Balzac, Literary Sociologist (book review)

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nouveau d’une fiction quelque peu délaissée. Il y a fort à penser que les futurs travaux
de cette chercheuse, collaboratrice de l’œuvre autobiographique pour la collection
“Pléiade”, ouvrent avec le recul nécessaire des perspectives ubéreuses dans l’approche
des études beauvoirriennes.

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Flavien Falantin

Pasco, Allan H. Balzac, Literary Sociologist. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-3-

This volume presents Balzac as a trailblazing proto-sociologist who documented
in his Scènes de la vie de province a radically-changed France transformed by the
noxious atmosphere of the Restoration and July Monarchy. Although Balzac wrote
“fiction,” he believed he was writing the kind of cultural history that we would today
call sociology (vii). He was interested in the web of connections forming a new society
from the enduring chaos of the French Revolution, Napoleon’s wars, and the Industrial
Revolution. Convinced that the motivating force was money, whether coin, banknotes,
bonds, debt, credit, land, or other forms of wealth, he illustrated the results of the
social pressures and activity inspired by the pursuit of such assets in various relation-
ships between church, state, and family, thus documenting France’s painful shift from
an agricultural to a capitalistic society. Comprised of twelve chapters including an
introduction and a conclusion, each of the ten interior chapters treats a different
volume of the Scènes de la vie de province following the order of the novels projected
in La comédie humaine. This section is important, since it contains ten of Balzac’s best
(yet under-studied) novels written during the pinnacle of his literary form (the 1830s
and 1840s), while introducing many of his most salient themes: the regrettable rise of
journalism, the weakening of the church, the loss of fathers to war and the resulting
decline of the traditional family, the decay of the nobility and the rise of the bour-
geoisie, the advent of a gerontocracy that clings to power while squelching the
ambitions of the youth, and the constant transferal of people, ideas, and capital
between Paris and the provinces. Ursule Mirouët (1841) suggests that all nuclear
families are slowly dying, due to war or social breakdown. Eugénie Grandet (1833)
emphasizes the differences between genuine Christian faith as embodied in Eugénie
and the monstrous perversion represented by her father. Pierrette (1840) and La vieille
fille (1837) treat the dark side of society’s demographics—the young are being crushed
by the venal gerontocracy. Le curé de Tours (1832) is a powerful mock-heroic drama
casting light on the ineffective ridiculousness of Charles X’s France. La rabouilleuse
(1842) underlines the lack of fathers while employing an innovative narration composed
of a moving target where the wealth (in the case, the inheritance) serves as the point
of focus. L’illustre Gaudissart (1833) highlights one of the most vital aspects of the
period’s nascent capitalism: the financial system could not be confined to urban
centers. The provinces had to be stimulated to take part. Both La muse du département (1837) and Illusions perdues (1843) show the degree to which journalism, however much Balzac despised it, was changing society, while Le cabinet des antiques (1838) offers a scathing critique of the waning provincial nobility and the post-Revolutionary system of justice. Eminently readable, this landmark publication shows like no other how Balzac used art as a tool of social inquiry to obtain startlingly accurate and relevant insights into his turbulent society and our own.

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Pelletier embarks on an engaging exploration of fin-de-siècle French culture through the intriguing lens of the jeweled narrative. Organized into three main sections, the study consists of six chapters as well as an introduction. Part one, “L’objet,” considers gems as prized possessions endowed with both filial and financial value in late nineteenth-century fiction. The opening chapter, “Bijoux et dandys: l’ostentation aristocratique confrontée à la marche du siècle,” investigates the highborn aesthete’s complex relationship to precious stones in the Decadent novel. Clarifying that the power and legitimacy of the aristocracy relied on intransience and lastingness for its continuation, Pelletier argues that “la pierre dure et durable, immuable et pérenne, s’offre alors comme la matière toute indiquée pour affirmer et afficher la perpétuité noble” (35). In her discussion of Jean Lorrain’s Monsieur de Bougrelon, Pelletier uses the image of “l’épave” to convey the multilayered symbolism of the dandy’s heirlooms caught between permanence and dissolution—“entre fixité et désintégration”—and simultaneously straddling past memories and the passage of time (47). Chapter two, “Fabriqué en argent et valant de l’argent: leçon d’homonymie fin-de-siècle,” explains how with the disappearance of sumptuary laws and dress codes, the display of costly jewels ceased to be an aristocratic monopoly as “bourgeois, paysans et routiers” gained the right to wear ornaments and finery (55). Pelletier defines this transfer of wealth and ostentation from the nobility to the rising bourgeoisie in terms of the jewel’s status shift from emblem of durability and perpetuity to “un objet circulant et fluctuant selon les lois du marché” (90). Part 2, “Le corps,” equates jewels with the feminine body, corporeality, and the construction of sexual identities and social roles. This section presents women’s adornment as both a sign of her enchainment and a symbol of her power. In the chapter “Collier esclavage, yeux d’émeraude et corps de pierre: de quelques artifices féminins,” Pelletier interprets Renée’s finery in Zola’s La curée as an indicator of her subservient role in her marriage to Saccard and comments that “le corps paré de Renée est entièrement mis au service de la réputation, des affaires et des