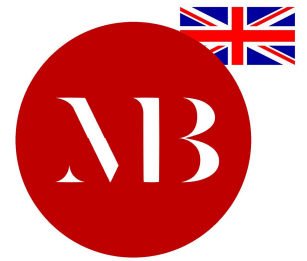


# TOURAINNE IN BALZAC'S WORK



## “A paradise within reach by stagecoach<sup>1</sup>”

When Honoré de Balzac mentioned Touraine in his work, it was synonymous with beauty, happiness and abundance. His native region, that he left at the age of 14, was reconstructed through his writing. As an archaeologist of social life, Balzac of course wanted to preserve his memory of the scenery, but also invited his readers to perceive the poetry of the places. This lyricism culminated in *La Grenadière* and *Le Lys dans la vallée* (*The Lily of the Valley*), in which Touraine became a space-time placed directly under the sign of brief visits and death. For example, the little close of *La Grenadière* in Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire became the magnificent stage on which the agony of Lady Brandon played out.

To convert his native region into an aesthetic object, Honoré de Balzac sometimes imbued it with a share of strangeness and exoticism. In this way, Balzac's Touraine became an island of dreams where time stands still, isolated from the “civilization” associated with Paris. In that sense, Touraine was sometimes compared with the Orient, whose stereotypes in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century remained immobility and laziness, based on another cliché, that of the slowness of the people of Touraine. At this point, Balzac's lyricism shifts into the comedic, as seen in *L'illustre Gaudissart* (*The Illustrious Gaudissart*), the symbol of Western hyperactivity whose greatest failure occurs in the town of Vouvray, and *Les Contes drolatiques* (*Droll Stories*), a satirical, bawdy homage to the Touraine of Rabelais.

*At this moment, when I stood there for the first time, the mills upon the brooksides gave a voice to the quivering valley; the poplars were laughing as they swayed; not a cloud was in the sky; the birds sang, the crickets chirped,—all was melody. Do not ask me again why I love Touraine. I love it, not as we love our cradle, not as we love the oasis in a desert; I love it as an artist loves art; I love it less than I love you; but without Touraine, perhaps I might not now be living.*

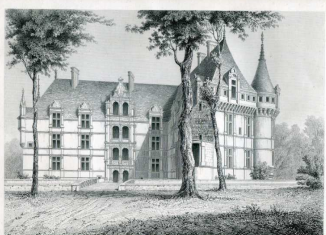
*Le Lys dans la vallée*  
(*The Lily of the Valley*)  
(1836)

*Transplant the Tourangian, and his fine qualities develop and lead to great results, as we may see in many spheres of action: look at Rabelais and Semblançay, Plantin the printer and Descartes, Boucicault, the Napoleon of his day, and Pinaigrier, who painted most of the colored glass in our cathedrals; also Verville and Courier. But the Tourangian, distinguished though he may be in other regions, sits in his own home like an Indian on his mat or a Turk on his divan.*

*L'illustre Gaudissart*  
(*The Illustrious Gaudissart*)  
(1833)

## LE LYS DANS LA VALLÉE (THE LILY OF THE VALLEY)

The novel *THE LILY OF THE VALLEY* is one of Honoré de Balzac's masterpieces. The plot focuses on the love story between Felix de Vandenesse and Henriette de Mortsauf, where the Indre Valley and the village of Saché set the idyllic scene. The geography and architecture of the châteaux in the novel, Frapesle and Clochegourde, were inspired by real châteaux in and around Saché: the Château de Valesne<sup>2</sup>, the Château de la Chevrière<sup>3</sup> and the Manoir de Vonne<sup>4</sup>. Through the voice of Felix de Vandenesse, Honoré de Balzac magnified the landscapes that he rediscovered each time he stayed at the Château de Saché.



De Mérimond (drawing), Bury (engraving)  
*Château d'Azay-Le-Rideau*  
Etching, ca. 1848

*As we mounted a crest I came in sight of the Château d'Azay, like a diamond of many facets in a setting of the Indre, standing on wooden piles concealed by flowers. Farther on, in a hollow, I saw the romantic masses of the Château de Saché, a sad retreat though full of harmony; too sad for the superficial, but dear to a poet with a soul in pain.*

1. Cf. Nicole Mozet, “Pour une histoire du paysage français. La Touraine balzacienne : un paradis à portée de diligence”, in *Paysages romantiques*, Études réunies et présentées par Gérard Peylet, *Eidolon*, Bordeaux: Université Michel de Montaigne, May 2000, pp. 59-71.

2. Château located in Saché, on the left bank of the Indre, whose geographic position inspired the location of the Château de Frapesle.

3. Château located in Saché, on the right bank of the Indre, whose geographic position inspired the location of the Château de Clochegourde in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (*The Lily of the Valley*).

4. Château located in Pont-de-Ruan, on the right bank of the Indre, whose architecture inspired the Château de Clochegourde.

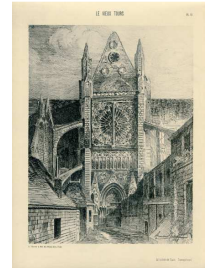
# Tours in *The Human Comedy*



MUSÉE BALZAC

Château de Saché

In his *Foreword to La Comédie humaine (The Human Comedy)*, Balzac reaffirmed the significance of human beings' environments. "Animals have little property, and neither arts nor sciences; while man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his use". Balzac thus endows the **neighbourhood of Saint-Gatien Cathedral in Tours** with a grim and gloomy appearance that points to the natures of the characters he places there, especially in **Le Curé de Tours (The Vicar of Tours)**.



Armand Guéritte  
Tours Cathedral, North Transept  
Photoengraving, 1898

*The house of which we speak, standing on the north side of the cathedral, was always in the shadow thrown by that vast edifice, on which time had cast its dingy mantle, marked its furrows, and shed its chill humidity, its lichen, mosses, and rank herbs.*

*Le Curé de Tours (The Vicar of Tours) (1832)*

## LE CURÉ DE TOURS (THE VICAR OF TOURS)

This novel is the tale of the fall of Abbot Birotteau, stripped of his luxurious apartments by Abbot Troubert. The character descriptions are terrific illustrations of Honoré de Balzac's interest in physiognomy, meaning the study of a person's temperament and character based on the shape, features and expressions of their face.



Pierre Ripert  
L'abbé Birotteau (Abbot Birotteau)  
Plaster, ca. 1930

*Birotteau's face, round and ruddy, proclaimed a kindly nature barren of ideas [...] The good vicar [...] trotted and ambled and seemed at times to roll himself along.*



Pierre Ripert  
L'abbé Troubert (Abbot Troubert)  
Plaster, ca. 1930

*Troubert, tall and lean, was yellow and bilious [...], while [the face of the Abbot Troubert], long and ploughed by many wrinkles, [...] He seldom spoke, and never laughed.*

The "Old Tours" district was another source of inspiration for Balzac. Built around the Basilica of St. Martin and stretching to the banks of the Loire, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this district had barely changed since the time of Louis XI. This environment, which was well known to Balzac, naturally provided the author with subject matter for several historical pieces set in Tours (**Maître Cornelius (Master Cornelius)**) and some of the **Contes drolatiques (Droll Stories)**), as well as novels based in other French towns (*Beatrix* in Guérande, *La Recherche de l'absolu (The Quest of the Absolute)* in Douai and *Eugenie Grandet* in Saumur).



Gilbert Riche  
Rue des Joulins (Tours)  
Etching, 1942

*Observing the outline of the houses occupied respectively by Maître Cornelius and by the Comte de Poitiers, it was easy to believe that the same architect had built them both and destined them for the use of tyrants.*

*Maître Cornélius (1832)*

## LES CONTES DROLATIQUES (DROLL STORIES)

*Droll Stories Collected from the Abbeys of Touraine and Brought to Light by Mr. de Balzac for the Amusement of Pantagruelists and No Others* is a testimonial to Balzac's interest in Renaissance literature, particularly the writings of Rabelais. In this "collection", the author imitates the satirical style and thinking of his illustrious role model, in a book that is both joyous and bawdy. Illustration of the posthumous 1855 edition was entrusted to Gustave Doré, who worked on it around the same time as his illustration of Rabelais's oeuvre (1854). The stylistic verve and comical situations of *Droll Stories* were powerfully echoed by Gustave Doré's dynamic, flowing strokes.



Gustave Doré  
Engraved wood, published in  
Honoré de Balzac, *Les Contes drolatiques (Droll Stories)*,  
Paris: Société générale de librairie, 1855.