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Balzac: Literary Sociologist. By ALLAN H. PASCO. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. xiv + 290 pp. £66.99. ISBN 978-[3-319-39332-2](#).

It was the ambition of Balzac's *Comédie humaine* to exhaustively portray the different stages of human life, from infancy to adulthood. In this evolution, the novels constituting the *Scènes de la vie de province* analysed by Alan Pasco represent 'the threshold of maturity' (36) : from Pierrette to Lucien de Rubempré, Balzacian characters adopt strategies to make their place in the world. It is therefore a judicious vantage point from which to explore what changes and remains of French society under the Restoration and the July monarchy, and to illustrate the book's foundational hypothesis, which is that Balzac is on a par with the likes of Saint-Simon in his ambition of giving a definite interpretive model to the fast-changing society he lived in, which is still very much ours. This portrait of Balzac as a proto-sociologist is now a widely accepted critical assumption; but what is innovative is Pasco's meticulous demonstration of its relevance in a series of ten close readings, most of them reassessing works generally neglected by Balzacian critics. There are two overarching themes in Pasco's analyses: firstly, Balzac's world is presented as an oppositional social force field, as the protagonists negotiate their positions between a series of conflicting powers or possibilities, such as traditional religious beliefs and the modern cult of gold (*Eugénie Grandet*), or Parisian energy and provincial apathy (*Le Curé de Tours*, *L'Illustre Gaudissart*). Secondly, Balzac's worldview is determined by his conviction that at the centre of the social order lies a dangerous institutional void, or, to use Pasco's word, an 'impotence' (13): neither the Catholic church, nor the state, the law or an ageing Restoration aristocracy are able to provide France with a clear sense of direction. More crucially perhaps, the paternal figure of authority has been destroyed both symbolically (by the killing of Louis XVI, a national patricide) and literally, by Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, which left France a country 'limited to grandfathers, women, and children' (248). Pasco's most successful pages are devoted to the opposition between the burning ambition of youth and the resistance of a still powerful gerontocracy (*Le Cabinet des Antiques*, *Pierrette*). The dysfunctions caused by the lack of paternal power are accentuated by a complex of economic undercurrents: while faster means of transportation and communication undermine the seemingly eternal divisions between Paris and the provinces, a stagnant economy means the transformative potential of French youth remains untapped. Pasco convincingly shows how the absence of fathers and the frustrations of a new generation stopped in its steps by the defiance of the old world lies at the heart of Balzac's social concerns. In doing so, he also breathes new

life into the analysis of some of Balzac's lesser studied works (*Ursule Mirouët*, *Pierrette*, *La Rabouilleuse*). Together with well-known masterpieces such as *Illusions perdues*, they create a meaningful ensemble linked not only by a common pattern of social relations but also by a rich web of allusions and cross-references. One such cross-reference is, again, that of the threshold : in the first pages of *Ursule Mirouët*, a bridge leads the reader away from Paris to Nemours and the *Scènes de la vie de province* ; by the time *Illusions perdues* closes, Lucien has joined Vautrin in his carriage, and the *Scènes de la vie parisienne* begin. This book does justice to the liminal nature of the works it studies, both thematically and stylistically. It is well served by Pasco's effortless and joyful erudition. While minute attention to Balzac's language (and notably onomastics) sometimes leads the author well away from the general theme of 'literary sociology', the book and each of its individual chapters are invaluable additions to Balzacian criticism, and a timely reconsideration of the *Scènes de la vie de province*.

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