

REVIEW

Review of Allan H. Pasco's *Balzac, Literary Sociologist*

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Allan H. Pasco's innovative *Balzac, Literary Sociologist* shows us how the writings of Honoré de Balzac function as a kind of sociology *avant la lettre*. Pasco's foreword situates his own work as a constellation of thoughtful analyses of Balzac's *Scènes de la vie de province*, structured around the author's depictions of the characters and morals of his time. As his point of departure, Pasco emphasizes that sociology is understood today to be "dealing with 'reality,'" and it is this quality that, first and foremost, would set it apart from fiction (vii). He argues nevertheless that "although Balzac wrote 'fiction,' he believed he was writing the kind of cultural history (*histoire des mœurs*) that we would today call sociology" (vii). Pasco's study focuses on the *Scènes de la vie de province*, in which, Pasco writes, "Balzac rehearses many of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century conclusions of sociology, though in some cases the results that the novelist saw would not be apparent to other observers for well over a century" (21). In addition to situating Balzac as a predecessor of modern sociologists, Pasco highlights the lack of critical attention that has been accorded to some, if not all of the *Scènes de la vie de province*, with *Eugénie Grandet* and *Illusions perdues* being the notable exceptions. Pasco's work here serves to correct this oversight, as this collection of Balzac's works, he writes, best illustrates the sociological project that he has identified; moreover, "[t]he same literary and social concerns apply to it as the rest of Balzac's cycle: Here and elsewhere he was attempting to illustrate his conception of Restoration and July Monarchy society" (22). Pasco situates the *Scènes de la vie de province* as a rich site for the exploration and illustration of the effects of what Balzac views as profoundly negative social change that developed throughout the nineteenth century in France. He reads Balzac as a critic of capitalism and a traditionalist that seeks a return to pre-Revolutionary social order.

Pasco's introduction usefully catalogues the "social happiness, uncertainty, and disruption" leading up to and surrounding Balzac's writings in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the profound impact that it had on France's socioeconomic landscape (8). He suggests that post-Revolutionary France is weakened by the "impotence" of former social structures such as the church, state, law, and family (13). Balzac's writings focus on what results from this failing of the former social order: a "capitalistic society that has laid all virtue to rest" (24). Pasco writes: "[Balzac] comprehended that old structures were no longer viable and that everything was changing to some degree: whether colonies, roads, finance, banking, education, manufacturing, building, communication, journalism, agriculture, or export. And all required capital" (26). Balzac's characters, then, in Pasco's analysis, serve a sociological function insofar as, although they are fictional, they could be real—just as "the reports of many sociological studies hide the true names of real people whose behavior is studied in the authors' reports" (viii). These fictional characters illustrate the very real evils that the bourgeoisie, in Balzac's view, incarnates; for them, the provinces "served as the source of money and fresh human beings for the gluttonous maw of the insatiable Parisian monster" (22).

In each chapter, Pasco presents a cohesive study of one work from the *Scènes de la vie de province*, highlighting Balzac's "penetrating sociological analyses of the provinces" (22). He treats each of the novels of the *Scènes de la vie de province* in chronological order, moving from *Ursule Mirouët* in chapter 1 and concluding with *Illusions perdues* in chapter 11. To examine just one example in greater detail, his sixth chapter, "The Dying Patriarchy: *La Rabouilleuse*," is adapted from an article originally published in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*. In it, Pasco emphasizes that, like many of the novels that make up the *Scènes de la vie de province*, *La Rabouilleuse* "has elicited no champions, a paucity of fans, and little scholarly interest" (117). Pasco shows this work to be an ideal candidate for further study in the context of his own project, and his close readings tie in seamlessly with his overarching critical lens. His analysis focuses on the role of parental influence—or rather, the lack thereof—on Balzac's characters, as well as the diminishing capacity of the patriarchy. He combines a study of both the dedication and the text itself to show how the work illustrates Balzac's criticisms of the bourgeoisie. Pasco reveals how, here as elsewhere, capital becomes the central theme of the novel; in this case, however, it takes on an enhanced role: "The technique of organizing a narration around an object, in this case the inheritance, reflects and, thus, highlights the novel's significance. The novel is set in a society where neither people nor their moral characters are important. Only money matters" (127). The chapter concludes by situating *La Rabouilleuse* in the context of Balzac's larger overarching sociological project: "in Balzac's literary critique of contemporary France, the middle-class arranges things so that vital young people have no future short of crime, exile, or death" (132).

Balzac, Literary Sociologist is an engaging read for both general and specialist audiences. Pasco's work is an important resource for anyone writing about or teaching the *Scènes de la vie de province*, as well as for those considering literature's sociological possibilities. It is sure to interest any reader studying in the history of sociology, the divisions between city and country, or nineteenth-century French studies more broadly. In a time when interdisciplinary approaches to the study of literature are growing in scope and recognition, Pasco's study makes its mark by bridging the gap between the fields of sociology and literature. Indeed, Pasco's study works to foster connections between humanistic and sociological concerns, the boundaries between which are not as clearly drawn as they might seem, both in the nineteenth century and today.