Analogies and Realities in Père Goriot

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1. Analogy and Language

Père Goriot is our classic of realism—if reality attaches only to the truths of economics. We know how much a loaf of bread costs at the Maison Vauquer and how much a room on the third story; we know how much a pair of white kid gloves costs, how much an attorney can sell himself for, and how much can be gotten for selling someone else. The book is alive with such evaluations, forcing us at every moment to pause, calculate, compare and acknowledge that everything has its price and is therefore part of a system. Yet it has been often remarked that this is a weakness of Balzac. His obsession with raw facts could not be reduced to novelistic form and intrudes upon the narrative in a way that, to invoke Stendhal, is like a pistol shot at an opera. Worse, his concern with "science" imposes a peculiar theoretical strain upon his writing. It is one of the great ironies that Balzac sought to establish his view of social life by evidence that no one can any longer take seriously. When he goes to what were the truths of nineteenth-century thought he satisfies us least because those truths are now considered illusions, if not ideological falsehoods.

Harry Levin notes in The Gates of Horn that Balzac was an intellectual captive to "the animal magnetism of Mesmer, the physiognomy of Lavater, the phrenology of Gall." These systems are not easily yoked to the novelistic form, for the true métier of that form is psychology. The novel resists categories. Thus character in Père Goriot is often in danger of becoming mere symptom. The "curious monstrosities" of the Vauquer household fit into a system of metaphor rather than of personality: Monsieur Poiret, for one, is "like a kind of machine"; Mademoiselle Michonneau, skeletal and withered, is described as the waste product of the aging process, a kind of exemplum of biological necessity; Victorine is "like a shrub, transplanted to unfavorable soil, the leaves of which are dying." What is a scientific analogy for one century is a myth for another. Vautrin, the modern reader observes, is a walking bundle of proverbial symptoms, the red hair as indicative of passion as the Galenic choleric humor, the blazing eye as hypnotic as that of the ancient Mariner. Goriot himself is placed by the pseudo-science of somatotypes:

Besides, his long square nose, and the large and salient calves of his legs prognosticated moral qualities, the existence of which was confirmed by the good old fellow's moon-shaped and ingenuously foolish face.¹

The tone is unserious, but the information is certainly offered seriously.

¹ I have used Wallace Fowlie's edition (New York, 1950).
Throughout the narrative the literary agents study each other against the norms of pseudoscience: the medical students at the Maison Vauquer observe Goriou's fall into misery and measure "the top of his facial angle" to comprehend the experience of grief; Rastignac looks at Vautrin and sees "the cold and fascinating gaze that is the gift of certain men of eminently magnetic temperament and is said to have the power of conquering madmen in insane asylums." When offered as literally true and realistic these observations lose all credibility. The problem is that Balzac tries to be most realistic—if not scientific—while using intellectual materials which have by now become totally unconvincing. We are at our most impatient when invited to contemplate the bumps on Goriou's forehead, or the externals which impose so faithfully upon Vautrin the forms of nineteenth-century forensic medicine. In short, criminology, biology, and phrenology may have been at one time guideposts of intellectual discernment, but they now seem to lack even the most elementary clues to character.

The greatness of Père Goriou would seem not to depend on the "scientific" norms to which it addresses itself. The intellectual systems that sustain the book are now dead, but the book manages to speak to us in our own critical language. Paradoxically, we are most convinced of Père Goriou's fidelity to reality by its literary norms. We become aware, for example, that this is a specifically literary book, that it urges us continually to break out of the circumstances of social life and contrast them with standards derived from wider and deeper experience. The book does this in several ways: by the use of rhetorical exaggeration and allusiveness; by a systematic inversion of values; and by the imposition of ideas derived from other books. It is covered with a thick layer of literary patterns.

There are different ways of being realistic about objects. The two bottles of champagne that Madame Vauquer declines to offer Vautrin "would cost twelve francs." That is the only life they have, as counters in her highly limited imagination. She prudently offers to substitute for them some bottles of her despicable homemade cordial (as prudently refused by her lodgers, who are aware of its laxative quality) and the matter of their existence is closed. The determination of these objects is simple and finite. In the flat and well-delineated world of economic realities they are simply the equivalent of twelve francs. On the other hand, the pair of white gloves envied by Rastignac "at six francs a pair" are the indispensable marks of an identity he wishes passionately to assume. As he stands waiting for the carriage to take him to his destiny in the Rue De Grenelle he is man unclothed, the thing itself "without any umbrella, in his black coat, white waistcoat, yellow gloves, and patent leather boots." His provincial outfit has been the emblem of his social success, if not of his total human value. The desired pair of white gloves translates the outfit into something else, and Rastignac becomes aware that he is worse than naked. Perhaps Balzac's acquaintance with King Lear was more thorough than we imagine, for it is at this moment, in the middle of a storm, that the hero reflects on appearance in a world of reality. It is a neat reversal. Man clothed and unclothed can also be the subject of comedy—a human comedy, to be sure.

Rastignac's subsequent ride through Paris becomes a rite de passage. With
evident premeditation Balzac dispatches him to the drawing-room of Madame de Beauséant in a carriage which still contains some sprigs of orange blossom, remnants of the wedding it has just served. That the ride costs ten francs is inconsequential; what matters is its allusiveness. As the “vulgar bridal equipage” rattles into the courtyard before lackeys “solemn as judges” he becomes a convert to the truth of Paris. The mocking transformations, the half-symbolic allusions go far beyond a literal sense of what is realistic. From the provincial outfit which reflects his social nakedness, to the “blind rage” of his self-hatred, to the symbolic ride in the bridal coach through the city of man, to the courtyard itself, a version of the Heaven he wishes to scale, all the details of realistic narrative transform themselves to something more inclusive. The event is easily managed in the sense that a scene is quietly moved by ponderous and well-oiled machinery beneath the stage. But in order to write about these simple actions a great deal of literary machinery is involved: from the intimations of the voyage perilous to the explicit figure of Paris as a “labyrinth” (as it is called by Madame de Beauséant) the events occur within the framework of literary tradition. To be simply realistic is to particularize, but here and in many other instances Balzac is intent upon universalizing. The allusions are brief but precise; they are the common stock of mythical and therefore psychological experience. As for the mode, there is considerable utility to diminuendo. The “quest” of Rastignac is from this moment endowed with a particular irony, for it is a parody of the heroic.

Surely one of the most meaningful and impressive verbal patterns imposed on the narrative is that supplied by Madame de Beauséant: “I give you my name to use, like the silken thread of Ariadne, in the labyrinth you are trying to enter.” She is a variant of the mythos of Fortune—and Rastignac is a man looking for the right gods to adore. The labyrinth is one of the dominant metaphors of the book, and not only because it suggests an equivocal resemblance between Rastignac and the amoral figure of Theseus. If we recall the opening, we will note that the buildings on the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève are “like those of a prison.” One does not locate this area, but, as in Bleak House, one comes upon it by accident, “straying in this direction.” It is not only the most unpleasant but the most “unfamiliar” of all Parisian quarters. Almost casually, the main aspects of the myth are sketched in: intricacy, strangeness, a sense of involuntary progression to a point of meaning. Balzac’s summation is explicit to the point of making comment superfluous:

*The Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève is like a bronze frame, the only one in keeping with my tale, for which the minds of my readers cannot be too well prepared by somber colors and somber thoughts, just as, step by step, the daylight wanes and the song of the guide grows hollow as the pilgrim descends to the Catacombs. This is a true comparison...*

The defining analogy for which Balzac searches, that of the Catacombs, invokes at once the figure of an infinitely deceiving maze of passageways and that of the quest for some kind of meaning. It is an analogy applied to the entire life of Paris, a figure used by Vautrin, by Rastignac, and most often by Balzac himself.
When the author describes Rastignac's intention to impose upon the Nucingen household the same kind of troika arrangement as that governing the Restauds, he writes that the ideal novelistic vehicle for this might be a derivative of the ancient but satisfying metaphor: "the crooked ways through which an ambitious man of the world drives his conscience when he tries to skirt along the edge of evil and succeeds in saving appearances and compassing his ends." When Madame de Nucingen is considering the pleasures of yielding to Rastignac the metaphor once again resurfaces, this time with a pronounced moralistic form deriving from the medieval topoi: "a young libertine, she found so much pleasure in straying through the flowery paths of love that she lingered gladly to study all its charms, to feel its thrills, and suffer herself to be caressed by its chaste breezes." Whether as an analogy or an allegory the figure will never relinquish its hold upon the narrative. The characters are seen persistently in figural terms, "straying" through the labyrinthine moral and material circumstances of their lives. When the last invocation of this figure appears we should recognize the tensions by now inherent in its use: "His eyes fixed themselves almost eagerly upon the space between the Place Vendôme and the Dôme des Invalides, upon the center of the great world he had longed to penetrate" (italics mine). With this summation of a very ancient figure the book closes, but not before warning us that all the meanings suspended in that figure are meant to be balanced against each other.

We are familiar with certain other rhetorical figures, which, like Vautrin's image of the "forest in the New World," force us to view a social fact in an unaccustomed way. The forest is Paris, and within it there rages a struggle for survival: "Paris, you see, is like a forest in the New World, swarming with twenty savage tribes, Illinois, Hurons, and others, who live on the prey offered them by the different classes of society. You are a hunter of millions, and to catch them you must use traps, snares, and decoys." As Irving Babbitt once said, the soul is a state of the landscape. Here it takes its character from the feral and predatory background. The almost incredible industriousness of Léon-François Hoffman bears out the power of Vautrin's metaphor. The charts in Hoffman's essay2 are almost certainly a triumph of mathematics over literary criticism, yet they do give us some quantitative sense of a metaphorical pattern imposed on a narrative form. In the chart below Hoffmann relates animal comparisons to character and milieu:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAISON VAUQUER</th>
<th>HAUTE SOCIÉTÉ</th>
<th>EXILES</th>
<th>AUTRES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Père Goriot</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Delphine</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vautrin</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Anastasie</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mme Vauquer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nucingen</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mlle Michonneau</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>M. Taillefer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Foiret</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F. Taillefer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christophe</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M. de Marsay</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
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Perhaps a quantification like this should be more of a warning than a guideline. Images do not exist in themselves but within larger schemes of reference. For example, the language of cost and value is in one sense a reflection of actuality, but in another it participates in a wildly metaphorical form of experience. The narrative is never really confined to the tonalities of literal meaning. Money metaphors become extravagant, lose their connection to fact, and impose a sense of grotesque strain. Gobseck the lender, pre-eminently the man of money, is described as “a precious rascal who is quite equal to making dominoes out of his father’s bones.” The insult is casual, for he is simply a background figure transfixed for a moment by Vautrin’s wit; but the language, connected to the feral and carnivorous themes of the narrative, has the truth of psychological intuition. In a book where daughters “devour” their father the remark gains in thematic credence what it loses in literalness. There is another remark of Vautrin (really a favorite motif of his dialogue) that Rastignac should “fish for an heiress.” Balzac himself, at the scene of the Maison Vauquer which opens the story, has reminded us that “Paris is like the sea,” and the force of such figures of speech when linked together is more subtle and vicious than their separate effect—particularly when we recall the predatory appearance of the inmates, whose “withered mouths were armed with voracious teeth.” They swim in the sea which is Paris, bottom feeders in the chain of life. As for Vautrin himself, he is given his proper station within this metaphorical conception: as he tempts Rastignac with the vision of Victorine’s fortune we see him “allowing a movement of joy to escape him, inexorable as the expression of the anger who feels a fish at the end of his line.” There is a coalescence of language here of the highest order, one which reminds us in fact of the Shakespearean model which may underlie the text. It was Coleridge who remarked of this kind of accomplishment that it was a proof of “imagination, or the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of fusion to force many into one.” I do not think it a coincidence that Coleridge’s remarks are addressed to King Lear. As Balzac’s metaphor swells and resounds through the story the merely realistic presence of money is heightened and mythologized. Where it is simply realistic, in short, Père Goriot tells us everything that realism should. But where it accumulates metaphors and alludes to a hidden sense of human activity and identity we can see that another conception entirely is being suggested. One phrase for it might be natural selection, in as pitiless a world as Darwin was ever to imagine.

2. Thematic Sources

If we stop to consider how many other books are addressed directly or obliquely by Balzac in the course of this narrative we find that they constitute a small library. Some of these books are used continuously and furnish guiding themes and germinal metaphors. Some are used in specific instances, inviting us to transfer our attention from one text to another. In both cases the text of Père Goriot must be viewed through the text of the book it addresses. Our responses are intentionally complicated and thickened by this method.
One of the most obvious examples is the death-bed scene which transfers attitudes and motifs from *King Lear*. It raises the subject of bourgeois tragedy to another plane altogether. Another well-known parallelism is that between *Père Goriot* and the Gospels, the latter imposing upon the former a pattern of the sufferings of Christ. This is not to mention what might be called biblical common-place:

"That old bat always makes me shiver," said Bianchon to Vautrin in a low voice, speaking of Mademoiselle Michonneau. "I am studying Gall's system, and I think she has the bumps of a Judas."

It would of course be folly to think literally in these terms, and to evoke the image of the Betrayal for the capture of Vautrin. Yet we should note that Bianchon's insight is convincing not because it has been authenticated by phrenology, but because it is precisely unscientific and intuitive. It gathers its force from the story it suggests, for the mystery of her character, like that of Vautrin, is impossible to communicate as a "realistic" conception. The imposition of Judas upon Gall allows Balzac to suggest souls as well as characters.

The text is full of explicit stage-directions. Two of the most important are concerned with analogues of character:

"The devil!" said the painter, "he would make a splendid model!"

In order to describe the expression of this Christ among fathers, it is necessary to seek a comparison in those pictures in which the princes of the palette have represented the sufferings endured by the Saviour of men for the salvation of the world.

The suggestions of a "model" and a "comparison" and the representational quality of the "palette" point to a formal quality of the narrative. What is really being stated is that a thing ought not to be viewed in itself. Particularly where the Christian mythos is involved, and at those points where values are being suggested, Balzac's method is to involve the reader's sense of the universal—and even to create it.

The Bible of course is not the only vehicle for this intention. I would venture a guess that *Paradise Lost* supplies its own "model" of the "poet of infernal genius, who . . . wore the look of a fallen archangel resolved for war." The temptations of Rastignac are related, I suggest, either to this specific source or to the vast, inchoate body of Christian tradition. Certainly of a more demonstrable order are those allusions made to contemporary literature. Certain writers are introduced briefly to point an allusion: Chateaubriand, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Arlincourt, Guibert de Pixérécourt. Their function is to underline a specific attitude, as when Madame Vauquer says of a drama called *Le Mont Sauvage*: "it is so pretty that we cried like so many Magdalens of Elodie, under the linden trees last summer, and it is moral too. . . ." The allusion gives us some sense of what is worthy of her grief—and of her ethical responsiveness. Mesmer and Gall are
invoked for the apparatus of their theories on evil. Anthropologists like Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire make their presence felt, giving to the narrative its theoretical form of evolutionary development and natural selection.

Balzac's use of *Paul et Virginie* is somewhat more complicated and will perhaps be clarified by passages in apposition:

"There," said he crossing his arms, "is a scene that would have inspired that good Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the author of *Paul et Virginie*. Youth is very beautiful, Madame Couture!—Sleep, my poor boy," said he to Eugène; "fortune comes sometimes when we are sleeping.—Madame," he resumed, addressing the widow, "what I find so attaching and so attractive in this young man is the knowledge that his soul is as beautiful as his face. See, isn't he like a cherub, leaning on the shoulder of an angel? He is really worthy of being loved!"

What need, indeed, had these young people of riches or learning such as ours? Even their necessities and their ignorance increased their happiness. . . . Thus grew these children of nature. No care had troubled their peace, no intemperance had corrupted their blood, no misplaced passion had depraved their hearts. Love, innocence, and piety possessed their souls; and those intellectual graces were unfolding daily in their features, their attitudes, and their movements. Still in the morning of life, they had all its blooming freshness; and surely such in the garden of Eden appeared our first parents. . . .

The cosmic drama which overshadows *Père Goriot*—the drama of temptation, fall, and transformation—has after all its point of origin in Genesis. *Paul et Virginie*, sentimental as it is, contributes strikingly to the mythos of *Père Goriot*. In the "forest" of Paris, we are reminded of the "garden" of the beginning; the preparations for a murder are confronted with the "innocence" of the state of grace; the primitivism of the bestial is contrasted to a primitivism specifically beyond history. In short, we are referred to *Paul et Virginie* in order to complicate and refine our responses. We are forced to read Vautrin's remarks within the atmosphere of Saint-Pierre's envisioning. The more we turn over the pages of *Paul et Virginie* the more we see how themes hinted at in *Père Goriot* are made explicit in the work to which it refers so obliquely. The essential point is that both books describe a state of nature: one does this in a way sentimental and serious, the other in a way ironic and indirect. But the power of irony lies in the fact that it is derivative, that it implies a vision corruptible enough to utilize. There is of course one more difference worth noting. Where *Paul et Virginie* is almost mindlessly sentimental, Vautrin is enormously complex. The balance of his feeling, his sensuality, and his contempt is made exquisitely plain in the remark I have quoted. In a way he is a literary critic.

This is by no means to exhaust the list of literary relationships. In order to imply the moral weakness of Rastignac under temptation Balzac contrasts him with the Alceste of Molière and the Jeanie Deans of Sir Walter Scott, both literary models of moral strength. In order to portray his increasing psychological
disintegration Balzac invokes the character of "Le Distrait" in La Bruyère. The comic elements of this "character" become attached to our conception of Rastignac. Menalca goes through Paris in a whirlwind of confusion, mistaking persons, confounding objects, blind to his own interests, absorbed in some interior dialogue that imprisons him. Much the same can be said metaphorically of Rastignac, who goes from the Maison Vauquer to the gaming tables, from the Mont-de-Piété to the home of the Nucings with all the blind haste and moral ignorance of that figure, which for an ironic moment, he once again brings to life in its satiric fullness.

The great books of the Enlightenment are not addressed specifically, yet they seem to permeate the story. When Balzac observes toward the end of Père Goriot that Rastignac's "education was approaching its completion" he is utilizing a conception made famous by Rousseau and Voltaire. Rastignac is certainly one of the great figures of paideia; his is a personality which forms itself in relation to the social truths by which it is circumscribed. There is of course an irony displayed—his education involves a contradiction between the individual and the citizen, a contradiction made famous by Emile. Rousseau observed of the "natural" man (of whom Vautrin is a representative figure) that he lives for himself: he is the whole unit of existence as opposed to the artificial entity of the state. It is toward this dangerous condition that Rastignac progresses; in other words, the very things feared by Rousseau as forms of moral alienation are exposed (and perhaps mordantly accepted) by Balzac as characteristic of social life.

Perhaps the most penetrating of the literary references in Père Goriot is addressed to this specific problem. At one point Vautrin reminds us of his own literary ancestry: "My passion is the same as that of Pierre and Jaffeur, and I know Venice Preserved by heart." One may presume that Balzac knows this drama thoroughly, and the reader of Père Goriot is well advised to become familiar with it. It is not often, in the novel, that a character gives us such explicit stage-directions concerning the interpretation we are likely to formulate about him.

If there is one phrase that reverberates through Otway's tragedy that phrase is "Nature." And it is always used in the same way, to indicate the violent abuse of individual being by civilized corruption. When Pierre describes the origin of society to Jaffeur he sounds like nothing so much as Vautrin instructing Rastignac:

Jaffeur. I'm thinking, Pierre, how that damned starving quality
   Called honesty, got footing in the world.
Pierre. Why, pow'rful villainy first set it up,
   For its own ease and safety; honest men
   Are the soft, easy cushions on which knaves
   Repose and fatten. Were all mankind villains,
   They'd starve each other; lawyers would want practice,
   Cut-throats rewards; each man would kill his brother
   Himself; none would be paid or hanged for murder.
Honesty was a cheat invented first
To bind the hands of bold deserving rogues,
That fools and cowards might sit in power,
And lord it uncontrolled above their betters.
Jaffier. Then honesty is but a notion?
Pierre. Nothing else;
Like wit, much talked of, not to be defined.

*Venice Preserved* offers a definitive picture of the relationship of Vautrin and Rastignac: the preceptor who is on the side of "Nature" and the pupil striving to formulate his experience. The rhetorical violence of the play suits the mood constructed by Balzac; its passion and anger at the state of society underlie the animosity of both the novelist and his creations. Most important, there is a great divide in *Venice Preserved* between the authenticity of "natural" man and the tyranny of culture. It is an opposition central to the dialogues of Vautrin.

There are of course some vast differences. As the object of parody—and in a central sense all the literary models mentioned in *Père Goriot* are parodied—its grandiloquence is transformed into something more modern and subtle: heroic friendship reappears as homosexuality and sensibility becomes a loathsome form of physical responsiveness. We are expected to draw upon this tragedy for our own responses to Vautrin, and to divide ourselves in the ambiguous way it indicates. It too is a drama of decadence, and it offers to the intellect the dangerous consolations of unleashed feeling and amoral action. It offers as well what has been called the sense of an ending—the operatic finale of *Venice Preserved* shows the whole edifice of human organization toppled by its own weight. The story that begins with the apologetics of philosophy ends in the fact of anarchy.

In summary, I have been trying to indicate the extent of Balzac's interest in literary patterns. The strategy of *Père Goriot* is, I suggest, to filter through its own text the analogies of its intellectual sources. Its mode, finally, is that of comparison. When Balzac uses these sources it is to impose upon the event at hand some consciousness of a larger and often more ironic meaning. His depiction of Victorine—"like an artless picture of the Middle Ages"—brings to our consciousness a disturbing reminder of the lost state of innocence. She becomes part not of a social circumstance but of a moral tradition. When Balzac uses this simile he invokes the nameless "artist" of the Middle Ages to crystallize in painterly detail, in the failure of mere objectivity, the attitude which he is trying to bring forth. He is at the limits of his descriptive power, but not nearly at the limits of his powers of analogy.

The literary mode of *Père Goriot* tells us a good deal about those limits. In his ceaseless strife with representation Balzac periodically addresses a truth beyond the objective. "This Christ among fathers" takes his place in a literary scheme and in a structure of values to which, eventually, the truths of realism are inconsequential. His great antithesis, who "wore the look of a fallen archangel re-
solved for war," is equally part of a grand dialectic. This dialectic will eventually dissolve the temporal world so painstakingly constructed by the author himself. The story does not remain a bourgeois drama but becomes a commentary on its sources. When Balzac pauses, late in the narrative, to reach for the kind of truth that descriptive power can hope to reveal, it is with a graceful sense of failure: "It is necessary," he writes, "to seek a comparison." That, in a sense, has been the mode of Père Goriot; the depth of its metaphors and the breadth of its literary analogies are comparisons in action.