

Inheritance and Literature II (Aarhus, March 1st, 2018)

Stefan Willer

The Value of Inherited Objects in Balzac's *Le cousin Pons*

I. Short summary

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Cousin_Pons:

“*Le Cousin Pons* is one of the last of the 94 works of Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, which are in both novel and short story form. Begun in 1846 as a novella, or long-short story, it was envisaged as one part of a diptych, *Les Parents pauvres* (*The Poor Relations*), the other part of which was *La Cousine Bette* (*Cousin Bette*). The book was originally published as a serial in *Le Constitutionnel*.

The novella grew in 1847 into a full-length novel with a male poor relation, Pons, as its subject, whereas *La Cousine Bette* describes the female aspect of that subordinate relationship. The two novels were thus similar yet diametrically different. They were complementary, forming two parts of a whole. [...]

Sylvain Pons, a musician in a Parisian boulevard orchestra, has a close friend in another musician from that same orchestra, the German pianist Wilhelm Schmucke. They lodge with Mme Cibot, but Pons – unlike Schmucke – has two failings: his passion (which is almost a mania) for collecting works of art, and his passion for good food. Schmucke, on the other hand, has only one passion, and that is his affection for Pons. Pons, being a gourmet, much enjoys dining regularly with his wealthy lawyer cousins M. and Mme Camusot de Marville, for their food is more interesting than Mme Cibot's and full of gastronomic surprises. In an endeavour to remain on good terms with the Camusots, and to repay their favour, he tries to find a bridegroom for their unappealing only child Cécile. However, when this ill-considered marriage project falls through, Pons is banished from the house.

The novella becomes a novel as Mme Camusot learns of the value of Pons's art collection and strives to obtain possession of it as the basis of a dowry for her daughter. In this new development of the plot line a bitter struggle ensues between various vulture-like figures all of whom are keen to lay their hands on the collection: Rémonencq, Élie Magus, Mme Camusot – and Mme Cibot herself. Betraying his client Mme Cibot's interests, the unsavoury barrister Fraisier acts for the Camusots. Mme Cibot sells Rémonencq eight of Pons's choicest paintings, untruthfully stating in the receipt that they are works of lesser value. She also steals one for herself.

Horrified to discover his betrayal by Mme Cibot, and the plots that are raging around him, Pons dies, bequeathing all his worldly possessions to Schmucke. The latter is browbeaten out of them by Fraisier. He in turn dies a broken-hearted man, for in Pons he has lost all that he valued in the world. The art collection comes to the Camusot de Marville family, and the vultures profit from their ill-gotten gains.”

II. Some excerpts

(transl. by Ellen Marriage, 1898; <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1856/1856-h/1856-h.htm>)

(headings are mine, StW)

1. *Evaluating art*

Like most men who are ruled by their wives, the President [Camusot de Marville] asserted his independence in trifles, in which his wife was very careful not to thwart him. For a month he was satisfied with the Presidente's commonplace explanations of Pons' disappearance; but at last it struck him as singular that the old musician, a friend of forty years' standing, should first make them so valuable a present as a fan that belonged to Mme. de Pompadour, and then immediately discontinue his visits. Count Popinot had pronounced the trinket a masterpiece; when its owner went to Court, the fan had been passed from hand to hand, and her vanity was not a little gratified by the compliments it received; others had dwelt on the beauties of the ten ivory sticks, each one covered with delicate carving, the like of which had never been seen. A Russian lady (Russian ladies are apt to forget that they are not in Russia) had offered her six thousand francs for the marvel one day at Count Popinot's house, and smiled to see it in such hands. Truth to tell, it was a fan for a Duchess.

"It cannot be denied that poor Cousin Pons understands rubbish of that sort—" said Cecile, the day after the bid.

"Rubbish!" cried her parent. "Why, Government is just about to buy the late M. le Conseiller Dusommerard's collection for three hundred thousand francs; and the State and the Municipality of Paris between them are spending nearly a million francs over the purchase and repair of the Hotel de Cluny to house the 'rubbish,' as you call it.—Such 'rubbish,' dear child," he resumed, "is frequently all that remains of vanished civilizations. An Etruscan jar, and a necklace, which sometimes fetch forty and fifty thousand francs, is 'rubbish' which reveals the perfection of art at the time of the siege of Troy, proving that the Etruscans were Trojan refugees in Italy."

This was the President's cumbrous way of joking; the short, fat man was heavily ironical with his wife and daughter.

"The combination of various kinds of knowledge required to understand such 'rubbish,' Cecile," he resumed, "is a science in itself, called archaeology. Archaeology comprehends architecture, sculpture, painting, goldsmiths' work, ceramics, cabinetmaking (a purely modern art), lace, tapestry—in short, human handiwork of every sort and description."

"Then Cousin Pons is learned?" said Cecile.

"Ah! by the by, why is he never to be seen nowadays?" asked the President. He spoke with the air of a man in whom thousands of forgotten and dormant impressions have suddenly begun to stir, and shaping themselves into one idea, reach consciousness with a ricochet, as sportsmen say.

"He must have taken offence at nothing at all," answered his wife. "I dare say I was not as fully sensible as I might have been of the value of the fan that he gave me. I am ignorant enough, as you know, of—"

"You! One of Servin's best pupils, and you don't know Watteau?" cried the President.

"I know Gerard and David and Gros and Griodet, and M. de Forbin and M. Turpin de Crisse—"

"You ought—"

“Ought what, sir?” demanded the lady, gazing at her husband with the air of a Queen of Sheba.

“To know a Watteau when you see it, my dear. Watteau is very much in fashion,” answered the President with meekness, that told plainly how much he owed to his wife.

2. Raising an inventory

An hour later, Pons was fast asleep. The doctor had ordered a soothing draught, which Schmucke administered, all unconscious that La Cibot had doubled the dose. Fraasier, Remonencq, and Magus, three gallows-birds, were examining the seventeen hundred different objects which formed the old musician’s collection one by one.

Schmucke had gone to bed. The three kites, drawn by the scent of a corpse, were masters of the field.

“Make no noise,” said La Cibot whenever Magus went into ecstasies or explained the value of some work of art to Remonencq. The dying man slept on in the neighboring room, while greed in four different forms appraised the treasures that he must leave behind, and waited impatiently for him to die—a sight to wring the heart.

Three hours went by before they had finished the salon.

“On an average,” said the grimy old Jew, “everything here is worth a thousand francs.”

“Seventeen hundred thousand francs!” exclaimed Fraasier in bewilderment.

“Not to me,” Magus answered promptly, and his eyes grew dull. “I would not give more than a hundred thousand francs myself for the collection. You cannot tell how long you may keep a thing on hand. ... There are masterpieces that wait ten years for a buyer, and meanwhile the purchase money is doubled by compound interest. Still, I should pay cash.”

“There is stained glass in the other room, as well as enamels and miniatures and gold and silver snuff-boxes,” put in Remonencq.

“Can they be seen?” inquired Fraasier.

“I’ll see if he is sound asleep,” replied La Cibot. She made a sign, and the three birds of prey came in.

“There are masterpieces yonder!” said Magus, indicating the salon, every bristle of his white beard twitching as he spoke. “But the riches are here! And what riches! Kings have nothing more glorious in royal treasuries.”

Remonencq’s eyes lighted up till they glowed like carbuncles, at the sight of the gold snuff-boxes. Fraasier, cool and calm as a serpent, or some snake-creature with the power of rising erect, stood with his viper head stretched out, in such an attitude as a painter would choose for Mephistopheles. The three covetous beings, thirsting for gold as devils thirst for the dew of heaven, looked simultaneously, as it chanced, at the owner of all this wealth. Some nightmare troubled Pons; he stirred, and suddenly, under the influence of those diabolical glances, he opened his eyes with a shrill cry.

“Thieves!... There they are!... Help! Murder! Help!”

The nightmare was evidently still upon him, for he sat up in bed, staring before him with blank, wide-open eyes, and had not the power to move.

Elie Magus and Remonencq made for the door, but a word glued them to the spot.

“Magus here!... I am betrayed!”

Instinctively the sick man had known that his beloved pictures were in danger, a thought that touched him at least as closely as any dread for himself, and he awoke. Fraasier meanwhile did not stir.

“Mme. Cibot! who is that gentleman?” cried Pons, shivering at the sight.

“Goodness me! how could I put him out of the door?” she inquired, with a wink and gesture for Fraasier’s benefit. “This gentleman came just a minute ago, from your family.”

Fraasier could not conceal his admiration for La Cibot.

“Yes, sir,” he said, “I have come on behalf of Mme. la Presidente de Marville, her husband, and her daughter, to express their regret. They learned quite by accident that you are ill, and they would like to nurse you themselves. They want you to go to Marville and get well there. Mme. la Vicomtesse Popinot, the little Cecile that you love so much, will be your nurse. She took your part with her mother. She convinced Mme. de Marville that she had made a mistake.”

“So my next-of-kin have sent you to me, have they?” Pons exclaimed indignantly, “and sent the best judge and expert in all Paris with you to show you the way? Oh! a nice commission!” he cried, bursting into wild laughter. “You have come to value my pictures and curiosities, my snuff-boxes and miniatures!... Make your valuation. You have a man there who understands everything, and more—he can buy everything, for he is a millionaire ten times over.... My dear relatives will not have long to wait,” he added, with bitter irony, “they have choked the last breath out of me.... Ah! Mme. Cibot, you said you were a mother to me, and you bring dealers into the house, and my competitor and the Camusots, while I am asleep!... Get out, all of you!—”

3. Making a will

The old artist felt that he was dying, and this was the scheme that he forged. He meant Schmucke to be his universal legatee. To protect Schmucke from any possible legal quibbles, he proposed to dictate his will to a notary in the presence of witnesses, lest his sanity should be called in question and the Camusots should attempt upon that pretext to dispute the will. At the name of Trognon he caught a glimpse of machinations of some kind; perhaps a flaw purposely inserted, or premeditated treachery on La Cibot’s part. He would prevent this. Trognon should dictate a holograph will which should be signed and deposited in a sealed envelope in a drawer. Then Schmucke, hidden in one of the cabinets in his alcove, should see La Cibot search for the will, find it, open the envelope, read it through, and seal it again. Next morning, at nine o’clock, he would cancel the will and make a new one in the presence of two notaries, everything in due form and order. La Cibot had treated him as a madman and a visionary; he saw what this meant—he saw the Presidente’s hate and greed, her revenge in La Cibot’s behavior. In the sleepless hours and lonely days of the last two months, the poor man had sifted the events of his past life.

It has been the wont of sculptors, ancient and modern, to set a tutelary genius with a lighted torch upon either side of a tomb. Those torches that light up the paths of death throw light for dying eyes upon the spectacle of a life’s mistakes and sins; the carved stone figures express great ideas, they are symbols of a fact in human experience. The agony of death has its own wisdom. Not seldom a simple girl, scarcely more than a child, will grow wise with the experience of a hundred years, will gain prophetic vision, judge her family, and see clearly through all pretences, at the near approach of Death. Herein lies Death’s poetry. But, strange and worthy of remark it is, there are two manners of death.

The poetry of prophecy, the gift of seeing clearly into the future or the past, only belongs to those whose bodies are stricken, to those who die by the destruction of the organs of physical life. Consumptive patients, for instance, or those who die of gangrene like Louis XIV., of fever like Pons, of a stomach complaint like Mme. de Mortsauf, or of wounds received in the full tide of life like soldiers on the battlefield—all these may possess this supreme lucidity to the full; their deaths fill us with surprise and wonder. But many, on the other hand, die of *intelligential* diseases, as they may be called; of maladies seated in the brain or in that nervous system which acts as a kind of purveyor of thought fuel—and these die wholly, body and spirit are darkened together. The former are spirits deserted by the body, realizing for us our ideas of the spirits of Scripture; the latter are bodies untenanted by a spirit.

Too late the virgin nature, the epicure-Cato, the righteous man almost without sin, was discovering the Presidente's real character—the sac of gall that did duty for her heart. He knew the world now that he was about to leave it, and for the past few hours he had risen gaily to his part, like a joyous artist finding a pretext for caricature and laughter in everything. The last links that bound him to life, the chains of admiration, the strong ties that bind the art lover to Art's masterpieces, had been snapped that morning. When Pons knew that La Cibot had robbed him, he bade farewell, like a Christian, to the pomps and vanities of Art, to his collection, to all his old friendships with the makers of so many fair things. Our forefathers counted the day of death as a Christian festival, and in something of the same spirit Pons' thoughts turned to the coming end. In his tender love he tried to protect Schmucke when he should be low in the grave. It was this father's thought that led him to fix his choice upon the leading lady of the ballet. Mlle. Brisetout should help him to baffle surrounding treachery, and those who in all probability would never forgive his innocent universal legatee.

[...]

“Sir,” said Pons, “I am in the full possession of my faculties, unfortunately for me, for I feel that I am about to die; and doubtless, by the will of God, I shall be spared nothing of the agony of death. This is M. Schmucke”—(the notary bowed to M. Schmucke)—“my one friend on earth,” continued Pons. “I wish to make him my universal legatee. Now, tell me how to word the will, so that my friend, who is a German and knows nothing of French law, may succeed to my possessions without any dispute.”

“Anything is liable to be disputed, sir,” said the notary; “that is the drawback of human justice. But in the matter of wills, there are wills so drafted that they cannot be upset—”

“In what way?” queried Pons.

“If a will is made in the presence of a notary, and before witnesses who can swear that the testator was in the full possession of his faculties; and if the testator has neither wife nor children, nor father nor mother—”

“I have none of these; all my affection is centred upon my dear friend Schmucke here.”

The tears overflowed Schmucke's eyes.

“Then, if you have none but distant relatives, the law leaves you free to dispose of both personalty and real estate as you please, so long as you bequeath them for no unlawful purpose; for you must have come across cases of wills disputed on account of the testator's eccentricities. A will made in the presence of a notary is considered to be authentic; for the person's identity is established, the notary certifies that the testator was sane at the time, and there can be no possible dispute over the signature.—Still, a holograph will, properly and clearly worded, is quite as safe.”

“I have decided, for reasons of my own, to make a holograph will at your dictation, and to deposit it with my friend here. Is this possible?”

“Quite possible,” said the notary. “Will you write? I will begin to dictate—”

“Schmucke, bring me my little Boule writing-desk.—Speak low, sir,” he added; “we may be overheard.”

“Just tell me, first of all, what you intend,” demanded the notary.

4. Opening a will

“Go back,” said Fraasier, when she [Mme Cibot] handed over the will. “He may wake, and he must find you there.”

Fraasier opened the seal with a dexterity which proved that his was no ‘prentice hand, and read the following curious document, headed “My Will,” with ever-deepening astonishment:

“On this fifteenth day of April, eighteen hundred and forty-five, I, being in my sound mind (as this my Will, drawn up in concert with M. Trognon, will testify), and feeling that I must shortly die of the malady from which I have suffered since the beginning of February last, am anxious to dispose of my property, and have herein recorded my last wishes:—

“I have always been impressed by the untoward circumstances that injure great pictures, and not unfrequently bring about total destruction. I have felt sorry for the beautiful paintings condemned to travel from land to land, never finding some fixed abode whither admirers of great masterpieces may travel to see them. And I have always thought that the truly deathless work of a great master ought to be national property; put where every one of every nation may see it, even as the light, God’s masterpiece, shines for all His children.

“And as I have spent my life in collecting together and choosing a few pictures, some of the greatest masters’ most glorious work, and as these pictures are as the master left them—genuine examples, neither repainted nor retouched,—it has been a painful thought to me that the paintings which have been the joy of my life, may be sold by public auction, and go, some to England, some to Russia, till they are all scattered abroad again as if they had never been gathered together. From this wretched fate I have determined to save both them and the frames in which they are set, all of them the work of skilled craftsmen.

“On these grounds, therefore, I give and bequeath the pictures which compose my collection to the King, for the gallery in the Louvre, subject to the charge (if the legacy is accepted) of a life-annuity of two thousand four hundred francs to my friend Wilhelm Schmucke.

“If the King, as usufructuary of the Louvre collection, should refuse the legacy with the charge upon it, the said pictures shall form a part of the estate which I leave to my friend, Schmucke, on condition that he shall deliver the Monkey’s Head, by Goya, to my cousin, President Camusot; a Flower-piece, the tulips, by Abraham Mignon, to M. Trognon, notary (whom I appoint as my executor); and allow Mme. Cibot, who has acted as my housekeeper for ten years, the sum of two hundred francs per annum.

“Finally, my friend Schmucke is to give the Descent from the Cross, Ruben’s sketch for his great picture at Antwerp, to adorn a chapel in the parish church, in grateful acknowledgment of M. Duplanty’s kindness to me; for to him I owe it that I can die as a Christian and a Catholic.”—So ran the will.

“This is ruin!” mused Fraasier, “the ruin of all my hopes. Ha! I begin to believe all that the Presidente told me about this old artist and his cunning.”

“Well?” La Cibot came back to say.

“Your gentleman is a monster. He is leaving everything to the Crown. Now, you cannot plead against the Crown.... The will cannot be disputed.... We are robbed, ruined, spoiled, and murdered!”

“What has he left to me?”

“Two hundred francs a year.”

“A pretty come-down!... Why, he is a finished scoundrel.”

“Go and see,” said Fraasier, “and I will put your scoundrel’s will back again in the envelope.”

While Mme. Cibot’s back was turned, Fraasier nimbly slipped a sheet of blank paper into the envelope; the will he put in his pocket. He next proceeded to seal the envelope again so cleverly that he showed the seal to Mme. Cibot when she returned, and asked her if she could see the slightest trace of the operation. La Cibot took up the envelope, felt it over, assured herself that it was not empty, and heaved a deep sigh. She had entertained hopes that Fraasier himself would have burned the unlucky document while she was out of the room.

5. Contesting a will

At that very moment Fraasier, straight from the affixing of the seals in the Rue de Normandie, was waiting for an interview with Mme. de Marville. Berthier and Godeschal had suggested that he should be shown into the study; the whole affair was too dirty for the President to look into (to use their own expression), and they wished to give Mme. de Marville their opinion in Fraasier’s absence.

“Well, madame, where are these gentlemen?” asked Fraasier, admitted to audience.

“They are gone. They advise me to give up,” said Mme. de Marville.

“Give up!” repeated Fraasier, suppressed fury in his voice. “Give up! ... Listen to this, madame:—

“At the request of’... and so forth (I will omit the formalities)... ‘Whereas there has been deposited in the hands of M. le President of the Court of First Instance, a will drawn up by Maitres Leopold Hannequin and Alexandre Crottat, notaries of Paris, and in the presence of two witnesses, the Sieurs Brunner and Schwab, aliens domiciled at Paris, and by the said will the Sieur Pons, deceased, has bequeathed his property to one Sieur Schmucke, a German, to the prejudice of his natural heirs:

“Whereas the applicant undertakes to prove that the said will was obtained under undue influence and by unlawful means; and persons of credit are prepared to show that it was the testator’s intention to leave his fortune to Mlle. Cecile, daughter of the aforesaid Sieur de Marville, and the applicant can show that the said will was extorted from the testator’s weakness, he being unaccountable for his actions at the time:

“Whereas as the Sieur Schmucke, to obtain a will in his favor, sequestered the testator, and prevented the family from approaching the deceased during his last illness; and his subsequent notorious ingratitude was of a nature to scandalize the house and residents in the quarter who chanced to witness it when attending the funeral of the porter at the testator’s place of abode:

“Whereas as still more serious charges, of which applicant is collecting proofs, will be formally made before their worships the judges:

“I, the undersigned Registrar of the Court, etc., etc., on behalf of the aforesaid, etc., have summoned the Sieur Schmucke, pleading, etc., to appear before their worships the judges of the first chamber of the Tribunal, and to be present when application is made that the will

received by Maitres Hannequin and Crottat, being evidently obtained by undue influence, shall be regarded as null and void in law; and I, the undersigned, on behalf of the aforesaid, etc., have likewise given notice of protest, should the Sieur Schmucke as universal legatee make application for an order to be put into possession of the estate, seeing that the applicant opposes such order, and makes objection by his application bearing date of to-day, of which a copy has been duly deposited with the Sieur Schmucke, costs being charged to... etc., etc.’

“I know the man, Mme. le Presidente. He will come to terms as soon as he reads this little love-letter. He will take our terms. Are you going to give the thousand crowns per annum?”

6. Epilogue: The heroine of the story

Every one, no doubt, wishes to know what became of the heroine of a story only too veracious in its details; a chronicle which, taken with its twin sister the preceding volume, *La Cousine Bette*, proves that Character is a great social force. You, O amateurs, connoisseurs, and dealers, will guess at once that Pons’ collection is now in question.