

## Springer on Pasco (2016)

Pasco, Allan H. *Balzac, Literary Sociologist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 290, ISBN 978-3-319-39333-9

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Allan Pasco's recent monograph draws upon Honoré de Balzac's self-definition as a "historian of manners" to show how *La Comédie humaine* can and should be interpreted as a proto-typical form of sociology. The book is composed of previously published material but redesigned as a kaleidoscopic display of various aspects of Balzac's scientific analysis. One of Pasco's major claims is that close attention to Balzac's strategic ordering of the novels from the *Scènes de la vie de province* yields a renewed appreciation of his artistry while opening new perspectives onto the novelist's "sociological" method. A second major claim is that Balzac's sociology is founded on an "idée-mère," or a founding seminal idea, that knits together behavioral causes and effects into an interlocking whole. Pasco thus naturally sets as his principal task both the identification of Balzac's "idée-mère" and a demonstration of this idea's role in generating a scientific/literary unity.

Scholars have previously investigated Balzac's sociology, such as the illustrious tradition of Marxist critics, and reaching as far back to the novelist's own introductory remarks on the role of social institutions in the early formation of human emotions, mentalities, and passions. Pasco's promise of originality comes from his singular focus on the *Scènes de la vie de province* as a privileged site of sociological investigation, explaining that as laggards in the historical process of modernization, the provinces function like a distant mirror that reflect into the present the early stages of modernity's corrosive impact (104).

An admirable feature of Pasco's study is his commitment to pursuing Balzac's claim of unity into the far corners of *La Comédie humaine*. Pasco's readings thus frequently derive their strength from decades-long experience with the entire *Comédie humaine* and insistence on close textual analysis. Some of the book's most engaging pages are devoted to Balzac's strategic use of onomastics, "allusive complexes" and other devices that enable Pasco to draw on his erudition, and especially on his keen eye for Biblical allusions and imagery. In *Eugénie Grandet*, for example, we see that the father's pursuit of gold results in a religious divide between father and daughter that is reflected in the symbolic descriptions of the daughter's household domain as a cloister and her resistance to gold as religiously inspired acts of self-sacrifice.

Eugénie Grandet's successful resistance to modernity, however, is a notable exception to the rule. The typical urban/provincial clashes conclude with the forces of modernity hollowing out traditional values and leaving provincials disenchanting and powerless (97). Balzac-as-sociologist is especially critical of the Restoration's gerontocracy and its cynical uses of religion and nobility to conspire avariciously for political power and money, to the point of sacrificing family, community and, indeed, an entire generation of post-revolutionary youth. In a chapter on *Le Curé de Tours*, we learn that the modern values of self-interest and greed have penetrated even the deepest motivations of provincial clergymen.

An important question raised throughout the book is: why would Balzac-as-sociologist turn to *literature* rather than the scholarly treatise or essay to communicate his putative scientific insights? The chapter on *Pierrette* develops this question at length, arguing that Balzac's choice of the novel over the essay was driven by his ambition to gain a wide readership, its potential for lasting emotional and intellectual impact, and its efficient expression of his characters' psychological complexities via literary devices such as allegory and allusion (89).

In the book's remaining chapters, Pasco completes the picture of Balzac's literary sociology with analyses of the emotional damage of fatherless children in *La Rabouilleuse*, social disruptions touched off by nascent capitalism in *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, the displacement of artistic and moral values by modern journalism in *La Muse du département*, the scourge of unproductive noble classes in *La Vieille fille*, the decay of noble values in *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, the corrupting force of emerging markets and commercial values in *Les Illusions perdues*, and more.

As we can clearly see from this summary, Pasco's picture of Balzac's sociology is one of inexorable civilizational decay as the forces of rational self-interest and capitalistic greed extend their reach to the most remote areas of the nation. With a few notable exceptions, everyone in provincial France appears vulnerable to modern social forces and must either adapt to them or be destroyed. In the exceptional cases, the force of resistance stems ostensibly from Catholic traditions and religious faith, and Pasco sometimes presents such belief as a universal, living choice that transcends history whereas Balzac casts it as local and under the sign of tragic irony, suggesting that the ways of life of remote provincial areas linger in a time warp and are destined for ruin, even if this occurs off-stage.

Despite Pasco's eminently readable prose and clarity of argument, the book is not without ambiguities, one of which arises from the central claim that the "idée-mère" that grounds Balzac's sociology is "rational self-interest" and "the desire for money" (2). This theoretical claim is fully justified in the examples provided in the book, yet if we widen the corpus to include the *Études philosophiques*, we readily find counter-examples in which Balzac seeks to unmask the myth of the rational ego. The rational wills of Balzac's famous mad-geniuses, for example, are paradoxically animated by irrational and self-destructive forces, which cannot easily be explained according to Pasco's rationalist terms. Given that the *Études philosophiques* are famously declared by Balzac to be the laboratory for exposing the hidden causes of the social effects described in the *Études de mœurs* (of which *Les Scènes de la vie de province* are a subset), prudence would require further investigation into how Balzac might theoretically align or integrate the rational and the irrational in his sociology. We find a parallel ambiguity within Pasco's chosen corpus in the claim that gold is the main driver of modern behavior, the cause of action, and the end of desire. Pasco appears to contradict this point when he also states that gold is a *means* to social ends like power, status, and luxury (3). Along these same lines, we learn that father-Grandet's putatively rational, market-oriented pursuit of gold is at bottom an archaic religious desire transfigured into an irrational and self-destructive form of idolatry.

Despite these theoretical ambiguities, *Balzac, Literary Sociologist* is a significant contribution to Balzac studies, especially for its fine-grained and richly erudite readings of an under-analyzed section of *La Comédie humaine*. The book artfully combines history, social science, and literary analysis to bring new clarity to Balzac's view of provincial France and is destined to have broad appeal to expert researchers and novice undergraduates alike.

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