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Allan H. Pasco, *Balzac, Literary Sociologist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ix + 290 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 25.99€. (pb). ISBN 978-3-319-39332-2; 20.22€. (eb). ISBN 978-3-319-39333-9.

Review by Michael Tilby, Selwyn College, Cambridge.

Allan Pasco's latest book is a study of the section of *La Comédie humaine* entitled *Scènes de la vie de province*, a grouping of ten works of prose fiction of varying length and set for the most part, whether wholly or partly, in Touraine or reasonably nearby. They do not constitute all Balzac's fictional narratives with provincial settings. Nor were they all originally designated "scenes of provincial life," just as not all the stories finally classified as such were initially so described. In the *Avant-Propos de la Comédie humaine*, Balzac maintained that their homogeneity was rooted not in geography, but in their representation of a progression from the focus in his "scenes of private life" on "l'enfance, l'adolescence et leurs fautes" to one that examined "l'âge des passions, des calculs, des intérêts et de l'ambition." [1] Pasco is a firm believer in the conformity of *La Comédie humaine* to a commitment to order, organization, and coherence, whereas other scholars are more inclined to treat Balzac's categories and definitions as porous. From this latter perspective, it is difficult to subscribe fully to an enterprise that implies clear-cut authorial points of view, thereby sidestepping inconsistencies and contradictions.

For Pasco, Balzac is a sociologist rather than a storyteller, the first half of which claim is hardly original, having been made by Brunetière in 1899 and followed soon after by Paul Bourget. He could also have cited the philosopher Alain, who proclaimed: "Balzac est le seul sociologue que je connaisse." [2] He nonetheless sets Balzac alongside his close contemporary Auguste Comte, who credited himself with coining the term "sociology," at least in France. Without further comment, Pasco states that it is "open to question" whether Balzac had read Comte (p. 20). Given the absence of any reference by Balzac to him, it is prudent to conclude that he had not. (The Comte featured in a list in *Ursule Mirouët* is Louis Comte, a conjuror and ventriloquist.) He would certainly have been wary of Comte's *Catéchisme positiviste* (1852) had he survived to see the gloss on the publication date included on the title page: "Soixante-quatrième année de la grande révolution." There are but two occurrences of the word "*positivisme*" in the *Comédie humaine*, each with reference to the French language and (according to Lucien de Rubempré) its inferiority to Italian as a vehicle for poetry. They clearly relate to a use of *positif* as substantive: in *Modeste Mignon*, La Brière sees Modeste faced with an easy choice between "le Positif" (himself) and "la Poésie" (Canalis). Elsewhere, Balzac's recourse to "*positif*" in the context of thought invariably has the meaning of "factual," rather than invoking the founding father of positivism.

Not only does Pasco not situate Balzac's narrative compositions in relation to the principal tenets of positivist sociology, but he steers clear of any consideration of sociological theory or method. Symptomatic is the slippage demonstrated by the reiteration of tags such as "proto-sociologist," "sociologist *avant l'heure*," "budding sociologist," "the sociologist in Balzac," in addition to "Balzac the sociologist" (respectively pp. 18 and 36; 113; 82; 196; 96). It is not until p. 113 that the term is related to Balzac's "attempt to reveal the intangible, intricate workings of Restoration and July Monarchy society." It is unfortunate, in this regard, that Pasco was unable to take account of the recent collection, *Balzac, l'invention de la sociologie*, edited by Andrea Del Lungo and Pierre Glaudes. Although Del Lungo and Glaudes do not hesitate to see the idea of "Balzac sociologue" as "une sorte de lieu commun de la critique," they readily make reference to Ricœur and Bourdieu.[3] The volume includes a study by Jean-Yves Pranchère reflecting on Durkheim's view that Comte had found a model for his concept of sociology in the ideas of the Catholic monarchist, Louis de Bonald, a thinker mentioned by Pasco only in passing and then as part of a list, but who was hailed by Balzac as a formative influence. It is Bonald's affirmation "la littérature est l'expression de la société" [4] (destined to become the ultimate commonplace on the subject) that Balzac could be said to paraphrase when, in *Petites misères de la vie conjugale*, he avers that "la littérature est l'image des mœurs." [5]

Pasco contends that Balzac scholarship has been hamstrung by an assumption that the author is a storyteller, 'story' being understood by him straightforwardly as character and plot. His counter-insistence on Balzac's sociological representations is an attempt to correct this alleged myopia. Yet it is difficult to square such a claim with his emphasis on a single, overwhelming response by readers to the demise of Balzac's (predominantly, but not exclusively female) protagonists. Readers of *La Vieille Fille* are said to find themselves confronted eventually with "a heart-wrenching tragedy that leaves the all too human characters in despair" (p. 174) instead of "com[ing] to the end of the adventure with a glow in our hearts" (p. 182). What was needed for Pasco's readings to achieve resonance was a prior discussion of the ways in which sociological significance is inscribed in the form and language of Balzac's fictional compositions. As it stands, the introduction, which begins with a potted account of French society post-1789, is overly broad and, like the book it heralds, cluttered with asides tangential to the central issue. An experienced copy-editor would have queried the irrelevant and the commonplaces, as well as the over-writing, a single example of which must suffice: "the majestic drumbeat of masterworks issuing from the author's pen to the printer and the public" (p. 20).

The elements Pasco highlights in Balzac's fictions, principally the dominance of a gerontocracy and the impact of family breakdown, are familiar from studies of Balzac as (social) historian, political observer, and moralist, though Pasco gives notable prominence to the decline in the influence of the church. Yet no sustained attempt is made to assess the sociological implications of Balzac's provincial scenes in the light of the author's moral and political conservatism. The "far-Right" label Pasco affixes to Balzac is anachronistic and left undefined (p. 97). Pierre Barbéris and Fredric Jameson are mentioned, although with no indication of the overtly political dimension of their analyses. The novelist's demonstration of the deleterious effect of fatherless families is validated by its foreshadowing of the thesis advanced, with reference to contemporary America, by David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, in a book listed in Pasco's bibliography with a date of 1951, four years before Blankenhorn was born. As for the claim that the question of the influence on Balzac of Saint-Simon (presented here as Balzac's fellow "proto-sociologist" though famously denounced by Comte as "un jongleur dépravé" [6])

“might reward further study” (p. 250), its extensive consideration by both Jean-Hervé Donnard and Bruce Tolley in the 1960s goes unmentioned.

More generally, just as he chooses not to recognize any kind of problematic at the heart of his subject, Pasco exhibits a disinclination to engage in debate. The majority of his references to the work of others are instances of assent marshalled in support of a discussion that proceeds largely by means of assertion or value judgment. Dissent is reduced to the level of semantics in the form of a polite preference for expressing things differently. Serious disagreement is mostly confined to rejections of the views of critics safely long dead, surely pointless in the case of Emile Faguet, Percy Lubbock or Martin Turnell and in need of more considered treatment in the case of Sainte-Beuve, though the demolition of Faguet’s objection to Balzac’s attribution of a “lunar face” to the miser Gobseck is nicely done (p. 235). Pasco also takes issue with an English man of letters who, in 1882, dubbed Balzac “the French Shakespeare.” In other instances, dissent either takes the form of a quibble (sometimes acknowledged as such) or avoids the target’s essential point. Proper recognition of Proust’s relationship to Balzac is, for example, thwarted when instead of arguing against the former’s (by no means preposterous) claim in *A la recherche du temps perdu* that the structure and organization of *La Comédie humaine* are “seriously faulty” (p. 23), Pasco takes him to task for an “ungenerous” failure to acknowledge a debt to his predecessor (p. 32). Quotations from various luminaries (Propp, Tomashevsky, Jakobson, Genette, Piketty) are selected, which when removed from their original arguments, allow them to function seamlessly as corroborative (and essentially decorative) illustrations of the author’s own point of view. (To reduce Shoshana Felman’s seminal article on *L’Illustré Gaudissart* to a focus on “the undoubtedly important literary thrust” of the story (p. 137) is, on the other hand, culpable emasculation. [7]) Writers such as Molière and Ionesco are introduced to emphasize the sense of a community of sameness that can only be regarded as so much wishful thinking.

The discussion of Balzac’s compositions is underpinned by Pasco’s teleological belief that their author was devoted to perfection and that the *Comédie humaine* embodies that state. He has no compunction in referring to the “final completed creation” (p. 159) or in attributing Balzac’s notorious re-writing at proof-stage to his “high standards,” a means by which to “perfect his work” (p. 174). It is difficult to reconcile such an idealist view with the complex genesis of Balzac’s fictions; their equally complicated publication history; his recourse to fellow writers; his re-use of his own writing; his hesitation over allocation to a particular category (true of the *Scènes de la vie parisienne* and the *Etudes philosophiques*, as well as the scenes of private or provincial life); the tardy formalization of the overall masterwork; the latter’s unfinished state; and arguably its intrinsic “unfinishability.” These various factors and, above all, the blatant exploitation of the first proof as a draft intended for expansion are evidence of compromise, rather than perfection. We have understandably come to regard Balzac’s annotated copy of *La Comédie humaine* as the sole basis for an authoritative edition, but there is a need to guard against a spurious sense of its being the definitive version. Rather than a hierarchy, we are, to a significant degree, faced with different versions. The uniqueness of Balzac’s writing stems from an awareness of its open-endedness and its implicit eschewal of the definitive. It was, for him, a never-ending task of imposing order on an intrinsically heterogeneous multiplicity of matter, an activity condemned to end in failure while offering myriad insights along the way. His expansive style itself embodies an awareness of the inherent approximation of the enterprise.

Pasco’s fundamental epistemological assumption may be seen at work in his discussion of the relationship between *La Vieille Fille* and *Le Cabinet des Antiques*. The former serves, albeit

teasingly, as the back story for the second, though the question is typically complicated by the fact of *Le Cabinet des Antiques* having seemingly been begun first, only to be set aside. The town in the second novel resembles Alençon, the topography of which had been meticulously laid out in *La Vieille Fille*, but is said merely to be “une des moins importantes Préfectures de France.”[8] The character named du Croisier (after having originally been given the name Boutron-Boisset) has perplexed some scholars, given that the corresponding figure in *La Vieille Fille* had been called du Bousquier. Pasco, however, is not amongst them. He maintains that Balzac gives a clear explanation in the opening paragraph of *Le Cabinet des antiques*, where anonymity or changes of name are attributed to a respect for *les convenances*. But in Balzac, things are rarely straightforward, particularly when the narrative persona seems to suggest otherwise. The explanation proffered relates specifically to the anonymity of town and street and to the fact that the name of the dwelling about to be introduced, the hôtel d’Esgrignon (a family the narrative persona claims appears in the annals as Des Grignons and to which Balzac had originally given the name d’Esgrigny) was an invention. He adds, almost as an afterthought, that the names of all the principal characters have been changed, but without specific mention of those previously featured in *La Vieille Fille*, which, contrary to a practice Balzac adopts elsewhere, is nowhere recalled. Even if one is prepared to extend the explanation to cover du Bousquier/du Croisier, this encounters the difficulty that whereas the noble Gordes family in *La Vieille Fille* is renamed d’Esgrignon in the version included in *La Comédie humaine*, du Bousquier remains du Bousquier (just as Alençon remains Alençon).

More generally, Pasco’s inference that Balzac was here using a hallowed eighteenth-century device to “enhance realism” (p. 193), a variation on the discovery of diaries or letters, ignores the fact that the narrative persona actually draws attention to d’Esgrignon as an example of the conventional names he cites from novels and stage plays. It fails likewise to acknowledge that d’Esgrignon is the opposite of an obviously conventional name. Pasco says that, together with the title, it “reminds us that under the Valois kings, the marquises d’Esgrignon were quasi-princes with enormous power” (p. 197), though this is not something Balzac’s reader could have known, since it forms part of an historical pedigree that, still more than the name itself, is pure invention on Balzac’s part. (The seigneurs de Grignon, however, had included a number of public servants, including Pomponne de Bellièvre, Chancellor of France during the Wars of Religion.) The effect is the opposite of a semblance of realism: it emphasizes that this is fiction. The crucial pointer is found in a statement that Pasco skates over: “l’auteur voudrait rassembler des contradictions, entasser des anachronismes, pour enfouir la vérité sous un tas d’invraisemblances et de choses absurdes.”[9] This hyperbolic celebration of self-conscious fictionality is the very opposite of an attempt to take the reader in. Pasco retains only the notion of burying the truth, thereby giving it the appearance of relating solely to the author’s recourse to anonymity and changes of name. Far from sanctioning the conclusion that du Croisier and du Bousquier are one and the same character, it raises the question only for it to remain irresolvable. The dilemma is implicitly encapsulated by Gisèle Séginger’s legitimate reference to du Croisier as du Bousquier’s alter ego. What is clear, however, is that this is a rare example of Balzac turning his back on his recent discovery of the potential of reappearing characters.

The most interesting part of Pasco’s book lies in his presentation of certain patterns of allusion. This is the case with his consideration of the explicit reference to André Chénier’s poetry in *Illusions perdues*, which is shown to be more than a passing aside, and with his identification of extended biblical allusion in *Eugénie Grandet*, for all his worrying insistence on this being “the

most persistently misunderstood of all Balzac's novels," as evidenced by the numerous "equivocal or flatly negative judgments" to be found in the "secondary literature" (pp. 59-60).

Particularly telling is the revelation that many of Grandet *père's* "positions seem modelled on Biblical principles" (p. 67) and that the miser, through the references to fire and speech (or tongue), can be linked to Nanon in an unholy trinity completed by Eugénie's cousin Charles. (The proposed link between Saumur, Nanon's appearance of being pickled in brine [*saumuré*], and the evangelical "salt of the earth" [p. 71] may, however, incorporate at least one step too far.) In a context that Pasco identifies as an extended allusion to "The Second Coming of Jesus," the "monstrous perversion represented by Grandet" (p. 74) is set against Balzac's depiction of his daughter, of whom it is said "[o]n a spiritual level [...] Eugénie displays progress of major importance" (p. 62). The claim, however, that "in this context many puzzling aspects of Eugénie's behaviour are resolved" (p. 71) invites scepticism insofar as the one thing the Balzac text might be said always to resist is resolution. Specifically, it is questionable whether the reader is encouraged to see Eugénie as an exemplary figure. For all her elevation above the society that reduces her to an object of value, a realizable asset infinitely more precious than the lavishly packaged trinket she receives from an apparently reluctant suitor (whose primordial desire is to package himself as a dandy), and in spite of the emphasis Pasco places on Saint Eugenia, Eugénie does not have the makings of a saint and can only loosely be considered a martyr. Her devotion is to the purity of her profane love for her unworthy cousin. Any apparent embodiment of saintliness is troubled by the fact that following her father's death, the ironically christened Eugénie (etymologically: "well-born") is the reincarnation of her father's parsimoniousness. Her acceptance of her lot is less a justification for sainthood than the illustration of a lesson passed on by her submissive mother. Nor are the references to "Marie," "Maria," and "the Second Eve" in the untitled and eventually discarded *moralité* to the novel to be considered unambiguous markers of her saintly status. Balzac comes close (if unintentionally) to sacrilege in showing Eugénie's life to parallel that of the mother of Jesus: both remain virgins after marriage. He nonetheless stops short of Lousteau's characterization of Mary and Joseph as "adulterers," a scurrilous instance Pasco himself recalls in his chapter on *La Muse du département* (p. 165). Balzac also has Eugénie take care to ask her parish priest whether such an intention on her part is permissible. Writing of the eponymous Pierrette Lorrain, Pasco states: "Her sacrifice and her exemplary life are to no purpose" (p. 90); could not the same be said *mutatis mutandis* of Eugénie? This is not *bien pensant* literature.

For Pasco, the allusions to sainthood are an unambiguous indication of Eugénie's status. Yet it is difficult to read Balzac's novel in terms of an equational allegory. A less selective approach to interpretation unearths signifying patterns in competition with the extended biblical allusion and which have the potential to problematize Pasco's reading in productive ways. A pointer to one such set of allusions is contained in the self-referential reference in the original *moralité* to a monk's cell adorned by an effigy of the Madonna. Unexceptionable in itself, at the time *Eugénie Grandet* was written, this would have readily conjured up the confused devotion and impiety of "Monk" Lewis's Father Ambrosio and beyond it the *poncifs* of Gothic fiction, thereby alerting us to a pattern involving a tyrannical father, imprisonment, and Eugénie's uncontestable status as sacrificial victim. Similarly, the situation in which she finds herself is reminiscent of the 1830 *Scènes de la vie privée*, which were advertised, albeit one-dimensionally, as cautionary tales for young women and their mothers. It is characteristic of Balzac's work to interweave seemingly incompatible generic stereotypes in the service of a plurality of rival signifying patterns, all of which remain fragmentary and with none emerging as predominant.

The reader may understandably be left with a feeling of ambivalence that derives from the tradition of the early scenes of private life. Is Eugénie's ignorance of the world an admirable embodiment of innocence or a culpable shortcoming in her make-up (or upbringing)? Is her acceptance of her lot both before and after her father's demise laudable or perverse? If she retains our interest as a fictional character, it may well be due to her resolutely enigmatic nature. Substituting Eugénie for Eugène, one might adopt Proust's celebrated "Vous connaissez Rastignac? Vrai?"[10] This suggests that "literary sociology" might best be understood as a creative activity in which the purpose of the "literary" goes beyond mere "storytelling" to substitute for the clarity demanded of an analytical essay a work that raises fundamental questions deriving from the inter-connectivity of the individual and society, but without advancing solutions.

In short, this is a well-meaning book that falls considerably short of the pre-publication plaudits reproduced on the rear cover. The author makes no secret of his "love for Balzac" (p. viii), but hagiography has led to a dubious belief in the existence of a key capable of unlocking the meaning of Balzac's creative constructs, thereby traducing them. A promising subject has, above all, been stymied by the adoption of a factitious dichotomy between storytelling and sociology.

Errors of detail include the dating of the small-format *physiologies*: *pace* Pasco (p. 17) these post-dated both Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*, which has in common with them only the form of its title, and *L'Illustré Gaudissart*, which could not therefore have been conceived as a response to them (p. 138). Of four works said to have been published in 1829 (p. 174), this is true of only one. Balzac's friend from Issoudun was not August Bourget (p. 136), but the artist Auguste Borget. In n. 17 on p. 134, a book is turned into an article, the authors into editors, and the *Annales* reviewer into the author, while in the title, "Gévaudan" is given as "Gelvaudan."

The bibliography is extensive and undeniably informative, but contains errors in names, titles, dates of publication, and page numbers. The journal *Dix-Neuf* appears as *Dix-Huit*. The text itself contains typographical errors too many to list. The auto-correction function has changed numerous French words to their equivalent English spelling, albeit not consistently.

NOTES

[1] Honore de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, edited by Pierre-Georges Castex, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981), p. 18.

[2] Alain, 'Le Style de Balzac,' in *L'Œuvre de Balzac*, edited by Albert Béguin and Jean A. Ducourneau, vol. 2 (Paris: Le Club français du livre, 1966), p. xviii.

[3] Andrea Del Lungo and Pierre Glaudes, eds., *Balzac, l'invention de la sociologie* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), p. 7.

[4] Louis de Bonald, 'Du style et de la littérature,' in Louis de Bonald, ed., *Mélanges littéraires, politiques et philosophiques*, 3rd edition (Paris: Le Clère, 1852), p. 169 (the essay was first published in *Mercure de France*, 1806).

[5] Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 12, p. 178. In his *Traité de la vie élégante*, Balzac claims that 'La toilette est l'expression de la société' (*La Comédie humaine*, vol. 12, p. 250).

[6] Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*, vol. 3 (Paris: Carilian-Goeury et V. Dalmont), p. xv.

[7] Shoshana Felman, "Folie et discours: *L'Illustré Gaudissart*," *Litterature* 5 (1972): 34-44.

[8] Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 4, p. 965.

[9] Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 4, p. 966.

[10] Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 248.

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