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Genius and Degeneracy: Auguste Rodin and the *Monument to Balzac*

How future generations will laugh over all this buffoonery of 'nerve art'!

Max Nordau, *On Art and Artists* (1907)

Je suis un nerveux.

Rodin, quoted in *L'Éclair* (1896)

When Auguste Rodin received the commission from the Société des gens de lettres to create a monument to Honoré de Balzac, he was living on the rue des Grands Augustins, the same Parisian street where the novelist had set his celebrated *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*.¹ In that fictional story, a seventeenth-century artist named Frenhofer spends ten years labouring lovingly over a painting of a nude woman. He eventually shows it to the Flemish painter Frans Po[u]rbus and a young Nicolas Poussin, who see only an indecipherable mass of colours and lines on an overworked canvas, except at one corner where a foot of the utmost beauty and perfection emerges. Having received their uncomprehending criticism, Frenhofer sets fire to his masterpiece, succumbs to madness, and dies. Surely, the coincidence of Rodin and Frenhofer's address was not lost on the well-read sculptor — and in the aftermath of the scandal that greeted his own 'misunderstood' masterpiece, the *Monument to Balzac* (1898), Rodin may well have recalled the novel's ill-fated protagonist (Fig. 9.1)

[insert Fig. 9.1]

Fig. 9.1: Eugène Druet, *Balzac*, 1898, gelatin silver print, 40 cm x 29.8 cm. Accession no. 1983.194.11, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University; Gift of Albert and Patricia Elsen. Courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University)

This monument was particularly important to the Société, as Balzac had been a founding member and its second president. Émile Zola, who was president at the time of the commission, was instrumental in awarding it to Rodin.² The details of the sculpture's tortuous birth and first public exhibition at the Salon of 1898 are well worn in Rodin scholarship. However, there has been insufficient recognition, let alone scrutiny, of the

¹ Originally published as *Maître Frenhofer* in *L'Artiste* in 1831. It was later revised and augmented by Balzac in his *Études philosophiques* (Paris, 1837). The story was integrated into *La Comédie humaine* in 1845.

² Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 253.

source of the public outrage and the often scathing criticisms of both the work and its maker.³ Critics savaged the work, saying that it was ‘grotesque’ and had the appearance of an ‘être informe, sorte d’ébauche couronnée d’un visage lugubre’.⁴ A year later, when Rodin’s planned pavilion outside the 1900 Universal Exposition began to receive attention from the press, one journalist invoked the *Monument to Balzac* and mused archly that perhaps the public was going to witness the installation of a museum of horrors.⁵ By attending more closely to the language used by the critics, this chapter argues that the sculpture’s provocation can be attributed to its evocation of theories of degeneration. Ignored until now in the voluminous scholarship on the *Monument to Balzac*, Rodin’s exploitation of these contemporary theories also sheds light on both his working method and the concerns of the Parisian *grand public*, who, upon the unveiling of the sculpture, ridiculed its distorted visage and enshrouded body.

As an artist who articulated repeatedly over his long career that ‘nature’ motivated his work, Rodin struggled for seven years to produce a monument to a deceased man he had never met.⁶ He searched for novel ways to model Balzac, a man who Alphonse de Lamartine famously described as having a face that ‘vous charmaient et vous fascinaient tout entier. [...] [L]es yeux noirs perçaient comme des dards émoussés par la bienveillance; [...] le nez bien modelé, quoique un peu long; les lèvres découpées avec grâce, mais amples, relevées par les coins’.⁷ Rodin began his research by meticulously documenting the writer from Touraine, his self-professed fidelity to ‘nature’ predisposing him to embrace the theories of physiognomy and regional type. In this he was following Balzac himself, in whose books Rodin would have repeatedly encountered the cultural currency of physiognomic theories.⁸ In fact, late in his career, Rodin equated the physiognomist and the artist: ‘A physiognomist can easily distinguish between a cajoling air and one of real kindness, and it is precisely the rôle of the artist to show the truth, even beneath dissimulation’.⁹ Yet signifiers of physiognomy and regional type proved both limiting and unconvincing, and, as this chapter demonstrates, Rodin’s research over the course of the 1890s led him to abandon a naturalistic approach to his portrait of Balzac.

As his studies of the novelist developed, Rodin focused on the ‘categories of difference, otherness, excess’ that were part and parcel of contemporary debates around genius, madness, and degeneration.¹⁰ Balzac was no ordinary writer, of course — he had attempted to rival Dante’s *Divine Comedy* by capturing the earthly travails of contemporary

³ The most important and complete source on this sculpture is Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, ex. cat. (Paris: Éditions du musée Rodin, 1998). See also Albert E. Elsen, et al., *Rodin & Balzac. Rodin’s Sculptural Studies for the Monument to Balzac from the Cantor, Fitzgerald Collection*, ex. cat. (Beverly Hills: Cantor, Fitzgerald and Co., 1973).

⁴ Adolphe Brisson, ‘Plumes et ciseaux’, *La République française*, 12 May 1898, [n. pag.]; and ‘Lettre de Paris, Le musée Rodin’, *Le Nord maritime* [Dunkerque], 8 July 1899, [n. pag.]. Articles located in the press files for ‘Balzac’, Archives du Musée Rodin, Paris (referred to hereafter as AMR).

⁵ *La Presse*, 14 July 1899, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘Balzac’, AMR.

⁶ For more on Rodin as nature’s ‘copyist’, see the author’s ‘Auguste Rodin and the “Scientific Image”: The Sublime Copy Versus the Photograph’, in *Visions of the Industrial Age, 1830–1914: Modernity and the Anxiety of Representation in Europe*, ed. by Minsoo Kang and Amy Woodson-Boulton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 109–136.

⁷ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Balzac et ses œuvres* (Paris: Michel Lèvy Frères, 1866), p. 17.

⁸ Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 261.

⁹ Auguste Rodin, *Rodin on Art and Artists. Conversations with Paul Gsell* [1911], trans. by Mrs. Romilly Fedden (New York: Dover Publications, 1983), p. 54.

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, ‘Artists’ Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History’, in *Picture This: Media Representations of Visual Art and Artists*, ed. by Philip Hayward (Luton: The University of Luton Press, 1998), pp. 101–39 (p. 109).

society; as the Belgian poet Georges Rodenbach would write of Balzac's seemingly superhuman achievement upon seeing the finished monument: 'Pensez donc: avoir vu la comédie humaine!'¹¹ The monument unveiled in 1898 revealed traces of the 'stigmata' of degeneration that, for Rodin, made explicit the author's 'genius'; this caused the public and the critics discomfort, even though genius and madness were closely linked in scientific and popular discourses on degeneration at the time.¹² The sculpture focused attention on Balzac's visage, where these markers were most pronounced. In relation to his planned monument to Charles Baudelaire, another author whom Rodin deeply admired, the sculptor made a statement in the early 1890s that is equally applicable to his *Monument to Balzac*: 'What is a statue after all? A body, arms, legs, covered with banal clothing. What do these have to do with Baudelaire, who lived only by his brain? With him the head is everything'.¹³ Yet Rodin did not simply replicate the 'stigmata' of degeneration — he magnified and ultimately distorted them for expressive purposes. Rodin manipulated contemporary scientific theories in crafting the visage of a towering figure of nineteenth-century literature to show the limits of a naturalistic approach to portraiture, creating a sculpture that was utterly modern.

The Physiognomy of a *Tourangeau*

Rodin would certainly have been aware from his close reading of Balzac's extensive œuvre that the Realist writer relied on the popular tenets of physiognomy to communicate information about his characters.¹⁴ The principles of physiognomy — defined as the study of the correspondence between an individual's physical features and his or her moral character and intelligence — had enjoyed broad popular acceptance since at least the Middle Ages.¹⁵ By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a multivalent term that generally referred to tenets delineated by Swiss pastor Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), whose *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* was first published in French in 1781.¹⁶ Although every element of the body was potentially a

¹¹ Georges Rodenbach, 'Une Statue', *Le Figaro*, 17 May 1898, p. 1.

¹² For an important discussion of the ways in which Rodin linked genius to sexual potency through the pose of Balzac's body, see Anne Wagner, 'Rodin's Reputation', in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. by Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 191–242.

¹³ 'Le monument de Baudelaire', *La République* (22 September 1892); quoted in Albert E. Elsen with Rosalyn Frankel Jamison, *Rodin's Art: The Rodin Collection of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University*, ed. by Bernard Barryte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 347. For more on the scandal, see Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, 'Pour une statue de Balzac: 1850–1891', in *Musée Rodin, 1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, pp. 15–74 (pp. 48–57).

¹⁴ Rodin was an avid reader of Hugo, Shakespeare and Dante in the years before this commission, but it is unclear how familiar he was with Balzac's œuvre before he began work on the monument. There are, however, a number of volumes by Balzac in Rodin's library, including *Le Député d'Arcis* (Paris, 1892–97); *Études philosophiques sur Catherine de Médicis, suivi de Louis Lambert, Les Proscrits, Séraphita* (Paris, 1864); *Histoire des Treize* (Paris, 1840); *Œuvres complètes de H. de Balzac, XXIV: Correspondance 1819–1850* (Paris, 1876); and *Scènes de la vie de province, deuxième série: La Vieille fille, La Grenadière* (Paris, 1839). For Balzac's indebtedness to Lavater, see Fernand Baldensperger, 'Les Théories de Lavater dans la littérature française', *Études d'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1910), pp. 51–91 (pp. 70–84).

¹⁵ One of the earliest works to discuss physiognomy is a medieval text entitled 'Physiognomics', which in the nineteenth century was wrongly believed to have been written by Aristotle. Aristotle, 'Physiognomics', *Minor Works*, trans. by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 84–137.

¹⁶ John [Johann] Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. by Henry Hunter, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1789–1798). I will not be discussing here the related science of phrenology, the study of the shape of the skull as it relates to the shape of the brain and its corresponding characteristics in an individual's personality, as its tenets do not seem to have influenced the work of Rodin. Balzac wrote in the *avant-propos* of *La Comédie humaine* that Franz Gall, the founder of

physiognomic signifier, Lavater is most famous today for his ‘science’ as it applied to facial features, which he discussed in the first two volumes of his treatise. ‘[T]o ascribe every thing to arbitrary causes, to blind chance, without rule and without law, is the philosophy of madmen’, he claimed, and his system was an attempt to clarify and codify the rules of physiognomy.¹⁷

Balzac bought a copy of Lavater’s treatise in 1822, and a careful reading of *La Comédie humaine* yields myriad clues to his reliance on physiognomic theories.¹⁸ In his early novel *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), for instance, Balzac gives a revealing description of Monsieur Grandet, the protagonist’s father:

He had a round sun-burnt face, marked by smallpox, a firm chin, uncurving lips, white teeth. [...] His forehead, which was deeply furrowed, bulged in a fashion not without significance for the physiognomist. [...] His nose, which was thick at the end, had a veined knob on it which was popularly said, with some reason, to be full of malice. In this face [was] written a dangerous craftiness.¹⁹

Facial features here expose Grandet’s moral character. Fernand Baldensperger asserts that, of the writers of the so-called ‘generation of 1830’, Balzac applied Lavater’s rules the most diligently.²⁰ In fact, the novelist stated categorically: ‘Les lois de la physiognomie sont exactes, non seulement dans leur application aux caractères, mais encore relativement à la fatalité de l’existence’.²¹ It is especially fitting, then, that Rodin would bring those laws to bear on his representation of Balzac’s own features.

Physiognomic theories appealed not only to nineteenth-century novelists, such as Balzac, George Sand, and Stendhal, but also to visual artists who were reacting to the codified expressions of the École des beaux-arts and Charles Le Brun’s enormously influential *têtes d’expression*.²² Moreover, painters, sculptors, and caricaturists could incorporate their widely known and accepted principles to create a visual language understood by the average consumer of culture.²³ Art critic and Realist advocate Théophile Thoré, who sought a ‘beauté vivante’, edited the *Dictionnaire de phrénologie et de physionomie à l’usage des artistes* in 1836.²⁴ Physiognomic principles influenced the portraits painted by Jacques-Louis David and Eugène Delacroix and sculpted by Jean-Pierre Dantan, among others; these were works with which Rodin would have been intimately familiar.²⁵ David d’Angers, whose investment in physiognomic theories was well known, sculpted a portrait of Balzac in 1844 and apparently found a kindred spirit in the writer:

phrenology, was the ‘*continuateur*’ of Lavater; cited in Jacques Lethève, ‘Balzac et la Phrénologie’, *Aesculape* (March 1951), 55–62 (p. 60).

¹⁷ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, I (1789), 30.

¹⁸ Baldensperger, ‘Les Théories de Lavater dans la littérature française’, pp. 51–91 (p. 71).

¹⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet* [1833], trans. by Marion Ayton Crawford (London: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 44.

²⁰ Baldensperger, ‘Les Théories de Lavater dans la littérature française’, pp. 51–91 (p. 84).

²¹ Balzac, *Une Ténébreuse affaire*, p. 3; quoted in Baldensperger, ‘Les Théories de Lavater dans la littérature française’, pp. 51–91 (p. 77).

²² See Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, and Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 3.

²³ See Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²⁴ Quoted in Phillippe Sorel, ‘La phrénologie et l’art’, in *L’Âme au corps: arts et science, 1793–1993*, by Jean Clair, et al., ex. cat. (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), pp. 266–79 (p. 266).

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Changeux, ‘De la science vers l’art’, in *L’Âme au corps*, pp. 13–39 (p. 22).

Balzac said to him, ‘Surtout étudiez mon nez! Mon nez est tout un monde!’²⁶ David, like most artists of his day, believed that the role of public sculpture was moral edification. His nude bust of Balzac, presumably through physiognomic (and phrenologic) signifiers, would demonstrate the traits of a *grand homme*.²⁷ Rodin, however, did not find the sculpture a useful precedent, commenting that David ‘was an *idealist*; all his busts are alike, whether it is Balzac, Victor Hugo, Goethe’.²⁸ For Rodin, then, David’s artistic agenda was more important to the final result than the sitter’s individual characteristics; half a century later, the same would be true for Rodin’s own *Monument to Balzac*.

When Rodin secured the commission for the monument, he wrote to Zola to say that he had ‘often studied [Balzac], not only in his works but in his native province’.²⁹ He then began to collect documentary material. Rodin told a reporter from *La France* that he intended to conduct research in the Tours library and that Balzac’s great-nephew was going to send him a plaster cast of the author’s hand.³⁰ He asked the photographer Nadar for help in securing a print of the only known daguerreotype of Balzac, taken in 1842 by Louis-Auguste Bisson (see Fig. 9.2).³¹ Rodin even had *père Pion*, Balzac’s tailor, create a suit using the author’s measurements.³² He said that he was attempting to ‘*comprendre le grand romancier*’.³³ By gathering traces of the individual — including indexes like the cast and the photograph — Rodin was clearly trying to motivate his study of an individual who had died more than forty years earlier.

[insert Fig 9.2]

Fig. 9.2: Camille Silvy, after a daguerreotype by Louis Auguste Bisson, ‘Reproduction by order of Mr Balzac’ (Honoré de Balzac), ca. 1862, albumen print, 92 mm x 92 mm. Inventory number NPG Ax58909. © National Portrait Gallery, London

The sculptor’s working method, however, led him to search for a live model. He therefore visited Tours, Balzac’s birthplace, to find an individual with *Tourangeau* features in order to capture as accurate a likeness as possible.³⁴ In nineteenth-century France, physiognomic theories served as the foundation of the politically-motivated discourse of regional type, which purported to identify and assign meanings to physical attributes

²⁶ ‘Notes d’art. L’image de Balzac’, *La Petite Gironde*, 6 May 1898; quoted in Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, p. 346.

²⁷ David was a founding member of the Société phrénologique; Jacques de Caso, *David d’Angers: Sculptural Communication in the Age of Romanticism*, trans. by Dorothy Johnson and Jacques de Caso (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 258, note 19.

²⁸ Gabriel Ferry, ‘La statue de Balzac’, *Le Monde moderne* X (1899); quoted in Albert Elsen, et al., *Rodin & Balzac*, p. 7.

²⁹ Letter from Rodin to Zola dated 3 July 1891. Aurélien Scholl, ‘La question Rodin’, *L’Écho de Paris*, 18 August 1896; quoted in Frederic V. Grunfeld, *Rodin: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1987), p. 310.

³⁰ A. B. de Farges’s article appeared on 15 July 1891 in *La France*; cited in Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*, p. 254. For an illustration, see Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, p. 262, cat. 11.

³¹ Joy Newton, ‘Rodin and Nadar’, *Laurels*, 52, 3 (1981–1982), 163–70 (pp. 167–68).

³² Véronique Mattiussi, ‘“Que de voyages j’ai faits en Touraine...”’, in Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, pp. 125–32 (p. 130).

³³ Emphasis in the original; Rodin quoted in Gustave Coquiott, *Rodin à Hôtel Biron et à Meudon* (Paris: Librairie Ollendorff, 1917), p. 107.

³⁴ Letter to Zola from Toudouze on 10 July 1891; quoted in Grunfeld, *Rodin: A Biography*, p. 310.

particular to the inhabitants of any given area of France.³⁵ It claimed that there was a constancy of regional features and personality — in other words, that an individual from Touraine would resemble his ancestors. Writers of the day, such as the geographer Elisée Reclus, judged the individuals from Touraine to have ‘l’intelligence lucide, [...] [le] tempérament bien pondéré’.³⁶ Reclus also commented that the people of the Loire valley ‘se trouvent fondus dans un harmonieux ensemble de bon sens et de gaieté, d’esprit et de sérieux’.³⁷

Rodin was keenly aware of physiognomic principles and theories of regional type — they would play a role not only in his studies for monuments in the 1880s and 1890s, but also in the way his sculptures were read by critics.³⁸ He must have understood that although the discourse of regional type was fundamentally flawed, it remained a useful entrée into his studies of Balzac. In pre-nineteenth-century France, when people rarely left their *ville natale*, the notion of regional type was more tenable; by the time Rodin was sculpting in the late nineteenth century, however, the seasonal workers of generations past who had shuttled between urban centres and their homes in agrarian communities had settled permanently in the cities.³⁹ As a first-generation Parisian himself — his father was born in Normandy and his mother in Lorraine — Rodin would have been intimately aware of the issues surrounding migrations within France.⁴⁰ However, he would also have realized that the public would ‘recognize’ the traits of a *Tourangeau*.

In fact, in an important early article on the *Monument to Balzac*, the sculptor’s friend Gustave Geffroy speaks of Rodin’s research in Tours in terms of regional type:

Tout d’abord, et naturellement [...], Rodin est parti pour la Touraine, où Balzac est né, où il a reçu sa première éducation, le pays de sa formation physique et intellectuelle. Il devait se trouver, dans cette coulée de la vallée de la Loire, des mêmes traits généraux et particuliers qui se trouvent marqués et résumés sur la face de l’écrivain.

Geffroy delineates some of these qualities when he describes the search for ‘quelque chose de la même corpulence, des mêmes plans de visage, du même rire des yeux, de la même lippe de la bouche’.⁴¹ In other words, Rodin had to look for the regional features visible on the face of Balzac and of his fellow citizens of Touraine and the individual physiognomic signifiers appropriate to the great writer. Rodin’s search, Geffroy asserts, was for:

un type tourangeau qui est le type de Balzac. Il choisit quelques-uns de ceux qui portaient le plus profondément cette empreinte, et il modela leurs masques en des séances attentives, avec le soin minutieux, l’étude respectueuse qu’il apporte à la reproduction de la nature.

He then summarizes the results of the artist’s two-year search for the right model: ‘J’ai vu ces masques dans l’atelier du sculpteur lorsqu’il les rapporta de Touraine, je les ai revus l’autre jour, et ma stupéfaction de la première heure n’a fait que s’accroître. Avec moins de hauteur

³⁵ Ségolène Le Men, Luce Abélès, and Nathalie Preiss-Basset, *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, ex. cat. (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), p. 21.

³⁶ Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle: la terre et les hommes*, 19 vols (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1876–1894), II: *La France* (1885), 58–59.

³⁷ Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, II, 554.

³⁸ See the author’s ‘Essence and Evanescence in the Hands of Rodin’, *Thresholds* 31 (May 2006), 102–109.

³⁹ David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 154–59.

⁴⁰ For more details on Rodin’s family, see Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*, pp. 3–20.

⁴¹ Gustave Geffroy, ‘L’imaginaire’, *Le Figaro*, 29 August 1893, p. 1.

de front, moins de largeur de joues, c'est matériellement Balzac'.⁴² Rodin had found a driver by the name of Estager who ran the public coach between Azay-le-Rideau and the rail station and who bore a remarkable resemblance to his subject (Fig. 9.3 and Fig. 9.4).⁴³

[insert Fig. 9.3]

Fig. 9.3: Anonymous, *Portrait de M. Estager dit le Conducteur de Tours, modèle du Balzac*, epreuve sur papier albuminé, 14.40 x 11 cm. Inventory number Ph.1216, Musée Rodin, Paris. [Figure 3 must not be printed larger than half-page.]

[insert Fig. 9.4]

Fig. 9.4: Auguste Rodin, *Honoré de Balzac*, probably 1891, terracotta, height 23.5 cm. Accession number 12.11.1, Rogers Fund, 1912, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (www.metmuseum.org)

However, it quickly became clear in letters from Rodin's supporters that physiognomic indicators of regional type were inherently unreliable. During his stay in Tours, Rodin received surprising news from his friend Albert Pontremoli, who had visited the Balzac specialist Vicomte Charles Spoelberch de Lovenjoul in Brussels: 'Selon M. de Lovenjoul, un voyage en pays tourangeau est de peu d'utilité, car si Balzac est né à Tours, c'est de parents étrangers au pays tous deux, et s'il a eu le type tourangeau comme vous me le disiez ce n'est certes pas qu'il soit d'un sang des bords de la Loire'. He continued, 'je [...] me rappelle [...] avoir vu à Amboise des naturels ayant bien le même type que votre grand modèle'. Pontremoli then enumerated various photographic and drawn portraits of the author, which he believed would give Rodin a better sense of Balzac's physiognomy.⁴⁴ A few months later, in October of 1891, Geffroy also discouraged Rodin from focusing on the inhabitants of Tours: 'Je ne voudrais pas déranger vos études de têtes de tourangeaux, mais ne perdez pas de vue tout de même, cher Rodin, que Balzac est d'origine méridionale'. He asked, 'Avez-vous le volume de la *Correspondance* [?]?', continuing, 'là [...] vous connaîtrez le mieux l'admirable grand homme'.⁴⁵ Pontremoli's and Geffroy's pleas that Rodin shift his focus went unheeded. And, in another surprising turn of events, Rodin did not seek a new model after learning that Estager was himself not a native of Tours either, but of Combressol

⁴² Geffroy, 'L'imaginaire', p. 1.

⁴³ Mattiussi, "'Que de voyages j'ai faits en Touraine...'", pp. 125–32 (p. 130).

⁴⁴ Letter dated 29 July 1891 in the 'Albert Pontremoli' correspondence file, AMR.

⁴⁵ Letter dated 4 October, probably from 1891, in the 'Gustave Geffroy' correspondence file, AMR. In fact, Balzac's father was born in the Languedoc and his mother was from Paris; Laure Surville, *Balzac, sa vie et ses œuvres d'après sa correspondance* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle and Jaccottet, Bourdilliat et Cie., 1858), pp. 6–7.

in the Limousin region.⁴⁶ Apparently one could be a *Tourangeau* type but not from Touraine. The artist, however, could have assumed that the public would have understood the physiognomic shorthand evident in the sculpture, regardless of Balzac's true ancestral origins of which most people were not aware.

In fact, a few years later the work in progress bespoke the *Tourangeau* type to the critics who saw it. In *L'Écho de Paris* in 1894, Gaston Steigler wrote that Rodin created 'un Balzac vivant, vrai, marqué des caractères généraux de cette robuste et saine race tourangelle dont le romancier aimait à s'enorgueillir, avec une tête large et puissante où l'on devinât le grouillement de la Comédie humaine'.⁴⁷ A writer for *Le Journal de Bruxelles* recounted Rodin's search for 'des signes de race, des conformations physiques, des éléments du type qui tiennent au sol'.⁴⁸ Georges Clemenceau, writing for *La Justice*, commanded Rodin to continue with his project: 'Va en Touraine te pénétrer de la race, interroge ces têtes rustiques, modèle ces crânes solides, assemble ces traits volontaires'. Moreover, he equated the sculptor and the novelist: 'tu presses ton génie et le forces de se mesurer avec le génie de ton modèle', an apt statement, given that the finished monument would reveal as much about the artist as it would about the model.⁴⁹

Rodin used physiognomy and regional type to motivate his sculpture, as a way of incorporating 'nature' into his work, and to fight against staid Salon conventions.⁵⁰ After the well-known scandal of 1894, when the Société gave Rodin an ultimatum because they had begun to doubt that they would ever see the completed monument, the sculptor set aside his '[concern] with an exact resemblance' and created an almost supernatural effigy of Balzac, which transcended considerations of regional type and instead focused on the author's 'genius'.⁵¹ Here too he was following Balzac's own musings; Gretchen Besser argues that, not only was the novelist preoccupied with the 'question of genius' throughout his life, but he even anticipated the later studies of Cesare Lombroso by '[suggesting] the possibility of making a scientific study of the heredity of great men, including their background and environment'.⁵²

Genius and Neurosis

Just at the time he began manipulating Balzac's visage to make the markers of genius more evident than the 'readable' signifiers of physiognomy that had been his focus for several years, Rodin himself became the object of a study on genius. In the first days of 1896, he received a curious letter from Doctor Édouard Toulouse, a senior doctor for mental illness at the Faculté de médecine and a physician at the Saint-Anne Asylum. Toulouse briefly outlined a proposal: he wanted Rodin to be the subject of an 'enquête médico-psychologique' on the

⁴⁶ Mattiussi, "'Que de voyages j'ai faits en Touraine...'", pp. 125–32 (p. 130).

⁴⁷ Gaston Stiegler, 'Rodin et Balzac', *L'Écho de Paris*, 12 November 1894, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac,' AMR.

⁴⁸ 'Lettres parisiennes', *Le Journal de Bruxelles*, 13 November 1894, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac,' AMR.

⁴⁹ G[eorges] Clemenceau, 'Balzac & Rodin', *La Justice*, 12 November 1894, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac,' AMR.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of these 'well-worn poses', see Gustave Geffroy, 'The Sculptor Rodin', in *Rodin in Perspective*, ed. by Ruth Butler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 62–73 (p. 69). Originally published in *Arts and Letters* (London, 1889), pp. 289–304.

⁵¹ Charles Chincholle, 'Balzac et Rodin', *Le Figaro*, 25 November 1894; quoted in Elsen, et al., *Rodin & Balzac*, p. 8.

⁵² Gretchen R. Besser, *Balzac's Concept of Genius. The theme of superiority in the 'Comédie Humaine'* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969), pp. 15 and 72.

relationship between genius and neurosis.⁵³ According to the young doctor, the question of whether genius was a neurosis was the subject of a millennia-old debate to which he hoped to bring ‘quelques faits précis’ and ‘quelques observations vérifiées et authentiques’.⁵⁴ Rodin met with him and quickly agreed to participate in the ambitious project.⁵⁵ Within a few weeks, Toulouse’s team of doctors and specialists were meeting with Rodin to, among other things, measure his ears and examine his myopic eyes.⁵⁶

By July of that year, Toulouse was preparing to publish his study of Zola, the first volume of a planned series, and he asked for permission to include Rodin’s name in the introduction.⁵⁷ Three months later — just one month before the book’s publication — the sculptor had still not given Toulouse a final answer. The physician pointedly asked in a letter whether Rodin thought it unseemly to have his name listed alongside those of Zola, Alphonse Daudet and Edmond de Goncourt, the painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and the sculptor Jules Dalou, all of whom had agreed to participate in the project.⁵⁸

The first book of the series, *Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie*, was released with an introduction by Zola himself, authorizing its publication.⁵⁹ Zola characterizes himself in terms familiar to both science and art, claiming, ‘Mon cerveau est comme dans un crâne de verre, je l’ai donné à tous et je ne crains pas que tous viennent y lire’; he then describes himself as a ‘pauvre écorché’ at the hands of his critics.⁶⁰ Toulouse, in turn, considers the work and the series of which it was to be a part as ‘uniquement scientifiques’.⁶¹ He asserts that ‘on pouvait s’occuper des hautes personnalités intellectuelles comme de simples matières à observation, comme de faits rares qu’on devait étudier minutieusement, sans prévention d’aucune sorte’.⁶² In order to make the profile as complete as possible, the doctor includes the contributions of such notable figures as the statistician and eugenicist Francis Galton, ‘qui a bien voulu noter les empreintes des doigts’, and Alphonse Bertillon, the Paris police chief famous for inventing the mugshot and creating a photographic archive of criminals, ‘qui a dressé la fiche signalétique anatomique’.⁶³ Other specialists checked Zola’s hearing and his sense of smell,

⁵³ Letter dated 6 January 1896 in the ‘Edouard Toulouse’ correspondence file, AMR.

⁵⁴ Letter dated 6 January 1896 in the ‘Edouard Toulouse’ correspondence file, AMR.

⁵⁵ It is of course possible that he had already heard of this project from friends and colleagues who had already agreed to participate, including Zola, Alphonse Daudet, and Jules Dalou, among others.

⁵⁶ Letters dated 1 February 1896 and 9 February 1896 in the ‘Edouard Toulouse’ correspondence file, AMR.

⁵⁷ Letter dated 3 July 1896 in the ‘Edouard Toulouse’ correspondence file, AMR. The second — and last — volume of this series appeared almost fifteen years later: Édouard Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique sur la supériorité intellectuelle. II. Henri Poincaré* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1910). Toulouse also published a short article on Berthelot; Édouard Toulouse, ‘Notes biologiques sur M. Berthelot’, *Revue de psychiatrie (médecine mentale, neurologie, psychologie)*, 4, 1 (1901), 368–71.

⁵⁸ Letter dated 10 October 1896 in the ‘Edouard Toulouse’ correspondence file, AMR.

⁵⁹ Édouard Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie. I. Introduction générale. Émile Zola* (Paris: Société d’Éditions Scientifiques, 1896). For more on Toulouse’s study, see Jacqueline Carroy, ‘“Mon cerveau est comme dans un crâne de verre”: Émile Zola sujet d’Edouard Toulouse’, *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle*, 20/21 (2000), http://elseminario.com.ar/biblioteca/carroy_mon-cerveau-zola.htm [accessed 5 September 2015]; Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An Idea and Its Uses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 89–122; and Agnès Sandras-Fraysse, ‘La folie de l’enquête: Zola disséqué’, *Fabula/Les colloques*, <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document874.php> [accessed 17 August 2015].

⁶⁰ Émile Zola, ‘Lettre de M. Émile Zola,’ in *Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie. I. Introduction générale. Émile Zola*, by Édouard Toulouse (Paris: Société d’Éditions Scientifiques, 1896), v–vii.

⁶¹ Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique*, I, ix.

⁶² Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique*, I, ix.

⁶³ Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique*, I, xi–xii. For more on the methods of Galton and Bertillon, see Allan Sekula, ‘The Body and the Archive’, *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 3–64.

analyzed his handwriting, and measured the strength of his hand, among many other measurements. Toulouse's methods — and his and Zola's comments — reveal their inherent positivism, attributing the acquisition of knowledge to direct observation.

In the end, Rodin was acknowledged in Toulouse's book — which concluded that Zola's genius was not a result of the fact that he suffered from nervous disorders — and the book caused a scandal.⁶⁴ Articles generally ridiculing the three-hundred-page study and its subject were published in all the major newspapers; most took exception to the text's complete and often indecorous revelation of its subject: from the dimensions of Zola's skull to the composition of his urine.⁶⁵ One author speculated that Puvis de Chavannes withdrew his participation in Toulouse's study because he was not terribly interested in 'renseigner l'univers sur l'abondance de son système pileux et la régularité de ses fonctions intestinales', as Zola had done.⁶⁶ It seems that Rodin felt the same way and communication between the sculptor and the physician ceased for several years.

In 1895, when Zola and Toulouse had begun their shared project, the novelist may have discussed it with Rodin.⁶⁷ It is intriguing to consider that it could have been Zola who proposed Rodin as a possible subject to the physician. Toulouse probably embarked on the 'vivisection'⁶⁸ of French notables as a reaction to Lombroso's theories about the connection between genius and madness, updating the Italian's nomenclature — he referred to genius as 'superior intelligence' and 'madness' as a kind of neuropathy — to fashion a more 'scientific' project.⁶⁹ The year 1889 saw the first French translation of Lombroso's *L'Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria, alla storia ed all'estetica*, a foray into the longstanding dispute on the relationship between genius and madness.⁷⁰ In France in the earlier part of nineteenth century, Louis-Francois Lélut, Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, and others had investigated the connection, but by the end of the century, there was a renewed interest in the topic with theories of hereditary degeneration circulating widely in medical and popular circles. Like the notion of regional type, theories of degeneration, too, were fed by concerns

⁶⁴ Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique*, I, 279–80. Zola's involvement in Dreyfus' defense helped the book capture the public's attention. See Michel Huteau, *Psychologie, psychiatrie et société sous la Troisième République. La Biocratie d'Édouard Toulouse (1865–1947)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), pp. 75–76. The articles that appeared around the publication of the books also attest to this. See, for example, Homodei [Arthur Huc], 'Chronique. Zola viviséqué', *La Dépêche*, 8 February 1898, [n. pag.]; L., 'Au jour le jour. Anthropologie et critique', *Le Journal des débats*, 9 June 1898, [n. pag.], and *Sunday Times* (London), 26 June 1898, [n. pag.]. Articles located in the 'personne' file for Édouard Toulouse, AMR. Later, the Dreyfus case influenced the protest that emerged when the Société des gens de lettres rejected the *Monument to Balzac* in 1898; see, for example, Le Normand-Romain, 'Balzac', I, 187.

⁶⁵ Toulouse's methods were questioned insofar as they compared to those of other theorists, such as Lombroso. See Charles Bardin, 'Médecine & Psychologie. Génie ou folie', *Gil Blas*, 3 November 1896, [n. pag.] and Maurice de Fleury, 'Au Jour le jour. Le Livre sur Zola', *Le Figaro*, 6 November 1896, [n. pag.]. Articles located in the 'personne' file for Édouard Toulouse, AMR.

⁶⁶ The anonymous author then criticizes Puvis for refusing to continue with Toulouse's study; *Le Journal des débats*, 10 November 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the 'personne' file for Édouard Toulouse, AMR.

⁶⁷ Zola and Toulouse's discussions started in the summer of 1895; Henri Mitterand, *Zola*, 3 vols (Paris: Fayard, 1999–2002), III: *L'Honneur (1893–1902)* (2002), 229.

⁶⁸ Homodei, 'Chronique', [n. pag.].

⁶⁹ De Fleury, 'Au Jour le jour', [n. pag.]. Lombroso later responded critically to Toulouse's book on Zola; C[esare] Lombroso, 'Émile Zola, d'après l'étude du Docteur Toulouse et les nouvelles théories sur le génie', *La Semaine médicale* 17 (1897), 1–5. Of course, Zola was already familiar with Lombroso's work, which he read in preparation for writing *La Bête humaine*. See Mitterand, *Zola*, p. 229.

⁷⁰ *L'Uomo di genio* was a revised and expanded version of Lombroso's *Genio e follia* from 1864. It was published in France as *L'Homme de génie*, trans. by Colonna D'Istria (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1889). Aristotle seemed to have begun this line of questioning, famously asking in Book XXX, 'Why is it that all men who are outstanding in philosophy, poetry or the arts are melancholic?', in his *Problems*, trans. by W. S. Hett, 2 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1936–37), II (1937), 155.

related to migrations within France from rural communities to cities.⁷¹ As Robert Nye has noted, by the 1890s degeneracy was seen as a social pathology that explained a variety of France's ills, including, among others, depopulation, alcoholism, prostitution, and crime. The causes and symptoms of each — and of degeneration itself — became so confounded that 'they were in practice virtually interchangeable'.⁷² Modernity itself could even be cast as the cause of degeneration.⁷³ Lombroso had already made his name with studies on criminals — a book that examined the 'stigmata' of degeneracy in the genius seemed a natural sequel.⁷⁴ In the preface to the first English edition of *The Man of Genius*, Lombroso writes:

Just as giants pay a heavy ransom for their stature in sterility and relative muscular and mental weakness, so the giants of thought expiate their intellectual force in degeneration and psychosis. It is thus that the signs of degeneration are found more frequently in men of genius than even in the insane.⁷⁵

Having made this analogy, Lombroso states later in the preface that there are those who contend 'the man of genius is a monster'. He then counters, 'Very well, but even monsters follow well-defined teratologic laws'.⁷⁶

Lombroso follows these contentious remarks with an extensive, detailed list of moral and physical 'stigmata'. The latter include: 'prominent ears, deficiency of beard, irregularity of teeth, excessive asymmetry of face and head, which may be very large or very small, sexual precocity, smallness or disproportion of the body, lefthandedness [*sic*], stammering, rickets', and so on.⁷⁷ He then delineates each symptom with the names of notable sufferers. Significantly, Balzac makes an appearance from the start, under the first sign of degeneration: 'height'. Along with Erasmus, Mozart, Hogarth, and many others, Balzac was 'famous for short stature as well as for genius', according to Lombroso.⁷⁸ Balzac reappears in the next chapter on 'Latent Forms of Neurosis and Insanity in Genius' with a long quotation from George Sand that testified to his 'megalomania'.⁷⁹ And, most importantly, Balzac is mentioned in the chapter on 'The Epileptoid Nature of Genius', where Lombroso presents his theory that 'the creative power of genius may be a form of degenerative psychosis belonging to the family of epileptic affections'.⁸⁰ He then cites a passage from Zola's *Les Romanciers Naturalistes* (1881) about Balzac's working method to prove that 'it is not only isolated paroxysms which recall the psychic phenomenology of the epileptic, but the whole life'.⁸¹ Interestingly, the continuation of Zola's passage — which was not included in Lombroso's text — hypothesizes about the cause of Balzac's 'temperament': 'Il y avait sans doute une lésion dans ce vaste cerveau, la fêlure du génie'.⁸² Zola probably knew, as did Rodin, that at

⁷¹ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 53.

⁷² Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 144.

⁷³ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ For example, Cesare Lombroso, *L'Uomo delinquente* (Milan, 1876).

⁷⁵ Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), vi.

⁷⁶ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, viii.

⁷⁷ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 6. See also Georges Raviart, 'Le génie de Balzac du point de vue psychiatrique. Génie et folie', *Annales médico-psychologiques*, 2, 4 (November 1954), 481–503 (p. 493).

⁷⁹ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 47.

⁸⁰ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 336. Toulouse's first point under his concluding comments is that Zola was not an epileptic, clearly in response to Lombroso's theory; Toulouse, *Enquête médico-psychologique*, I, 279.

⁸¹ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 343.

⁸² Émile Zola, *Les Romanciers naturalistes* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1881), p. 55.

the age of fourteen Balzac had suffered a serious and unexplained nervous attack: ‘une espèce de coma’, according to his biographer Edmond Werdet.⁸³

In the preface to the 1889 French edition of Lombroso’s text, physiologist Charles Richet emphasizes that geniuses are not insane but, rather, exceptional.⁸⁴ This caveat reveals the anxiety surrounding any talk of hereditary degeneration: while it could lead to a diagnosis of genius, it could also lead to one of moral depravity. Daniel Pick has observed that the term degeneration ‘served to anchor meaning, but paradoxically its own could never be fully stabilised [...]; it explained everything and nothing as it moved back and forth between the clinic, the novel, the newspaper and the government investigation’.⁸⁵ Its wide cultural currency and protean meaning facilitated its appropriation by a wide variety of interests, which could extol its connection to superior intelligence or tout its links to social and physical decay. The symptoms of cultural degeneracy, for instance, were enumerated in Max Nordau’s popular diatribe, *Degeneration* (1892).⁸⁶ Also written in response to Lombroso’s work, it begins with a dedication to the Italian physician in which Nordau makes clear his intent:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.⁸⁷

And Nordau devotes a long chapter on the pernicious and corrupting influence of Zola and ‘His School’.⁸⁸ Criticizing as false the precept that one can describe reality, he goes on to diagnose Zola as a ‘high-class degenerate’ through a reading of his works.⁸⁹ Nordau concludes: ‘Zola’s novels do not prove that things are badly managed in this world, but merely that Zola’s nervous system is out of order’.⁹⁰ His discussion also touches on Balzac; Nordau writes that the theory of ‘milieu’ used by the writer of *La Comédie humaine* ‘in fact, explains nothing’.⁹¹

In sum, over the course of the decade when Rodin was fashioning his *Monument to Balzac*, the terms ‘genius’, ‘madness’, ‘neurosis’, and ‘degeneracy’ were linked both positively and negatively to one another and also to Balzac, Zola, and even Rodin. In casting

⁸³ Emphasis removed; Edmond Werdet, *Portrait intime de Balzac, sa vie, son humeur et son caractère* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1859; reprinted Paris: L'Arche du livre, 1970), p. 48. An annotated copy of the 1859 edition is in Rodin's library, Inv. #3548; http://musee-rodin.bibli.fr/opac/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=5728 [accessed 25 September 2015]. Rodin received Lemer's biography of Balzac from the author himself; Auguste Rodin, *Correspondance de Rodin*, 4 vols (Paris: Éditions du musée Rodin, 1985–1992) I: 1860–1899 (1985), 134. In *Louis Lambert*, the narrator, a partly autobiographical character, suffers a similar attack; Honoré de Balzac, *Louis Lambert, suivi de Séraphita* (Paris: Charpentier, 1842), p. 66.

⁸⁴ Charles Richet, ‘Préface’, Cesare Lombroso, *L'Homme de génie*, trans. by Colonna d'Istria (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1889), vii.

⁸⁵ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: Duncker, 1892). The first French translation, *Dégénérescence*, was published in 1894.

⁸⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), vii.

⁸⁸ This chapter is an about-face for Nordau; he had previously published a laudatory book on Zola, *Zola und Naturalismus Ausgewählte Pariser Briefe* (Leipzig, 1887). For more on this, see Hans-Peter Söder, *That Way Madness Lies: Max Nordau on fin-de-siècle Genius* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2009), esp. p. 142.

⁸⁹ For his full diagnosis, see Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp. 499–500.

⁹⁰ Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 499.

⁹¹ Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 488.

himself as a ‘nerveux’, as the second epigraph to this chapter illustrates, Rodin makes clear that he understood his own character through the discourses on nervous diseases in these same years.⁹² Talk of genius and neurosis reached a fever pitch in his social circle around 1895 and 1896, when he, Zola, and others were involved in Toulouse’s studies. It was exactly around this time that Rodin began transforming Balzac’s facial features — from ‘readable’ physiognomic signifiers to markers of genius.

Degenerate Balzac

By 1896 the long-awaited monument to Balzac had still not materialized, and critics were growing restless; one in Bordeaux commented ominously that the public could expect from the ‘mains nerveuses’ of Rodin ‘un Balzac de cauchemar’.⁹³ More positively, Alexandre Hepp wrote in *Le Soir* that Rodin engaged in the ‘minutieuses et passionnées enquêtes d’historien, de psychologue, d’artiste’.⁹⁴ Writing in *Le Figaro*, Rodenbach complimented Rodin’s *Balzac*: ‘Elle est de ce siècle, parce qu’elle offre le nu moderne, tirillé, raviné par la névrose moderne’.⁹⁵ Roger Marx claimed that ‘Rodin s’est préoccupé de chercher ce qui, sur ce visage franc, large et ouvert annonçait la puissance, la volonté, le génie, et il a visé [...] à la ressemblance statuaire [...] en accentuant les traits caractéristiques, signalétiques: l’élévation du front, l’enchassement profond de l’orbite, l’éclat aigu des yeux, la carrure du nez, la sensualité des lèvres épaisses’.⁹⁶ Like a contemporary Frankenstein, Rodin himself used the metaphor of birth in discussing the creative process: ‘J’ai enfanté un Balzac dont je suis satisfait’.⁹⁷

Also in 1896 — the year of Rodin’s participation in Toulouse’s study — the head of Rodin’s *Balzac* began to transform dramatically. He had found a new sitter whose resemblance to Balzac he found inspiring: a man by the name of Féroux or Ferrou, who was either a bookseller or a Parisian businessman.⁹⁸ According to Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, this portrait was the ‘starting point for the final head [of the *Monument to Balzac*]’.⁹⁹ *Head H*, as it is known, already shows a marked difference with earlier studies by Rodin (Fig. 9.5). The treatment of the surface is much more expressive, with pronounced dips and bumps on the forehead and the cheeks. The eyes are deeply set and the protruding eyebrows and brow give the visage a look of deep concentration and even consternation. The surviving terracotta attests to Rodin’s wrestling with the material; balls of clay, the marks of the sculptor’s tools, and the trace of his nails are all revealed on the surface.¹⁰⁰

⁹² Rodin quoted in ‘Balzac et Rodin. Ou en est le monument du père de la ‘Comédie humaine’’, *L’Éclair*, 28 January 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹³ ‘Lettres parisiennes’, *La Gironde* [Bordeaux], 29 January 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹⁴ Alexandre Hepp, ‘Notes quotidiennes. L’impossible statue’, *Le Soir* (Paris), 30 January 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹⁵ Georges Rodenbach, ‘Encore la statue de Balzac’, *Le Figaro*, 25 August 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹⁶ Emphasis removed; Roger Marx, ‘Balzac et Rodin’, *Le Voltaire*, 5 February 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹⁷ Rodin quoted in ‘L’actualité. La Statue de Balzac et l’impatience des souscripteurs’, *L’Éclair*, 20 August 1896, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for ‘*Balzac*’, AMR.

⁹⁸ Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, ‘Balzac, head with bare forehead and cleft chin, known as Head H’, ca. 1894, in *The Bronzes of Rodin. Catalogue of Works in the Musée Rodin*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2007), I, 174.

⁹⁹ Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, ‘Balzac, head with bare forehead and cleft chin, known as Head H’, p. 174.

¹⁰⁰ Catalogue entry for ‘Balzac, tête au front dégagé et au menton fendu, dite tête H’, in Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, pp. 316–317 (p. 316), cat. 67.

[insert Fig. 9.5]

Fig. 9.5: Auguste Rodin, *Balzac, tête au front dégagé et au menton fendu, dite tête H*, ca. 1894, terracotta, 21 x 19.90 x 22.50 cm. Inventory number S.1653, Musée Rodin, Paris. Photographer: Christian Baraja. [Must not be printed larger than half-page.]

[insert Fig. 9.6]

Fig. 9.6: Auguste Rodin, *Avant-dernière étude pour la tête de Balzac*, ca. 1895-1896, plaster, 19.10 x 18.20 x 18.20 cm. Inventory number S.1652, Musée Rodin, Paris. Photographer: Christian Baraja. [Must not be printed larger than half-page.]

The penultimate study of Balzac's head reveals a further deformation of the visage (Fig. 9.6). The face has grown wider and fuller. The expression is softer and the eyes further entrenched. The features of the face — the lips, the eyes, the nose — are less symmetrical. A small cylindrical pellet of clay seems to be crawling up the bridge of the nose. Each eyebrow is modelled differently: the right has deep, slanted grooves while the flattened left evinces a central furrow created by a tool or the sculptor's finger. The lobe of the sunken left ear emerges unnaturally from the head. Balzac's moustache is more integrated into the swelling and sinking surfaces of the skin and rests, almost indistinguishable, on the thick ridge created by the uppermost contour of his upper lip. The lobes of his hair swell and collapse, billowing around his head, perhaps attesting implicitly to phrenological changes in the shape of his skull.

Returning to Lombroso's list of stigmata, one finds several elements visibly heightened in Balzac's evolving visage: 'prominent ears, deficiency of beard, [...] excessive asymmetry of face and head, which may be very large or very small'. Similarly, a later variant with the same title, dated ca. 1896–1897, cast from the penultimate head above, has a wider face and more dramatically cresting and lobed hair (Fig. 9.7). The nose appears more bulbous and the nostrils are deeply incised over a wider and fuller moustache. Two parallel scratches are visible on the forehead, calling attention to Rodin's authorship.¹⁰¹ It is a cast of this version that was included in a photograph taken with two portraits of Estager (Fig. 9.8). This trio of heads, likely assembled by Rodin himself, highlights the transformation of Balzac's face in the progression of studies. Against a creased backdrop, the three sculptures stand in a pyramidal composition. The speaking portraits of Estager appear above, on a higher support, and on the right, while the cast from the penultimate head of Balzac sits on the left. The latter work appears shrivelled by comparison to the sturdy and earnest faces of the studies based on the coach driver.¹⁰² Its unruly hair, vestige of a shoulder and bloated features make for a monstrous vision. This photograph is a personal testament to the evolution of Rodin's studies for the *Monument to Balzac*.

¹⁰¹ See David J. Getsy, *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 73–100.

¹⁰² It is smaller because of the process of *estampage* from which it was created; for more, see Agnès Cascio, 'Approche technique de Rodin pour *Balzac*', in Musée Rodin, *1898: le Balzac de Rodin*, pp. 229–42 (pp. 236–37).

[insert Fig. 9.7]

Fig. 9.7: Auguste Rodin, *Balzac, avant-dernière étude pour la tête, variante*, ca. 1895-1896, terracotta, 17.70 x 24 x 20.50 cm. Inventory number S.1576, Musée Rodin, Paris. Photographer: Christian Baraja. [Must not be printed larger than half-page.]

[insert Fig. 9.8]

Fig. 9.8: Anonymous, *Trois études de têtes pour Balzac (terre)*. Épreuve sur paper albuminé, 24 x 34 cm. Inventory number Ph.1213, Musée Rodin, Paris. [Must not be printed larger than half-page.]

With the author's stout body concealed, the head of the final *Monument to Balzac* is, in fact, its only legible aspect, and it demonstrates that Rodin moved away from the physiognomic signifiers that he seemed intent on gathering in visits to the Touraine region towards those of genius (Fig. 9.9).¹⁰³ Yet even these 'stigmata' of degeneration are exaggerated, enhancing the fantastic appearance of the statue and its forceful address. Rodin has intensified the mien of the author by distorting the features of the visage: he affirmed in referring to his *Monument to Balzac*, 'Il faut amplifier la nature'.¹⁰⁴ And, in another interview, 'selon moi, la sculpture moderne doit exagérer [...] les formes'.¹⁰⁵ By manipulating and exploiting scientific theories here and elsewhere, Rodin proffered a 'nerve art' that was not to Nordau's liking, as evidenced by this chapter's first epigraph, and revitalized the moribund field of sculpture.¹⁰⁶ He confused and angered many of the visitors to the Salon of 1898, such as the one who saw in his figure a madman: 'It's Balzac at Charenton, in his hospital gown'.¹⁰⁷ Jean Rameau, himself a member of the Société, sarcastically advocated casting it in bronze and setting it on a high pedestal so that 'les siècles futurs sachent à quel degré d'aberration mentale nous étions arrivés à la fin de ce siècle-ci'.¹⁰⁸

[insert Fig. 9.9]

Fig. 9.9: Eugène Druet, *Balzac*, 1898, gelatin silver print, 38.1 x 27.7 cm. Accession no. 1983.194.12, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University; Gift of Albert E and Patricia Elsen. Courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University)

¹⁰³ Wagner instead argues that in the *Monument to Balzac* '[t]he eventual decision was to equate genius with the phallus, and to subsume the particularities of history under a symbol meant to contain them'. Wagner, 'Rodin's Reputation', p. 223.

¹⁰⁴ Rodin quoted in Ph. Dubois, 'Chez Rodin', *L'Aurore*, 12 May 1898, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac', AMR.

¹⁰⁵ Rodin quoted in Charles Chincholle, 'La Statue de Balzac', *Le Figaro*, 12 May 1898, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac', AMR.

¹⁰⁶ Max Nordau, *On Art and Artists*, trans. by W. F. Harvey (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), p. 292. See also the author's 'A Hysterical Reading of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*', *Art History*, 36, 5 (November 2013), 994–1017.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Villemer, 'Le Vernissage' [1 May 1898], in *Rodin in Perspective*, ed. by Ruth Butler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 91–92 (p. 92). Originally published in *Le Figaro*.

¹⁰⁸ Jean Rameau quoted in Arsène Alexandre, *Le Balzac de Rodin* (Paris: H. Floury, 1898), p. 10.

But for Rodin's supporters, his interpretation of theories of degeneration in the *Monument to Balzac* coalesced in a testament to genius. Clément Vautel wrote in *L'Événement* that the sculpture represented 'la matérialisation du génie énorme',¹⁰⁹ while Frank Harris, writing in the *The Saturday Review*, saw 'an extraordinary grotesque, a something monstrous and superhuman'. He continued, 'There is [...] something uncanny in the head. Yes, uncanny; the great jaws and immense throat that seems to rise out of the chest and form a part of it; the cavernous hollows of the eyes without eyeballs or sight, and above, the forehead, made narrow by the locks of hair — a grotesque of extraordinary power'.¹¹⁰ In a long defence of the sculpture that appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro*, Rodenbach, one of the sculptor's most astute critics, writes that Rodin captured the 'visage du génie sorti de la matière et qui va rentrer dans la matière'. Echoing Balzac's own sentiment that one's destiny is written on the body, Rodenbach argues, 'La mort prématurée était là... Elle était déjà sur son visage'.¹¹¹ In a later text, he plainly articulates Rodin's vision of Balzac, 'Les génies sont moins des hommes que des monstres. Voilà ce que M. Rodin a compris et rendu si magnifiquement'.¹¹² It is clear, then, that the sculptor was ultimately most influenced by Balzac's conception of himself as 'an exceptional being', a notion in line, as we have seen, with Richet's formulation of genius.¹¹³

The implicit link between Balzac's genius and Rodin's own was difficult for some critics to ignore. Clemenceau, of course, alluded to it several years before the final monument was revealed. Gustave Schneider argued that 'l'immortel écrivain et le sculpteur m'apparaissent comme deux expressions d'un même idéal, deux génies de même puissance'.¹¹⁴ Yet, for others, the implications that Rodin, too, was degenerate were disturbing. In 1917, the year of Rodin's death, his biographer Judith Cladel saw fit to dismiss the theories that linked genius with neurosis. In *Rodin, the Man and His Art*, she takes offense at the possibility that Rodin could have been considered degenerate:

Discredited to-day are the theories of Lombroso and his school, once so warmly welcomed by mediocre minds athirst for equality, in which great men were considered as degenerates of a superior variety, and the most sensitive spirits qualified as candidates for the madhouse! [...] Far from being half mad, this unique being [the genius], this prodigious mirror of a million facets, achieves his aim only because he possesses far more intelligence than the most brilliant of his contemporaries, because he is in touch with a more profound order of things and a more comprehensive method, because he combines the qualities of continuity in sensation and of discernment which constitute that supreme sensibility of all the senses acting together — taste. But it does not please ordinary mortals to believe things of this kind, and one can easily understand how the crowd, repudiating any such humiliating notion, are all too willing to follow

¹⁰⁹ Clément Vautel, 'Notes parisiennes, la Rodinière', *L'Événement*, 7 July 1899, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac', AMR.

¹¹⁰ Frank Harris, 'A Masterpiece of Modern Art' [1898], trans. by John Anzalone, in *Rodin in Perspective*, ed. by Ruth Butler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 97–99 (p. 98). Originally published in *The Saturday Review* (2 July 1898).

¹¹¹ Rodenbach, 'Une statue', p. 1.

¹¹² Georges Rodenbach, *L'Élite: écrivains, orateurs sacrés, peintres, sculpteurs* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1899), pp. 289–90.

¹¹³ Uncited quotation, presumably by Balzac, in Elsen, et al., *Rodin & Balzac*, p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Gustave Schneider, 'L'Exposition privée de Rodin', *Le Petit bleu de Paris*, 19 July 1899, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac,' AMR.

the lead of exotic pseudo-scientists and look upon great men as lunatics, considering themselves far more rational.¹¹⁵

In this diatribe, Cladel tries to lay to rest a distressing possibility and claim Rodin's status as a genius for posterity. And yet his *Monument to Balzac* was a testament to the power of this link and its visual provocation.

To return to the story of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, the similarity between Frenhofer's artistic project and Rodin's was picked up in the years when the *Monument to Balzac* was being conceived and crafted. In 1896, Paul Dolfus, wondering if the sculpture would ever be finished, stated, 'If at least, one day, Mr. Rodin could give us Balzac's foot'.¹¹⁶ Rodin's difficulty in bringing commissioned sculpture to completion — an issue that dogged him throughout his career — recalled Frenhofer's quixotic quest for perfection. And when the monument was being ridiculed at the Salon, his supporter Georges Duval advised the Société to remember the words of Balzac's protagonist: 'La mission de l'art n'est pas de copier la nature, mais de l'exprimer!'¹¹⁷ Rodin echoed Frenhofer's words in those same days, asserting that his working method 'n'est pas d'imiter seulement la forme, mais d'imiter la vie. [...] Cette vie, je la cherche dans la nature, mais en l'amplifiant'.¹¹⁸ For the sculptor, 'nature' included popular notions of physiognomy and regional type and the most up-to-date scientific theories on genius, but, in the end, he interpreted and deformed it to create a modern paean to genius. Rodin's sculpture avoided the accepted conventions of the monument: easily legible features, heroic pose, and appropriate attributes. In an interview with Paul Gsell, Rodin articulated his artistic contraventions: 'Une statue sur une place publique doit représenter un grand homme dans une attitude théâtrale et capable de le faire admirer par la postérité! Mais de telles raisons sont absurdes. Je prétends, moi, qu'il n'y avait qu'une manière d'évoquer mon personnage: je devais montrer un Balzac haletant dans son cabinet de travail, les cheveux en désordre, les yeux perdus dans le rêve, un génie qui [...] reconstruit pièce à pièce toute une société'.¹¹⁹ Indeed, while Rodin used contemporary scientific theories as an entrée into creating Balzac's likeness, he ultimately privileged his own subjective interpretation of the author and the traces of his hand over a naturalistic portrait. Thus the *Monument to Balzac* marks the birth of a modern public sculpture. With it, Rodin cast his genius as equal to that of Balzac's: his inner vision, too, could conjure a world.

The scholarship on Rodin has consistently emphasized the artist's own iterations about copying 'nature': for instance, Rodin claimed, 'I obey Nature in everything, and I never pretend to command her. My only ambition is to be servilely faithful to her'.¹²⁰ In general, art historians have narrowly defined the term, emphasizing in particular Rodin's practice of drawing from the nude models who, we have repeatedly been told, roamed freely around his studio, providing 'natural' poses for him to copy.¹²¹ He wanted to create an art in which

¹¹⁵ Judith Cladel, *Rodin, the Man and His Art. With Leaves from his Note-Book*, trans. by S. K. Star (New York: The Century Co., 1917), pp. 6–7.

¹¹⁶ Paul Dolfus, *L'Événement*, 20 August 1896; quoted in Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, 'Balzac', in *The Bronzes of Rodin*, I, 184.

¹¹⁷ Georges Duval, 'Rodin et le Comité des Gens de Lettres', *L'Événement*, 13 May 1898, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac', AMR.

¹¹⁸ Rodin quoted in X, 'M. Rodin & la Société des Gens de Lettres', *Le Journal*, 12 May 1898, [n. pag.]. Article located in the press files for 'Balzac', AMR.

¹¹⁹ Paul Gsell, 'Auguste Rodin', *L'Art et les artistes*, January 1907, 410–411. Elsen calls it a 'realistically-based visionary art'; Albert E. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Premises* (London: Phaidon Press, 1974), p. 29.

¹²⁰ Rodin, *Rodin on Art and Artists*, p. 11.

¹²¹ For a discussion of the ways in which Rodin's drawings also demonstrate that he did not simply 'copy' nature, see the author's 'Against the Grain: Rodin's Experiments with Paper', in *Ecstasies: Drawings by*

meaning was located in the form of the body and on its surface and not in the conventional poses and traditional attributes often seen in the Salon sculpture of his day. Using contemporary scientific and pseudo-scientific theories — widely discussed and popularly accepted — that attempted to understand the manifestation of morality and intelligence on the surface of the body, Rodin conceived a new way of fashioning the body with parallel goals. Just as he did not simply replicate the poses of his models, he was not ‘servilely faithful’ to these discourses, either. Rather, he actively engaged with them in order to serve expressive ends. Ultimately, Rodin co-opted the contentious theories of degeneration, genius, and madness to subvert and redefine naturalistic representation. His monument was a tribute not only to Balzac, but to himself and his artistic process.

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* Quotations from the following texts are taken from their first English translation unless otherwise noted: Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott, 1891) and Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895).

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