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"If I Want to Imagine a Fictive Nation...": The Balzacian Model of the Opening Passage in Roland Barthes' Writing

Abstract

This paper explores Roland Barthes's use of Balzac's narrative techniques in the openings of *L'Empire des signes* and *Système de la mode*. While drawing on the arguments presented by Andrea Del Lungo in his analysis of the poetics of Balzac's incipit published in 2003, I try to demonstrate how Barthes follows a similar approach to the one represented by Balzac. When it comes to the *L'Empire des signes*, I seek to prove that Barthes constructs a fictional version of Japan, not by mimicking the real country, but by isolating specific elements and organizing them into a cohesive whole. This method mirrors Balzac's strategy of creating self-contained worlds within books that form the overall universe of *La Comédie humaine*. Barthes's integration of photography into his book further reflects the tension between the real and the imagined, echoing Balzac's symbolic use of objects transcribed into language. This phenomenon can also be observed in Barthes' analysis of clothing from *Système de la Mode*. However, I believe that Barthes departs from Balzac's totalizing vision, opting instead for a fragmented approach that signals a shift in literary techniques from the 19th to the 20th century. While Balzac sought to form a unified world, Barthes emphasizes the selective, arbitrary nature of modern literary creation and, thus, the constructed character of knowledge.

Roland Barthes; Balzac; 19th century literary conventions; narrative structures



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In one of the sections of the book *Les XIXe siècles* by Roland Barthes, devoted to the relationship that the author of *S/Z* maintained with the works of Balzac, Jacques-David Ebguy concludes his analysis with the following observation:

[...] Perhaps today we cannot write like Balzac, or rewrite Balzac, but we can, we must, read him and, tirelessly and meticulously, assess the full scope of the excesses contained in his writing. (Ebguy 2019: 173)¹

This observation is more than legitimate in the context of the Ebguy's reflection upon the status of Balzac's texts as they relate to Barthes's philosophy, and specifically when it comes to their oscillation between the concepts of modernity and tradition that preoccupied both writers². This statement overlooks, nevertheless, Barthes's potential attempts, whether conscious or not, to replicate the structural devices developed by the author of *La Comédie humaine* in his own narratives.

Based on the remarks made by Andrea Del Lungo in his text on the poetics of Balzac's incipit (See Del Lungo 2003: 201–222), I propose to examine here the opening passages of two of Barthes' books to show that they might have been inspired by some of Balzac's literary strategies.

¹ Whenever the translation of a French text into English has been provided by me, I include the source text in the footnotes — N.G. The source text: “[...] Peut-être ne peut-on, aujourd'hui, écrire comme Balzac, ou réécrire Balzac, mais nous pouvons, nous devons, le lire et, inlassablement, et minutieusement, prendre la mesure de ses excès.”

² According to the vision outlined by Antoine Compagnon in his seminal book *Les Antimodernes. De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, the author of *S/Z*, though widely associated with progressive or avant-garde intellectual currents, emerges as truly anti-modern writer. In Compagnon's interpretation, this anti-modern orientation is reflected in Barthes's profound attachment to literary tradition and to the aesthetic refinement of the French language, which he perceived as increasingly diminished in the experimental writing of the late twentieth century, especially toward the end of his life (See Compagnon 2005: 492–537). The interplay between modernity and anti-modernity in the works of both Barthes and Balzac is further examined by Ebguy (Ebguy 2019: 147–173).

From Details to Systems: Is Barthes' Japan a Fictional World?

The first of these examples is the beginning of *L'Empire des signes*, a 1970 book that Kohei Kuwada rightly describes as a "ouvrage romanesque", that is a novelistic work (Kuwada 2024: 255):

Si je veux imaginer un peuple fictif, je puis lui donner un nom inventé, le traiter déclarativement comme un objet romanesque, fonder une nouvelle Garabagne, de façon à ne compromettre aucun pays réel dans ma fantaisie (mais alors c'est cette fantaisie même que je compromets dans les signes de la littérature). Je puis aussi, sans prétendre en rien représenter ou analyser la moindre réalité (ce sont les gestes majeurs du discours occidental), prélever quelque part dans le monde (*là-bas*) un certain nombre de traits (mot graphique et linguistique), et de ces traits former délibérément un système. C'est ce système que j'appellerai : le Japon. (Barthes 1994a: 747)

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse)—isolate somewhere in the world (fantasy) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan. (Barthes 1992: 3)

This passage features a couple of techniques characteristic of the openings of Balzac's works. Firstly, the spatial nature of the initial passage of text, which Del Lungo discusses when referring to Balzac's works (Del Lungo 2003: 206), may be observed in the title that Barthes gives to this part of his book: *là-bas* — there, inside a "fantasy". Consequently, prior to setting Japan within a literary narrative, the author takes care to outline the subject of his reflection. He proceeds to do so by marking the boundaries — both geographical and metaphorical — of what Japan means to him. Any work undertaken by the analyst who attempts to understand the system of signs in which they suddenly find themselves — and, it should be noted, a system of signs that remains foreign to their understanding — is therefore conscientiously preceded by an act of division, of fragmentation. Secondly, the very first sentence of the opening paragraph ("If I want to imagine a fictional people [...]") indicates that the rest of the story is the product, if not of literary fiction, then at least of the writer's imagination, the latter seeking to express himself through literary symbols.

Thus, through this introduction to *L'Empire des signes*, Barthes's desire to position himself as the creator of an imagined world also becomes apparent. The author in no way claims that his book offers a faithful reproduction of the Japan he was able to visit and discover. On the contrary, he specifies that he does not seek to represent this country or to analyse the slightest reality of it. His method is presented in an entirely different way: he begins by selecting a few samples, namely the subtle features that compose the outline of the world he depicts, in order to turn them into a system and subsequently call it Japan. *L'Empire des signes* does not offer a mimetic image of a country; rather, it proposes a system of knowledge about this place,

constructed from details carefully chosen by the analyst-creator. Hence the comparison of this project to the Henri Michaux's fictitious country of Garabagne³. Barthes's Japan, although endowed with a real referent, nonetheless remains an object of literary production, governed by the laws and logical rules assigned to it by the author. Barthes's approach, explained in the form of a *didactic preparation*⁴ included in the incipit of *L'Empire des signes*, thus recalls the strategy repeatedly used by Balzac which Del Lungo describes in the following way:

The fundamental aspect of Balzac's vision of the novelistic work indeed lies in the desire to create a world which, while maintaining a strong referential connection, is structured autonomously in relation to reality: a full world, governed by internal principles, populated by paper characters [...]. (Del Lungo 2003: 210)⁵

The very use of the notion of “referential connection” in an article discussing Barthes' works might cause some literary scholars to raise an eyebrow. Was it not Barthes who tried to alert us to the lure of the comforting idea that reality can be depicted through language, and that words are anything more than mere elements of a textual system? The answer to that question is more complex than it might seem. Some analyses, still under the thrall of the pervasive post-structuralist school of thought, have gone so far as to say:

Barthes always maintained that literature is a matter not of reality, but of language. To be sure, literature tries to deceive us by pretending to speak about reality, but in fact it speaks only about itself—about its own semiotic construction. (Markowski 2012: 133)⁶

This way of thinking, while applicable to a specific subset of Barthes' texts and useful for interpreting them in a manner that emphasizes his role as a literary theorist or semiotician, has lost its validity when applied to the entirety of his work. This is partly due to the emergence of previously inaccessible material — for example, the 2015 publication of *La préparation du roman* — and partly to shifts within Barthes scholarship itself. Contemporary studies of Barthes offer a more nuanced approach to questions of referentiality, particularly regarding the role of objects in his texts. A case in point

³ Garabagne is a fictional realm that forms the backdrop for a narrative of an imagined journey recounted by Henri Michaux in his *Voyage en Grande Garabagne* from 1936. As Nicolas Ragonneau points out, Garabagne may be inspired by the author's travels through Portugal, Spain, and Luxembourg (Ragonneau 1995: 137–153).

⁴ With these ironic terms, Balzac himself described in the preface to *La Recherche de l'absolu* the process of delaying the proper entry into the narrative by outlining the general principles governing the world being described (such as the relationship between human customs and the architectural forms they produce) (See Del Lungo 2003: 203–209).

⁵ The source text: “L'aspect fondamental de la vision balzacienne de l'œuvre romanesque réside en effet dans la volonté de création d'un monde qui, tout en gardant une forte liaison référentielle, se structure de façon autonome par rapport au réel: un monde plein, régi par des principes internes, peuplé de personnages en papier [...]”.

⁶ The source text: “Barthes zawsze powiedział, że literatura to kwestia nie rzeczywistości, lecz języka. Owszem, literatura próbuje nas nabrać, udając, że mówi o rzeczywistości, ale tak naprawdę mówi tylko o sobie, o swojej semiotycznej konstrukcji”.

is Patrick Ffrench's article, which focuses on Barthes' use of extended enumerations as a device for producing what he terms a "pleasure of the material and sensual object" (Ffrench 2022)⁷. Ffrench concludes his analysis with the following observation:

[...] This also sheds light on Barthes's materialism, and on the desire for the material object that underlies his writing. This desire haunts the texts on everyday objects discussed above. It also haunts *Le Degré zéro* [...]. But it is a desire that aims to reach the thing itself—or at least the *gesture* of the thing, its *trait*—and consequently the exemption from the word. (Ffrench 2022)⁸

According to Claude Coste, it is the presence of objects in Barthes's texts that gives his essays "the materiality of the novel form" (Coste 2024: 548)⁹: This does not imply, however, that Barthes believed literature could straightforwardly represent the material world, since a gap always exists between language and the objects it seeks to describe. As Guido Mattia Gallerani aptly notes, "Barthes defines realism as the attempt of literary language to grasp a reality that irretrievably escapes it" (Gallerani 2024: 663)¹⁰. Despite this conviction, the writer would ceaselessly (especially at the late stage of his production) search ways to overcome this distance because: "Despite his suspicion toward various forms of realism, Barthes's entire body of work continually—though in different ways—confronts reality" (Gallerani 20024: 664)¹¹.

One need not delve deeply into Barthes scholarship to see how preoccupied the author of *S/Z* was with the idea that good literature should strive to capture material reality, even though this task is far from straightforward. Barthes himself makes a forceful claim that stands in stark contrast to the remark by Markowski cited above:

As far as I am concerned, for a long time (I sometimes notice this when I glance at texts I wrote in the past), I have been very sensitive to the presence, in a narrative or intellectual text, of words whose referents are concrete things, objects — things that one can touch, sensual objects. And that's why I propose giving these words a Latin name, so that we can handle them: *tangibilia*, meaning things that can be touched, in the neutral plural. (Barthes 2015: 163–164)¹²

⁷ The source text: "le plaisir de l'objet matériel et sensuel."

⁸ The source text: "[...] Cela nous éclaire aussi sur le matérialisme de Barthes, et sur le désir de l'objet matériel qui sous-tend son écriture. Ce désir hante les textes sur l'objet quotidien qui ont été discutés plus haut. Il hante aussi *Le Degré zéro* [...]. Mais il s'agit d'un désir qui vise à atteindre la chose même, ou du moins le geste de la chose, son *trait*, et par conséquent l'exemption du mot."

⁹ The source text: "la matérialité du romanesque".

¹⁰ The source text: "Barthes définit le réalisme comme la tentative pour la langue littéraire de saisir une réalité qui lui échappe irrémédiablement".

¹¹ The source text: "Malgré sa prévention à l'égard des différentes formes de réalisme, toute l'oeuvre de Barthes ne cesse, selon des modalités différentes, de se confronter au réel."

¹² The source text: "[...] En ce qui me concerne, depuis très longtemps (je le vois parfois en jetant un coup d'œil sur des textes que j'ai écrits autrefois), j'ai été très sensibles à la présence, dans un texte narratif ou intellectuel, de mots ayant pour référent des choses concrètes, des objets — qu'on pourrait toucher, des objets sensuels, et c'est pour ça que je propose de donner à ces mots un nom latin pour pouvoir les manier : des *tangibilia*, c'est-à-dire des choses qu'on peut toucher, neutre pluriel."

All these arguments lead me to the following conclusion: like Balzac, Barthes was deeply engaged with the status of material objects and the reality his writing sought to represent. While he challenged the naive belief that language can simply mirror the external world, he never entirely abandoned the idea that literature can and should evoke at least traces of that reality.

This tension between the fictional (literary) and the real (material) becomes evident in the opening section of Barthes' book on Japan, where he juxtaposes introductory remarks defining the object of literary analysis with a photograph of the actor Kazuo Funaki's face (See Barthes 1994: 746). According to the statements the author himself makes in the liminary paratext of the work, the images do not illustrate the narrative of *L'Empire des signes*, but rather complement it, producing therefore "the circulation and exchange of these signifiers" (Barthes 1992: XI)¹³.

The presence, in the photograph, of a person dressed in traditional attire carries symbolic meaning. An outfit associated with Japanese traditions and culture is, in fact, merely an actor's disguise. The themes introduced in the opening of *L'Empire des signes* are reflected in the image that accompanies the start of the book. It attests to the reality of the people described (Barthes' famous *c'est ça*¹⁴), while also pointing out that this people and this country remain, in the text, a fictional, literary construct — the photographed person is simply an actor, their clothing created for a theatrical performance. This highlights the tension, as noted by Kuwada, between "[...] the deliberate choice of the literary form and the resistance of Japan as a referent" (Kuwada 2024: 257).

Returning to Del Lungo's remarks, we can argue that the photograph depicting Kazuo Funaki which interacts with the opening of *L'Empire des signes*, serves a function similar to the one bestowed upon the description of the Claës house at the beginning of Balzac's *La Recherche de l'absolu* (See Del Lungo 2003: 206). Alongside the specific mention of a place (over there, in Japan, but a Japan that belongs to fantasy), an image emerges, meant to somehow represent this place: an actor playing in traditional attire, symbolizing the fusion of the real and the fictional. Here, the importance that Barthes places on detail becomes apparent. To return to the formula outlined in the opening of the analysed text, it is worth noting that Barthes creates his own image of Japan by beginning with simple and subtle features. This is confirmed throughout the rest of the book, which consists of 26 fragments — close-ups of isolated phenomena or objects, from which an entire literary panorama of the country is subsequently formed through writing.

Can a reader of Balzac find in his works a union of word and image that creates a particular vision of a country or place—one whose referential existence is both affirmed and, deliberately, called into question in the opening passage of the book? Surprisingly, the answer is yes. *Séraphîta*, a novel from 1834, begins with the following description of Norway, a country Balzac had never visited:

¹³ The same passage in French: "la circulation, l'échange de ces signifiants" (Barthes 1994: 745).

¹⁴ As Tiphaine Samoyault insightfully observes, in the context of the photographs examined by Barthes in *La Chambre Claire* (1980), the expression "c'est-ça" is used to render in language the supposed existence of the referent it is meant to signify (See Samoyault 2015: 720).

À voir sur une carte les côtes de la Norvège, quelle imagination ne serait émerveillée de leurs fantasques découpures, longue dentelle de granit où mugissent incessamment les flots de la mer du Nord ? qui n'a rêvé les majestueux spectacles offerts par ces rivages sans grèves, par cette multitude de criques, d'anses, de petites baies dont aucune ne se ressemble, et qui toutes sont des abîmes sans chemins ? Ne dirait-on pas que la nature s'est plu à dessiner par d'ineffaçables hiéroglyphes le symbole de la vie norvégienne, en donnant à ces côtes la configuration des arêtes d'un immense poisson ? car la pêche forme le principal commerce et fournit presque toute la nourriture de quelques hommes attachés comme une touffe de lichen à ces arides rochers. Là, sur quatorze degrés de longueur, à peine existe-t-il sept cent mille âmes. Grâce aux périls dénués de gloire, aux neiges constantes que réservent aux voyageurs ces pics de la Norvège, dont le nom donne froid déjà, leurs sublimes beautés sont restées vierges et s'harmonieront aux phénomènes humains, vierges encore pour la poésie du moins, qui s'y sont accomplis, et dont voici l'histoire. (Balzac 1980: 729)

As the eye glances over a map of the coasts of Norway, can the imagination fail to marvel at their fantastic indentations and serrated edges, like a granite lace, against which the surges of the North Sea roar incessantly? Who has not dreamed of the majestic sights ever to be seen on those beachless shores, of that multitude of creeks and inlets and little bays, no two of them alike, yet all trackless abysses? We may almost fancy that Nature took pleasure in recording by ineffaceable hieroglyphics the symbol of Norwegian life, bestowing on these coasts the conformation of a fish's spine, fishery being the staple commerce of the country, and well-nigh the only means of living of the hardy men who cling like tufts of lichen to the arid cliffs. Here, through fourteen degrees of longitude, barely seven hundred thousand souls maintain existence. Thanks to perils devoid of glory, to year-long snows which clothe the Norway peaks and guard them from profaning foot of traveller, these sublime beauties are virgin still; they will be seen to harmonize with human phenomena, also virgin—at least to poetry—which here took place, the history of which it is our purpose to relate. (Balzac 1916: 1–2)

In this excerpt, Balzac also begins his narrative by delineating the spatial dimension in which the story takes place. This gesture is made particularly striking by the fact that Norway, as he describes it, first emerges as a shape wriggling on the map ("À voir sur une carte les côtes de la Norvège [...] leurs fantasques découpures, longue dentelle de granit où mugissent incessamment les flots de la mer du Nord"). What then unfolds before the reader's eyes is nothing short of the process Barthes describes at the beginning of *L'Empire des signes*, where he notes that a writer can "compromise" a real country through his own imagination. Numerous fragments of this passage suggest that the place the reader is about to visit is a product of fiction and, as such, should be experienced first through imagination and the senses, not merely understood logically ("qui n'a rêvé les majestueux spectacles offerts par ces rivages sans grèves"; "ces pics de la Norvège, dont le nom donne froid déjà"). That being said, Balzac does not entirely disregard the referential nature of his account; scattered throughout the text are detailed observations reflecting the factual knowledge he possessed about the country — its society, nature, and geography ("Là, sur quatorze degrés de longueur à peine existe-t-il sept cent mille âmes"; "la pêche forme le principal commerce et fournit presque toute

la nourriture de quelques hommes attachés comme une touffe de lichen à ces arides rochers”). These observations lead to a conclusion that echoes the result of my analysis of the incipit of *L’Empire des Signes*. The opening passage of *Séraphîta* serves as a perfect example of how Balzac’s narrative functions less as a mimetic representation of reality and more as a window through which the reader gains access to a particular set of knowledge about the country — knowledge that is both limited and shaped by fantasy, creating an interpretative challenge. In other words, the openings of both *Séraphîta* and *L’Empire des signes* present the reader with a semiological enigma: a puzzle in which every narrative element points toward the overarching questions posed subtly at the very beginning of the text: What is this country? How should it be understood? As Boris Lyon-Caen explains in his article on the role of epistemology in Balzac’s narrative:

As an exposition of knowledge, Balzacian narrative relies primarily on a dualism of Platonic and Christian ancestry. The representation of the sensible repeatedly serves the revelation of the intelligible; the visible appears subordinated to the readable, and the bodies or figures staged ideally constitute incarnations of meaning. [...] The whole rests on a logic of elucidation with a detective-like hue, on interpretative and classificatory principles, and mobilizes operators of intelligibility such as trace, remainder, or symptom, as well as detail, type, or symbol [...]. (Lyon-Caen 2003: 289–290)¹⁵

In this regard, it is the details — often taking the form of sensual objects — that function as signs for the reader to interpret. One example occurs in the incipit of *Séraphîta*, where Balzac perceives the line of the Norwegian coast as the shape of a fish (“Ne dirait-on pas que la nature s’est plu à dessiner par d’ineffaçables hiéroglyphes le symbole de la vie norvégienne, en donnant à ces côtes la configuration des arêtes d’un immense poisson”), using it to illustrate how nature communicates in “hieroglyphs” to symbolize the essence of human existence — the life of the Norwegian people in the novel being largely centred around fishing. This narrative practice exemplifies the phenomenon described by Del Lungo as *sursémantisation des détails* (Del Lungo 2003: 215), that is, the semantic overloading of details.

My hypothesis is that Barthes’ book about Japan consists mostly of such close-ups on specific objects, signs and symbols through which the reader can access some sort of knowledge about this place. In fact, from a formal point of view, one might have the impression that, due to its structure, Barthes’ text resembles the description of the famous jumble that Raphaël de Valentin rummages through at the beginning of *La Peau de chagrin*, the place where particular and eclectic objects represent gateways — or, to use Del Lungo’s expression, “miroirs concentriques” (Del Lungo 2003: 217), concentric mirrors — that allow the protagonist to glimpse into other worlds, other time periods:

¹⁵ The source text: “Comme exposition de savoirs, le récit balzacien recourt essentiellement à un dualisme d’ascendance platonicienne et chrétienne. La représentation du sensible y sert de façon récurrente la révélation d’un intelligible, le visible y semble inféodé au lisible, et les corps ou les figures mis en scène constituent idéalement autant d’incarnations du sens. [...] Le tout repose sur une logique de l’élucidation à coloration policière, sur des principes interprétatifs et classifiants, et mobilise des opérateurs d’intelligibilité comme la trace, le reste ou le symptôme, le détail, le type ou le symbole [...]”

Au premier coup d'œil, les magasins lui offrirent un tableau confus, dans lequel toutes les œuvres humaines et divines se heurtaient. Des crocodiles, des singes, des boas empaillés souriaient à des vitraux d'église, semblaient vouloir mordre des bustes, courir après des laques, ou grimper sur des lustres. Un vase de Sèvres, où madame Jacotot avait peint Napoléon, se trouvait auprès d'un sphinx dédié à Sésostris. Le commencement du monde et les événements d'hier se mariaient avec une grotesque bonhomie. (Balzac 1979a: 69)

At a first glance the place presented a confused picture in which every achievement, human and divine, was mingled. Crocodiles, monkeys, and serpents stuffed with straw grinned at glass from church windows, seemed to wish to bite sculptured heads, to chase lacquered work, or to scramble up chandeliers. A Sèvres vase, bearing Napoleon's portrait by Mme. Jacotot, stood beside a sphinx dedicated to Sesostris. The beginnings of the world and the events of yesterday were mingled with grotesque cheerfulness. (Balzac 1899: 15)

However, in the case of *L'Empire des signes*, these 26 fragments about various objects and phenomena (such as chopsticks, the arrangement of Japanese meals, tempura, traditional theatre, city structures, slot machines, etc.) are multiple entry points into the culture of a foreign country, or rather into the world created by Barthes on the pages of his book.

From Totality to Fragmentation: Barthes' *Liber Mundi* of Fashion

The construction of a more or less coherent system of meaning from details or fragments (See Sheringham 2006: 178) becomes one of the recurring devices in Barthes' writings. Yet, like Balzac, he seeks either to justify or to conceal the manifestly arbitrary nature of the details he selects to compose his worlds. This approach is particularly evident in longer openings, such as the one Barthes uses to begin *Système de la Mode*, his 1967 structuralist work. Before launching into his analysis, he pauses to offer some remarks on the very motivations that led him to write this text:

Une méthode s'engage dès le premier mot ; or ce livre est un livre de méthode ; il est donc condamné à se présenter tout seul. Cependant, avant d'entreprendre son voyage, l'auteur demande à s'expliquer sur l'origine et le sens de sa recherche. (Barthes 1994b: 131)

A method functions from the first word; now, this is a book of method; it must therefore stand on its own. Nonetheless, before beginning his journey, the author would like to account for the origin and the direction of his inquiry. (Barthes 1990: IX)

Based on these opening observations, the very first sentence, the very first words of a given analysis already represent an act of establishing a method that will later structure the phenomenon being described, namely clothing as it is presented in major fashion magazines. Barthes positions himself as the one who sets a general rule that should shape the world of his own narrative (as proven by the imperative and metaphorical assertion that the work is doomed to appear alone, to "stand on its own"). However, he also seeks to disguise the abstract nature of his choices by manifesting that his work is objective, governed by the laws of causality, which forces him to provide explanations

for the foundation and validity of his own project. In other words, in Barthes writing no statement can be made without explaining its necessity.

This is particularly evident in the second part of the opening passage. Here, we again encounter a narrative device that might be described as a Balzacian *didactic preparation*, typically taking the form of an *analepsis*. The following two examples illustrate this pause in the narrative's progression, which serves to explain the causes underlying the state of affairs as presented to the reader at the beginning of each novel:

1. *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*

Tel était l'état des choses dans cette petite république, qui, au milieu de la rue Saint-Denis, ressemblait assez à une succursale de la Trappe. Mais pour rendre un compte exact des événements extérieurs comme des sentiments, il est nécessaire de remonter à quelques mois avant la scène par laquelle commence cette histoire. (Balzac 1976: 52)

This was the state of affairs in the tiny republic which, in the heart of the Rue Saint-Denis, was not unlike a dependency of La Trappe. But to give a full account of events as well as of feelings, it is needful to go back to some months before the scene with which this story opens. (Balzac 1955: 31)

2. *La Recherche de l'absolu*

Il existe à Douai dans la rue de Paris une maison dont la physionomie, les dispositions intérieures et les détails ont, plus que ceux d'aucun autre logis, gardé le caractère des vieilles constructions flamandes, si naïvement appropriées aux mœurs patriarcales de ce bon pays ; mais avant de la décrire, peut-être faut-il établir dans l'intérêt des écrivains la nécessité de ces préparations didactiques contre lesquelles protestent certaines personnes ignorantes et voraces qui voudraient des émotions sans en subir les principes générateurs, la fleur sans la graine, l'enfant sans la gestation. L'Art serait-il donc tenu d'être plus fort que ne l'est la Nature ? (Balzac 1979b: 657)

There is a house at Douai in the rue de Paris, whose aspect, interior arrangements, and details have preserved, to a greater degree than those of other domiciles, the characteristics of the old Flemish buildings, so naively adapted to the patriarchal manners and customs of that excellent land. Before describing this house it may be well, in the interest of other writers, to explain the necessity for such dramatic preliminaries, — since they have roused a protest from certain ignorant and voracious readers who want emotions without undergoing the generating process, the flower without the seed, the child without gestation. Is Art supposed to have higher powers than Nature? (Balzac 1916b: 1)

It is the same pulsion that draws Barthes towards the explanation of the reasons of why he decides to describe the specific phenomenon of fashion: "Cependant, avant d'entreprendre son voyage, l'auteur demande à s'expliquer sur l'origine et le sens de sa recherche". Despite the obvious fact that, in the case of *Système de la Mode*, we cannot speak of a true retrospect that would have taken the character back to his past, since the only protagonist of Barthes' narrative remains the garment transposed into lan-

guage. Nevertheless, the author adopts an emblematic structure present in a number of Balzac's stories, where the order of the narrative is "[...] immediately motivated, almost imperatively, according to a typical phrase in Balzac's discourse that introduces an explanatory digression (« but before describing it, perhaps *it is necessary* to establish... »)" (Del Lungo 2003: 206)¹⁶. Just as in *La Recherche de l'absolu* and *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*, the entry into the universe with well-defined rules, the world of fashion in this case, is postponed in Barthes' work due to preliminary reflections on the genesis and justification of the "journey" of writing that constitutes the body of the text.

In my opinion, it is not an exaggeration to say that the project Barthes embarks on in *Système de la Mode* is a utopian endeavour. As noted by Marie R. Schiele, the purpose of this book is to:

Account for how fashion is invented from the very elements that compose it: clothing. Fashion, and more precisely, the garment, is "not a real object like any other", Barthes adds; it is a "true code". In other words, a system of ordered meanings. (Schiele 2020)¹⁷

Consequently, we find in *Système de la Mode* the same movement that emerges within the *L'Empire des signes*. Barthes begins with a static and explanatory statement in the introductory part of the book to establish the rules and generative principles underlying his system — being a sort of linguistic universe — in order to later focus on small details, the elements that make up the coherence and symbolical dimension of this world. However, these elements, namely clothing, are not merely fragments of reality subject to easy interpretation. Barthes analyses the written garment as a medium of meanings attributed to it by the society of a specific time and place, or as clothing inscribed within a system of connotations. To echo Michael Sheringham's remark:

At one level, costume detail illustrates perfectly a cardinal property of all systems of signification, namely the way a minimal difference can have maximal consequences. [...] The appeal of formal systems, and especially what Barthes will come to call their "systematicity", is that they enable us to observe a wider context — that of everyday experience — where tiny details and infinitesimal differences conspire to produce multiple networks and processes of meaning in the thick of the seemingly insignificant. (Sheringham 2006: 179)

However, such an operation — the ordering and reorganization of the knowledge produced by a particular society based on the details, the "concentric mirrors," meant to represent it — remains, undoubtedly, a difficult task. By the end of his introduction, Barthes himself seems to notice the very broad scope of his analysis:

¹⁶ The source text: "[...] Immédiatement motivé, d'une façon presque impérative, selon une phrase type du discours balzacien qui introduit une digression explicative (« mais avant de la décrire, peut-être faut-il établir... »)."

¹⁷ The source text: "[...] Rendre compte de la manière dont s'invente la Mode à partir des éléments mêmes qui la composent : les vêtements. La Mode et plus précisément, le vêtement n'est « pas un objet réel comme un autre » ajoute Barthes, c'est un « code véritable ». Autrement dit, un système de significations ordonnées."

[...] Les innombrables objets qui peuplent et constituent l'imaginaire de notre temps relèveront de plus en plus d'une sémantique, et la linguistique, moyennant certains développements, deviendra, par une seconde naissance, la science de tous les univers imaginés. (Barthes 1994b: 133)

[...] The countless objects that inhabit and comprise the image-system of our time will increasingly derive from a semantics, and, given certain developments, linguistics will become, by a second birth, the science of every imagined universe. (Barthes 1990: XII)

What stands out in this passage is the writer's positive conviction that language can meet the challenge of summarizing a complete knowledge of the fictional worlds created by human thought. The opening of *Système de la Mode* immediately reveals Barthes' approach to language, which "from the first word" creates a sort of *liber mundi*, one of Balzac's fantasies (See Del Lungo 2003: 201)¹⁸. However, the seemingly smooth surface of this exordium, with its tone of committed scientism, is covered with cracks that reflect the author's uncertainties. These are the same concerns encountered by Balzac, which are especially evident if one looks closely at, yet again, the very beginnings of his stories. According to Del Lungo:

The Balzacian opening seems to be both an act of *synthesis* and *genesis*, evoking countless connotative signifiers, in a discourse that, through the abundance and authority of its perpetual justifications, actually reveals its weakness in the face of the infinite "universe of thoughts"; a discourse thus expressing the anxiety of a language pursuing a utopian goal: to reorganize the knowledge of the world. (Del Lungo 2003: 212–213)¹⁹

Barthes is, in a way, forced to begin his "journey" into the "universe of thoughts" on fashion with an explanation of the origins of his project and its meaning. He does that precisely to mask the utopian nature of such an endeavour. It is clear that whatever system he imposes on the language constructed around the simulacrum of the garment, it remains arbitrary, as it stems from the author's creative subjectivity. Hence the numerous justifications aimed at demonstrating the scientific nature of the approach established in *Système de la Mode* as well as its utility.

One could expand this list of examples illustrating how the beginnings of Barthes' works might have been inspired by Balzac by including in the analysis the opening passages that are more dynamic in form (particularly the one from *La Chambre Claire*). However, even just examining these two books shows that the initial sections of Bar-

¹⁸ The concept of *liber mundi* refers to the idea of a book that would contain all the thoughts of the universe, offering a complete summary of the world within a finite space. As Del Lungo points out, this represents an unattainable dream, a single, ineffable book that has fascinated many modern writers, from Mallarmé to Borges. It symbolizes the desire to encompass all knowledge yet remains an impossible ideal well reflected in Balzac's project of *La Comédie humaine* (See Del Lungo 2003: 201).

¹⁹ The source text: "En effet, dans la pratique de l'écriture, *l'incipit* semble relever d'un acte de *synthèse* et de *genèse* à la fois, évoquant d'innombrables significés de connotation, dans un discours qui, par l'abondance et l'autorité de ses perpétuelles justifications, dévoile en réalité sa faiblesse devant l'infini « univers des pensées » ; un discours exprimant ainsi l'angoisse d'une parole qui poursuit un objectif utopique : réorganiser le savoir du monde."

thes' narratives, in their form, are reminiscent of the narrative structures present in *La Comédie humaine*. The problem faced by both authors — the creation of a sort of *liber mundi*, the writing account that would encompass the knowledge about a given world — remains the same. And yet, while Barthes seeks to achieve a certain level of completeness in the systems created in each of his works, these, unlike Balzac's books, do not form a coherent, totalizing project. As Andy Stafford points out:

[...] Starting with the discovery in the early 1960s, within fashion, of the crucial role of the "detail," and later, in the essays, that of the "fragment," totality as a positive value is first marginalized and then progressively discarded, in what Ginette Michaud has called *la détotalité*. (Stafford 2024: 884)²⁰

Where Balzac undertakes the utopian effort of creating a second textual world and encapsulating it within his stories, Barthes, by contrast, is content to dissect the fragments of reality that his texts reveal. Until the late phase of his writing, he does not attempt to link his works into a larger, cohesive project. Each of his texts offers merely a glimpse into several specific worlds, a set of limited knowledge about them transcribed into langue, his modernity being also more fractured and fragmented than that depicted by Balzac. Consequently, the term *liber mundi* should be replaced here with a more fitting expression: *libri mundorum*. Instead of a single unifying narrative, we encounter multiple accounts — "books of worlds" — each differing significantly from the others, akin to the diverse objects forming the *bric-à-brac* in the opening scenes of *La Peau de chagrin*.

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²⁰ The source text: "À partir de la découverte au début des années 60, dans la mode, du rôle capital du « détail » ensuite, dans l'essai, de celui du « fragment », la totalité comme valeur positive est, d'abord, marginalisée, puis progressivement écartée, dans ce que Ginette Michaud a appelé la « détotalité »".

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