

People, Animals, and Transformations in *Eugénie Grandet*

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In the unforgettable presentation of the main characters in *Eugénie Grandet*,¹ Balzac frequently uses animal analogies and other biological associations. These analogies reveal the very essence of the characters to whom they are applied, and help to explain the substantial changes experienced by the characters at the conclusion of the novel.

Le père Grandet is arguably the main character of the novel which bears the name of his daughter; he dominates the environment of Saumur, and certainly his household. The first bit of information about his financial skills is that "Monsieur Grandet tenait du tigre et du boa" (p. 22). He has the steel claws of a tiger (p. 22), and his purse swallows up gold coins like a boa constrictor, "comme le serpent qui digère, impassible, froid, méthodique" (p. 22). Our first impressions are consequently those of a vicious predatory beast.

When Balzac arrives at the point of sketching a more conventional portrait of old Grandet, he attributes big calves, white teeth, and a character of bronze to him (p. 25). And his eyes reveal the same voracious tendency announced earlier, with an "expression calme et dévoratrice que le peuple accorde au basilic" (p. 25). Later, when he has had opportunities to display these instincts, he will be labeled a tiger two more times, first as a "tigre affamé" (p. 71) and secondly as a tiger pouncing on a sleeping child (p. 150), when he attempts to wrest Charles's precious box from Eugénie. Elsewhere, Balzac borrows from the characteristics most admired in animals to complete his sketch of Grandet's inclinations. His business dealings have earned him the reputation and surname of "vieux chien" (p. 95), but he does not have a dog's fidelity. More typically, he is as sly as an old fox (p. 134). When surprised by Eugénie's statement that she no longer has her collection of gold coins, he rears back "comme un cheval qui entend tirer le canon à dix pas de lui" (p. 136), and in pursuit of his hapless daughter, he races up the old staircase with the agility of a cat (p. 139). In all of his financial and personal dealings with others, Grandet is a superior *animal*.

Madame Grandet is everything that her husband is not. Our first view of her is one of a tired and debilitated woman: "Madame Grandet était une femme sèche et maigre, jaune comme un coing, gauche, lente; une de ces femmes qui semblent faites pour être tyrannisées" (p. 34). Her yellowish color is cited again by her husband, who calls her "un petit brin jaunette" (p. 135). And yellow happens to be the only color which Grandet loves. Mme Grandet is tyrannized by her husband; she lives in mortal fear of him, like an insect that is tormented by children (p. 35), but which resigns itself to its fate. One of the more flattering animal analogies applied to her is that of a seagull, "une mouette" (p. 60), capable of sensing the storm about to break inside Grandet. But more in conformity with her trampled identity, she is a "biche effrayée" and an innocent lamb, "un agneau sans tâche" (p. 153), available for slaughter by her predator. The importance of this last analogy will be explained in the paragraphs which follow.

¹The edition of *Eugénie Grandet* cited is the commonly available Garnier-Flammarion version (Paris: 1964), and I used parenthetical references for all quotations to this edition.

The most brutal and the most bestial characterization in *Eugénie Grandet* is that of the domestic servant, Nanon. Much less a person than a thing, "La Grande Nanon appartenait à Grandet depuis trente-cinq ans" (p. 30), and is placed among his other possessions: wine casks, vineyards, and land. Her life began among animals: she watched over grazing cattle before coming to Saumur (p. 31). More masculine than feminine, she has a herculean build, and resembles an old oak tree (p. 31). As an animal, she is of course a *dog*, referred to twice as a "chien fidèle" (pp. 31 and 33), and again as a "dogue" (p. 33). Balzac goes so far as to place a studded collar around her neck, albeit figuratively, in specifying her relationship to her master (p. 32). In good years, when the branches of the trees are breaking with ripened fruit, Grandet regales her with fruit that would otherwise have been given to swine (p. 32). When he refers to her as a "grande bête" (p. 36), the dual connotation of the French word *bête* is obvious, and when she is initially introduced as "la seule créature humaine capable d'accepter le despotisme de son maître" (p. 30), Balzac's irony is again apparent. Since Nanon's life is concerned with *things* (firewood, sugar, candles), the sub-human references to her are less surprising than those applied to the other characters, although no more flattering.

The remaining female character is the title figure, Eugénie, and, as in the case of her mother, most of the biological analogies given to her are opposites or foils of those of *le père Grandet*. Like her mother, she was as yellow as a quince (p. 54), but only in the eyes of the Cruchots, after the birthday scene. She is a serpent, in the words of her father, and a serpent cursed by him when she refuses to relinquish her treasure (p. 138). Similar to the other female characters, she is preyed upon by him: ". . . cette jeune fille qui, semblable à ces oiseaux victimes du haut prix auquel on les met et qu'ils ignorent, se trouvait traquée . . ." (p. 41). In contrast to the catlike agility of *le père Grandet*, Eugénie has the "légèreté d'un oiseau" (p. 92). Again as opposed to the rapacity of Félix Grandet, the daughter and mother are intimidated *mice* (p. 87). Eugénie is less bestial than her parents, however, and she is most frequently depicted as a flower (pp. 61, 63, and 119). Going beyond the ageless comparisons of women and flowers, Balzac cultivates her and her love for Charles as a veritable springtime: "Dès lors commença pour Eugénie le printemps de l'amour" (p. 119).

Charles, the Parisian cousin and nephew who encroaches on the provincial beings, is more cosmopolitan, and Balzac makes a genuine menagerie of him. More frequently than not, he is described as a *mirliflor* (= fop and coxcomb, both of which are applicable at diverse stages of his evolution; see pp. 53, 71, and 85). He is a strutting peacock (p. 43) who finery is out of place in the humble environment of Saumur. He is so different that on the one hand he is a "colimaçon dans une ruche" (p. 43), and a *giraffe* (p. 46) on the other. His diet, his clothes, and (for Eugénie) his charms provoke shockwaves in Saumur: whereas Eugénie sees him as an angel, Nanon views him as weeping like a calf, when informed of his father's death (p. 82).

The minor characters in *Eugénie Grandet* are also typified by animal or plant analogies, but to a lesser extent than the main ones. Mme des Grassins is a faded rose (pp. 38 and 39). And Charles's bride, Mlle d'Aubriion, is treated with greater severity: she has the figure of an insect, and an excessively large nose, which turns red after meals, and which was an "espèce de phénomène végétal plus désagréable au milieu d'un visage pâle et ennuyé que dans tout autre" (p. 164). But Charles is less interested in her physical appearance than in her possessions.

It is obvious that the animal analogies cited above—I have counted more than fifty of them in the novel—transcend the standard clichés of animal qualities relating to human behavior. In French as in English, faithful people are like dogs; mild or

meek people are like lambs. They can be fat as pigs, but they do not necessarily eat the food intended for pigs, as does Nanon. Tall people are compared to giraffes in both languages, but Charles Grandet is not exceptionally tall. He is however quite exotic when compared to the plainer creatures of Saumur. A generous person has a "heart of gold," but Grandet's heart and his love of gold are by no means indicative of generosity. Balzac's use of these analogies is special at the very least, and frequently is the opposite of the customary association.

I have found only two studies in recent Balzac criticism which treat this high frequency of comparisons of people to animals. In an article entitled "Les Clichés dans *Eugénie Grandet*, ou les négatifs du réalisme balzacien,"² the authors cite the "femme-fruit" analogies in the novel, ornithological figures and connections between weather references and economic conditions in Grandet's Saumur, in support of the thesis that the Balzacian cliché marks conventionality and routine usage on the one hand, and the germ of denunciation of its artifice on the other. No attempt is made to inventory the major images used. Nor is there a comprehensive approach used in R. Le Heunen's and P. Perron's book, *Balzac: Sémiotique de personnage romanesque; l'exemple d'Eugénie Grandet*.³ This work is a structuralist-semiotic approach to the novel, with numerous charts and diagrams, concentrating on Balzac's "système du portrait," his "système des objects," and other highly complicated pairings. A few of Balzac's animal analogies are treated, however, such as the list of "anaphores de caractère métaphorique" (pp. 88-89).

If we look for comparable treatments of human figures in Balzac's other novels, we discover two extremes. *Le Père Goriot* (1834-35) was written shortly after *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), and is the other major novel of this period. Things (clothes, food, and money) are important in *Le Père Goriot*, but the human characters are not compared to animals with the same frequency as in *Eugénie Grandet*. The two portraits of the main figure, old Goriot, would be the likely spot for such analogies, but they are not to be found.⁴ One exception is the description of Mme Vauquer who, on the night when Goriot arrived at her boarding house, "se coucha le soir en rôissant, comme une perdrix dans sa barde" (p. 28).

The other extreme in Balzac's use of biological analogies is found in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1836). In this novel, the metaphor could not be more blatant: "Elle était, comme vous le savez déjà, sans rien savoir encore, LE LYS DE CETTE VALLÉE, où elle croissait pour le ciel en la remplissant du parfum des ses vertus."⁵ This metaphor is applied at least five more times to Mme de Mortsauf throughout the work.⁶ As in the case of *Eugénie Grandet*, unlikeable characters such as Henriette's husband are referred to with denunciatory images. He is a "lion sans ongles," with a "gueule de loup," and "des yeux de tigre" (pp. 66-68).

With exception made for *Le Lys dans la vallée* and perhaps *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, wherein Paquita's eyes are like those of a tiger, *Eugénie Grandet* stands apart in Balzac's system of characterization. After associating each person with a particular animal, the author separates them into various groups, according to their instincts.

²Ruth Amossy and Elisheva Rosen, "Les Clichés dans *Eugénie Grandet*, ou les négatifs du réalisme balzacien," *Littérature*: 25 (1977), 114-28.

³Roland Le Huenen and Paul Perron, *Balzac: Sémiotique du personnage romanesque; l'exemple d'Eugénie Grandet* (Montréal: Presses universitaires, 1980).

⁴I refer to pp. 37-38 and 101-05 of *Le Père Goriot*, in the Classiques Garnier edition (Paris: 1963).

⁵Balzac, *Le Lys dans la vallée* (Paris: Garnier, 1966), p. 27.

⁶See pp. 39, 55, 59, 163 and 287.

The first such grouping is the *domesticated* versus the *untamed* animals. No one is more domesticated than Nanon, the dog (and slave). In addition, Mme Grandet (the lamb, p. 153) and her daughter Eugénie (also a lamb or ewe, p. 153) are watched over by Grandet, the "vieux chien." The following passage serves to recapitulate the subjugation of the three women by their master: "Puis elles vinrent s'asseoir à leurs places devant la fenêtre, et attendirent Grandet avec cette anxiété qui glace le coeur ou l'échauffe, le serre ou le dilate suivant les caractères, alors que l'on redoute une scène, une punition; sentiment d'ailleurs si naturel, que les animaux domestiques l'éprouvent au point de crier pour le faible mal d'une correction, eux qui se taisent quand ils se blessent par inadvertance" (pp. 89-90).

Similar to the first grouping, which seems to be drawn along the lines of males versus females, there are also *country* animals and *exotic* creatures in *Eugénie Grandet*. Besides the jungle-like aspects of old Grandet, Charles is the most colorful and exotic of all the creatures (a peacock and giraffe). After the mention that he is as incongruous as a snail in a beehive, his arrival is compared to that of a peacock in some obscure village barnyard (p. 43), and he fully realizes that he is in the country: "Il se croyait dans un juchoir à poules" (p. 57). Obviously, he is a misfit on this "farm."

The most apparent biological differentiation of characters is that of *predators* and their *prey*, and here again Grandet is the key figure. The women are like mice (p. 87) in the presence of the catlike old man. They are lamblike against the famished tiger, and he does pounce (p. 150), just as the miser pounces on money (p. 91). Grandet forces his family to eat crow, in the literal, not the figurative sense of the cliché, as seen in this curious exchange between Nanon and Grandet:

—Faudra que j'aïlle à la boucherie.

—Pas du tout; tu nous feras du bouillon de volaille, les fermiers ne t'en laisseront pas chômer. Mais je vais dire à Cornoiller de me tuer des corbeaux. Ce gibier-là donne le meilleur bouillon de la terre.

—C'est-y vrai, monsieur, que ça mange les morts?

—Tu es bête, Nanon! ils mangent, comme tout le monde, ce qu'ils trouvent. Est-ce que nous ne vivons pas de morts? Qu'est-ce donc que les successions? (p. 67)

Nanon's simplistic question permits Grandet to reveal his truly carnivorous inclinations; in the world of the miser, any and all creatures are fair game, and scavengers have a greater chance for survival than lambs or peacocks.

One more point is in order concerning Grandet's appetite or need for nourishment. Beyond the references to animal behavior cited above, it could be argued that Grandet does in fact live from the flesh of his fellow creatures. It should be recalled that his brother's bankruptcy and suicide stemmed in part from the fact that the latter had invested considerable sums of money in wine. And since Félix was holding back on his own stores of wine in order to increase the price, he was partially responsible for his own brother's economic disaster.

More literal references to Grandet's homicidal tendencies are to be found in the scene of Mme Grandet's death, where the latter says quite bluntly: "Monsieur, vous m'assassinez!" (p. 151). There are two knives drawn in this episode: that of Grandet, who attempts to extract the gold from Charles's box, and another seized by Eugénie, who threatens suicide, if he tampers with it. On a figurative level, Grandet's lengthy confinement of his daughter until she begins to think and act properly (like him), is further evidence of his homicidal inclination. Parricide in all

of its forms (murder of brother, wife and daughter) is therefore implicit in the novel. As will be seen below, the Grandet tendency to abuse or even destroy members of one's own species will be manifested in the behavior of Charles Grandet.

The associations between people and animals identified in the preceding paragraphs help us to understand the patterns of behavior revealed at the end of the novel. For example, *le père Grandet*, who began as a tiger and boa constrictor, leaves the biological realm and becomes or is fused with the thing that he prized most: his gold. Less fearful of death than of the loss of his precious metal (that permanent medium of exchange, as it is today), Grandet cannot fully comprehend his nephew's reaction to the news of his father's death: "Mais ce jeune homme n'est bon à rien, il s'occupe plus des morts que de l'argent" (p. 80). At about the same time as his own wife's death, old Grandet begins to weaken, and the "pile de granit" (p. 142) starts to crumble. Gold having become his very soul, his essence, his monomania, Grandet orders that he be surrounded by it: "Ça me réchauffe! disait-il quelquefois en laissant paraître sur sa figure une expression de béatitude" (p. 157). Balzac's reference to Grandet's holy countenance is ironic. The old man's last word to Eugénie, "Aie bien soin de tout. Tu me rendras compte de ça là-bas," is equally sacrilegious, and allows the narrator to moralize in saying that Christianity is the religion which is best suited to misers (p. 157).

Grandet therefore became what he wanted to be from the very beginning. Nanon, on the other hand, had few expectations from life, as she led a dog's life. Since she is less complex, her transformation is that much more startling, and certainly more rapid. With Grandet's demise, she can leave the bestial level and pass on to the higher, human level: "En moins d'un mois, elle passa de l'état de fille à celui de femme, sous la protection d'Antoine Cornoiller, que fut nommé garde général des terres et des propriétés de mademoiselle Grandet" (p. 158). We also learn that Nanon, now Madame Cornoiller, and now with a complete name and identity, has immense advantages over women of her age. The deplorable conditions of her earlier life had preserved her health and vitality, and there is even some talk of her capability to bear children (p. 158). Evidently, her status is vastly superior to that of the servant to old Grandet.

As opposed to her husband, Madame Grandet does find "le chemin pour aller au ciel." Her transformation is more than just that: she experiences a transfiguration. On page 143 of the text, we are told of changes which she undergoes: the nearer she comes to death, the more beautiful she becomes. Then as death draws ever nearer, she becomes an angel, a process which Balzac labels a "transfiguration" and a "transformation." Whereas her husband will defile Christianity in death, Madame Grandet provides an exemplum of the proper Christian approach to it. Her final moments on earth are of special note: "Au mois d'octobre 1822 éclatèrent particulièrement ses vertus, sa patience d'ange et son amour pour sa fille; elle s'éteignit sans avoir laissé échapper la moindre plainte. Agneau sans tâche, elle allait au ciel, et ne regrettait ici-bas que la douce compagne de sa froide vie, à laquelle ses derniers regards semblaient prédire mille maux. Elle tremblait de laisser cette brebis, blanche comme elle, seule au milieu d'un monde égoïste qui voulait lui arracher sa toison, ses trésors" (p. 153). The death of Madame Grandet is worthy of *Séraphita*. And her view of heaven is almost a beatific vision, similar to Félicité's naïve view of the divine in Flaubert's *Un Coeur simple* (where Félicité's parakeet is mistaken for the holy spirit). In Eugénie Grandet, the spotless lamb is quite close to the Lamb of God.

It is said that following her mother's death, Eugénie became more attached to the house in which she was born (p. 153), and Balzac's treatment of this alteration is equally interesting. Indications of earlier change in Eugénie's psychic and physical

dispositions have already been noted. These changes are accentuated after Charles's departure. When her father dies, she becomes the "maîtresse du logis" (p. 155), and by that "mademoiselle Grandet" (p. 159), no longer merely Eugénie, as she was in the first part of the novel. The importance of genealogy and heredity is again stressed in Eugénie's brief marriage to Bonfons, the terms of which allow her to maintain the Grandet fortune (and her chastity; see p. 174). And with Bonfons's sudden death (p. 177), we can say that Eugénie was quite intent on remaining a Grandet. When the young lamb (the second one) begins her walk toward heaven (last paragraph of the novel), we see that to an extent she is retracing her mother's steps, and even those of her father, since she has fulfilled his demands of correct management of the estate. The daughter even begins to speak like her deceased father. The latter was known for his patterns of stuttering (when feigning ignorance in business), and for such refrains as "motus, Nous verrons cela, Ta ta ta ta," and so on. When shown the letter concerning Charles's marriage to Mlle d'Aubrion, Eugénie reacts: "Nous verrons cela . . ." (p. 173).

Charles too is faced with the problem of how to become a true Grandet, all the while refusing to do so. If we recall his arrival in Saumur, which was for Eugénie that of a seraph (p. 47), then Charles's transformation is the most drastic. He becomes a demon. Based on his first impressions of his provincial uncle and the fate of his father, we can readily understand why he would wish to become something other than a Grandet. But the extent of his rejection of his ancestry, "Mais il reniait sa famille" (p. 163), is incredible. At this point, in the Indies and in Africa, he is known as Carl Sepherd, and the Grandet lust for money resurfaces: "Le sang des Grandet ne faillit point à sa destinée. Charles devint dur, âpre à la curée. Il vendit des Chinois, des nègres, des nids d'hirondelles, des enfants, des artistes; il fit l'usure en grand" (p. 162). Like the uncle whom he wished to forget, Charles manifests homicidal tendencies—a destroyer of his own species. The slaver who sought to break completely with the past also acquires the monetary exchange unit prized by his uncle: gold. And Charles brought three casks of it back from the colonies (p. 163). The rich man who was temporarily impoverished can now compete on the Grandet scale, and with the same currency. "The Grandet blood ran true to its destiny. Charles became hard and ruthless in his hunt for prey. He sold Chinamen, Negroes, swallows' nests, children, performers, performers? Where could he have sold performers? I wonder. But let it pass. The essential fact of the matter is that he is transformed. In Balzac, moving to another country always transforms people in some way."⁷

The second phase of Charles's transformation involves class status and title. He wants to become *le Comte* d'Aubrion, not for the homely daughter of this penniless family, but for the title itself. "Monsieur, d'ici à quelques jours, je me nommerai le Comte d'Aubrion. Vous entendez bien que ce me sera parfaitement indifférent" (p. 166). Charles had indeed acquired the moral, sentimental, and emotional values of a true (Félix-type) Grandet. But at this point, there is another Grandet at the head of the dynasty, Mademoiselle Grandet, who actually *expels* Charles from the family by her settlement of her bankrupt uncle's finances; by that she forces Charles into the d'Aubrion clan. This donation should be viewed as more than fair reward for Charles's token return of the few coins that Eugénie had provided him when he was destitute. He who was introduced as being so noble and delicate (the peacock), and who used the lowest means (slavery) to achieve success, has therefore become a Grandet, whether he wanted to or not.

After explaining that old Grandet might have been some thing or some one completely different if he had left Saumur, Balzac notes: "Peut-être en est-il des esprits comme de certains animaux, qui n'engendrent plus transplantés hors des

⁷Félicien Marceau, *Balzac and his World* (New York: Orion, 1966), p. 75.

climats où ils naissent" (p.95). This subtle observation is one indication as to why Balzac typifies his characters by association with animals. The remark seems to apply to old Grandet alone, but it is much better suited to Charles who, after all of his travels to the far corners of the globe, was not able to change his identity nor continue his lineage, and is confronted with the sterility of his original habitat.

For a philosophical explanation of the changes which occur in the characters in *Eugénie Grandet*, we know from Balzac's readings of Swedenborg, Saint-Hilaire, Leibnitz, Buffon, and others, that he believed in a single, primordial substance which permeates all of nature, and that there are connections or *correspondances* between all of the elements of his universe. This belief is stated in general terms in the "Avant-propos" to *La Comédie humaine* (1842):

Il n'y a qu'un animal. Le créateur ne s'est servi que d'un seul et même patron pour tous les êtres organisés. L'animal est un principe qui prend sa forme extérieure, ou, pour parler plus exactement, les différences de sa forme, dans les milieux où il est appelé à développer. . . . La Société ne fait-elle pas de l'homme, suivant les milieux où son action se déploie, autant d'hommes différents qu'il y a de variétés en zoologie? Les différences entre un soldat, un ouvrier, un administrateur, un avocat, un oisif, un savant, un homme d'état, un commerçant, un marin, un poète, un pauvre, un prêtre, sont, quoique plus difficiles à saisir, aussi considérables que celles qui distinguent le loup, le lion, l'âne, le corbeau, le requin, le veau marin, la brebis, etc. Il a donc existé, il existera donc de tout temps des Espèces Sociales comme il y a des Espèces Zoologiques.⁸

These remarks are applied by Balzac to his entire *opus*, and are not limited to any particular novel. Although some anachronistic ideas are expressed in this passage, others are mildly revolutionary. Modern science since Darwin has shown that animal forms are in fact a result of adaptation to environment. However, there are not that many variations of the human species; but when Balzac inserts the word "Sociales" (with a capital S), we can allow for the parallel of diversification of humans along the lines of animal difference, including the savage and the carnivorous. In further reinforcement of his argument, Balzac notes that there can be two completely dissimilar beings found in the same household (witness the Grandet foyer). The most important point in this introduction to *La Comédie humaine* is that all men and animals derive from a common source. On the applied level, this notion finds its most concise expression in *Séraphita* (1835), another near-contemporary of *Eugénie Grandet*, and the work in which Balzac pays his greatest homage to Swedenborg. There are very few biological analogies in *Séraphita*, but this lack is overshadowed by the central metamorphosis of Séraphitus who becomes Séraphita in a mystical, androgynous way.⁹ This idea of the continuity of matter is stated in *Louis Lambert* also. Given the contemporaneity of these philosophical works to *Eugénie Grandet*, and the extent of Swedenborg's influence on Balzac, we must conclude that the concepts of universal correspondences were prominent in Balzac's mind when he composed *Eugénie Grandet*.

Balzac's goal in *Eugénie Grandet* is twofold. On the one hand, he promises us an isolated "scène de la vie de province." But during Eugénie's birthday party, he claims that we are witnessing a "scène de tous les temps et de tous les lieux, mais ramenée à sa plus simple expression" (p. 41). His aim is thus to pass from the particular to the general, and to communicate the moral and social nature of

⁸"Avant-propos" to *La Comédie humaine*, édition de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), I, p. 4.

⁹*Séraphita*, in tome X of *La Comédie humaine*. See pp. 477 and 544 in particular.

Saumur at the same time. But the setting in Saumur is not as innocent as it might seem, due primarily to the presence of the aggressive nature of *le père Grandet*. If a slight amount of animal behavior is acceptable in humans, Grandet surpasses that limit considerably, and forces those who surround him into animal-like behavior. And the author, through this less-than-innocent reference system, reminds his readers of some of the less-than-noble aspects of their own nature.