

PÈRE GORIOT

HONORÉ DE BALZAC



TRANSLATED BY BURTON RAFFEL
EDITED BY PETER BROOKS

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Honoré de Balzac
PÈRE GORIOT



A NEW TRANSLATION
RESPONSES: CONTEMPORARIES AND
OTHER NOVELISTS
TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

Translated by

BURTON RAFFEL

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHWESTERN LOUISIANA

Edited by

PETER BROOKS

YALE UNIVERSITY

W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York • London*

This title is printed on permanent paper containing 30 percent
post-consumer waste recycled fiber.

Copyright © by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
English translation of PÈRE GORIOT copyright © 1994 by Burton Raffel.

All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.
First Edition.

The text of this book is composed in Electra
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.
Composition by PennSet
Manufacturing by Courier Companies

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Balzac, Honoré de, 1799–1850

[Père Goriot. English]

Père Goriot : a new translation : responses, contemporaries and
other novelists, twentieth-century criticism / Honoré de Balzac ;
translated by Burton Raffel ; edited by Peter Brooks.

p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-393-97166-X (pbk.)

1. Balzac, Honoré de, 1799–1850. Père Goriot. I. Raffel,

Burton, II. Brooks, Peter, 1938– III. Title.

PQ2168.A374 1997

843'.7—DC21

97-19938

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street,
London W1T 3QT

The Translator

BURTON RAFFEL is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, where he has taught since 1989. He is the translator of many works, including *Don Quijote*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (awarded the French-American Foundation Translation Prize), *Beowulf*, and the five romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

The Editor

PETER BROOKS is Tripp Professor of Humanities at Yale University, where he teaches in the departments of Comparative Literature and French. He has written extensively about the nineteenth-century novel, French and English. His books include: *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*; *Reading for the Plot*; *Body Work*; *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*; and *Troubling Confessions*.

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.
Also Publishes

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Nina Baym et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
edited by Jack Zipes et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Joyce Carol Oates

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE BY WOMEN
edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY
edited by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY
edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF THEORY AND CRITICISM
edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD LITERATURE
edited by Sarah Lawall et al.

THE NORTON FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST FOLIO OF SHAKESPEARE
prepared by Charlton Hinman

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE
edited by Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT NOVEL
edited by Jerome Beaty

THE NORTON READER
edited by Linda H. Peterson and John C. Brereton

THE NORTON SAMPLER
edited by Thomas Cooley

THE NORTON SHAKESPEARE, BASED ON THE OXFORD EDITION
edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al.

For a complete list of Norton Critical Editions, visit
www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nce_home.htm

Editor's Introduction

Père Goriot stands as a classic of the nineteenth-century European novel, and the most enduringly popular of Balzac's myriad works. Yet how strange it is that one can think of any Balzac novel as a "classic." A novelist who in his own lifetime gained a wide readership, who made—and lost—large sums of money through his writing, Balzac never quite made it into literary respectability. One of the first writers in history to live by his pen, he was part of a vast transformation of literary production into what the contemporary critic C. A. Sainte-Beuve—who was always suspicious of Balzac's success—called "industrial literature": literature written for the marketplace, often published in serial form, and dependent for its success on journalists' notices and on the new industry of advertising. Balzac, who was something of a dunce as a businessman, was ever trying to write his way out of debt: without success, since he managed to spend more than he earned and to compromise those earnings by rewriting his novels—often more than once—on printers' proofs, with corrections charged to the author.

He also had an insatiable appetite for material goods: furniture, clothes, and accessories—he had a notorious collection of canes with elaborate heads—and when, toward the end of his life, he had gained a measure of ease and won the hand of the Polish noblewoman, Countess Hanska, with whom he had been corresponding for years, he spent a fortune furnishing a new house for his impending marriage. Exhausted and ill from years of a taxing existence, he survived the marriage only by a few months and died at fifty-one. Material things, and the money required to buy them, are very much at the center of his novelistic universe: he is one of the first novelists to understand the dominating importance of money in the dawning world of capitalism, when the old values of the landed aristocracy were being challenged by the rising commercial and industrial classes. He admired the old order and the aristocracy—to the extent of adding a pseudo-aristocratic "de" to the name Honoré Balzac—and took up reactionary positions, declaring himself a monarchist and a Catholic, yet he was ever aware of how the old order was giving way to the unbridled competition, the "every man for himself" spirit of capitalist entrepreneurship. This split between what he idealized and what he perceived to be reality allowed him to register, better than any other novelist of his time, the contra-

dictions of an era of rapid transformations—which is why he has always been a favorite of Marxist critics, starting with Marx and Engels themselves.

“The Nineteenth Century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac’s,” wrote Oscar Wilde. Our whole picture of the nineteenth century owes much to this first writer to conceptualize it, to give it form, to analyze its dynamic forces. Modern French historians have repeatedly recognized that Balzac, despite his exaggerations and far-fetched imaginings—or perhaps because of them—remains their prime source for the social history of the period. As his literary production unfolded over the 1830s, Balzac himself recognized that he was writing an unprecedented portrait of a whole society. He decided that he would become “the secretary of society” and “compete with the Civil Registry” in presenting all the types of citizens in the nation. By 1840, he had conceived of grouping his novels together under the grandiose title *La Comédie humaine*—the modern, secular version of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*—with sub-sections devoted to Parisian life, provincial life, private life, military life, and so on. From 1842 onward, every novel and tale (there are some ninety in all) would find a place in this large structure.

Père Goriot marks Balzac’s discovery of the idea of an ensemble that would become *La Comédie humaine*. *Père Goriot* was the work of a thirty-five-year-old who up to then had to his credit the Gothic “pot-boilers” written during the 1820s, published under pseudonyms, then the *succès de scandale* of the anonymous *Physiologie du mariage*—a cynical anatomy of marriage—then the real success of the flamboyant and allegorical *La Peau de chagrin* [*The Fatal Skin*] and the first “scenes of private life.” He was not yet considered a “serious” writer, but an entertainer. Written with great speed, in sessions that could go nearly round the clock, during the fall of 1834, *Père Goriot* began its serialization in the *Revue de Paris* in mid-December, then was published as a book in 1835.

In the course of writing the novel—at the moment when he was describing his young protagonist’s first visit to the house of his aristocratic relative Madame de Beauséant—Balzac drew a line through the first name he had assigned to this protagonist, Messiac, and wrote instead: Rastignac. Rastignac already existed in Balzac’s fiction. He was a secondary character in *La Peau de chagrin*, in which he became the disabused and dissipated mentor to the young Raphaël de Valentin, whom he initiated into a life of gambling and high-stakes life choices. In choosing to make the hero of *Père Goriot* the same character we had already met—at a later stage of his life—in *La Peau de chagrin*, Balzac invented the technique of “returning characters” who link his various novels together into a larger whole. The more we read his novels, the more we discover various aspects and characteristics and life-stages of

literally hundreds of characters. Some forty-eight of the characters in *Père Goriot* reappear in other novels. Some of them are forever bit players; others become principal figures in other novels; some, like the doctor Bianchon, the lawyer Derville, and the moneylender Gobseck, are by their professional roles vital linking figures throughout many novels, creating the sense of a peopled social world. The returning characters enable Balzac to create an ensemble that is more than simply the accumulation of its parts; we are given multiple perspectives on one person and different angles of vision on a given situation. The novella *Gobseck*, for instance, will give us quite a different picture of the struggles between the Count and the Countess de Restaud, who appear in *Père Goriot*; another novella, *La Maison Nucingen* [*The House of Nucingen*], will fill us in on how Rastignac later came to fame and fortune.

This is not to say that *Père Goriot* isn't complete in itself. One of the reasons for its enduring success is its real perfection of form, its economy of means and ends. A number of Balzac's novels lack this unity, especially when different parts of the novel were composed at different times—Balzac chronically had too much to do and was behind in meeting all his deadlines. *Père Goriot* has the achieved completeness that has made its protagonist into a proverbial figure for the French: if you call someone a "Rastignac," everyone knows you mean a bright and ambitious young man determined to succeed—perhaps at any cost.

In the figure of Rastignac, Balzac contributes decisively to that most characteristic of nineteenth-century novelistic forms, the *Bildungsroman*—the novel of education, of initiation, of coming-of-age, in which a young person sheds his original naiveté and learns the ways of the world. In the case of Rastignac, this learning is specifically worldly. Rastignac, who has been sent to Paris by his aristocratic but impoverished family in the provinces to study law, quickly learns that a law degree is not the direct route to what Paris tantalizingly displays to his avid gaze: desirable women, luxury, power, money. Money especially, since without that all the rest is unobtainable. In his first visits in high society, Rastignac learns—and he's a quick study—that his good name and good looks are valuable assets but that they need the leverage given by money. Money will get you beautiful women, too. And maybe, if you use your youth and good looks wisely and take advantage of your family ties to good society, you can use women to get money.

In his worldly initiation, Rastignac is served not only by his highly aristocratic relative, Madame de Beauséant, but also, in very different ways, by two surrogate fathers: the one who gives the novel its title, old Goriot, and the mysterious Vautrin, alias Jacques Collin, alias "Death-Dodger." Vautrin is one of the chief reappearing characters in *La Comédie humaine*, and one of Balzac's most remarkable creations, at once a kind of superman, like some of the figures from Balzac's youthful Gothic fiction, and a keen analyst of contemporary society. An

outsider—indeed, proscribed by society, outside the law—Vautrin understands that the social contract is nothing but a fraud for those without power and money, and therefore that social success for the powerless demands extraordinary and often extralegal means. Some of the greatest pages of the novel consist in his “lessons” to the young man he would make his protégé—lessons in which he strips bare the facades of society and presents a chillingly accurate picture of the world as it is.

As for Goriot, the *père* that becomes his informal title means two things. It’s a familiar, condescending, belittling way to refer to an old man who seems to have little social status, and it refers to his chosen role as father, exploited and betrayed by his children. Balzac had Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in mind when he created Goriot, and by the end of the novel the old man has something of Lear’s mythic grandeur. But his deathbed rantings are not only about filial ingratitude. They constitute the denunciation of a whole society that has denatured family loyalties by its obsession with success and money, in which marriage has become a sordid financial barter, in which fathers are valued only as moneybags.

Together, Vautrin and Goriot raise the stakes of all Rastignac’s actions and choices. What they represent in terms of social experience, and what they articulate about how the world goes on, helps to make Rastignac’s career truly exemplary. How Rastignac negotiates his way in the social labyrinth offers the chief possible choices in existence. His final decisions and gestures—as in the famous scene that ends the novel—mark a bitter shedding of illusions and a new clarity of vision. This clarity is not necessarily that of morality, in the conventional sense: morality hasn’t proved to be of much help in the world. It’s more a sense of the price to be paid for what you want in life, and the value of facing the struggles of existence without flinching from the means necessary to gain the desired ends.

Rastignac in this last scene stands on the high ground of Père Lachaise cemetery and looks down on the rich districts of Paris where he has staked out his plans for success. Certainly a good part of the claim that Balzac invented the nineteenth century lies in his understanding of the modern city, in its glory and abjection, its palaces and its mud-holes. From the opening pages of the novel, with its presentation of the decrepit lodging-house where the young and the social failures must abide, Paris is the looming presence that gives the novel its particular tone. No novelist before Balzac understood and gave a living presence to the city in this way, and he became a model for later novelists—Dickens with London, Dostoevsky with St. Petersburg—who understood, as he did, that the modern city had become a total environment, a place from which there was no escape. Balzac wrote at a time when Paris was in transformation—from 1800 to 1830, the population of the

city had doubled, largely from the arrival of immigrants from the countryside, peasants in search of employment, aspiring intellectuals and artists eager for cultural life, ambitious young men, like Rastignac, seeking to make it.

Balzac understood the history of his time exceptionally well. French history has this peculiarity, that the Revolution begun in 1789, played out through the Reign of Terror, the reaction that led to the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, the epic conquest of most of Europe by Napoleon and the founding of his Empire, and then Waterloo and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, decisively severs the Old Régime from modernity. After the Revolution, even when the Bourbon kings returned and tried to revive the old monarchy, all was changed utterly. While the period recorded in Balzac's novels lies mainly in the 1820s—during the Restoration period—he had the additional advantage of writing following the Revolution of 1830, which overthrew the Bourbons in favor of the "Citizen King" Louis-Philippe, thus demonstrating how shallow the notion of a "restoration" had been. The true values of the modern age lay, not with the feudal aristocracy, not with land and inherited titles, but with money and its multiplication through capitalist production.

The scandal of society analyzed in different perspectives but with concurring results by Madame de Beauséant, by Vautrin, by Goriot, and eventually by Rastignac himself can lead, on the one hand, to Balzac's choice to be a monarchist reactionary, and on the other hand to Rastignac's understanding of the uses of social mobility. While France in the 1820s would appear to us, today, as very hierarchical and class-bound—and indeed, Rastignac at once discovers its caste system—in comparison to the Old Régime it offered real possibilities of upward mobility and social self-fashioning. If Rastignac has to learn the codes of Parisian social manners, once he masters them there are few limits to success. Vautrin's career suggests in other ways the proteanism made possible by modernity: he moves through a series of disguises in the course of *La Comédie humaine* and eventually abandons the underworld for a high position with the police. His metamorphoses indicate the rich potential for self-fashioning in a world where identities are not so firmly determined at birth as they once were. You can—though you'll need money—become what you want to be: this, in part, is Vautrin's lesson to Rastignac, and to himself, and it is a lesson that many young Frenchmen in the first half of the nineteenth century were eager to hear, and to act on.

Balzac the social reactionary liked to lament the loss of the highly structured caste system of the Old Régime when, he claims, you could tell who someone was from his or her appearance, often simply from the person's costume, since workers and artisans tended to wear traditional garb associated with their professions. In the nineteenth century,

everyone wears the standard black frock coat, they all look alike, and you can't at first glance tell a banker from a butcher in his Sunday best, or a lawyer from a nobleman, or a police detective from an undercover spy. This means that the observer—the young man on the make, the novelist writing his account of Parisian life—must learn to penetrate appearances, to read the significant detail that betrays identity, must get beneath the surface, uncover the hidden meaning. Thus it is that we see the narrator of *Père Goriot* constantly exercising the pressure of observation on the surrounding world, attempting to decipher it—to crack not only its social codes but its hidden meanings as well. What appears on the surface is rarely the whole story. You need to look behind closed doors, through keyholes. You need to interrogate faces for their true meaning, read clothing and gesture for what they are trying to hide.

Such a view of modern reality often gives an insistent quality to Balzac's narrative voice and technique and leads to heightened moments of drama. Though he was not a success in his ventures into playwriting—he could never tailor his dramas to the limitations of the stage—Balzac has a high sense of dramatic enactment, one that has often struck critics as exaggerated and overcharged. Though he is authentically the father of the realist novel through his meticulous attention to history and the things of everyday life, he doesn't quite fit the confines of realism. His temper is too romantic, his dramatizations too thunderous. As his most admiring critics—from Charles Baudelaire to Henry James and Marcel Proust and on to our own time—have claimed, if Balzac is a great observer he is also a great visionary, someone whose ambitions reach beyond recording life as it is to attempting to understand its deep occult forces. *La Comédie humaine* included some novels Balzac classified as “philosophical,” which often concerned visionary figures seeking—and usually failing to find—some Absolute, one of the great causes or motors of human and social existence. And *La Comédie humaine* was to include as well a series of “analytical studies,” which were to analyze the very principles that govern life. The analytical studies exist only in fragmentary form—how could they ever be written?—and Balzac often goes off in pursuit of pseudo-sciences such as phrenology, mesmerism, and animal magnetism that seem to offer convenient explanations of phenomena of human identity and the power of the will. His failure to complete his social vision with an explanation of the arcane causes of social life may matter less than the energy given to his work by the constant striving after principles of unity, explanation, and vital movement.

Balzac a classic? The claim has always been contested because he has always had critics who accused him of writing badly, of lacking a sense of proportion, of exaggerating and inflating, of failing to find an overall harmony of form. In a country that tends to cherish its classic

tradition—that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers such as Racine, Molière, La Rochefoucauld, Montesquieu, Voltaire—Balzac's melodramatic excess has often been viewed with suspicion, his breathless prose has often disqualified him from canonization. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century he had become a European classic, read in all corners of the Continent. A visit to most college libraries in the United States will lead to the discovery of a complete set of *La Comédie humaine* in English translation, published between 1890 and 1900, approximately. Balzac was at that time an integral part of Western culture. Then his reputation suffered a partial decline: the mid-twentieth century seemed to prefer sparer, leaner fictions: Balzac's older contemporary Stendhal, known for his spare, unsentimental style, emerged as more in tune with modern tastes, and Balzac's later disciple Flaubert, who tended to prick all the bubbles of romance in his master's work, became the hero of modern writers. But Balzac has known a definite revival of interest in the past twenty years or so. Maybe as "post-moderns" we have learned to value styles that are more ornamented, less functionalist, and visions that are more vividly baroque, less sober. Above all, we keep returning to Balzac as the person who invented the nineteenth century: who was the first to recognize and fully represent the modern era in which we still participate.

In inventing modernity, Balzac also invents the modern novel, in the sense that he develops the capacities of the novelistic form to the point at which it can do so much more than it had before, represent so much more of life. He gives the novel a kind of freedom of range that has been an inspiration to writers ever since. And when that freedom is used with the greatest intensity, in the most focused and concentrated way, we get a masterpiece such as *Père Goriot*.

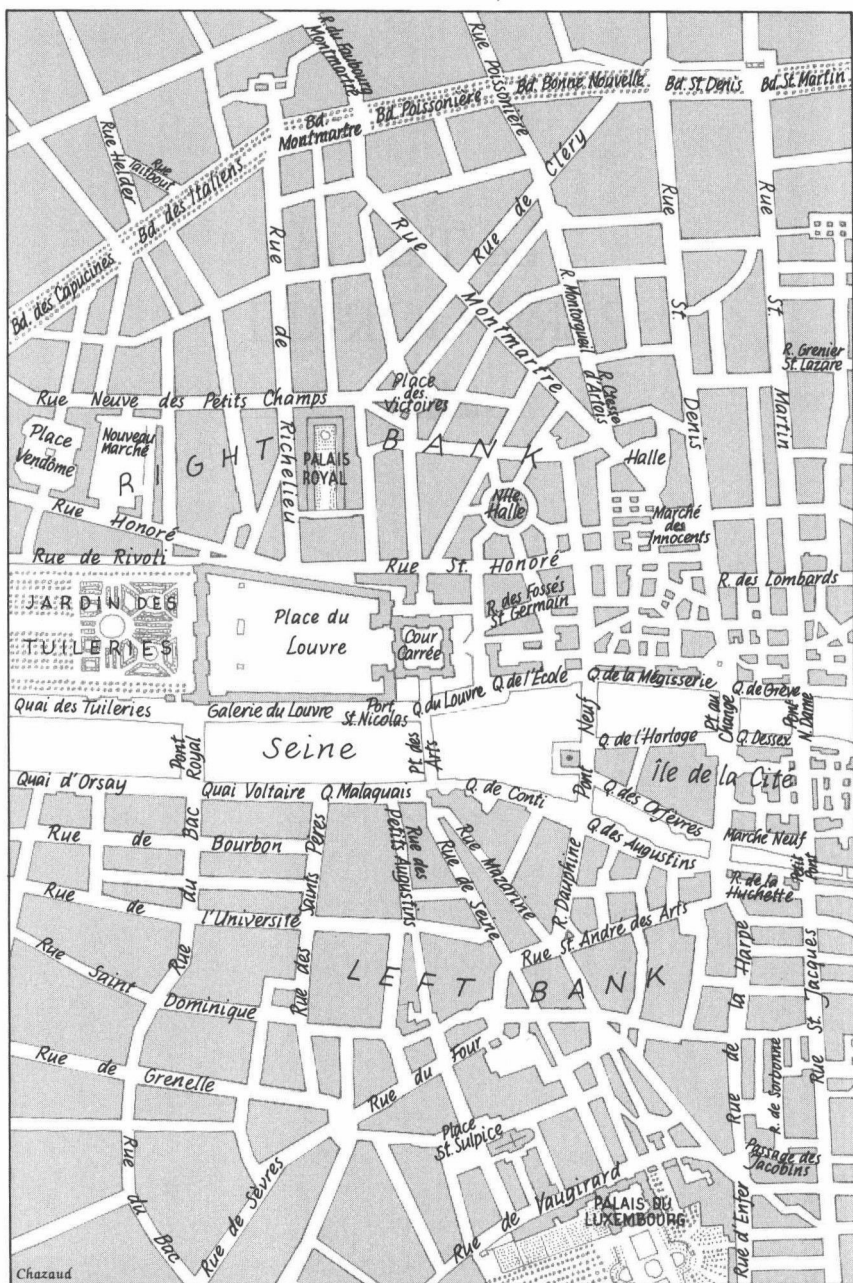
My editorial tasks have been greatly aided by the work of two assistants, Benjamin Elwood and Rima Canaan Lee, to whom my warm thanks.

Contents

Editor's Introduction	vii
The Text of <i>Père Goriot</i>	1
Map: Paris in the 1820s	2
Responses: Contemporaries and Other Novelists	
C. A. Sainte-Beuve • M. de Balzac	221
Charles Baudelaire • [Balzac's Genius]	224
Théophile Gautier • [Balzac's Modernity]	225
Hippolyte Taine • Balzac's Philosophy	228
Emile Zola • From <i>The Naturalist Novel</i>	235
Marcel Proust • Sainte-Beuve and Balzac	238
Henry James • The Lesson of Balzac	245
Twentieth-Century Criticism	
Ernst Robert Curtius • Energy	261
Albert Béguin • Balzac the Visionary	268
Erich Auerbach • [<i>Père Goriot</i>]	279
Georges Poulet • Balzac	289
Michel Butor • Balzac and Reality	294
Louis Chevalier • <i>La Comédie humaine</i> : Historical Document?	301
Pierre Barbéris • The Discovery of Solitude	304
Peter Brooks • Balzac: Representation and Signification	314
Sandy Petrey • The Father Loses a Name: Constative Identity in <i>Le Père Goriot</i>	328
Nicole Mozet • Description and Deciphering: The Maison Vauquer	338
Janet L. Beizer • Mirrors and Fatherhood in <i>Le Père Goriot</i>	353
Honoré de Balzac: A Chronology	365
Selected Bibliography	369

The Text of
PÈRE GORIOT





Paris in the 1820s

