

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

THE TWO BROTHERS / *La Rabouilleuse* / *The Fisherwoman* (1842)
HONORE DE BALZAC

OVERVIEW

Text The text announces its readiness for a wide purview, major tale extending from Issoudun to Paris, and winding through the generational inter-twinings of several lives, families, or historical periods. One thinks of the ways Tolstoy or Dante open up their huge word canvasses, family by family, or historical period. For Balzac, a native of Tours, it is usually a question of starting somewhere in the French provinces, then of building a central focus converging on Paris. That is the strategy of the present novel.

Much is to be said for this kind of expansive or incorporative strategy. It is an effective way to construct the growing architecture of a composition as vast as a novel. Balzac's particular twist, as we see in the strategy of the present novel, is to embed characters from previous novels—in the *Comedie Humaine* series—in later and various novels in the same series—sometimes at points at which the characters “fit,” sometime at points at which the characters must be more tangentially adjusted to their new milieu. Sequence and continuity are implied in both of the above structural strategies, which are ways in which we can project totalities for our literary universes.

Author Of Agathe's children, Balzac is partial to Joseph, her artistic son, although he presents her two children—Joseph and Philippe—as of coequal gifts from the beginning. From the start, though, the narrator sees that the militaristic in Philippe—whether in clothing or bearing, or sympathies—is his leading trait. Nor is it a leaning which plays out to his advantage, for in the course of his gambling and drinking—as Balzac recounts it—Phillippe gives himself up fatally to ex-military vices. By contrast, as Balzac sees the matter, Joseph is the type of the artist, hyper sensitive, true and loving toward his mother, reliable to the end. The author devotes abundant attention to the Art Academy into which Joseph accidentally happens, is first teased by the art students, then is taken up by the art professors, who see in Joseph the work of a budding genius. The author himself is strongly a partisan of Joseph, both due to his moral staunchness and to his artistic genius. Such artistic adroitness at ‘taking sides,’ among your characters, is no usual talent, having more usually the effect of ‘putting the reader off.’

Background The background of the present tale is the chaotic to turbulent cultural environment in which the Bridau brothers and their mother are brought up. We are in the just post-Napoleonic aftermath, and looking into the period of the Bourbon Restoration followed by the regime of the Citizen

King, Louis Phillipe. We see in Phillipe Bridau the archetype of the devoted follower of Napoleon, a man for whom the glory of his nation is wrapped up in the wonder of this heroic figure. We see and move through the Imperial structures of administrative Paris, and can feel the dignity and pomp of the city. We see in Joseph Brideau a stage in the long grounded French academic tradition of art training. Balzac is particularly skillful at intimating the first contact of Joseph with this tradition. We are in the Paris flat to which Agathe, the boys' mother, has moved after the death of her husband.

Through the windows looking out from mother's flat, Joseph can see the art students of the local Academy cleaning their brushes, thinning their paints, and exchanging the gossip and chatter that make up the fiber of a self-involved art community. We are inside the private vitality of a hallowed corner of a grand western city.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Bridau Brothers, Joseph and Philippe. It is hard to separate the two Bridau brothers, when it comes to centrality of character. Each of them seems a perfect case study of his particular temper. So precisely is each of them tuned to his distinctive humor, that as a pair they would seem almost profiles from a mediaeval textbook on the humors.

Philippe is a war veteran who idolizes Napoleon, and is adored by his mother. After retirement from the army he drifts into drinking and gambling. Eventually he pilfers money from his family.

Joseph is a virtuous and talented artist, who is underappreciated by his family, despite his loyalty to them. He becomes a painter of great renown in his time.

Agathe Bridau is the mother of Philippe and Joseph. Her failure to evaluate them accurately becomes a great source of pain to her for it prevents her from recognizing the danger that Philippe can and will do to her. She maintains her preference for her military son, although in the end he will bring her only bitterness and loss. Yet even that life attitude is reversed at the end of Agatha's life, when her confessor urges her to respect integrity and unity in the evaluation of her two sons.

Secondary characters

Jean-Jacques Rouget. Agathe's wealthy brother, who lives in Issoudun. Much of the plot involves Philippe's efforts to separate this man from his money,

Flore Brazier, a peasant woman, and the housekeeper for Jean-Jacques Rouget. She is romantically involved with Max. (She is the 'rabouilleuse' (crayfish gatherer) who gives this novel one of its three titles.)

Maxence Gilet, an Issoudun townie and a local rascal, romantic with Flore, and eager to pocket her money for himself. One more of the money grabbers who dot the landscape of this novel.

Madam Descoing, the aunt of the Bridau brothers, Agatha's wealthy relative. She lives in Paris, and suffers from Philippe's thefts.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The action of the novel takes place in Issoudun and Paris, and turns around two axes: the bad blood and decline of the family Bridau, in Paris, and Issoudun; the conflict between Joseph and Philippe, on every level as they see the family fortunes play out.

Agathe Rouget, daughter of Dr. Rouget in Issoudun, is sent by her father to be raised in Paris, with her maternal relatives. There she meets a gentleman named Bridau, whom she will subsequently marry and adore, and with whom she will give birth to the brothers Joseph and Philippe mentioned above. After the death of M. Bridau, Philippe joins Napoleon's army, and Joseph turns his interests to making himself as fine a painter as possible. It seems not to matter, at this point, that Mother has neither interest nor respect for the artistic career.

Meanwhile events of extraordinary violence are taking place at Issoudun. Philippe, whose drinking and gambling have led to further personal degeneration, The scene taking over Issoudun is just what this shaky young gentleman does not need.

Jean-Jacques, elder brother of Agathe, takes in an ex-soldier named Max Gilet. Max works together with Flore Brazier, Jean Jacques' servant, to get at Jean Jacques and his money; he is joined by Philippe, who has been on and out of prison and the law, for his nefarious dealings against Agathe. Philippe then virtually takes control of Jean Jacques, turning his household upside down, and taking his money. Philippe has adequately proven himself a

scoundrel, by this point, and has gone farther than that, manipulated himself into nobility, declaring himself the Comte de Brambourg, and attempting, unsuccessfully, to have himself married to the daughter of a wealthy local businessman. Agathe, meanwhile, continues to misjudge her two sons, but she comes up bluntly against the truth, without having tried when she asks Philippe to visit her, to arrange giving a loan to Joseph. Philippe refuses flatly, fearing that his credit as a would-be nobleman will be compromised, if his family's financial situation is exposed to the light. This rude awakening drives Agathe into despair, becoming fatally ill she goes to her confessor, who reproaches her for having misjudged her true and honest son, Joseph. She reaches out toward Joseph, who cares for her during her final weeks of life, but they have no success in bringing Philippe back into the fold.

In the end, after the death of Agathe, Philippe rejoins the army, and is killed while fighting in Algiers. Joseph inherits the family fortune and the noble status of his brother. The last laugh, of course, goes to Joseph, who comes out of it all as count, and without having tried.

THEMES

Virtue versus vice Balzac is fully able to deal with subtle truths, and many-sided personalities. Goriot, Raphael, and Bette all shimmer with the richness of changeable personalities. They are multi-sided and susceptible to events. Nevertheless these characters exist as in sharp contrast to their surrounding denizens, and leave us with the sense that in Balzac's universe there are many self-cancelling personal polarities. This Balzacian trend toward mutually self-cancelling character types is part of what we might call an Hegelian world-shaping, in which the present is forever rewriting the past, and vice versa.

Military versus artistic. Philippe and Joseph seem to fit in to the above polarity. However, Philippe falls far shy of the bearing of the classical military; it is true that he is ready to fight, and at the end of his life he dies on the battlefield in Algeria. But like his brother, we may say, he hardly becomes a rounded or full-bodied character. He is a full-blown replica of his mother's needs. Joseph is also not a multi-dimensional figure, but more nearly just a loyal defender of his mother, whom nothing can prevent him from defending.

Corruption versus integrity Joseph will, of course, remind us of the beauty of integrity, for he unflinchingly supports his mother. In fact the piety of that very sane mother, Mme. Bridau, toward her just-deceased husband, M. le Ministre, is a second piece of evidence, in the ambition and greed-driven culture of post-Napoleonic France. The lady, mother of Joseph and Philippe, is devastated by the relatedly early death of her husband. She turns the records of his life—his honors, medals, pictures, dress clothes—into a veritable living museum of his life. (Should one call this behavior devotion or does it verge on the obsessive?)

Urban versus provincial life The world of Issoudun reminds us of the setting of *Eugenie Grandet*: cobbled streets, mediaeval architecture, small shopkeepers and local potentates lording it over extensive vineyards. It is the classic isolated village from which small children would dream of a wider world about which, in this moment of the mid-nineteenth century, there would be little news. Horseback communications were foremost, and occasional mail-transporting carriages.

The city of Paris, which plays so dynamic a role in the development of the Brideau brothers and their kin, was changing dramatically throughout the period of the present novel: bridges and monumental architecture marked the profiles of Paris; markets spread widely, the upper class and remaining nobility occupied a few fashionable areas like the Faubourg St Germain. Universities, Museums, public monuments: all announced the preface to a modern city, in which the military headquarters as well as the centers of art and learning awaited earnest provincials like Philippe and Joseph.

The Genesis of Bourgeois Greed, and Ambition This historical thematic threading throughout the *Comedie Humaine* is bourgeois-centered. Balzac was not a trained

historian—although we know, from *La Peau de Chagrin*—that he knew how to rummage through the old curiosity shop of history, and to bring his attention down onto treasure points in our historical evolution. He was sensitive to the exotic and the magical, but he was also uncannily sensitive to the kinds of lesson he finds written on the ass' skin. This is where we see Balzac coming into his 'philosophical dimension,' for the discovery of which he was indebted to in the teachings of Victor Cousin, his professor at the Sorbonne. Balzac is closing with the issue inscribed on the ass' skin. The message, of course, is that the skin can be freely invoked for the satisfaction of its possessor's wishes. This seemed to be a perfect outcome for Raphael, until he became aware of the flip side of the skin's message. One must pay in kind for the powers and pleasures he borrows from the ass' skin. Once Raphael has learned this hard lesson, he has been introduced to the tragedy of bourgeois life, the life of ambition and greed, which pervades the text of *The Two Brothers*—in which ambition, greed, and conflict generate most of the action.

The post Napoleonic Era versus the Ancient Regime *The Two Brothers* tale revolves around the Cain and Abel theme, with Philippe cast in the role of vindictive slayer—though in the end the winning cards turn out to rest in Joseph's hand. Aligned with this morality, throughout the novel, goes the implication that times were more stable and honest in the past. Balzac's realism implies the sense that he is no friend of innovation for its own sake. The chaos introduced to France by the Revolution, then by the successive regimes of the first half of the nineteenth century, brought with it what Balzac plainly considered a serious 'loss of the center.'

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do ambition and greed drive most of the action in this story, and, as well, prove to be central pressures in many of Balzac's finest works, *Le Pere Goriot*, *Eugenie Grandet*, or *Cousin Bette*? Putting the first question in this manner suggests answers one might expect to enter a virtually theological response. One can imagine responses that suggest the replies that would come from Jonathan Edwards or even John Calvin that the human condition is fundamentally evil, and that mankind will follow the darkest path if left to its own inclinations.

What does artistic expression, which may well not be remunerative, have to offer the individual? Is the artist (for example,) who is at heart interested in self-expression and not the fruits of secular ambition, an indicator of non-secular pathways to satisfaction? Does Balzac seem to be telling us, at the end of the novel, that art has its way of winning in the end?

What blows young Joseph away when he discovers the Art Institute in Paris from the windows of his mother's apartment? Why does the distinguished sculptor, Chaudet, insist the free artist is the king of mankind, and totally free? What do you think to be Joseph's mother's objection to a career in art? Is she under the influence of middle class Philistinism? Was she unaware of the prevalence of painting and painters in the Paris of her day? Did Balzac the author align himself with the perspective of the supreme importance of art?

Balzac rightly thinks of himself as a realist. But when it comes to the construction of literary characters, like Philippe and Joseph, would you say that Balzac descends, regularly, into the depiction of details? Do you know what Philippe and Joseph look like? Do you know how they dress? Do you see them at meals? Or sleeping? Or know their mannerisms? If the explanation of Balzac's realism does not lie in the above particularities, then what does it derive from? Balzac is a master at contextualizing characters, so as to predefine the figura that will fill a particular fictional space. Felix Grandet is so predefined, in his fixity, rigor, and routine lifestyle, that we see him before or without