La littérature au prisme de l’économie: argent et roman en France au XIXe siècle (book review)

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This important collection, comprised of an introduction and eighteen essays, sees the novelistic imaginary and monetary logic as intertwining worlds, producing a reflection on money in its triple nature of formal principle, thematic network, and cultural object. Adhesion to economic theories and Marxist criticism can only provide an approximation of what the truth of money in literature might be. We must return to the inaugural moments of the novel’s constitution, the eighteenth century, and reexamine texts like Le paysan parvenu and Manon Lescaut, in order to discover the avenues later explored by novelists in the century of the industrial revolution and triumphant capitalism. After Spandrì’s historical introduction, five essays treat matters of form. Pierluigi Pellini analyses economic topoi in the Rougon-Macquart, in comparison with models in Balzac and Dickens. Jean-Joseph Goux, Éric Bordas, and Susi Pietri study Balzac, the first establishing links between the omniscience of money and the omniscient narrator, the next examining the various registers of the financial lexicon, and the latter looking at how various contemporaries like Henry James and Hugo von Hofmannsthal understood the Comédie humaine. Christophe Reffait asks what representations of states of matter in Jules Verne’s tales have to say about money and its circulation. The next section treats financial themes and contains two more essays on Balzac, Fabrice Wilhelm analyzing the unique figure of the prodigal father, and Paolo Tortonese studying the intricate relationships between interest, self-love, and motivation. Yves Ansel shows how attitudes about money and privilege in Stendhal betray certain aristocratic prejudices, François Vanoosthuyse demonstrates
the consolatory function of the popular novel in his essay on ideological issues in the Comte de Monte-Cristo, and Agnese Silvestri shows how, in George Sand, the future is open to those who use their wealth to prepare a more equal future. Luca Pietromarchi asks the extent to which the Flaubertian description of human relations obeys the dynamics of commerce and finance. Karen Haddad and Pierre Glaudes examine the abstract nature of money, the former seeing it as something that vanishes in Dostoyevsky, the latter understanding it as a source of deep spiritual anxiety in Léon Bloy. Valerio Cordiner studies the realistic fresco of industrials and bankers of the Third Republic in the virtuosic writings of Maurice Barrès. The final section sees money as a cultural object. Annamaria Lessara examines the paradoxical relationships between bourgeois ideology and dandyism in Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Balzac, and Baudelaire. Maria Luisa Maniscalco analyses the contribution that Alexis de Tocqueville made in creating the sub-discipline of the sociology of money. Carole Christen-Lecuyer uses the example of savings banks, founded in 1818, to show how propaganda literature and novels employed pedagogies of money to resolve social questions. Finally, François Vatin demonstrates how the works of Eugène Buret (1811–43), known as a social investigator of poverty, cannot be disassociated from his literary Romanticism. This motley, enjoyable collection provides an invaluable contribution to the new field of economic criticism. It is highly recommended to all interested in the complex relationships between literature and economics.

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