

Article

## Balzac and the Crimes of the Powerful

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes a journey through some of the many novels written by Honoré de Balzac, through the mythic constitution of his world, his epic, which summons up the same recurrent circle of figures: his “human comedy” will offer surprising insights for a better understanding of the crimes of the powerful.

**Keywords:** power; crime; criminal criminologists; ruthlessness; interests; spectres

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The secret of great fortunes without apparent cause is a crime forgotten, for it was properly done.

—Le Père Goriot

### 1. Introduction: Crime and Fiction

For Aristotle [1], the difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes prose and the other verse. The real difference, in his view, is that the former tells what happened, while the latter what might happen. For this reason poetry, and for that matter, fiction, are more scientific and serious than history, as they tend to give general truths, whereas history only gives particular facts. By general truth, Aristotle meant the sort of thing that certain types of people will do or say, either probably or necessarily. Giambattista Vico [2] echoes this view, when he equates fiction to the *verisimile*, namely an ideal truth that conforms to the common sense of all citizens. Fiction is not a mere product of the imagination. The beings of fiction do exist and impose themselves on us. Don Juan exists in as much as we discuss his exploits with the same passion with which we permeate our judgment of concrete events [3]. By the same token, Vautrin, Rastignac, Eugène Grandet and Père Goriot exist, and it for us to read these characters and their undertakings criminologically, in order to complete, or perhaps even modify, our understanding of wrongdoing. Of course, interpretations may diverge, but if this is so, it is because the

work we interpret possesses many folds and engenders a variety of subjective reactions. Fictional characters populate our world and our mind, but they need our solicitude, in the sense that we need to “take them in”, and “if we don’t appreciate them, they risk disappearing altogether” [3] (p. 242). They have this peculiarity, then: they become objectively existing beings when we encounter them and reprise them through our subjectivity. In brief, we complement with our creative work that performed by their creator [4]. Fiction, therefore, is a communicative event bringing people together and eliciting in them the need to weigh, discuss and compare values.

## 2. Ruthlessness

Balzac draws circles around social groups: the nobility, the clergy, manual workers, poets, artists, scientists, criminals, and so on. He then condenses such groups into one character, so that a hundred different bankers form the Baron de Nucingen and an infinity of usurers form Gobseck.

“The first lesson Balzac’s young people have to learn is ruthlessness. They know that their numbers are excessive, and that they must therefore gobble one another up ‘like spiders in a pot’, as Vautrin observes” [5] (p. 13).

Competitive environments require the toughening of energies, the conversion of intelligence into cunning and of beauty into vice. Balzac’s heroes are avid, and all marketable goods propel their greed, including power. Obstacles to one’s success must be thumped and rivals poisoned, if necessary. We are right at the core of what criminologists describe as the crimes of the powerful, namely offences that are not the result of social disadvantage and exclusion, but of their exact opposite.

Following the appreciation of Engels, we can learn from Balzac more than from any historian about the birth of the bourgeoisie in France, this new emerging elite, this aristocracy devoid of nobility, in a country disillusioned by a failed revolution and a fallen empire. In his characters, we also see distinct expressions of universal truths: good and evil, love in Goriot, gold in Grandet. The latter is a miser who grows into a maniac, caring for gold more than for Eugénie, his daughter, robbing her of her inheritance from her mother, “grasping on his death-bed at the precious metal of a crucifix” [6] (p. 7). Avarice takes on a new meaning in Balzac’s time when, with the decline of the restraining force of the Church and the sudden openings within a rigid social order, dreams of accumulation compound the ‘natural’ hoarding instincts. Intrigue spreads from the Court of Versailles in a process of dissemination affecting ascending social groups, all eager to follow in the footsteps of the elite in the pursuit of money, hence of power. Money and power are the central protagonists of *La Comédie Humaine*, which is populated by penniless aristocrats, adventurers, dodgy lawyers, improbable careerists, speculators, bankers, financiers, cynical usurers and misers of every conceivable kind.

“Balzac always declares his moral aim: he is concerned to show what damage these people do to themselves, to the State and to the fabric of society. Money-making is a sordid business, and he spares us no detail of the sordidness and the callousness it engenders in human beings” [6] (pp. 10–11).

Monsieur Grandet radiates a cold metallic glitter from his eyes. His fortune follows the breaking up of the aristocratic estates and the expropriation of land after the Revolution. His subsequent business prospers when he starts selling wine to the Republican army and when he learns that money breeds

money and financial investments are not penalized, like crops, by the vagaries of the weather. His wife's grandfather and his own grandmother had been misers, too, and they had kept their money in their stockings, so that they could handle and gloat over it. Grandet shares this physical love for money, but as a man of the new age, is capable of moving it around productively. Wealth, however, does not translate into a decorous lifestyle or even into material wellbeing, Grandet's house being disfigured by defensive walls, with a rickety, worm-eaten staircase leading to a dingy parlour, permanently occupied by Madame Grandet and Eugénie engaged in tedious needlework. Houses such as this, Balzac warns, have made the history of France, making the environment gloomy and humans joyless: "These houses may combine the cloister's silence with the arid desolation of the waste and the sepulchral melancholy of ruins. Life makes so little stir in them that a stranger believes them to be uninhabited until he suddenly meets the cold listless gaze of some motionless human being, whose face, austere as a monk's, peers from above the window-sill at the sound of a stranger's footfall" [7] (p. 33).

On one particular evening in the middle of November, 1819, while celebrating Eugénie's twenty-third birthday, the Grandets resolve that it is time to arrange the marriage of the young woman. Families vying for the heiress's wealth arrive after supper and start a hypocritical display of friendliness, and in the middle of the comedy, a dazzling young stranger from Paris appears. It is Charles, Eugénie's cousin, who quickly becomes the object of the young woman's desire. Soon Monsieur Grandet makes it clear that Charles could never aspire to become Eugénie's husband, not least because his father's bankruptcy and suicide make him a romantic, but penniless dandy. Readers of *Eugénie Grandet* start savouring the disintegration of a family, a metaphor for the dissolution of society itself, with groups and individuals harbouring mutual resentment in the pursuit of their egoistic ambitions.

Grandet is still called "honest Grandet" by certain old people, though their number is noticeably declining. We learn that he hoarded his wealth by greasing the palm of 'the rough-hewn Republican who was in charge of the sale of the public estates' and that he bought for the price of a crust of bread "the finest vineyards in the neighborhood, an old abbey and some small farms" [7] (p. 37). The worthy Grandet then becomes mayor, carries out his public duties soberly and discreetly and fills his wallet more discreetly still. The Mayor's fortune is estimated at a figure proportionate to the obsequiousness shown to him.

In matters of finance, Monsieur Grandet combines the characteristics of the tiger and the boa constrictor. Like a tiger, he waits for his prey, lurking concealed until the moment comes to attack and hold the victim at his mercy. Then, the jaws of his purse open to engulf a plenitude of coins, and finally, he lies down again peacefully, "like the gorged python, to digest; impassible, emotionless, methodical" [7] (p. 41). To get the better of others implies the right to despise one's victims, "those weaklings of the earth who [are] unable to save themselves from being devoured". The miser leaves the "lamb grow fat, then he pens, kills, cooks, eats, and despises it. Misers thrive on money and contempt" [7] (p. 131).

Balzac seems inspired by physiognomic criminology (Lombroso's and the Positive School's painstaking examination of crime through the physical traits of offenders) when he detects malice in Grandet's nose and in his face a dangerous craftiness, a calculated rectitude, the selfishness of a man who concentrates all his emotions on saving money. Additionally, he spends very little indeed, as his tenant farmers pay their rent partly in kind, bringing him bread, meat, eggs, butter, corn, flour and wood, and in return, receive his thanks. At home, he counts the lumps of sugar his guests melt in their tea, in case the precious substance is recklessly wasted.

Having Charles been entrusted to his care, Grandet studies the way in which even his brother's bankruptcy can be turned into a chance to make money. A bankrupt, he muses, is a thief that the law takes under its protection: it is better to encounter a highwayman than a bankrupt. However, as lawyers advise him, the creditors of Charles's deceased father can be appeased without spending money. His lawyer friends explain that the commercial tribunal to whose jurisdiction he is subject has the power to name liquidators who will wind up his brother's business. Liquidation is not the same thing as bankruptcy, and the liquidator, normally a neutral agent, will be instead a reliable person, a close business or political partner. As for the creditors, they will be promised that he will pay in instalments: "you can lead dogs a long way with a piece of bacon in front of their noses" [7] (p. 142). The two families eager to welcome Eugène and her money among themselves vie in offering their deviant support in this enterprise. In brief, Grandet shows himself to be an excellent brother, and the whole town talks admiringly about him, while in fact, his generosity does not cost him anything. He sells all the remaining properties owned by his brother, pays a portion of his debts and makes some profit, while the liquidators establish that a derisory amount of money is due to the creditors.

Charles, in his turn, appears to be virtuous, but he is quickly imbibing "all the principles of egoism". "The seeds of this destructive political economy lay dormant in his heart, and could not fail to germinate as soon as he ceased to be an idle spectator and became an actor in the drama of real life" [7] (p. 157). After planning to seek his fortune in the East Indies, he entices Eugène into handing him her gold and leaves forever.

### 3. Petty and Grand Figures

It is true that Balzac does not find petty thieves interesting, namely the hungry and fearful figures who sneak a loaf of bread from the bakery. On the contrary, his grand figures are thieves on a large scale, professional miscreants, who steal, not because they are needy, but because they are filled with the desire to grapple everything to themselves [5]. On the other hand, a large-scale thief, as we have seen, elicits respect, mobilizes cooperation and enjoys unsolicited complicity, as those surrounding him hope to reap some material advantage from his dishonesty. The whole town, we are told, is led to admire Grandet, a powerful individual, who, irrespective of the means utilized, is in the potential position to benefit others, thus turning his own advantages into general wellbeing. Similar arguments, put into sociological terms, emerge in some of the specialistic literature on the crimes of the powerful [8]. In this sense, the encouragement of Vautrin, whom we will encounter later, incorporates a sinister truth: one has to use people like horses, harness them to one's chariot and whip them towards one's goal. Power and crime, in Balzac, are linked in a theory of energetics, a mechanics of passions, whereby individuals follow their illusions and dissipate their inner force, no matter the objective they pursue. Power and crime are condensed in monomaniacs focused on intense appetites, who cling to their life illusion with every nerve and muscle, concentrating all their thoughts upon it: whatever the illusion, they must embrace it wholeheartedly.

Balzac's grand figures know everything there is to know about the intricacies of lawsuits, the tactics to be adopted in commercial battles and the tricks to manoeuvre the stock market. Speculators and dishonest journalists are among his characters, all immersed in a volatile economic system, seen as a vast, institutionalized gaming table, guided mainly by the principle of risk [9]. For this reason, reproach

is constantly hurled at Balzac, with critics arguing that novelists cannot limit themselves to dissecting worldly hypocrisies and ignominies: too many corrupt types darken literature, and authors should avoid being exclusively devoted to the portrayal of moral ugliness [10]. The author's personal experience may be at the origin of this exclusive devotion.

In the summer of 1828, he is lying low, in a city full of creditors hunting him. In *La Peaux de Chagrin* Balzac describes bank officials as objects of indifference to him, those embodiments of the commercial conscience, clad in grey and wearing the silver badge of their master's livery [11]. Now, when he sees them pass in the streets of Paris, he hates them because he is in debt: "To be in debt means that you no longer belong to yourself. Other men could call me to account for my life" [12] (p. 141). Bankers are greedy, but so are aristocratic and bourgeois ladies, such as Madame Cibot, who in *The Poor Relations* is dizzy while conceiving the idea of "worming herself into the testament of the worthy Pons", in imitation of those servant-mistresses whose annuities excite so much cupidity in the quarter of the Marais. She already sees herself living in the suburbs of Paris, strutting about in a country house, where she will finish her days served as a queen [13]. While helping Monsieur Pons in his house, she pretends to get injured and goes straight to a doctor who fraudulently certifies to the severity of her wound. Before even planning how to exploit the mendacious certificate, 'this frightful Lady Macbeth of the streets' is suddenly illuminated by an infernal light: the doctor is her accomplice, having accepted an honorarium for her "pretended malady", and his reputation for healing his patients so promptly will grow with his monetary requests in the area. How could she benefit from the advantages she has brought to him?

In *Lost illusions*, misers return as do complex legal and commercial undertakings [11]. We see Old Sechard swindling his own son and witness the moral worthlessness of journalists. We also encounter Sixte du Chatelet, who constitutes a considerable addition to Balzac's gallery of the aristocracy in transition, of the Bonaparte *parvenus*, whom perhaps he understands even better than the old nobility, for they are already in his time becoming adulterated and corrupt. In the novel *Le Notaire*, young lawyers see how every fortune is brought about by the proverbial oily wheels and face the horrible wrangling of heirs while the bodies of their relatives are not yet cold [11]. What is important to note in all of these novels is how greed and illicit commercial and financial practices involve all classes, in a new participatory enthusiasm stemming from the decline of the old order. Sure, Balzac is a conservative political observer, but what he condemns is the dehumanized system of connections, the spectacle of "high" and "low" being united in a symbolic alliance whose nodal point is money. In the new order, money is the source of division and conflict in an individualistic society, a force circulating throughout the social organism, providing the points of contact between its otherwise divided parts. Buying and selling, exploitation and theft are seen to implicate everyone from top to bottom of the social structure, making the very distinction between top and bottom meaningless. A lady sells herself in order to receive diamonds, which then she sells to a usurer, who sells illusions to the poor, who have nothing to sell, but, again, themselves. Petty and grand figures participate with solemn religiosity in the same sordid rituals. *Le Père Goriot* offers a vivid example of these rituals.

#### 4. Fatherly Love

Goriot's fortune buys his daughters access into high society, a purchase that symbolizes the odd and problematic relationship between bourgeoisie and aristocracy in the early nineteenth century. However,

his very business success is far from epitomizing the shift from hereditary privilege to privilege acquired through merit. The origin of his own wealth is dubious, and his existence is, in a sense, hidden from sight. While he guarantees his offspring the luxury of exclusive parlours and the display of social brilliance, he is relegated to a mediocre guesthouse run by Madame Vauquer. Goriot's fortune derives from the squalid manipulation of the black market in flour during the famine of the Revolutionary period. Victorine Taillefer is another boarder of the guesthouse, whose sickly pallor makes her appear as an anaemic girl, although her unvarying expression of sadness is just consistent with the general wretchedness of the place. However, her face is young, her movements elastic, and something in her light-brown hair and dark grey eyes makes her pretty. She lacks two things that create women a second time: pretty dresses and love-letters. Her father provides for her, but all his wealth is destined to enrich Victorine's brother only, sole designated heir to his estate.

Eugène de Rastignac is the third guest, a thoroughly southern type with a fair complexion, blue eyes and black hair. In his figure, manner and his whole bearing, it is easy to see that he either comes from a noble family or that, from his earliest childhood, he has been gently bred. A bit of care for his wardrobe would make him a young stylish man. However, his carelessness shows in his shabby coat and waistcoat, an untidily knotted black cravat and boots that have been resoled. Monsieur Vautrin completes the prime layer of Madame Vauquer's boarders, and his great dream is to trade in humans as the owner of a slave plantation. Forty years old, with dyed whiskers, he has broad shoulders, a well-developed chest, muscular arms and strong square-fisted hands. His face is marked by premature wrinkles, and his gentle manners do not hide a perceptible harshness in his character: a certain resolute look, sometimes seen on his face, inspires fear in spite of his easy, good-natured appearance. He knows all about ships, the sea, France, foreign countries, men, business, law, great houses and prisons. He lends money to Madame Vauquer or to the boarders and leads a very regular life, going out after breakfast, returning in time for dinner and disappearing for the rest of the evening, letting himself in about midnight with a latch key, a privilege that Madame Vauquer accords to no other boarder.

Vautrin takes pleasure in deriding the upper classes, accusing them of incompetence, and in mocking law and order, "as if there were some mystery carefully hidden away in his life" [14] (p. 42). He vents his anger against frantic extravagance, which leads people to the money-lender's office and those already in deep debt to sell themselves or to tear out their mothers' hearts to find something to pay for their splendour. Eugène de Rastignac will not tear his mother's heart out; he simply writes to his sisters and cunningly takes their savings, an act that only later, in a moment of rueful lucidity, he describes as theft. Those surrounding him teach him that if he is determined to succeed, he has to make cold-blooded calculations, that he has to strike ruthlessly and he will be feared. If he has a heart, he has to carefully lock it away like a treasure: the moment someone suspects he has one, he will be lost.

Eugène then starts thinking of Goriot's daughters and their ostentatious splendour, the luxury of the *parvenues*, the riotous extravagance of courtesans. Additionally, after one of them becomes his lover, his dark thoughts gather and his ideas widen, while his conscience grows more elastic. He finally sees the world as it is: he sees how the rich live beyond the injunctions of the law and the judgment of public opinion and finds himself agreeing with Vautrin that success is virtue, it is the *ultima ratio mundi*. This is when Vautrin attempts to buy the soul, and probably also the body, of Rastignac. The latter realizes that fortunate people have at least a hundred thousand "livres" a year, and a lodger at Maison Vanquer

is not exactly Fortune's favourite. Vautrin tells him that he has to stop to peep through holes in curtains, that he must go behind and watch the whole show. He then starts expounding his philosophy.

Vautrin depicts himself as someone who does just what pleases him, someone who is good-natured to those who are good to him and those whose hearts speak to his. However, people who annoy him had better expect the ire of an ugly devil, as he does not scare away from murder if necessary. He can kill "properly", as an artist, although not in a duel, which is childish, utter nonsense and folly! "When one of two living men must be got out of the way, none but an idiot would leave chance to decide which it is to be; and in a duel it is a toss-up—heads or tails—and there you are!" [14] (p. 58). He shows Rastignac his scars and claims that, after studying the world very closely, he only sees two alternatives: stupid obedience or revolt; and he obeys nobody. Ambition produces scars, of course, but on the other hand, one cannot live in a small room without dreaming about a mansion. "What sort of men do the women run after? Men of ambition. Men of ambition have stronger frames, their blood is richer in iron, their hearts are warmer than those of ordinary men" [14] (p. 62).

Vautrin then describes Eugène's future, who, being a law student, can at most expect to learn how to browse the penal code and send poor devils to the galleys, so that the rich can sleep in peace. There is no fun in that: 'bark at thieves, plead the cause of the rich, send men of heart to the guillotine, that is your work!' A pirate on the high seas is happier. How about marrying a rich woman? This is not fun either, it is like hanging a stone around your neck, crawling like a serpent before your wife, licking her mother's feet. 'You are at the crossway of the roads of life, my boy; choose your way' [14] (p. 72). However, Eugène has already chosen, as he has started visiting wealthy women and perhaps has even learned that a man makes his way "by brilliant genius or by skillful corruption". Corruption is a great power in the world, and honesty is the common enemy. An honest man, after all, is just someone who plunders without sharing the booty.

"Life is no cleaner than a kitchen; it reeks like a kitchen; and if you mean to cook your dinner, you must expect to soil your hands; the real art is in getting them clean again, and therein lies the whole morality of our epoch...I do not think that the rich are any worse than the poor; man is much the same, high or low, or wherever he is. In a million of these human cattle there may be half a score of bold spirits who rise above the rest, above the laws; I am one of them" [14] (p. 76).

Rastignac eagerly interrupts Vautrin's speech and asks what he should do. "Next to nothing" is the reply: you hunt millions, you set your snares, use lures and nets: there are many ways of hunting. And everyone who comes back from the chase with his game-bag well filled meets with a warm welcome in good society. Mademoiselle Victorine is his prey, but her brother is designated as the only heir of the family wealth. And if it should please God to take that youth away, the banker her father, Monsieur Taillefer, would have only the girl left: so, "turn him off into the dark!" Eugène is paralyzed and becomes unconscious of his surroundings, falling into deep thought. For a while, he hesitates, but intends to act nobly and owe his fortune to nothing but his own exertions. It may be the slowest of all roads to success, but he shall lay his head on the pillow at night untroubled by evil thoughts. He then chooses not to think, but be guided by his heart.

The world of Paris, nevertheless, appears to him to be like an ocean of mud: whoever sets foot in that black sludge, he feels, sinks into it up to the chin. He is lost in the disorienting maze of Parisian

corruption, greed and power worship [14]. When for the first time he sees Goriot's room, he cannot control his amazement at the contrast between the den in which the father lives and the luxury that his daughters enjoy. The window has no curtains; the walls are damp; the wall-paper is peeling; the wretched bed is covered by a blanket made out of large pieces of Mme. Vauquer's old dresses. Goriot gives everything he has to his daughters, who, in turn, forcefully demand it, and as long as "they are happy, and smartly dressed, and have soft carpets under their feet, what does it matter what clothes I wear or where I lie down at night? I shall never feel cold so long as they are warm; I shall never feel dull if they are laughing. I have no troubles but theirs" [14] (p. 147).

He even loves his daughters for the pain they cause him. However, when Goriot becomes seriously ill, Eugène witnesses the indifference of the two young women, with Delphine who is unable to visit her father because of a previous commitment: a ball, where she would go even if she had to step over the old man's corpse. This is when Eugène ponders on obedience, struggle and revolt: obedience, he says, is dull, revolt impossible, struggle hazardous. On the other hand, the crimes of Parisian high society seem to him paltry, while Vautrin, he starts thinking, is great.

He does not reproach Delphine for her selfishness, but tries to convince himself that Goriot is not so seriously ill after all; in brief, he ends up collecting a quantity of duplicitous justifications for her conduct. She does not know how ill her father is; the kind old man himself would make her go to the ball rather than have her beside his bed. Eugène does not wish to see too clearly; he is ready to sacrifice his conscience to his mistress.

Later, Vautrin is arrested: he is a criminal on the run, an ex-convict who hides the letters T and F tattooed on his body (*Travaux Forcés* (forced labour)), and Eugène, thanks to his love affair with Delphine, enters the high society of which he dreams. Additionally, when Goriot dies, after having comfortably finished his dinner, he goes to find a priest and prepares for the wake beside the bed of the poor man. The other residents of the lodging house keep him company.

"Before nine o'clock that evening the body was laid out on the bare sacking of the bedstead in the desolate room; a lighted candle stood on either side, and the priest watched at the foot" [14] (p. 251).

Rastignac makes inquiries about the expenses for the funeral and writes a note to the husbands of both Goriot's daughters, a count and a baron, asking the two men "to authorize their man of business to defray the charges of laying their father-in-law in the grave" [ibid]. He sends a servant to deliver the note and then goes to bed, exhausted, and sleeps. The next day, he takes charge of the remaining bureaucratic issues, the death certification and the registrar, and by twelve o'clock, the formalities are completed. No word comes from the Count nor from the Baron, and Rastignac himself is forced to pay the priest and the funeral. He has already given Sylvie ten francs for sewing the old man in a sheet and making him ready for the grave. After the funeral, attended by himself, Christophe and two gravediggers, Eugène reaches the highest point of the cemetery, looks out over Paris and the windings of the Seine, while the lamps begin to shine on either side of the river. His eyes turn almost eagerly to the space between the column of the Place Vendome and the cupola of the Invalides: there lays the shining world that he has wished to reach. He glances over that humming hive, seeming to draw a foretaste of its honey, and says magniloquently: "Henceforth there is war between us" [14] (p. 254). By way of throwing down the glove to Society, Rastignac goes to dine with his lover.



## 5. A Criminal Criminologist

Power possesses an intimate criminal nature; it is ontologically corrupt in Balzac's descriptions. Those who inherit a fortune wield their social and financial power thanks to the illegitimate accumulation of wealth of their parents and ancestors. Those who experience a decline in their fortunes search for ways of catching up with the powerful by imitating them in dishonesty and illegality. Those who only inherit social disadvantage follow suit, reinventing themselves as business people, wheeler-dealers, accepting risk, while rejecting even the thought of failure. Balzac depicts a perfectly interconnected society, where separation or exclusion are counterbalanced by a rampant spirit characterizing all groups, apparently all fighting one another, but in fact all engaged in mutual mimicry. The boundaries between licit and illicit conducts grow blurred as *La Comédie Humaine* unfolds, with characters who leap from one context to the next, at times changing their name, but still holding and often exacerbating the counter-values they adopt. Vautrin, in this respect, represents the apotheosis of "power as crime", as he combines the deceitful qualities of the greedy with the efficiency of the clerk, the giddy entrepreneurship of the innovator with the respectful solemnity of the institutional actor [15].

In *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, Vautrin is the supposed Spanish priest Don Carlos Herrera, whose real name turns out to be Jacques Collin [16]. We have seen him in *Le Père Goriot*, a guest at Madame Vauquer's boarding-house, hinting at murder as a viable path to success. We see him in a play, called indeed *Vautrin*, which had a short, unsuccessful run in 1840 at the Porte Saint Martin theatre. He likes reminding people that there are no such things as principles, there are only events; there are no laws, there are only circumstances: those who are wiser than their fellows accept events and circumstances in order to turn them to their own ends.

The real-life figure inspiring Balzac is Eugène François Vidocq, a great name in criminological history. Vidocq is an ex-convict who becomes the founder of the French *Sûreté* and, thus, the ancestor of criminal investigation departments throughout the world. Also regarded as the first private detective, as a teenager he is fearless, rowdy and cunning, talented and lazy. A fighter and a thief, he manages to reach a comfortable material condition, and his victims include his own parents, while his combatant spirit finds expression in the French army fighting Austria. After striking a superior officer, he becomes a deserter, but adopting a false identity, he is enlisted again, until he is finally identified and forced to resign. His love affairs are often followed by duels with competitors, and he is imprisoned for a year at the age of eighteen. Once released, he supports himself through fraud and forgery, and after several periods of incarceration, he resolves to cross the line, offering his services as an informant to the police. He is now thirty-four and works in prison as a spy, collecting information about unsolved crimes. He is adored by thieves and esteemed by the most determined bandits, thus learning about planned offences, in which at times, he takes part with the purpose of exposing his partners [17,18]. After the success of the private detective firm he establishes, the authorities acknowledge his skills and incorporate his services under the *Préfecture de Police* [19,20]. Vidocq, as would any member of the Positive School of criminology, records the physical characteristics of criminals and suspects and develops a rudimentary understanding of fingerprinting, a tool of criminalistics that only in 1914 becomes accepted in France [21]. This criminal criminologist could not epitomize more vividly Balzac's view of power.

Balzac is accused of possessing a diseased imagination leading him to depict in seductive undertones the most loathsome individuals. In response, Balzac claims to have met Vidocq and heard from him that

“all the criminals he had arrested went from one to five weeks before recovering the ability to salivate, he had never seen a man spit on the way to the guillotine” [21] (p. 322). Echoing this observation, which Balzac turns somewhat upside down, in *Le Père Goriot*, Vautrin reveals his pathological nature, when arrested, by spitting a torrent of saliva. A similar upturning is found with respect to homosexuality, which Vidocq despises, while Vautrin reveals in his feelings towards Rastignac.

Vautrin, however, is not a solitary devil, as he intermingles with a variety of characters who operate in the social system at large. All connect and disjoint, reassemble and retract, providing a closely knit social whole: bankers, prostitutes, fraudsters and aristocrats do not stand far apart, but conjure up a totality made of interweaving strands of power and crime. The interests shared by all of these characters reflect an all-pervasive moral disease, a universal complicity in corruption and decay. “High and low, base interest and calculation interact with each other; a class-divided society finds its common factor in amoral anarchy that runs from top to bottom throughout the whole social structure” [9] (p. 81).

## 6. The Ball of Spectres

The long descriptions of the environment, the houses, the furniture, the different objects in Balzac do not just provide the backdrop against which events unfold and people interact: the link between human beings and things is conceived of as a necessity, and there are no boundaries between the concrete entities described and the moral meanings conveyed. Balzac has a mighty passion for things, for material objects, but his is a transfigured materialism: inanimate objects glow with a haunting life in his telling of the world, even if what they communicate is terrifying, because it confirms the vanity of human cravings [22]. A countess’s bedroom reveals traces of evanescent pleasure: a bearskin rug upon which gleam two white satin slippers flung down carelessly, stockings twined around an armchair, a half-spread fan, open drawers showing flowers, diamonds and gloves. Usurer Gobseck, for whom life is a machine fuelled by money, is a phantasm, the very power of gold made flesh. He ends by succumbing to the madness of greed he has so cunningly exploited, as he, in turn, lies in a house overflowing with stockpiled delicacies, masses of rotten food of all sorts, fishes sprouting mould, worms and insects crawling everywhere [23].

The links between things and humans allude to, and emphasize, a rigid notion of private property, the accumulation of objects and wealth as the result of a past history. The present is subordinated to the past. While melding with their possessions, the characters of the *Comédie Humaine* “are trapped in past decades or centuries” [24] (p. 716). In this sense, these characters appear at first sight to be conservative, because for them, the present is the last stage of the past, rather than the beginning of the future.

There is something else to be learned if other aspects of Balzac’s work are singled out. Eugène Rastignac feels a deep sense of indignation when, just after hearing the death-rattle in Goriot’s throat, he finds himself facing the vanity and cruelty of the man’s daughter, surrounded by golden embroideries and the precious garments of her friends. The ball she attends, which she prioritizes over tending her father in his death bed, is a sumptuous display of wealth, luxury and status, and the things in view seem to take on their own independent life. The lamps of five hundred carriages light up the darkness about the Hotel de Beauseant, a gendarme in all the glory of his uniform stands on either side of the resplendent gateway, while the great world flocks in, filling the glorious room already close to overflowing. The attire of the most beautiful women in Paris is dazzling, while the most distinguished men proudly deploy their decorations, stars and ribbons, as if showing less their military honour than their bank account. The

music of the orchestra vibrates, and the waves of notes confer more splendour to the golden ceiling of the palace. It is a society adorning itself with things that speak, move and dance by themselves. In that ball, we can see not only a ghostly dance that repels the “spectre haunting Europe”, but also an assemblage of commodities endowed with invincible force and frightening power. Lamps and golden ceilings are not just things, and their properties do not merely respond to human needs. They are on a stage as commodities, symbolic entities acting and interacting among one another, presenting themselves as marked by their specific market value. The ball is a *coup de theatre*, in which the ordinary is transfigured and metamorphosed into a supernatural thing. Commodities assume ghostly silhouettes, invade the stage with their spectral moves, come alive and address other commodities, their ghostly fellows [25]. In brief, Balzac’s characters are not just trapped in past decades or centuries, but prefigure the insatiability of consumerism, and many of his fictional characters anticipate an image of man as a Faustian man, voracious and ambitious, perpetually driven beyond his own limits by the lure of the infinite [26].

## 7. A Constellation of Interests

In Balzac’s analysis, power is exercised upon individuals who do not resist or oppose it. In social theory, this aspect of social power is rendered as the capacity of one group to make another desist from engaging in any opposition [27]. More than domination, therefore, Balzac anatomizes hegemony, a form of cultural prominence incorporating and attracting others rather than rejecting them. Balzac’s power does not rule by force alone: it transforms dependence into acceptance. The accumulation of money, in the works discussed here, is the common goal mobilizing all groups and individuals, particularly, and paradoxically, those who are devoid of status. In this sense, his philosophy of money echoes that of Georg Simmel [28]. Drawing on historians and economists, Simmel remarks that the emancipated Roman slaves are predisposed towards monetary transactions, because they lack any chance of achieving citizen status. Already in Athens, at the very inception of pure monetary transactions in the fourth century, the wealthiest banker, Pasion, starts his career as a slave. In Turkey, the Armenians, a despised and persecuted people, are frequently merchants and money-lenders, as, under similar circumstances, are the Moors in Spain. There is no need to emphasize, says Simmel, that the Jews are the best example of the correlation between the central role of money interests and social deprivation. The issue is that, while it is easy to deny despised groups access to status, it is extremely hard to exclude them from the acquisition of money, because all possible paths constantly lead to it.

There is a difference, however, between entrepreneurs and experts in money transactions: the former acquire material goods, such as land, productive tools and machineries, while the latter, as Balzac’s misers, accumulate an indeterminate, inert, abstract means of exchange. Material goods cannot be easily expropriated, whereas money can. Therefore, those marginalised groups who are allowed to make some continue to be despised, because the dynamics guiding monetary exchange can always expropriate them of their means. As we have seen, the “democratic” aspect of money soon becomes evident, as this peculiar means of exchange lends itself ideally to robbery. Balzac’s rich and would-be rich prove the motto *pecunia non olet* veritable. In Roman, as well as modern law, money that has been stolen cannot be taken away from a third person who has acquired it in good faith.

In Balzac, money rolls in every direction, and those who pursue its accumulation “hold no belief in a life beyond the grave”; the present is all that counts for them. Incapable of delaying gratification, they seem the ideal objects of study of “control theory”, which attributes to impulsive, physical actors the potential for committing any type of offence. Whether impulsive or calculating, however, Balzac’s characters “undermine the belief in a future life upon which the fabric of society has been built”.

“The grave holds few terrors for us now, is little feared as a transition stage upon man’s journey. That future which once awaited us beyond the Requiem has been transported into the present” [7] (p. 126).

The “paradise of luxury, vanity and pleasure” described by Balzac turns hearts into stones and “mortifies the flesh for the sake of fleeting enjoyment of earthly treasure”. Monetary ambition is “stamped on our age and seen everywhere”, and even legislators are no longer required to exercise their power in making equitable laws, but their power of producing money. “When this doctrine has been handed down from the bourgeoisie to the people, what will become of our country?” [7] (p. 127).

Balzac lays bare a constellation of interests rather than a kind of domination based on authority, showing how the stigma against new, insatiable wealth is collectively overcome. His protagonists, however, do not justify their greed by proving innovative, energetic, honest and self-restrained. In this sense, they are far removed from the Weberian entrepreneur, whose religiosity translates into the conviction of righteousness accompanied by moderation, spirituality and hard work. Work is not the legitimation of the social power exerted by Balzac’s characters, who do not show diligence, assiduity, exertion or effort. Bourgeois work, historians and sociologists tell us, is a calm passion: steady, methodical, cumulative and, thus, stronger than the turbulent (yet weak) passions of the old aristocracy [29]. Additionally, while the old aristocracy “shamelessly idealized itself in a whole gallery of intrepid knights” [30], Balzac’s money-hunters produce no such myths of themselves.

“As capitalism brought a relative well-being to the lives of large working class masses in the West, commodities became the new principle of legitimation; consensus was built on things, not men—let alone principles. It was the dawn of today: capitalism triumphant, and bourgeois culture dead” [30] (p. 22).

This can also be said of Balzac’s bourgeoisie, which unites irrationality and calculus in a single ethos, adventure and careful planning in a unique strategy. This bourgeoisie shows a close resemblance to Sombart’s [31] entrepreneur, who combines the soul of a respectable individual with the spirit of a reckless pirate, bringing to a synthesis the greed of gold, the desire for adventure, the love of exploration, calculation, careful policy, reasonableness and economy. We are always in a phase of primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession, and Balzac’s money-hunters bring their picaresque characteristics into the process, arriving to success less by working and praying than through invention and fraud. On the other hand, these anti-heroes may well be obsessed by power and money and may perhaps exist for the mere sake of them, but their acts are equally guided by both irrationality and cold assessment of costs and benefits. One may associate, as Moretti [30] does, fog with the nascent English bourgeoisie, in that the new class achieves power while losing intellectual vision. “The bourgeois feels suddenly ashamed of himself. He reveals himself to be much better at exercising power within the economic sphere than at establishing a political presence and formulating a general culture” [30] (p. 13).

Not so for Balzac's bourgeois, who achieves power and money while persuading all that no one is necessarily bound to fail. Rastignac and Vautrin are two faces of the same medal, as the spoilt courtesans are the alter ego of the humble maids. Balzac's characters appear in real life even more frequently after the death of the novelist: "Balzac seems less to have observed the society of his age than to have contributed to the formation of an age. Thirty years later, reality arrived on the terrain that his intuition had already crossed in a single bound" [32] (p. 760).

Fiction may be accused of steering away from logical argument opting for mythological narrative. With Protagoras, however, we can attempt to resolve the dilemma by saying that there is no difference between the two, both being able to support a demonstration, both being expressions of a functioning intellect [33]. Balzac proves that power and crime can be grasped with elegance and passion without the aid of established academic disciplines.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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