

the slip-case with the two volumes of text.

The Nimrud expedition first began excavation at Fort Shalmaneser in mid-March of 1957, when much of ancient Nimrud had already been exposed to view, and its political, economic, and sociologic history reconstructed. The N.W. Palace of Assur-nasir-pal II had given up secrets held in its depths for centuries, and the palace-fortress of his son Shalmaneser III—spreading over eighteen acres and containing more than 200 rooms—was made to do the same. By the study of remains of rulers subsequent to Shalmaneser III, and the excavated tokens of war, prosperous times, and the decline of Nimrud the history of Assyria was extended.

Mallowan's second volume is given over entirely to Fort Shalmaneser and stresses the importance of its ivories. Exceeding all expectation and unsurpassed by any other, the collection included decorative objects, furniture, harness ornamentation, friezes, plaques, and open-work panels.

Although excavation at Nimrud is far from complete, for economic and scholarly reasons work there was brought to a close. Before reopening operations at Nimrud there should be a passage of years for the study, evaluation, and publication of material accumulated between 1949 and 1963. It is estimated that examination of the ivories alone will require the attention of numerous experts for decades to come.

In a nine-page epilogue Mallowan skillfully and logically sums up the accomplishments at Nimrud. To the ivories he assigns the place of honor as legacies from the craftsmen of the ancient East. But a sandstone stela celebrating the opening of the palace of Assur-nasir-pal II in 879 B.C. helped to establish a pattern of vital statistics, added to by clay documents written more than two centuries later during the reign of Esarhad-don.

Anyone who tries to use this book for reference will be frustrated by the lack of adequate index; none would be preferable to the short and incomplete listing at the back of Volume II. Two examples will serve to show how impossible it is to work from the index given: There is no reference to Shalmaneser I, and only four page-numbers follow the name Layard, which occurs dozens of times throughout the two volumes. Less hampering, but also irritating, is the absence of a chronological list of Assyrian kings; surely not even every scholar knows by heart all the rulers and their dates.

Nevertheless, Mallowan has given us an unforgettable picture of Nimrud; and, in so doing, a self-portrait emerges that contains charm, wisdom, erudition, and generosity.

## Observer of the Human Comedy

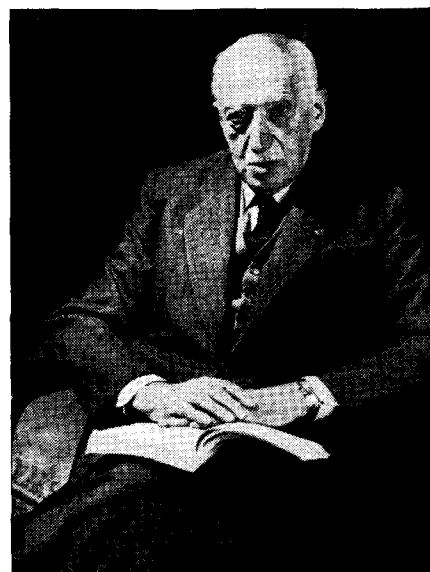
*Prometheus: The Life of Balzac*, by André Maurois, translated from the French by Norman Denny (Harper & Row. 573 pp. \$10), depicts both "the demigod who gave birth to a world and the fat man who reveled in childish puns." Justin O'Brien, professor of French at Columbia University, has translated works by Proust, Gide, and Camus, and written about many contemporary French authors.

By JUSTIN O'BRIEN

ANDRÉ MAUROIS possesses a genius for depicting the life of genius. Early in his long and glorious career he felt drawn chiefly to England, doubtless because he was brought up in Normandy—Elbeuf and Rouen—and because of his assignment as interpreter to a British regiment during World War I. After living with and penetrating the strange psychology of the Colonel Brambles and Doctor O'Gradys, he quite naturally turned to biographies of Shelley, Byron, Disraeli. Then, moving to his native France for subjects, he produced dazzling life-size portraits of Victor Hugo, Marcel Proust, George Sand, the Dumas family, and others.

It would be difficult to imagine a member of the august French Academy more ideally suited to his function, now that Paul Valéry is dead. André Maurois possesses a brilliant mind steeped in French history, literature, and art, capable of independent thought, and open to the best of the foreign. To be sure, he nourishes a special affection for everything English, even to the point of looking and acting like one of those benign gentlemen educated at Eton or Harrow *cum* Trinity, Cambridge, or Balliol, Oxford. With her artistic manner and Oxford accent Madame Simone André-Maurois graces the portrait perfectly (she is the daughter of Proust's friend Gaston Arman de Caillavet).

His luxurious apartment, well-lined with precious dedication copies of Balzac, George Sand, Anatole France, and Marcel Proust, overlooks the Bois de Boulogne with its stately trees and eighteenth-century groves. This ought to be, one thinks, Regent's Park or Carleton Terrace overlooking the Mall, so utterly has André Maurois combined the best in the English with the best in the French traditions.



André Maurois—"the required empathy and gusto."

In his spacious, workmanlike library there Maurois stacked up the many volumes of the *Comédie humaine* and all the thousands of articles devoted to Balzac and his time, and set to work on *Prometheus*. Now, at the age of eighty, in what he claims is his final undertaking of such vast proportions, he has published his biography of that towering genius Honoré de Balzac. No one less than a Rodin could portray Balzac as he looked to his contemporaries and as he looks to us; only a Maurois could write his life with the required empathy and gusto.

Quite obviously, the same indefatigable energy and all-embracing observation that produced the *Human Comedy* in a short life of fifty-one years went into André Maurois's *Prometheus*. More than a hundred titles by Balzac fill the chronological list at the end of this volume, whereas the hundreds, not to say thousands, of books and brochures on Balzac produced in the 116 years since his death have been boiled down to a highly selective bibliography in this English-language edition. To be sure, the Balzac cult is world-wide, and André Maurois was keenly aware of the myriad traps lurking in every episode of this flamboyant existence. But in France, where every lettered person has the complete works on his shelf if not on his tongue, the cultists are both more eagle-eyed and more powerful; hence the French edition contained infinitely more documentation and annotation.

Far more than a critical study of Bal-

zac, this thick, fascinating book succeeds in reconciling “the demigod who gave birth to a world and the fat man who reveled in childish puns.” As Maurois says, “How is one to pass judgment on Proteus? Balzac was by turns a saint, a criminal, an honest judge, a corrupt judge, a minister, a fop, a harlot, a duchess, and always a genius.”

Balzac was all these things because of his intuitive gift for observation, which permitted him to penetrate the souls of others and swap personalities with them. “Listening to people talking,” he wrote as a youth, “I could enter into their lives, feel their tattered clothes on my back, walk with my feet in their shoes; their desires, their needs, all passed into my soul, or my soul passed into theirs. It was the dream of a man awake.” That same faculty of genius allowed the future creator of Rastignac to describe himself thus in his mid-twenties:

In my five feet three inches I contain every possible inconsistency and contrast, and those who find me vain, extravagant, obstinate, frivolous, illogical, fatuous, negligent, idle, unpurposeful, unreflective, inconstant, talkative, tactless, crude, unpolished, crotchety, and of uneven temper are no less right than those who would say that I am economical, modest, courageous, tenacious, energetic, neglected, hard-working, constant, reserved, full of finesse, polite, and always cheerful. The man who calls me a poltroon will be no more wrong than the man who says I am extremely brave. In short, learned or ignorant, talented or inept, I am astonished by nothing more than myself. I conclude that I am simply an instrument played upon by circumstance. . . .

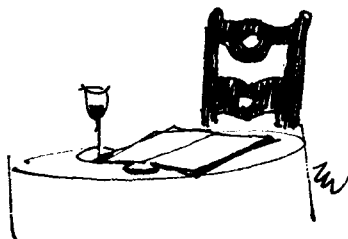
As Balzac himself sensed, he was what the French call a force of nature, writing three novels at once while proofreading a fourth, juggling complex business enterprises each with its pot of gold just out of sight, playing off one adored lady against another, climbing the social ladder, and piling up unbelievable debts through his unquenchable thirst for luxury and his chimerical investments. Those who approached him saw him this way, and not the least virtue of Maurois’s biography is his judicious use of quotations from letters of friends, as well as from the numerous novels and letters of the lusty Balzac himself.

For instance, Madame Marbouty, who, disguised as a male secretary, accompanied Balzac on a business trip to Turin in 1836, wrote to her mother back in Limoges:

Like all men of superior intellect, Balzac is very much preoccupied with his ideas and not very lovable. But he has such intellectual force and vigor and there is such superiority in his

whole being that he pleases none the less. His physique is poor and his face, though wonderfully expressive, is bizarre. . . . I have a wonderful apartment and am admirably waited upon. What makes it all the more remarkable is that Balzac has not a penny and is overwhelmed by debts, and it is only by dint of incredible labor that he is able to maintain his position between luxury and the financial ruin that threatens him every day. . . . Balzac is very kind, even-tempered, and frank, like all great spirits, but more concerned with the *future* and *ambition* than with the love of women. Love is necessary to him as a physical act. Except for this, his whole life is given to work.

Madame Marbouty, one of his rare ladies not to have a noble title and not



to have the same first name as his beloved sister Laure, saw correctly. Maurois explains her male disguise, which must have been a convenience, on the ground of the fashion set by George Sand; but it is noteworthy that on the last night in Turin, unable to bear her *travesti* any longer, she suddenly appeared at a ball in the most Parisian of gowns.

Every episode in the book would bear quoting, for all of them illustrate the vast creative energy, the fire and imagination, the wit and high intelligence of this vibrant electric storm that illuminated French life in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thriving on emotional upheaval and crisis, Balzac yet became a galley-slave to his pen, living under a self-inflicted and therefore harshest form of despotism. But anyone meeting him in society might have wondered when he found time to write, his outer life would have seemed so vivid and varied. Each of these episodes is recounted here with appropriate verve and most often with a lapidary aphorism to remind us that André Maurois is a thinker and man of the world in his own right, formed by the rigorous, independent mind of the great philosopher Alain. Noting that Balzac hesitated to apply the same Christian name to a second beloved who legitimately bore it, he adds: “Scruple has its quirks which constancy does not know.” Or, apropos the antagonism between a woman and the work of art: “Every woman who loves an artist is condemned sooner or later to suffering.” The frequent attacks on Balzac’s reputation prompt Maurois to say: “When

fame goes beyond acceptable bounds, malice discards all decency.”

Unforgettable is the correct word for almost every incident in this book. Just take Victor Hugo’s last two visits to the only man whose genius rivaled his at the time. On the first, Balzac, dying of dropsy, displayed his swollen legs, talked politics, twitted Hugo about giving up the title of Peer of France, boasted of his deep religious feeling, and, hobbling to the door with his guest, called downstairs to his wife: “Make sure you show Hugo all my pictures!” On the second visit, the death-rattle had begun from the blue-black face on the pillow as the room filled with the stench of gangrene; Hugo drew back the coverlet and squeezed the novelist’s sweaty hand; and back home that evening he told his guests, among whom he was proud to number the Turkish *chargé d’affaires*, a Spanish poet, and an exiled Italian count: “Gentlemen, Europe is about to lose a great spirit.”

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this is a book for all to read, whether or not they are familiar with the *Human Comedy* in any language. On the last page André Maurois evokes the name of that other dedicated novelist, perhaps the only equal of Balzac, who knew the *Comédie humaine* almost by heart—Marcel Proust.

Of him he could have written, as he does of Balzac, that he nourished a multitude of characters with his own substance. “He gave them his life, and so died young. But who would not wish to be Balzac?”

What a magnificent concluding line for a final biography by a master who has passed the age of eighty.

**FRASER YOUNG’S  
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1196**

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1196 will be found in the next issue.*

GL RDI HUCSMN RDIL NYAZI,

SWT RDI HAYBANIMN RDIL OAFI,

LI NDSOO ZWAP RDI RIKREMI AJ

YIW’N NAEON.

—XADW CSONPAMRDL

**Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1195**

*Life is too short to do anything for oneself that one can pay others to do for one. —W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM.*