A Tale of Two Bureaucracies: The Formal Development of Mid-Nineteenth-Century French and British Office Novels

DANIEL JENKIN-SMITH

Office life does not make for especially compelling storytelling. As David Graeber writes in *The Utopia of Rules* (2016), "administrative procedures are very much *not* about the creation of stories; in a bureaucratic setting, stories appear when something goes wrong."[1] Of course, what form these resulting stories may take is in part dependent on their context: bureaucracies in different spheres and from different periods "go wrong" in different ways, and they occupy distinct ideological and cultural positions in different societies—and so too do the shapes that these new stories may take partly depend upon the forms handed down by literary history.

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 77, No. 2–3, pp. 93–123, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352, © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2022.77.2–3.93.

[1] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), p. 185.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

While expedients for the literary depiction of office life are now commonplace, it took time for these approaches to become established. Whereas the office is now a go-to setting for any would-be portrayer of postmodern malaise, in the nineteenth century this workplace represented a narrative snare as much as it was a source of relative curiosity. While bureaucratization in nineteenth-century Europe and America was an undeniable social phenomenon, the epicenter of this process, the office, as Herman Melville writes, was rather "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life.'"[2] Although armies of clerks therefore populate nineteenth-century literature (often providing "magical escape routes" in the form of missing wills and valuable information, or entrapping protagonists in legal webs), they tend to figure as bit players in the broader social panorama.[3] Emergent bureaucratic networks and their agents represented "infrastructures techniques et cognitives" (technical and cognitive infrastructures) that enabled authors to unite an increasingly complex and atomized social world (just as they did in real life), but the realm from which these agents emerge, the office itself, tends more to figure as a *peripheral* space in the totemic works of the period.[4]

Nevertheless, a handful of novels produced in France and the United Kingdom during this period attempt to make office life their principal setting and subject matter; in so doing, they develop models that appear to adapt, problematize, or satirize existing narrative forms within this unpromising context. Moreover, I argue in this article that these French and British attempts to adapt narrative models to office settings in the middle of the nineteenth century also reflect the contrasting technical, social, and ideological histories of bureaucratization

[2] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1853), in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 9 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), p. 14.

[3] See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961; rpt. Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), pp. 88–89.

[4] Delphine Gardey, *La dactylographe et l'expéditionnaire: Histoire des employés de bureau 1890–1930* (Paris: Belin, 2001), p. 13, my translation. See also Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970) (Frogmore: Paladin, 1974), p. 14. Throughout this essay, all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

in these countries during this period. That is, not only does the office serve as a means of satirizing mainstream literary forms, but these literary forms also work to articulate changing attitudes toward bureaucratic structures that were themselves also evolving (or stagnating).

By reading William Makepeace Thackeray's office-based *Bildungsroman, The History of Samuel Titmarsh, and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841), with reference to its successors (in particular Anthony Trollope's *The Three Clerks* [1858]), we see how the combined effects of mid-nineteenth-century bureaucratic standardization, and the saturation of bureaucratic forms throughout British society, informed novels of maturation in Victorian literature. By contrast, I argue that what might be called a devolution in narrative form between Honoré de Balzac's highly reflexive satirical novel *Les Employés* (*The Government Clerks*) (1844) and Émile Gaboriau's office-hopping picaresque *Les Gens de Bureau* (*Office People*) (1862) illustrates increasing jadedness about France's apparently unreformable state bureaucracy during this same period.

Of course, none of this is to say that these novels provide *unmediated* insights into bureaucratic history or office life. Indeed, the extent to which the changing character of bureaucracy and office life as social phenomena was in part *informed* by their conceptualization in a broader cultural-ideological milieu (in which literary works exerted major sway) is a factor also worth bearing in mind. That said, exploring the degree to which office work and office literature may have exhibited some *mutual* constitution over their history is a larger task than can be undertaken in this article, which more modestly focuses on how the morphological development of midcentury novels may have reflected and accommodated formal developments in bureaucratic organization over this same period, and, indeed, reconciled these developments to established narrative forms.

The term "bureaucracy" was likely coined in mid-eighteenth-century France by the physiocrat Vincent de

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

Gournay, for whom it represented a facetious addition to Aristotle's canonical modes of government.[5] It was in the 1920s, meanwhile, with the German sociologist Max Weber, that bureaucracy's purely theoretical character was first concertedly outlined: as an organizational structure in which "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs . . . are raised to the optimum point."[6] Of course, the history and theory of bureaucracy and office work have continued to develop and change since Weber, but the development of this term from satirical neologism into the designation of an autonomous *social form* is suggestive of bureaucracy's conceptual and material evolution over the course of the nineteenth century.

The relative autonomy of Weber's social form from the specific institutions or spheres of society in which it may be instantiated is reflected in the history of bureaucratization—particularly when we compare that between France and the United Kingdom. Whereas the emergence of bureaucratic forms in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century France was primarily concentrated around the state, in the United Kingdom bureaucratization was more decentralized, developing in part within state institutions like the navy and civil service (albeit to a lesser extent than in France in the latter case), but also between industry and commerce, as well as in "para-state" bodies like the East India Company and in a legal sector that mediated market engagement (Gardey, *La dactylographe et l'expéditionnaire,* p. 50). As de Gournay recognized, proto-bureaucratic forms in France were already developing around the centralized absolute monarchy, but it was with the French Revolution that the "theoretical bases of a new form of domination" could be developed and implemented.[7] The more

[5] See Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, "1er Juillet, 1764," in vol. 4 of *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot,* 15 vols. (Paris: Furne, 1829–31), p. 11.

[6] Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), p. 214.

[7] Clive H. Church, *Revolution and Red Tape: The French Ministerial Bureaucracy 1770–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 78.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

"rational" administrative tools, divisions of labor, and hiring practices—as well as office buildings and equipment—speedily and centrally developed by the French state in response to the "war, rebellion, and social and political militancy" arrayed against it (Church, *Revolution and Red Tape*, p. 110) were, in the United Kingdom, developed piecemeal and relatively haphazardly between different sectors of society over a longer period of time.[8]

The novels I focus on in this article were all written in the middle decades of the nineteenth century (roughly the 1840s to the 1860s), a pivotal period in the history of bureaucratization (indicated, perhaps, by the eruption of hostility toward it in the literature of this period).[9] That said, novels that focus primarily on office life are few and far between—they appear more prototypical than archetypal in their attempts to mine the still "emerging, bureaucratic, managerial, or administered form of capitalism" for novelistic potential.[10] While they certainly have aesthetic forebears and peers—drawing from contemporary journalism, pre-nineteenth-century satirical traditions, and aspects of broader nineteenth-century realism—these novels also stand out in the extended, almost perverse, attention that they give to office life. Moreover, I argue that it is partly because of the respective disparities between French and British bureaucratization over this midcentury period that these works take their respective forms: the transitions from Thackeray's *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* to Trollope's *The Three Clerks*, and from Balzac's *Les Employés* to

[8] On these tools and their development, see Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (1965; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), pp. 38–40; on changing hiring and promotions practices, see Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management*, pp. 149–51; on organizational changes, see H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 149; and on different workplaces, see Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1976), p. 9.

[9] See James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), p. 14.

[10] Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 148.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

Gaboriau's *Les Gens de Bureau,* evoke how these respective national literary traditions in the portrayal of office life evolved.

"I shall excuse you nothing on the plea of being my brother; if I find you stupid, negligent, dissipated, idle, or possessed of any faults detrimental to the interests of the house, I shall dismiss you as I would any other clerk," Edward Crimsworth tells his brother, William, after hiring him as a correspondence clerk in the opening pages of Charlotte Brontë's early novel *The Professor* (posthumously published in 1857).[11] It is little wonder that William soon hops it to Belgium to become a teacher, after which his story begins in earnest. Office jobs figure similarly in other midcentury *Bildungsromane*: in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) the clerk's life is a developmental cul-de-sac—Copperfield must be cast out of Doctors' Commons if he is to attain the full stature of bourgeois hero. It is in George Henry Lewes's *Künstlerroman, Ranthorpe* (1847), meanwhile, that what these other novels imply is made explicit: Lewes signs off on his hero's ascent by declaring that "the poor attorney's clerk has become an honoured author. . . . His footing in society is no longer dependent upon the caprice of a drawing-room" but rather upon the self-directing "intellectual power" of one who "wields a pen" ("wields" it toward his *own* ends, rather than *driving* it for others).[12] Self-fashioning individual agency is strongly contrasted against the passive dependency represented by the office job (however sedentary the actual activity of the "man of action" may be, as in the case of the *littérateur*).[13]

[11] [Charlotte Brontë], *The Professor, a Tale,* 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1857), I, 29.

[12] [George Henry Lewes], *Ranthorpe* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1847), pp. 350–51.

[13] On the self-presentation of "men of letters," see James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), p. 34; and Maurice S. Lee, *Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019), p. 133. Corroborating this sense of the unsuitability of bureaucracy to *Bildung,* Friedrich Kittler, in his analysis of Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785–90), remarks that "the *Bildungsroman* can only lead as far as the threshold of [Prussian state] bureaucracy" (Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse*

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

The *Bildungsroman* is an archetypal genre of the midcentury realist novel: in its focus upon the maturation, setbacks, and eventual successes of a (usually male) middle-class protagonist, it reflects (if not asserts) this period's individualistic worldview, its internalized moral code, and its rather chaotic conceptualization of society. Moreover, as Nicholas Dames argues in "Trollope and the Career" (2003), at least in the British case it was only really after the reform of state bureaucracy in the 1850s (following experiments in the administration of British India and the famous 1855 Northcote-Trevelyan Report) that "the career"—understood as "the sequential ascension of one ambitious individual within a profession whose stations were carefully graded"—could legitimately intersect with the *Bildungsroman* as narrative form.[14] Dames illustrates this shift with Anthony Trollope's novels *The Small House at Allington* (1864), *Phineas Finn* (1869), and, most pertinently for our purposes, *The Three Clerks*. With the standardization of bureaucratic careers in the third quarter of the century, what Dames describes as "professional" and "social" conceptual spheres converged in contemporary fiction—they became "indissoluble, and . . . merged in the figure of the career" (Dames, "Trollope and the Career," p. 267). That is to say, in the late 1850s and 1860s, *Bildung* aligned with what I am calling "*Beförderung*" (literally "promotion")—however temporarily.[15]

The Three Clerks in particular represents a formal test-case in the newfound ideological position of the office job in the late 1850s. Following the differing career trajectories of its three protagonists—the straight-laced Harry Norman, the fatally overambitious Alaric Tudor, and the wastrel Charley Tudor (who eventually comes good)—it explores the introduction of competitive examination and careerism on the British civil

Networks 1800/1900, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990], p. 76).

[14] Nicholas Dames, "Trollope and the Career: Vocational Trajectories and the Management of Ambition." *Victorian Studies*, 45 (2003), 267.

[15] As office jobs became increasingly mainstream, even feminized—and therefore *déclassé*—by the end of the century, we see yet another cultural shift, a transition also exemplified by Trollope in more social-realist works like *The Telegraph Girl* (1877) and *Marion Fay* (1882).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

service. Although the novel occasionally satirizes Utilitarianism and meritocracy (evoking Trollope's own later conviction that civil service berths could only really be occupied by "gentlemen"), Maurice S. Lee stresses that *The Three Clerks* is ultimately ambivalent, if not "evasive," about the ideological position of standardized promotion (*Overwhelmed*, p. 195).[16] Whereas the naturally genteel Harry Norman balks amid the cutthroat atmosphere of examination, Alaric Tudor thrives and gains further promotions—putting him in a position to embezzle a trusteeship, leading to his downfall. Although, as Lee writes, Trollope registers the contemporary truism that "competitive testing may measure cleverness, cramming, and ambition but not moral character" (*Overwhelmed*, p. 196), it is nevertheless in the degree to which meritocracy and standardized bureaucratic hierarchies form the acid bath in which Harry's and Alaric's respective strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices can be exposed and gauged that *The Three Clerks* illustrates influence of emergent "ideal type" Weberian bureaucracy upon Victorian novels of the late 1850s. For "middle class paupers, who are born with good coats on [their] backs, but empty purses," as Alaric characterizes himself and his cousin, Charley, the office job becomes the constitutive vehicle of their personal and moral growth—their *Bildung*.[17] In its capacity as a sphere in which "all material intercourse between man and man must be regulated" (as Trollope describes his novel's fictional "Office of the Board of Commissioners for Regulating Weights and Measures") (*The Three Clerks*, I, 1–2), bureaucracy figures as a social node from which prestige and corruption alike are accessible: Alaric and Charley Tudor succumb to vice (in the form of fraud and loose living, respectively) directly as a result of their particular job roles. Meanwhile, as Jennifer Ruth argues, it is in Charley's eventual willingness to knuckle down and present himself as little more than a "hack" by publishing mediocre short stories (themselves about office

[16] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (1883), ed. Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950, 1989), pp. 40–41.

[17] Anthony Trollope, *The Three Clerks, a Novel*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1858), II, 17.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

workers) that he attains civil service success.[18] In true "disinterested" bureaucratic style, therefore, it is less a body of *particular* virtues that assures Charley's happy ending, and more his ability to hone a generalized, readily fungible, "capacity for disciplined mental labor" (Ruth, *Novel Professions*, p. 97). *Bildung* in this light becomes a process of learning to make oneself amenable to the demands of a suprapersonal administrative mechanism—a development whose rewards manifest themselves via *Beförderung*.

But before this process of meritocratic standardization and cultural legitimation, British bureaucracy tended—as Sukanya Banerjee notes—to be ironically rather unbureaucratic.[19] Larger organizations, like civil services, operated according to almost courtly principles of privilege, nepotism, and cronyism: positions were paid for, or acquired as favors for the indolent second or third sons of the elite.[20] Meanwhile, smaller offices—haphazardly set up in the backrooms of warehouses and factories, or in converted houses for small mercantile and legal firms—were strangely familial (albeit dysfunctionally so). Organized according to intimate, habitual arrangements, and often governed by exploitative gentlemen's agreements and meagerly paid apprenticeships, mid-nineteenth-century clerks were, as David Lockwood writes in his seminal study, *The Blackcoated Worker* (1958), "as a class, fragmented and isolated in small groups," their lives characterized by "servitude, dependence and low income."[21] The isolation and pettiness of office life, as well as the overarching sense that career success in an unreformed bureaucracy was governed largely by personal connections or dependence

[18] See Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2006), p. 95.

[19] See Sukanya Banerjee, "Writing Bureaucracy, Bureaucratic Writing: Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, and Mid-Victorian Liberalism," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 75 (2020), 138.

[20] See Oliver MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government 1830–1870* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), pp. 199–200.

[21] David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 29, 32, 30.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

upon employers' caprice, were anathema to the demands of the *Bildungsroman*.[22]

Moreover, because an "entrepreneurial ideal" of "capital and competition" predominated over more standardized "professional" values until the midcentury, the office job was ideologically suspect.[23] Whereas the process of *Bildung*, according to Franco Moretti, follows "a clear and irreversible course" from "youth to maturity, from romantic imagination to the patient observation of reality,"[24] the cloistered world of the office, and the strange rarefaction of its immediate ends, figure more as a (temporary) retreat into complacent illusion: the "sleepy-headed little family-party" that is Doctors' Commons constitutes a modern-day island of the lotos eaters in David Copperfield's personal odyssey (one directly pegged to cognate events in Copperfield's personal life—his inappropriate marriage to the infantile Dora Spenlow).[25] If, as Fredric Jameson writes, the *Bildungsroman* constitutes "an instrument for the exploration of the new possibilities of bourgeois society,"[26] it must also cleave to the "entrepreneurial ideal" of its age in its form, conveying a sense of contingency, adaptability, and competition over one-sided, dead-end professionalism—at least until bureaucratic forms rendered themselves the mediators of "all material intercourse between man and man."

The relative irreconcilability between *Bildung* and what I am calling "*Beförderung*" (career progression as a narrative form) during this pre-reform period is illustrated by the rare instance in which *Beförderung* forms a narrative vehicle precisely *because* of its dubious character: Thackeray's *The History of Samuel Titmarsh, and the Great Hoggarty Diamond*. Written early in Thackeray's career, this short novel revolves around the City

[22] On this cultural antipathy to office work, rooted in its apparent condition of dependence, see Joshua Gooch, *The Victorian Novel, Service Work, and the Nineteenth-Century Economy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 44.

[23] See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 272.

[24] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture*, new ed., trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 91–92.

[25] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 301.

[26] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 146.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

of London of the 1820s. At the beginning of his story, Titmarsh is thirteenth clerk at "the Independent West Diddlesex Fire and Life Insurance Company," recently established during a general mania for joint-stock companies and speculation, and whose owner-operator is the ostensibly benign, ostensibly successful, financier, Mr. Brough.[27] Like his colleagues (and indeed like many real clerks during this period), Titmarsh obtained his position after his mother "had sunk a sum of four hundred pounds" in the firm—a fact that speaks to the dubiously unmeritocratic ideological position of office job during this period, as well as figuring as the underpinning source of conflict in the novel (*The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, p. 10). The favorite nephew of his wealthy, aristocratic aunt, Titmarsh receives an early inheritance from her in the form of a brooch known as the "Great Hoggarty Diamond." This token of aristocratic connections soon grants Titmarsh access to more genteel circles—but the tension between "remain[ing] in a vulgar office in the city [while] hav[ing] such great acquaintances at the west end" (p. 48) compels him to embezzle money off his aunt to purchase better positions in the firm (a wheeze very much encouraged by Brough himself, who argues that this unsolicited investment of her capital will ultimately see her reap future dividends). Surprise, surprise: Brough is corrupt—he strips the firm of its assets and flees, leaving Titmarsh, now risen to head clerk and (via his aunt) chief shareholder-by-proxy in the firm, to deal with the fallout. Indebted and impoverished, Titmarsh is saved by his ever-loyal wife, Mary, who finds work as the nurse to an aristocratic family; Titmarsh himself, meanwhile, who has "learned . . . what it is to make friends with the Mammon of unrighteousness" (p. 185), announces his resolution to persevere as an honest office drudge somewhere, a conviction that earns him the respect of Mary's employers, who make him their steward.

Concluding with a paean to the virtues of honest toil, and with a retrenchment of social hierarchies (with whatever anxieties that may have formerly underlain these hierarchies being

[27] W[illiam] M[akepeace] Thackeray, *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841; rpt. London: Bradbury and Evans, 1849), p. 10. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

resolved by the Titmarshes' newfound roles within the aristocratic order), *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* suggests that *Bildung* has indeed taken place. However, the need for eventual *Bildung* cannot get in the way of office satire, which dominates the center of the book. This satire is displayed not only through the guiding narrative of Titmarsh's dubious ascent, but also though the everyday character of office life: the comic colleagues (including a clerk called "Roundhand"), the rivalries between them, and the implication that office work merely requires one to "sit, and laugh, and joke, and read the newspapers all day"—as well as portrayals of upper-class snobbery regarding "cursed ledgers and things" (*The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, pp. 15, 16, 76). Equally, the distinction made between the more organic social hierarchy into which Titmarsh is eventually happily inculcated and the rather chaotic, atomized world of finance that he at first naively construed to be a social shortcut also aligns the novel with an array of nineteenth-century finance novels, to which it may appear office themes are subordinate: Mr. Brough falls in readily with Jonas Chuzzlewit, Merdle, Augustus Melmotte, and Aristide Saccard in his capacity as a "stock-market villain."[28]

That said, however, Titmarsh's rather sanguine conclusions regarding Brough—that "one thing we may at least admire in the man, and that is, his undaunted courage," and that "there must be some good in him" (*The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, p. 186)—situate the financier in ambiguous relation to his more overtly roguish or Faustian literary peers. Of course, Titmarsh's conclusions regarding Brough could simply serve to illustrate his continued good faith (or perhaps just his naiveté), but the fact that he ends this episode of his life with such magnanimity is indicative of the determinate role that the office career plays in mediating the novel's various concerns. Titmarsh's magnanimity toward his former employer is indicative of the fact that many of those factors conducive to *Bildung* were latent within the initial process of *Beförderung*, however

[28] See Tamara S. Wagner, "Speculators at Home in the Victorian Novel: Making Stock-Market Villains and New Paper Fictions," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 21–40; and Timothy L. Alborn, "The Moral of the Failed Bank: Professional Plots in the Victorian Money Market," *Victorian Studies*, 38 (1995), 199–226.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

fraudulent, which structurally predominates over the main body of Thackeray's novel.

Bureaucratic forms are accommodated by, and even come to predominate in, *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* because its generic ambiguities reflect its story. It is because Titmarsh equates career progression, speculation, and social climbing with one another for the majority of the novel that the bureaucratic forms (specifically, formal career progression) that tether the three together constitute the novel's predominant structuring narrative device. With the succession of each chapter, Titmarsh rises in the West Diddlesex Fire and Life Insurance Company—albeit through obviously dubious means, despite reassurances from Brough (indeed, it is Brough who dictates the embezzling letters). And each step in Titmarsh's rise is followed by his heightened (or inflated) standing among the fashionable set. However illusory Titmarsh's process of *Beförderung* is ultimately revealed to be, especially in contrast to the subsequent period of hard grind that constitutes the true face of *Bildung*, his rise to first clerk at the West Diddlesex Company conveys concrete advantages upon him at the midpoint of the novel—the influence of these advantages even outlasts his eventual fall.

Most important, it is from this artificially heightened position that Titmarsh meets his wife, Mary—whose naval officer grandfather "had been at the first very much averse to [the] union," until he recognizes that "Sam Titmarsh, with a salary of 250 *l.*, a promised fortune of 150 *l.* more, and the right-hand man of John Brough of London, was a very different man from Sam the poor clerk, and the poor clergyman's widow's son" (*The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, p. 92). Titmarsh would never have been able to marry his wife if not for his fraudulent success, but it is Mary who ultimately redeems him from the fallout thereof; paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is only after having climbed the ladder of *Beförderung*, therefore, that Titmarsh can throw it away and achieve meaningful *Bildung*. It would be some years before professional forms and social values truly aligned in nineteenth-century novels of maturation, but Thackeray here illustrates that the process of distinguishing the two in this pre-reform era does not wholly discount the *relative* substance of these forms.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

Both the *Bildungsroman* and this one abortive instance of "*Beförderungsroman*" are necessarily individualistic narrative forms: they follow the protagonist's process of maturation. Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of *Beförderung* from *Bildung* in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh*—however much *Bildung* is ultimately shown to predominate over *Beförderung* in real moral and social value—is indicative of the far broader emergence of bureaucracy and office work as autonomous *social* categories during this period. That is, it is as bureaucracy comes to figure as a social sphere whose rules and metrics are relatively distinct from both their impetus and their object—whose internal mechanisms develop an autonomy that oblige us to construe bureaucracy as a distinct social form—that the concrete effects of such procedures are acknowledged both in real life and in fiction. Weber's unanswered question at the end of his "Bureaucracy" essay as to whether developments in bureaucratization can ultimately be traced to "economic determination" or to "purely political" circumstances—or whether these are "created by an 'autonomous' logic that is solely of the technical structure as such"—is a question that is also implicitly asked by Thackeray (Weber, "Bureaucracy," pp. 243–44). Whether Titmarsh achieved his happy ending purely by financial caprice or by the eventual development of virtues that were amenable to an aristocratic elite—or whether his ascent through the ranks of the West Diddlesex Company really *did* exert some influence on his eventual denouement—represents an incarnation of Weber's question on an individualized register. Of course, the concept of a *Beförderungsroman*—a novel that follows a protagonist through formalized promotion without *any* more broadly moral or social character—could only work in a facetious capacity (in the same way that a bureaucracy with no object but itself is the knee-jerk means of its satirization), but as a term *Beförderungsroman* nevertheless illustrates the uneasy relationship between an emergent structure of rationalized roles and rankings alongside the more organic but nebulous character of *Bildung* proper.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

Beförderungsroman as a hypothetical literary category cannot survive on its own without the moral and social substance embodied in the *Bildungsroman* proper. Even with the increased legitimacy of standardized career progression in the United Kingdom of the late 1850s and 1860s, the formal promotional narrative development implied on an isolated register by *Beförderung* must be imbued with more intangible qualities like ambition or self-control (even simply deservedness) before achieving cultural legitimacy.[29] In *The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, therefore, *Beförderung* constitutes at most a narrative carapace: the resonance of bureaucratic forms with the value systems that underlie civil society, and, indeed, the power of bureaucratic forms to structure aspects of social reality, cannot quite be denied, but they are ultimately distinguishable from those things that really count—this process of differentiation in part characterizes Titmarsh's *Bildung*. Indeed, the successive promotions that constitute a narrative of *Beförderung* would themselves be devoid of value in a work that *lacks* any accompanying deeper sense of maturation: a *Beförderungsroman* unto itself would quickly degrade from the verticality of a "novel of promotion" into one that simply follows a protagonist along a series of job roles that are ultimately interchangeable—an "office Picaresque." What this kind of work might look like is suggested in Gaboriau's *Les Gens de Bureau*, and why French office literature reached this point by the 1860s is, like in the United Kingdom, a question of the history of bureaucratization and of bureaucracy's place in the cultural imaginary.

The history of bureaucracy between the 1840s and 1860s in Britain is largely a shift toward standardization and (begrudging) legitimation—reflected in part by the changing narrative role of the bureaucratic career between *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* and *The Three Clerks*. In France, whose centralized state administration had rapidly transformed during the Revolution into something approaching a prototype of Weber's later "idealized" model, bureaucratization thereafter took a more muddled course. In short, France "paid a price for being a pioneer" (Church, *Revolution and Red Tape*, p. 74)—

[29] See Dames, "Trollope and the Career," p. 275, n. 16.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

stagnating where it had once been cutting edge, what Pierre Rosanvallon calls "*le paradoxe français*."[30]

This change is paradoxical because the civil service in France was typified by extreme continuity: centralized as an administrative organ since the ancien régime, its essential procedures, hierarchies, and division of tasks remained formally unchanged after the 1790s for much of the nineteenth century.[31] However, it also bore the indelible marks of history: leaning into republican, Bonapartist, or aristocratic values when the occasion suited, the civil service deformed aspects of itself in the process, and incurred suspicion from all sides of the political spectrum in turn (Church, *Revolution and Red Tape*, p. 289). Indeed, as Ralph Kingston argues throughout *Bureaucrats and Bourgeois Society* (2012), apparently countermanding Weber's famous claims of the inevitable coalescence of a hyperrational "iron cage," it is ironically as France's bureaucracy asserted its autonomy that it became subject to the same struggles that befell other spheres of society. Tensions between privilege and merit, old hands and new men, individual ambitions and the limitations of the system, all conspired to turn France's bureaucracy into yet another arena of social conflict—albeit that of a particularly staid and pettifogging variety.

Itself subject to social conflict, the civil service was also held to have *mediated* French history more broadly. This disturbing claim was most notably made by Alexis de Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*) (1856), contending that the centralization of the French state had rendered the French Revolution necessary for *any* political change to take place, but that the entrenched position of this self-same administrative machine had also thwarted the Revolution's truly democratic potential—a synthesis characterized by Hayden White as having all "the inevitability of a Tragic

[30] Pierre Rosanvallon, "Administration, politique et société: le paradoxe français," *Réseaux*, 8, no. 40 (1990), 58.

[31] See Guy Thuillier and Jean Tulard, *Histoire de l'administration française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), p. 24; and Ralph Kingston, *Bureaucrats and Bourgeois Society: Office Politics and Individual Credit in France 1789–1848* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 13.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

Drama."[32] In contrast to Britain, therefore, where decentralized bureaucratization produces office novels that conceive of office life on a highly individualized register (if not more generally figuring it as a magical network of mismanaged data lying behind civil society), in France there is a strong conceptualization of the national, indeed societal, position of bureaucracy, but also one of growing alienation from it—a position that lends itself to quite different office-based narratives than those seen in the United Kingdom.

This difference is well illustrated by those works that most closely parallel the *Bildung-Beförderung* tension evoked in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh.* In volume 2 of Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen* (abandoned without a third and final volume in 1835), the well-heeled but spiritually drained eponymous protagonist is secured a high-ranking civil service berth at the Ministry of the Interior by his at once indulgent and disturbingly cynical banker father. Office life itself figures little: Leuwen's job amounts to political fixer and society schmoozer. Framed as an opportunity to exert "une grande influence sur les destinées de la France" (a great influence over France's destiny), Leuwen's protagonistic agency is rather subsumed under the vying interests of the Minister and his father—just as (recalling Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the Stendhalian parlor) bureaucracy more broadly serves primarily as a space in which politics, courtly intrigue, and finance can converge, with no real content of its own.[33] Just as André-Jean Tudesq claims that "la confusion des deux fonctions, parlementaire et administrative" (the confusion of the two functions, parliamentary and administrative) under the clientelism of the July Monarchy (1830–1848) undermined and delegitimized its constitution, so too does Stendhal's novel soon veer from *Bildungsroman* into a quagmire of political satire (despite Stendhal professing at

[32] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973, 2014), p. 195.

[33] Stendhal, *Lucien Leuwen*, ed. Anne-Marie Meininger (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 388. See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), p. 246.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

the start of the volume that he would not do so [*Lucien Leuwen*, p. 383]), *roman à clef*, and sexual intrigue.[34] The plot only regains some direction when politics wholly takes over: focus shifts to the parliamentary career of Leuwen senior, who becomes an outsider demagogue, while Leuwen himself fades into the background. In this light, Stendhal's decision to peg his protagonist's *Bildung* to a social sphere conceived of as thoroughly hollow and compromised seemingly foreshadows the novel's eventual abandonment.

With Balzac's *Un début dans la vie* (*A Start in Life*) (1842), which follows its protagonist, Oscar Husson, through different sections of French society, it is, as with *David Copperfield*, only once Husson abandons the grind of a legal clerkship and returns into the chaos of the world that he can attain a degree of respectability.[35] Unlike Dickens, for whom Doctors' Commons is anathema to *Bildung*, there is a strong implication in *Un début dans la vie* that, had Oscar simply knuckled down at the law office (a hermetic but industrious space, devoid of the compromising political associations of the civil service), he would have made a name for himself. Nevertheless, like Copperfield's "proctorship," and unlike in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* or *The Three Clerks*, it is because an office job (specifically a legal career) is framed more as a guildlike apprenticeship rather than a steady ladder of formally bureaucratized promotion (however illegitimate) that Husson must, in a moment of hedonism, break its rules and leave for a more dynamic sphere where narrative and personal progress can become manifest. Like Charley Tudor, Husson cannot acquire the bourgeois virtue of self-discipline without having first transgressed it—but, for Husson, this requirement and office life in its current historical state are mutually exclusive.

[34] André-Jean Tudesq, "Les Directeurs de Ministère sous la Monarchie de Juillet," in Francis de Baecque, et al., *Les Directeurs de Ministère en France (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), p. 35.

[35] See Honoré de Balzac, *Un début dans la vie* (1842) (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

With midcentury French offices of all stamps apparently narratively unconducive to *Bildung* (for both structural and ideological reasons), we get a different kind of narrative. As already implied by *Lucien Leuwen*, the office in French literature figures both as a space that dissolves a protagonist's volition and one where vying parties can converge—but, with a greater focus on the office setting, there also necessarily comes a sense of its concreteness, one by which petty bureaucratic procedures certainly mask social conflict, but also mediate it. It is Balzac's *Les Employés* that models this complex interplay of protagonistic entropy, social mediation, and bureaucratic autonomy most radically—even (rather paradoxically) most dynamically. Set among the *employés* of a government ministry (an *employé* being any civil servant below the top-flight *hauts fonctionnaires*, who have actual power and influence over the execution of policy), *Les Employés* starts with an ambitious middle manager, Xavier Rabourdin, in his quest to attain a promotion to *Chef de Division*, from where he can start to enact sweeping bureaucratic reforms.[36]

With this premise, based around the vaguely militaristic hierarchies of French bureaucracy, the plot of *Les Employés* initially appears therefore to adhere to the forms of *Beförderung*. Unlike the situations with Titmarsh or Alaric Tudor, however, the conflict here does not lie in the tension between Rabourdin's ambition and his limitations (although this is certainly manifest), but rather it focuses on the rivalry over this promotion: Rabourdin's opposite number, the pathologically mediocre Isidore Baudoyer, also wants the job. The novel's guiding question is therefore "à qui la place?," the title of its third and final part: the plot is structured less around the individualized question of Rabourdin's and Baudoyer's moral worth, or their fitness for the role (these are clear from the outset), and more about why they want this role, and how they will attain it.[37]

The title of the original 1838 version of the novel, *La Femme supérieure* (*The Superior Wife*), gives some indication of

[36] See J. Suratteau, "Fonctionnaires et employés," *AHRF*, 151 (1958), 71–72.

[37] Anne-Marie Meininger, introduction to Honoré de Balzac, *Les Employés* (1844) (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 7. Further references to *Les Employés* are to this edition and appear in the text.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

the nature of this conflict: it is really between Rabourdin's and Baudoyer's wives. Where obsessive Rabourdin and dim-witted Baudoyer carry on their lives fairly normally, the ambitious Célestine and Élisabeth call in connections from the government, the Church, the salons, and in the *demimonde* to inch ahead of each other. As with *Lucien Leuwen*, the office in *Les Employés* therefore becomes an arena of broader social conflict: when Élisabeth Baudoyer has a loan shark threaten to call in a high-ranking official's debts unless he make her husband the *Chef de Division*, Rabourdin's position founders.

Unlike in *Lucien Leuwen*, however, where the ministries are *solely* a site of political, social, and financial convergence, Rabourdin's fate is overdetermined—both from beyond the bureaux and from within. When Rabourdin's plans for massive layoffs as part of his reforms are leaked, the various "médiocrités" and "Lilliputiens" who would lose their jobs were the reforms enacted lend their efforts to Baudoyer's cause (Balzac, *Les Employés*, pp. 44–45). Again, as with *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* (although from a rather different perspective), the office at once tethers together other social spheres (becoming the focus of social conflict) but is also subject to internal dynamics, and exerts a concrete influence of its own—the various elements that make up this structure are endowed with a kind of transpersonal agency, even if individual protagonists lack such power within its confines.

In *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* the social concreteness of bureaucracy is paradoxical: it was only because Titmarsh received his fraudulent promotions that he attained the conditions of his salvation. Balzac's novel exhibits a similar sense of paradox, but, because of differences in narrative perspective (themselves rooted in the far more centralized and politically focused position of bureaucracy in France), this manifests itself on a more formal register. *Les Employés* gives a very real sense of the mediatory power and concreteness of the bureaux, but also stresses their chaotic power to absorb all agency: whereas "les plus belles choses de la France se sont accomplies quand il n'existait pas de rapport et que les décisions étaient spontanées . . . les bureaux se hâtèrent de se rendre nécessaires en se substituant à l'action vivante par l'action écrite" (the greatest

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

things in France were accomplished when there were no reports and decisions were spontaneous . . . the bureaux render themselves necessary by substituting written action for living action) (*Les Employés*, pp. 44–45). In this light, the story of Rabourdin's fall is not only anticipated but also intercepted by the fact that the bureaux quickly come to dominate the novel: we get far more scenes of clerical "types," office banter, and remonstrations against the "nature, à la fois sauvage et civilisé" of "ces affreux compartiments, nommés bureaux" (the at once savage and civilized nature of these frightful compartments named offices) than appears necessary to Rabourdin's story (p. 142). As Alex Woloch writes:

> Confronting the multiplicity inherent in bureaucratic work leads to the static portraits of many individuals crammed into a little space, and submerges the central character, who cannot control or anchor his novel's aesthetic form, just as he is unsuccessful in controlling his fate *within* the novel. Spending too much time shifting attention from one employee to another, the narrator kills the story itself, so that the well-made plot falls victim to excessively close observation of monotonous work.[38]

Whereas the implicit paradox in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh*, consolidated within the fundamentally individualistic perspective of the *Bildungsroman*, resolves itself in the comic outcome of its protagonist's eventual success and absorption into society, in *Les Employés* bureaucracy precludes individuation and the novel's comparable paradox swells to ever greater proportions: Rabourdin's tragic fall is soon enfolded within the Tocquevillian tragedy of French bureaucratization itself.

Balzac's novel was disliked by contemporaries, but, as it loses itself amid the personalities and minutiae of office life, it gains a metafictional aspect (indeed, its form emulates the problematic history of French bureaucracy) which has since earned it critical reappraisal.[39] For Marco Diani, Balzac's modeling of the tension between individualized bourgeois agency

[38] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), p. 309.

[39] See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 309. See also Dominique Rosse, "Satire et mise en abyme dans «Les Employés» de Balzac," *L'Année balzacienne*, 1 (2004), 402–6.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

and structural autonomy makes *Les Employés* "the great novel of the Bureaucracy, [with Balzac] paradoxically managing to create at one stroke both a new literary *genre* and its uncontested masterpiece."[40] In this respect, if only in aesthetic terms, Balzac parallels contemporaries under the July Monarchy and those immediately following the 1848 Revolution who still imagined the civil service to be reformable.[41] Although the plot of *Les Employés* is ultimately about failure, it is in the sense that bureaucratic stagnation becomes a vehicle for narrative innovation that, as an institution, the office demonstrates that it is not entirely without creative energy. Indeed, despite its unconduciveness to individualized narratives (like the *Bildungsroman*), France's bureaucracy, with *Les Employés*, nevertheless represents a means of achieving a new kind of *social* narrative—one less dependent on coincidences and happenstances, as in other nineteenth-century novels' sense of the individual negotiating their place in "a great but abstract world," and more on intelligible (albeit mediated) networks of interaction (Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," p. 234). It is in this respect that Diani asserts that Balzac's novel was the first example of an office-based literary "masterpiece."

Les Employés was the first, but apparently, Diani claims, also the last of such "masterpieces." Whereas, in the United Kingdom, bureaucratic reforms during and after the 1850s served to legitimize office careerism in literature, giving it a new and transformative constitutive role in the fiction of the period, the continued failure of reform efforts in France during this same period stifled the creative dynamism exhibited by *Les Employés*. The sense, reflected in the very form of Balzac's novel, of the bureaux' plasticity—that they are still conceivably reformable, but for the machinations of Élisabeth Baudoyer and her cronies—changes with the next generation of novelists. This change recalls Jameson's broader claim that, in Balzac's historical moment, "social and economic reality was still relatively transparent, the result of human activity still visible to the

[40] Marco Diani, "Balzac's Bureaucracy: The Infinite Destiny of the Unknown Masterpiece," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 34, no. 1 (1994), 42.

[41] See Kingston, *Bureaucrats and Bourgeois Society*, pp. 141–44. See also Guy Thuillier, *L'E.N.A. avant L'E.N.A.* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

naked eye," whereas Balzac's successors were alienated from the by now established and objectified structures of modernity.[42] As hope of reform subsides for a generation, we see the irrepressibly social perspective of *Les Employés* and its metastasizing aesthetic replaced by a more individualized perspective, one alienated from an ossified social sphere known solely for a range of set stereotypes—a conceptual development that produces the "office Picaresque" exemplified by Gaboriau's *Les Gens de Bureau.*

Les Gens de Bureau opens with its protagonist, Romain Caldas, having just failed his law exams, and therefore deeming himself "admirablement propre" (admirably suited) to a career in administration.[43] Soon thereafter he takes the civil service entrance exam—and is impressed by a system in which candidates' grades allow one "mesurer au juste l'influence de leurs protecteurs" (to measure exactly the influence of their protectors) (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 8). This collapsing of nepotism and meritocracy into one another already illustrates the novel's fundamentally jaded characterization of France's bureaucracy, but it also reflects Caldas's own strange characterization. Unlike the hero of a *Bildungsroman*, Caldas undergoes no moral or psychological growth: he never loses his naiveté precisely because it comes leavened with cynicism. Like the broader cultural sense of France's bureaucracy, his development is at once arrested and overripe. The same sense of contrariety applies to Caldas's self-regard: assuming that he will win a prestigious civil service job, he buys an expensive suit, indebting himself to his Swabian tailor; but when it transpires that he has placed ninety-third in his exams, "honor" (that is, his debt) forces him into a low-paid "supernumerary" position—"à prendre le grattoir dans la grande armée de la paperasse" (to take

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

[42] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 204.

[43] Émile Gaboriau, *Les Gens de Bureau* (1862), 4th ed. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1871), p. 3. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

up the penknife in the *grande armée* of paper-pushing) (p. 13).[44]

What follows is a series of satirical episodes, each with a caustic observation about French bureaucracy. First (and, appropriately, illustrating a contemporary sense of disparities between French and British attitudes to office work), Caldas is forced to wait in the personnel office to be allotted a role:

> Cette couple d'heures ne fut pas d'ailleurs inutile à son apprentissage administratif. Il avait eu jusqu'alors des idées tout à fait anglaises sur la valeur du temps; l'oisiveté si occupée de ces fonctionnaires marron-clair fut une révélation pour lui; et concluant de leur fainéantise individuelle à la fainéantise universelle de la gent bureaucratique. (This couple of hours was not useless to his administrative apprenticeship. He had had until then quite English ideas about the value of time; the highly occupied idleness of these light brown functionaries was a revelation for him; and he ascertained from their individual laziness the universal laziness of the bureaucratic race.) (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 16).

Next, he gets lost in the maze-like ministry—eventually finding someone who can help him, he is described as more joyful than Christopher Columbus when he discovered America: a world unto itself, bureaucratic time and space alike are subject to dilation (p. 27). So too are the careers of Caldas's colleagues: Rafflard, a classic desiccated old clerk type who has taken twenty-three years to become head clerk in his office, naively imagines that he therefore has the proverbial "bâton de maréchal" (marshal's baton) in his backpack (p. 54). Meanwhile, the jaded Lorgelin, a born administrator who never gets promoted thanks to an anonymous denunciatory letter, condemns the bureaux as a retreat for "imbéciles incapables de faire autre chose que ce labeur automatique" (imbeciles incapable of doing anything other than this automatic labor), as a world where "on confond la nullité et le mérite" (nullity and merit are confused) (pp. 86, 90).

What sounds like a litany of bitter observations is nevertheless quite funny—and this is in part because of their absurd

[44] A *grattoir* is actually a knife used for erasing ink, but the metaphor does not work as well with the English term: "ink eraser."

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

sense of permutation. Caldas continually gets kicked from office to office, due either to his own failings or to those of his peers, and his warped innocence enables him to observe ministerial life "comme un naturaliste observe à la loupe des helminthes" (as a naturalist observes intestinal worms through a magnifying glass) (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 236). But this sense of observation is less about seeing the world through fresh eyes than about itemizing variations within the established perimeters of the "species": the novel's form therefore becomes a satire on the self-contained schemas of bureaucratic abstraction. Apart from visits from mistresses and creditors, the office is less a site of social convergence than a microcosm whose elements' mutual disparities develop within the fixed and arbitrary confines of routine work, bureaucratic hierarchy, and the workday. Caldas is a terrible scrivener, so he visits Coquillet, "prince des calligraphes" (prince of calligraphers) for training (p. 105).[45] Having met the jaded Lorgelin, Caldas also meets a Rabourdin-style reformist crank who is devising a Weberian "Iron Cage" in which every clerk will be known simply by a number—"une des inévitables conséquences de notre immortelle révolution de 89" (one of the inevitable consequences of our immortal revolution of '89) (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 116).

Caldas meets poetical clerks, argumentative clerks, amicable clerks, ill clerks, shirkers, zealots, pessimists, optimists, and so on—the ministerial setting lends itself to a literary combinatorics, whereby the character of each office that Caldas visits is modeled against that of its predecessors. This same sense of permutation applies to Caldas's empirical conceptions of the ministerial space, with Gaboriau's style shifting methodically from sense to sense between episodes. In a travesty of the story of Aegeus and Theseus, different colored ties become a visual code that allow a Lothario clerk to subtly (mis)manage his infidelities (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 60); at lunchtime, the offices of Provençal clerks emit a whiff of garlic, whereas those of Alsatians smell of sauerkraut (p. 62); then we hear "les

[45] Coquillet condemns the metal pen as an English import: a talented man only needs a goosequill. Guy Thuillier corroborates the bureaux' incredible slowness at adopting new technology, including metal pens (see Thuillier, *La Vie quotidienne dans les ministères au XIXe siècle* [Paris: Hachette, 1976], p. 195).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

récriminations et les gros mots [éclatant] tout d'un coup comme des bombes" (recriminations and profanities going off like bombs) through the walls as clerks in a neighboring office insult each other (p. 137). Caldas has little hope of, or interest in, career success within the ministry—and it is only by the deus ex machina of him becoming a successful playwright that the novel ends. For Trollope's Charley Tudor in *The Three Clerks*, the ability to churn out literary portrayals of office life *proved* his worth as a "hack" within a functioning bureaucracy, whereas Caldas, whose bureaucratic satire *Les Oisifs* (*The Idlers*) enables him to *leave* a dysfunctional civil service, is taught "[ne jamais se plaindre] de l'Administration" because "elle mène à tout" (never [to complain] about the administration, it leads to everything) (*Les Gens de Bureau*, p. 303). Bureaucracy is held to be conducive to literary production if nothing else—a resource for "written action," if only on an individualized level.

As with the other novels so far covered, *Les Gens de Bureau* appropriates the forms of bureaucracy and office life (or, at least, the cultural sense thereof) for literary ends. However, in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* and *The Three Clerks* these forms revolved around the changing relationship between the protagonists' *Bildung* and their *Beförderung*, and in *Les Employés* a sense of narrative entropy mirrored bureaucracy's power to dull individual agency while also suggesting its relative institutional plasticity. In *Les Gens de Bureau*, meanwhile, bureaucratic structures dissipate individual agency and opportunity while themselves being sclerotic and self-contained: they produce a narrative that, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's metaphor, simply moves its "counters" across a determinate field of "fixities and definites."[46] Of course, where a sense of permutational artistic creation within preestablished confines was for Coleridge a means of repudiating his eighteenth-century predecessors, this ludic fixity, within the very real context of mid-nineteenth-century bureaucratic proceduralism and *pro forma*

[46] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols., vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), I, 305.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

systems of thought, gains a satirical edge: at once exposing the stultifying limitations of the office, it also indicates the wide room for maneuver—the range of dysfunctionality—facilitated by this supposedly rational setting.

This kind of story is certainly anticipated by the Picaresque, those Early Modern novels that take place on the "high road winding through one's native land" in order to expose the "vulgar conventions and . . . the entire existing social structure" to reproach (Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," p. 165). And, like *Les Gens de Bureau* (although perhaps with less implicit formal critique), the Picaresque also makes its principal setting its constitutive narrative form: the highway enabling both "random encounters" and the intersection of "representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages . . . at one spatial and temporal point," as Bakhtin writes in his famous "Chronotope" essay ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," p. 243). There are certainly parallels here with the comparably episodic and individualistic narrative of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, but this genre also stresses the influence and interaction of overarching social structures and their influence upon the protagonist's life.[47] The Picaresque meanwhile largely abjures this structural depth in favor of a linearity that heightens the sense of convergence through accident, arbitrariness, and immediate sensation—reflected in the picaro's own carnal (or vainglorious) and fickle desires. This absence of a structural perspective, and its substitution by the formal device of succeeding (implicitly comparable) episodes, is reflected in the midcentury conception of bureaucracy's own ossification—and, by extension, its declining role in literature as a mediatory social sphere.

However, even the limited social commentary of the Picaresque still implies the shadow of a value system: the successive portrayal of poverty and wealth, and core and periphery, cumulatively produces a broad sense of social criticism—the implicit commensurability of these episodes suggests their social and

[47] See Aleksandar Stević, "Dickensian Bildungsroman and the Logic of Dependency," *Dickens Studies Annual*, 45 (2014), 72.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

moral equality.[48] Within the office setting, however, all highs, lows, and other distinctions awaiting comparison are already equalized: each subdivided task is at once so abstractly esoteric as to be unintelligible to the observer *and* is therefore also superficially indistinguishable from its peers—and this same doublet of esotericism and indistinguishability applies to each workplace and each member of staff (hence the proliferation of near-uniform articles outlining the clerical "type" and its various dysfunctional subcategories in midcentury journalism).[49] Despite revolving narratively around the succession of job roles, *Les Gens de Bureau* is not a *Beförderungsroman.* Indeed, because Caldas does not really care about his position (and nobody else does either), the story takes on a kind of abstract cynicism: an absurd sense that every stage in his life is interchangeable. Of course, the subdivision of time into identifiable episodes (all of which appear more or less identical) evokes both the approaches of bureaucratic management as well as the quasi-industrial character of bureaucratic work itself—just as the cynically dispassionate sense of these moments' mutual worthlessness satirically evokes the "value-neutral" ideals of bureaucracy.[50]

If bureaucracy and office work in themselves, in a particular historical moment, generally lack ideological or moral

[48] See Giancarlo Maiorino, "Introduction: Renaissance Marginalities," in *The Picaresque: Tradition and Displacement*, ed. Maiorino (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. xi-xviii.

[49] See, for example, *Heads of the People* (1841), or *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840–42), as well as Balzac's *Physiologie de l'employé* (1841), Wilhelm Ténint's "Les employés" in *La France administrative* (1841–44), and the periodic "natural histories" of clerks that appeared in *Punch* during the 1840s and 1850s.

[50] The "impersonality" of bureaucracy is a key component in its formulation and definition: see Weber, "Bureaucracy"; and Richard H. Hall, "The Concept of Bureaucracy: An Empirical Assessment," *American Journal of Sociology*, 69 (1963–64), 32–40. See also, from the nineteenth century itself, Henri de Saint-Simon's call for administrative structures that are "absolument indépendantes de toute volonté humaine" (absolutely independent of all human will) (Henri de Saint-Simon, "L'Organisateur" [1819–20], vol. 20 [1869] in *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin*, 47 vols. [Paris: E. Dentu, 1865–78], pp. 198–99). Of course, the "industrial" character of these works is reflected in the character of nineteenth-century novels more broadly (albeit leavened by market structures) (see Laurel Brake, "Star Turn: Magazine, Part-issue, and Book Serialisation," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 34 [2001], 208–27).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

legitimacy, then an office narrative that ignores the moral or social values of society *beyond* its immediate setting is similarly devoid of a sense of moral development. Gaboriau's portrayal of bureaucracy as an impenetrable nihilist microcosm is indicative of the civil service's at once structurally totemic and ideologically compromised position in the France of the 1860s. Of course, as soon as this sense of alienation is realized in a novel like *Les Gens de Bureau*, there is nothing to prevent further deracination thereafter—this time of plot from setting. In the latter decades of the century, as Dean de la Motte writes, "bureaucracy moves from a source of thematic, discursive material to a structuring paradigm for fictional *écriture*."[51] That is, the apparent autotelism and hyperformality of office work in its supposedly by now ossified state are in part reflected in French fin de siècle literary experimentation—aside from a late, and similarly absurdist, return to the office with Georges Courteline's *Messieurs les ronds-de-cuir* (1893).[52] From a different perspective, Gaboriau himself is more famous as a pioneer in detective fiction, by which the whole world becomes a profane object of study to an individual investigator—a protagonist who, unlike Caldas, can schematically and satisfactorily resolve the deficiencies of this narrative world.

Office novels of the mid nineteenth century are underlain by two major issues: the apparent unconduciveness of office work to long-form narratives, and the ideological position of office work and bureaucracy in contemporary culture. As I have argued, it is as the forms that govern office work change (cohering or stagnating), at least as conceived in their broader ideological milieu, that different kinds of office narrative present themselves. The constitutive

[51] Dean de la Motte, "Writing *Fonctionnaires*, Functions of Narrative," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 34, no. 1 (1994), 22.

[52] Indeed, perhaps traces of Gaboriau's narrative succession of office spaces can be found in Georges Perec's knight's tour around a Parisian apartment building in *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

elements of *Bildung-Beförderungsromane* shift and reconfigure themselves just as the career becomes a recognizable and accepted social form in British society. Equally, the chaotic plasticity and open-endedness of the bureaux in the 1840s made them a counterintuitively dynamic setting for an experimental novel like Balzac's *Les Employés,* but, once the civil service became a byword for unreformability, it became the vehicle for a cynical "office Picaresque" in the 1860s.

Of course, labor in general—especially in its industrial, capitalistic form—does not make for the kinds of narratives associated with the nineteenth-century novel. Dickens complements his depiction of office work as "no variety of days" in *Sketches by Boz* (1839) with his later image in *Hard Times* (1854) of the uniform workers of Coketown, who "all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next."[53] Dickens's implication here is that there is apparently little room in these kinds of lives for the chaotic succession of improbable meetings, rivalries, and revelations that conventionally make up Victorian novels. Equally, however, the fact of these figures' appearance between the pages of one of Dickens's own works suggests that the nineteenth-century novel was itself willing to address, and capable of addressing, this aesthetic tension. Indeed, the apparently paradoxical interdependency of laissez-faire social forms, like civil society and the market, and those that are more regimented, like industry and bureaucracy, is a tension that more broadly underlies French and British self-regard during this period. It is in particular because the office was at once hermetic space subject to its own alien rules, but also increasingly served to mediate much of the epistemic and material relations of modern society, that it became a subject of interpretation—and a point of contention—in nineteenth-century literature.

[53] Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1833–39,* ed. Michael Slater (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1994), p. 213; Charles Dickens, *Hard Times: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Sources, and Contemporary Reaction, Criticism,* ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 17.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024

The office novels covered in this article represent extreme examples of a far broader infatuation with clerks, lawyers, institutions, and paperwork in the literature of this period.

Aston University

ABSTRACT

Daniel Jenkin-Smith, "A Tale of Two Bureaucracies: The Formal Development of Mid-Nineteenth-Century French and British Office Novels" (pp. 93–123)

The history of British and French society over the long nineteenth century can be framed as two contrasting histories of bureaucratization. In France, a "rational" body of organizational rules and procedures coalesced quickly around the state, taking their paradigmatic form during the First Republic and Empire (1792–1814) but stagnating thereafter. In Britain, these structures developed piecemeal, and over a longer time, gaining relative coherence by the midcentury. In both cases, however, office work became a major social, ideological, and cultural phenomenon, one that warranted literary portrayal despite its apparent unconduciveness to conventional narrative forms. In this article I illustrate the shifting character of "office novels" within these contexts, and I accordingly operate from both a comparative and a longitudinal perspective: comparing novels from France and Britain produced during the midcentury period (pivotal in the history of bureaucracy *and* of the novel) that focus on office life. I argue that the changing role of the office career between William Makepeace Thackeray's abortive office *Bildungsroman The History of Samuel Titmarsh* (1841) and Anthony Trollope's *The Three Clerks* (1858) reflects the reform, saturation, and ideological legitimation of bureaucratic forms in Britain over this period. Meanwhile, the transition from Honoré de Balzac's highly reflexive satirical novel *Les Employés* (1844) to Émile Gaboriau's office-hopping Picaresque *Les Gens de Bureau* (1862) reflects an increasing jadedness in France about the ability of these structures to change.

Keywords: William Makepeace Thackeray; Honoré de Balzac; Anthony Trollope; Bildungsroman; Picaresque

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/2-3/93/767052/ncl.2022.77.2-3.93.pdf by guest on 06 December 2024