H-France Review Vol. 25 (June 2025), No. 51

Rebecca Terese Powers, *Balzac on the Barricades: The Literary Origins of an Economic Revolution*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024. xii + 228 pp. References and index. $32.50 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780813951409; $32.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9780813951416; $115.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780813951393.

Review by Melanie Conroy, University of Memphis.

Balzac on the Barricades: The Literary Origins of an Economic Revolution is a literary history of the political economy of mid-nineteenth-century France. Rebecca Terese Powers chooses to focus on a much larger group of *littérateurs* than Balzac and his circle. The author places Honoré de Balzac in the context of these--largely bourgeois--writers of the 1840s who contributed to discourses on work and labor. One of the recurring questions raised in this book is the difference between cognitive labor and manual labor. Balzac himself hesitates on this question, seeing writing as a laborious activity but also wanting to claim some of the suffering of manual labor for writers. Situating Balzac in the context of the 1848 Revolution and the workers' rights movement, Powers accentuates the overlapping ideologies of the era, when writers from Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve agreed that literature shaped political culture. They also agreed that the relation of literature to workers' movements was important, despite disagreements over why and how literature and labor related to one another.

The title of *Balzac on the Barricades* sets up a tension that Powers finds across these discourses on the value of work. The *feuilletonistes* get special attention for their role in creating fictions that articulate the experiences of the working class that are popular and compelling. Powers also finds these same debates in popular theater, political debates, political rallies (called banquets in the lead-up to 1848), and the political rhetoric of the post-1848 period. Essentially, writers from all sorts of backgrounds were either taking advantage of the political winds of change to promote their version of the right to work, or they were acting on longstanding empathy for workers. It is often difficult to know how sincere calls for improvement of conditions were, and that is a big part of why these debates were so fervent. Balzac was one of the most popular writers of this movement to recast literature as work, but his politics are inconsistent enough that he bridges various ideological groups, each with their own beliefs about work and literary exertions. This hesitation on Balzac's part makes his works an interesting starting point for the economic revolution of industrialization and the commercialization of literature.

Despite his failure to attain political power, Honoré de Balzac saw a role for himself in politics and revolution. This is where Powers makes her most insightful critiques of the cliché of Balzac as an

apolitical writer who somehow impressed political philosophers like Marx. The Balzac who appears the most in this interpretation is the Balzac who co-founded the *Société des gens de lettres* in 1837 (p. 122) and who wrote, "*Lettre addressée aux écrivains français du XIXe siècle*" (p.1-3). Indeed, this anecdote and the analysis of the letter set the stage for the contrast between cognitive or imaginary work and labor in the first place. For Powers, this letter is a call to action for writers to see their own labors reflected in the work of other writers and artists and for Balzac to re-assert the value of literary toil. Balzac was personally interested in the application of copyright law and with social recognition of the work of writers, painters, singers, and other artists who were underpaid according to his analysis. While Balzac's intervention in politics through the letter was not a decisive one, "Balzac's letter reveals how important the question of labor had become in the literary culture of his day" (p. 2). "By stressing the economic value of literature and by pointing to its laboriousness," writes Powers, "Balzac was hoping that his grievances" about copyright law "would be heard" (p. 2).

Powers shows that many writers questioned the division of labor and intellectual work during and after the Revolution of 1848. Some writers, notably Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo, were elected to political office based on Romantic pleas to see writers (or, at least, the Romantics) as cross-class allies. Yet, even as many writers saw themselves as advocates for the people, they did not agree on how to advocate for the right to work, either for writers or for the working class. One bloc in the Provisional Government, associated with Louis Blanc and the Leftists, called for "le droit au travail," a guarantee of work in the newly formed "*ateliers nationaux*"; others pushed for "*le droit du travail*," a sister concept that Powers identifies as less stringent on truly providing work for men of all classes (p. 14). Whatever the legal and political details, Powers argues, there was broader agreement that "labor should be recognized socially and perhaps even politically" (p. 15).

One side of the polemic about the right to work and literary labor was occupied by writers like Karl Marx and Pierre-Josef Proudhon who found the idea of literary writers being equal to manual labor laughable. The other side of the polemic was occupied by writer-politicians like Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine. In their view, "Romantic politicians would be able to employ [Romantic] techniques to bring social classes together" (p. 5). Romantic ideas of empathy and unity would have them seek out roles in government based on the idea that they were socialist allies, not that they were themselves worker-writers, as Proudhon and Marx portrayed themselves.

Powers shows how Balzac hesitates between empathizing with other writers and competing with them: "despite a short period of solidarity in the founding of the *Société des gens de lettres* in 1838, Balzac and his fellow writers usually saw each other as rivals rather than colleagues" (p. 161). For Balzac, argues Powers, "the process of creating literature was just as important as any other type of work" (p. 3); in Balzac's view, literature's "practitioners would have to organize themselves like other sectors of the labor force in order to survive the new social, political, and economic realities of the nineteenth century" (p. 3).

Given the broad agreement that writing was a type of work and that literature could contribute to economic revolution, how did 1848 end up being seen as largely a failure? Powers argues that the "dominant narrative" of the "futile" 1848 Revolution crafted by political writers like Marx and Proudhon (p. 10) was echoed by Gustave Flaubert and later Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu. In this archeology, there is a line of writers and thinkers from Flaubert to Bourdieu who saw the 1848 Revolution as a simulated or botched venture: "The field of twentieth-century literary studies took a

slightly different approach to the 1848 Revolution, framing it as a rupture rather than a failure" (p. 6). Nevertheless, these interpretations of the lead-up to 1848 and of the Provisional Government as failed revolutions short-change the real improvements for workers and the (short-lived) democratic improvements, including serious consideration of the right to work. "By the end of 1848," writes Powers, "accounts of the workers' revolution were presented as little more than a hollow joke" (p. 48).

Powers situates her work in the context of other recent books on popular French literature of the mid-nineteenth century. She cites Anne O'Neil-Henry's *Mastering the Marketplace* (2017), Bettina Lerner's *Inventing the Popular: Printing, Politics* (2018), and Eliza Jane Smith's *Literary Slumming: Slang and Class in Nineteenth-Century France* (2021) as recent works that have sought to trouble the relation of popular literature with the 'failure' of 1848.[1] *Balzac on the Barricades* charts the rise of concepts related to productivity and work as they were articulated in mid-nineteenth-century France and the author's elegant writing makes the book a joy to read. Powers also sews together disparate threads of intellectual history and literature in a compelling way that shares the optimistic view of intellectual work that came out of the Revolution of 1848 and the economic revolution occurring at the same time.

In chapter one, "Between Two Resolutions," Powers tracks the changes that were made under Louis-Philippe, the so-called Bourgeois king, that impacted the 1848 Revolution the most. Louis-Philippe made reforms that allowed presses, publicists, and authors a degree of freedom, but he got very little praise politically for reducing regulation of the press; he was criticized for not getting rid of censorship entirely and because his reforms did not improve conditions for booksellers, publicists, and printers as much as workers in those jobs expected. From early in the July Monarchy, there was a sense that Louis-Philippe's "mandate was far from solid" (p. 28). In the early years of the July Monarchy, the connection between writer and worker was largely formed by alliances between printers and writers. Securing a higher standard of living for those adjacent to literary writers made sense to both parties. But as time passed, conditions did not improve for manual laborers; tensions were equally felt under the second republic. When Louis Blanc proposed the *ateliers nationaux*, they seemed to be a way for writers and artists to generate income and for artisans and workers to be guaranteed a certain level of dignity.

Chapter two focuses on Balzac's literary works and the theory of value that he puts forward in the *Human Comedy*. While this book touches upon various texts in Balzac's oeuvre, such as *La fille aux yeux d'or* and *La Physiologie du mariage*, that relate to economics and markets, at its heart, this book examines the discourse of the writer as worker, with Balzac appearing primarily as the advocate who created the *Société des écrivains* and sought to increase the capital of writers like himself. As with other cross-pressured writers, Balzac sought to decide what labor was valuable and how the labor of writers, philosophers, poets, and artists related to the world of capital. As the founder of the Société, Balzac put forward a model of how writers and literary people could come together to defend their work and its value to the broader society.

Chapter three lays out various attempts to create a utopian version of the writer as worker. Drawing heavily on George Sand and Étienne Cabet, Powers argues that the utopians and Romantics both held ideas of a "fully formed" worker (pp. 94-95) that stands in opposition to Balzac's "vision of the worker as 'some kind of winch'" (p. 95). While there are some differences between these bourgeois and idealized "workers as heroes," most versions of the working-class hero are idealized. For example,

Sand's "Pierre Huguenin is the epitome of working class virtue…: extremely skilled, extremely virtuous, and extremely handsome" (p. 97).

Chapter four examines the "counternarrative" of the worker-writer "based on a clear distinction between the cerebral activity of literary creation…and the physical process of performing labor" (p. 112). Unlike bourgeois writers, "working-class writers understood the importance of literature in the process of forming a working-class identity but wanted to empathize that writing literature was not itself labor" (p. 112). Working-class writers, from this perspective, deserved to partake in the institutions of literary culture as equals; the bourgeois writers, with no experience of manual labor or being an artisan, did not understand the day-to-day stresses or the pain of manual labor that the "real" participants in labor did.

Another aspect of bourgeois and working-class conflicts, treated in chapter four, came from publishing and the commercialization of literature. While publishers and investors like Emile de Girardin and Armand Dutacq "saw this commercialization [of literature] as a path toward democratization," others saw "the transformation of literary creation into an industry [as] nothing short of a cultural catastrophe" (p. 120). The journal *La Ruche Populaire* (the people's hive) played an interesting role in these debates; claiming to speak for the people but also voicing the more pessimistic opinion on the commercialization of literature and emphasizing the need for working people to maintain their jobs outside the literary world (pp. 119-120). By doing so, working-class writers could maintain their authenticity and also be sincere in their literary efforts, which would not be undermined by capitalism.

Chapter five re-examines the typology of working-class characters in the best-sellers of the 1830s and 1840s. Balzac and Sue represent the two poles of bourgeois writers trying to find the right voice and framing for working-class characters. Powers argues that both Balzac and Sue rely on empathy more than authenticity. Sue relies on the creation of characters who are sympathetic or even pitiable. Balzac, on the other hand, "barely bothered to hide his cutthroat intentions"; his *La Cousine Bette* and *Le Cousin Pons* "are monuments to the author's determination to prove him as the most important author of his time," despite the differences between their protagonists and their life outcomes (p. 160).

The epilogue returns to the debate between Proudhon and the *littérateurs*, here represented by Alexandre Dumas for the most part due to his advocacy for writers as workers. Literary writers such as Lamartine and Dumas continued to insist that writers of fiction were workers and literary work was valuable. Responding to the *littérateurs*, Proudhon published the polemic "Ce que la révolution droit à la littérature," to which the answer was "nothing" (p. 180). Alexandre Dumas reuses the title for his response, arguing that the proof of literature's productivity is "the writers themselves, poets and novelists whose works were crucial to the formation of a revolutionary spirit" (p. 180). While the "battle raged on between *littérateurs*, philosophers, politicians, scientists, romantics, and realists," there were fewer opportunities for the working class to make themselves heard (p. 181). Powers quotes a painter named Pouillaude who wrote a letter to the Provisional Government "asking for the establishment of a system of municipal libraries" in each neighborhood of Paris (p. 181). In acts such as these, working-class *littérateurs* claimed the right to both cognitive and mental labor and insisted on opening literary institutions to men (and sometimes women) of all classes.

NOTES

[1] Anne O'Neil-Henry, *Mastering the Marketplace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Bettina Lerner's *Inventing the Popular: Printing, Politics* (Philadelphia, USA /Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2018); Eliza Jane Smith's *Literary Slumming: Slang and Class in Nineteenth-Century France* (Kentucky: Lexington Books: 2021).

Melanie Conroy
University of Memphis
mrconroy@memphis.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172