

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Le cousin Pons. 1847 Honore de Balzac. (1799-1850)

OVERVIEW

Le cousin Pons was one of the last novels (or short stories) in Balzac's 94 volume *Conedie Humaine* series. Its first version was as a novella, out in 1846. (The rapid growth of the newspaper business in France, after 1814, morphed into the process of serialization, as different stages of reader appetite were activated. Balzac took full advantage of this publishing trend)

Le cousin Pons was originally conceived of as one part of a trilogy, *Les Parents Pauvres* (Poor Relations), and in that capacity was twinned to *Cousine Bette*, *Cousin Betty*. During 1847, however, Balzac kept working at the text of *Pons* until he had severed the text from *Cousin Betty* entirely. At that point Balzac had two poor relations to represent him. The text involving Pons has taken on board a raft of new characters—Remononcq, Elie Mag and Fraisiere, Poulain, --and it remains a matter of critical dispute whether the amalgamated text coheres, as Pons is thrown into a wider social sphere— as, in general view, Goriot was thrown into the wildly unfamiliar social world of his high society daughters.

Character

Pons, a 'poor relation,' but in the following tale, a complex one, takes his place before our eyes, walking down the Parisian Boulevard, catching the glances of those practiced people watchers, sitting as they do in their chairs in the sun, noting, laughing and whispering, sustaining the social fabric in a way dear to the Parisian heart. The enframed scene is Balzac at his 'realistic' best. We are given the pleasure of seeing Pons as a piece of history.

The elderly person, a thin spare man, wore a nut-brown spencer over a coat of uncertain green, with white metal buttons. A man in a spencer in the year 1844! It was as if Napoleon himself had vouchsafed to come to life again for a couple of hours.

Balzac artfully makes Pons part of an historical pastiche, while not forgetting that the watchers of this scene are at the same time part of the history Pons is demonstrating for them.

At the sight of the spencer, men of forty or fifty mentally invested the wearer with top-boots, pistachio colored dints, hollowed out like a Roman mask...

From which Balzac segues into a hypertrophied word picture of the ugly face of Pons, in which 'close inspection failed to detect the substructure.' The ugliness of the man which is elaborated into a theme of the novel, melds into 'a pair of gray eyes, red rimmed and lashless, ' which 'looked forlornly out of a countenance which was flattened something after the fashion of a pumpkin...' To which, in addition, the author makes clear that Pons evoked pity, so devoid was he of any physical power to please.

Parallels

For the ancient Greeks, ugliness was lack of form, dysmorphia, and thus had no positive sense of its own—it was a negative, but could assume many characterful forms. Homer is a repository of creations that crush the Greek sense of order; one thinks of the Cyclops, with one round orb of an eye in the middle of his forehead, or of Proteus the sea god who could transform himself into multiple shapes, a weird escapee of nature, lumpy, raw, rude; one re invisages raw, clumsy human figures like Thersites, who seem to enter this world as prototypes of the inharmonious. Personal ugliness was, for the Greeks, most fully embodied in Socratea, a baffling blend of ugly features with a subtle and probing mind.

Illustrative moments

Hats and history. As he walks down the boulevard Pons' hat testifies to the historical shaping of his coat and the biogenetic shaping of his ears, whose floppy lobes had left their mark on the brim of his fedora. 'The silk tissue fitted badly over the cardboard foundation and hung in wrinkles here and there; and some skin disease had attacked the nape, 'in spite of the hand which rubbed it down of a morning.' Balzac's daring in realism is dangerous to underestimate. He reaches far into the micro places of being here, and would be hard to equal in the most probing visions of contemporary literature.

Shabby and Fastidious The reader may wonder at the detail with which Pons' clothing awakens Balzac's scrutiny. There is however a crescendo of items of wear, as well as a profusion of appointments—waistcoats in several layers, a huge white muslin stock with an enormous bow, a silk watch-guard hanging across his shirt front—'the black velvet collar and shining metal buttons, recently renewed, told of carefulness which descended ~~even~~ to trifles.' The crescendo of which we talk, here, will acquire its significance as the details of wardrobe attention accumulate, as we might not realize from attending too closely to the earliest parts of the novel.

Rome and the arts We have been watching, in the stream of idiosyncratic types that make their ways down the Boulevard, a M. Pons, who is at the moment sustaining himself as a street musician and avid amateur art collector, and who has positioned himself for such a degree of public life by lucky chance: he had in the past been awarded a grant to spend several years in Italy, where he had the opportunity to refine his musicianship and to travel widely through those European countries in which antiquity had deposited its vast profusion of 'antiquities and bric a brac,' of which Pons became an 'avid collector.'

Aesthete, lover, via crucis The subsequent destiny of Pons, after our initial moment of boulevard inspection and sympathetic pathos, may turn out to be plaintive but fatal. As a simpatico himself, Pons made the acquaintance of a dreamer and lover of the highest German music, a certain Schmucke, with whom Pons formed an immediate and Platonic relationship, the turning point in Pons' bachelor life. The two men became inseparable. The subsequent 'illustrative moment' in Pons' life, after the discovery of a soul mate, is the discovery of his extended upscale family, with whom he could dine—one of his two passions—and to whom he could sell antiques—his other passion. And how does a crucifixion emerge from this brew? Pons grows dependent on his extended family—which comes to include a despicable crew of petty thieves; a crew sufficiently contemptuous of Pons—the parasite, they call him—that in the end they deprive him of what integrity he retains. His death is the only conclusion possible to a life so mired in the petty contempt of those who should be honorable kinsmen.

Discussion Questions

The character of Pons is fastidiously and fascinatingly portrayed, in the early sections of the novel, and yet the decline of Pons, into a parasite upon his family, and a victim of ugly family scams, leaves us little of Pons to take interest in, with the consequence that while Pons in himself is a mesmerizing figure, the cohesion of the novel, as a whole, has, to many seemed seriously compromised. Please give some attention to this critique of the novel.