

DIANA FESTA-McCORMICK

Honoré de Balzac

Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979.
Pp. 187.

This book is for those whose ignorance of Balzac is total, and who are prepared to devote half a day to dispelling it by finding out what happens in half-a-dozen famous novels, and picking up a few facts about his life plus a handful of anodine judgments. They will, I fear, not have the pleasure of reading elegant prose; Professor Festa-McCormick's style is the most slapdash I have come across in many years.

The plan adopted is certainly a defensible one. What depresses, is that all that emerges is a string of long established commonplaces. Two exceptions, perhaps, where the text flickers into life: the pages on *La Vieille Fille* and parts of the chapter on "The Universe of Women" (whatever that means). Although one must assume that the author has read the books she lists in her bibliography, she seems to have been impervious to their influence. (Was it by mistake that the bibliography jumps from D to L, omitting, for example, Herbert Hunt who is frequently mentioned in the text?). One has the impression that Balzac is great because despite what some people say, his characters are convincing. In 1980 we expect better than that.

It would be otiose to list the infelicities and inaccuracies with which this volume abounds. An example of the first would be the opening sentence, which says that the "attempt" to "do" a comprehensive study of Balzac in the limited space is "perplexing," and of the second, the persistent addition of the definite article to the title of Balzac's finest novel, *Illusions perdues*. One puts the book down feeling a good opportunity has been lost. A concise study of Balzac courageously reassessing him in the light of shifting critical attitudes would have been a most worthwhile addition to the corpus of criticism on the unquenchable author of the *Comédie humaine*.

Anthony R. Pugh

AVROM FLEISHMAN

Fiction and the Ways of Knowing
Austin: University of Texas Press,
1978. Pp. 224.

This is an impressive collection of essays on the nineteenth and twentieth-century British novel which brings the learning of such disciplines as philosophy, linguistics, sociology, astronomy—in other words, the human sciences—to illuminate aspects of the novels. These are not easy essays, but they are insightful, learned, suggestive—in a word, *good*. Readers may find that the best parts of the studies are not the theoretical or the interdisciplinary, but rather the analyses of the novels themselves.

The book consists of thirteen chapters: an introductory essay, seven previously published essays on Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad, Joyce, Forster, Woolf, and Fowles, and five new pieces on Emily Bronte, Thackeray, Trollope, George Eliot, and Hardy.

The first of the reprinted essays applies anthropological theory to *Northanger Abbey*, to show how young Catherine becomes "an adequately functioning member of her society" (p. 24). Dickens's *Little Dorrit* is viewed from the perspective of Hegel's famous chapter on "master and servant," and the pervasive theme of liberation and servitude is examined. Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* is looked at from the point of view of the relationship between speech and writing, drawing on modern theories from such writers as Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. The essay on Joyce shows the "interplay of narration, characterization, and symbolism in Joyce's use of scientific materials" (p. 140), particularly the theory of relativity, solar parallax, and astronomy generally, in the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*.

Perhaps the best of the reprinted essays is the one on "Being and Nothing in *A Passage to India*: a meditation on its religious structure," a sensitive, illuminating, and richly suggestive piece, which gives a detailed, sentence by sentence analysis of the opening chapter where a tripartite structure of reality emerges, and then an explanation of the meaning of the caves and the drama therein enacted, all of which serves to clarify the whole novel.