

## Review

**Family Plots: Balzac's Narrative Generations. By Janet L. Beizer. New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press. 1986. x + 213 pp. £18.00.**

**William Butcher**

*Family Plots* is very good in parts, but I also found it somewhat annoying, because of its excessively modernistic methodology. Its approach is explicitly, but not dogmatically, Freudian; one is also aware, I think, that a female critic is writing about a male novelist, although unfair advantage is never taken. There are numerous references to Zola, Borges, and Barthes, and the index is typical in that under L it lists three moderns and one '*ancien*': Lacan, Levin, Levi-Strauss, and Lukács.

Janet Beizer starts with a longish plot summary of the less well-known tale 'El Verdugo' (1829), and analyses the images, especially those of light and vision, and the various displacements of impulse. She concludes that there is a chassé-croisé between manifest and latent eros and parricide, but also that the language itself is highlighted and thus that the text qua text often constitutes Balzac's ultimate subject of concern.

With 'Une Passion dans le désert' (1830), the author begins to warm up a little. The centre of interest, described at least four times, is the remarkable friendship between a soldier stranded in the desert and a female panther who chooses to befriend him. There are various pleasant word-plays with trees and stumps and with long tails and castrations. While being caressed one day, however, the panther becomes enraged, and bites the soldier's thigh; in reaction, 'je lui plongeai mon poignard dans le cou' - an excuse for an entertaining field-day of 'dagger-leg-phallus' interpretation (p. 78). But the opportunity to take what might be considered the most striking play on words in this scene is wilfully neglected. (To tell the truth, it was the person typing the present review who, by a brilliant slip of the finger, revealed the possibility.) If the final 'u' of the quotation is replaced by an 'n', then all becomes totally and obscenely clear.

Chapter 3, on *Le Père Goriot*, is perhaps more substantial. After setting the general and specific contexts, Dr Beizer leads us through the socio-erotic urges and images visible in the text: for example, 'la traite des femmes' (p. 115), the mud image, the sphinx as hermaphrodite, 'artificial paternity', and Delphine's triple relations with Rastignac, as 'lover, sister and mother' (p. 133). The text thus reveals, in one of the author's finer phrases, 'heavily charged networks of relations, . . . virtual lines of force, a welter of tangled threads which superimpose paternity, conjugality, incest and homosexuality' (p. 135).

Chapter 4, the last, deals especially with *Illusions perdues*, and argues that for Balzac the process of writing is torn between the mystic and scientific modes, in the same way as the lover is torn between the spiritual and sexual ones. Lucien and David, in fact, exemplify both oppositions, according to Dr Beizer's sensitive analysis, which comes close here to a traditional approach. (But might a reference to Hesse's Narcissus and Goldmund or Tournier's *Les Météores* not also have been useful at this point?) Once again, language is the final destination of both Balzac and Dr Beizer. Her conclusion is that 'the cry to flee, hide, and be silent, to preserve the ineffable, plaintively resounds through every novel, every story, every essay written by Balzac', but a silence which potentially calls language back into existence.

Family Plots is often very appealing, then, but not consistently so. The author sometimes gets bogged down or sidetracked (as in the afterword). There is little attempt to evaluate Balzac in comparison with other writers, and a tendency to trendiness of critical approach means that both sides of some arguments are apparently upheld. Two examples of this are: the question of whether subversion of traditional structures is more characteristic of nineteenth-century or twentieth-century literature (p. 11), and the central question of whether the paternal figure is undermined by Balzac and his successors, or simply 'multiply reinvented' (p. 182). There is occasional overstatement (psychoanalysis 'replaced the novel as the prevailing myth at the end of the nineteenth century' (p. 10); 'the modernist deconstruction of paternity as a "legal fiction" ' (p. 182)) or dogmatism ('Balzac's failure to write a latterday master fiction is not worth lamenting' (p. 182)). The text is sometimes heavy-handed or forced, with the odd bad (English) pun: the reader is 'stumped by stories of truncation' (p. 57); or Goriot's being buried at Père-Lachaise means that 'one paternal "plot" has absorbed the other' (p. 139).

In sum, I imagine that the general reader will get a considerable amount of use and pleasure from this book provided he/she can separate the wheat from the chaff (he/she would perhaps be well advised to start with the second half). The professional *balzaciens*, despite being very much neglected by the author, will certainly not be able to ignore the conclusions of this book. And I suspect that we shall be hearing from Janet Beizer again, in both theoretic and thematic modes.

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