**Un prince de la bohème and Pierre Grassou, or How Love Makes Money**

Genius in spite of mediocrity, in a bourgeois context: this is what characterizes two novellas in which love and money determine the representation of reality and interact to the benefit of the mediocre.

In *Un prince de la bohème*, Claudine, a dancer known as Tullia, mistress of several rich important men, evolves into a *bourgeoise* by marrying the vaudeville writer du Bruel, which does not prevent her from falling madly in love with Charles-Édouard Rusticoli, comte de La Palférole, an impoverished but authentic nobleman. But La Palférole, the cynical, capricious prince of bohemia, is bored with her and, to get rid of her, pretends he would keep her only if she had a title and rode in a carriage equal to his rank. Not one to miss a hint, Claudine proceeds with alacrity to transform her *vaudevilliste* of a husband into a count, with his heraldic arms on a splendid carriage. In the process, her evolution from demi-mondaine to countess casts doubt on the real meaning of the name and insignia of a countess.

This short story puts into place a trio of characters tied together by love in one direction, because du Bruel loves Claudine in spite of her fickleness (“il portait à une femme de théâtre une de ces affections qui ne s’expliquent pas” [for this lady of the theater he bore one of those affections that cannot be explained] [7: 825]), and by money or its associated interests in the other direction. Like the “alte Geschichte” that Heinrich Heine put into a poem and Schumann set to music, like the formulaic round of love in a type of
comic play, and like the situation of the Bridaus in *La Rabouilleuse*, none of the characters in this story returns the love they receive. Balzac dedicated the story to Heine, “à vous qui savez mieux que personne ce qu’il peut y avoir ici de critique, de plaisanterie, d’amour et de vérité” [to you, who know better than anyone what criticism, humor, love, and truth one might find here] (7: 807), thus alerting the reader to the motifs of the story. But the one-way arrows indicating Love become arrows of Money in the opposite direction, and the desire for love affects the action of money on the situation of the three characters. Balzac exploited such a premise more than once (see chapter 10).

Love as expressed in this story rests on the Balzacian theory of the unique, profound, unalterable love that only the fortunate will find once in their lifetime. Du Bruel loves Claudine like this: “le vaudevilliste . . . l’aimait de cet amour que l’habitude finit par rendre indispensable à l’existence” [the vaudevillist . . . loved her with the love that habit makes indispensable to existence]; he is “un homme lié, pieds et poings, cœur et tête” [a man tied up hands and feet, heart and head] (7: 829). This Balzacian theory of love also contributes to the contradictory portrait of La Palférine: “Charles-Édouard a sur l’amour les idées les plus justes. Il n’y a pas, selon lui, deux amours dans la vie de l’homme; il n’y en a qu’un seul, profond comme la mer, mais sans rivages. A tout âge, cet amour fond sur vous comme la grâce fondit sur saint Paul” [Charles-Édouard has a most appropriate understanding of love. In his opinion, there are not two loves in a man’s life; there is only one, as deep as the sea but without shorelines. This love can descend upon you at any age just as grace descended upon St. Paul] (7: 818). Unfortunately for Claudine he feels neither the thunderbolt nor the slow revelation and recognition of attractive qualities that bind two people in a powerful crescendo—neither love at first sight, nor the gradual fusion of two beings into one. And in contradiction to his views, La Palférine has love affairs—practice belies the theory. Claudine however “éprouvait l’amour complet, idéal et physique, enfin La Palférine fut sa vraie passion à elle” [felt complete, ideal, and physical love—in all, La Palférine was the true passion for her] (7: 819). Such absolute love exists on a high moral plane when it is mutual, but when the arrows point in only one direction, as also happens to Thaddée Paz in *La fausse maîtresse*, the love thus illustrated can become a corrupted, degraded version of absolute love (see Michel, *Le réel* 246, for observations on absolute love). Du Bruel obeys Claudine, who obeys La Palférine, each a slave to love. Paul Gadenne coupled the slave metaphor to the tyrant: “C Claudine, qui est tyran, se fera esclave mais pas pour le même homme. . . . Ange et démon, certes, mais ange pour l’un [La Palférinie], démon pour l’autre [du Bruel]” [Claudine, a tyrant, will make herself a slave, but not for the same man. . . . Angel and demon, to
be sure, but angel for one [La Palférine] and demon for the other [du Bruel]] (638–39). Once Claudine has money, La Palférine loves her again, but in merely honoring his part in what is essentially a contractual agreement, he expresses cynicism: money corrupts what could have been absolute love, in this narrative design.

Here Money is expressed not in terms of how it can keep a family in food and furniture, which was the case for the Bridau family in *La Rabouilleuse*, but in terms of the social rank or status it can purchase. To have money, for a down-and-out aristocrat, is to have the external signs of status that accompany the inalterable internal ones of birth and ancestry. Hence La Palférine’s desire to complete the fullness of the sign identifying him in his proper and full identity in the world. Gadenne wrote:

> la différence de race, d’origine, justifie la manière dont Claudine est traitée. Claudine a pu s’élever; ce n’est pas ce qui compte. La Palférine est une protestation vivante—faite, notons-le, moins au nom de la race elle-même que de l’esprit qui est attaché à la race—contre une bourgeoisie qui croit pouvoir se sauver par l’argent. L’ambition de Claudine du Bruel . . . est de devenir une bourgeoise; et l’on sait que cela s’achète. (635)

[the difference in class, in birth, justifies the way Claudine is treated. Claudine was able to lift herself up; that is not what counts. La Palférine is a living protest against a bourgeois class that thinks it can save itself by means of money (a protest leveled, it should be noted, at the *spirit* of the class rather than the class itself). Claudine du Bruel’s ambition . . . is to become bourgeois; and it is well known that that can be bought.]

The drive for money essentially characterizing the social-climbing lower class female constitutes a fundamental driving force of *La Comédie humaine*.

Yet money, or more exactly signs thereof, are what La Palférine requests of Claudine, and she will do everything to obtain it precisely by turning the same interest in the direction of her unloved husband. She drives her husband to wealth, just as she is driven by Charles-Édouard. The relation of love and money works by reverse psychology: La Palférine exploits Claudine’s love, which expresses itself through complete obedience to his wishes, to demand that she obtain title, wealth, carriage, liveried lackeys, and horses, thinking she cannot reach such a level of money; that will be his plan to be rid of her; but when she succeeds, money turns into a form of love.

“Les Fantaisies de Claudine” was the original title of *Un prince de la bohème*; its focus on Claudine lent true measure to the psychology of the
social-climbing “premier sujet” of the theater. “Fantaisies” refers not only to the expensive baubles she buys to furnish her home and impress others, but also to the demands she makes of her husband: exerting her will power, she launches him into writing vaudevilles at a ferocious pace, making pots of money that allow him to buy carriage and horses—whence his meteoric rise in the political sphere. Additionally, “fantaisies” implies capricious fancies, which describe not only Claudine’s behavior with her husband but also La Palfèrine’s with Claudine. But “fantaisie” also has the precise connotation of a lover, as in “On ne connaissait pas de fantaisie à l’ancien Premier Sujet” [The former Prima Donna was not known to have had any “fantasies”] (7: 830)—not, that is, until she meets La Palfèrine. Then her fantasy for the prince of bohemia must be turned into money to obtain the interest she hopes to gain.

Un prince de la bohème employs one of the most elaborate discursive structures found in La Comédie humaine: a doubly framed story within a story transmitted via two embedded manuscripts in which the authorial voice is split from the narrative voice, and whose ending lies outside the diegesis. Chantal Massol (185–88) has given an excellent analysis of this narrative design, whose ultimate effect makes itself felt in the closing lines, including the famous “je ne crois pas aux dénouements” [I don’t believe in conclusions] (7: 838; see also chapter 20 on problems of closure). The diegetic story about Claudine du Brueil and Charles-Édouard de La Palfèrine as narrated by Nathan and written up by Mme de La Baudraye, who then reads it aloud to Nathan, does not have a dénouement in Balzac’s novella, but the act of narration recorded in Mme de La Baudraye’s story, which stages Nathan narrating to the marquise Béatrix de Rochefide, a narrator whom we occasionally hear from in intrusions of the frame into the narration, has an ending that lies in the effect of the narrated story on Béatrix: she has fallen in love with La Palférine after listening to Nathan’s skillful portrait of the cynical, capricious prince of bohemia. Then this story—the story that ends with Béatrix falling for La Palférine—has what can only be called a delayed and displaced dénouement: it will take place in the future and in another novel, Béatrix, which ends with Béatrix returning to her husband Rochefide. Inscribing Mme de La Baudraye in his own role as writer, exploiting narration and its effects, giving his parable a moral at second or third remove, Balzac gives form to the idea: love turns into money to redefine social position and identity.

Pierre Grassou gives greater consistency to this essential strategy of La Comédie humaine. Grassou, the mediocre painter of copies and pastiches,
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resembles La Palférine for the cheerful cynicism that characterizes him. He ekes out a paltry living until he sells copies of old masterworks to the unscrupulous dealer Elias Magus, who, unbeknownst to him, sells them as originals for vast sums after having artfully aged them. The copies, snapped up by the bourgeoisie, sell far better than originals, eventually turning Grassou into an affluent and respected member of the bourgeoisie: Grassou succeeds because he is recognized by the bourgeois citizens as one of them, as primarily a businessman rather than an impecunious artist. One of the chief buyers of Grassou’s copies is M. Vervelle, a wealthy industrialist; when Grassou reveals that he is the author of the Rubens, Rembrandts, and so on in Vervelle’s collection, Vervelle doubles his daughter Virginie’s dowry; via marriage to Virginie, the painter obtains a title. The happy ending crowning his success, called a euphoric ending by Anne-Marie Meininger (6: 1089), ratifies his abilities, in stark contrast to other Balzacian mediocrities who end badly, such as Lucien de Rubempré. The moral of the story seems to be that the end justifies the means: why not succeed through mediocrity rather than superiority?

A brilliant opening page sets the underlying theme with lapidary precision. What used to be art has turned into commerce; no longer does the Salon maintain an aristocracy of art. “Depuis 1830, le Salon n’existe plus. Une seconde fois, le Louvre a été pris d’assaut par le peuple des artistes, qui s’y est maintenu” [Since 1830, the Salon no longer exists. For the second time, the Louvre has been besieged—by the artist populace who has maintained its position there] (6: 1091). Instead of a society of elites, instead of honors, a crown, and passionate discussions about art, the keywords of this opening are foule, émeutes, and bazar: popular insurrection and commercialism instead of art. “Au lieu d’un tournoi, vous avez une émeute; au lieu d’une Exposition glorieuse, vous avez un tumultueux bazar; au lieu du choix, vous avez la totalité” [Instead of a tournament, you have a riot; instead of a glorious Exhibition, you have a tumultuous bazaar; instead of choice, you have totality] (6: 1092). This theme opposing art and merchandise, elite and the crowd, selection and election, is maintained from the beginning to the end. By the ending, which arrives at the historical present in 1839, art as commerce has been ratified in lofty regions. The bourgeois circle in which Grassou evolves considers him “un des plus grands artistes de l’époque” [one of the greatest artists of the period] (6: 1111). In the list of his accomplishments and honors there is the commission for a battle scene for the museum of Versailles, another iconic location, like the Louvre, of ancien régime aristocracy and a true indicator of quality. But the ironic reason for his bourgeois success, “la grande raison des Bourgeois” [the great bourgeois rationale], is the money he makes: “il place vingt mille francs par an chez son notaire” [he invests twenty thousand francs
a year with his financial advisor] (6: 1111). The ending fully realizes, in this
fashion, the success of the bourgeoisie announced in the opening page; as
Boris Lyon-Caen writes (170), the figure Grassou emblematizes the rise of the
bourgeoisie after 1830.

If his success is crowned by monetary reward, Grassou is nevertheless
not of the same stuff as the merchant class as illustrated elsewhere in La
Comédie humaine, for instance by the Rogrons of Pierrette. He has qualities
that deserve recognition, even if they are precisely the opposite of a great art-
nist’s qualities; he is modest, simple, good, gentle, hard-working, patient, hon-
est, reliable, obliging, loyal, punctual, and dutiful; but the most important of
these descriptions lasting a page and a half is that he has energy (6: 1101).
Energy is a Balzacian virtue that, as Anne-Marie Meininger remarks, is never
without reward (6: 1089).

So why not succeed via mediocrity? The answers that would give the
resoundingly negative response to this rhetorical question reside in several
significant places in La Comédie humaine. Grassou is commonly opposed to
Frenhofer, who in Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu not only illustrates the concept of
the artist driven by the passion of an idea but also teaches the artist’s function
to younger painters. “La mission de l’art n’est pas de copier la nature, mais
de l’exprimer! Tu n’as pas un vil copiste, mais un poète! . . . Nous avons à
saisir l’esprit, l’âme, la physionomie des choses et des êtres” [The mission of
art is not to copy nature but to express it! You are not a vile copier, you are a
poet! . . . Our task is to grasp the spirit, the soul, the physiognomy of things
and beings] (10: 418). But Grassou is a vile copier. Can he be a creator? In
contrast, the satirical depiction of Grassou’s success leads him to this ironic
realization: “Inventer en toute chose, c’est vouloir mourir à petit feu; copier,
c’est vivre” [To invent at every moment is to want to die a slow death; to copy
is to live] (6: 1101)—again, quite the opposite of Frenhofer, who did die for
inventing. Anne-Marie Meininger sounds the depth of this contrast between
the two kinds of painting by musing that if a cataclysm were to destroy all
but Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu and Pierre Grassou, readers would find it dif-
ficult to believe that the Balzac of the one was the Balzac of the other (6:
1079). Although the theme of the artist as man of passion is central in La
Comédie humaine, giving automatic precedence to the Frenhofer model, this
slight tale of the mediocre painter has a disproportionately important func-
tion. What Pierre Grassou institutes is a serious questioning of the very idea
of the copy.

In the story itself, Joseph Bridau, another model for the artistic creator,
avoir plus d’esprit que la Nature?” [Approach Nature as she is! . . . Are you
trying to be cleverer than Nature?] (6: 1107). Given Balzac’s ambitions, this line invites us to place Balzac into the model of the copier. The painter and the writer both toil tirelessly to make imitations while thereby gaining fame and fortune, consideration and credit, a prosperous wife, and, in Grassou’s case, a decoration and a title. To be sure, mediocrity was never a good descriptor for the grand creator of *La Comédie humaine*, and most of Balzac’s many avatars, like Louis Lambert, fly high in the empyrean ether. Yet if we consider the idea of the copy (imitation) as copy, the product of writing, we are not far from a model for how Balzac did in fact succeed, producing so many lines of fiction a month.

For Balzac, love of his art turned of necessity into money. The Frenhofer model fails to communicate the beauty of the vision to the receiver; this is the theme that *Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu* illustrates. To communicate the vision, to “approach Nature as she is,” the artist must compromise the very art it is his passion to illustrate; to convey the spirit, the soul, and the physiognomy of things and beings, Balzac does in fact create copy, and copies. Arlette Michel, in discussing the value of the real for Balzac, writes: “Le créateur . . . doit inscrire l’Idée dans la Forme pour la rendre communicable, même si, évidemment, l’Idée est allusion à l’absolu donc rebelle à la Forme, toute forme étant réductrice” [The creator . . . must inscribe the Idea into the Form so as to make it communicable, even when, as is likely, the Idea is an allusion to the absolute and therefore rebellious to the Form, all form being reductive] (*Le réel* 84–85). The form is the copy and money; the idea is the expression of nature, the soul, and love. In *Pierre Grassou* even the form of the painter’s name is a copy of aristocratic naming conventions, where the land owned by the family has given its name to the family: Grassou is more often called Fougères or Grassou de Fougères than simply Grassou (Fougères occurs 60 times, Grassou 40 times). And Grassou de Fougères is a perfect imitation, or copy, or phony version of the aristocratic practice—a little reminiscent of the Balzac family’s imitative mutation into de Balzac. In analyzing *Massimilla Doni*, Max Milner also pointed to the danger for an artist who is locked into the sphere of ideas and first principles—the way Cataneo and Capraja are in that novella. Milner writes that the creator runs the risk of not being able to return to earth and of losing “le contrôle de ce système raisonné de moyens en-dehors duquel il n’existe pas d’art communicable” [control of that rational system of methods without which there is no communicable art] (48)—with the accent on “communicable.” *Pierre Grassou* goes far to illustrate Balzac’s understanding of this risk to artistic creation, beginning with himself.

Marrying for money is of course the height of cynicism in the romantic context. Grassou marries the Vervelle daughter because her dowry has
doubled, because he covets their beautiful country home, because he has dis-
covered “un filon plein d’or” [a vein full of gold] (6: 1101) in the family’s
wealth, because “Le veau d’or jeta sur cette famille son reflet fantastique”
[The golden calf cast its fantastic reflection upon this family] (6: 1104). The
monetary value of painting is made equivalent to marriage: Vervelle’s col-
lection of paintings is worth one hundred thousand francs, which is also
the amount of Virginie’s dowry, according to Elias Magus, before Vervelle
doubles it. If the Pierre Grassou model reveals a double bind for the creator,
enveloping the artist in a necessary cynicism, in a Faustian struggle for the
soul, the mediocre, bourgeois artist emerges unscathed and morally unblem-
ish: because the god of capitalism justifies turning love into money. Moti-
vated by love, which is the Idea, the artist nevertheless must reduce it to a
Form, which will always be a copy.

But not just the god of capitalism. It is also a matter of the activity of the
artist. Where does the Idea lie, in relation to the Form? To transform the idea
into a form, as Arlette Michel has pointed out, it takes the agency of the art-
ist: the portrait is not a copy but a transformation of the real; the artist has to
seize the real, analyzing the character, to turn it into the portrait. What Gras-
sou achieves with his painting turns the business of copying into a transfor-
mation of nature. And that is the Balzacian act. As we can read in Un prince
de la bohème, “En France le style vient des idées et non des mots” [In France,
style comes from the ideas, not the words] (7: 823).