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Poétique des Cycles Romanesques de Balzac à Volodine (book review)

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CONRAD, THOMAS. *Poétique des cycles romanesques de Balzac à Volodine*. Paris: Garnier, 2016. ISBN 978-2-8124-3851-6. Pp. 498.

Although such well-known authors as Balzac, Zola, Dumas, and Giono expressed the explicit desire to link their novels together, few studies are devoted to their methods of linking. Indeed, due to its paradoxical nature—it is at once singular and multiple, open and closed, and transcendent and immanent—the novel cycle has been largely ignored by critics, appealing neither to champions of intertextuality who appreciate radically open works nor to more traditional experts who favor closed, self-contained texts. Hence, this ambitious volume that examines both mainstream and popular authors (Balzac, Zola, Dumas, Poe, Giono, Gide, Mauriac, Montherlant, Duras, Potocki, Volodine, Asimov) as well as different genres (science-fiction, realism, naturalism, epic) is one of the first to study the cycle in its remarkable diversity. Comprised of an introduction, two large sections on cycle forms and evolutions, and a conclusion, the book seeks to formulate a typological and historical poetics of the cycle during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, treating not only how and why writers tie their works together in vast frescoes, but also how our reading of a novel is transformed when it is part of a cycle. The first and largest section, on cycle forms, examines the three major ways that authors sew texts together: via recurring characters (by far the most widespread method), via what Conrad calls a “plan” (45) and defines as common narrative statements either paradigmatic or syntagmatic in nature, and finally via “enchâssement” (46) or framing, in which two texts are associated through a common narrative situation. While Balzac’s recurring characters make him seminal to the first method, neither *Eugénie Grandet* nor *Le curé de Tours* share any characters with the rest of the *Comédie humaine*. These volumes are thus incorporated into the larger work in other ways, proving that more than one linking method can be employed by the same

author and in the same cycle. As examples of the third method, Conrad offers trenchant insights into *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Decameron*, and the *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, among others. The second section traces the complex history of the cycle through Balzac, Zola, Poe, Giono, and Volodine, and establishes an evolution in three major stages. The post-Revolution cycles (1830–90) define an epic moment characterized by the massive use of recurring characters, in contrast to early forms in which framing techniques predominated. After 1890, the epic model fades, even in Zola, creating a crisis in the cycle that mirrors the crisis of the novel itself. Finally, after 1945, the cycle makes a comeback characterized by challenges to the notion of coherence and to the recurring character method, a resurgence of framing techniques, and a proliferation of paraliterary cycles (fantasy, science-fiction, detective fiction, graphic novel). This massive and important volume is highly recommended to all interested in the history of the French novel during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in the complex inner-workings, epic dimensions, and social impact of the novel cycle.