

Representations of Realism in Honoré De Balzac's Novels

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Abstract

European realist authors have one driving force- their vision of literature shows contemporary, typical people and situations, honouring accuracy, and with an aim to unflinchingly address the unpleasant, sordid aspect of life. Far from an idealized version, the Realist claim is to explore the 'rejects' of society. Realism started as an art movement, where the paintings explicitly showed realistic portrayals of human figures and horrific situations. Balzac through his literature explores similar themes, occupying a historical moment where Parisian society comes to terms with and embattles the sphere made turbulent by the far-reaching effects of the French Revolution and an increasingly capitalist society.

Old Goriot conflates the investigation of human nature in its psychological complexity with its larger implications on contemporary social mores and manners. The reader is given an overarching picture of French society and its political/economic terrain, but at a very profound and relatable level, the novel is as much about the domestic, deep human pain of a father repeatedly trying to protect and connect with his daughters. Balzac, along with other realist writers, attempts to render the mundane, everyday life into the extraordinary and these becomes the recurring subjects in his works. This paper also seeks to problematise notions of reality as theorized by writers of this movement and their dependency as well as challenge of a universal, dominant perspective. Balzac's novels are often described as catalogues of materialist and contextual details and the paper aims to negotiate the complex space between the propagation of a hegemonic idea of truth by the author, or in another sense, historical accuracy.

Keywords: European Realism; Balzac; *Old Goriot*; Nineteenth Century; Human Comedy; Contemporary French society

Notions of reality unfold through a complex system of thought and discourse and attempting to question them would quite evidently lead to a vicious circle. Which is to say, that to embark on any analysis, reality would have to be labelled or defined. This is precisely the point at which this paper seeks to make a beginning- that the subjectivization of reality has its roots in the 19th Century Realist movement; its key pioneers being stalwart figures such as Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Zola, Goya and Courbet. It is then logical to examine reality as expressed through the text, whether fictional or theoretical. The purpose of this paper is to examine the works of European Realist key writer Honoré De Balzac; focusing particularly on the novel *Old Goriot*. The novel provides a picture of contemporary society and manners, highlighting the realist project of depicting the lives of everyday characters, the mundane and the ordinary taking up centre stage.

Modernist discursive practices question and critique the tenets of such movements, discounting the reading of a text according to universal values, laws and systems. The word 'text' then takes on multiple ramifications; not only to do with the 'fictionalised' text but also the historical, the sociological or the psychological text. None of these can be entirely separate from the literary one, simply because these subcategories are no longer read as 'factual' or 'truthful' as opposed to the 'fantastical' or the 'fictional'. Quite validly, all of these boundaries are seen to overlap, because truth itself is such a fluid, sceptical term. If the historical text prides itself on recording truth, the literary or fictional text simply claims to present a different kind of truth. Neither of these can be assumed to have a greater value or validity. Furthermore, the act of reading a text adds yet more realities and perceptions to an already dense mass. A critic who has much to say on this subject is Roland Barthes, who remarks in *S/Z*:

This "I" which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite...to read, in fact, is a labour of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept towards other names; names call to each other, reassemble... (10-11)

From the infinite pluralities of text, reader, language and expressive resources, the reality which emerges is equally undefinable.

Balzac's texts lend themselves to these pluralities of text; on the one hand being documentary-like records of the life and times, and on the other, containing within themselves multiple perspectives and tentative exploration of complexity. While the concrete form of the Realism movement largely centred on the nineteenth century, its implications were far-reaching. Moving beyond specificities, it brings forth larger questions on art, literature and representation, none of which have final answers. This paper seeks to examine these questions in some detail and seek to address general issues that emerge from the specificities of the Realist movement. Just a basic examination of the notion of reality and the nature of realistic portrayal contains inherent dangers of drifting into binaries and universal truths. It

would then be better to examine this issue in the light of one of the quintessential proponents of this movement, Honoré de Balzac. If the definition of realism is problematic, it is less so than a writer or an artist's individual perception of it. This paper proposes to address a number of questions vis-à-vis art and literature by way of the examples of the texts of Balzac. Likewise a number of questions are raised. How does he interpret his claim to realism and how narrow or wide is their interpretation? The implications of this question would involve taking into account several factors. Perhaps the most important of these is whether Balzac restricts himself to the rigid confines of the dictates of realism. If not, then it would be relevant to analyse whether and how far he provides an original interpretation of an otherwise rule-oriented theory.

Balzac moves beyond the medium he is primarily known for, i.e., he accompanies his novel-writing with extended discussions on painting keeping in mind his conceptualisation of realism. He stands as a representative and pioneer of the Realism movement, occupying a seminal space at the historical moment when it emerged as a consciously defined movement. He is something of a pioneer in the field of realist literary writing. His initial claim to fame was to outrage the viewing public and disrupt the complacency of the existing academia at the time. Through setting, form and subject matter, he initiated a departure from erstwhile accepted ideas of literary value. The lengthy and intricately formulated descriptions are a catalogue of contemporary Parisian life; but on the other hand, also elide simplification and binaries and render in painstaking details the complexities of individual characters and situations. It combines within its limited canvas multiple narratives and points of view. No one character or theme is granted more importance than the others. It is almost impossible to pinpoint the focus of the work. The synchronic space which is available to Balzac has been used to express depth and myriad narratives. He maintains an unfolding narrative, an incomplete and forever evolving space, to portray character through its development as a consequence of experience. The idea of beauty is also a preoccupation in these principles, being effectively juxtaposed with the seedy and unpleasant, an idea expounded in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*. Beauty in the subject apparently can be comprehended if the individual has the perceptive powers, or acquires them, to absorb all its nuances.

One of the many implications of the term 'realism' would include its avoidance of idealisation. There can be elements of romanticization in the most 'realistic' of depictions. One of the features of Balzac's writing is that he strives again and again to escape from this element. This in itself is not very significant since there are plenty of writers who purport to represent ordinary life. But while Balzac may paint pictures of peasants and the working classes, he refrains from sentimentalising these subjects. His novels reveal a preoccupation to show the truth in its naked brutality. The result of this is that he does not elevate any of his characters, or turn them into heroic figures. He is actively involved in the politics of his time and a self-proclaimed socialist in a sense. But this does not mean that his novels have the political agenda of garnering sympathy for the working classes. He can show them as petty, devious, very human and capable of wrongdoing and evil. Aside from this, he is at pains to show the life of his people as it actually is, and so he does not necessarily pick

up significant events but rather, everyday incidents, showing the position and way of life of the working classes of French society. The colours and imagery used are muted, pastel shades. There is little effort to brighten them up even for the purpose of prettifying the writing, or making it aesthetically appealing. The dullness of the colouring might make it possible for the viewer to bypass the depiction, which is of course the idea in the first place. Balzac describes in lengthy detail precisely the kind of scenes one might bypass without noticing. If ordinary life is to be the theme of Balzac's works, he makes efforts to remain true to this consistently.

The depictions of working classes and class hierarchies in *Old Goriot* are distinctly divided, particularly through the structure of the book, which alternates between the settings of the Maison Vaquar and the Faubourgh Saint-Germain. "As well as exemplifying life in nineteenth-century France, each character plays a symbolic role, which Balzac frequently underlines like an artist adding captions to his drawings; just as he heightens the contrasts of his tableau: age and youth, poverty and wealth, the glittering Faubourg Saint-Germain and the festering Latin Quarter" (Robb, xxiii). The aristocracy and the fashionable society of Paris are shown to have as much of a grotesque, seamy side as the so-called lower classes. This is subtly brought out by means of characterisation, situation and the unfolding of an inner life of some of the characters.

Thus, the constant questioning of accepted rules of literary value are at the forefront in Balzac's writing. What the artist seems to be trying to say is that it is limited to accept only certain subjects and certain events as material for good art. A profound question that has already been raised by this movement is being asked here; what are the factors that contribute to the making of good literary subjects? Can there be any fixed definition and if so, who decides that definition. Balzac subverted the canon of literary studies, in a sense, by his interpretation of it. *The Human Comedy* employs an enormous canvas normally only reserved for battles, historical events or mythology, and is Balzac's way of stressing both the importance and the realism of what he is creating. The effect is both that of reduction and elevation, that is, the reduction of erstwhile notions of literary value and the elevation of contemporary, everyday subjects that are as much an intrinsic part of life, and more. Balzac renders the ordinary and quotidian as extraordinary in *Old Goriot* and it is to his credit that his working class, ordinary protagonist, Goriot, elicits as much compassion as any great historical figure. Again, a similar pattern is evident there; the idea that the subjects for a good novel can very well be those nobody would consider as worthy of notice. It is not just the protagonist who belongs to the working class but also the other characters, either in situation or origin.

Balzac achieves complex effects through the hundred- odd page canvas available to him. These are also dependent on the reader's ability to understand signs and symbols used by the author so that a shared understanding is enabled of the reality he is trying to create. It is useful to examine how Balzac uses materials available to him through the literary medium and the extent to which he is able to manage complexity and depth. When Balzac included *Old Goriot* as part of the series called *The Human Comedy*, he intended to paint a picture of

society historically, socially and culturally. An issue that will be addressed is whether his analysis becomes perspectivised or if he actually manages to achieve this aim. In other words, does the novel portray an adequate picture of reality and does it conform to the dictates of the Realist movement? It is certainly so by way of intention. The title *The Human Comedy* is telling and aims to encompass what Crawford describes as “characters drawn from every stratum of society, and every trade and profession, reflecting the whole of life in every aspect and every sphere of human activity (6).” This is somewhat proved by the sheer array of characters in the novel, all of whom belong to varied social positions from every section of society. This implies characters as wide apart as ex-convicts, lawyers, glittering high- society members from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, aristocrats gone to seed, students and so on. If sheer quantity can paint a realistic picture, then *Old Goriot* has its day. It remains to be seen, however, if simply external details contribute to the making of reality, or is just one cog in the proceedings. If the latter is true, then it would be essential to examine the way in which other elements are introduced to lend cohesion and depth to this piece of literature. One of these jigsaw pieces consists in the immense and sometimes obsessive detailing in the descriptions all over the book. The landscapes create form not just a superficial setting or backdrop, but in fact set the foundation for multiple thematic strands running all through the novel. What the reader has, then, is the creation of a landscape which is both pictorial and contains depth in that it possesses certain underlying tones that need to be deciphered. An important motif to be noted here is that of polarities. The use of diametric opposites in the landscape is far from incidental. Thus, there are two major locations described in detail in the novel, and it is fitting that both belong to oppositional ends in the spectrum of society. The Vaquar Pension is where the lowest dregs of society, its rejects, gather together. On the other end, the Faubourg Saint-Germain is the domain of the aristocratic classes. Realistic detailing is given to both these places, but the structure can stand alone in taking on ethical and moral tone (Auerbach in Brooks 320). The possibility of depth and multiple meanings in the ostensibly physical landscape created by the realists can be examined through a detailed analysis of the description at the very beginning of the book. This is of Madame Vaquar’s boarding house.

This dwelling combines within itself paradoxical motifs. On the one hand, it is built up, practically brick by brick, so as to painstakingly give as accurate a description as possible. On the other hand, there is an inescapable sense of mystery throughout; hints that each inhabitant is hiding a dubious past or present. Nicole Mozet identifies two phases that Balzac uses as a literary device. This is a method to both maintain richness and depth of plot, as well as sustain the interest of the reader. The initial phase is the concealment and disguise phase, and the final is revelation. In relation to this, Mozet has a comment on Balzac’s tedious and seemingly unnecessary details of the boarding house:

From the concealment phase come all the details that can’t be explained away except by attributing them to a realist concern for minutia; the overdone description of the placement of the house with respect to the street, for instance, the size of the gravel...given that we can’t locate their architectural or aesthetic significance, we

must interpret their various measurements and bits of information as so many intentionally negative signs... (Mozet 350)

Each object in the boarding house, no matter how insignificant, is invested with another layer of meaning. A quintessential theorization of the Realist movement is the detailing in descriptions of surroundings. However, Balzac's descriptions are neither superficial nor cold-blooded and do not work with the simple intention of transposing a landscape. On the contrary, the aim is to create a milieu. Much of the process of reading the book depends on the ability of the reader to decode these signifiers and create linkages between the physical object, the effect it creates and the intended meaning. Barthes has much to say on a subject like this. What he would define as an orchestration of connotations takes place in the lengthy descriptions of the pension to contribute towards the imposition of an ideology and a manner of perceiving.

A striking quality of the manner in which the detailing progresses is its pictorial quality. The author seems to be of the view that a visual image cannot be created in the mind of the reader without merciless attention to every aspect of the surroundings. The address is then given right down to the name of the street and the neighbouring buildings, ostensibly unnecessary details. But it is Balzac's way of saying that the milieu and events he is going to talk about are so real that they can actually exist. One also needs to remember that a street might have significance and certain associations just by virtue of its name. In other words, the location would give an initial hint of which class or level in society the object or person who is about to be described belongs to. In contrast to the mechanically stated address, there follows the mention of "gloomy colours" and "heavy thoughts (28)" and further, of "empty skulls" and "withered hearts (29)." These are obviously value-loaded terms rather than detached opinions. It also hints or rather foreshadows that the events that are going to take place within these surroundings would have a dark edge to them. The author constantly enables a physical descriptive statement to suggest a mental one. He also undercuts these phrases in the very next line with an ominous one. The statue of the God of Love in the garden of the boarding house takes on just such a note when it is further described to have a "chipped, scaling surface" which makes it look like "a patient for one of the nearby hospitals (29)." There is an emphasis on the idea that the surface value of things cannot always be trusted, and even the simplest of objects can carry multiple connotations. For instance, even the picnic table set up in the garden for the tenants to enjoy is quaint but "hot enough to hatch out eggs (30)." In the exterior surroundings of the house, there is an obvious effort to bring in undertones of distrust, an intention far from merely observed reality.

The exteriors of the house have already provided multiple hints as to what might be the personality and situation of its inmates. The spaces within the house itself take this motif even further. It is an opportunity to utilise a talent that Balzac possesses of a superior quality, that is, portraying people. Here again, seemingly tiny and obscure objects are described in much detail. However, this has an ultimate useful purpose because it employs what Peter Brooks calls the method of 'signification'. He further goes on to say that "we can observe the narrator working upon the details of the reality ...to make them release latent significances

(314-315).” Syntactically speaking, the atmosphere being described does not remain just that for long, it becomes inextricably linked to descriptions of character. This is worked out both directly and indirectly in this lengthy description. Every single object within the Maison Vaquar, from the furniture to the wine bottles to the food, is musty and decayed. This skilful use of spaces complicates the documentary-style intent and instead enables the novel to “resist categories” (Berman 8). Berman comments that “To be simply realistic is to particularize but here and in many other instances Balzac is bent upon universalising” (9). The characters in the Maison Vaquar complement seamlessly and become metaphors/products of their surroundings, compelling the reader to make connections as well as experience the psychological depth of universal human experience.

The complexity of *Old Goriot* is brought about by the author through what Anthony Pugh calls the camera technique, where “the camera moves along a street, or through a building sufficiently leisurely for us to take in the detail. After the inanimate exposition comes the animation...” (2). Balzac’s characters take on life and energy with individually described quirks, shades of grey and unfolding narrative. The author deliberately does not impose control or an overarching omniscient voice and the inhabitants of the novel retain a sufficient sense of unpredictability. Along this vein, the personalities elide allegory or symbolism and as mentioned earlier, idealisation. For example, Goriot’s devotion to his daughters may well provide a contrast to the materialist-driven environment of Paris, but the character is also atypical. “Like a strange bacterium, he feeds on lies and self-deception” (Robb xxiii). He elicits mixed responses from the reader, as does the Vaquar boarding house itself; the meticulous details of street sign and room numbers accommodate many secrets, mysteries and clues where every object takes on “an organic life of its own” (Robb xxvii). The eschewal from idealisation reflects in the portrayal of the economically deprived sections and the working classes:

The men wore frock-coats whose colour you’d be hard-pressed to define, shoes of the kind found discarded in the road of fashionable districts, linen hanging by a thread, clothes stripped of all but their soul...Yet despite these clothes, almost without exception they had solid physiques, constitutions which had survived life’s storms and cold hard faces...Their thin lips contained greedy teeth (*Old Goriot* 11).

The portraits of Mademoiselle Michonneau as well as Victorine, along with the protagonist, Eugene de Rastignac, are similarly variable.

Old Goriot, a pioneering Realist text, combines documentation with complexity in order to display the infinite variety of life in the metropolis. The incomplete project of Balzac’s ‘human comedy’ escapes the rigid categorisation and rules associated with Realism and Naturalism. The novels, with recurring characters and plots that form bildungsromans for many, attain an epic-like scale, covering vast range of human experience. The author also complicates the notion of depicting reality as set out in the principles of the Realist movement.

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