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EUGENIE GRANDET

The Curé of Tours

BY HONORÉ DE BALZAC

TRANSLATED BY Merloyd Lawrence

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY Henri Peyre

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Honoré de Balzac

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and
THE CURÉ OF TOURS

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YALE UNIVERSITY

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Gordon N. Ray



Introduction

BY

HENRI PEYRE

There are a dozen novels by that most fecund and most varied of novelists, Honoré de Balzac, which might be considered his masterpieces: some are more visionary and fanciful than *Eugénie Grandet*; others are more philosophical; still others cover a broader range and portray events and heroes of Napoleonic grandeur. *Eugénie Grandet*, however, ranks among the most celebrated works of fiction of the golden age of the novel, the nineteenth century. It has the simplicity and the pathetic directness of a classical tragedy. It anticipates the realistic masterpieces of Flaubert and Zola, but it also embodies the romantic dreams and the sentimental urges of the generation which, reaching full manhood in the years following the revolution of 1830, hoped to mold the world anew according to its visions. No other of Balzac's novels constitutes such a fitting initiation to the variegated human, all too human, comedy of one of the most powerful creators of fiction who ever lived.

When *Eugénie Grandet* appeared in 1833, Balzac, who was thirty-four, had already published a dozen works under assumed names, as many short stories which rank with any written in the French language before or since, philosophical tales, historical novels, comic and "droll" stories, a fictional autobiography, and penetrating studies of women from all social classes. His childhood had been unhappy; he had been starved of love by a mother who lacked tenderness and never understood her son. During the six years which he spent as a pupil at a school in Vendôme, not far from Tours where he was born, his mother visited him only once, and he never enjoyed the respite of a vacation from the rigid discipline of the Oratorian priests who ran the school. In 1814, he left his native Touraine when his father moved to the capital. Between 1816 and 1819, he studied law with little

zest, worked for a lawyer, acquired an inside knowledge of financial manipulations and of the harshness with which families fight over the legacies of dead relatives. But, following a familiar pattern among French men of letters, he soon decided, in the face of his family's opposition, to forsake law for literature. He lived alone in a Paris attic, reading, and writing profusely. He fell in love with Mme. de Berny, a woman of rare insight and of immense generosity, twenty-two years older than himself, who provided him with the tenderness and the encouragement which he had failed to find at home. Soon other women, attracted by his talent and by his powerful personality, entered into his life. He wrote, and received, several thousand love letters, possessing to a remarkable degree the talent, with which Frenchmen are so often credited, of pursuing several love affairs at the same time and of keeping a multiplicity of mistresses in relative harmony. His resounding success of these years was his strange and epic novel on a theme akin to that of *Faust: La Peau de Chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*). The hero, Raphael, becomes the possessor of a talisman which enables him to fulfill his every wish; but after nights of orgy, sumptuous living, triumph over his rivals, he falls prey to the terror of death as he watches his wild ass's skin shrink with each of his wishes. His power over others and over things only hastens his end, without bringing him any more inner joy than gold does to old Grandet. One young woman alone, Pauline, to whom Eugénie bears some similitude, meek and unselfish, might have saved Raphael from the malady of covetousness and greed for power, but he appreciates her modest qualities too late.

In 1832, Balzac wrote *Le Curé de Tours*, and received his first letter from Eveline Hanska, a Polish countess who called herself "*L'Étrangère*." That was the beginning of a long and amorous correspondence through which posterity gained much insight into the secrets of Balzac's creative process. Ten months later, on September 25, 1833, the novelist first saw the countess, escorted by her aged husband, in Switzerland. They met occasionally, wrote prolifically, and married at last in March 1850, five months before Balzac died, exhausted by a life of prodigious intensity. At the end of 1833, *Eugénie Grandet*, on which Balzac had been engaged for about a year, appeared. It did not take long for the book to become a recognized classic.

Eugénie Grandet

Every detail of Balzac's life, every one of his love affairs, every item of his complicated financial accounts and of his debts has been scanned by biographers. Few great writers have been favored, or afflicted, with such an army of fanatical devotees a hundred years after their death. The four-line dedication "to Maria," which first appeared in the edition of 1839 and was again reproduced, with Balzac's own signature, in the first collected edition of the *Comédie humaine*, has provoked almost as much discussion as the mysterious dedication of Shakespeare's sonnets. It reads:

May your name, — you whose portrait is the fairest adornment of this work, — be like a branch of the blessed boxwood, cut from no one knows what tree, but consecrated by religion, and always kept fresh and green by pious hands to protect the house.

Who was this Maria whom Eugénie Grandet resembled? Her name clearly does not correspond to that of Mme. de Berny, of Countess Hanska, of the Duchess Castries, or of any of the women then courted by the novelist. On October 12, 1833, back from his visit to Neuchâtel where he had surprised Mme. Hanska by his coarse manners and his undistinguished and plebeian appearance, but had nevertheless fascinated her, Balzac wrote to his sister during the course of a long letter: "I am a father — that is another secret I wanted to confide to you — and adored by a lovely person, the most naïve creature imaginable, dropping like a flower from heaven, who comes to see me secretly, demands neither correspondence nor attentions, and who says: Love me for a year, I shall love you all my life."

The identity of this young lady who offered herself to the novelist while he was drawing the portrait of Eugénie long baffled biographers. René Bouvier and Edouard Maynial, in their 1938 study of Balzac's finances and debts, *Les Comptes dramatiques de Balzac*, first surmised that the child Balzac mentions might have been Marie du Fresnay, to whom, in his will, Balzac bequeathed a sculptured Christ by Girardon, one of his most prized possessions. Marie du Fresnay, born in 1834, died at Nice in 1930, at

the age of ninety-six. Balzac was present at her first communion. Her mother, whose first name was indeed Maria, and whose maiden name was Daminois, born in 1809, had married Charles Guy du Fresnay in 1829. The first of her three children, Marie-Caroline, was probably Balzac's child. Two very precise and persistent scholars, André Chancerel and Roger Pierrot, have established this fact, or Balzac's conviction that it was a fact, in a curious article, "La véritable Eugénie Grandet" (*Revue des Sciences humaines*, October–December, 1955). The novelist asked his publisher to send a copy of *Eugénie Grandet*, with the dedication to Maria, to Mme. du Fresnay. The recipient cut off the page on which the dedication appeared, probably so as not to arouse her husband's suspicions; later, when her husband had died, she sewed the page cut off from the earlier edition to her volume of *Eugénie Grandet* in the 1870 *Comédie humaine*. Apparently, like Eugénie Grandet herself, Maria was not particularly pretty; her forehead was "masculine but delicate; . . . her eyes were gray . . . under a calm brow, a world of love."

This story is indeed striking. Certainly Balzac believed he was the father of Maria's first child, and carried away by his imagination, as he often was, or by his egocentricity, he showed his gratitude to his mistress by dedicating to her the novel in which he had transfigured her. At the same time, with his natural bent for polygamy, he proudly kept his other love, Countess Hanska, informed of the progress of *Eugénie Grandet*, and assured the Polish lady that many pages of it, "written in the midst of my sorrows, belong to you, as all of me does."

Eugénie Grandet cannot be called one of Balzac's autobiographical novels in the sense that *Louis Lambert* and even *The Wild Ass's Skin* are. The character to whom the novelist imparts most of himself is Eugénie; but she represents what Honoré de Balzac, the sentimental and meditative young man from Tours, desperately dreaming of achieving success through his pen while hemmed in by the gloom and conventionality of provincial life, might have become if he had lacked the energy to rebel against his environment. Eugénie's revolt was short-lived; she soon bowed to an imperious father and to the sway of harsh destiny. Still Balzac draws her with warmth and sympathy. Like many creators, he became his creation, Eugénie, while he was sedulously analyz-

ing her emotions, as he also became Grandet while he was endeavoring to understand the miser's passion for hoarding, and shared not a little even with Charles, the dandy from the capital whose shallow sentiments quickly give way to the pursuit of social glitter and to heartlessness. "We go from ourselves to men, never from men to ourselves," Balzac once declared; "and those who have probed deepest into the vices and virtues of human nature are people who studied it in their own selves with good faith." *Eugénie Grandet* appears as an objective and strictly realistic novel only to the hasty observer. It starts from a piercing observation of reality, but it expands and magnifies what had first been observed; it completes the data thus collected, adds mystery to humble lives, and generalizes individual experience into a broader and universal truth. Indeed, it was held by Balzac himself — who never was chary of statements on the origins of his creative works, and who could be a clear-sighted critic of others and of himself, multiplying confessions over which his reader may well ponder — that "most books the subject of which is entirely fictitious, which have no bonds, close or loose, with any reality, are still-born; while those which rest upon facts observed . . . taken from real life, secure the honors of an enduring survival."

The setting of the book is in Touraine, in that region of the Loire which Balzac knew so well from his youth and in which, like Rabelais before him, he was proud to have his roots. That province of slow-flowing rivers, Renaissance châteaux, and small, dormant towns is often said to be typically French because everything about it is of modest size, and nature there has long ago been tamed by man. But the writers and artists who came from Touraine, even Ronsard and certainly the creators of Gargantua and Grandet, were not lacking in boldness and violence, or frightened by the monstrous and the abnormal. The giant Balzac, although he had not been especially happy during his childhood in the Loire valley, had discovered nature there and found in its contemplation the comfort which the Romantics sought. "No longer ask me why I love Touraine," he wrote in a novel where the scenery of that province is lovingly and poetically described, *The Lily in the Valley*; "I do not love it as one loves one's cradle or an oasis in the desert — I love it as an artist loves art."

Saumur has few old and picturesque streets today. It has been

modernized and broadened, and its avenues along the Loire have an air of grandeur. A few old houses, however, have been singled out by Balzacian scholars as the possible home of the miser, or the several misers whom Balzac merged into a type when he composed his novel. Balzac, as was his custom, began with an elaborate but evocative description of the cloistral stillness of old houses in a sleepy city of central France. The details lavished by his pen are architectural and antiquarian. The past is eternally present in these venerable stones; the medieval workshops of artisans are clustered around the churches and the homes of noble families. But all that is alive centers on the wine trade. Prices of grapes, of barrels and wine presses, of barns and of timber are dependent upon the weather which favors or ruins the delicate growth of the vines and their juicy fruit. News passes from one village fair to another with the speed of lightning. Men are out in the fields or in the square discussing prospects and prices.

Women, in those days of the early nineteenth century, hardly enjoy any freedom. Their lives are rigidly controlled by conventions and by the constant mutual spying which constrains them to chastity or hypocrisy. Balzac is the ancestor of all those, from Flaubert to the Proust of Combray, to Mauriac, and to Julien Green, who have left vivid portrayals of provincial manners. Only in the provinces, according to these novelists, do passions rise to a tragic pitch, exacerbated by the obstacles which forbid fulfillment and seem systematically to ban joy. In a passage of his *Lost Illusions*, Balzac generalized on this theme which underlies many of his descriptions of provincial gloom:

Life in the provinces is singularly contrary to contentment in love, and favors the intellectual upheavals of passion; at the same time, the obstacles which it opposes to those sweet exchanges which bind lovers can force ardent souls into extreme positions. Life there rests upon such a meticulous spying, such a transparency of private life, it so very seldom admits the intimacy which consoles without infringing on virtue, the purest relationships are so unreasonably incriminated, that many women are branded in spite of their innocence. Some of them then blame themselves for not enjoying all the bliss of a sin which they have not committed but the suspicion of which hangs over them like a calamity.

Elsewhere, in a fragment on "The Provincial Woman," a creature who puzzled and fascinated him, Balzac noted that "woman in the provinces has but two ways of being: either she resigns herself or she revolts." Like many men, Balzac seems to have preferred those who took the part of resignation. Like the wife and the daughter of the grandiose and terrifying inventor Balthazar Claes, in *The Search for the Absolute*, Eugénie and her mother attempt a weak rebellion against the domineering male absorbed by one voracious passion; but they are soon crushed by their environment, their lack of education, and a conspiracy of law, tradition, and the Church — all forces aligned against feminine self-assertion.

After a description of the locale, which was essential to Balzac, as it is to many a novelist who must first, like the author or producer of a play, determine the exact position of the doors, the furniture, and the stairs before he unfolds his drama, Grandet is introduced. The structure of the novel is as admirable as that of *Madame Bovary*, though it is less laboriously contrived. The sequence of description, dialogue, and backward glances at the history of the characters, of narrative now slow and meandering like life in the provinces, now hurrying to the denouement, is expertly managed. Though Henry James, in his *French Poets and Novelists*, praised "the extraordinary closeness of tissue" in Balzac's novels, he added that Balzac, always urged on by want of leisure, indulged unduly his propensity for abundance: "his descriptions offer one a liberal chance to be bored." Later, however, in *The Question of Our Speech* (1905), the American novelist, who himself adopted an unhurried gait in consistently adhering to the point of view which he chose for each of his stories, paid tribute to Balzac's pre-eminent possession of the chief virtue of all novelists: the "saturation [of the artist] with his idea. When saturation fails, no other presence really avails. When, on the other hand, it operates, no failure of method fatally interferes."

The sketch of Grandet's career affords a glimpse of French history during the momentous years of the Revolution and of the Empire. The action of the novel slowly unfolds between 1819 and the last years of the restoration of the Bourbons to the throne of France; Charles X was expelled by the revolution of 1830, an event which led Balzac to ponder on the frailty of monarchy and

on the need for social and religious checks to control a people prone to anarchy and excessive individualism. Grandet had been shrewd enough to acquire rich vineyards and meadows during the early years of the Revolution, when the property of the Church was liquidated and bought up cheaply by the middle-class and well-to-do farmers. His wife had brought him more landed property. He had increased his capital by lending money at usurious rates. He worked very hard and watched over every detail of the cultivation of his fields and vines. A typical peasant in Balzac's eyes (for Balzac never idealized rural life as did such contemporaries and successors of Rousseau as George Sand), Grandet trusted no one but Nanon, a tall, uncouth, fiercely strong country woman, devoted to him with a stubborn, doglike attachment. Balzac portrays Grandet through his manner of speech, his guarded, diffident, sly approach to others, his peasant's shoes and clothes, the conventual and prison-like life which he imposed upon his family. Only six friends, belonging to two families, the Cruchots and the des Grassins, ever entered Grandet's house. The son of each family had designs, or was encouraged by his avid relatives to have designs, on Eugénie, whom public rumor held to be a wealthy heiress. But old Grandet revealed little to anyone, not even to his awe-stricken wife. Nanon alone helped him carry his bags of gold coins and weigh them secretly in the dark attic. He was, like many other Balzacian heroes, a monomaniac. He was a compulsive accumulator of gold and of land. To enjoy his immense fortune, to cultivate the amenities of life, these were aims beyond the ken of that passionate miser. Hoarding, getting the better of his competitors in buying, selling, and speculating, these things were all in all to him. He is like those robber barons, fiercely intent upon getting ever richer, impelled by lust for power, who have since populated American fiction, a financier or a Titan unconcerned with sentiment or with generosity and bent upon self-aggrandizement. The reader's reaction in the presence of such a monomaniac is one of horror at his inhumanity and egocentricity, yet of fascination before his domineering personality. Grandet is akin to Napoleon, to an inventor such as Claes who also ruins his family, to any composer, artist, writer, or politician who, enslaved by a single engrossing idea, tramples under foot all ordinary human emotions.

Grandet's character is not dryly analyzed by the novelist. It is presented in action, through several sketches, each of which contributes a few features to the full portrait. As we see him infuriated by opposition, resourceful in the face of difficulties, his personality gradually takes shape. The pace of the story is at times slow and leisurely, panoramic in the sense that the narrator is omniscient and embraces a great deal at a glance, at times swift and narrowed to dramatic scenes of crisis. The progression of old Grandet's avarice hardly knows any relief, and he grows more monstrously dehumanized as his passion develops unchecked; but that steady progression is conveyed to the reader through selected episodes which blend social satire, pity for the terrified weak who are relentlessly crushed, admiration for the energy of the aging tyrant defying fate.

The novel's first important scene is that of Eugénie's twenty-third birthday in 1819. A meager feast is arranged by her mother, who has yielded all initiative in the home to her husband. Like Molière's self-centered fathers, Grandet refuses to envisage the marriage of his daughter to any young man: she would through marriage escape his dominion and he would have to provide a dowry for her or share with her his wife's portion of their estate. The two Saumur families which are allowed to visit the Grandets offer their best wishes, their posies of flowers, and their humble presents. Suddenly the door-knocker resounds; a visitor appears. He is Charles, the young and elegant nephew of old Grandet, a delicate and effeminate dandy accustomed to the social life of the capital, whom his father has sent off to Saumur. The other guests watch Eugénie's face; it is clear that she is interested in her attractive cousin. She becomes ashamed of the primitive conditions to which her father's miserliness has reduced their home, of her father's counting out every lump of sugar and ounce of butter which the refined Parisian requires. For the first time in her life, her heart beats loudly. And as she dreams of love, she looks closely at herself, for she fears she may not be attractive to the worldly Charles. "Tall and strong," she lacks the prettiness which is often prized in women; but in Balzac's idealizing portraiture, she makes up for this lack by the purity and the innate nobility of her face, the spontaneity of her sentiments, her utter lack of calculation.

Old Grandet's sordid stinginess — with the household expenses, with his enslaved servant Nanon, and with his gamekeeper — at first draw a smile from the reader. Life in the French provinces early in the last century was hardly that of an affluent society; inured to penury for centuries, peasants looked upon any superfluity as immoral. But soon the heartlessness of the miser is glaringly revealed. Engulfed in debt and reduced to bankruptcy, his brother in Paris, before blowing his brains out, had entrusted to Grandet his spoiled and pampered son. The pages in which Grandet breaks the sad news to his nephew, without a trace of sentiment, curtly upbraiding Eugénie (in whom pity is already close to love), subtly depict the opposition which is developing between father and daughter. Rebuked, Eugénie learns that "the woman who loves must always hide her feelings." She finds in her mother, who has never yet dared withstand the orders of her tyrannical husband, a timid ally. Her small attentions to Charles are described with the homely tenderness of a Dutch genre painting: she foils her father's surveillance of the larder in order to serve her cousin richer dishes than Grandet's Spartan diet allows his family; she consoles him when he weeps. Meanwhile, on the very newspaper which announced his brother's suicide, Grandet adds up figures to reckon how much money he could make by investing in government stocks. He refuses his wife and daughter the expense of mourning clothes, and openly rejoices in an extra saving when Charles, immersed in his sorrow, cannot eat the meals offered him. Balzac's reflections here give the provincial miser a stature larger than life. He comes to embody all the greed of men who have stifled their human emotions, turned their relatives into docile robots, and made themselves into gamblers desperately eager to win but unable to put their winnings to use. Grandet is possessed by his lust for possession as others are by ambition or sexual passion.

Balzac is often praised, occasionally also blamed, as the first novelist who introduced into the very warp and woof of fiction the efforts of men to acquire, to accumulate, and to spend money. The middle part of *Eugénie Grandet* is filled by the transactions of the miser who, in elaborate discussions with his friend the notary, tries to devise means to spare his dead brother the obloquy of a bankruptcy, not by paying off the creditors but by

duping them through a liquidation which would leave them in hope of being repaid one day. Balzac had pondered over the importance of money in the modern world, where aristocratic values no longer prevailed, while working at a lawyer's office and watching the rush for gold and for the power which riches ensured in post-revolutionary France. Romantic readers may be driven to exasperation by the accumulation of financial and legal details in which the novelist revels; but this accumulation emphasizes by contrast the sentimental idealism and naïve generosity of Eugénie. Driven by her adoration for her cousin, the only man of refinement whom she has ever met, Eugénie for the first time in her life risks a slightly improper action: she reads letters which Charles has left unfinished on his desk. In them he assures a Parisian lady of his love, announces his forthcoming departure for the East Indies, and confesses his destitution after his father's suicide. A timid love affair develops between the two young people after Eugénie begs Charles to accept the little hoard of gold coins, her sole treasure, which her father had doled out to her each New Year's Day and birthday since she was a little girl. They exchange a kiss on a bench in the garden. Charles leaves for Java and Eugénie promises to wait for his return, thinking of him as her fiancé.

The next tragic scene of the novel is the outburst of ferocious anger which shakes Grandet when he forces his daughter to confess that she no longer has her gold coins. Eugénie for the first time then defies him. He takes his revenge by imprisoning her in her room on a regimen of bread and water. His wife, too weak to fight against this mistreatment of the person who is her sole reason for living, pines away and perishes. Little does the miser care, except to grudge the money spent on doctors and medicine. Only when the lawyer has warned him that his daughter might legally claim a share in her mother's inheritance, does he relent. Grandet extorts from Eugénie a renunciation of the money due her; but after this supreme manifestation of his fanatical love for money, he collapses, taking a last greedy, demented look at his piles of gold coins. His death is one of the most admired episodes in literature.

Eugénie distributes money to Nanon, to the Church, to the poor. She has no interest in life other than to await the return

of Charles, who has never troubled to send her a single letter. The monotony and emptiness of her life are oppressive. She loses the bloom of her youth, as she languishes in idleness. She too is the victim of a single passion, unable to break away from her past, to travel, to introduce charm and elegance into her life. She allows time to erode her without any suspicion that it is not in Charles' shallow nature, during his wanderings on other continents, to remember a vague promise of fidelity. She has never read a novel, never imagined other lives. With a sure instinct, Balzac avoided telling his story from the point of view of a woman of narrow inner life who is as devoid of the self-analytical gift as of will power. Her father has crushed her to pallid insignificance.

Charles returns from the Indies, having grown rich on selling trinkets, exotic products, slaves. On the ship which brings him to France, he falls into the hands of a wily aristocratic lady who arranges to marry him to her daughter. He notifies Eugénie nonchalantly of his decision. Never will she see him again. All her long-nurtured hopes are crushed, but bowing to her harsh fate, she pays off the debts which might hamper his prospects of marriage into the aristocracy. She herself enters into a loveless marriage on the advice of her confessor, solely to have her immense fortune watched over by a man of experience. Thus this "bourgeois tragedy, with no poison, no dagger, no shedding of blood" but more cruel than those of Aeschylus, as Balzac described it, comes to an end, as it opened, in a glaring contrast between the sordid calculations of greedy worldlings and the chimerical idealism of a simple-hearted and single-minded woman.

Le Curé de Tours

Scenes of clerical life have tempted many British writers, a considerable number of whom, up to the late Victorian era, were clergymen or clergymen's children. Their high level of education, their training in self-analysis, their amused or irate perception of the discrepancy between religious ideals and the frailties inseparable from human behavior frequently determined their vocations as storytellers or moralists. Swift, Sterne, Crabbe had been churchmen, and their Victorian successors introduced into their novels the tensions aroused by conflicts between the doctrine of evolution