

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

Michael Breger  
Stanford University

Presentation at St. Johns College, Santa Fe on 6/9/19

Honoré de Balzac's 1835 novel, *Père Goriot* is the tragic story of a father whose obsessive love for his two daughters leads to his financial and personal ruin. Interwoven with this theme is that of the young aristocrat, Eugene de Rastignac, who came to Paris to become educated and make his fortune. He befriends Goriot and becomes involved with the daughters. These live all coalesce around a boarding house, La Maison Vauquer, which represents a microcosmic version of a whole society driven by social ambition and lust for wealth. The title Pere Goriot is striking, as it means both Old Man Goriot and Father Goriot. Balzac is simultaneously disrespecting and deifying the title character, similar to the way he describes Restoration Paris at large.

Balzac writes that "Money is life. If you have cash, you can do anything." 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. My talk aims to underscore the primacy and the role of materiality as a societal force in Restoration Paris by using examples from Balzac's *Père Goriot*. More specifically, I intend to share ideas on the ways in which 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. I will do so by developing an interpretation of Balzac's stylistic approach, social realism, which identified and personified the preponderance of economic realities over feelings and ideas. What I am interested in doing is tracing the trajectory of material culture and the material representation of value in Balzac's Paris, which when followed to its logical conclusion, ultimately leads us to the realm of nineteenth century philosophy, specifically to Marx and Engels, who were known to have read and respected Balzac's masterful and accurate displays of materialistic Parisian life in *La Comédie humaine*.

Balzac's work embodies an all-encompassing preoccupation with the material, where money and its manifestations compose the structure and meaning of *La Comédie 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 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 phenomenon, social, historical, or otherwise. Literary realism made it possible to reveal the traits of a particular temporal context.

The distinct cognizance of economic and social realities in *La Comédie humaine* is strikingly similar to the necessary and universal emphasis on economics and the material in the works of Marx and Engels. 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, the motor that puts the whole of society into motion. It is no secret that both Marx and Engels were fans of and influenced by

literary realism. Karl Marx, who praised “the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers” in an article for the New York Tribune on August 1, 1854, 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, who developed a definition of realism 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” (1888 Letter).

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 is not to say that Balzac was any sort of proto-Marxist revolutionary. 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, Balzac does not necessarily promulgate progressive ideas or defend the interests of the progressive forces in society. 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, is less concerned with the overthrow of the existing system than are Marx or Engels. 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.

### **What to say of Balzac’s social realism?**

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, the young social climber, Eugène Rastignac 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’” (Pere 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 Vauquer, 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, which 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.

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 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, 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 daughter Delphine, which is material in nature.

### **Although critical in his descriptions, 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, the good the bad, and the ugly. 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 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 silvergilt 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.

This development of literary materiality is Representative of a broader philosophical problem of the 19th century, the material/ideal split, the project of many philosophers, literary, and cultural critics during this time was to bring together, in one way or another, the disparate parts of human knowledge in a grand synthetic project, one that would unify the material/ideal split.

In Balzac’s work, 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-blond hair, presumably belonging to Madame Goriot. On one side of the locket was engraved ‘Anastasia’ 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.

As far as materialism is concerned, the largest divergence between Balzac and Marx/Engels 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 is astounding. 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 Paris 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).

### **What is the experience then, of everyday Parisians in this world?**

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 Comédie 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 accord 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 *La Comédie humaine*.