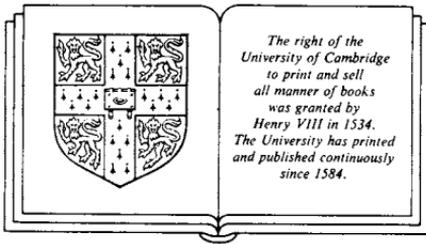


HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Old Goriot

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Introduction

Old Goriot is a complex work of art which seeks to represent the complexity of life. In this introductory study I will necessarily simplify Balzac's novel to some degree by explaining and discussing separately features which are woven into each other in the text itself. My aim is not to replicate the impact of *Old Goriot*, but to provide the modern reader with information which will help him or her to understand how complex Balzac's novel is. In Chapter 1, I deal principally with the processes which lead to the final shape and material of *Old Goriot*; Chapter 2 is concerned mainly with looking at four related aspects of what the novel achieves.

Balzac's novels have ceased to be easy texts for modern readers to understand and enjoy without effort. Because its action is in a social, historical, and geographical setting which was intended to be familiar to its original audience but is now dead and gone, *Old Goriot* presupposes a certain amount of knowledge which modern readers, by and large, do not have. Balzac's particular way of combining fact with fiction, descriptions of settings with character analyses, individual life with social environment, has had an enormous impact on the subsequent course of the European novel, and as a consequence on our own general expectations of what novels should be like, so that it is hard for us to perceive, let alone enjoy, the novelty and inventiveness of *Old Goriot*. Habits of language have also changed in the last hundred and fifty years almost as much as everyday habits, and these changes make it relatively difficult for a modern reader to respond appropriately to Balzac's stylistic verve and humour. As with all works of past ages, there is a danger that history in its various forms (social, literary, and

linguistic history) may have combined to transform *Old Goriot* from a living, complex work of art into a dusty and obscure museum piece. The aim of this book is not to brush aside the dust of history, but to provide the knowledge needed to read Balzac's novel in its own context. The effort of acquiring that knowledge is rewarded by the possibility of rediscovering a novel which integrates in a quite remarkable and moving way the fundamental conflicts of social life, and which still gives a masterful representation of the complexity of a world which, in the last analysis, is not very different from our own.

Old Goriot is a novel which weaves together three separate tales: the tale of Eugène de Rastignac, the young man starting out on life and learning how to make his way in Parisian society; the tale of Vautrin, a forty-year-old arch-criminal attempting to extend his power from its secret base in the underworld to control indirectly the life of a socially respectable young man; and the tale of the old man, Jean-Joachim Goriot, dying in poverty, unloved and unaided by his two daughters to whom he has given every ounce of his love, and every penny of the fortune he made in the flour trade. In 1819, when the action of *Old Goriot* commences, all three protagonists are lodgers at the boarding house of Madame Vauquer, a shabby and mysterious place located in one of the dark corners of the Latin Quarter, where nothing is quite what it seems, and certainly not what its proprietress, Madame Vauquer, claims it to be.

Eugène de Rastignac has set out with the best intentions and aims to make his way to the top through hard work, and to repay his family the sacrifices they have made to support him through his studies for a degree in law. But little by little, he lets his studies slip, as he is drawn at the start of his second year towards the glamour of the wealthy society of the *grande bourgeoisie* and the aristocracy which flaunts itself in the capital, and to which he has access by virtue of his nobility and a letter of introduction from his mother's aunt to a prominent society lady, Madame de Beauséant. Rastignac learns rather

abruptly that 'high' society, like the 'low' society of the lodging house, is not what it seems. The wealthy and beautiful Anastasie de Restaud whom he meets at the first ball he attends turns out not only to be a commoner by birth, but the daughter of the retired flour-merchant who shares his lodgings in the Latin Quarter. Madame de Beauséant, noble and rich as she is, is also on the brink of despair and on the point of being abandoned by her lover, Ajuda-Pinto, for a younger and even wealthier bride. She advises Rastignac to seduce Goriot's other daughter, Delphine, the wife of a bourgeois banker, in order to establish his position in Parisian society. And that is what Rastignac does in the course of the novel.

Vautrin, whose real name is Jacques Collin, is lying low at the Vauquer lodging house after escaping from forced labour. He sees what it is Rastignac wants – wealth, position, prominence – and tells the young man in forceful terms that he will not achieve such ambitions honestly. All great fortunes, he claims, are the fruits of secret crimes neatly hidden. He offers the handsome student a deal: he will have the son of the millionaire Taillefer eliminated in a trumped-up duel, if Rastignac will seduce and marry the banker's daughter Victorine, currently disinherited by her father, and also lodging at the Vauquer house; in return, Rastignac would pay Vautrin a commission of twenty per cent on the million-franc dowry he would undoubtedly extract from his father-in-law once the latter is bereft of a male heir. Rastignac hesitates; he has no feelings for the pallid Victorine, but the pact offers rapid access to a fortune which could only be got, if it could be got at all, through a lifetime of hypocrisy and petty crime. He hesitates for sufficiently long to fail to prevent the first stage of the plot taking place, and Victorine's brother is killed in a duel provoked on purpose by Vautrin's associate. But the arch-criminal is the most wanted man in Paris, and two further lodgers at the Vauquer house, Poiret and Michonneau, turn out to be informers and stool-pigeons; they trap the ex-convict, who is arrested and taken off by the police.

The story of how Goriot himself came to be a down-at-heel lodger in a shabby boarding-house whilst his two daughters lead lives of spendthrift luxury is revealed piece by piece through the discoveries Rastignac makes in his adventures and blunders in high society, through Vautrin's uncanny insight, and through the visits that Delphine and Anastasie make to the house. Once Vautrin has been removed from the scene and the Victorine plot put aside, the novel focuses firmly on the twin tales of the dying father and the ungrateful children. In a long monologue, Goriot goes over the story of his life as a parent and the issues it raises: had he done wrong by giving in to his daughters too easily in their childhood? Is he to blame for their present ingratitude? Or are they to blame for their own financial and emotional problems? Rastignac alone tends the dying man throughout his agony, but he also attends to Delphine and takes her to the great ball given by Madame de Beauséant, which represents to Delphine a satisfying revenge on her elder, aristocratically married sister. This close juxtaposition of splendour and squalor heightens the pathos of Goriot's death; the flashes of insight the old man has in his last moments into the nature of his daughters and of himself render his suffering properly tragic. The novel ends with Goriot's desolate funeral attended only by Rastignac and the empty carriages of two wealthy households, after which the young man of ambition, his education completed, walks back down in the city to proceed with his conquest of a mistress.