

Transcription

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Episode: Balzac in translation: Portraits of a turbulent 19th century France with remarkable contemporary resonances

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/balzac>

Teaser from “Lost Illusions,” read by Raymond MacKenzie: “The fact, itself, is of no account. What matters is how people see it. From that, young man, we can draw our second precept: Pay close attention to your image. Hide away any side of your life that’s not so savory, and always project a brilliant exterior.”

Doug Armato: I felt very much — when I first read [Balzac’s work] in the late 1980s and early 1990s — that [Honoré de] Balzac in a way was writing almost more accurately about the 20th century than most 20th century writers did. There was just a sense that Balzac tells you how the world works.

Host intro: I’m Doug Armato, I’m director of the University of Minnesota Press. [As an editor](#), I’ve had the pleasure over these past years of working with [Raymond MacKenzie](#), who has translated quite a few books of 19th and 20th century French literature. Raymond MacKenzie is professor of English at the University of St. Thomas and a translator of a lot of different key authors from Minnesota. He’s published translations of [Stendhal](#), [\[Jules\] Barbey d’Aurevilly](#) and [\[Alphonse de\] Lamartine](#) as well as the contemporary critic, Lionel Ruffe. His translation of [Emile] Zola’s [Germinal](#) was a finalist for the PEN translation award. His translation of Stendhal’s [Italian Chronicles](#) was shortlisted for the National Translation Award, and his [translation of Gustave Flaubert’s] [Madame Bovary](#) was selected for use in the Norton Anthology of Western Literature. He joins us today from St. Paul, Minnesota. Hello, Ray.

Raymond MacKenzie: Hello, Doug. Good to be here with you.

Armato: The occasion for this talk is Balzac, and you’ve just completed the second of two linked Balzac novels. The first is his famous novel, [Lost Illusions](#), and the second, just published, [is] his lesser-known continuation, [Lost Souls](#). That’s nearly 1,200 pages in all. So what is it like to live with an author such as Balzac, or Balzac specifically, for what I think has been some three years now?

MacKenzie: He’s very good company, a very good author to live with. I was thinking about contrasting him with Flaubert, who just about 10 years after Balzac’s death, Flaubert made a famous formulation about the relationship of the novelist to the novel, and he said, famously, “The author in his work should be like God in the universe: present everywhere, but visible nowhere.” That sort of impersonal approach to the novel, where the author never intrudes, never

gets between the reader and the subject matter, probably comes to an extreme with certain modernists — T. S. Elliot, in particular, who says that what the poet is trying to do is not express his personality but escape from it. Literature that is impersonal and perfectly shaped and sculpted is the Flaubert sort of literature, but I think in contrast to that is Balzac, who was very happy to express his personality all the time, to indulge it, and to even intrude it. He makes comments on characters, he makes comments on life constantly. He digresses. He's happy even to advertise his other books. There are a number of points where he'll refer to some character, and he'll say, "see Le Pere Goriot" or "see this other novel," just to make sure the reader notices the person pulling the strings is, indeed, Honoré de Balzac. As a personality, in other words, he's very present in the books, and the novel went in a different direction after him. But it's a pleasure to come back to that kind of presence. By all accounts, he was the same way in real life, actually — sort of a compulsive storyteller as opposed to a conscious, cold artist. These things seemed to pour out of him. There are tales of him showing up at a friend's house and just bursting in the door and saying, "I've got to tell you what just happened to me." And when he starts the story, before long, he's scripturalizing it very clearly, and apparently he was such a raconteur, he could hold people's attention for hours with these stories that he just rattled off. It's not so much a matter of an art as a matter of compulsion with Balzac, and you feel that in the novels. In the process of translating these two books, I've been living constantly with that presence, that voice and that personality. My hope is to replicate it as much as I can and make sure it's present in my translations as well.

Armato: If I'm recalling the phrase correctly, you brought up Flaubert, and he was known for suggesting that the writer should live like a good bourgeois, you know, have a very modest life, and Balzac as you said, was sort of a gargantuan character in his own way, known for wearing monks' robes and [attending] massive banquets and [drinking] coffee from dawn until way after dark. As a translator, you've done writers with such different personalities. Do you enjoy switching from author to author and not be necessarily a specialist in one author or another?

MacKenzie: I really do enjoy the change. I can't admire anybody more than I admire Flaubert, but at the same time, it's great to get to [translate] his opposite in someone like Balzac. And the other kinds of authors I work with, too, are all very different. There are those sort of Promethean translators from the 19th Century, like Ellen Marriage, who worked her way through the entirety of Balzac. You honor people like that, but I don't think I could be one myself. I think I would go mad. It's nicer to be able to move around a bit.

Armato: I can definitely see that. Some of those great translators of that period, every book they do has a certain polish to it, or a sense of sameness, whereas having worked with you now on several books, your Balzac is a very different voice than your Lamartine. I mean it couldn't be more different in a lot of ways. Lamartine is so sensual, and Balzac is almost shouting at you, I think.

MacKenzie: That's true. Lamartine is so gentle by comparison. There's a story that he actually enjoyed Balzac's novels, which is surprising that he would. He had such a different sensibility. But I guess he understood what was good about them.

Armato: Together these novels — just to summarize briefly — follow the highs and lows of a young poet and social climber, Lucien de Rubempré, from his provincial upbringing to Parisian high society. After his try at Parisian society, he's chastened back to the provinces, and then once again he's brought back to the brink of an uneasy triumph in Paris. It's really quite an amazing story that this young man of modest means and background goes through. How would you characterize Lucien?

MacKenzie: I think you could argue that Lucien is one of the most important, most imitated, characters in all 19th century fiction. His story is almost archetypal: the young man of artistic talent comes from the provinces to the metropolis and slowly loses all his youthful idealism, all his illusions, and eventually succumbs to the deadening weight of modernity. His story has been considered almost a parable of the fate of the artist under capitalism, where everything good and ideal and pure ends up being turned into a salable commodity, and where, in fact, everything is for sale. I have the opportunity, frequently, to teach [John] Milton, and there's something of [*Paradise Lost*](#) about this story of Lucien, as well — moving from innocence to painfully acquired experience — but it's couched not so much in the framework of falling into sin as falling into the harsh realism of the modern world. In that sense, Lucien's story becomes almost a universal one. We see something of what happens to him in all of us. The whole thing is made so vivid early in the story *Lost Illusions* where one of the first booksellers Lucien encounters is a guy who's literally selling literature by the pound. He's weighing it up in boxes just to be sold by the pound, so that the beautiful and delicate poems and novels that the innocent Lucien thought he'd be creating to the delight of an enraptured audience, now he realizes they're just so many pages, just so much weight, to be weighed and sold at such-and-such a price. But having said all that, I don't think Lucien is exactly reducible to a parable or a lesson. He's an extraordinary triumph on Balzac's part, I think, paradoxically, because there's so much to dislike about Lucien, and yet we nonetheless care about him and want to follow him all the way through the end of his story. I remember the story about Oscar Wilde claiming to be heartbroken about reading of Lucien's death. When I think of Lucien, the first term that comes to mind is "weakness" — that he's morally weak, he has very little willpower, he's intellectually weak, he doesn't make good decisions, he doesn't think things through. He overthinks things that he should have just done naturally, and he under-thinks things he should have thought through. He lets himself become passive. He becomes picked up and taken over and mothered by first his sister, and his mother, too, then the young actress, Coralie, who literally cleans him up and tucks him into bed the first night, and takes care of him like a child. I think she's actually younger than him, but she becomes a kind of a mother figure and she dies for him, in a way. His first lover back in

Angoulême, Madame de Bargeton, is likewise a mother figure. Ultimately he comes under the hand of the ultimate mother figure, that is the false Spanish priest, Carlos Herrera, who much later turns out to be the arch criminal, Vautrin. But he, too, speaks about Lucien in terms of mother and son. Lucien never really takes charge of his life. He lets things happen to him as he's walking from here to there. As a result, there's a weakness to the character, so much so that it's a little surprising how compelling the guy is, and how compelling it is for us readers to follow him. I wonder, do you react to him in the same way? Do you see him differently?

Armato: It's interesting. As you know — we've talked about this — I first read these books when I was in my twenties, and I'm now in my early sixties, so it's been quite a while, and you see them a little bit differently [over time]. But it isn't just that. What really astounded me reading your translation is that Balzac is really being quite funny. There are moments when Lucien's behavior is so odd and extreme and nonsensical, that you just find yourself laughing out loud, and I said, was it really like that when I read it in [my] twenties. I went back to the translations I'd read, and they were much more even and stately in a way, where in your translation, the comedy — Balzac's sense of humor — really comes through. You tend to see Lucien not so much as a heroic young man, but as someone, as you say again and again, [who] just makes bad choices and gets caught in situations he later regrets.

MacKenzie: Yeah, I think we do read these characters very differently at different stages of our life. When I was young, I probably would have identified with Lucien and ignored the negative aspects of his character, just as when I first read Madame Bovary, I thought Emma Bovary was a perfect heroine, and she would have had a perfect life, if only she had met me.

Armato: It is as you say though, it's partly what still affects you about Lucien's story — and clearly it affected Oscar Wilde — that sense of lost illusions, how again and again he has an ideal of who he might become and again and again he fails either through his own weakness or by manipulations by people who are much, much wiser in the ways of the world than he is, whether they be aristocrats or lawyer or the master criminal disguised as a Spanish priest, Carlos Herrera. When we first started talking about the idea of translating these two works, I'd always been a little troubled, as I'd said, that *Lost Illusions* is so well known, and the book which you've called *Lost Souls* was hardly known at all, it seemed, even though the story is continued in them. And so at the time, I came from the sort of sense that this was one long narrative. In our conversations, you made clear that it was anything but one long narrative, that this was several books. This was a long project fused together. Maybe you could say something about the way Balzac posed this work.

MacKenzie: Yeah, “fusing together” is a good phrase. Allan Pasco referred to Balzac as a montage. He's got a part of a novel here, part of a novel there. When you put them together, they make a really interesting whole, and maybe you don't even realize it until you do put them

together. That's kind of the way the composition of both *Lost Illusions* and *Lost Souls* took place, was in a patchwork way. In retrospect — maybe I'm selling Balzac short here — but I think it's in retrospect that he realizes, "Oh now I see what I can do with these things. Now I can put these together. At the time I thought I was going down this one path, but now I see I've got this larger road than I thought I had." And I tried to detail that composition process in the introduction of both books, because it's quite complicated in both cases. They were both published piecemeal and slowly brought together. But the larger question about why the second novel is less well known is a good one. First is the title, which is wonderful in French, and very hard to manage in English. "Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes — Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans." It's awkward and clunky in English. Although, I've occasionally seen that phrase being used. I saw someone in the introduction to a book the other day referring to his book being an introduction to the splendors and miseries of German metaphysics. The phrase does get translated into English, and that's nice. But the title is one thing, but also with this book we enter into a world, especially of the criminal underworld. There's murder, there's kidnapping, there's prostitution front and center — not as a metaphor, as it usually is in Balzac's work — but it's literally there, the buying and selling of people — Esther, most horribly. When we move into the criminal underworld we get a glimpse of, somewhat surprisingly, of a gay underworld in the prison underworld there, that one did not see coming at all in a novel from the 1830s. And so, for previous generations, I think there might have been something a little indecorous or salacious or something about this book that kind of kept it out of people's perspective. That translator that I mentioned earlier, Ellen Marriage, when she translated "Splendeurs et Misères," she gave herself a male name as translator [thinking that] it would be inappropriate for a woman's name to be on the title page of such a book. So that might have been part of what kept the book from the fame that it deserves and the popularity that it deserves in previous generations, but certainly not in our time where such things are more likely to be a selling point, more likely to make the book of interest to people. Maybe this new translation will help its reputation a bit. As you know, it certainly has no shortage of drama. A lot of things happen in the second book that are just fascinating.

Armato: I almost feel, in a way — and we haven't had a chance to really talk about this; in the past, you know we always had time to get together when a book was published, and go over it and talk about projects — it almost seems as if *Lost Illusions* is very much Lucien's book, but that the polarity changes to Vautrin in *Lost Souls*, that it becomes almost a book about Vautrin's desires and wishes and ambitions, almost more than Lucien's. Lucien almost becomes a subsidiary character, it seems to me.

MacKenzie: Yes.

Armato: And Vautrin is a truly fascinating character, not only because he has so many different names and has this secret underground alliance and network that he portrays and he has great confidence in his ability to manipulate society through all sorts of people who he plays almost

like a puppet master. You really have this fascinating master criminal, here, who to Lucien's final misery, just takes control of him.

MacKenzie: Yeah, [I] don't want to give too many spoilers if anyone hasn't read it, but I think it's not a spoiler to say poor Lucien comes to the end of his life in this second volume, which is a terrible personal tragedy for Vautrin, who has put so much time into molding and shaping him and living through him vicariously — and loving him, frankly. But at the same time, in the very last quarter or so of the novel, Vautrin suddenly emerges victorious. He dominates everyone. And he goes off on the last page of the book to start a whole new life, a life that Balzac apparently was going to come back to in a future book, and we would have read more about that, the later life of Vautrin as a policeman, of all things. So it's really interesting as you say, Vautrin comes into the foreground, and we see the tragedy, the collapse of all his hopes, which frankly he's been working on not only in these two books but all the way back to *Le Pere Goriot*, where he tried to get [Eugène de] Rastignac to be his puppet.

Armato: There's that great moment when Rastignac, in *Lost Illusions*, sees Vautrin with Lucien, and he shudders. Like, "oh no, not him!"

MacKenzie: One of the real delights about Balzac's world is the way these stories interpenetrate each other, and you remember the character from this novel and he shows up in this one at just the right moment, and there's such an, almost, electric shock sometimes seeing these people up on the stage when you realize that to Balzac, they were real, they were living characters — so much so that there's a story that, on his deathbed, when he called for a doctor, he called for Doctor Bianchon, who was one of his fictional inventions. He's a super doctor, but unfortunately, not a real one.

Armato: So this way in which Balzac's characters reoccur is one of the great pleasures of reading the works, and just as you've said *Lost Illusions* and *Lost Souls* are made up of individual books that have been fused together, they're very much part of the *Comédie humaine* which was 91 novels and shorter works, all creating this world, plus countless other ones that Balzac never wrote. What would you say is the position of these two works within *La Comédie humaine*? Are they central?

MacKenzie: Yeah. He, himself, referred to them as the vertebral column — the spine — of the whole *Comédie humaine*. That's interesting to think about. I think maybe thematically they could be seen as the spine. Again with the kind of thing we were talking about earlier, the sense of the critique of modernity and of — as [Karl] Marx said — all the solid melting into air, everything being for sale — that this is maybe the dark heart of the modern world that Balzac is documenting, and maybe he thinks it comes through most comprehensively in these two books, which form one huge narrative. Yet at the same time, as a translator, I'm going page after page

and finding references to this character from another book, that character from another book, this incident that occurs in another book — and you're realizing that, in a way, as Balzac is putting this together, he himself must be seeing this as the magnet that holds all the pieces together, or the spine — whatever metaphor you want to use. The heart of it is here in these books.

Armato: I felt very much, when I first read them in the late 80s and early 1990s, that Balzac was writing almost more accurately about the 20th century than most 20th century writers did. There was just a sense that Balzac tells you how the world works. And there's just so many — not just these books but other ones — where people live virtuous, blameless lives and end up in horrible situations, whereas the manipulators, such as Vautrin, end up going on to these triumphs. There's something which seems very current about that, very much of our time.

MacKenzie: Oh it sure does. Let me read you just a short section toward the end of *Lost Illusions*, where Carlos Herrera, the Spanish priest — we don't know yet that he is Vautrin — he is speaking to Lucien, giving him a long lesson. “The fact, itself, is of no account. What matters is how people see it. From that, young man, we can draw our second precept: Pay close attention to your image. Hide away any side of your life that's not so savory, and always project a brilliant exterior. Discretion, the watchword of the ambitious, is also that of our order. Make it yours, as well. The great people commit about the same number of foul acts as the poor do, but they commit them in the shadows, and they make a grand parade of their virtues, and this is how they remain great. The little people hide their virtues in the shadow, exposing their misery to all in broad daylight, and thus they remain despised.” So all that matters is image. You want to say, “Oh, Balzac, you had no idea how far this was going to go.”

Armato: It's really true, there are so many moments, you know, reading these books, where you reflect on the world that we're in. And sort of leaving that world and going back to the world Balzac was writing about, one of the fascinations of these books is their descriptions of not only how the world in general works, but just the various industries and businesses that Balzac touches and that he reveals for us. He seems to take great glee in that. There is, famously, a remarkably detailed description of how paper is made that occurs in *Lost Illusions*. You also have dissections of the publishing industry itself, of journalism, the theater, prostitution, money lending, the legal chicanery, prisons, the judiciary, underworld gangs — I mean, it's an amazing constant switching of gears. Were there parts of that you particularly enjoyed translating or entering into those worlds?

MacKenzie: Yeah that's a really important aspect of Balzac. In a way, it's a reflection of the personality that's so attractive. The man was interested in everything. It's not just that he knew this stuff but he was enthusiastic about it, [for instance,] the history of papermaking, and the manufacturing of books as well as the idealistic side of literature, the world of banking the world of theater, the world of the prostitutes, the world of the criminal underworld. That, I think, was

one of the most difficult parts of the translation of *Lost Souls* — he’s like an anthropologist the way he approaches his world. And like an anthropologist, he gets fascinated by the language that criminals use. He includes a couple little essays on slang and the function of slang, you know, the world as he sees it. Those could probably be detached from the book and read on their own. They’re quite insightful and quite interesting. But for the translator, that’s one of the thorniest problems I faced with *Lost Souls*, that criminal slang. Balzac is very insistent upon using it, so you can’t just paper over it as a translator and let the slang go and turn it into ordinary English. But, on the other hand, what do you do with it? Well in some cases it is simple. The slang term for a gang boss is the dab: d-a-b. Well, just translate [it] as boss. And then “boss” works just as well today as it would have worked in the 1830s. It doesn't sound anachronistic. But then there are other terms — the term for a gangster's girlfriend or wife. The term he uses is *largue*: l-a-r-g-u-e — a weird word that no dictionary really will help you with. Back in the 17th century, apparently it was a mariner's term for kind of setting sail and setting off on the ocean. But that's part of a verb phrase: *prendre larguer*. And so how that got from there to [becoming the word for] the gangster's girlfriend, I have no idea. But we’re fascinated to think about how it might have taken place. Maybe she's the escape route or something [and] somehow that got associated with it. But [in the] meantime, it doesn't solve my problem as a translator of what to do with the darn word, because I can't use the word that comes to mind [which] is “moll.” But if you refer to the “moll,” you sound like you're from the era of Al Capone or something, and that's completely anachronistic. And so in a case like that, I ended up leaving the French word in and just adding a footnote and saying [what the word is]. Thank heavens for footnotes, because in the footnote I can explain what this means. That also gives the reader a little bit of the flavor that Balzac was trying to give his readers, in French, of this language that to them, too, was very strange and very foreign.

Armato: Yeah. And the notes, since you bring up the notes, one of the real fascinations of your translations is the in-depth notes which you provide to help track down these references. And it becomes all the more complicated in Balzac, because as it turns out, he made up a lot of stuff.

MacKenzie: Yes.

Armato: Especially his literary and cultural references, [you realize that] no, this person doesn't seem to actually exist.

MacKenzie: Yeah, it's fun to sort that out and hunt them down. He'll talk about [how] there were three men standing there, and two of them are fictional, but one is a real historical personage. And he's got the historical person mixing with his fictional characters. And again, that's the fun of writing the footnotes, is to be able to sort this out for the reader a little bit. Although maybe if the reader is a little confused, that's okay, too. Maybe that was part of the effect he was trying to create.

Armato: Tell us a little bit about how you work as a translator. [At] what stage does your research take place? Or does it take place all at once? What's your process of entering into these works?

MacKenzie: Well, only a couple of times I've translated a book because I was asked to, because a contract was offered. In all my other cases, I've been able to translate books that I really wanted to translate, that I really, frankly, loved and wanted to work with. And that's a real piece of luck on my part. I'm very grateful that that's the situation. But that being the situation, I sort of start already with certain knowledge of the author, the background, and then I will go on and make sure I know as much as I can about the book and about its origins, its genesis, and its context. Before I start, what I'd like to do is just open up to page one and get going and get a big chunk, 50, 100 pages done, and only then pause and say, What do I need to annotate? And then what do I need to revise? Because, oh gosh, I need to revise all the time. My first drafts are terrible and I'm so grateful that I can revise. I watch those people like those UN translators, you know, where the French comes into their ear and it comes out of their mouths in English. I have no idea how they do that. I have to pause and reflect and look things up and think it over. But fortunately, you do have that ability to do it when you're doing written translation. I try to let the annotations come a little bit later as part of the revision process. And sometimes an editor, too, will tell me, "Gosh, you really ought to have a footnote on this. I don't know what the heck is going on here." And that's good feedback to get.

Armato: So in terms of that sort of revision process, did you actually literally translate the whole thing and then go back through it again, or is it always in segments?

MacKenzie: Segments but big segments. I'd like to have, like I say, at least 100 pages before I stop, because for one thing, you don't know where you're going until you've been there. The revision you might do on page one might change once you've done page 110, when you realize, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm building up to this. I don't want to make that change after all." You have to sort of see the thing as a whole.

Armato: And do you ever look at the prior translations?

MacKenzie: I try not to. That's a curse, you know, because the French original says something like "the door was open" and the previous translator says "the door was open." So you're saying [as the current translator], okay, now I've got to say "open was the door," because I don't want to plagiarize. So, no, it's best not to look at them at all. Sometimes I have, when I'm all done, and [there's a passage where I think] "I'm not too comfortable with this. How did he do this?" I go back and look at something else, and sometimes I'll make changes if I feel I've missed something

that the other person got. But you're so anxious about plagiarizing and copying that it's best to just not open them at all.

Armato: That makes sense. You've translated so many of the leading French writers of the 19th century now: Stendhal, [Baron de La Brède et de] Montesquieu, Lamartine, Flaubert, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Zola, [Charles] Baudelaire. So these are all, again, very different writers. I mean, not to put you on the spot, but is there a favorite? Is there an experience which, to you, is like breathing fresh air? Or do they all bring their own challenges?

MacKenzie: They all have their own pleasures, that's for sure. The easiest book to translate, of that list you just gave, was the Lamartine novel *Graziella*. There was something about that that just said, "Turn me into English." Every page, this was ready to go. It seemed like for some reason it was the smoothest thing, a very, very pleasant experience. The hardest is probably Balzac and Barbey. Balzac, because of those long descriptions. The thing I always dreaded was turning a page in Balzac and seeing a sentence that said, "He was wearing" And then I [thought], "Oh, here we go. There's going to be all this description of fashion terms that I don't know and materials that go into make up the shoes that this guy is working with and so forth. I'm going to have to research all that and figure it out." Likewise, with the interiors of rooms, he knows all the words for how a lamp is attached to a wall and so forth. Some of these things don't exist anymore, but you've got to figure out how to clarify them for a modern reader. In his own time when he was publishing in the periodicals, the editors complained that subscribers were saying, "Tell that guy to cut out those descriptions. We're sick and tired of all the descriptions." And so even the contemporary readers thought he was going too far with them. So the translator feels that way for sure, but it's a sense of accomplishment to get them done. And then with Barbey, and that set of stories called the *Diaboliques*, that was difficult in another way. His sentence style is so abstract, so many clauses embedded within clauses and arcane allusions that come up at the beginning of the sentence that are explained only fully by the time you get to the end. I could have approached those sentences [with a mindset that] I'm going to turn them into so-called "good English," the "proper English." But I thought it was better to try to replicate what Barbey was doing so beautifully in his native language. And that was hard. Yeah. So each of these authors gives you a different experience.

Armato: And Barbey comes across as so refined, and everything is really almost crystalline when you're reading his descriptions. Balzac, I think famously — it's always been said — has a very journalistic kind of rough style. It's, in a way, a lot more blunt than we're used to in a lot of 19th century fiction, or at least when you read it in English translation, which a lot of times are English and bring their own level of polish sometimes to things. What about Balzac's reputation as a stylist? Do you think it's true that he didn't have good style, or do you see something else at work?

MacKenzie: No, I don't think that's true at all, though the stereotype is there. And maybe it's because he was so darn prolific that you almost feel like the guy couldn't have taken the time to revise this stuff; he was just pouring it out. But that's not true. He revised almost manically, and he was very concerned about style. He was reading and revising. It drove printers crazy. He would have it set in print, typeset, and then read from there and then do the revisions on that, so that very often any profit he might have got from the book was eaten up by the cost of doing all the other revisions. But his style is not the kind of measured, clear, precise style that classic French style calls for. And again, maybe there the epitome would be Flaubert. [With Balzac] it seems more rough and ready, more tacked together. But I think that betrays that compulsive storyteller that's in him — that he's got so much to say and so many things to cover that he hasn't got the time to — or at least it feels like he hasn't got the time to — break it up into little chunks. Instead, we just get this torrent. But if you go with the torrent, it's a delight unlike any other writer. He's often compared to Zola, because Zola, too, created his own world with his own combined families that make up all those *Les Rougon-Macquart* novels of his. But Zola, too, famously was concerned that he was writing too much, and he didn't have the time to go back and do the revisions that he wanted to. There's an entry in the journals of the Goncourt brothers where Zola comes to visit them and [is] saying he just feels terrible. "I've been reading proofs all morning and the style is so bad, but I just haven't got the time. The book has to be finished and yet goes." So I think Balzac's rough style can be overstated. It's just his style, and one gets used to it, especially in the course of the 1,200 pages of these two books.

Armato: You bring up Zola, and I can't help thinking how when you're reading Zola — who makes his debt to Balzac very clear — but when you're reading Zola, you have a sense that there's a side of Zola, which is that he's a moralist. It's almost like he's standing in judgment. And sometimes I feel as if Balzac is standing in tolerance, instead, that there's something exceedingly understanding of human nature about Balzac, whereas there's something almost more anatomical about Zola.

MacKenzie: Yeah. He referred to himself in one of his prefaces — Balzac did — as the secretary of the modern world, that his job is to get it done, and the secretary is not there to pass judgment. Earlier, when I was describing the so-called spine of *The Human Comedy*, I think I was stating how dark those novels are and how tragic they are. But they don't feel dark and tragic, I think, in part because of the enthusiasm of the documenter.

Armato: And he can somehow, it seems, take a character like Vautrin — who runs through several books, who appears not just in these two, but [also] in several books throughout the *Comédie Humaine* — and Vautrin can, by turns, be this manipulator, this destroyer of reputations and lives, this blackmailer, but also shows incredible passion and love and just this sort of sense of devotion. It really does become a question throughout these books of exactly

who someone is, because Balzac is able to see different parts of their personalities and bring them to the fore at different times.

MacKenzie: That's right. One of the defining characteristics of melodrama is that you have a one-dimensional character: this is the bad guy; this is the good guy. And you really don't get that in Balzac, even with a criminal like Vautrin. And as you say, there's a redemptive side to him — that love that he feels and the passion that he feels is something strangely beautiful itself, even if it is criminal passion. There's an intensity and, I don't know, a life in it that you can only admire.

Armato: As you said, Balzac is setting him up for a long career in the police, so he sort of goes from being the target of criminal pursuit and investigation to being in charge of those things.

MacKenzie: You wish you'd written that novel. You'd like to see how that went.

Armato: I was surprised, in the period when I was reading Balzac, by his real affection and the influence of Walter Scott on Balzac, because you think of them as very, very different writers. Balzac mostly [sets his work] in the gritty cities, and Scott's books [are] so often set in the highlands and in sort of rural settings. But Balzac was influenced, I think, as a historical novelist more than anything. But there's a moment — and I think it's in *Lost Illusions*, not *Lost Souls* — when he just sort of backs up and says, “Well, you know, the problem with Walter Scott is that he couldn't really describe what animates women, what makes women, what their desires are, what they really want.” And Balzac seems to take great pride in his understanding of women and his affection for his women characters.

MacKenzie: Yeah, yeah. I've got the passage here. The idealistic artist, [Daniel] d'Arthez, who is speaking to Lucien. “You can adapt the Scottish novel as a form of dramatic dialogue to the history of France and still be original. There's no passion in Walter Scott. Either he, himself, is without it, or it's forbidden by the hypocritical laws of his country. For him, woman is duty incarnate, but woman brings disorder into society through passion. Therefore, you, Lucien, must portray the passions. Then you'll have at your disposal immense resources that the great Scottish novelist had to forgo.” Interesting.

Armato: That's really wonderful. And it's also really true that two of the characters who really compel you in these books are both courtesans. They're both prostitutes. And they have not just hearts of gold, but just incredible passion and generosity. And in the case of Esther, this desire for a moral life, to be able to leave behind the gutter in a way, and go instead in a godly, moral direction.

MacKenzie: She's an incredible character. I shouldn't use that word. She's very credible. He makes an incredible character credible. She was raised as one of those opera rats. You remember

that awful term? Little girls, particularly, raised and groomed for sex objects. It's just treated as a matter-of-fact thing. And the wealthy guys are grooming them that way. She was one of those. And she goes from there into a life of relatively high-class prostitution because she's so good looking. But in terms of that theme that everything is for sale, poor Esther is literally reduced to a commodity, and she's bought and sold repeatedly. And the only way out of the cycle for her ultimately is to choose her own death. I think the death of Esther is one of the most moving things Balzac ever wrote. You come to feel so much for her, and she suffered so much at that point that it's really powerful. That happens in *Lost Souls*. In *Lost Illusions*, the similar moment is the death of the young actress, Coralie, who took up Lucien. I think she was something like 15 or 16 when their relationship starts, and she doesn't have much longer to live, either. And both of those prostituted women, they both have a nobility of soul that kind of makes them stand above almost everybody else in the whole pageant of the two books. And there's again, on the part of the novelist, there's a sympathy — an imaginative sympathy — that's so powerful in his depiction of them, and his depiction of the courtesans that the book is about. “Courtesans” is plural in the French title of *Lost Souls*. And I suppose the other courtesan we're concerned with is Lucien himself.

Armato: Yeah.

MacKenzie: He's let himself be bought in order to get this imaginary better life than he thinks he's going to have.

Armato: I think that really becomes clear in reading the translation — that Vautrin is manipulating both Esther and Lucien and prostituting them. He's basically their pimp in a lot of ways, and he sort of uses them as tools towards his own fame and wealth. And that's what he's trying to achieve. But Lucien very much takes on the role of prostitute, and it's part of what leads him to his own doom.

MacKenzie: Gender is really interesting in these books because Lucien is always described in very feminine terms. He's got feminine hips. Even Balzac makes a point of mentioning his skin is very soft and so on. He's feminized all throughout.

Armato: Whereas Carlos Herrera, Vautrin, also given to queer desire, is just described again and again as a sort of grotesque figure, as someone who's immediately repellent.

MacKenzie: Yeah, scarred, both inside and out.

Armato: This sort of brings me around again to Zola. You know, Zola's *Nana*, who's a prostitute, is really a monster. I mean, she devours all of Paris, like literally, she eats everything up. She dominates everything. And Zola is just so much less sympathetic to Nana than you find

Balzac with Esther or with Coralie. We've been talking a bit about Balzac and Zola. But the other thing which is interesting is you've just delivered your translation of the next thing we're going to work together on, which is a new translation of Stendhal's famous [Red and Black](#), which was another book I really identified with closely growing up, which is, itself, kind of frightening. Nevertheless. But still, it's funny that it only occurred to me later just how similar the stories of Julien Sorel in *Red and Black* and Lucien in *Lost Illusions* actually tend to be. They're both impoverished young men from the provinces who just seek to make their fortune. And did you feel that as you jumped from Lucien's to Julian's?

MacKenzie: Yeah. And their names are even similar enough: Julien, Lucien. You get a little confused sometimes [when translating], and I probably typed the wrong name from time to time. If you set the two stories together there, there are many, many connections you could make, but there are also really important differences. I was describing — at least in my view — Lucien, as a sort of a passive character, someone to whom things happen. Julien really tries to take hold of his destiny. His ideal, of course, is Napoleon — the ultimate nobody from nowhere who ended up on top of the world, dominating the world. So what an inspiring source for Julien — [the thought that] that could be me, too — anyone in this day and age could become that. Napoleon has shown us that it's possible. And so as a result, he charges forward in life, determined to make his fortune and make his way. He, like Lucien, however, makes a lot of bad decisions, likewise overthinks at the wrong time, under-thinks at the wrong time, and fails to see when he's got something really wonderful right in front of him, fails to appreciate it. A big, big difference is in the end, though, of the two characters. Again, without giving any spoilers to anyone who hasn't read the two of them. But [in] *Red and Black*, there's a spectacular, almost operatic ending. And Julien seems to come to a kind of peace at the end of his life that poor Lucien never, never does. Lucien's tormented to the end. [At] Lucien's death, he looks back on his life as a failure. Julien has kind of reached a plateau, instead, and that gives that book quite a different feel. Another contrast between Stendhal and Balzac, I think that it's interesting to think about, is the relationship between the author and the character. Stendhal will criticize Julien and stand apart from him. But I think he identifies with him and kind of invites the reader to identify with Julien. Whereas Balzac, I think, never really — he can sympathize with Lucien — but he never really identifies with him. Lucien is not a Balzacian stand-in as Julian maybe is a little bit of a Stendhal stand-in. So that, too, makes for a different feel of the two books. Yeah, I agree. When I first read it, I totally identified with Julian. I would have been delighted if my life had taken such a path from where I was back then.

Armato: Well, Stendhal certainly gives Julian a better mentor Balzac gives poor Lucien.

MacKenzie: For sure.

Armato: It's always such a pleasure talking about different books and possible books to translate with you. Are there authors you'd really like to have a shot at now? I know that you came to me after you were finishing up *Lost Souls* and said, "I really want to do *Red and Black*." And I mean, how could I possibly not want to have a new translation of *Red and Black*? But are there other authors who are in your sights that it would be great to work on?

MacKenzie: Oh, so many. Dozens, dozens. And I'd like to go back to some of the people I've worked with before. I'd like to go back to Flaubert. I'm really interested in *Salammbô*, that strange novel of ancient Carthage. And his masterpiece, *Sentimental Education*, would be fun to work with. With Stendhal, sticking with Stendhal for a while, *Lucien Leuwen*, that unfinished novel, has not had an English translation in — I don't know when — I think at least a half a century, I think quite a bit longer than that. And then, of course, there's Balzac. I mean, wouldn't *Cousin Bette* be a wonderful book to do? And so many other titles in *The Human Comedy*. I will also confess that I've had a long-standing wish that I could do my own translation of all seven volumes of Proust, just work my way through from beginning to end. There's a recent retranslation that was done, although that publisher assigned a different translator to each volume, which I think is a kind of a shame. It'd be nice to see one sensibility matched with Proust all the way through the way the original translation with Scott Moncrieff was. So anyway, that's a fantasy. Maybe someday that'll happen, but I don't know. Again, [there are] so many things to do. There's no shortage.

Armato: Yeah, there's definitely no shortage. Well, this has been a great conversation. It's really been a dream to see these two books newly translated together. I always felt that seeing the totality would be a great thing for readers. And the translations that were available of *Lost Illusions* — because it's so much better known — were significantly better than the translation we had to work with on the book that was most recently called *A Harlot High and Low*, before it was called *Lost Souls*. So it's a thrill having these out. Great speaking with you. [I] look forward to *Red and Black* coming out.

MacKenzie: Yeah, great. Thank you very much, Doug. I enjoyed it, too.