, elsewhere in Balzac re-reading stimulates the imagination and the creative impulse. A similar stimulus to re-reading can, moreover, be found when Balzac's own readers are forced to reinterpret his characters in the light of their reappearances in different novels at different stages of their lives. Balzac the inveterate re-reader thus forces his own readers into their own, creative, re-readings of his texts. How fortunate, then, that so many of Balzac's own letters, not least those to Mme Hanska, have been preserved for our own reading and re-reading, and are thus able to give rise to this subtle, sophisticated, original--and eminently readable--new study.

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