



The Wrong Side of Paris

Honoré de Balzac, Jordan Stump (Translator), Adam Gopnik (Introduction)

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The Wrong Side of Paris, the final novel in Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, is the compelling story of Godefroid, an abject failure at thirty, who seeks refuge from materialism by moving into a monastery-like lodging house in the shadows of Notre-Dame. Presided over by Madame de La Chanterie, a noblewoman with a tragic past, the house is inhabited by a remarkable band of men—all scarred by the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution—who have devoted their lives to performing anonymous acts of charity. Intrigued by the Order of the Brotherhood of Consolation and their uplifting dedication to virtuous living, Godefroid strives to follow their example. He agrees to travel—incognito—to a Parisian slum to save a noble family from ruin. There he meets a beautiful, ailing Polish woman who lives in great luxury, unaware that just outside her bedroom door her own father and son are suffering in dire poverty. By proving himself worthy of the Brotherhood, Godefroid finds his own spiritual redemption.
This vivid portrait of the underbelly of nineteenth-century Paris, exuberantly rendered by Jordan Stump, is the first major translation in more than a century of Balzac's forgotten masterpiece *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*. Featuring an illuminating Introduction by Adam Gopnik, this original Modern Library edition also includes explanatory notes.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Wrong Side of Paris Details

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Richard Anderson says

Not top flight Balzac, but some good moments.

Stephen C. says

WOW. Probably the best book I've read on the essence of charitable giving and the why and the how and the who that receives the "charity". Probably a great model for today for anyone who has the resources to execute such a complex and somewhat "risky" approach to giving. It certainly makes you understand the critical nature of what is given and who it is given to. Worth all the time it takes to understand.

Matthew Wilson says

When I was laid up with back trouble in the late 1970s, I set myself a project to read 19th century French fiction, and my favorite was Balzac. I read all of the novels in translation in Penguin, and I read many more from the Rutgers library, but I never read this book, the last novel he published, and I'm reminded why I liked Balzac so much. Adam Gopnik's introduction helped me understand that liking -- despite B's convictions -- Catholic and monarchist -- his form is anything but traditional. Gopnik calls it a kind of magic realism, where his best novels are always grounded in a dense social reality, but also can have at their center something that defies realism, in this case, an anonymous secret Catholic group that's dedicated to doing good for the poor. If that were all the novel were about, it would be boring, but the back stories of the older characters are so fascinating that I'm reminded of Faulkner's having written that the "past is never dead. It's not even past." Two of the back stories intersect in the conclusion of the novel in a way that's startling and unsettling.

Will says

Like in *The Wild Ass's Skin*, this is Balzac at his most eccentric (mysticism, magic, secret societies) though that's not a good thing at length (and Balzac is always over-long anyway). For a Balzac novel, there aren't nearly enough trivial furniture descriptions, and in English, this practically reads like an English translation of a French translation of mashed up bits from Chesterton and Wells.

Deborah Zwayer says

Make you question your own ideas of materialism & charity and who will really be there for you in the end.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

L'envers de l'histoire contemporaine=The Brotherhood of Consolation, Honoré de Balzac
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Tony says

THE WRONG SIDE OF PARIS. (1848). Honore de Balzac. ***1/2.

This was apparently the last entry in Balzac's great project in literature called "The Human Comedy." The series consisted of about 80+ novels and short story collections that attempted to describe life in Paris after

the Revolution. In this novel, the protagonist, Godefroid, stumbles upon a family-based group who seemed to be involved in a great scheme to right some of the wrongs done to many families by the affairs of the previous government. They attempted to do so by pooling their resources to allay the sufferings of once prospering families – all done in their own way. I found this novel interesting, and a relatively quick read. In the Modern Library version I found, translated by Jordan Stump, the translator added his own preface, one that poured on nothing for praise for the book. It was obvious that he was more than a little impressed with the quality of the product. It seemed a little different to me than most of the Balzac I've read, but it was still written in a style that kept your attention. Reading this, in addition, gives you bragging rights about having joined the club that read the last novel in the series.

Kris says

Certainly not Balzac's best work, and it has the somewhat characteristic truncated ending, but even more pronounced than usual. Still, the character sketches - Balzac's forte - are very good, and the story is interesting, and a rather notable departure from his usual themes. This book could very easily have been twice as long, and it probably would have been better for it. Godefroid's conversion would have been more convincing and more fleshed out if it were developed over the course of a career of charitable works, than simply over his very first one!

Balzac's treatment of poverty and the poignant dignity that can be found there is the best part of the book; at least, I found myself wanting more such scenarios. I can recommend this to Balzac fans, or more generally perhaps to believers in true Catholic charity, as the book relies on buying in to this doctrine to be at all moving.

Jim says

Balzac is an author whose individual works can run the gamut from ill-conceived and hastily constructed to sublimely powerful novels such as **Pere Goriot**, **Lost Illusions**, **A Harlot High and Low**, **Cousin Bette**, and **Cousin Pons**. And I would also have to add **The Wrong Side of Paris**, which required a re-reading to appreciate its power. Yet, even Balzac's inferior works have their place: This is because the *Comédie Humaine* is like a vast continuum illuminated by greater lights and lesser lights. A vast cast of characters jumps from stories to novels and back again, and the lesser lights frequently illuminate the greater ones.

In the 51 short years of his life, Balzac burned like a candle lit at both ends. He wrote with a passion that is wholly absent from literature in English. To miss having read him is to miss a unique perspective on the Promethean world that swings like a pendulum between the material and the spiritual. Reading him requires care, particularly when one is deeply involved in the minutiae of a grand conspiracy bringing together obscure points of French law and economic transactions of the period.

The Wrong Side of Paris is one of the author's few attempts to depict goodness triumphant. (The only other example I can think of at this moment is his **The Country Doctor**.) Just as the evil conspiracies in many of his most famous novels have a muscular drive to them, so also does the goodness of the secret group formed around Mme de la Chanterie. Influenced by the charitable work of St. Vincent de Paul and the society named after him in the 1830s, Balzac sees a secret, almost Masonic, order of powerful individuals who seek out people who are at one and the same time besieged by poverty and worthy of help.

In the first half of the book, the hero, known to us only by his first name, Godefroid, is drawn to this circle and becomes ever more involved as he becomes more fascinated with the story of Mme de la Chanterie. In the second half, he is sent to help a desperate former lawyer known at first only as M Bernard whose daughter Vanda has a rare nervous disease and who has not left her tenement room for many years. The daughter's room is elegantly decorated, even as her father and son live in slumlike conditions in the adjoining rooms. Godefroid manages to alleviate the conditions of M Bernard and his family, until he runs into a shocking revelation, which I will not reveal here.

This is one of Balzac's last completed novels and a kind of Valentine to the Polish Countess, Eveline Hanska, whom he was pursuing and eventually married -- only to die shortly after. Perhaps for this reason he employed more care in **The Wrong Side of Paris** than in many of his earlier novels. Even so, there are a few slip-ups, which translator Jordan Stump documents in his excellent end notes.

Jon Falzon says

It would appear that far too many great minds go the way of Rochester and find themselves dominated by thoughts of god at the end of their lives. It astonishes me that the man who brought us vibrant characters like Rastignac and the Bridau brothers managed to sink so far into maudlin religious apologetics. The whining bleeding heart who wrote this book bears no resemblance to the Balzac of former years. It would be more at home on the bookshelf of a doddering Catholic granny than on one accompanied by Zola, Diderot, and Maupassant. It's full of jabs at Napoleon, the Revolution, and revolutionary spirit-- instead choosing to portray the malignant royalists as victims. At one point, a kindly Christian goes off to quash a labor movement at a local factory where the workers are suffering in poverty and despair. Why? Because the disturbance to the economy and the violence of protest would be an even greater sin! Is this Balzac?! Is this France?! I can only say with Voltaire, "Ecrasez l'infame!"

Jamie says

When I picked up this translation at the local annual library book fair, I was confused. The cover and title have a distinctly late-twentieth century feel to them, but the author's name was vaguely familiar in an old-timey sort of way. Those contradictory characteristics, plus the unambiguously moralistic nature of the plot summary on the back jacket, convinced me to buy it.

As someone with translation studies background, translated literature will always hold a special place in my heart. And, likewise, when a translated novel is denied the dignity of a proper translator's note, my heart breaks a little. Happily, Jeremy Stump wrote an absolutely phenomenal translator's note that was even longer than the preface (hurrah!) and reading it before I began the novel itself was extremely useful.

I'm not going to write about the history of Balzac's collection of *La Comédie humaine*, because I am nowhere near an expert in French literature or Balzac. My French history is also apparently rubbish because I relied heavily on this edition's end notes to provide the much needed additional information. As do most authors who write for their contemporaries about their present, *The Wrong Side of Paris* is full of references to all sorts of cultural and social factoids that were lost on me. I remember very little from my AP European History course, apart from a vague idea of when the Revolution occurred, the approximate years of Napoleon's reign and a faint recollection that at one point the Bourbons were briefly placed back on the

throne.

Instead, I'll just add a quick note for why I gave this four instead of five stars, even though I really did enjoy this. As much as I love dramatic, last-minute plot twists (in this sense, TWSOP felt like reading a French Dickensian novel), the story was slightly too caricatured. It was interesting to read about Paris as it was in the early/mid-nineteenth century, though.

Melika Arast says

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Sylvester says

A bit different from the usual Balzac fare. I loved the idea - a man joins a secret charitable society and gets caught up in the lives of a family that has fallen on hard times. Not a thing wrong with this book, only I wish there had been more of it! Not just the one family - more, more, more! Balzac ends it quite abruptly, something he occasionally does, and I only forgive him because his writing is so wonderful, his descriptions of character, interiors, the Parisian city-scape - all so skillfully done, and transport this 21st Century Canadian into an otherwise unattainable world! I recommend as a short read for fans of Balzac.

Sarah Archer-beck says

I really wanted to like this book more. I have wanted to read Balzac for a while and so jumped on this book when I found it on sale at the book store. There were some great descriptions and interesting commentaries, but the story was not that engaging and then truncated once things started to get interesting. I am a religious person, but I found the religion a little heavy-handed, especially in the first part of the book.
