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Edmund Birch, *Fictions of the Press in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. ix + 238 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-319-72199-6; \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-030-10167-1; \$79.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-3-319-72200-9.

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Readers' habits die hard. How often do the pre-millennials among us assume that the bound volume of a novel was how it first appeared? Older scholars have grown used to the book per se. In nineteenth-century France, however, prose fiction was more likely to have been serialized in a newspaper before circulating as a book. This two-step publication was typical of works by Honoré de Balzac, the brothers Goncourt, and Guy de Maupassant, who were sharply critical of the press. Indeed, these authors distinguished themselves as literati, not as journalists. What a delicious irony it is therefore to read their defiance of journalism in novels that owed so much to this profession and its discursive practices. The *roman-feuilleton*, tucked below the fold on the newspaper's *rez-de-chaussée*, quickly earned an unsavory reputation, even though many instances of this genre subsequently found a place in the literary canon. It was how these works garnered an audience. As Edmund Birch's thoughtful and well-informed study states, "We cannot hope to understand the nineteenth-century novel in France without first considering its myriad connections with the newspaper" (p. 3).

Birch focuses on a particular nineteenth-century French novel, however, the novel of journalism. "What I propose to explore here," he writes, "are the forms of language—the vocabularies, the motifs, the metaphors—given to describe the press in the nineteenth century" (p. 14). These forms are manifested in three tensions that Birch identifies at the heart of his chosen genre and its various historical, literary, and discursive contexts: (1) the ambivalent relationship of novel to newspaper; (2) the interplay of referentiality (facts) and reflexivity (imitation) in literary discussion of the press; and (3) the different discourses that made an authority of the news, despite its obvious inadequacies. In so doing, Birch seeks to engage the literary representations of journalism, their expressions of authorship, authenticity, and the status of literature in the nineteenth century. In this regard, the novels of chief interest are Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (1837-43), the Goncourts's *Charles Demailly* (1860), and Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885), all of which were exemplary in the obsessions they shared with other French titles in the period. "It is the novel which all too often transforms the newspaper into the arbiter—or even the author—of everyday life" (p. 7).

Birch's study self-consciously draws on the theoretical positions taken by other literary specialists, which he discusses at some length in chapter two, "Newspaper Fictions, Newspaper

Histories.” Among the most important of these critical voices are the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his theorization of an autonomous literary field, as developed in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992), and the theorist Marc Angenot in his approach to literature's relation to a web of social discourses, as framed in *1889. Un état du discours social* (1989).^[1] According to Birch, while Bourdieu may have failed to historicize literary artefacts, Angenot does not. The latter thereby provides valuable insights into the way that “the novel of journalism transforms the press into the nineteenth-century discourse par excellence, the discourse which shapes and organizes the social world to its own ends” (p. 22). This critical perspective Birch uses to unpack the historicity of both press and novel, their rhetorical strategies in representing reality, and the discursive struggle of journalism with literature, which was well analyzed by the theorist Richard Terdiman's *Discourse/Counter-Discourse* (1985).^[2] How these critical insights play out in Birch's work is also indebted to more recent voices like those of Marie-Ève Thériault, Guillaume Pinson, and Alain Vaillant (pp. 10-11, n. 16) which are cited frequently throughout this study.^[3]

Thus, well-grounded by relevant conversations in the field, chapter three turns to arguably Balzac's best-known *Bildungsroman*, *Illusions perdues*, of a young man from the provinces attempting to make his way in the world of Parisian letters. Birch here also discusses two lesser-known novels in *La Comédie humaine* on journalists and the press, *Une fille d'Ève* (1838-39) and *Les Employés* (1837). “In Balzac,” Birch writes, “talking about journalism becomes a way of talking about the array of discourses...highlighting the social, political and economic foundations which underpin his characters' formation” (p. 64). Lucien de Rubempré learns the disillusioning truth about the press the hard way, from the inside of the mercantile exchange of language during the July Monarchy. The fundamentally dishonest practices of journalists pose “the constant threat of misreading, the ways in which the tricks and ruses present in the press threaten to transform the social order” (p. 82). The same process unfolds for Marie-Angélique de Vandenesse, the heroine of *Une Fille d'Ève*, where her infatuation for a journalist is ultimately dissipated by the same problem. This theme plays out as well in *Les Employés*, where a manipulated press misleads the principal characters, mid-level functionaries in government service, and one of their spouses, the ambitious Mme Rabourdin. Such was “the sentimental education” of Balzac's figures in a merciless discursive context.

Chapter four proceeds to the Goncourt brothers' *Charles Demailly*. This novel's attack on journalism chooses a different target in its scathing account of the popular press during the Second Empire: making public matters of private affairs. This shift owed in part to the regime's stringent censorship that forced the *petite presse* to redirect the attention of its readers from politics to the safer topics of innuendo and scandal-mongering: hence, the Goncourts's famous 1860 lament in their personal journal that private life had gone public (pp. 115, 125-26).^[4] Their debt to Balzac in this *roman à clef* was both obvious and deliberate, however different their respective views of the problem. The newspaper editor in question here was *Le Figaro*'s infamous Hippolyte de Villemessant. “*Charles Demailly* thus not only offers a general critique of the newspapers,” Birch writes, “but represents an attack on the very individuals responsible for writing and editing the press itself” (p. 121). The chief victim of the newspaper's insidious workings is the novel's eponymous protagonist, who is driven mad by the public invasion of his personal affairs. By retreating from journalism to literature and a disastrous marriage with a duplicitous actress, he is ensnared by the press's machinations of life itself.

The final chapter deals with another exemplary text, Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*. The narrative traces the journalistic success of Georges Duroy, who navigates adeptly the press's manipulative stock

and trade during the Third Republic. “What emerges from this novel,” Birch declares, “is a connection between widespread media corruption and the notion of *actualité*, that concept crucial to the newspaper’s reflection on the day-to-day realities of social and political life” (p. 164) and of the metaphorical sleight of hand that makes it possible. The contending social discourses at work in this account underlie the complex relationship between the press and the immediate, of the moment, the relevant, the newsworthy at the heart of its power, beginning with the Republic’s colonial politics. Journalistic language is little different from the symbolic game of the *bilboquet*, the endlessly repetitive snap of the cup and ball mastered by Duroy and his professional cronies. As Birch suggests, it is emblematic of *actualité* as it operates in the novel—“fictional, derivative, manipulative” (p. 198)—and as the press defines social knowledge in the news for its readers.

Birch has written a rich, textured, and thoughtful analysis of the novel of journalism in nineteenth-century France. The significance of his book to our understanding of the period’s social and intellectual life is as far-reaching as literary realism itself, which the works under study here all represent. The discursive basis of facts, truth, and expertise in the French realist—and naturalist—novel is implicitly interrogated in Birch’s work, however selective its focus. The conclusion raises the counter-point of other journalism novels, like the work by Jules Vallès, who chose commitment over critique in his accounts of the press for a very different audience and for a very different purpose. Vallès’s revolutionary engagement highlights the elitism at work in the novels by the pessimistic realists Balzac, the Goncourts, and Maupassant. One also gets a very different impression from the popular fiction by Alexandre Dumas père, Paul Féval père, and Jules Verne in the same period, but that would require another book altogether. Instead, Birch’s study underscores the challenge we face today with the comparable role played by the digital media. At times, they are just as corrupt, invasive, and manipulative as the press was in its nineteenth-century heyday. It is enough that Birch has brought the attention of historians to the dynamics of language and genre, as evident in three major literary works in another historical context.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Marc Angenot, *1889. Un état du discours social* (Longueuil, Québec: Le Préambule, 1989).

[2] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[3] See, for example, Dominique Kalifa, Philippe Régnier, Marie-Ève Thérenty, and Alain Vaillant, eds., *La Civilisation du journal. Histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2011); and Guillaume Pinson, *La Culture médiatique francophone en Europe et en Amérique du Nord. De 1760 à la veille de la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2016).

[4] From a closer reading of the Goncourts’s *Journal*, the issue is more complicated. In fact, the brothers were speaking of a larger development, including the Haussmanization of Paris, rather than just changes in the press. Cf. the entry for November 18, 1860, in Edmond and Jules Goncourt, *Mémoires de la vie littéraire* (Monaco: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956), 1: 345-46. See also

T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 30-36.

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