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Allen H. Pasco, *The Nineteenth-Century French Short Story: Masterpieces in Miniature*. Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature 50. New York and London: Routledge, 2020. xiii + 198 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$155.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0367332716. \$57.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0429319006.

Review by Laurence M. Porter, Oberlin College.

Pasco offers eight *explications de texte* influenced by the Neo-Aristotelian Chicago School and Wellek and Warren. He concentrates on Realists and Naturalists, omitting women writers, regionalists, and Romantic short-story writers on dreams and other second states of consciousness. His chapter one, "On Defining Short Stories," is rich in examples, although most of the critics cited date from the 1970s or before, because "during the last quarter of the twentieth century, critics neglected generic questions and turned to the consideration of narration or storyline or *récit*" (p. 1). In other words, we are instructed to ignore narratologists. However, the reader-oriented narratological theory that Pasco ignores would have greatly helped him to appreciate how places of indeterminacy invite creative reflection by the reader.

"Brevity and artistry" are the salient traits of Pasco's "short story" genre (p. 13). These traits alone, of course, fail to distinguish short stories from lyric poems. And they overlook authors' distinguishing their short stories from novellas by dividing the latter into chapters (as in Flaubert's *Trois Contes*), or differentiating stories from oral tradition (*contes* or *légendes*) from realistic ones. Pasco is primarily interested in identifying superior stories he considers as "great" (p. ix) "crystallization[s] of human genius" (p. 5). He surreptitiously distinguishes popular from high culture, as does the useful French distinction between popular songs and art songs (*chansons* versus *mélodies*). His guiding principle is clear: "shortness . . . energizes the reader's creative role" (p. x). He believes that the less the author explains, the more the reader is invited to decipher meanings implied through metaphoric detail, images, sequences, allusions, frames, cycles, and open conclusions (p. ix). But his demonstration of his thesis is impoverished by his neglecting unreliable narrators, and stories that withhold a resolution of the plot and a final revelation of meaning, such as shaggy dog stories or *Flaubert's Parrot*, which ends the virtual search for Loulou the parrot by confronting the reader with a whole row of parrots on a shelf, dusted with insecticide, and concluding, "Perhaps it was one of those."

Nevertheless, Pasco reenters narratology through the back door, although he does not seem aware that similar interpretative involvement of the reader occurs regularly in popular culture's formulaic murder mysteries and spy novels. With his "masterpieces," these share multiple places of indeterminacy and ambiguity. Nor does he have the granular sense of language and culture

that would have allowed him to recognize multiple meanings in the briefest communications. The tale of Goldilocks and the three bears, for example, dramatizes four different points of view. Many single-frame comic strips with text are built around standard rhetorical tropes. Furthermore, recent experiments have shown that apes can lie when using symbolic communication. When a keeper came upon a broken object in a cage, he used the available symbolic blocks to ask the resident ape who had done the damage. “It was the other keeper,” the ape symbolically replied. Deliberately self-protective, misleading behaviors, of course, extend far down into the animal kingdom.

Pasco’s eight readings are not arranged chronologically, but according to the structural complexity of the stories presented. Chapter two, “Sequential Uncertainty in Vivant Denon’s ‘Point de lendemain’” (1777, revised 1812), brings to light a seldom-discussed work, drawing upon several good books on short story theory. It also tries to situate Denon’s work in its sociohistorical context of the transition from a monarchy to the Napoleonic dictatorship. But at length, Pasco contents himself with evoking “a shifting paradigm of possibilities” (p. 31), and collapses into a long plot summary of Denon’s story. Although he has read widely in the criticism of his individual authors, he does not spend much time contextualizing them in their society.

Chapter three, “Huysmans and the Bifocal Dilemma,” rambles. It uses Huysmans’s short story “Le Dilemme” as an example of an “analogical story,” which Pasco erroneously defines as a “sequence of events taking place primarily in the minds of the main characters” (p. 36)—what narratologists would call a “thought report.” It actually describes a carefully constructed fraud victimizing a poor, helpless woman. Pasco then compares such a story to Mallarmé’s poetry, undermining his own attempt to define the short story as a distinct genre. He overlooks the self-reflexive nature of Mallarmé’s poetry, which frequently describes failed attempts to create poetry itself (“un cygne d’autrefois se souvient que c’est lui, / magnifique mais sans espoir se délivre / pour n’avoir pas chanté la région où vivre”). He digressively claims that some of the most important (French) writers of the first half of the twentieth century “gathered regularly . . . at the feet” of Mallarmé—although the poet died in 1898. He drifts into otiose comparisons of Huysmans with Flaubert, Stendhal, and William Styron. By stating that Flaubert’s *Trois Contes* lack a “reappearing character” to “tie the various parts together” (p. 38), although they occur over two thousand years of history, Pasco misleadingly implies that Flaubert intended them as one coherent narrative. Thus, he undermines his own later discussion of them in his Flaubert chapter, which appropriately relates their threeness to manifestations of the Holy Trinity. He fails to explain that the coherence of short stories that are grouped by their author usually emerges only gradually over an author’s career, growing out of the his or her progressive self-discovery. The same is true of Huysmans’s novel *À rebours*, which Pasco discusses as lacking “a story line” (p. 38), without mentioning that its protagonist’s failure to find meaning in life will lead to the following novels that depict his gradual religious conversion.

Chapter four, “Sequence Denied in Barbey’s ‘Don Juan’ and ‘Le Dessous de cartes,’” takes two stories from the author’s collection *Les Diaboliques*. In the event, “Sequence Denied” actually means that the covert influence of Satan, rather than the intentions of the six female protagonists, drives the action, although readers recognize this only gradually, as key details of the story are revealed and then coalesce. “We do not know in every case . . . what punishment was meted out to those ensnared by the *diaboliques* [evil women], although it is clear that like many of Pirandello’s characters, they change” (p. 68). A confused description of Satan as a hidden *deus ex*

machina concludes with this muddle: “The very real danger confronting spiritual evil is that it can evolve into degradation, destruction, and damnation. For Barbey, no one is safe” (pp. 69-70).

Chapter five, on Mérimée’s “Carmen,” is the weakest of Pasco’s essays. He tries to present the gypsy woman as an instrument of bourgeois critique, but fails to develop this idea, lacks a base of critical theory for it, and makes inept comparisons to other literary works. For example, he says that Carmen is “a female Vautrin, a Satan” (p. 83), failing to realize that Balzac’s Vautrin is a model of integrity, who avoids injuring or killing anyone, although he does train a young protégé to be a deadly dualist when provoked by a hateful aristocrat.

Chapter six, on Hugo’s novella *Claude Gueux*, hardly discusses the short story as a genre, but resorts to a long plot summary and vapidly flowery language to make the adventitious claim that Hugo invents “a literary form of social activism . . . a shadow-fable [that] if implemented . . . could raise society to a higher level” with “an ancient genre [turned into] a weapon capable of changing society [and enhanced by Hugo’s invention of] a system of intertwining repetitions that perfume the story with the scent of legend [that achieves a literary form of social activism] by making use of the tradition infusing the modern fable” (p. 95). This unfortunate mixed metaphor awkwardly attempts to describe an arabesque with the grotesque, while ignoring the fact that throughout his life, Hugo used several literary genres—poetry, prose fiction, theater, and essays—as vehicles for his social activism. Although he became an effective legislator only late in his career, when he was in exile he was an influential polemicist: his denunciation of the emperor Napoleon III, *Napoléon le petit*, became well-known after it was printed in many copies and smuggled into France.

Chapter seven, “Flaubert’s Talking Heads in the Cyclical *Trois Contes*,” once again relies on the oxymoron of Pasco’s theory, which contrasts the patterned complexity of his individual “Masterpieces in Miniature” with the supposedly higher meanings of their structures when considered as a group. Hardly any of his generalizations about these stories are accurate. The chapter title is quite misleading. In all three stories, there is only one talking head: in “Un cœur simple” the “talking head” is Loulou the parrot, which speaks its three conventional sentences only when alone with its owner, the housekeeper Félicité, but it learns to imitate street noises to entertain her. At the conclusion, Loulou appears in two guises at once: he becomes an entire stuffed bird of which only the blue forehead is visible as it is carried in a religious procession on the Corpus Christi, to be laid beside a portable altar in Félicité’s backyard. But he reappears as a hallucination that “*elle crut voir*” (emphasis added) as she dies. Pasco’s claim that in all three stories, “God reaches out to save his elect” (p. 121) applies only to “Saint Julien.” Flaubert writes “Un cœur simple” as an agnostic; and in “Hérodias,” the severed head of Saint John the Baptist is carried back by three Christian disciples to the Holy Land, where his martyrdom (as we know from history) will help inspire the rise of a new religion. Flaubert’s depiction of the suspicion and ill will that exists in Syria between the Roman occupiers and the local Jewish tribes only hints at the political turmoil that will follow. Pasco’s imagined sequel—“One is forced to assume that Iakannan’s [John the Baptist’s] love was displayed in the underworld” (p. 126); actually, it is Christ who performs the Harrowing of Hell—betrays Pasco’s lack of political awareness. For example, the pragmatic meaning of the legend of Saint Denis (decapitated, he picked up his head in his hands and walked north until he collapsed, at the spot where his cathedral—declared such since 1966—stands today) is not that God can perform amazing miracles for the just, but that even in death, saints can advance and disseminate their faith.

Chapter eight, “Power and Ambiguity in Balzac’s Open Closures” (sic) arbitrarily groups three stories that Balzac eventually gathered in *La Comédie humaine*. Pasco offers lots of “yes or no” questions about the author’s places of indeterminacy, but creates nothing with them except otiose associations with Goethe and Rabelais. Reaching dramatically for significance, he then concludes, “Balzac impressively makes his small story [“L’Auberge rouge”] of a narrator who, incapacitated by uncertainty, mirrored the major problems and opportunities affecting the future of France” (p. 145). This reading cries out in vain for support from Balzac’s life and letters.

The conclusion speaks for itself: “a masterpiece is always more than the sum of its parts” (p. 177), says Pasco; “while a run-of-the-mill work demands very little from readers, exceptional stories require more diligence and a significant dose of imagination” (p. 175). Thus, Flaubert, for example, “masterfully moves each suggestive part into new, dazzling configurations . . . Often, he leaves readers with no recourse but to turn hopelessly away from the work with no resolution” (p. 173). Such should be our reaction to Pasco’s book. A few decades ago, his publisher, Routledge, was perhaps the best in academe for socially conscious criticism. Today, unfortunately, that press has apparently succumbed to the disease of overpublishing, of which this book is a symptom.

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