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The making of Paris in novels by Balzac and Flaubert

Annika Möрте Alling

In the nineteenth century, Paris was a preeminent focal point of the world. It was mythologized as the city of love, fashion and literature, seemingly radiant with the promise of personal fulfilment and happiness. In Alfred de Vigny's estimation it was the 'shaft of the world'; Victor Hugo saw it as the 'city of the future' (Prendergast 1992: 16–17) and, retrospectively, Walter Benjamin (1999) dubbed it 'the capital of the nineteenth century'. It has since then been the object of countless representations and descriptions in various types of texts, as in art. Notwithstanding, Paris has also remained peculiarly elusive, both for characters in novels and for authors trying to give shape to the city as a delimited and defined place. Christopher Prendergast (1992) has analysed this problem from a social and cultural-historical perspective. Even in novels generally associated with the realist mode, the Parisian world does not really seem to exist but has to be constructed again and again. Such world-construction will be the object of this study, at a close character level, in two novels by Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (1835) and *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843),¹ and two by Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869). More precisely, I examine the Parisian world as it is created and imagined by the protagonists, from their particular viewpoints and linked to their desires, emotions and values. Strikingly, these desires tend first to emerge in the countryside or the provinces. It is mostly at this level, in this broad sense, that my chapter considers the 'vernacular', or rather 'the

¹ The novel was originally published in three parts: *Les deux poètes* (1837), *Un grand homme de province à Paris* (1839) and *Les souffrances de l'inventeur* (1843), but to simplify the reading of the chapter I only note the year of publication of the novel as a whole, in the Furne edition of 1843. For a thorough analysis of the genesis of the novel see Stéphane Vachon (2010).

domain of the vernacular', as discussed in the overall introduction to this book series. Thus this chapter does not consider the vernacular in its linguistic aspect, but in relation to the 'little world' of the subject that is contrasted dynamically to a larger, more cosmopolitan world.

Paris plays an important role in all four novels, although in different ways. Both *Le Père Goriot* and part of *Illusions perdues* are set in the capital, as is *L'Éducation sentimentale*. With his passivity and detachment from society, the protagonist of this last novel, Frédéric Moreau, is different from Balzac's Rastignac and Lucien in character, but his point of departure is similar to theirs in certain ways; Frédéric, too, expects a happiness in the capital that seems unattainable in the provinces – a life, success, excitement – even though he moves back and forth between the two worlds rather than leaving one for the other. Emma in *Madame Bovary* remains in the provincial environment she abhors, and maybe she *has to* stay there. This unattainability of Parisian life makes her case special. The resemblances in character between her and Frédéric Moreau are striking, and she shares traits with Madame de Bargeton in *Illusions perdues*, who also dreams fervently of Paris, without having to refrain from going there.

Le Père Goriot is the first novel Balzac envisages within *La Comédie humaine*, and in *Illusions perdues* he lets characters reappear for the first time. More than ninety novels and novellas are included in this vast work, where Balzac wanted to capture the whole of society, all types of human beings, as Buffon tried to do in the realm of zoology (Balzac [1842] 2010: 77). As an example of world-making, such an all-encompassing experiment is interesting. In his preface to *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac expressed the intention to describe a world of 'men, women, and things; that is to say persons and the material expression of their minds; man, in short, and life' (ibid.: 93) ('Ainsi l'œuvre à faire devait avoir une triple forme: les hommes, les femmes et les choses, c'est-à-dire les personnes et la représentation matérielle qu'ils donnent de leur pensée; enfin l'homme et la vie' (Balzac [1842] 2012: 47)).

Thematizing a city and the lives lived therein is a project that seemingly allows for the representation of a whole world in concentrated form. In fact, as Balzac points out, capitals are places where extremes meet, the good and the bad, all types of human beings, tastes, vices, unbridled forces. All this is what he wants to capture in *Scènes de la vie parisienne* ('le tableau des goûts, des vices et de toutes les choses effrénées qu'excitent les mœurs particulières aux capitales où se rencontrent à la fois l'extrême bien et l'extrême mal'

(ibid.: 66–7)).² At the same time, he underlines the necessary local colours in the scenes and seems to say that Paris is not describable without its antithesis, the provinces ('Chacune de ces trois parties a sa couleur locale: Paris et la province, cette antithèse sociale a fourni ses immenses ressources' (ibid.: 67)). Balzac makes the complex world of *La Comédie humaine* graspable, knowable, by giving us access to smaller, simplified versions of this world in a similar way to Charles Dickens, as discussed by Caroline Levine (2016).

As Wetherill (1983: 123) points out, from the nineteenth century the preoccupation with cities is at the very centre of the occidental novelistic experience; in Balzac, Dos Passos, Dickens, Zola, Proust and Joyce almost everything happens in the city. During the eighteenth century the interest in Paris was less manifest; the desirable life was that in the countryside, and in literature it was rather the escape *from* the city that was thematized (Dufief 1994: 4).

Realism³ as it developed in the nineteenth-century novel reveals a new conception of the cosmopolitan in relation to the individual and to the local, provincial context – a conception that of course reflects the situation in reality. The industrialization, the urbanization and the explosive development in society in general imply a movement from provincial contexts to larger cities, especially Paris. New technology and modes of transport mean new access to the outside world. The world surrounding the protagonists receives new focus and importance. Those who are not strong enough to withstand the destructive forces of the city are shattered and dispersed, and have problems asserting their individualism against the values of the modern world. There is a distance in the texts regarding the protagonists, an indifference (the title of Flaubert's novel is *Madame*, not *Emma*, *Bovary*), at the same time as they are the objects of the narration and the focalizers of the world, which makes them interesting and exceptional to the reader. In fact, it is possible to talk about a dynamic or tension between the local and the global on a narratological level as well; between intra- and extradiagetic perspectives.

² The translations in English of the novels are the editions accessible on the site Gutenberg.org, since these are the most broadly available. In general, my intention is to cite longer passages both in translation and in French. For shorter, unproblematic citations, I only refer to the English translation to make the chapter more readable. Where I find that fundamental aspects of the original are not respected in the translations, I either translate myself or paraphrase in English.

³ Since a definition of literary realism is not unproblematic, I directly refer to the traits mentioned by Jennifer Yee (2016: 9), which I find sufficient in a definition of the French realist novel as it developed roughly between 1830 and 1890: some sort of 'rejection of idealism in favour of materialism', a predilection for everyday subjects, for a representation of human types rather than that of exceptions, for 'a holistic vision' (implying for instance a close relation between character and milieu), and the aim, not least, to give the impression that the real world is reflected, even to give 'the illusion of a directly mimetic relation to the outside world'.

On the one hand, realism implies an interest in describing the world *as it is* and the *visibility* of this world, as Sara Danius (2013) has underlined. This objective is expressed in Balzac's cited preface. Something objective, general and typical is aimed at, as well as a totality, such as a human life. At the same time the novels reveal how difficult it is to grasp reality: at description level, thematically and existentially, for the characters. *What* is visible and *to whom*? How does one handle life in the new, modern, cosmopolitan world?

A theoretical perspective that seems relevant to keep in mind in this chapter is the model of 'significant geographies' proposed by Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora and Francesca Orsini (2018: 294): 'trajectories and imaginaries that are *recurrent* and/or that *matter* to actors and texts.' The authors are right to underline the importance of geographies in studies within literary texts (although their model applies to levels outside texts too), and the close relation between subject and place; a geography is 'significant' *for someone*; the question of angle and scale is always relevant. Moreover, there are advantages to a term in the plural over the singular 'world', because it 'underlines how "the world" is not a given but is produced by different, embodied, and located actors' (ibid.). Within literary texts, Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini (ibid.: 303–4) see 'objective geographies (setting, narrator's descriptions, characters moving in space), subjective geographies (character's worldviews), and the implicit geographies (terms, "traces" of other locals in the narration, for example traces of other languages, hints to different traditions ...)' At the end of the study I return to these categories in an overall discussion of the four novels.

In the following sections, different descriptions and views of Paris are examined in each of the novels, beginning with Balzac's. I also analyse the factors that play a role in this world-making process, how conceptions of the capital take form, what provokes the protagonists' desire to live there and how they deal with the new world that confronts them. The initial quote under each novel title is central in the section, but not immediately commented upon.

Le Père Goriot

Paris is in truth an ocean that no line can plumb.

(Balzac [1835] 2010: 24)

Paris est un véritable océan. Jetez-y la sonde, vous n'en connaîtriez jamais la profondeur.

(Balzac [1835] 1971: 34)

Paris appears in the first sentence of *Le Père Goriot*, but it is significant that the first words are ‘Madame Vauquer’. She and the boarders at her pension are in focus in the long, very local description of the capital that follows, famous for its zooming technique and the strong interdependency of the characters and their milieu: ‘Mme. Vauquer (*nee* de Conflans) is an elderly person, who for the past forty years has kept a lodging-house in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, in the district that lies between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel’ (Balzac [1835] 2010: 6) (‘Madame Vauquer, née de Conflans, est une vieille femme qui, depuis quarante ans, tient à Paris une pension bourgeoise établie rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, entre le quartier latin et le faubourg Saint-Marceau’ (Balzac [1835] 1971: 21)). The description that follows of this ugly district, its streets, the lodging house and in particular its interior and lodgers, even uglier, is one of the most detailed in the novel, and also very subjective. This is the most abhorrent part of the capital and also the least known, says the narrator (‘Nul quartier de Paris n’est plus horrible, ni, disons-le, plus inconnu’ (ibid.: 23)). In fact, according to the narrator, the story about this district and its inhabitants is too particular to be understood or appreciated anywhere outside the walls of the city, or even beyond the district: ‘Sera-t-elle comprise au-delà de Paris? Le doute est permis. Les particularités de cette scène pleine d’observations et de couleurs locales ne peuvent être appréciées qu’entre les buttes de Montmartre et les hauteurs de Montrouge ...’ (ibid.: 21–2). In fact, from the beginning, local aspects of the capital are underlined in the novel, rather than cosmopolitan ones. There are actually few other detailed descriptions of Paris in *Le Père Goriot* when it comes to the exteriors of the city, as was observed by Wolfgang Matzat (2004: 14).

At different points in the novel the reader is reminded of the vagueness and vastness of the capital, of its indescribable traits, of the fact that this city defies any observer who tries to grasp it. It is referred to as ‘an ocean that no line can plumb’ (Balzac [1835] 2010: 24),⁴ ‘the ocean of Paris’ (ibid.: 146), ‘an ocean of mud’ (ibid.: 413), ‘the labyrinth of Paris’ (ibid.: 53) and ‘a forest in the New World’ (ibid.: 186).

⁴ ‘Paris est un véritable océan. Jetez-y la sonde, vous n’en connaîtrez jamais la profondeur. Parcourez-le, décrivez-le! quelque soin que vous mettiez à le parcourir, à le décrire; quelque nombreux et intéressés que soient les explorateurs de cette mer, il s’y rencontrera toujours un lieu vierge, un autre inconnu, des fleurs, des perles, des monstres, quelque chose d’inouï, oublié par les plongeurs littéraires’ (Balzac [1835] 1971: 34).

At the end, Rastignac has learnt certain things about the capital, which his elevated position on top of the Père Lachaise hill suggests. He is no longer down there, in the sordid quarters of Paris, but contemplates the city from above. The difficulty of grasping the capital remains, though, and it is still not described with any precision; the only elements that help us recognize the capital as Paris are the River Seine, the Place Vendôme and the top of the Invalides. Rastignac is strongly affected by the tragic life and death of his friend Goriot, and sheds a tear that presumably blurs his view of the city, which is almost seen as a creature, a snake, lying tortuously (*'tortueusement couché'*) close to the banks of the Seine, reminding us of evil forces. The narrator is not more objective, contrary to the idea of 'objective geographies', since he is clearly behind the comments on his youth coming to an end, and on his pure heart (*'cœur pur'*, not transmitted exactly in the translation):

It was growing dusk, the damp twilight fretted his nerves; he gazed down into the grave and the tears he shed were drawn from him by the sacred emotion, a single-hearted sorrow. When such tears fall on earth, their radiance reaches heaven. And with that tear that fell on Father Goriot's grave, Eugene Rastignac's youth ended. He folded his arms and gazed at the clouded sky; and Christophe, after a glance at him, turned and went – Rastignac was left alone.

He went a few paces further, to the highest point of the cemetery, and looked out over Paris and the windings of the Seine; the lamps were beginning to shine on either side of the river. His eyes turned almost eagerly to the space between the column of the Place Vendome and the cupola of the Invalides; there lay the shining world that he had wished to reach. He glanced over that humming hive, seeming to draw a foretaste of its honey, and said magniloquently:

Henceforth there is war between us.

And by way of throwing down the glove to Society, Rastignac went to dine with Mme de Nucingen.

(Balzac [1835] 2010: 580–1)

Le jour tombait, un humide crépuscule agaçait les nerfs, il regarda la tombe et y ensevelit sa dernière larme de jeune homme, cette larme arrachée par les saintes émotions d'un cœur pur, une de ces larmes qui, de la terre où elles tombent, rejaillissent jusque dans les cieux. Il se croisa les bras, contempla les nuages, et, le voyant ainsi, Christophe le quitta.

Rastignac, resté seul, fit quelques pas vers le haut du cimetière et vit Paris tortueusement couché le long des deux rives de la Seine où commençaient à

briller les lumières. Ses yeux s'attachèrent presque avidement entre la colonne de la place Vendôme et le dôme des Invalides, là où vivait ce beau monde dans lequel il avait voulu pénétrer. Il lança sur cette ruche bourdonnant un regard qui semblait par avance en pomper le miel, et dit ces mots grandioses: 'À nous deux maintenant!'

Et pour premier acte du défi qu'il portait à la Société, Rastignac alla dîner chez madame de Nucingen.

(Balzac [1835] 1971: 367)

This scene is also interesting in that it reveals the fundamental tension between the local and the global in the novel, between the hero in his private sphere and the new urban reality that reveals itself at a distance. The present moment seems united with the past (the churchyard, Rastignac's dead friend, his lost dreams) and with the future down there below him, his life in the capital.

The translation above of his exclamation 'À nous deux maintenant!' does not respect the ambiguity of these words in French, but corresponds approximately to 'It is you and me now!' In fact, it can be interpreted both as an exhortation to combat between Rastignac and the city *and* as a desire to cooperate with it, a willingness to adapt to its conditions and laws. At this point he has already gained important insights about the mechanisms of Parisian society, such as the lack of authenticity in people living there and their egoism. Goriot has been ruthlessly exploited by his own daughters until his death. Rastignac has learned that empathy and true love do not have a place in Paris and that it is impossible to change Parisian people. This bleak truth is not only valid in higher circles, but also in Madame Vauquer's lodging house, where total indifference dominates the moments after Goriot's death, at dinner.⁵

The fact that the view of Paris is so blurred and lacking in detail contradicts the idea that the Balzacian novel should be regarded as a typical realistic representation of cosmopolitan Paris and urban modernity. This idea is expressed by for instance Anna Westerståhl Stenport (2004: 42), according to whom Balzac constitutes the very basis of this convention for authors like August Strindberg.

⁵ This indifference regarding Goriot's death is revealed in the statement by the private teacher: 'It is one of the privileges of the good city of Paris that anybody may be born, or live, or die there without attracting any attention whatsoever ... Father Goriot has gone off the hooks, has he? So much the better for him. If you venerate his memory, keep it to yourselves, and let the rest of us feed in peace' (Balzac [1835] 2010: 463). ('Un des privilèges de la bonne ville de Paris, c'est qu'on peut y naître, y vivre, y mourir sans que personne fasse attention à vous ... Que le père Goriot soit crevé, tant mieux pour lui! Si vous l'adorez, allez le garder, et laissez-nous manger tranquillement, nous autres' (Balzac [1835] 1971: 362).)

This said, it is beyond doubt that Strindberg was influenced by *Le Père Goriot* when writing the panorama scene in *The Red Room* (*Röda rummet*, 1879), where Arvid Falk contemplates Stockholm from Mose Backe hill (see Alling Mörté 2018: 73–4). To compare these scenes in Balzac and Strindberg is interesting, since in both cases the heroes lose their sense of determination and control as soon as they approach the capital and disappear in it again. There is necessarily a loss of perspective, not only in space but also existentially; they both need models and initiators to show them which life to live. Everything is a matter of perspective and scale.

In both cases the subject has to accept becoming peripheral, this being the irrevocable condition of the new modern world, as in the new type of novel. In *The Red Room* this occurs directly; Arvid is not a hero, nor even at the centre of the novel. Rastignac becomes peripheral in the next novel, *Illusions perdues*. It is not possible to have an overview of life in the capital, nor to control it – as impossible as it is for the reader to get a full overview over the novel he is reading. There is fragmentation at all levels. The experience of fragmentation is at the core of the realist novel.

At several levels, a comparison between the novels of Balzac and Strindberg reveals the dynamics between a local or vernacular context and one that is larger, more global. The panorama scenes are local in several respects: a solitary hero at a specific point in space and time. But something larger is also present: Paris, Stockholm, the new world he is facing, modern times, a new type of novel. In addition, the comparison between the two novels reveals a relation at a literary history level: the fact that Balzac's scene is referred to, implicitly at least, in a novel by Strindberg almost fifty years later makes this an exemplary scene. It is viewed, as are Balzac's novels in general, as representative of realistic description in nineteenth-century novels, as Westerståhl Stenport (2004: 42) showed, even though we have seen that this view is somewhat problematic. *Le Père Goriot* appears as a sort of convention or background, a referential point in relation to Strindberg's Swedish novel.

Illusions perdues

Paris, besides, is the capital of the intellectual world, the stage on which you will succeed; overleap the gulf that separates us quickly. You must not allow your ideas to grow rancid in the provinces ...

(Balzac [1843] 2004: 324)

D'ailleurs Paris, capitale du monde intellectuel, est le théâtre de vos succès! Franchissez promptement l'espace qui vous en sépare! Ne laissez pas vos idées rancir en province ...

(Balzac [1843] 1974: 159)

At the beginning of *Illusions perdues*, Lucien de Rubempré dreams of Paris in a way that echoes Rastignac's determination to dine with Madame de Nucingen at the end of *Le Père Goriot*: 'Does not my success entirely depend upon my entrance on life in Paris through the Marquise d'Espard's salon?' (Balzac [1843] 2004: 335). ('N'est-ce pas faire fortune que d'entrer pour mon début à Paris dans le salon de la marquise d'Espard?' (Balzac [1843] 1974: 164)). What is more, the bird's-eye view of Paris reappears in this novel, from Lucien's point of view this time, as he listens passionately to Madame de Bargeton's words about a future success for him in the capital, starting with the words cited above about Paris as 'the capital of the intellectual world':

To Lucien, listening to the alluring words, and bewildered by the rapid bird's-eye view of Paris which they brought before him, it seemed as if hitherto he had been using only half his brain and suddenly had found the other half, so swiftly his ideas widened. He saw himself stagnating in Angoulême like a frog under a stone in a marsh. Paris and her splendors rose before him; Paris, the Eldorado of provincial imaginings, with golden robes and the royal diadem about her brows, and arms outstretched to talent of every kind. Great men would greet him there as one of their order. Everything smiled upon genius. There, there were no jealous booby-squires to invent stinging gibes and humiliate a man of letters; there was no stupid indifference to poetry in Paris. Paris was the fountain-head of poetry; there the poet was brought into the light and paid for his work. Publishers should no sooner read the opening pages of *An Archer of Charles IX*, than they should open their cash-boxes with 'How much do you want?'

(Balzac [1843] 2004: 326–7)

Lucien, hébété par le rapide coup d'oeil qu'il jeta sur Paris, en entendant ces séduisantes paroles, crut n'avoir jusqu'alors joui que de la moitié de son cerveau; il lui sembla que l'autre moitié se découvrait, tant ses idées s'agrandirent: il se vit, dans Angoulême, comme une grenouille sous sa pierre au fond d'un marécage. Paris et ses splendeurs, Paris, qui se produit dans toutes les imaginations de province comme un Eldorado, lui apparut avec sa robe d'or, la tête ceinte de pierreries royales, les bras ouverts aux talents. Les gens illustres allaient lui donner l'accolade fraternelle. Là tout souriait au génie. Là ni gentillâtres jaloux lui lançaient des mots piquants pour humilier l'écrivain, ni sottise indifférence

pour la poésie. De là jaillissaient les œuvres des poètes, là elles étaient payées et mises en lumière. Après avoir lu les premières pages de *l'Archer de Charles IX*, les libraires ouvraient leurs caisses et lui diraient: 'Combien voulez-vous?'

(Balzac [1843] 1974: 159–60)

Obviously this view of the capital is anything but objective; she rises before him with 'golden robes', a 'royal diadem' and her 'arms outstretched', and as 'the Eldorado of provincial imaginings'. This reference to Eldorado can, by the way, be seen as an interesting inversion of the colonial relation – here it is not Latin America but Paris, the centre of the empire, that is to be conquered. Moreover, this passage shows that Paris is closely related to the potential of the subject, to what Lucien could become there: a famous poet, the lover of Madame de Bargeton.

It also seems as if Lucien's desire to succeed in the capital is not spontaneous, but 'mediated' by Madame de Bargeton, in the sense of René Girard (1965). The space she exhorts him to overleap seems to correspond to the one that separates the two types of mediation of desire, according to Girard (*ibid.*: 9): 'external mediation' and 'internal mediation'. In Girard's description of internal mediation, the distance between the subject and the mediator is 'sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly' (*ibid.*). The internal mediator is not only a model in the eyes of the subject, but also a rival who desires or could desire the same objects as the subject. In Lucien's case, to go to Paris will not be enough to surpass the important step Madame de Bargeton speaks of. He shows later that he is quite conscious of this: observing the beautiful upper-class Parisians travelling through the Tuileries, 'Lucien saw a great gulf fixed between him and this new world, and asked himself how he might cross over, for he meant to be one of these delicate, slim youths of Paris [...]' (Balzac [1843] 2004: 381). He has to imitate his internal mediators (among them, Rastignac) – their behaviour, desires, gestures, way of dressing – and this conquest of Parisian manners is a process that will take a long time.

To some degree Lucien also seems to get his desire to succeed from books that he read earlier in life, by Schiller, Goethe, Lord Byron, Walter Scott, Lamartine and André Chenier, among others. Absorbed by these books, brought from the capital, Lucien and his friend David Séchard forget about the sorrows of the countryside, cry together and plan for a future of fame: 'Incessantly they worked with the unwearied vitality of youth; comrades in poverty, comrades in the consuming love of art and science, till they forgot the hard life of the present, for their minds were wholly bent on laying the foundations of future fame' (*ibid.*: 75–6).

For Lucien, this future means obtaining glory as a writer in Paris, which we have seen Madame de Bargeton convince him of in the longer passage above.

Madame de Bargeton in her turn is also very influenced by the literature she reads, and suffers as much as David and Lucien from the monotony of the countryside. She is a passionate reader of, for instance, Lord Byron and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and adores 'all the poetic and dramatic lives' (my translation)⁶ ('toutes les existences poétiques et dramatiques' (Balzac [1843] 1974: 64)). Unlike Emma Bovary, she is able to realize her desire to live a cosmopolitan life, and travels to the capital with Lucien at the beginning of the novel's second part. Life in Paris, she says to Lucien, 'is the only life for a woman of quality, and I have waited too long before entering upon it. [...] There, beloved, is the life for a man who has anything in him' (Balzac [1843] 2004: 324). She feels a strong necessity for 'rubbing off Angoulême' (ibid.: 362), a desire that is mediated by Baron Sixte Du Châtelet, who tells her the latest news of the capital, such as where to find the best clothes and dressmakers, and brings her books from there.

However, as is the case with Lucien, to learn how to dress and behave like real Parisian women will take time. After her arrival in Paris, Madame de Bargeton is seen in a less favourable light by Lucien when compared to these women, and she feels the same way about Lucien. The distinction they saw in each other in the countryside vanishes quickly. The reason for this is Paris, states the narrator: 'a process of disenchantment was at work; Paris was the cause' (ibid.: 370). More precisely, the causes seem to be the comparison in itself, the mechanisms of internal mediation – in other words the importance of models, of the conceptions and desires of authentic Parisians.

In *Illusions perdues* as well as in *Le Père Goriot*, space is generally very intimately related to ways of being and desiring, to values, to what is considered right and wrong in that place – by the protagonists, by the other characters, by the narrator. The opposition between Paris and the provinces in *La Comédie humaine* is well known; Balzac even comments on its importance in his preface, as we have seen.

For Lucien and Madame de Bargeton, Paris represents something positive: career, success, events, literature, the possibility of individual blossoming, the opposite of dull country life. At the same time, from other points of view, Paris is associated with danger and negative behaviour. David is apprehensive about

⁶ The translation by Ellen Marriage is further away from the original: 'or anybody else with a picturesque or dramatic career' (Balzac [1843] 2004: 85).

Lucien's future life there: 'he had terrible presentiments of the fate awaiting Lucien in Paris' (Balzac [1843] 2004: 276). The narrator, too, predicts a sad consequence of Parisian life for Lucien, namely the end of his sincere attachment to family and friends: 'The so-powerful ties that bind young hearts to home, and a first friendship, and all early affections, were to be severed at one ruthless blow' (ibid.: 328).

The reader of *Le Père Goriot* already knows of these bad characteristics of Parisian life from Vautrin's speech to Rastignac – honesty is pointless and success can only be obtained through corruption or genius.⁷ Another of Rastignac's models, the Vicomtesse de Beauseant, had a similar message: that the Parisian world is villainous and mean, corruption and vanity rule and it is crucial to hide one's true emotions (Balzac [1835] 1971: 115). What Vautrin explains to Lucien in *Illusions perdues* is along the same lines: to be a real Parisian, one has to strive for glory and money. Both Rastignac and Lucien grasp these rules, even if the latter will not live by them (and consequently does not succeed).

Thus, at least on the surface, there seems to be a certain coherence between several points of view of the Parisian world, as well as with what Rastignac and Lucien experience. As for the countryside, some sort of convention is manifest here too, even if there are exceptions, as always in Balzac. According to Madame de Bargeton and Lucien, country life is very dull and inimical to the blossoming of the self and the realization of a career as an author for Lucien. The narrator also evaluates the provinces negatively: immobility, narrowness, greed, gossip and ridicule rule, and ideas are narrow and mischievous. He is unreliable, though, for instance in stating that love in the countryside is a type of love that is not satisfied;⁸ the sincere feelings between Lucien's sister Eve and David clearly contradict that. For this couple the countryside becomes something different than for Lucien and Madame de Bargeton. David is not interested in a career, in Paris or anywhere, but wants to live a harmonious life with his family in the country, and it is significant that this choice is valued positively by the narrator on the last page of the novel. Once again, to make a career in Paris is not represented as something given. Not even Lucien believes so when he stands on the hill of

⁷ 'Savez-vous comment on fait son chemin ici? par l'éclat du génie ou par l'adresse de la corruption' (Balzac [1835] 1971: 151); 'L'honnêteté ne sert à rien' (ibid.: 152); 'il faut se salir les mains' (ibid.: 153).

⁸ 'Provincial life, moreover, is singularly well calculated to keep desire unsatisfied' ([1843] 2004: 235). 'La vie de province est d'ailleurs singulièrement contraire aux contentements de l'amour ...' (Balzac [1843] 1974: 145).

Père Lachaise gazing out over Paris at the end of the novel's second part, with quite different thoughts than Rastignac: of loved ones, of his family, David, his mother and sister, and life in the provinces (Balzac [1843] 2004: 471–2). His beloved Coralie has just died and he is ready to leave Paris and life itself. What is more, he does return to the provinces at the end of the novel (after having been saved and brought back to life by Vautrin), as does Madame de Bargeton, to gain a more elevated position. Finally, we cannot say that a dichotomy exists between the countryside and the capital, nor that the characters' movements are directed only from the local space to the cosmopolitan one. It is rather a question of a dynamic between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, of a force exerting attraction on the characters in both directions.

Madame Bovary

She wished at the same time to die and to live in Paris.

(Flaubert [1857] 2006: 129)

Elle souhaitait à la fois mourir et habiter à Paris.

(Flaubert [1857] 1972: 95)

Charles Bovary never longs to go to Paris. This has nothing to do with the city in itself, but with his general lack of curiosity, his character. Very much unlike Emma, Charles simply never desires that which is beyond his reach and is content with what he has and where he is, in the little Normandy village of Tostes, where he has succeeded the only doctor. He knows he would never be successful in Paris, or in any larger city. The opening classroom scene in *Madame Bovary* is well known; Charles, 'the new', is hopelessly provincial, with too little experience of the world even to fit in in a country school. Everything is wrong with him. He is too tall (presumably older than the others), dressed up 'en bourgeois', with a provincial haircut and red wrists (revealing too much outside life), too attentive, too shy (to get up when the bell rings, to throw his cap, new and shining, on the floor like the other boys) and too clumsy (dropping the cap when he gets up, to the amusement of the others) (ibid.: 23). He is unable to stand up and articulate his name clearly, only mumbles a 'Charbovari' (ibid.: 25).

This is the man Emma Bovary marries, she from an isolated farm, not even a village, mentioned only with the family name Les Bertaux. Thus marrying Charles means a move towards a more urban environment. After a while he

accepts moving from Tostes to the 'bourg' Yonville-l'Abbaye, near Rouen. Emma's bad health, he presumes, must have to do with the place. But Yonville is equally dull, Emma finds quickly, a dullness that is also noted by the narrator and Léon, whom she meets there. She dreams intensely of Paris.

These dreams are first mentioned after the ball at Vaubyessard, where Emma gets a glimpse of glamorous Parisian people and a cosmopolitan life, as she imagines it, and has a decisive dance with the handsome viscount. More precisely, her Parisian dreams are triggered by a green silk cigar case, dropped from a passing carriage and found by Emma and Charles on their way home from the ball. She assumes it belongs to the viscount: 'She was at Tostes; he was at Paris now, far away! What was this Paris like? What a vague name! She repeated it in a low voice, for the mere pleasure of it; it rang in her ears like a great cathedral bell; it shone before her eyes, even on the labels of her pomade-pots' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 123). ('Elle était à Tostes. Lui, il était à Paris, maintenant; là-bas! Comment était ce Paris? Quel nom démesuré! Elle se le répétait à demi-voix, pour se faire plaisir; il sonnait à ses oreilles comme un bourdon de cathédrale; il flamboyait à ses yeux jusque sur l'étiquette de ses pots de pommade' (Flaubert [1857] 1972: 91).)

Obviously, this Paris has very little to do with a real place, it is a construction of Emma's imagination. She buys a map and goes for walks in the city with her fingertip, up and down the boulevards. She avidly reads about Parisian life in the lady's journal *La Corbeille* and in *Sylphe des Salons*; about theatrical first nights, horse races, soirees, concerts, the latest fashions and best tailors. She studies furniture in Eugène Sue, devours Balzac and George Sand and thinks continually about the viscount. This is how her impression of the capital is formed, in a total mixture of everything, originating from the experiences at the ball, her reading and her bovarystic desire to be other than she is, and elsewhere.⁹ The vagueness and heterogeneity of her dreams are striking and, as in Balzac, Paris is associated with an ocean: 'Paris, more vague than the ocean, glimmered before Emma's eyes in an atmosphere of vermilion' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 126). ('Paris, plus vague que l'Océan, miroitait donc aux yeux d'Emma dans une atmosphère

⁹ Departing from Emma Bovary's case, Jules de Gaultier (1902: 13) defined 'bovarysme' as the general 'capacity of man to conceive of himself as other' (my translation): 'le pouvoir départi à l'homme de se concevoir autre qu'il n'est'. Later in the same book he redefines Emma's case as a pathological version of bovarysme, that is 'when man is incapable of realizing this conception of himself' (my translation); 'en tant que l'homme est impuissant à réaliser cette conception de lui-même' (ibid.: 217). In other words, bovarysme in itself was eventually found to be a good and healthy capacity, helping us to progress and strive forward in life. For more analyses of 'bovarysme' see Alling Mörté 2007: 231–50.

vermeille' (Flaubert [1857] 1972: 93).) As the subsequent passage reveals, life there becomes a jumble of ambassadors, pale duchesses, dresses with trains, men riding horses to death, fantastic actresses and authors.

Emma never goes as far as Paris, but regularly travels to Rouen for her trysts with Léon and adopts the luxurious habits of a metropolitan woman (to the point of reminding Rodolphe, her other lover, of a 'Parisienne' (ibid.: 180)), although she hardly has the prerequisites for such a life. In everything, she adapts reality to her desires. In a bird's-eye view from the Hironnelle, Rouen appears as 'an enormous capital, as a Babylon into which she was entering' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 545). Babylon not only represents something vast, which is ironic in contrast to little Rouen, but also something evil, signalling to the reader what is to come. Nothing characteristic of Rouen is discernible, nor of any town in particular. There is fog, chimney smoke, mist. It is a world full of life, people and noises, but to Emma it appears as an immovable picture. Compared with the strategic panorama scenes in *Le Père Goriot* and *The Red Room* analysed above, not the slightest impression of control or insight is provoked by the city here. Emma does seem to experience a sort of overview at this moment, or rather a 'mass of existence' (in French in the plural: 'ces existences amassées'), but this experience only results in a 'giddiness' and a heart swelling from the vapour of the passions in the city, a vapour then transformed in Emma to a liquid of love that she pours on to the city, filling every street:

A giddiness seemed to her to detach itself from this mass of existence, and her heart swelled as if the hundred and twenty thousand souls that palpitated there had all at once sent into it the vapour of the passions she fancied theirs. Her love grew in the presence of this vastness, and expanded with tumult to the vague murmurings that rose towards her. She poured it out upon the square, on the walks, on the streets, and the old Norman city outspread before her eyes as an enormous capital, as a Babylon into which she was entering.

(Ibid.: 545)

Quelque chose de vertigineux se dégageait pour elle de ces existences amassées, et son cœur s'en gonflait abondamment comme si les cent vingt mille âmes qui palpitaient là lui eussent envoyé toutes à la fois la vapeur des passions qu'elle leur supposait. Son amour s'agrandissait devant l'espace, et s'emplissait de tumulte aux bourdonnements vagues qui montaient. Elle le reversait au-dehors, sur les places, sur les promenades, sur les rues, et la vieille cité normande s'étalait à ses yeux comme une capitale démesurée, comme une Babylone où elle entrait.

(Flaubert [1857] 1972: 340)

This is the only time Babylon is mentioned, but fragments reminiscent of a larger world appear elsewhere in connection to Emma's dreams and readings, even though they are always grounded in her very particular and selective interpretation of things. For instance, images from Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) appear, a novel set in Mauritius under French rule: a 'little bamboo-house, the nigger Domingo', red fruit on 'trees taller than steeples' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 77). We also know she has read about the 'great world' in feuilletons ('du *grand monde* que l'on racontait dans le feuilleton' (Flaubert [1857] 1972: 97)),¹⁰ and that the organ-playing man outside her window gives her 'echoes of the world'; inside the instrument she sees images of 'women in pink turbans, Tyrolians in jackets, monkeys in frock coats, gentlemen in knee-breeches', all behind 'a curtain of pink taffeta under a brass claw in arabesque' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 133). She is obviously not interested in the places themselves, but only thinks about them insofar as they fit her moods and desires, longing to go to 'lands with sonorous names' (ibid.: 88) where one could breathe the 'perfume of lemon trees', imagining 'certain places on earth [that] must bring happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, and that cannot thrive elsewhere', wanting to 'lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage' (ibid.: 88). These dreams of other places, in a total mixture, represent a rather typically French and uncritical conception of the world at the time of Flaubert. In an article on Rancière and *La Peau de Chagrin*, Baidik Bhattacharya (2017: 558, 560) observes that objects in Balzac's novels 'mostly invoke great civilisations like Egypt, Rome, China and India' and that the texts of Balzac and his contemporaries also 'produced a distinct textuality of the Orient'. Although this does not seem to be the case in *Le Père Goriot* and *Illusions perdues*, it is certainly true of *Madame Bovary* and also in works by for instance Chateaubriand, Lamartine (in *Itinéraire* by the former and *Voyage en Orient* by the latter, as Said notes, cited by Bhattacharya) and in Flaubert's *Salammô*. In these representations of the world, a clear manifestation of power and racial oppression, of colonial governance, is sometimes revealed. Paul and Virginie in Emma's readings own slaves, even though they treat them well and even though the author of the novel argues for the emancipation of slaves and criticizes eighteenth-century French society.

¹⁰ In the English translation, 'le grand monde' ('the great world') corresponds to the 'upper ten' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 133).

However, the world of most importance to Emma is naturally Paris; close geographically, and a natural place to go to, at least for characters like Léon and, in *Illusions perdues*, Lucien and Madame de Bargeton. What lies behind Léon's decision to move to Paris is a desire for success, but also the same sense of deep boredom with provincial life from which Emma suffers. However, in his case nothing prevents a realization of his Parisian dream, as he quickly concludes: 'This apprehension soon changed into impatience, and then Paris from afar sounded its fanfare of masked balls with the laugh of grisettes. As he was to finish reading there, why not set out at once? What prevented him?' (Flaubert [1857] 2006: 247). He has eager plans to study law, live the life of an artist, take guitar lessons – the possibilities for a young man in Paris are many.

It should be said also that Léon's determination to go to the capital seems to be in accordance with the expectations of others around him: his employer, his mother, the pharmacist Homais. Only Charles shows a resistance to the idea of a life in Paris, and feels sorry and anxious about Léon. Again, Charles never imagines a life in the capital, satisfied with his situation as he always is. Unlike Madame de Bargeton (accompanied by Lucien), Emma has no man with whom to go to Paris, but whether or not this plays a role in the realization of Emma's Parisian dream the novel does not reveal.

In any case, even for the characters who do not go to the capital, Paris seems to exert both positive and negative powers. On the plus side, it inspires courage, blurs limitations and limits and gives hope of success, change and happiness and of becoming 'other', beyond social and spatial origins. Emma often talks to Léon of a happy life in Paris: 'Often, when they talked together of Paris, she ended by murmuring, "Ah! how happy we should be there!"' (ibid.: 559). As for Léon, we know little of the life that follows for him there, but Paris does give him the power he needs to return to Rouen in triumph and to despise provincial manners, determined to do what he did not dare to before: possess Emma.

However, the capital also represents something negative, a behaviour that is immoral – as in the famous love scene when Emma and Léon travel in the horse cab up and down the streets of Rouen, a scene entirely described from an extradiegetic perspective. Emma hesitates somewhat before succumbing to their mutual desires: "Ah! Leon! Really – I don't know – if I ought," she whispered. Then with a more serious air, "Do you know, it is very improper" – "How so?" replied the clerk. "It is done at Paris." And that, as an irresistible argument, decided her' (ibid.). The capital's destructive forces are also suggested in relation to the

fatal club-foot operation, affecting Charles's reputation irreversibly: 'These are the inventions of Paris! These are the ideas of those gentry of the capital!' (ibid.: 379) ('Voilà les idées de ces messieurs de la Capitale! ...' (Flaubert [1857] 1972: 242). The consequences of these negative influences of the capital are disastrous if there is a maladaptation between place and behaviour. In Emma's case, such a maladaptation is the fundamental problem of her bovarystic character. There is a deep conflict between her life in the provinces and her cosmopolitan desires – for luxury, beautiful clothes and a glamorous life. Thus Emma's quest for a life in the capital may correspond partly to the type of negative 'detachment from one's place of origin' that Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta (2017: 2) discuss in *Cosmopolitanisms*. This detachment means a refusal of the values and conventions of the local place and a desire to be part of a larger, more compelling context, enabling a richer mode of life, socially as well as existentially. In fact, it is probably in this wide, emotional meaning that the cosmopolitan is best understood in this chapter.

L'Éducation sentimentale

Paris was associated with her person, and the great city, with all its noises, roared around her like an immense orchestra.

(Flaubert [1869] 2011: 188)

Paris se rapportait à sa personne, et la grande ville avec toutes ses voix, bruissait, comme un immense orchestre, autour d'elle.

(Flaubert [1869] 1973: 87–8)

In the first paragraph of the novel, Frédéric Moreau's life in the capital has already started. It is 15 September 1840, at six in the morning, and he is on board the ship *La Ville-de-Montereu* at the Quai St. Bernard in Paris, going back to Nogent-sur-Seine. We know that he has only spent a short time in Paris, and will soon start his law studies there after two months of boredom in his home village. Like the Balzacian heroes he is full of expectations of his future life in the capital, thinking about his apartment, 'on the plan of a drama, on subjects for pictures, on future passions' (Flaubert [1869] 2011: 15). His immediate initiative to approach the influential Jacques Arnoux on the boat is in line with this desire for success.

However, Frédéric only occasionally behaves like an ambitious Balzacian hero. To judge from his behaviour most of the time, his desire for success in

Paris does not come from within, but from people around him, notably his mother and his close friend Deslauriers. His first plans to go to the capital appear in the scenes describing his childhood years with Deslauriers. What motivates Frédéric's desire to live in Paris simply seems to be a need to be with his friend, who goes there before him to study law. Together they dream about a life in the capital after college and their travels: 'Then they would come back to Paris; they would work together, and would never part; and, as a relaxation from their labours, they would have love affairs with princesses in boudoirs lined with satin, or dazzling orgies with famous courtesans' (ibid.: 43). ('Puis ils reviendraient à Paris, ils travailleraient ensemble, ne se quitteraient pas; – et, comme délassément à leurs travaux, ils auraient des amours de princesses dans des boudoirs de satin, ou defulgurantes orgies avec des courtisanes illustres' (Flaubert [1869] 1973: 31).)

Interestingly, it is with reference to Rastignac that Deslauriers tries to inspire a desire for success in Frédéric: 'Remember Rastignac in the *Comédie humaine*. You will succeed, I have no doubt' (Flaubert [1869] 2011: 52–3). ('Rappelle-toi de Rastignac de *La Comédie humaine*! Tu réussiras, j'en suis sûr!' (Flaubert [1869] 1973: 35).)¹¹ In this context Deslauriers makes a proposition that reminds us of Rastignac's resolution at the end of *Le Père Goriot*: that Frédéric should become the lover of an influential Parisienne, Madame Dambreuse. Hearing this advice, he smiles, forgets his true love, Madame Arnoux, for a moment, and soon pays his first visit to the Dambreuse family. Nonetheless, to judge from his behaviour most of the time, the desire to be a Rastignac is not sincere. Throughout the novel, Frédéric's only object of interest in Paris is Madame Arnoux: 'Every street led towards her house; the hackney-coaches stood in their places to carry her home the more quickly; Paris was associated with her person, and the great city, with all its noises, roared around her like an immense orchestra' (ibid.: 188).

When he contemplates the capital from his balcony for hours, Frédéric's panorama view is quite different from Rastignac's at the end of *Le Père Goriot*. He observes the city below him, the river, trees, details, people, buildings, but without the least desire to be active there. The only thought that comes to Frédéric's mind has to do with Madame Arnoux, with where she must live: 'Madame Arnoux's house must be on this side in the rear!' (Flaubert [1869]

¹¹ The references to Balzac's 'Scènes de la vie parisienne' have been observed by others too, of course. See Leclerc 1997: 9, Rey 2004: 132.

2011: 179). In other words, the view of Paris does not inspire him to dream about the future at all, as in the scene with Rastignac. It is only when Frédéric is back on his divan that he abandons himself to thoughts and plans, as if the reality of the capital has frightened him (Dufief 1994: 41).

In general, Paris is not at all described as the centre of novelistic action, but from Frédéric's particular perspective, fragmentarily, passively, everything else but systematically. The focus of the novel is Frédéric's total lack of action, despite the ongoing 1848 revolution and all the other activities around him. He contemplates the world rather than acts in it. As Leclerc (1997: 9) notes, when Dambreuse is buried – about where Rastignac pronounces his dramatic words – Frédéric does nothing other than admire the landscape.

What we see in the descriptions of the capital is actually mostly Frédéric's character traits. The world is inseparable from the person, they are both revealed in each other, as Rey (1983: 73) observes. In the scene from the balcony referred to above, Frédéric's emptiness is mirrored in the unusually deserted and quiet streets of the city before him (Dufief 1994: 38). Interestingly, studies of different versions of the novel reveal that Flaubert systematically removed details from the urban landscape to put forward the subjective, particular Paris that is perceived by Frédéric (Wetherill 1983: 129).

Like Emma, Frédéric is strongly influenced by romantic books. This is clear in the first scenes of the novel, when he contemplates Madame Arnoux: 'She resembled the women of whom he had read in romances' (Flaubert [1869] 2011: 32). Her whole appearance seems to be imbued with colonial exoticism. He sees a 'negress' by her side, and directly assumes that 'she must be of Andalusian descent, perhaps a Creole: had she brought this negress across with her from the West Indian Islands?' (ibid.: 23). When Frédéric later imagines travelling with Madame Arnoux, his dreams of 'distant countries' have similarities with Emma's. At least they are as stereotypically exotic and marked with orientalism; a sight of a palm tree in the Jardin des Plantes transports Frédéric into dreams where he is riding with Madame Arnoux on dromedaries, elephants and mules with little bells:

When he went into the Jardin des Plantes the sight of a palm-tree carried him off into distant countries. They were travelling together on the backs of dromedaries, under the awnings of elephants, in the cabin of a yacht amongst the blue archipelagoes, or side by side on mules with little bells attached to them who went stumbling through the grass against broken columns.

(Ibid.: 188)

Quand il allait au Jardin des Plantes, la vue d'un palmier l'entraînait vers des pays lointains. Ils voyageaient ensemble, au dos des dromadaires, sous le tendelet des éléphants, dans la cabine d'un yacht parmi les archipels bleus, ou côte à côte sur deux mulets à clochettes, qui trébuchent dans les herbes contre des colonnes brisées.

(Flaubert [1869] 1973: 88)

There is no question about Flaubert's irony when describing this artificial image of distant countries.¹² His way of juxtaposing the different elements of the dreams makes them seem absurd, as in Emma's case.

Regarding the relation between the countryside and the capital, there is much less of an opposition between these two worlds than in Balzac's novels. As already noted, the details of the city are less present in the final novel than in the earlier versions of *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Wetherill (1983: 128) also observes that the specificity of the provinces as well as the provincialization of Frédéric are less apparent in the novel than in the manuscript. This effacement of spatial limits accentuates the importance of Frédéric's state of mind. He is bored wherever he is; what happens within him is what matters.

This is not to say that there is no difference between the countryside and the capital in the novel – there is, of course. The detailed descriptions are many, of both these worlds and of important activities surrounding Frédéric, not least connected to the revolution of 1848. Moreover, even for Frédéric there is of course a difference between the provinces and Paris. His mind sometimes lightens considerably when he moves from the cosmopolitan context to green Fontainebleau or Auteil, for instance, as Wetherill (*ibid.*: 131) observes. At the same time, it is true that he values the provinces negatively, associating them with boredom, as at the beginning of the novel when he reluctantly leaves Paris for Nogent-sur-Seine, 'where he would have to lead a languishing existence for two months' (Flaubert [1869] 2011: 13), before returning to the capital and his law studies. Altogether, his repeated trips between the countryside and Paris suggest that he is in need of both these worlds. Paradoxically, it is perhaps in this very movement back and forth that he can find his only fixed point and force, the only thing he is able to *do*.

¹² For an analysis of the general patronizing attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies, see Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*.

Concluding remarks

In the examples analysed above, Paris is represented and constructed in relation to a subject's desire and potential, to what the protagonist could be and become in that place. Important existential things are at stake, and strong emotions involved.

The desire to go to Paris, to live and be successful there, does not seem to be spontaneous, but is mediated, by literature and by other people. In other words, it appears as if the capital does not *by itself* exert an obvious force of attraction on the protagonists, at least not as a real and defined place. Thus, in a way, the novels relativize the cosmopolitan prestige and authority attached to Paris in literature as well as in reality, by for instance Pascale Casanova (2004).

In fact, the conceptions of the capital are very vague; it is more of an imagined place than a world corresponding to a real city. From distant positions, on heights, or from the point of view of maps and texts, the protagonists try to grasp the world of the city, but as soon as they move closer and start living in it according to cosmopolitan conventions, the illusion of control is revealed. To get into it and submit to its laws is difficult if you come from outside. As the narrator affirms at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot*, it is hardly possible to understand the story of Paris for people 'extra muros'. No overview is conceivable, and this is true also on the reader's level; no general understanding of the novel can be reached. The subject's identity is relentlessly absorbed, in the vast city, in the new world, in the modern novel. Momentarily, however, going back to the countryside can mean a reinforcement of identity and a feeling of having become someone in the eyes of non-Parisians. In this way the dynamics between the local, provincial sphere and the cosmopolitan one play an important role. The tension between these two worlds is fundamental in both Balzac and Flaubert (as in novels by many other authors during this century, not least Stendhal). It is in this power field that the modern subject is born and provincialism and cosmopolitanism are produced. Paris takes form in contrast to the provinces, through the distance to them. It is therefore better to speak of a dynamic than of a dichotomy or twofold world. Even if some sort of convention is possible to identify in the city as well as in the provinces – concerning desires, values, behaviours, ways to dress – the differences between these two worlds are not absolute. The criticism of country life and people is not consequent, needless to say, in any of the novels.

What has been in focus in this chapter seems to correspond to the category 'subjective geographies', mentioned at the beginning (Laachir, Marzagora and

Orsini 2018: 303–4), that is the ‘character’s worldview’. In the novels analysed here there is indeed a close – and emotional – relation between subject and place. Paris is ‘significant’ for these characters in different ways, and the question of scale is important; their distance from the capital plays an important role when they form their conceptions of the city and of themselves.¹³ The concept of ‘objective geographies’ is more difficult to apply. No Paris ‘as such’ seems possible to identify outside the characters. In the analysed passages of *Le Père Goriot*, the narrator too is subjective and emotional. The countryside cannot be said to exist as ‘objective geography’ either, and the values that at first seem to characterize its inhabitants are not more fixed there. As for the ‘implicit geographies’ (ibid.: 304), the novels by Flaubert do reveal fragments of an exotic world outside Paris, but these are seen from a highly subjective, selective point of view and reveal a world conception that is full of clichés. As Jennifer Yee (2016: 11) pointed out, this interest in the foreign and distant in a way challenges realism as a genre, and we can add that so do the vagueness and subjective character of the urban descriptions above.

Finally, it should be said that the protagonists’ desire to change their situations does not only have to do with their longing for a life in Paris (even if they seem to think so at times) or for any place in particular. This is also something that relativizes the role of the capital. There are examples in all the novels of a more general type of desire, generated by boredom, especially in the countryside; Emma feels it, as do Frédéric, Lucien, David and Madame de Bargeton. It is linked to what Jules de Gaultier (1902: 13) called ‘bovarysme’, that is a capacity to conceive of themselves as other and different than they are, to transgress limits. Their reading of literature promotes this capacity, and should not be seen only as causing illusory images of reality and deceptions. Literature helps them to cope with the dullness of the countryside, to imagine a world beyond it, even to transgress its limits (in the cases of Madame de Bargeton and Lucien). Thus the novels demonstrate the capacity of fiction to offer consolation as well as open new dimensions and facets of the world. These important functions and capacities of literature should be remembered, not least in a context where we want to grasp and study ‘the world’. What is more, if ‘there is no concept of the world’, as Hans Blumenberg states (Jordheim 2019: 6), and ‘no conception of the totality of being’, it may be only through literature that the world and life as a whole can be captured in some way.

¹³ This is in line with what Eric Prieto (2013: 13) states: that a place is above all a human relation.

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