Trousers That Are Not Trousers: The Primacy of Materiality in Balzac's Paris

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Honoré de Balzac writes, in his 1835 novel *Le Père Goriot,* "Money is life. If you have cash, you can do anything" (*Old Man Goriot* 205).[1] Balzac, who was intimately acquainted with the hierarchy of wealth in Restoration society, revealed the veiled contours of wealth and its inevitable implications on the lives of men and women, most notably their material realities. With his sociological eye, Balzac depicted the effects of wealth disparity with an authenticity and evocative power that few empirical analyses have been able to match. Drawing from the norms in 19th century Parisian society, Balzac's social realistic stylistic approach identifies and personifies the love of money. His literary realism uncovers the importance and preponderance of economic realities over feelings and ideas. However, it was not money alone that was of central importance to Balzac; it was the appearances that could be obtained with money, the destinies that could be unlocked by real material things and the power they signified. Balzac's work embodies an all-encompassing preoccupation with the material, where money and its manifestations compose the structure and meaning of his series of novels, *La Comèdie humaine*. In the social and physical world Balzac creates, the beginning and end of all feelings, beliefs, and mores is gold and its subsequent material benefits. This distinct cognizance of economic and social realities in *La Comèdie humaine* is strikingly similar to the necessary and universal emphasis on economics and the material in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Balzac's literary realism had a profound effect on the founders of Communism, Marx and Engels, who referenced Balzac's body of work in multiple letters and articles. Both thinkers shared Balzac's material fixation, as one could

[1] This paper references the English translation of the novel, but I will refer to the French title throughout.

not live in the tumultuous industrial age without recognizing the effects of the media of exchange. Despite some theoretical divergence, the emphasis on materialism presented in *Père Goriot* contains links to the broader philosophical materialism that ultimately shaped a central aspect of Marx's theoretical construct of historical and dialectical materialism. In the preface to the 1888 English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels identifies the fundamental proposition which forms the nucleus of the work, stating that,

> "In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch, that consequently the whole history of mankind…has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes" (*The Communist Manifesto* 5).

This systematic approach to human history carries a Balzacian resonance, in which the prevailing mode of economic production and its material implications comprise the social substructure.

Marx's and Engels's private letters and public articles indicate their admiration of and the influence of literary realism. Karl Marx praised "the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers" in an article for the *New York Tribune*. He further stated that realistic novelists' "graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" (Marx in *New-York Tribune* 1854- "The English Middle Class"). For Marx and Engels, realism represented not only a trend in literature, but a formidable achievement in the world of aesthetics. Engels, in an 1888 letter to Margaret Harkness in London, argued that, "Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances" (*Letters: Marx-Engels Correspondence*). This emphasis on truth and realistic representation of environment was not intended to merely copy reality but represented an

aesthetic tool to infiltrate and reflect the essence of a social and historical phenomenon. Literary realism made it possible to reveal the traits of a particular temporal context in ways that are useful to modern scholars who wish to grasp such an essence.

Marx views language, and subsequently literature, as a reflection of particular social conditions and relationships. "Language," wrote Marx, "is practical consciousness …language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men… Consciousness is therefore from the beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (*The German Ideology* 19). This view indicates Marx and Engels' belief that social relations, class antagonisms and the conditions for the development of human individuality, have significant bearing on literary consciousness, determining its nature and development. This social emphasis is emblematic of Balzac's work.

Engels too described Balzac's brilliance as a novelist in the 1888 letter and highlighted a specific fondness for Balzac's treatment of economic and material details. In the letter, Engels states that Balzac gives the reader, "A most wonderfully realistic history of French society…in economic details, (for instance the rearrangement of real and personal property after the Revolution) …I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together" (1888 Letter). Engels' appraisal of Balzac bears a striking similarity to Marx's article in the *New York Tribune,* written 34 years prior. The similarity of their praise indicates the profound impact that Balzacian social realism had on the two thinkers. Balzac was so appealing to Marx and Engels precisely because of his truthfulness of depiction, his concrete historical approach to the events and characters described, and his emphasis on the importance of material reality. Here in the 1888 letter, the mention of the material, in this case personal property, accentuates the commonality of materialism in the thinking of

all three writers. This fixation on personal property is nearly always present in *Le Père Goriot*.

Balzac's world is saturated with the contradictions between the exploitative capitalist system and the humanist ideals so lauded by Parisian society. This contradiction is reflected in the trajectory of the young social climber, Eugène Rastignac, who "Like other noble souls…first wanted to succeed on merit alone…[and] was soon side-tracked by the need to make the right connections" (*Old Man Goriot* 29). Rastignac's forked path to material and social success is rife with moral dilemmas. The young man is nearly always pulled in multiple directions by filial piety, the criminal mastermind Vautrin's temptations, the beckoning comforts of high society, his sense of idealism, his increasing understanding of Goriot himself, and ultimately, his love of Goriot's beloved daughter, Delphine, which is material in nature.

Balzac's realism represents a vast accumulation of real and realistic, people, cities, houses, furniture, clothing and currencies, all of which are interrelated. Indeed, trousers are not merely trousers; they are signifiers of social status and carry significant metaphorical weight, not to mention golden "Louis d'or" coins. Upon receiving much needed funding from his family members, Eugène felt as if, "The world belonged to him! His tailor had already been summoned…Rastignac had understood the influence that tailors exercise over the lives of young men… Eugène found his to be a man who understood the paternal side of his trade, seeing himself as the link between a young man's present and future… 'I know', he said, 'two pairs of his trousers that made matches worth twenty thousand livres per year'" (*Old Man Goriot* 88). Here, Balzac is unambiguous in establishing the primacy of belongings and the power they signal. Eugène's immediate plan upon receiving an infusion of cash is to acquire new trousers, so that he might be seen in them and make a match worth twenty thousand or more livres per year. Balzac is aware of the magnificent

power of trousers, of material, of what something as quotidian as trousers can do for their wearer.

Whether intentional or not, Balzac's descriptive satire of this avaricious social reality effectively condemned the moral rot of capitalist society. It is no question that bourgeois society produced Balzac, who despite his own class position, was capable of transcending his particular environment to view society as a whole to produce a true and vibrant picture of real life. Balzac's development of individual character traits, best exemplified by the inhabitants of that respectable boarding house, *La Maison Vauque*r, reflects typical aspects of the character and psychology of the class milieu to which they belong. In the very beginning of *Goriot*, Balzac states that, "this drama is neither fiction nor romance. *All is true,* so true that we may each recognize elements of it as close to home, perhaps even in our hearts" (*Old Man Goriot* 4). While aspects of the story are almost certainly fictionalized, Balzac signals to the reader that he communicates his ideas not by didactic philosophizing, but through vivid images of the real. Such images represent a clear understanding of the dynamic interchange between people, classes, and socioeconomic forces, which are intended to affect the reader with their artistic expressiveness. All this well describes the standard explanation of Balzacian realism, that there is an external reality, independent of the text, that Balzac does a good job of reflecting. A more interpretive reading acknowledges that realism is not necessarily a translation of a pre-existing reality but a manifestation of that reality itself; it is, in a sense, the experience itself.

This is not to say that Balzac was any sort of proto-Marxist revolutionary. He does not necessarily promulgate progressive ideas or defend the interests of the progressive forces in society, despite the fact that Marx and Engels were deeply convinced that realist literature must reflect the deep-lying, dynamic processes of a particular epoch, which Balzac' does. In fact, Balzac was deeply entrenched

in the social relations of the day. He was a legitimist, a royalist, and wrote for money (Lyons 146). The serialization of his work was based on an urgent need to make money; money to pay for his expensive material tastes that he had cultivated as part of his integration into Parisian high society. Balzac, a self-described reactionary and monarchist, was less concerned with the overthrow of the existing system than Marx or Engels were. In his 1888 letter, Engels wrote how

> "Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the inevitable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply – the nobles. And the only men of whom he always speaks with undisguised admiration, are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloître Saint-Méry" (1888 Letter).

Despite his admiration of the "republican heroes," Balzac's intentions are not those of the provocateur. He does not seem as focused on where things may be going; rather he is singularly fixated on illustrating how things are in Restoration society with as much detail as possible, showing it all to the reader.

Balzac's ability to depict genuine passions and the multiple facets of the human character generates a portrait of Parisian material life that exposes the suffering and the absurdity of humans operating under capitalist relations. Balzac's bourgeois society is hostile, and rife with collusions, alienation, and tragedy. Perhaps the ultimate tragedy is personified in the life of the eponymous character of the novel, old Goriot himself. Identified by his mercantile title, "the vermicelli dealer," Goriot represents the socioeconomic prime directive of post-revolutionary France: accumulate capital and spend it on material items that denote social significance. As Balzac introduces the character, he describes that, "Goriot arrived fitted out with an opulent wardrobe, the magnificent trousseau of a merchant with the means to treat himself on retiring from trade. Madame Vauquer, [the landlady], had admired eighteen cambric shirts, whose exquisite

quality she found all the more remarkable for the two pins joined by a fine chain, each set with a huge diamond, that the vermicelli dealer wore on his shirt frill" (*Old Man Goriot* 17-18). Goriot's opulent possessions, namely clothing and gilded trinkets, are meant to be shown off, to indicate his social stature, emblematic of the materiality in Balzac's world.

The tragic nature of Goriot's life is inexorably tied to the material, and his degeneration over the course of the story is at all points based in material circumstances. This idea is best exemplified by the transformation of his most prized possession. As he unpacks his belongings at La Maison, Goriot reveals "a platter and a small dish with two kissing turtle-doves on its cover…the first present my wife ever gave me, on our anniversary…It cost her every penny of her maiden's savings…I would rather scrape a living from the earth, with my bare nails than part with this" (*Old Man Goriot* 18). Later, Eugène secretly observes Goriot as he shapes "a silver-gilt platter and what looked like a tureen…into ingots…Old Goriot contemplated his handiwork sadly, tears trickled from his eyes" (*Old Man Goriot* 33). In a powerful display of what Engels called "rearrangement of real and personal property" in his 1888 letter, this transformation of sentimental artifact into material commodity is symbolic of deeply emotional sacrifices one makes to acquire cash, in this case intended for Goriot's grasping daughters. Balzac intentionally tugs at the reader's heart strings, not to sensationalize, but to indicate the reality of these kinds of sacrifices, which are also made by Eugène's family, all to acquire new material goods to keep up appearances and ascend to the next rung of the social ladder. The objectivity and realism of Goriot's story speak to Balzac's focus on the material, and the broader human experience of suffering and endless striving in pursuit of capital.

The material emphasis in *Père Goriot* contains links to the historical materialism espoused by Marx and Engels, but the two are not entirely similar. Materialism is a difficult to define, and this paper will consider two definitions. The

first is a standard definition: a preoccupation with material rather than intellectual or spiritual things. This is the definition that is most pertinent to Balzac's aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The second, a philosophical definition: the only thing that can be said to truly exist is material substance. In this philosophical definition of materialism, one can identify the idealist/materialist split that dominated much of nineteenth-century philosophy. Broadly, idealism, which takes the process of thinking as the primary ontological reality, is opposed to materialism or naturalism, which sees matter and its movements as the primary ontological reality.

Much like his philosophy, Marx's relationship with materialism is rife with contradiction. To call Marx a "materialist" is misleading, as he is concerned, like Balzac, with conditions of material reality, but he is not an ontological materialist in the philosophical sense. Marx was profoundly influenced by a Hegelian conception of rationality in which logic equates to ontology, and in which ontology thus equates to mind (*Marx Engels Reader xx-xxi*). To call Marx a pure materialist, or an ontological materialist who believes that the world is ultimately material and nothing more, would be false. Marx wished to take no position on the ultimate question of reality, rather his position was more pragmatic; he wished to address the real concerns of human beings (Megill 8). What really concerns human beings is not "What is the nature of reality," but rather "How are we to engage the social and natural world that surrounds us?" (Megill 8). Marx is therefore concerned with material reality as well.

For Marx, Engels, and other nineteenth-century thinkers, history, change, and consolidating the sheer volume of systematic knowledge became of central concern. Marx suggests that "we see how consistent naturalism or humanism differs both from idealism and materialism and is at the same time their unifying truth. We also see that only naturalism is capable of comprehending the process of world history (*Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy- Early Writings* 389.) In dealing with this contradiction, Marx indicates that he has drawn

from both sides of the material/ideal split, that man has a material nature but he also has a thinking nature. This empirical feature of humanity indicates a reconstitution of the split. Many intellectual historians argue that Marx was a synthesizer of ideas, that he was not an original thinker and merely incorporated ideas that came to him from elsewhere. Indeed, Marx's historical materialism comes largely from Hegel's dialectic, developed in *History of Philosophy*. There is some validity to this criticism, but one must not ignore the breadth and applicability of the synthesis itself (Megill 36). Marx's broader project was to bring together, in one way or another, the disparate parts of human knowledge. In nineteenth-century literary figures, especially Balzac, one can also identify a similar vein of synthesis, whose aim was to create a stylistically unified and broad-ranging description of his immediate material and psychological reality.

Like Marx, Balzac understands the connection between material and psychological elements, and ultimately ascribes more significance to the material. In *Goriot,* materiality is inevitably tied to psychological impact, best expressed in sentimental material artifacts, which represent the material/ideal synthesis. Balzac describes the scene at Goriot's deathbed, where the old man reaches a hand towards his chest, grasping for his locket and

> uttered plaintive, inarticulate cries, as an animal does when in terrible pain…Eugène went to fetch the plaited chain of ash-blonde hair, presumably belonging to Madame Goriot. On one side of the locket was engraved 'Anastasie' and on the other 'Delphine': a mirror image of his heart… As he felt the locket touch his chest, the old man let out a long, deep sigh of such contentment…one of the last echoes of his sensibility (*Old Man Goriot* 249-50).

The locket, like the silver gilt platter, indicates the unquestionable power of material possessions saturated with emotional significance. Without the locket, Goriot cries out like an animal, as a fundamental piece of his humanity is

contained within the trinket, no doubt an indication of Balzac's emphasis on the material.

The most significant divergence between Balzac and Marx/Engels views of materialism rests in the agency of the human in relation to material reality. Balzac's materialism is a bourgeois materialism, in which sensuous material reality affects the human observer through the medium of the senses, which stir up emotional and psychological effects. Here, the external world is the active element, a dynamic force that impresses itself upon the receptive mind. Balzac's characters are not static observing beings, but dynamic forces that react to the environment around them. Upon receiving money from his family, Eugène's near-suicidal disposition transforms instantaneously. Balzac describes that, "As soon as a few notes slide into a student's pocket, an imaginary pillar of support rises up inside him. He walks taller than before, senses a fulcrum giving him leverage…yesterday timid and humble, he would have cowered under a shower of blows; today he has it in him to punch a Prime Minister" (*Old Man Goriot* 88). The profound impact that money and its potential have upon Eugène's psychology in this scene reinforces the importance of material possessions. Furthermore, material circumstances impress themselves upon human agents, exemplified when Balzac writes that "[Eugène's] last remaining scruples had vanished the previous evening when he found himself in his new rooms. Now that he enjoyed the material benefits of wealth…he had shed his provincial skin and smoothly made a move that pointed to a promising future" (*Old Man Goriot* 199). Such is the nature of the intersection between class, personal ambition, and materiality, a cash nexus where shallow values are quickly abandoned in favor of material comforts.

The crucial distinction between Balzac's materiality and historical materialism is in Marx's view that the human position in society is not purely that of an observer, but that of a force that impacts the world, and changes history

through the negating or overturning of existing systems through dialectical progress. In *The German Ideology,* Marx writes that

> "the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature…the writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men" (*The German Ideology* 149).

For Marx and Engels, the passive bourgeois materialism will indeed be naturally superseded by the active part of history, the technical, production-oriented transformation of the world by human agency. Balzac himself was a thorough observer of reality, perhaps his view of this subject/object problem was influenced by his activity as an observer (Mortimer 99). Balzac's characters, like their author, are not concerned with changing the external world, as they have seen the grizzly consequences of the revolution. Rather, Balzac's Parisians seem more concerned with navigating a city that he describes as inordinate, disorganized, and chaotic, almost to an absurd degree.

Balzac describes nearly all his characters as operatives in the frenetic striving for social ascendance but does not characterize them as shaping history in the same manner that Marx and Engels do. These characters are so fixated on obtaining money and objects to climb the social ladder that they become passive actors in the broader trajectory of society, the historical materialist project that Marx is so concerned with. The characters are idealistic; Balzac describes "the *Parisiennes* who now fulfilled [Eugène's] dream of ideal beauty [and] the uncertain future of this large family, one that rested on his shoulders…fueled his desire to succeed and tripled his yearning for distinction" (*Old Man Goriot* 29). The primary activity of Balzac's Parisians is not to shape the world, but to allot their efforts to secure the material aspects necessary to appear as though they have ascended to a higher social class. Balzac's moneyed classes only wish to see and

be seen, like peacocks, showing off their plumage, content to trot about the palace grounds and peck at scraps of "the obvious material delights of Paris" (*Old Man Goriot* 28). Regardless of the characters' lack of history-making praxis, Balzac's emphasis on materiality parallels that of Marx and Engels, who placed the materialist conception of history at the center of their project.

Père Goriot is a masterful and accurate display of materialistic Parisian life, where "love is essentially vainglorious, shameless, wasteful, flashy, and false" (*Old Man Goriot* 199). In this central novel of *La Comèdie humaine,* we have come to identify and isolate the components of Balzac's social realism, an interpretive tool which enabled the transposition of the author's acute perception of social reality. Indeed, Marx and Engels identified social realism as a truthful and authentic method of encapsulating the struggles of a particular temporal context. Balzac's realism amounts to a capacity for re-counting the same reality formulated theoretically by Marx and Engels and designates a clear implication of the primacy of materialism. Despite some theoretical divergence, all three writers ultimately shared this material fixation, and developed their works around this nucleus. In the words of Engels,

> [Balzac] describes how the last remnants of [*la viellie politesse française*], to him, the model society gradually succumbed before the intrusion of the vulgar moneyed upstart…how the grand dame whose conjugal infidelities were but a mode of asserting herself in perfect accordance with the way she had been disposed of in marriage, gave way to the bourgeoisie, who horned her husband for cash or cashmere; and around this central picture he groups a complete history of French Society (1888 Letter).

The cash or cashmere of the vulgar moneyed upstart are personifications of Balzacian materiality, the glittering gilded focal point that illuminates the entire edifice of *Le Père Goriot*.

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