

DE GRUYTER

*Caio Yurgel*

# LANDSCAPE'S REVENGE

THE ECOLOGY OF FAILURE IN ROBERT WALSER AND  
BERNARDO CARVALHO

LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURES IN THE WORLD  
LITERATURAS LATINOAMERICANAS EN EL MUNDO

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Caio Yurgel  
**Landscape's Revenge**

# **Latin American Literatures in the World**

# **Literaturas Latinoamericanas en el Mundo**

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Caio Yurgel

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# 1 Introduction

There is something amiss behind Robert Walser's idyllic vistas and Bernardo Carvalho's exotic sceneries. They are, upon closer inspection, neither idyllic nor exotic, but the first subterranean signs of a world that is slowly undoing itself. Landscape, as it appears and is described throughout the work of the Swiss and the Brazilian writer, provides an excellent – and yet insufficiently explored – pathway to the authors' literary projects. Through their treatment of landscape both authors reveal not only their main aesthetic concerns and stylistic preferences, but also their broader literary goals – and, in Carvalho's case, the extent to which he is influenced by Walser's work.

This study, thus, posits the landscape as the feature which not only binds the work of these two authors together, but also unveils their literary projects in their entirety. The landscape functions as a synthetic and unifying figure that triggers, at first, through the analysis of landscape description *per se*, the main and most evident elements of the authors' works, such as their preferences for settings and themes, their linguistic and narrative tics, their Romantic influence and backdrops, their penchant for movement and heights. However, when sustained as a methodological figure beyond the scope of its own description, the landscape soon reveals a darker, far more fascinating and far less explored side of Walser's and Carvalho's oeuvres: a vengeful, seemingly defeatist, barely disguised resentment against the *status quo*, which gives way to the more latent and biting elements of the authors' prose, such as irony, the *unheimlich*, the apocalyptic aesthetics of a disaster-prone fictional world, the obsession with the themes of madness and sickness, an understanding of history and literature through the figures of failure and marginality, as well as the anti-heroic agenda which undermines the very same Romanticism from where both authors seem, at a first glance, to draw their strengths.

A comprehensive study of the landscape and its implications in the work of both Walser and Carvalho is barely inexistent. With two notable yet still insufficient exceptions,<sup>1</sup> the landscape within the critical reception of Carvalho's work is usually – if at all – used as a byword for the post-colonial or the (trans)cultural, when it in fact underscores a much more literary than political maneuver, as the opening chapters of this research seek to demonstrate (the politics is in the details). The landscape is also, in both authors' cases, commonly equated to the poetic (in

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<sup>1</sup> One unfortunately too short – Pedro Dolabela Chagas & Dárley Suany Leite dos Santos, “O Narrador e a Paisagem: Milton Hatoum, Bernardo Carvalho e o Fim do Projeto de uma Literatura Nacional”, 2015 –, and the other too adjectival – Carlinda Fragale Pate Nunez, “*Mongólia* de Bernardo Carvalho: Romance de Espaço e Imagologia”, 2015.

Walser) or the photographic (in Carvalho), a naïve notion which this research also seeks to offset by showcasing the complex implications triggered by landscape description in the authors' oeuvres, as opposed to the mere affectation of a writerly or aesthetic sensibility. It is also not unusual, within the authors' critical reception, to have the landscape foreshadowing the mood of a given character or, rather, of a given narrator, as if symbolically mirroring said narrator's psychology and inner turmoil. This book shows how the narrators' agendas run much deeper than psychology, a notion in any case shunned by both authors, and how their inner turmoil is located above all in language, of which the landscape is not only a function, but also the gateway to all that is hidden underneath the text's surface.

The landscape, as previously stated, also functions here as a unifying figure, not only triggering both the main and covert elements in the authors' oeuvres, but also providing a conceptually sound conclusion to their analysis. This somewhat circular maneuver pays tribute to one of the few systematic studies on the landscape in Walser's work, Jochen Greven's "Landschaft mit Räubern. Zu Robert Walsers (vermutlich) letztem Prosastück", which, in spite of its unique approach, is ultimately a text more interested in Walser's rapport to Schiller than in Walser's approach to the landscape.<sup>2</sup> Greven nevertheless insightfully notes that the landscape is a prominent feature in what are usually considered to be Walser's earliest piece of writing, 1899s sketch "Der Greifensee", as well as of his last, 1932/3s "Die Landschaft (II)". The landscape comes full-circle in Walser's oeuvre, both prefacing and concluding what Greven deems the central elements of the Swiss author's prose: the progressive transition from open and known territories to small and unknown spaces, the presence of an ironic and self-commenting first-person narrator, the gasp for freedom and autonomy, the clash between Realism and Romanticism, between Materialism and the Absolute. This assessment prompts Greven to ponder, in the first half of his text, before turning his attention to Schiller, over the specificities of the landscape as a narrative device in connection to Walser, amongst which three are of fundamental importance to the initial framing of this research.

Greven initially shapes his approach by poetically claiming that, to Walser, landscape is a framed picture full of mysteries or riddles ("Ein gerahmtes Bildchen voller Rätsel"); it conjures a familiar sight which can be contemplated from a safe distance, at arm's length, the guarded distance of a landscape painter, but that underneath its apparent idyll flows a metaphysical sense of loss. From there,

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<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, two other articles also deal prominently with the landscape in Walser's oeuvre, although both reduce the landscape to a component of Walser's flânerie: Claudia Albes, *Der Spaziergang als Erzählmodell. Studien zu Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adalbert Stifter, Robert Walser und Thomas Bernhard*, 1999; and Bernhard Böschstein, "Sprechen als Wandern. Robert Walsers 'Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet'", 1987.

Greven resorts to the intertwinement of nature and culture in Walser's oeuvre in order to note how these fixed and familiar aspects of the landscape actually play on the underlying illusion of its cultivation and colonization, a notion which this research further investigates by way of Rousseau and of the meanings and implications the term "landscape" has acquired over the centuries, leading up to a contemporary discussion with anthropological undertones on which Carvalho's fictional and essayistic work sheds light. Building upon that, Greven finally remarks on the profound artificiality of the landscape in Walser's oeuvre, especially in the texts written during the author's so-called "Bieler Zeit" (1913–1920), around which this book's first chapter is organized. The landscape is made into an artifact, a highly artificial *décor* which, rather than merely working towards the projection of a given mood, as seems to be Greven's takeaway ("Landschaft als Spiegel der Seele"), is effectively made into a function of the language. This study posits, with Greven but adjusting slightly his emphasis, that the turmoil found in Walser's (and in Carvalho's) work is not projected by the landscape, but by language itself, of which the landscape is arguably its most revealing function.<sup>3</sup> It is only then, by submitting the landscape to the language and its narrative agenda, that one may unravel, in all of its complexity and scope, the fictional stage upon which Walser's and Carvalho's self-reflecting first-person narrators narrate, with their dying breath, a world full of riddles that is slowly undoing itself.

The state of turmoil to which most characters and narrators in Walser's and Carvalho's oeuvre are subjected, of a world that is undoing itself faster than language can stabilize it, speaks of an existential crisis in search of an outlet; it speaks of tiny, off-centered, marginal, logorrheic voices on the verge of extinction desperately trying out words and turns of phrase in the hopes they might stumble upon an answer to the riddle that is their existence, an answer to why this world and all the dark secrets that lurk underneath it. From a strict philosophical point of view, it could hardly be posited that either Walser's or Carvalho's work are properly existential, as they both lack a more sustained discussion on (and representation of) alterity, and downplay all psychological implications, but there is nevertheless an existential cry lurking behind their work, a cry of fundamental conceptual importance inasmuch as it negates what could at a first glance be perceived as two purely cerebral or belletristic bodies of work. This existential cry is pursued throughout this entire research as it greatly underscores one of its central concep-

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<sup>3</sup> Although informed by its usage within the structuralist literary theory as a kind of use to which language can be directed, or as an action contributing towards the development of a narrative, the term 'function' is ultimately being employed here in its grammatical sense, i.e., as an action contributing to a larger action, or as a factor that is related to or dependent upon other factors. See the entry 'function' in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008, 136–137).

tual concerns: that of equating literature with existence, i.e.: to rapport literature first and foremost to the existential aspects of human experience, rather than to a jargon-laden technical vocabulary. To that extent, this study favors the primary sources over the secondary literature, thus placing the literary text itself at the forefront of the research and investing heavily in close reading strategies. Likewise, the essayistic shall be given priority throughout this study by means of both its writing style and its most recurring and influential theoretical sources, such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, W. G. Sebald, and Susan Sontag.

Benjamin and Sebald perform a particularly significant task inasmuch as they not only bind Walser to Carvalho, but also simultaneously open up Carvalho's own work to the German tradition, a central tenet of Carvalho's fiction which receives very little attention beyond its more obvious Kafkaesque implications. Thus, through Benjamin and Sebald, this book explores a few connections between Carvalho and Thomas Bernhard, Heinrich Böll, and Thomas Mann, always reporting these connections back to Walser. Any comparative study of Carvalho within the late nineteenth or twentieth century German tradition, be it with Bernhard, Sebald, or even Kafka, to name but a few, must necessarily first go through Walser. This study seeks to pave the way for such future studies.

In addition, the connection between Walser and Carvalho via the German tradition allows for an intensive immersion in Romanticism and in its legacy over the course of the last two centuries. Romanticism, as already mentioned, plays a central role in this book not only as theoretical fodder, but also as the overall solitary yet self-sufficient tone which subverts notions such as failure, defeatism, marginality, and escapism into viable literary values. In doing so, this research seeks to explore Romanticism's lasting influences as they emerge at the two ends of the twentieth century and at the two margins of the Atlantic, first in Walser's oeuvre and then in Carvalho's, and how these authors' depiction of the landscape actualizes Romanticism's (and Schiller's) belated promise of freedom through nature, albeit with an *unheimlich* twist via Nietzsche, Sebald, and the linguistic challenges posed by the turbulent course of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

The external pressures of Romanticism are also to be felt throughout this study, as they seep into biography and shape the reception of an author's work, especially if that author is either deceased or prone to first-person narration, or both. This Romanticized biography, feeding off undue psychology and idealized suffering, is, in many ways, a curse to the oeuvre of Robert Walser (1878–1956).

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<sup>4</sup> Language's fallibility in the face of the twentieth century, a recurring theme in this book, is succinctly captured by Susanne Zepp when she writes that "[t]he course of the twentieth century shattered the capacity of language to capture events." (Zepp, 2015, 153)

More than sixty years after his death, his death still stands as his life's emblem. Walser is resurrected through the merit of his fall, introduced by means of anecdotal prophecy – that famous passage from *Geschwister Tanner* (1907) which, fifty years *avant la lettre*, foreshadowed his own solitary demise in the snow. The writing proper only comes afterwards, and is not infrequently bent in order to shed light on his troubled life, perversely confirming that from one's death one does not escape even after dead. Walser's oeuvre is held hostage by Walser's biography, by the mystery that was his weightless existence, by the echoes of an "I" whose secrets will never be truly revealed.<sup>5</sup>

Walser's life is a legend begging for theoretical indulgence, and Romanticism would be here to blame – Romanticism was the meter against which Walser measured his worth, at times mirroring its ways, at times writing against its grain. Valerie Heffernan nonchalantly points this out by means of an 'of course': "Of course, we should not forget that according to the romantic cliché, the lonely, forgotten writer, who suffers so much during his lifetime, is usually discovered after his death and celebrated for his genius" (Heffernan, 2007, 77). Walser fits the profile to the dot, like a guilty criminal on a police lineup: the anecdotal quirkiness of his youth in Berlin; the frustrating silence following each of his publications, save for Hesse's early enthusiasm, Benjamin's prophetic short essay, Kafka's belated fandom, or an unhelpful Thomas Mann toying with the idea that one of Walser's short-story collections – *Die Rose* (1925) – might had been written by a child; the ever-looming bankruptcy, the long-lasting poverty; the inescapable (yet debatable) onset of the mental illness inscribed in his family's genes and the lucid refusal to keep on writing, adding up to almost twenty-five years of silence in the sanatorium of Herisau, until the day came when he went out for one of his famous walks and never returned, an outcome already predicted half a century before in one of his books – and the additional decades it nonetheless took before he achieved some degree of posthumous recognition.

By the tone of some critical biographies and less critical theoretical accounts, Walser was one miracle short of plain martyrdom. And yet, to reduce Walser's prose to the turn of phrases of his own autobiography – to let his oeuvre be

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<sup>5</sup> As Walser himself stated to Carl Seelig in one of their Wanderungen: "Das alles ist viel hübscher von außen. Man muß nicht hinter alle Geheimnisse kommen wollen. Das habe ich mein ganzes Leben so gehalten. Ist es nicht schön, daß in unserem Dasein so manches fremd und seltsam bleibt, wie hinter Efeumauern? Das gibt ihm einen unsäglichen Reiz, der immer mehr verloren geht. Brutal wird heute alles begehrt und in Besitz genommen" (Seelig, 1989, 23). Or as Walser, hidden behind another deceptive, enigmatic "I", warns his reader in the short story "Das Kind (III)": "Niemand ist berechtigt, sich mir gegenüber so zu benehmen, als kennte er mich" (P, 78).

tainted by Romantic clichés – would mean to annul his unique voice and literary merits in benefit of a compelling narrative. To accuse Walser – in a Mann-like manner – of being an autistic writer disengaged from reality, to presume he was merely illustrating his own life via his writing, would mean to deny the ingeniousness of his fictional persona. Walser was, *of course*, reacting to his environment, and although one might scholarly connect the dots between the texts and the anecdotes, it would be considerably more rewarding to follow the path of one of Walser’s best commentators: Sebald. Sebald, compounding on Elias Canetti’s reading of the Swiss author, notes that Walser remains eerily absent from his own texts despite the autobiographical echoes they might suggest, an absence that instills abstract undertones in his writing, that exchanges weight for melancholy and thus subverts the equation: where his autobiography might have succumbed to density, his prose thrives on weightless atmosphere.

According to Elias Canetti, what set Walser apart from other writers was the way that in his writing he always denied his innermost anxieties, constantly omitting a part of himself. This absence, so Canetti claimed, was the source of his unique strangeness. It is odd, too, how sparsely furnished with detail is what we know of the story of his life. (...) Walser must at the time have hoped, through writing, to be able to escape the shadows which lay over his life from the beginning, and whose lengthening he anticipates at an early age, transforming them on the page from something very dense to something almost weightless. (Sebald, 2013, 129; 139)

If there is an autobiographical truth in Walser’s oeuvre, let it then be the truth of a fabricated autobiography cut from his own skin but made of different material, made of depth and craft and words that dissolve from one line to the next. Walser’s oeuvre is ultimately as autobiographical as that of a Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), but whereas Pessoa was a functional schizophrenic obstinately curating his own biography, Walser allowed himself to be absorbed by the opacity of his own writing, conjuring with little method from one story to the next an “I” who is by no means affiliated to the “I” from a previous text, or characters who share a name but little memory of a life past. Each full stop decimates a dynasty, leaves behind a parade of familiar faces who, upon closer inspection, have no faces whatsoever.

Walser subverts identity and biography by not making them last. His oeuvre is a ghost town erected on the Romantic-Realist crossroads, pledging allegiance here to one, there to the other, and ultimately to none – his not having an audience freed him from having an audience, from having to conform to genres and comply to expectations.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, this reading of Robert Walser’s oeuvre will

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<sup>6</sup> In Walser’s own words, as reported once again by Seelig: “Je weniger Handlung und einen je kleineren regionalen Umkreis ein Dichter braucht, umso bedeutender ist oft sein Talent. Gegen



not take the autobiographical and the Romantic at face value, but rather focus on the spaces left open between authorship and biography, between affiliations and refractions, between marginality, failure, and heroism.

Lacking the Romanticized deeds of posthumous achievements, Bernardo Carvalho (1960–) must resort to his keen reading of Walser – an otherwise virtually unknown and, until recently, untranslated author in Brazil<sup>7</sup> – in order to carve his own marginal mythology out of the Walserian tradition. After all, a nuisance for the work of contemporary writers is the inconvenience of their still being alive. Their insistence, even, on choosing life over canon. Death is ultimately only simple for the heart, and only preferable in the arts. If Hegel’s aesthetics have imparted Western civilization with one bit of wisdom, is that the only good artist is a dead one. Atop his formaldehyde tower, Hegel knew what was best for art: to lead it to its grave, so that philosophy could write its epitaph.<sup>8</sup> Legends, true or false, find in the epitaph their first tentative formulation; the epitaph cradles the myth in its infancy while teaching it one important lesson: the deed is not what has been done, but its depiction. The main symbolic difference between “work” and “oeuvre”, when referring to an author’s *corpus*, is that the latter tends to be posthumous: while an author’s “work” means the sum of his or her books, an author’s “oeuvre” encompasses all such books plus the ever expanding mystery of his or her existence. Alive and active, Carvalho must thus, through Romanticism, the landscape, and the Walserian tradition, manage his own fictional claims to autobiography, failure, defeatism, marginality, and escapism.

Carvalho is, in many respects, the odd man out in recent Brazilian fiction. He appears to be stylistically and conceptually estranged from his contemporaries, invariably fashioning himself as an outsider despite being critically acclaimed, published by one of Brazil’s most influential publishing houses, recipient of the country’s main literary prizes, and perfectly inserted within the cultural and academic *milieux*. Carvalho’s self-styled outsider status comes not so much from a lack of commercial or critical success, but from its systematic refusal, from his conscious descent into self-imposed exile, his definitive steps towards a Walserian

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Schriftsteller, die in Handlungen exzellieren und gleich die ganze Welt für ihre Figuren brauchen, bin ich von vornherein misstrauisch. Die alltäglichen Dinge sind schön und reich genug, um aus ihnen dichterische Funken schlagen zu können” (Seelig, 1989, 9).

<sup>7</sup> A 2003 edition of *Der Gehülfe* (translated as *O Ajudante*) has long since run out of print. Only in 2011 has *Jakob von Gunten* first appeared in Brazil, and a first, lean collection of short stories, called *Absolutamente Nada e Outras Histórias*, was published as late as 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Following Benedetto Croce’s morbidly compelling criticism of Hegel: “L’Estetica dell’Hegel è, perciò, un elogio funebre: passa a rassegna le forme successive dell’arte, mostra gli stadi progressivi che esse rappresentano di consunzione interna, e le compone tutte nel sepolcro, con l’epigrafe scrittavi sopra dalla Filosofia” (Croce, 1990, 387).



kind of marginality and disappearance. When analyzed chronologically, Carvalho's body of work exposes an author deliberately trying to be marginal in face of a successful formula, choosing, out of principle, obscurity over fame. By doing so, by actively pursuing the solitude of the Walserian tradition as posited here (the link between Walser, Kafka, Bernhard, and Sebald), Carvalho attempts to cast himself as an exile within his own literary generation, and the outcome of such a maneuver is one of the most intriguing and singular voices in recent Brazilian fiction, and one of the few to still be explicitly dealing with the legacy of Romanticism.

In order to not only compare the work of these two authors from the viewpoint of the century and the ocean that stand in between them, but also to unravel the legacy of Romanticism and the historical implications of the landscape from a joint European and Latin-American perspective, this study begins with a literature review on the topic of the landscape which seeks, on the one hand, to first introduce scholars and concepts that shall be called upon as the research unravels, and, on the other, to frame the original approach given to the landscape via Nietzsche, Sebald, and the Dutch poet Armando: that of a vengeful and cruel landscape, indifferent to the suffering of those who roam its surface and to their plight in search of a language that might make sense of a world that is undoing itself around them.

The third chapter follows suit by positing the landscape as an original means of uncovering the poetics of Walser and Carvalho, thus establishing the tone and the baseline for the reading of these authors' oeuvres throughout the entire research. It first seeks to establish the progression of landscape descriptions in Walser's work, showing how his deceptively idyllic and pastoral depictions are in fact subtle gateways to the *unheimlich*, and how this progressive incursion into the *unheimlich* gains momentum as the dissonant elements pick up pace and Walser's fictional world abruptly starts to shrink, exposing, in this progression, the main elements and themes behind Walser's oeuvre. The chapter then expands on these Walserian themes and begins exploring their repercussion within Carvalho's own literary output, showing how the *unheimlich* feeling elicited in Walser's oeuvre is reworked into Carvalho's apocalyptic and deceptively exotic aesthetics, and how this apocalypse, much like Walser's *unheimlich*, surfaces in language and in movement, eventually shedding light on both authors' ambiguous relationship towards the legacy of Romanticism, which this chapter only begins to analyze. Finally, the chapter turns its attention to irony, autobiography, and disappearance, topics explored in further depth in the fourth chapter.

The fourth chapter continues to examine the role played by Romanticism in the authors' oeuvres as they try to come to terms with its legacy. Two topics in particular are pursued in this chapter within a Romantic framework: the role of irony in each author's work and its transmutations over a century and across an ocean; and the implications of the recurring refusal of manual labor voiced by the authors'

characters, a refusal which presupposes two oeuvres that deal primarily with the life of the mind and that, as a result, portray the fate of intellectuals in the turn of two centuries. The contention towards manual labor and the penchant towards depicting the Romantic-yet-not-entirely-Romantic life of the mind are combined throughout the chapter in order to posit a view shared by both authors of “history as failure”, and how such worldview further fuels the aesthetics of strategic marginality championed by Walser and embraced by Carvalho. The chapter also focuses on the central role played by the narrator, and how this narrator prompts a broader analysis of narrative authority and of the artificiality of narration in the authors’ work. The figure of the narrator surfaces as the central pillar in the triangulation between character, narrator, and author, as articulated in the fifth and last chapter.

The fifth chapter draws back from the literature review and the opening chapters in order to show how the landscape provides not only a pathway to the oeuvres of Walser and Carvalho, but also how these two authors set the landscape as the horizon towards which their literary projects flow. The chapter draws upon previous discussions on epidemics and their connection to the landscape as a means of exploring how first Walser’s and then Carvalho’s characters and narrators fall prey to spells of madness and sickness, and how these spells not only underline the role of language in their work, but also mark the irreversible path of their protagonists towards the margins, thus consolidating their status as outsiders and anti-heroes. The chapter also resorts to Carvalho’s reading into Walser’s biography in order to make a final point on the figure of the author and on the use of (deceiving) autobiographical strategies in fiction, thus adding the last leg to the ongoing discussion on the articulation between author, character and narrator. Finally, the chapter seeks to draw conclusions from the recurring debate on nature versus culture as framed throughout the research, and how this debate triggers once again the *unheimlich* in the authors’ narratives, prompting with it the return of the landscape as closed, claustrophobic spaces give way to open, phantasmatic sceneries – vengeful, barren, seemingly sentient landscapes prone to fire and desertification.

The prophetic recurrence of the desert in Walser’s and Carvalho’s oeuvre – or, rather, of the linguistic representation of a desert which illustrates the position of the landscape within their work as a function of their language and narrative agenda – is neither random nor naïve, but the conceptual culmination of the trajectory which this research sought to uncover and analyze. By congregating some of this study’s recurring names around the topic of the desert, such as the late Barthes, the early Lévi-Strauss, and Nietzsche, the conclusion aims at coming full-circle both theoretically and thematically, wrapping up all elements and themes that were triggered by the analysis of the landscape and that ultimately found solace in the landscape, in the literary prophecy of Walser’s and Carvalho’s ecology of failure.

## Table of abbreviations

Table of abbreviations to the work of Robert Walser:

- A – *Aufsätze* (1913)
- F – *Feuer* (1907–1933)
- FKA – *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (1904)
- G – *Der Gehülfe* (1908)
- Gsch – *Geschichten* (1914)
- GT – *Geschwister Tanner* (1907)
- JvG – *Jakob von Gunten* (1909)
- KD – *Kleine Dichtungen* (1914)
- P – *Poetenleben* (1917)
- Ps – *Prosastücke* (1916)
- R – *Der Räuber* (1925)
- S – *Der Spaziergang* (1917)
- T – *Träumen* (1913–1920)

Table of abbreviations to the work of Bernardo Carvalho:

- A – *Aberração* (1993)
- BS – *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos* (1996)
- FM – *O Filho da Mãe* (2009)
- I – *As Iniciais* (1999)
- M – *Mongólia* (2003)
- MFE – *O Mundo Fora dos Eixos* (2005)
- MS – *Medo de Sade* (2000)
- NN – *Nove Noites* (2002)
- O – *Onze* (1995)
- R – *Reprodução* (2013)
- SP – *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo* (2007)
- T – *Teatro* (1998)

## 2 Literature review: Landscape's revenge

Towards the end of his life, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) decided the whole alphabet was in dire need of a sprucing up. Being well versed in matters both artistic and scientific, he proceeded to set out millimetric rules behind the geometry of each Roman majuscule, the instructions encompassing both written theory and illustrated examples. The volume, aptly titled *Of the Just Shaping of Letters*, was published in 1525 as part of his theoretical treatise on applied geometry, in which Dürer – in the true spirit of Renaissance – explored the newly introduced possibilities made available both by the printing press and by recent mathematical breakthroughs.

“In our Germany, most excellent Willibald,” – begins the artist, and where one might have expected the caring words of a feverish, dying old man addressing his long-time friend and patron, Dürer instead veers off into a socio-pictorial reproach – “are to be found at the present day many young men of a happy talent for the Art Pictorial, who without any artistic training whatever, but taught only by their daily exercise of it, have run riot like an unpruned tree”. Such painters, by relying on their own uneducated whims, ignore that the “sane judgment abhors nothing so much as a picture perpetrated with no technical knowledge, although with plenty of care and diligence”. To these unpruned young men Albrecht Dürer offers a redeeming solution: Geometry. “Now the sole reason why painters of this sort are not aware of their own error is that they have not learnt Geometry, without which no one can either be or become an absolute artist; but the blame for this should be laid upon their masters, who themselves are ignorant of this art” (Dürer, 1965, 1).

Not a hint of hypocrisy is to be found in Dürer’s reproach. The German master himself, while journeying through Venice some twenty years prior, had sought the necessary – and, by then, pioneering – instruction in the blossoming field of geometry. In one of the many letters sent to the very same Willibald Pirckheimer during his Venetian sojourn, Dürer remarks that he “should like to travel to Bologna to learn the secrets of the art of perspective, which a man there is willing to teach me” (Dürer, 2010, 37).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The identity of the instructor sought out by Dürer is not known, although Andrew Morrall suspects it to have been either Scipione del Ferro (1465–1526) or “the more famous Luca Pacioli [1445–1517], with whom Leonardo had closely worked, illustrating the former’s geometrical treatise, *De divina proportione*” (Morrall, 2010, 114). *N.B.* All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. In the interest of length, and with a few exceptions, translations into English are only provided for citations quoted in the body of the text.

Having acquired widespread reputation and renown since an early age, Dürer combined both the financial and the intellectual means that would ultimately place him in the epicenter of the invention of the landscape as a modern phenomenon: its transition from the medieval notion of “an area owned by a lord or inhabited by a particular group of people”, to the more modern and less factual usage as “representation of scenery” (Whyte, 2002, 13). The landscape as a modern phenomenon is the progeny of a very unique Italo-Flemish lineage that would reach its peak in the seventeenth century and start fading off in the early eighteenth as the two nations began to drift apart culturally. Dürer, however, was able to travel extensively through Italy and the Low Countries, and thus experience at first hand the burgeoning rapport between these two countries, a snippet of which he registered in his *Memoirs of journeys to Venice and the Low Countries*, written between 1506 and 1521 and published posthumously.<sup>2</sup>

Not only did Dürer seek counsel from Italian masters in the field of design and Euclidian geometry, he also set himself in dialogue with leading Flemish landscape painters such as Joachim Patinir (ca. 1485–1524), a pivotal figure on the usage of perspective in landscape painting. Dürer, adding intensive networking to his already heralded qualities, managed to capture the infancy of landscape representation in both his writings and paintings, despite never having promoted it to the foreground.<sup>3</sup> The landscape was instead used by Dürer as a means of providing further depth to a religious motif, increasing its impact and thus exuding a sense of control and mastery of the overall arrangement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, in passing, that through his diary Dürer reveals himself to be quite the modern traveler, favoring the factual (and sometimes bureaucratically tedious) over the colorful or the religious – a preference that subterraneously informs this entire research.

<sup>3</sup> Which does not mean the landscape was to be taken lightly: Pirckheimer notes that Dürer had intended to write about landscape, a project unfortunately stymied by the artist's death (Dürer, 2011, 326–327).

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Andrews discusses at length the philosophical chicken-or-egg conundrum lurking behind the independency of landscape painting by pondering whether the landscape is a genre in itself or a mere setting to what really matters: the human drama – “is landscape representation ever independent of human narrative even if the human presence is removed?” According to Andrews, the discussion regarding the hierarchy of subjects in art divided sixteenth and seventeenth century artists and theorists into two groups: the group of those who understood landscape paintings as “proper” works, and the group of those who did not, seeing in them nothing but *divertissements* (or *parergon*: ‘by-work’) which told no worthy story whatsoever. Andrews' overarching argument, which shall be resumed later on, goes as far as to posit landscape as periphery: “It has been argued that the German *Landschaft* or *Lantschaft* was not originally a view of nature but rather a geographic area defined by political boundaries. In the late fifteenth century, the land around a town was referred to as its landscape, a meaning that still survives in some places (...). In the topographical view, the enviroing landscape serves as the natural

Dürer's investment in the idea of artistic mastery – as per his diatribe against the unpruned young painters – was made quite evident by the (mostly) supplementary yet meticulous treatment he gave to landscape. His approach to landscape representation was based on careful observation, a trait that was to become characteristic of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Flemish art. The journals he kept during his journeys through the Low Countries, although primarily concerned with keeping track of his travel expenses and table manners (which gift was given to whom and why), are nonetheless drawn here and there to the pictorial description of a beautiful view.<sup>5</sup> But careful observation was futile without its technical counterpart, without the necessary scientific tools granting the artist complete control over his creation. Hence geometry, and hence also the need for a methodical approach to the work of art: “For even with such great diligence I could hardly accomplish a face in half a year – and the panel has nearly a hundred faces, this not including the garments and the landscape and the thousands of other things that are in it” (Dürer 1872, 29).<sup>6</sup> Due to the “growing emphasis on the design and brushwork of the artist, rather than on the use of expensive materials”, as Denis Cosgrove (1984, 87) puts it, the landscape provided the artist an ideal opportunity in which to display his technical and imaginative skills, to prove his virtuosity in front of the canvas. Centuries before it even became an issue within the artistic field, Dürer had already sketched the first incipient lines towards the notion of art as a conscious product. And the representation of landscape played a decisive role in it.

It could be argued that landscape (both in terms of its representation and of its actual trimming and shaping within the confines of a garden or a villa, for instance), given its close affinity to cartography and Euclidian geometry,

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setting for the portrait's main subject, the city; and that environment is understood as being part of the territorial domain of the city. *Landschaft's* status as periphery to, and setting for, the main subject is analogous to the contemporary status of landscape in relation to the religious subjects of painting” (Andrews, 1999, 28–29; 30; 41).

<sup>5</sup> “Middelburg is a good town; it has a very beautiful town hall with a fine tower. There is much art shown in all things here. There are very rich and beautiful stalls in the abbey, and a splendid gallery of stone and a beautiful parish church. The town is excellent for sketching. Zeeland is beautiful and wonderful to see on account of the water, for it stands higher than the land.” Or also: “This house lies high, and there is a most beautiful view at which one cannot but wonder. And I think that in all German lands there is not the like of it”; “I paid 1 stiver to be allowed to go up the tower at Antwerp, which is said to be higher than that at Strasburg. From thence I saw the whole town on all sides, which was very pleasant.” (Dürer, 2010, 75; 57; 82)

<sup>6</sup> Or alternatively: “Herr Georg Tausy hat sich mir von selbst erboten, ich möchte ihm mit dem gleichem Fleisse und in der Grösse dieser Tafel ein Marienbild in einer Landschaft machen...” (Dürer and Briefe, 1872, 35).

was in fact a broader attempt at exerting control over space, and thus an all-out Renaissance illusion (albeit a fertile one). The concept of landscape is intimately connected to the notion of linear perspective as first discussed in Leon Battista Alberti's (1404–1472) *Della Pittura* (1435–6). Although Alberti does not mention the landscape other than within the inventory of all good subjects fit for a painting (or for a *istoria* – “Grandissima opera del pittore sarà l'*istoria*”<sup>7</sup>), Ian Whyte resorts to Alberti's treatise in order to argue that there were

close links between the landscape idea and the development of linear perspective as a way of controlling space; both were linked to the growing domination of the natural environment associated with the development of capitalism. (...) The illusion of control provided by the new ways of structuring the world through landscape art was often matched by real power and control over farms and estates by artistic patrons. (Whyte, 2002, 56)

Christopher Wood, writing on the legacy of Albrecht Altdorfer (1480–1538) and the origins of landscape, formulates the same transition in more charged tones:

Landscape in the West was itself a symptom of modern loss, a cultural form that emerged only after humanity's primal relationship to nature had been disrupted by urbanism, commerce and technology. For when mankind still 'belonged' to nature in a simple way, nobody needed to paint a landscape. (Wood, 1993, 25)

Indeed, beyond the virginal and theoretical charms of Euclidian geometry, Italian and Flemish artists were also reacting to tangible economic and urban realities that took place throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as the large-scale drainage of both Venice and the Scheldt estuary, the development of commercialized agriculture, the increase in deforestation and water pollution, as well as the rapid growth of urban centers. The increasing amount of peasants seeking a better fate away from their rural backgrounds, combined with the pre-industrial smog and general insanitary conditions of urban agglomerations, “encouraged nostalgia and perhaps a sense of guilt for a past landscape that was being rapidly changed by contemporary commercial enterprise”, argues Whyte (2002, 57–62), thus creating a lucrative niche for artists. Landscape paintings became desirable objects in which the artist could compose scenery as to enhance its idyllic nature, relocating monuments and generally dramatizing locations.

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<sup>7</sup> “Dirò io quella istoria essere copiosissima in quale a suo luoghi sieno permisti vecchi, giovani, fanciulli, donne, fanciulle, fanciullini, polli, catellini, uccellini, cavalli, pecore, edifici, province, e tutte simili cose.” (Alberti, 1973, 68)

This tension between the ideal and the real, the observable and the desirable, is also what fuelled the pastoral tradition. “Pastoral landscapes are not simply idealized representations of nature”, writes Louisa Mackenzie (2011, 6), “they are about the human and social dramas that play out in them”. Which is not to say, despite the complexity of its socio-cultural mediations, that the pastoral is immune to a high degree of idealization. In fact, the fashion quickly spread and intensified throughout the pre-industrializing nations of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe, especially in Britain. In short, the pastoral tradition “celebrated an idealized version of shepherding drawn from Virgil and other Classical authors, provided an escape, mentally and sometimes physically, from the pressures of urban and court life” (Whyte, 2002, 70). Pastoral writers, poets, and painters attempted to counterpoint the greedy and grinding charms of industrial development, but the movement ended up collapsing under the capitalist-by-way-of-Protestantism ideal of ‘(self-) improvement’.<sup>8</sup> The representation of landscape shifted from idyllic to ideological, as a tool for uniting a growing heterogeneous populace. Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) is a pivotal figure in the re-signification of the landscape and its shifting towards the national, the commercial, and the expansionist – or, as Raymond Williams (1975, 62) brands Defoe’s narrative world: “[i]t is a frankly commercial world, with hardly any pastoral tinge”. Such traits are abundant in Defoe’s *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–26), as is his emphasis on the idea of the landscape as a cultural construction.

In the first of the thirteen letters that make up the three volumes of *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Defoe quickly asserts that his business “is not to lay out the geographical situation of places” (Defoe, 1971, 100), as if to warn the reader that he is not interested in what is merely “given” by nature, geography being a contingency humankind cannot overcome. Instead, he’ll focus his attention on the improvements and accomplishments carried out on the landscape, a hymn to scientific, economic, and cultural progress. Hence the unending praise to roads, canals, manufactures, Royal Exchanges, well-kept houses, agrarian advances, and the transformation of whale fat into oil for trains (Defoe, 1971, 632). Defoe goes as far as to praise wilderness and the woods for its striking resemblance to a “planted garden as far as the eye can see” (Defoe, 1971, 111).

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<sup>8</sup> As Raymond Williams (1975, 22; 35) puts it: “What is much more significant is the internal transformation of just this artificial mode in the direction and in the interest of a new kind of society: that of a developing agrarian capitalism. (...) These celebrations of a feudal or an aristocratic order (...) have been widely used, in an idealist retrospect, as a critique of capitalism. The emphases on obligation, on charity, on the open door to the needy neighbour, are contrasted, in a familiar vein of retrospective radicalism, with the capitalist thrust, the utilitarian reduction of all social relationships to a crude moneyed order”.



Nature, in short, should be trod with a gentlemanly five-o'clock distrust: it does invite one in, but one should exercise great self-restraint in its company, making sure beforehand that all necessary precautions were taken and that the environment is "fully prepared to receive". The ideal location of nature should be one "capable of all that is pleasant and delightful in nature, and improved by art to every extreme that Nature is able to produce" (Defoe, 1971, 98–99). The resulting location would still be nature, only an enhanced version of it, Nature with a capital N – a synonym for landscape.

Defoe's view of the landscape as a cultural construction is not without its royal affiliation – the English writer pays tribute to King William and Queen Mary for having "introduced each of them two customs, which by the people's imitating them became the two idols of the town, and indeed of the whole kingdom": the queen introduced the love for calico and chinaware; the king brought in the passion for gardening and painting (Defoe, 1971, 175). The economic progress achieved through commerce and industry – its (positive, by Defoe's account) impact on nature and on the lives of people –, was then culturally matched, and even improved, by the new ways in which landscape could be manipulated and represented. Landscape was no longer an object to be seen, it was – to quote W. J. T. Mitchell (2002, 1) – "a process by which social and subjective identities are formed". And, as processes go, Defoe's understanding of landscape implied an acquired taste that required teaching. Therefore his claims to novelty and superiority:

But I find none has spoken of what I call the distant glory of all these buildings: There is a beauty in these things at a distance, taking them *en passant*, and in perspective, which few people value, and fewer understand; and yet here they are more truly great, than in all their private beauties whatsoever; Here they reflect beauty, and magnificence upon the whole country, and give a kind of a character to the island of Great Britain in general. The banks of the Sein [sic] are not thus adorned from Paris to Roan [sic], or from Paris to the Loign [sic] above the city: The Danube can show nothing like it above and below Vienna, or the Po above and below Turin; the whole country here shines with a lustre not to be described; Take them in a remote view, the fine seats shine among the trees as jewels shine in a rich coronet; in a near sight they are mere pictures and paintings; at a distance they are all nature, near hand all art; but both in the extremest beauty. (Defoe, 1971, 175)

Defoe's chauvinism exposes a series of eighteenth century landscape-related ideological goals: (1) the vanishing of the pastoral tradition under the weight of development and improvement<sup>9</sup>; (2) the creation of a national and communal

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<sup>9</sup> Whence Terry Eagleton's famous blurb on Defoe's oeuvre: "An eighteenth-century reader, raised on a high-minded diet of elegy and pastoral, must have felt stunned on first encountering

identity through a shared landscape<sup>10</sup>; and (3) the pre-eminence of the landscape-as-cultural-construction, or, as Simon Schama (1995, 61) puts it, “landscapes are culture before they are nature – constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock”.

The ideological views highlighted by Defoe in *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* had already been prominently featured in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), albeit under a different textual approach. Instead of venturing into a lengthy analysis of the novel, it would be more productive, for the purposes of this literature review, to simply point out the novel's kinship to a range of groundbreaking prose works that also deal with the notion of landscape as nation (or ideology), such as Jonathan Swift's (1667–1745) *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), or Laurence Sterne's (1713–1768) *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1765). In their own way, these works have channeled into literature the relationship between mankind and nature, and have thus contributed, unknowingly, to the inception of a modern quarrel from which neither Walser nor Carvalho are immune, and which this research seeks to explore: the ever recurring debate between nature and culture.

In addition, due to its eclectic and prolific nature, *Robinson Crusoe* has exerted ongoing influence over the centuries on a wide range of theoretical debates, from philosophy to economy, from feminism to post-colonialism. A landscape-relevant example among those is that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whose writings frequently resort to the figure of *Robinson Crusoe* as the idealized, autonomous man whom one should aspire to become. Robinson – even if *en passant* – is no stranger to *Du Contrat Social* (1762), where he makes a brief guest appearance as master of his own domain, sovereign of his island “as long as he was its only inhabitant” (Rousseau, 2012e, 194) – a quite fitting example to a book that sought to dismiss the misconception that granted monarchs divine right to rule, when in fact a fair society should be guaranteed by undivided, popular sovereignty.

One could do worse than speculate that Rousseau fashioned himself as a Crusoe of sorts, the intimacy being such that the Swiss philosopher and the

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the jagged prose of a Daniel Defoe, with its street-wise populism and delight in the commonplace” (Eagleton, 2006, 20).

<sup>10</sup> “The naturalization of the land played an important part in creating changed communal identities within a nation that had a high proportion of immigrants. Immigrants were attracted by the prosperity of Amsterdam and the northern Netherlands, by an open market economy with capital being amassed for investment, and by Protestantism. (...) Since there was no monarch to symbolize national identity, the Dutch turned to their land in the creation of a communal identity.” (Whyte, 2002, 63)

fictional character were on a first-name basis: always Robinson, never Crusoe. When Rousseau is feeling blue in Paris, he thinks of Robinson<sup>11</sup>; when Rousseau wants to explain his need for solitude and clarify he is mostly an introvert, not a misanthrope, he thinks of Robinson<sup>12</sup>; when Rousseau yearns for some time alone with his dog, he climbs onto a boat and rows into the lake wishing “it were an ocean” and thinks of Robinson.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond politics or autobiography, *Robinson Crusoe*'s influence is most striking in *Émile, ou De l'Éducation* (1762). In it, Rousseau tries to balance the divide between nature and culture, thus continuing the discussion started in *Du Contrat Social* as how to coadunate man's sovereignty with society's intrinsic wretchedness: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (Rousseau, 2012b, 2). Although Rousseau opens the book with such a grim sentence, it soon becomes clear that there is no way of escaping from the corrupt reach of society, and therefore the only solution would be to make the best of it by devising, through education, the most unifying rapport between “l'homme civil” and “le corps social”: “Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole” (Rousseau, 2012b, 8).

In order to accomplish the task, Rousseau advocates “l'éducation naturelle” as a way of rendering a man<sup>14</sup> fit for all human conditions. However, “before daring to undertake the formation of a man, one must have made oneself a man.

11 “...plus seul au milieu de Paris que Robinson dans son Isle...” (Rousseau, 2012f, 235)

12 “J. J. n'a pas toujours fui les hommes, mais il a toujours aimé la solitude. Il se plaisoit avec les amis qu'il croyoit avoir, mais il se plaisoit encore plus avec lui-même. Il chérissoit leur société; mais il avoit quelquefois besoin de se recueillir, & peut-être eut-il encore mieux aimé vivre toujours seul que toujours avec eux. Son affection pour le roman de Robinson m'a fait juger qu'il ne se fut pas cru si malheureux que lui, confiné dans son Isle déserte. Pour un homme sensible, sans ambition, & sans vanité, il est moins cruel & moins difficile de vivre seul dans un désert que seul parmi ses semblables.” (Rousseau, 2012f, 215–216)

13 “Cependant, pour complaire à mon pauvre chien, qui n'aimoit pas autant que moi de si longues stations sur l'eau, je suivois d'ordinaire un but de promenade; c'étoit d'aller débarquer à la petite isle, de m'y promener une heure ou deux, ou de m'étendre au sommet du tertre sur le gazon, pour m'assouvir du plaisir d'admirer ce lac & ses environs, pour examiner & disséquer toutes les herbes qui se trouvoient à ma portée, & pour me bâtir, comme un autre Robinson, une demeure imaginaire dans cette petite isle” (Rousseau, 2012g, 122).

14 The gendered pronoun strikes quite an uncomfortable chord throughout the literature review; it has however been kept unchanged in the interest of textual fidelity, and to further reflect the period's male-centric discourse.

One must find within oneself the example the pupil ought to take for his own”, and such example should be inculcated into the child’s mind before it develops a conscience of its own: “While the child is still without knowledge, there is time to prepare everything that comes near him in order that only objects suitable for him to see meet his first glances” (Rousseau, 2012b, 120). And who better to shape a child’s still unconscious mind than Robinson himself (despite his own paradoxical lack of a proper “éducation naturelle”)? Rousseau poses the rhetorical question: “Since we absolutely must have books, there exists one which, to my taste, provides the most felicitous treatise on natural education. (...) What, then, is this marvelous book? Is it Aristotle? Is it Pliny? Is it Buffon? No. It is *Robinson Crusoe*” (Rousseau, 2012b, 309).

The child – Émile – should fashion him or herself as a castaway of sorts, much like Robinson Crusoe, living in a metaphorical deserted island away from all undesired and corrupt influences – until the time comes when Émile, master of his domain, would brave into society with a mindset already made, self-sufficient and sovereign. In the meantime, Émile should busy himself with “his mansion, his goats, his plantations”, learning life from life itself and “not from books” – in short, Émile should aspire to be “Robinson himself” (Rousseau, 2012b, 309). As Christie McDonald and Stanley Hoffman shrewdly point out in *Rousseau and Freedom* (2010, 165), this is yet another of *Émile, ou De l’Éducation*’s contradictions:

The tutor claims that he wishes Emile to be immersed in thoughts of Robinson, and even to believe that he is Robinson. This reveals more about Rousseau’s methodology of constraint than it does about an ideal of natural education. If Emile truly identifies with Robinson, he may fail to see the most obvious way in which he is nothing like him: Emile is never alone, isolated, or away from the guiding hand of his tutor.

However enticed and fascinated by Robinson he might have been, Rousseau’s view of the landscape ultimately differs from Defoe’s. Rousseau’s understanding and usage of the landscape can be pinpointed to two specific texts: *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (1782) and *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Whereas – *grosso modo* – the former focuses on the botanic (and soon to be Romantic) nature of the landscape, the latter deploys the landscape as a means towards a moralizing tale on the value of autonomy and authenticity. Nonetheless, despite their formal and symbolic differences, a common trait unites both texts, a trait that has its origins – once again – in *Robinson Crusoe*.

In *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau – somewhat heavy-handedly – conjures nature in order to set the tone of his high-mindedness: for instance, in the dichotomy between “the cliffs of Meillerie, amidst winter and ice, with horrible

chasms in front of me” – representing the temptations of flesh and passion – and Julie’s garden, “a secluded spot which is her favorite place to walk and which she calls her Elysium” (Rousseau, 2012c, 319; 109).<sup>15</sup> Saint-Preux (Julie’s tutor), lured by the garden’s mystery, finally slips into it and is at once “struck by a pleasantly cool sensation which dark shade, bright and lively greenery, flowers scattered on every side, the bubbling of flowing water, and the songs of a thousand birds impressed on [his] imagination at least as much as [his] senses”, but, at the same time – and this is an important conceptual frame for this research –, Saint-Preux thought he was looking at the wildest, most solitary place in nature, and it seemed to him that he was the first mortal who ever had set foot in that desert (Rousseau, 2012c, 110). Moreover, despite the garden’s Robinson-esque virginity, Saint-Preux cannot avoid remarking that the place is not only “quite close to the house”, but also carefully hidden and masked by the “alders and hazelnuts that leave only two narrow passages along the sides” (Rousseau, 2012c, 110). In other words: despite the garden’s apparent wilderness, it is in fact surrounded by carefully planned landscape – its wilderness is nothing but a tamed structure.

James Swenson explores this thesis by highlighting the pattern found both in *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* and *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*: man’s hand inevitably shapes nature. In *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* Saint-Preux notes the “surprising mixture of wild and cultivated nature revealed throughout the hand of men, where one would have thought they had never penetrated” (Rousseau, 2012b, 69) a theme later revisited in *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*’s seventh promenade:

I was alone. I sunk into the crevices of the mountain, going from shrub to shrub, from rock to rock, until I came to a recess so secluded and of a wilderness such as I had never seen before. (...) I compared myself to those great travelers who discover a deserted island and said to myself with complacency: I am doubtless the first mortal who has ever penetrated thus far. (Rousseau, 2012d, 478)

Once again the Robinson-esque imagery: the self-sufficient and fearless traveler, the deserted island... The only problem now being the fact that the island is not so deserted as it first seemed: a nearby noise catches Rousseau’s attention, and the philosopher pushes through the bushes to find “a stocking

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<sup>15</sup> The dichotomy is also a projection of Saint-Preux’s state of mind: “La même chose m’étoit arrivée autrefois à Meillerie en découvrant la maison du baron d’Etange. Le monde n’est jamais divisé pour moi qu’en deux régions: celle où elle est & celle où elle n’est pas” (Rousseau, 2012c, 33).

manufactory” not twenty feet away from where he previously basked in solitude. Rousseau is torn:

I cannot express the confuse and contradictory agitation which I felt in my heart upon this discovery. My first movement was a sentiment of joy on finding myself once again among humans, where I had imagined myself entirely alone. Quicker than lightning, however, this sentiment, soon yielded to a much more durable feeling of regret, at not being able to escape – even in the burrows of the Alps – from the cruel hands of my fellow men, eager to torment me. (Rousseau, 2012d, 479)

The philosopher concludes – not without a sway of pride – that Switzerland is a garden, the only place on earth endowed with this union between wild nature and human industry, to which Swenson adds: an *English garden*.<sup>16</sup>

Rousseau had, in fact, visited England and its famous gardens in 1766, and he was not all that impressed. He used one of Saint-Preux’s letters to Julie (the eleventh) to voice his discontentment regarding the gardens’ lack of “culture”: “Everything is verdant, fresh, vigorous, and the gardener’s hand is not to be seen: nothing belies the idea of a desert Island which came to my mind as I entered, and I see no human footprints. Ah! said Monsieur de Wolmar, that is because we have taken great care to erase them” (Rousseau, 2012c, 121).

Not that Rousseau would dismiss the idea of the landscape as a cultural construction that requires taste in order to be appreciated,<sup>17</sup> but what puzzles him (or Saint-Preux) is rather why should they “take such pains to hide from themselves those they had taken; were it not better to have taken none at all?”, to which Julie replies that Saint-Preux shouldn’t be “gauging the labor from the effect” before launching into a *Little Prince*-esque remark: “Those who love [nature] and cannot go so far to find her are reduced to doing her violence, forcing her in a way to come and live with them, and all this cannot be done without a modicum of illusion” (Rousseau, 2012c, 122).<sup>18</sup> Whereas Rousseau might have harbored a conflicting view between “wild” and “cultivated” landscapes (although ultimately

<sup>16</sup> “Switzerland is a *jardin anglais*. It appears to be entirely natural but is in fact a pure artifice, its flowers the traditional flowers of rhetoric.” (Swenson, 2000, 145)

<sup>17</sup> The philosopher writes in *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (2012b, 43): “C’est ainsi qu’un peintre, à l’aspect d’un beau paysage ou devant un beau tableau, s’extasie à des objets qui ne sont pas même remarqués d’un spectateur vulgaire”.

<sup>18</sup> It is worthwhile to recall Julie’s famous reply to Saint-Preux’s bafflement regarding the Elysée: “Il est vrai, dit-elle, que la nature a tout fait, mais sous ma direction & il n’y a rien là que je n’aie ordonné” (Rousseau, 2012c, 111). As if to convey that the *Elysée* is the garden nature would craft if nature were able to craft gardens – or, alternatively, to posit it as the ideal of ‘naturalness’ behind the artifice of its creation.

tending to be associated with the former), the England he visited in 1766 was ploughing ahead into Picturesque mode, a strong reaction to the ideal of cultivated land incensed in Defoe's work. The gardens Rousseau visited were already being modeled so as to reflect Picturesque's emphasis on the scenic, a modicum of illusion better conveyed in the dictum that a landscape should be worthy of a painting – or at least resemble one.

As William Gilpin (1724–1804) formulates it in his *Observations of the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales* (1789, 25), “when we introduce a scene on canvas; when the eye is to be confined within the frame of a picture, and can no longer range among the varieties of nature, the aids of art become more important”. Gilpin is in fact reinforcing his theory of the Picturesque, a theory he posited in his *Essays on Prints* (1768) and according to which the beauty behind an ideal landscape ought to be agreeable in a picture. Gilpin concedes: “Nature is always great in design. She is an admirable colourist also; and harmonizes tints with infinite variety and beauty; but she is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole”. Thus the artist, by resorting to “the principles of picturesque beauty”, adapts and frames the landscape, making it worthy of our sensibility (Gilpin, 1789, 32). Gilpin, whilst traveling through Wales and England (and in a way revealing the extent to which the “modicum of illusion” regarding the landscape might turn into an idyllic denial of the land's foremost military or agricultural purposes), judges fitting to criticize modern fortifications for being “ill calculated for the purposes of landscape”, as well as to point out the spots where nature was at its Picturesque best: “Breknoc is a very romantic place, abounding with broken grounds, torrents, dismantled towers, and ruins of every kind. I have seen few places where a landscape-painter might get a collection of better ideas” (Gilpin, 1789, 92; 91).

Gilpin's model of the Picturesque is informed, on the one hand, by his nostalgic preference for the pastoral over arable improvements,<sup>19</sup> and, on the other, by Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Digressing on the ambiguous nature of water, for instance, Gilpin comments on both its “slow and solemn pace (...) tranquil, and majestic”, as well as on its violence: “all was agitation and uproar; and every

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<sup>19</sup> “The banks of the Wye consist almost entirely either of wood or of pasturage; which I mention as a circumstance of peculiar value in landscape. Furrowed-lands and waving corn, however charming in pastoral poetry, are ill-accommodated to painting. The painter never desires the hand of art to touch his grounds. – But if art must stray among them; if it must mark out the limits of property, and turn them to the uses of agriculture, he wishes that these limits may, as much as possible, be concealed; and that the lands they circumscribe may approach as nearly as may be to nature; that is, that they may be pasturage. Pasturage not only presents an agreeable surface; but the cattle which graze it add great variety and animation to the scene.” (Gilpin, 1789, 44)



steep and every rock stared with wildness and terror” (Gilpin, 1789, 39). Such nerve-shattering dichotomy is what underlines Burke’s treatise on the sublime and the beautiful: the two fundamental and conflicting instincts (or passions) of humankind towards propagation and preservation – “The passions belonging to the preservation of the individual turn wholly on pain and danger: those which belong to *generation* have their origin in gratifications and *pleasures*” (Burke, 2010, 37). Gratifying and pleasurable traits – such as smoothness, delicacy, grace, speciousness – were considered beautiful, whereas danger- or pain-inducing experiences – such as darkness, infinity, privation, vastness – were deemed sublime. Whyte (2002, 72) accentuates the influence of Burke’s ideas “on landscape aesthetics in Europe and America in the later eighteenth century”, influencing “both the Picturesque and Romantic views of landscape”. Indeed, Burke’s ideas – via both the Picturesque movement and Illuminist attempts at co-opting the new aesthetic categories of the “beautiful” and the “sublime” – played a decisive role in the Romantic placement of nature “at the heart of cultural interest in nineteenth-century Europe” (Whyte, 2002, 103).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) – to name a paragon of continental Enlightenment –, took the time to rather ironically thank Burke for compiling data on the beautiful and the sublime, but all the while stressing how unequipped Mr. Burke was to properly understand and clarify the mental faculties involved in the phenomenon. Kant went about it swiftly, first commending Burke on being the most important author to adopt this mode of treatment, and then highlighting that “this mode of treatment” – i.e. empirical, psychological observations – pales in comparison to philosophy’s mighty scientific nature.<sup>20</sup> An Illuminist to the core, one cannot reproach Kant for resorting to Science in order to overcome Nature.

This research, however, veers less the way of Kant’s plight, and more towards Thomas Gray’s state of mind. One of Gray’s (1716–1771) best known works, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), conjures from the very first stance an imagery heavy in that which six years later Burke would typify as the sublime:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (Gray 1854, 94)

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<sup>20</sup> “Man kann mit der jetzt durchgeführten transzendentalen Exposition der ästhetischen Urteile nun auch die physiologische, wie sie ein Burke und viele scharfsinnige Männer unter uns bearbeitet haben, vergleichen, um zu sehen, wohin eine bloß empirische Exposition des Erhabenen und Schönen führe. Burke, der in dieser Art der Behandlung als der vornehmste Verfasser genannt zu werden verdient...” (Kant, 2004, 204)



Gray's poems are oft oriented by a solitary figure strolling through a deserted, desolated landscape, much like Rousseau's *promeneur*, and much like Walser and Carvalho. Encountering but fleeting vestiges of mankind (the ploughman who exits the scene), Gray's introspective wanderer projects his emotions onto the surrounding landscapes, unintentionally opposing Kant's attempts at an analytical analysis of Nature. Instead of typified, rational landscapes, Gray offers emotional ones: the landscape as the manifestation of states of interior emotion.

However interior and solitary the sceneries,<sup>21</sup> the poet's depiction of them is not without its social comforts: be it the possibility of a communal encounter – for instance in the closing stances of Gray's poem, when the solitary wanderer gains a friend (albeit a dead one)<sup>22</sup> –, be it in art's implicit promise of safety: after experiencing the most sublime of landscapes, one may always close the book and return to the social apparatus of civilization. Through a shared range of aesthetic categories which emphasized the emotional rapport between observer and surroundings, both Gray and Gilpin helped to establish a common vocabulary which not only promoted the quest for such interior, sublime experiences, but which also provided the tools for its communication. Whyte (2002, 98) remarks that while Gray "has been considered to be one of the first Picturesque tourists in terms of the vocabulary he used to describe landscape", Gilpin's later writings have definitively "encouraged Picturesque tourism and the appreciation of landscape by middle-class travellers".<sup>23</sup>

In hindsight, the tool provided by a shared Picturesque vocabulary – enhanced by the popularity of the affiliated poets – meant a redefinition of Britain's cultural life: the middle-class was now mobile (both in practical and aesthetical terms). "The eighteenth-century 'discovery of Britain' by educated travellers led to British landscapes being viewed as cultural and aesthetic objects", writes Whyte (2002, 91), and thus equivalent to the aristocratic landscapes seen via Italy and the Alps in the then well-established *Grand Tour*<sup>24</sup> – a *Tour* that thrived on golden-lit,

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**21** Burke's take on the beautiful implies a social silver lining – he can conceive no greater pain than "the total and perpetual exclusion from all society", thus making solitude both painful and sublime (Burke, 2010, 40).

**22** "Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere, / Heav'n did a recompence as largely send; / He gave to mis'ry (all he had) a tear, / He gain'd from heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend." (Gray, , 110)

**23** A further confirmation of Whyte's thesis is provided by John Dixon Hunt (1989, 136): "Gray was, of course, among the pioneers of picturesque travel. It was Gray to whom Gilpin first submitted one of his picturesque tours and Gray who urged publication".

**24** "The Grand Tour involved the wealthy from France, the Low Countries, Germany and Sweden, but it was most strongly associated with the British aristocracy, who supplied by far the greatest number of travellers. The classic route of the British tourist took in France, the Low Countries, the Alps and parts of Germany, but the focus was on Italy and especially Rome, although Venice,

timeless pastoral sceneries (Black, 2003, 51). Due to the massive popularization of Picturesque travel literature towards the end of the eighteenth century, British sceneries became socially and culturally valid both to the middle classes and to the aristocracy. What's more, they were imbued with a sense of "Britishness" that would afterwards reflect on Romanticism's focus on national identities.

The development of Picturesque tourism in Britain was, of course, closely linked to the spread of industrialization and public transportation, to the extent that rare was the landscape unaffected by coal-smudged factories or crisscrossing railways. Not only did these sights interfere physically with the pristine, rural (and by then highly idealized) landscape, they also distanced the traveler from it. Railways, noisy and fast, reduced the landscape to a nineteenth century blur and exposed the odds at which the pace of industrial life and traditional values were – a phenomenon nowadays best typified by David Harvey's (1991) concept of "time-space compression". In response to fume-intensive chimneys and the implicit back-breaking, insanitary labor – and despite the best efforts of engineers and architects in erecting mesmerizing buildings and structures –, artists shunned industrialization and turned their attentions to landscapes threatened with poetic extinction.

With the turn of the century, as an overall feeling of glory was being replaced by utilitarianism, and as the Picturesque movement was turned into fodder for satire – most notably in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) –, it was left to Romanticism to pick up what may still be salvaged from its predecessor – namely its "more thoughtful (...) historical associations of ruins in the landscape" (Whyte, 2002, 104) –, and to discard the rest: the rigidity of Picturesque tourism, its authoritarian depiction of nature, its residual emphasis on the social. As a result, the sublime was amplified, old social conventions were questioned, the self was brought to the foreground, imagination trumped reason, identity was hidden in nature, authenticity was a must (better be dead than derivative).

Romanticism was born with its back turned to the urban sprawl, its eyes staring off into the horizon – Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) is its most clichéd example. The painting's ominous composition invites the spectator to partake in the wanderer's view, even to embrace the landscape's murky grandeur at the expense of the wanderer himself, as if signaling that everything can be turned into landscape provided it is seen from enough distance and with the right amount of pathos. Wood argues

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Florence and other Italian cities also attracted attention. In the process, the landscapes of Italy, with their Classical and Renaissance architecture, became accepted as an ideal by the educated landowning elite, and by the artists they patronized." (Whyte, 2002, 89)

(1993, 25) – via Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) – that a landscape painting is only necessary when humankind has lost its oneness with nature: “Landscape painting restored, momentarily, an original participation with nature, or even – in its greatest Romantic apotheoses – re-established contact with the lost sources of the spiritual”. Therein lies one of Romanticism’s many binary oppositions: the dynamics of loss and redemption through art and nature.

Nature in itself was no longer as interesting (nor as valid) as nature captured through the lens of culture – which made for a rather anxious turn of events. Instead of simply being in nature, the Romantic artist must now prove his spiritual oneness with nature by creating a twice-removed cousin of it and thus digging one extra layer down the rabbit hole that would ultimately collapse when Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) raised a mirror against art’s own mirror and cast an image not unlike that of a dog chasing its own tail. Romanticism’s brutal quest for originality and authenticity paved the way towards a form of anxiety that reached its peak in the late twentieth century (an anxiety to which we will come back to in due time), a fretful loss of ‘naturalness’: the landscape that is no longer a landscape, but the confession of an artifice<sup>25</sup> – the artist that knows that the viewer knows that the artist knows. The focus thus shifted from the artwork itself to the process of its creation (or, Romantically speaking: its process of ‘geniality’, a topic approached in later chapters).

This research does not seek to hold Romanticism accountable for contemporary shortcomings, but rather to observe its lasting influences as they materialize at the two ends of the twentieth century, first in Walser’s oeuvre, and then in Carvalho’s, and how these authors’ depiction of the landscape actualizes Romanticism’s belated promise of freedom through nature, as echoed in Schiller’s famous words: “They [the children] are what we were; they are what we ought to become once again. We were nature as they, and our culture, by way of reason and freedom, should lead us back to nature”.<sup>26</sup> A melancholy freedom, to be sure, in part derived from Rousseau’s pessimism, but a freedom nonetheless: the birth of a new individual, one meant to overcome Enlightenment’s aristocratic social-political model, as well as its scientific measurements of nature. A freedom that reached both the artistic and the spiritual realms: “artistic” for art was no longer chained to a set of eternal rules, nor the artist a servant to art’s edifying purposes, as previously dictated by the ruling Classicism; and “spiritual” given

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<sup>25</sup> It bears mentioning that Oswald Spengler fittingly accused Romanticism of being “a sentimental Imitation, not of life, but of an older Imitation” (Spengler, 1945, 197).

<sup>26</sup> “Sie sind, was wir waren; sie sind, was wir wieder werden sollen. Wir waren Natur wie sie, und unsere Kultur soll uns, auf dem Wege der Vernunft und der Freiheit, zur Natur zurückführen.” (Schiller, 2005, 8)

the organic feeling of oneness provided by the return to nature, the wanderer's homecoming into his constitutive environment.

Among the many readings and interpretations of the Romantic period, this study is drawn to Rüdiger Safranski's emphasis on the constitutive role of travel at the movement's very core. Safranski's take on Romanticism begins with Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) sea voyage to France in 1769 – a maritime adventure devoid of an ulterior destination: “A conversion experience, an inner about-face, exactly as Rousseau had felt his great inspiration twenty years earlier under a tree on the road to Vincennes: the rediscovery of genuine Nature beneath the crust of civilization” (Safranski, 2007, 17). Herder's quest for new lands and customs is at the same time a quest for himself: the idea of confronting the alien world becomes a self-confrontation. Safranski's somewhat desolate yet persistent, lonely yet self-sufficient rendering of Romanticism, his emphasis on a sense of dislocation without destination, of an existential quest ever so slightly doomed, contributes quite fittingly to the overall tone of this research, one which seeks to explore notions such as failure, defeatism, marginality, and escapism in Walsler's and Carvalho's oeuvres, although ultimately portraying these traits as viable literary values. Moreover, Romanticism's own escapist strategies, as pointed out by some critics,<sup>27</sup> are equally befitting to two authors who are, throughout their oeuvres, constantly trying to bypass Romanticism, but end up succumbing to the weight of its (and their own) contradictions.

Terry Eagleton, in his Marxist retelling of nineteenth century literature, stresses that Romanticism's “creative imagination” should be considered as more than idle escapism from the harsh realities of industrial capitalism: “‘Imaginative creation’ can be offered as an image of non-alienated labour; the intuitive, transcendental scope of the poetic mind can provide a living criticism of those rationalist or empiricist ideologies enslaved to ‘fact’”. Literature becomes an ideology deemed to “transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies” – or at least in theory (Eagleton, 1996, 17).<sup>28</sup> Eagleton proceeds by

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<sup>27</sup> Georges Bataille among them – in *La Littérature et le Mal* (1957), the French writer takes turns between finding faults with Romanticism and researching a variation on the post-Romantic theme of *le poète maudit*: “Le thème de la nature, dont l'opposition pouvait sembler plus radicale, n'offrait lui-même qu'une possibilité d'évasion provisoire (l'amour de la nature est d'ailleurs si susceptible d'accord avec le primat de l'utile, c'est-à-dire du lendemain, qu'il a été le mode de compensation le plus répandu – le plus anodin – des sociétés utilisatrices: rien évidemment de moins dangereux, de moins subversif, à la fin de moins sauvage, que la sauvagerie des rochers)” (Bataille, 1990, 44).

<sup>28</sup> As Wood briefly mentions in his work on Altdorfer, materialist thinkers tend to revel in finding bourgeois contradictions left and right, much as Matthias Eberle does with Romanticism, accusing its landscapes of conveying “an urban or bourgeois consciousness of a new distance

pointing out how the blossoming Romantic ideology trips on its own transcendentalism and, instead of engaging with reality, ends up detaching itself from it, losing its place within the very society it sought to transform. The Romantic artist finds refuge in himself, in his own genius, and thus a chasm between “poetic vision and political practice” is revealed, leading both to the rise of transcendental art theories (Kant, Hegel, Schiller) – which posited art as a finality in itself –, and, ultimately, to the artist’s deprivation of an apparent social function. Art, inadvertently “liberated” by Romanticism from having an obvious social function – “the writer was no longer a traditional figure in the pay of the court, the church or an aristocratic patron” (Eagleton, 1996, 18) –, experienced, for a brief period of time, a *sui generis* situation.

Art had always been historically saddled by external values – in the service of the Church, of a wealthy patron, of the Monarchy, of instruction and indoctrination – until, for the briefest periods of time (until capitalism and the art market stepped in), it found itself somewhat liberated from constraints: Monet could set his easel in front of a landscape and paint a dozen different versions of it without having to please none other than himself. And so he did, and alongside him several other artists now deemed Impressionists – to whom the landscape was of fundamental importance.

However much Impressionism is nowadays critically acclaimed and admired for its successful maneuver in benefiting from a *sui generis* situation and overcoming disadvantages (an exemplary tale to all underdogs – and a cautionary tale to all critics), it wasn’t reinventing art from scratch. Instead, two unambiguous connections to seventeenth and eighteenth century landscape art may be traced back, the first via the collapsible tin paint tube, the second via the English painter John Constable (1776–1837).

It is usually accepted that the industrial development of the collapsible tin paint tube has allowed the Impressionist artist to leave their studios and revel in *plein air* painting, hence getting closer to their subject matter. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) put it quite directly: “Ce sont les couleurs en tubes si facilement transportables qui nous ont permis de peindre complètement sur nature” (Bonafroux, 2008, 21). This immediate connection with nature was among the great innovations introduced by the Italian pictorial developments following the post-Dürer aftermath – the stage in which landscape was slowly but steadily

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and detachment from the land” (Wood, 1993, 26). Although he doesn’t say it, what Wood – or rather Eberle – is getting at is to suggest that Romanticism has mended the Pastoral dichotomy between the rural and the urban by making the landscape a paradoxically urban product as well. To once again quote Bataille (1990, 45): “...sous sa forme consacrée, le romantisme ne fut guère qu’une allure antibourgeoise de l’individualisme bourgeois”.

rising to the foreground. Headed by the French painter Claude Lorrain (1600–1682), the habit of sketching in the open air quickly spread among his contemporaries. Richard Rand (2006, 52–53) quotes an early biographer of the artist on his “frequent excursions in the *Campagna* to draw and paint from nature. Claude was especially committed to the practice, both to seek out the motifs for his paintings and as a means of directly recording natural phenomena”.

Meanwhile, in Flemish territory, the post-Dürer aftermath led to a surge in the already mentioned Realist landscape painting, which eventually made its way through the Picturesque movement and the Romantic period, whereupon it found Constable, a former Picturesque adept converted to the true faith of Romanticism. Constable attempted to steer clear from Lorrain’s easy, mannerist solutions, focusing instead on nature as he saw it (Gombrich 1984, 45). Through his careful handling of color and light, his sense of air and movement, Constable was hand-picking vital elements from the Flemish Realist school that suited his restrained rendition of Romantic art, and that would ultimately influence the Impressionists more than his own British counterparts (Whyte, 2002, 133).

But more than a fertile, constraint-free dialogue, the Impressionists were in fact fighting for their survival, for their place within society. Art’s momentary freedom from external values also implied that the artist himself had no legitimate means of sustenance – particularly when their remaining source of income (the portraiture) was suddenly co-opted by the futuristic and potentially soul-snatching charms of photography. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), in his “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931), sums it up quite elegantly:

In retrospect, it was when Daguerre succeeded in fixing the pictures of the *camera obscura* that the painters were left behind by the technician. The real victim of photography, however, was not landscape painting, but the miniature portrait. Things developed so quickly that by 1840 most of the countless miniature painters had become professional photographers, at first merely on the side, then exclusively so. (Benjamin, 1991e, 374)

The genius behind Impressionism – as the tale presses on – lay in finding a way out of such a conundrum: if a photography is *realer* than a painting, then one should make even *less* objective paintings, thus beating photography at its own game:

According to this view, the painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill. What it contains that fulfills the original desire would be the very same stuff on which the desire continuously feeds. What distinguishes photography from painting is therefore clear, and why there can be no encompassing principle of “creation” applicable to both: to the eyes that will never have their fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty. (Benjamin, 1991e, 645)

Despite attributing to reproducible media such as photography the downfall of the artistic *Erfahrung*, Benjamin was nevertheless fascinated by it. Benjamin's torn fascination erupts in the opposition between the "Auge" and the "Blick", a struggle, a visual dis-placement, a chasm between what the eye sees and what it *should* see. At stake here was reality, or what constitutes reality – although wrapped in Benjamin's ideational theory of mimesis,<sup>29</sup> a theory which posits – in the likeness of much of Benjamin's *Erfahrung*-bound writings – an identification between the inner and the outer world, between the self and the other. The imitation – or, alternatively, the *similarities* – would then serve as pointers for uncovering meaning in the world. A significant portion of Benjamin's theory relies on psychoanalysis and memories of his childhood, areas of knowledge that shall not be pursued in this research. But the silver lining rings true all the same: there is authority in imitation.

In spite of Benjamin's auratic and reticent fascination *vis-à-vis la photographie*, there was nonetheless an underlying literary mindset spreading throughout the nineteenth century, one infused by photography's descriptive talent and heralding a detachment from the Romantic emphasis on the imaginative and on the self. The mutual recognition was far from immediate: due to photography's "artless" background, most of the then emerging Realist authors found in their best interest to distance themselves from it, despite still equating *vraisemblance*<sup>30</sup> to photography's mimetic illusion – a *vraisemblance* stripped from transcendental functions, but still inserted in the Romantic dichotomy of the superficial versus the deep.<sup>31</sup> As Joachim Küpper (2004, 180) points out, the emerging practice of photography is, in this context, nothing but an example (although a striking one) of an artifact that, although "de-pragmatized", still preserves its authority when rising in imitation.

There is authority in imitation. Ian Watt credits a loosely understood notion of Realism as the common trace linking Defoe, Henry Fielding (1707–1754), and Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), thus making it the invisible force behind the rise of the novel in the West (a notion he then proceeds to analyze and undermine – to

<sup>29</sup> A theory best outlined by Benjamin in "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" (1933) and "Über das mimetische Vermögen" (1933). See Benjamin, 1991e, 204–209 and 210–212, respectively.

<sup>30</sup> A discussion regarding the notion of 'Nachprüfbarkeit' in the realm of French realist literature, with an emphasis on Balzac, may be found in Joachim Küpper's *Balzac und der Effet de Réel* (1986, 37): "...im Sinne der Erzeugung einer Illusion von Nachprüfbarkeit, und das heisst in dieser Epoche: von Wissenschaftlichkeit in Bezug auf das, was der Erzähler als das wahre Wesen der Dinge enthüllt".

<sup>31</sup> "Der discursive Rahmen, in dem sich die Überbietung der jeweiligen Vorgänger im Hinblick auf das Ziel, die Wirklichkeitsillusionierung, vollzieht, ist immer die romantische Dichotomie von 'Oberfläche' und 'Tiefe'" (Küpper, 1987, 4). See also Küpper, 1986, 3.



an extent). Watt posits that the “usefulness of the word was soon lost in the bitter controversies over the ‘low’ subjects and allegedly immoral tendencies of Flaubert and his successors”. As a result, “Realism” became the mere binary opposition to “Idealism”; to say “Realist characters” was a shortcut to criticizing their (and their authors’) lack of moral values. In exchange for clear-cut morals or idealized beauty, the Realist writer proposed a convoluted scientific objectivity that drew attention to an issue specific to the novel: “the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates”, forcing Watt to resort to the scholastics of medieval realists in an attempt to clarify the question (Watt, 1957, 10–11).<sup>32</sup>

In practical terms, the exchange of morals for objectivity – the much debated *vraisemblance* – finds a sharp definition in Küpper (1986, 31): “The novel no longer defines itself first and foremost by aesthetic or moral qualities, but rather alongside a reality-bound Historiography (...): The expectation is no longer of writing beautifully or morally, but rather: realistically”.<sup>33</sup>

The Realist novel proposed a shift from universal, classical truths, to a particular, individual rendition of it.<sup>34</sup> A shift that charged its toll (the capital R in Realism does not come cheap): in quest for fidelity towards observable human experience, the novel abdicated from formal conventions to the point where it became, according to Watt and in comparison to more classical genres, almost “formless” (Watt, 1957, 13). It also displeased those critics who deemed it ‘ephemeral’, as if literature’s sole endeavor was to stand the test of time, like a cryogenically frozen creature unaware of its surroundings.

More than Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), or even Émile Zola (1840–1902), it is the work of Stendhal (1783–1842) which most resembles Walser’s and Carvalho’s ambiguous approach to Realism, and thus most informs this research. Stendhal is cast here as the exemplary Realist not because Erich Auerbach (2003, 463) branded him so, calling him the founder of

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<sup>32</sup> An issue so convoluted that, after a brief detour through Descartes, Watt already seems to be regretting his decision to go into it: “...the distinctive tenets of realist epistemology, and the controversies associated with them, are for the most part too specialised in nature to have much bearing on literature” (Watt, 1957, 12).

<sup>33</sup> Speaking about Balzac specifically, Küpper (1986, 34) adds: “Die moralisierenden Texte befinden sich somit in jeder Hinsicht in einer peripheren Position zum ‘plan general’ und vermögen schon deshalb zum Gesamtbild der fiktionalen Welt nur wenig beizutragen”.

<sup>34</sup> And, in doing so, completely obliterating the dying Italo-Flemish cultural enterprise: instead of the “‘great and general ideas’ of Italian painting”, the French Realists preferred the “‘literal truth and... minute exactness in the detail of nature modified by accident’ of the Dutch school” (Watt, 1957, 17).



“serious realism”, nor because his famous mirror is still reflecting,<sup>35</sup> but because he was a Realist in spite of his Romantic vistas, or a Romantic in spite of his Realist soul,<sup>36</sup> an ambiguous, shifting author who, despite favoring a third-person narration, never hid his own first-person self too far from the written page – Stendhal was not, after all, and to put it in Edward Said’s (1979, 171) exquisite formulation, a “self-abnegating writer”.

Moreover, Stendhal’s oeuvre negotiates a transition from “life as it should be” to “life as it is”, from the subjunctive to the indicative, eliciting from it a covert darkness that blossoms, equally furtive, in Walser and Carvalho, and which informs, even if inceptively, this book’s central thesis.

But most importantly, Stendhal’s oeuvre establishes a clear link to the modern perception of the landscape. The French author is responsible for having added one extra word to the already lengthy French lexicon: *touriste*. Having extensively and passionately traveled throughout France and Italy, Stendhal wrote several books on the landscape and on the customs of these regions – amongst which *Mémoires d’un Touriste* (1838). In it, and by means of a narrator that is nothing but a barely disguised *alter ego* of the “not self-abnegating” writer, Stendhal succumbs to the desire of exploring the French countryside one last time before sailing across the Atlantic – and he proposes that, instead of “objectively” crossing the country in search of business opportunities, he should now travel “looking around himself” (Stendhal, 1891, 17). It is an exquisite formulation, one that once stood for all that tourism ever meant: a quest for natural beauty but also – and most importantly – a quest for meaning and self-knowledge.

While searching for meaning and self-knowledge, the Stendhalian tourist does not project himself onto the landscape, as a pureblood Romantic would. Landscape, to Stendhal and to the *corpus* of this book, is not an extension of the characters, but a function of language. Discussing the absence of a corresponding connection between landscape and mood in the work of Balzac, Küpper (1986, 224) underlines that in the Romantic novel the concept of a metaphorical

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35 Stendhal’s famous passage in *Le Rouge et le Noir* – “Hé, monsieur, un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l’azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des bourbiers de la route” (Stendhal, 1975, 107) – was at the center of a very contemporary discussion involving the English novelist Zadie Smith and the North-American critic James Wood, who urged for contemporary authors to abandon Social-Realist affectations. Wood took Stendhal’s mirror for a walk under the not-so-azur Manhattan skies and concluded that it wouldn’t survive the experience: it would explode. See Wood, 2001, 6.

36 Eagleton provocatively portrays Realism as the inescapable beast preying on Western literature: “Indeed, it has proved perhaps the most resilient cultural form in Western history, beating off all contenders. And this suggests that it has at least some of its roots deep in the Western psyche” (Eagleton, 2004, 66).

congruence between the landscape and the mood of the protagonists is decisive, constituting the central process through which the unbounded dimension of the Romantic soul is depicted. Instead of a metaphorical function,<sup>37</sup> the landscape (or, alternatively, the act of traveling through the landscape) fulfills a social role in Stendhal's travel literature – the tourist does seek an inner truth, but his inner truth relies heavily on the world around him:

Je n'eus jamais le temps de m'enquérir, ou, pour mieux dire, de chercher à deviner comment les gens chez lesquels je passais avaient coutume de s'y prendre pour courir après le bonheur. C'est pourtant là la principale affaire de la vie. C'est du moins le premier objet de ma curiosité. J'aime les beaux paysages: ils font quelquefois sur mon âme le même effet qu'un archet bien manié sur un violon sonore: ils créent des sensations folles; ils augmentent ma joie et rendent le malheur plus supportable. (Stendhal, 1891, 77)

Stendhal weaves an abrupt connection between society and landscape, a *non-sequitur* of sorts that subsumes both realms into the same quest for happiness and existential meaning. Although inspired in his existential-touristic insights, Stendhal made one crucial mistake while assessing the economic and cultural impact of the railway within French society, claiming that despite helping commerce and increasing the number of travelers, the railroad would ultimately not create new forms of consumption or business (Stendhal, 1891, 333). Stendhal could not predict that within less than a century tourism would become one of the world's – and in particular one of France's – largest and fastest-growing industries, and one with a direct impact on literature.

Already Flaubert, four meager years after Stendhal's death, was touring Brittany alongside his friend and photography enthusiast Maxime du Camp (1822–1894). Between 1849 and 1850 he journeyed through Egypt, Greece, and Turkey, before visiting Carthage in 1858 in order to collect material for his historical novel *Salammbô* (1862).<sup>38</sup> Flaubert wasn't alone – François-René de Chateaubriand

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<sup>37</sup> “Das mimetische Konzept der Aussenwelt ist in Balzacs Roman noch nicht aufgegeben. Die Darstellung dynamischer psychischer Prozesse wird nicht durch die Reduktion der Landschaftstableaux auf eine metaphorische Funktion ermöglicht, sondern durch eine quasi-realistische Motivierung: Die Landschaft verändert sich tatsächlich.” (Küpper, 1986, 224)

<sup>38</sup> Susanne Zepp, in her work on Jorge Luis Borges, discusses the importance of this Flaubertian maneuver to the Borgesian aesthetics, a topic that shall be resumed shortly: “Der Roman Flauberts um das Schicksal der Fürstentochter Salammbô spielt drei Jahrhunderte vor Christus, den geschichtlichen Rahmen für die Handlung bilden Karthagos Kämpfe mit seinen Söldnern nach dem ersten Punischen Krieg. Flaubert hat für diesen 1863 erschienenen Roman intensiv recherchiert, zahlreiche historische Darstellungen miteinbezogen und einige Reisen an Orte des Geschehens unternommen, um dem Text einen größtmöglichen Realismus zu geben” (Zepp, 2003, 92).

(1768–1848), Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), and Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855) – to name a few contemporary French heavy-weights – were also mobile, but it is Flaubert that leads the charge in Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978).

Said resorts (among many others authors) to Flaubert's depiction of Oriental landscapes and customs (his bourgeois attempt at escaping from the "boredom" of French bourgeoisie<sup>39</sup>) as a way of conveying the hidden Eurocentric prejudices that accompany any representation of the Orient ("the great Asiatic mystery"): "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences". By means of wave upon wave of cultural pilgrimage and misrepresentation, Europe managed to accomplish what tangible, empirical geography had not: a technique for "turning vast geographical domains into treatable, and manageable, entities" (Said, 1979, 1; 115).

Mimicking Lorrain's beloved technique for rendering an Italian scenery, these European traveler-authors conjured farfetched images of golden-coated landscapes, a stark contrast to the otherwise damp and grayish vistas available back home. European cultural imperialism thus succeeded in further exoticizing a vast geographical region, and in doing so drawing a very neat line between "our" space and "their" space: "Imperialism", writes Whyte (2002, 144), "involved an expansion of European landscape conventions and ways of seeing landscape – and often elements of European landscapes themselves – into other parts of the world".

Whereas a first wave of Napoleonic explorers sought to convert the foreign, exotic landscape into an extension of Europe's, the second batch of travelers – among whom Flaubert and, on the British front, Richard Burton (1821–1890) – could then retrace the steps of the first group under the pretence of dispelling "the mustiness of the pre-existing Orientalist archive" and hence providing a "fresh new repository of Oriental experience" (Said, 1979, 169). Burton, in particular, comes across as the ambiguous and multifaceted explorer: on the one hand recognizing his role as a pawn in England's imperial power in the East, and on the other relating to the local population and their struggle. According to Said (1979, 169), what one reads in Burton's prose is "the history of a consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behavior. Burton's liberty lay in having shaken himself free of his European origins enough to be able to live as

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<sup>39</sup> "Flaubert's Oriental perspective is rooted in an eastward and southward search for a 'visionary alternative', which 'meant gorgeous color, in contrast to the greyish tonality of the French provincial landscape. It meant exciting spectacle instead of humdrum routine, the perennially mysterious in place of the all too familiar.'" (Said, 1979, 185)

an Oriental". Burton sets the example for the late twentieth century Eurocentric writer aspiring to discuss the Orient – or, for that matter, any of non-“our” spaces: they must have tread its landscapes, experienced the culture firsthand, camouflaged themselves amidst the society. They have no pending ontological commitment to reality – they are no anthropologists after all –, but they do have a heavy conscience. They must pay their forefather’s dues for all the wood they chopped and all the gold they mined and all the bad films they shot in the desert: a bit of displaced suffering is the least they can do. Thus the late twentieth century writer who isn’t born in exile must voluntarily seek it if they aspire to World-credibility. But it still helps immensely if they are born in Europe.

Such intertwinement between exile, mass-tourism, and anthropology shall be analyzed throughout this research. Meanwhile, back in the eighteenth century, while Flaubert and Burton were exploring Eastbound landscapes, the everyday European dweller was also becoming increasingly mobile: aboard trains and along boulevards.

European urban centers were experiencing exponential and disorderly growth under the impact of industrialization and rural depopulation (Bade, 2003, 41), and amid such chaotic, epidemic-laden and migration-intensive environment, the so-called detective or crime fiction genre found the perfect setting for its exploits. The unsettling feeling of insecurity and lack of guarantees engendered by the new urban logic was – following Benjamin – one of the main reasons behind the rise of crime fiction, in particular that of its founding father: Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849). Poe’s detective was a *flâneur* of sorts, simultaneously seeking the city and hiding himself in it: “The flâneur was to Poe, above all, someone who does not feel at ease in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd; the reason why he hides in it is probably close at hand” (Benjamin, 1991e, 550).

The subsequent development and consolidation of the genre in the early twentieth century preserved in its depths the dark mark of Poe’s detective-*flâneur* dubiously roaming through an ever-pathological “modern cosmogony” (Benjamin, 1991e, 545). “There has always been a subversive element in the genre”, claims John G. Cawelti (1997, 6), “possibly going back to the ambiguous mixture of rationality and decadence that Edgar Allan Poe built into his original creation”. The subversive element endured, albeit temporarily hindered by the conservative turn taken between 1880 and 1920: “When the detective story first became widely popular through the great success of Sherlock Holmes, the social values and ideologies it expressed were generally conservative” (Cawelti, 1997, 6). Not only Sherlock Holmes, but the vast majority of the period’s detectives would embody the high-moral values of a society threatened with dissolution and uncertainty. In many ways, the predictable formula concocted by the detective

novel assuaged the fears of the modern-day city dweller, providing a bourgeois escape from the urban unknown.

Although Cawelti's argument posits the genre's constitutive subversion, and that its subversive undertones may be proven by both the dominance of female writers and the recurring depiction of minority groups and themes, it is nevertheless the case that the genre remains up to today a source of certainty amidst the debris of cultural skepticism and fading institutional guarantees. It is perhaps for these reasons that Cawelti admits, towards the end of his article, that "the detective story constitutes a *mythos* or fable in which crime, as a distinctive problem of bourgeois, individualistic, and quasi-democratic societies is handled without upsetting society's fundamental institutions or its worldviews" (Cawelti, 1997, 12).

It is no surprise that crime fiction is a fiercely devout Realist genre: Realism – to a lesser extent – and crime fiction – to a larger one – are the sole literary havens in a post-Joyce, post-Dadaist world. They bestow upon the readers a tranquility no longer to be found in real life: everything will be explained in due time. Writing in the beginning of the 1930s, Benjamin notes that "few are those who, aboard trains, read books that they have on their shelves back at home, choosing instead to buy what catches their eye in the very last moment". By resorting to the formulaic and suspenseful predictability of a literary genre, the traveler seeks to anesthetize "one fear through another one": they replace the real qualms of a rapidly changing society with the artificial ones pressed between the covers of a book: "Between the freshly-cut pages of crime novels he seeks the idle or, as it were, virgin feelings of trepidation which could help him get over the archaic ones of the journey" (Benjamin, 1991e, 381). The reader-traveler is worried about being late and missing their connection (the ever-increasing pace of things), about being alone in their compartment (and in life in general), about the unknown destination where they are headed (the sprawling urban growth) – as the locomotive gains speed and blurs the actual landscape, the reader resorts to the fictional landscapes of their favorite detective.

Location – the landscape as *couleur locale* – is fundamental to crime fiction, arguably even more than to any other literary genre. A detective is, after all, known for the landscapes he or she inhabits, adding, through them, unity and social realism to the whodunit formula. Stijn Rejinders' (2011, 27–29) very provocative take on the intersection between crime fiction, landscape, and tourism sheds some light on the matter. Resorting to Pierre Nora's concept of "places of the imagination" and Harvey's notion of "geographic imagination", Rejinders argues that the genre's insistence on a same setting "brings unity to something that in fact has no unity", thus raising the story's credibility: "[t]he plots may be fictional, but the events could also actually have occurred – they could literally

have *taken place*". The landscapes are hence "injected" with narrative meaning, not only helping to move the plot forward, but also becoming extensions of the detectives' own personalities.

By conjuring a sturdily Realist environment, the crime fiction writer is in fact asking for the reader's unrestricted belief: the landscape may be recognizable, but the actual crime-solving mechanisms are not. Instead of boring, bureaucratic legal procedures, the fictional detective relies on a mixture of tight-paced action and personal geniality – unlikely traits in the life of everyday law-enforcement workers. The implicit promise made by the writer is the following: by "telling the truth" about the landscape, he or she also makes a commitment with "telling the truth" about everything else. The landscape is thus stripped from its aesthetic attributes and employed as a mere tool for writerly credibility.

The landscape also plays an important role in asserting the detective's movement from crime scene to clue location. Rejinders (2011, 30) points out the "on the go" nature of crime fiction, in which the police investigation appears "as an unending movement through the narrative space": "the landscape is a realm that contains certain secrets, which means that it needs to be passed through and investigated, in search of truth and justice". In doing so, the detective's *modus operandi* nears that of the early twentieth century tourist, moving from attraction to attraction in search of some kind of sensorial illumination. If the second half of the nineteenth century marked a literary transition from the Romantic *flâneur* to the Realist detective, the second half of the twentieth century fashions the detective into a tourist – and a clueless one at that.

In the cunning hands of a Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) or a Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), the predictable structure of crime fiction is truly subverted into a series of wrong turns and false solutions, a labyrinthine enigma in which all clues are set in place for a detective to sort them out – but to which enigma they belong to and who is supposed to uncover them remains to be seen. Building a case for Borges' constitutive skepticism, Susanne Zepp resorts to "La Muerte y la Brújula", a 1942 short-story that undermines the conventions of crime fiction by exposing the hiatus between logic and reality: "What is 'true' from the standpoint of thought is false from the standpoint of facts". The story's detective, Erik Löhnrot, ends up getting lost in his own investigation and "must pay with death for his rational dogmatism" (Zepp, 2003, 76; 77). Cawelti (1997, 12) follows suit and places Borges and Nabokov among the twentieth century authors that "find a way of artistically expressing the pervasive philosophical and cultural skepticism of modern times by using or inventing the double plot of the detective story to create a structure in which their own sense of problems of truth and meaning can be embodied". Such a development lies at the core of Carvalho's narratives, and shall be returned to, by way of Walser, in due time.

The mystery lingers, but the reader now finds himself destitute of the detective's helping hand. The reader is lured into a double-edged Borgesian trap which suggests – according to Alberto Manguel (2010, 72–73) – both that “authorship is a casual, haphazard thing”, and that “it is the reader who determines the nature of a text through, among other things, attribution”. The reader is turned into a tourist holding in his hands a guide whose writings either do not coincide with the reality of what he or she sees, or expose mechanisms he or she would have preferred to stay hidden (the illegal immigrants selling miniature Eiffel towers in its vicinity). Borges notoriously blurs the distinctions between reality and fiction, and with him a sort of literary anxiety is born, an anxiety towards a post-war world that seems more and more keen on denying literature, on denying artistic artifice. The misadventures of Pierre Menard or of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”'s unnamed narrator (perhaps Borges himself) are escape mechanisms of sorts that attempt to simultaneously crack bitter jokes about the writer's (or literature's) condition, and to philosophically supply the meaning History fails in providing (or the lack thereof). As if through literature, through its artifice, Borges could proceed to filling the gaps that history “neglected to fill”: “Fake, then, in Borges's universe, is not a sin against creation. It is implied in the act of creation itself and, whether openly recognized or adroitly concealed, it takes place every time a suspension of disbelief is demanded” (Manguel, 2010, 74).

And by the time Borges was publishing both “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”, and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in his 1944 masterpiece *Fictions*, the world was forcing upon its population a monstrous suspension of disbelief.

After the unspeakable traumas of war, language does come back – but it cannot be trusted anymore. W. G. Sebald's (1944–2001) account of the post-air-raid anesthesia to which the German population succumbed in 1943–4 is interspersed with reports from eyewitnesses whose testimonies were burdened with clichés to the point where language's main function was not so much to convey information, but to “cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend”: “The apparently unimpaired ability – shown in most of the eyewitness reports – of everyday language to go on functioning as usual raises doubts of the authenticity of the experiences they record” (Sebald, 2003, 36).

Everyday language is not to be trusted for the reality to which it adheres ceases to be a reality to which one subscribes, or to which one would like to subscribe. Reality becomes a cruelty, a campfire horror tale that cannot be interrupted even if the storyteller is silenced. The need for a new language surfaces, infused with a semblance of truth one may believe in, or may derive some meaning from. For an eerie post-war beauty lingers as the last fires are put out and autumn closes in, and with it landscape's vengeance takes place.



One cannot make poetry after Auschwitz but nonetheless the flowers are blooming and one must make some sense out of it, out of nature's callous indifference to human suffering. Sebald seems to channel what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) called the "Grausamkeit der Natur" – nature's cruelty – in order to evoke his post-war horror at nature's brutal indifference to the plight of those to whom she herself gives life, the perverse pleasure she finds in destroying the very things she has previously created. Nature, to Nietzsche (1987, 64; 140), is not only cruel but also cold-blooded, an ice queen devoid of compassion and mercy, merely continuing on while people suffer senselessly. Or, as Sebald puts it:

At the end of the war, some of the bomb sites of Cologne had already been transformed by the dense green vegetation growing over them – the roads made their way through this new landscape like 'peaceful deep-set country lanes' [Sebald is quoting Heinrich Böll's *Der Engel schwieg*]. In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature's ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire. (Sebald, 2003, 39)

It is this painful, incongruous process that the Dutch artist and poet Herman Dirk van Dodeweerd, known as Armando (1929–), referred to back in the 1970s when coining the term 'guilty landscapes'. Having spent his childhood near the transition camp of Amersfoort (meant for prisoners who were later to be dispatched to concentration camps), Armando was overcome, after the war was over, by nature's ambiguous stand – on the one hand having sheepishly submitted to the enemy,<sup>40</sup> and on the other having blossomed into something beautiful after the enemy was gone:

I observe them, I look at them, and something frightful occurs: they are beautiful, I find them beautiful. (...) The beauty of sites where the enemy was, where the enemy was located, where the enemy lived and plundered, where the enemy exerted its reign of terror, where traces of the enemy's terror are still to be found. Right there. Beauty should be ashamed. (Armando, 1988, 245–247)

Armando would from then on carry the ambiguity close to his heart – a simple stroll down the boulevards of Berlin would suffice to trigger in him the very conflicting

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<sup>40</sup> "Look at the pictures in which the enemy is busy: there they stand, the trees, they stand laughing in the background. And not only pines and firs, the other trees too. Shouldn't something be said about this? I'd think so, because sometimes they are still there, the trees, the forest's edge and the trees, the same place they were back then; do not think they have moved on, they are still standing there like indifferent eyewitnesses." (Armando, 1988, 245–6)



emotions of indifference and anger, of death and rebirth. He wishes he could be “totally indifferent to the masses” that populate the houses he sees on both sides of the streets, but he cannot: he complains about it as vehemently as he complains about the guilty landscapes that just stood there and impassively watched “amid all that human strife” (Armando, 1996, 46).<sup>41</sup> He even ironically advocates a tree-like behavior as a means of escaping the ruthless post-war realities: “It’s better to follow the example of one of those beaming trees. It might even add a few years to your life, provided those cowardly organs on the inside of your body do their part” – after all, “[t]he land and the people had to come together at some point. Why not in a beautiful forest” (Armando, 1996, 45–46), an eerie reflection that seems directly taken from Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), as shall be demonstrated in the fifth chapter.

Why not in a beautiful forest, amidst a beauty that should be ashamed – but is not. The revenge of the landscape lies in its starting anew whereas humankind is still trying to find the language that will make sense of it all. They both have burned and drowned, but only one is blossoming again, effortless. As if centuries of scenic representation were rendered useless by trauma and time, having taught us nothing of concrete value. When humankind most needed the therapeutic, anesthetizing vistas of a Romantic landscape, it was just then that they had no remaining value whatsoever.

A mixture of incomprehension and anger haunts henceforth all artistic endeavors, confirming Eagleton’s (1996, 30) suspicion that, sadly, one does not read literature in order to become “a better person” – a wishfully formulated notion meant to allay bleak times: “When the Allied troops moved into the concentration camps (...) to arrest commandants who had whiled away their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe, it appeared that someone had some explaining to do”. Neither beauty nor *Bildung* are acceptable: they both convey a deceiving, unlayered stability that fails in uncovering the landscape’s darker narratives, its guilt and shame, its terrifying lack of empathy *vis-à-vis* the people who inhabit it.

The landscape is henceforth infused with an unreality of its own, blurring even further the borders between reality and fiction:

...when he assigns an active role to space, Armando is joining a philosophical movement that has long been part of Western thought, though it is true that it was never a dominant

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<sup>41</sup> “Oh, I can go on walking around Berlin and asking myself every time I come to a house: what was here before, who used to live here, what did it look like? But it’s high time I cut that out. Who gives a damn about the people who used to live here, they’re probably all dead anyway. Is there something wrong with that? Yes, there is, but I won’t elaborate on this hypothesis. I suspect I’d be wasting my breath.”

school. Different phenomenological philosophers, from Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty, have pointed to the importance that place has in the experience and observation of reality. (Rejinders, 2011, 34)

Through a sense of 'being-in-the-world', phenomenology sought to reconnect the self and the world. The individual should not be perceived as a self-contained entity treading in the world 'out there', as if the world were a passive receptacle to his or her projections. Tim Ingold (2000, 173) maintains that "it is through being inhabited, rather than through its assimilation to a formal design or specification, that the world becomes a meaningful environment for people". In all its hopefulness, phenomenology tried to revert landscape's loss of empathy by binding both our identity and consciousness to it. Far from a Romantic mood-projection onto the landscape, phenomenology's "being-in-the-world" saw the individual as already integrated to the world and partaking in its "dialectical 'pull' between transcendence and ruination" (Ebbaston, 2013, 3).

When Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) briefly changed the *Zeitgeist's* gears and went from epistemology to ontology, he was in part alluding to phenomenology's contradictory bidding: to bind humankind to the world, despite it being a highly unstable, alienated, and 'progress'-mad one. How does one philosophically go about praising the earth and the skies – as did Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>42</sup> (1908–1961) – when all empirical testimonies point towards loss and indifference and the ambiguous status of technology? One of the solutions set forth by both Heidegger – less successfully – and Merleau-Ponty – more poetically – was to phenomenologically uncover the *unheimlich* found in nature and in everyday life. In many ways they were looking for transcendence amidst ruins, a flash-light piercing the darkness in search for meaning – a maneuver Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) achieved with a higher degree of existential accomplishment than Heidegger (minus the transcendence), although the two philosophers ultimately differed on what "existence" meant.

Phenomenology inadvertently provided the theoretical tools for landscape sentiency, inasmuch as it transferred onto the landscape a somewhat bizarre and human-like agency. No longer only a Romantic or touristic trope, nor the background for war crimes (although simultaneously remaining all of these things), the landscape also became a place for vengeance, its lack of empathy was

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<sup>42</sup> "Moi qui contemple le bleu du ciel, je ne suis pas en face de lui un sujet acosmique, je ne le possède pas en pensée, je ne déploie pas au-devant de lui une idée du bleu qui m'en donnerait le secret, je m'abandonne à lui, je m'enfonce dans ce mystère, 'il se pense en moi', je suis le ciel même qui se rassemble, se recueille et se met à exister pour soi, ma conscience est engorgée par ce bleu illimité." (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 248)

turned into literary rebellion. Not that it was solely phenomenology's doing – it merely updated philosophically an ongoing literary trend.

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, nature's active indifference demanded literary compensation. As a result, it was often cast in three different roles: as the narrative's set-up, as its climax, or as its silver lining.<sup>43</sup>

The first role portrays an implacable landscape that is to be blamed for uprooting the characters and setting the plot in motion. Such is the case of two American masterpieces: a northern one – John Steinbeck's (1902–1968) *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) – and a southern one – Graciliano Ramos' (1892–1953) *Vidas Secas* (1938). The drought serves both books as the triggering incident towards the (attempted) reconstruction of a new life in the midst of economic and social hardships. In Steinbeck's case, nature is so relentlessly unpredictable that it turns drought into flood by the end of the book, whereas *Vidas Secas* begins and ends in an arid, hopeless setting (a setting that follows the characters wherever they go). Nature seems to create havoc at its own will, stripped from the Godly punishment that colored literary representations of natural disasters in previous centuries.

Nature also provides climaxes for a broad range of texts and in a wide variety of manners. It may be as cleansing as it is catastrophic, for instance in Jean Rhys' (1890–1979) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or in Ray Bradbury's (1920–2012) *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Fire is devastating and redeeming in both narratives, but fire never erupts as a mere accident: it is a deliberate, man-triggered action that then takes a life of its own. The characters unleash nature and are thereafter either dangerously drawn to it – as in *Wide Sargasso Sea's* overt fire politics<sup>44</sup> –, or unable to control it – as in *Fahrenheit 451's* redemption through fire (and, when that does not pan out as expected, through more reliably lethal atomic bombs). It may also be bellicose and existential, as when trees abandon their submissiveness and provide characters with enlightened and timely solutions. Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938) benefits from a learned chestnut in its narrative path towards existential malaise and philosophical awe. J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) *The Two Towers* (1954), the second installment into the widely popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy,

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<sup>43</sup> A fourth category should also be considered were it not so heavily steeped in allegorical motifs, thus shadowing landscape's revenge with symbolic undertones: Camus' *La Peste* (1947) and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) would serve as its most accomplished examples.

<sup>44</sup> The book's last sentence is pregnant with fiery revenge, a motif already abundant in *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel which *Wide Sargasso Sea* seeks to prequel and comment upon: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (Rhys, 1996, 190).

channels technological-angst into the otherwise peaceful and non-committal treelike Ents: the fact that vast portions of the forest are being felled in order to fuel an evil wizard's furnaces is enough of a *casus belli* to send the Ents on a war-mongering rampage, ultimately winning the battle for the Allies.

Lastly, nature may offer a conflicted silver lining by hinting at a hope that is later on revealed to be unavailable to anyone other than to nature itself. In Tennessee Williams' (1911–1983) play *Spring Storm* (1937) a storm foretells the inevitable despair to which its characters are doomed, and none other than a *spring* storm – a capricious season if ever there was one. Or, more famously, in the paltry tree that sprouts leaves between the first and second acts of Samuel Beckett's (1906–1989) *Waiting for Godot* (1949), the ever-so-elusive promise of a regeneration none of the play's characters are bound to find. Nature no longer carries neither a spiritual nor a secular wisdom about itself, having instead forsaken humankind to its own solitary fate.

Human solitude is accentuated by landscape's intangibility and teasing appearance, as finely exemplified in Heinrich Böll's (1917–1985) début novel *Der Zug war pünktlich* (1949), in which the landscape is always seen at a distance, from train compartments, restaurant windows, and brothel rooms, or recalled from childhood memories. Written shortly after the war's aftermath, the novel is infused with a traumatic, revolving, regurgitating language that every so often repeats the same set of words and sentences, returns like a prayer to their familiar incantation in search of refuge and meaning (a cadence which bears a distinctive German post-war inflection, and which is not only tentatively rehearsed throughout Walser's oeuvre, but also a vital – yet overlooked – aspect of Carvalho's own diction, as shall be shown in the next chapter). Andreas, the novel's main character, is bound in a non-heroic journey to the Polish battlefield, and through the train window he helplessly watches the “gorgeous gardens, gentle hills, smiling clouds” of the passing landscape, all the red trees and green houses and blue skies and golden suns he shall never again set eyes upon (Böll, 1972, 21; 22). At first sight, the landscape at least brings color to the otherwise gray world that seems to engulf Andreas: the gray railway tracks, the gray faces of soldiers, the gray darkness behind him, the gray coffee and the gray milk, the gray skin. The only color to be found in the novel is located outdoors, but none of the characters are ever allowed outdoors. Although alluring, the landscape is not to be indulged, for therein lies nothing but despair:

It was indeed summer, and the crops stood golden in the fields, thin blades of grass, some scorched black, eaten up by the summer, and I hated nothing so much as to die a hero's death in a cornfield, it reminded me too much of a poem, and I didn't want to die like in a poem, to die a hero's death like an advertisement for this dirty war... (Böll, 1972, 37)

Böll's début novel is primarily concerned with life, with how one continues to live when all seems to point at death and despair. The colorful life Böll nevertheless indentifies in the landscape (the landscape between 1944 – when the narrative is set – and 1948 – when the book was finished) is not a human life, and although plants are blossoming, man is not thriving, and the novel ends, accordingly, in tragedy and despair. Böll's novel is exemplary not only because it contributes to the departure of post-war German-language literature towards new beginnings, but also because it does so by decisively moving the characters' actions and fates indoors, both physically and mentally, a maneuver foreshadowed – albeit still timidly, in comparison – by Walser, as shall also be shown further on. These characters' existences are less corporal than vaporous, so overwhelming is their guilt, anguish, and perplexity. Landscape's unrelenting indifference spawns a world of abandonment from which the artist derives no meaning, and in which he or she struggles to find his or her place and relevance (is the author dead, after all?). The landscape is neutralized as twentieth century literature turns more and more to language, as is the case with Thomas Bernhard (1931–1989), whose writings are equally central to this research, as mentioned in the introduction.

If the importance of landscapes once rested on “the relationships between the physical environment and human society”, thus underlying the engagement of people “with the world around them” (Whyte 2001, 7), the second half of the twentieth century abruptly severed this connection by increasingly alienating the representation of landscape in literary works.<sup>45</sup> The (mental and physical) indoors became the rule, and the landscape was no longer worthy of a leading role. Landscape was once again turned into the supporting act meant to hold the show's background together, but instead of serving religion, like it did in Dürer's day, it now seems to serve a combination of two possible outcomes, as posited in this research: either to infuse a literary text with the hue of sensibility (or prosaic poetry), or to convey a feeling of World-literature authenticity.

Roland Barthes' (1915–1980) theoretical and eventually testimonial dealings with the outdoors – its weather and light, its topography and melody – is a good

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<sup>45</sup> A particularly European maneuver that was counterattacked by the rebirth of American Realism in the late 1980s, whereupon the landscape – albeit an urban one – was once again given some prominence as a link between literature (art) and society (world). Tom Wolfe's initial manifesto “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel” (1989) and, further on, Jonathan Franzen's successful rebranding of a Tolstoy-inspired all-encompassing ambition as seen in *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), were fundamental to the twenty-first century Realist resurgence.

example of the landscape's reduction to "a class sensibility"<sup>46</sup> that is not readily available to all speakers – and despite exposing this "short-circuit of language", Barthes nonetheless frequently indulges in a belletrist exercise, deriving vitality (but "no signified") from an atmospheric reading of the landscape: "Again, after overcast days, a morning of clear weather, the glow and subtlety of the atmosphere: a cool, luminous silk; this blank moment (no signified) produces a self-evident truth: that life is worth living" (Barthes, 2003, 84). Elsewhere, Barthes goes as far as to argue that the capacity of "reading" a landscape according to the whims of the body and the memory is the "vestibule of knowledge and analysis that is assigned to the writer: more conscious than competent, conscious of the very interstices of competence" (Barthes, 1982, 129). The writer should then be attuned to this class sensibility which enables him to craft a literary text that shall nonetheless remain incomprehensible to the same *boulangère* with whom he tried to communicate before, which, if done with either too much levity of ego (which, despite all, is not Barthes' case), may open literature to some precarious developments.

The second supporting role played by landscape, as posited in this research, is a variation on the already mentioned strategy of exile as a literary credibility-inducing maneuver. The post-colonial concern with representation and authority (both artistic and historic) revives the Romantic notion of authenticity as a means of counter-attacking colonizing instances and institutions. The landscape portrayed by a post-colonial-prone literature is therefore aesthetic only in the sense in which it is aesthetically credible: an accurately authentic (albeit fictionalized) world is (re)created instead of a universal one (for it would be too easily subjugated by the powerful and the dominant). The landscape is an artifice, a quotation mark in quest for legitimacy. In the manner of an academic text whose validity is undermined by insufficient or insubstantial sources, so is the literary text aspiring to World Literature, to a theoretical weight that might grant it access to both academia and the canon. Landscape, in the turn of the twenty-first century, is both performative and peripheral – a misplaced gasp for poetry or credibility.

By seeking the anthropological and/or topographical detail that shall render a landscape credible, the twenty-first century World-Writer is paradoxically emulating globalization's *modus operandi*: "globalization itself creates a corresponding

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46 "Ce matin la boulangère me dit: il fait encore beau ! mais chaud trop longtemps ! (les gens d'ici trouvent toujours qu'il fait trop beau, trop chaud). J'ajoute: et la lumière est si belle ! Mais la boulangère ne répond pas, et une fois de plus j'observe ce court-circuit du langage, dont les conversations les plus futiles sont l'occasion sûre; je comprends que voir la lumière relève d'une sensibilité de classe..." (Barthes, 1975, 178)

need for localism, for places and their landscapes that retain their distinctiveness and continuity” (Whyte, 2002, 217). The need arises in response to globalization’s very tendency of homogenizing places, from motorways to hotel rooms, as typified by Marc Augé’s concept of ‘non-places’<sup>47</sup> (1992), or prophetically illustrated in Italo Calvino’s (1923–1985) *Le Città Invisibili* (1972). The writer thus scavenges this local, peripheral landscape for a precarious illumination that shall be relevant to the universal urban realities of his or her readership. It remains to be seen whether this writer may be acting like an outdated or misguided anthropologist, feeding off a sense of authenticity in search of a reverberation that should rather come from literature itself.

The underlying ambiguity of these nowadays seemingly ubiquitous non-places – a liminal space that leads not to discovery and awe, but to solitude and disillusion, eliciting a sense of rootlessness akin to both exiles and tourists (minus the political implications) – seems to provide a blank enough slate with which to frame, historically and conceptually, the main goal of this study: to promote the landscape once again to the foreground of literary discourse and, by using the century and the ocean that stand between Walser and Carvalho as a strategic constraint, to resort to the landscape as a tool to explore, on the one hand, the oeuvre of these two authors, and, on the other, to better gauge the implications of some of the historical and aesthetic developments overseen in this literature review.

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<sup>47</sup> Non-lieux are transitional places, tightly linked to mass tourism and late capitalism. In a way, they subvert (without cancelling out) a “chronic restlessness” Sebald identifies in Böll and in the German craving (via Romanticism) for travel: “Later, Henrich Böll suggested that such experiences of collective uprooting are at the origin of the German craving for travel: a sense of being unable to stay anywhere, a constant need to be somewhere else. In terms of social conditioning, this would make the ebb and flow of the population bombed out of their homes rather like a rehearsal for initiation into the mobile society that would form in the decades after the catastrophe. Under the auspices of that society, chronic restlessness became a cardinal virtue” (Sebald, 2003, 34).



### 3 From the unreal to the apocalypse: The landscape as a function of language and narrative in Walser and Carvalho

This chapter resorts to landscape as an original means of uncovering the poetics of Walser and Carvalho, thus establishing the tone and the baseline for the reading of these authors' oeuvres throughout the entire research. The focus of this chapter is therefore more descriptive than comparative, although it already prefigures the first comparative elements that shall be further explored in upcoming sections. It also greatly emphasizes the role played by landscape in this research, establishing recurring themes and conceptual repercussions which are of fundamental importance to the study's conclusion.

The chapter is divided – as are all – into two subchapters, a first on Walser, and a second – and more properly comparative – on Carvalho. The research, as already stated in the introduction, pursues a close reading of the two authors' entire oeuvre but with an emphasis, in each chapter, on a specific book, here the short-story collections *Träumen* (1913–1920, first published in 1966), by Walser, and *Aberração* (1993), by Carvalho. Two short-story collections have been paired together in this chapter in order not only to observe an important methodological equivalence of genre, but also to portray a wide and heterogeneous variety of themes and motifs which might have otherwise been absent from a monothematic novel. Such heterogeneous variety of themes and motifs is indispensable to this chapter's introductory and descriptive objectives, as they set the conceptual constellation around which the remaining research shall revolve.

The subchapter 3.1., on Walser's *Träumen*, seeks to establish the progression of landscape descriptions in the Swiss author's work, showing how his deceptively idyllic and pastoral depictions are in fact subtle gateways to the *unheimlich*: a more somber and eerie projection of parallel realities – or thought-experiments – hidden underneath the sunny surface of a countryside stroll. This progressive incursion into the *unheimlich* – which starts quite small, with one seemingly dissonant adjective at most – gains momentum as the short stories in *Träumen* move forward and the dissonant elements pick up pace, with Walser gradually shrinking his attention, shifting it from open landscapes to closed drawers, eliciting a surreptitious feeling of claustrophobia which doesn't quite match his vocabulary or choice of subject (but which perfectly explain the odd, dark sense of humor of his texts). The close reading of this progressive downfall into the *unheimlich* and unsettling brings to light the main elements towards



an inceptive and fundamental reading of Walser's oeuvre, elements which are explored along the subchapter: his use of language (especially of adjectives and subjunctive formulations); his constant quest for movement with strong Romantic undertones; the inception, through subjunctive grammar, of "what-if" scenarios which later on acquire the unheimlich contours of a world slowly undoing itself, triggering in his character-narrators a quest for the margins and for marginality, two concepts which are further explored in upcoming chapters and applied to Carvalho's own literary project.

The subchapter 3.2. focuses primarily on Carvalho's début short-story collection, *Aberração*, but also on what is being considered here to be the author's first cycle of novels: *Onze* (1995), *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos* (1996), *Teatro* (1998), *As Iniciais* (1999), and *Medo de Sade* (2000). Also using the landscape as a point of departure and leitmotiv, the subchapter seeks to expand on the previously established Walserian themes and commentators (most notably Sebald and Sontag) and begin exploring the repercussion of such themes within Carvalho's own literary output. The subchapter seeks to show how the unheimlich feeling elicited in Walser's oeuvre is reworked into Carvalho's apocalyptic aesthetics ("the last human beings"; Blanchot's *désastre*), and how this apocalypse, much like Walser's unheimlich, surfaces in language (the exhaustion thereof) and in movement (the displacement of exiles, tourists, and globe-trotters). There is, in Carvalho, a caustic disenchantment not to be openly found in Walser, even though the source of such disenchantment is of Walserian extraction, and one of the clearest stances of Walser's influence over Carvalho: an ambiguous relationship towards the legacy of Romanticism, which this chapter begins to analyze. In Carvalho, this disenchantment – manifested in language and in an underlying apocalyptic aesthetics – leads to what is being originally posited here as Carvalho's "civilizing project", a fundamental feature in the author's work and which introduces the discussion on irony further elaborated in the fourth chapter.

Also of Walserian extraction and central to this chapter is Carvalho's thesis on literature's "power of anticipation", which sheds the first (still dim) lights on Carvalho's reading into Walser's biography and on the use of autobiography in literary texts (as is explored in greater depth in the fifth chapter). What literature anticipates, according to this reading of Carvalho, is disappearance and disaster, and what the Brazilian author seems to locate in Walser and in Walser's oeuvre is perhaps that which Sebald called "the clairvoyance of the small": to glimpse into the literary future conjured in subjunctive, parallel realities and to then choose the margins not out of defeatism, but as someone who sees true artistic value in it, in one's own marginality and inevitable disappearance, which are two of the fourth chapter's main themes.

### 3.1 Walser: *Träumen* (1913–1920) and the short prose

From exile to exile, it is his way of moving in a landscape towards moonlight, following dusk and the drudgery of the day; a way of staving off the self's intrusive dance-steps on the page.

–Gad Hollander, *Walserian Waltzes*

#### 3.1.1 The dissolution of the landscape into language in Walser's short prose

An honest sentence is a hard thing to come by, harder still to write. Language compounds with oxygen in the shortest of distances between fingertip and paper, by the time it is made into letters it has long since lost its essence. The written word does not yield to pressure, little is to be gained by hovering a hand over the dictionary. It unravels itself instead in instants of frailty, when the air is at its thinnest and the author on his knees.

Therein surfaces the secret for writing an honest sentence, and with it the first element towards a reading of Robert Walser's literature: his prose is language with the faintest of intentions collapsing into fascination. A quiet, crisp beauty on the cusp of erasure, a minimalistic insight about nothing much, really, the smell of freshly picked apples in autumn: "Mit den Äpfeln, die Sie mir schickten, ist mir ein wahrer Herbst ins Haus geflogen. Ich will sie aufsparen und mich einsteilen bloß mit den Augen daran sattessen. In so schöne Früchte hineinbeißen ist sünd und schade" (T, 49), writes the narrator of "Brief aus Biel", who however much tempted dares not touch the apples, stares at them from a distance as if these mundane crops concealed the secret of an entire season and touching them would serve no other purpose than poisoning whatever fleeting peace of mind has been achieved. The bare, vulnerable grace of this opening remark represents a brief moment of reprieve and motion ("ins Haus geflogen") in the life of a writer who sits for hours on end at his desk, from where he now and then sighs, pining for movement ("weil er sich nach Bewegung sehnt") (T, 50).

Then comes retribution. As the smell of autumn fades away, the writer is faced with a task writers are usually ill-equipped to deal with, that of matching one tangible object with another of similar weight. Rather, the writer from Biel resorts to pen and paper, a promise and a thank you letter: "Vielleicht darf ich Ihnen zum Zeichen, daß ich erkenntlich sei, wenigstens mein neues Buch schenken, sobald es im Druck erscheint. Bis dahin wird freilich noch Zeit und Wind verstreichen" (T, 49). The helplessness of it all only underscores the fragile nature of Walser's sentences – his "many tender or prickly blooms that flourish in the barren wastes of the journalistic forests", as Benjamin (1961, 370) puts it –, how they capture a moment of pure honesty and subdued desolation without being

neither over-wrought nor sentimental. Here's an author who wishes to reciprocate the kindness of mundane fruit with an entire forthcoming book, in his own quiet way trying to say: my fingers cannot create life, they can only write.

The only apples he dares touch are these six-lettered ones that breathe an autumn wind into a home.

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Walser's narrators are afflicted by their black thumbs, they cannot grow anything out of nature, they can however bring it to life on paper. Pristine landscape descriptions are an abundant vista throughout his fiction, in his short prose above all, where, as Susan Sontag (1992, vii) points out, "the musicality and free fall of his writing are less impeded by plot". *Träumen*, a collection of short prose written during his so-called Bieler Zeit (1913–1920), is exemplary in this sense, as in quick succession within the first twenty pages the leaves turn green and back to yellow once again, autumn becomes summer, summer winter, winter spring. From the deep and lush golden hues of summer – "Alle höher und niedriger gelegenen Häuser waren golden angehaucht, und alle grünen Wiesen hatten einen himmlischen tiefen Schimmer. Der Schatten da und dort war lang und von tiefster, sattester Farbe" (T, 7-8) – to the sharp, biting rose-reds, greens, and blues of winter – "Winterliche Luft hauchte mich aus dem offenen Fenster an. Die Farben waren so ernst, so scharf. Ein kaltes edles Grün kämpfte mit einem beginnenden Blau; der Himmel war voller rosenroter Wolken" (T, 10) – to the fiery green of spring – "Das junge Frühlingsgrün erschien mir wie ein grünes Feuer" (T, 17) –, Walser mixes the colors on his palette, the silver-gray and the black (T, 11), the burning red (T, 12), the watery blue-black-gray of a lake (T, 13), the chiaroscuro of a deserted street at dusk (T, 17), lays down on the canvas the imprimatura for all the scenes yet to come.

The painting proper, varnished and signed, will either take a long time or at it he may never arrive. Walser's pace is glacial, withholding, the remote "Hantierung" of people echoing somewhere down the road, a road that shall be avoided lest it charges in conversation its toll. For the time being there are only sceneries, no scenes. The landscape is less horizontal than it is vertical. "Himmel und Erde lagen einander so nah", (T, 7) writes Walser on *Träumen's* first sketch, "Kleiner Streifzug", and the juxtaposition is no small wonder: Walser's characters are drawn to where the air is thinnest and the view magnificent, hoisted upon hills or mountaintops or rocky boulders, and even a sovereign terrace will do ("Auf der Terrasse") if geography is not at hand. The Romantic taste for distance and elevation is summed up in "Das Frühjahr": "Auf der Anhöhe stehend, sah ich in der Ebene, welche reizend schimmerte, die Stadt mit ihren hübschen Gebäuden und Gassen liegen" (T, 18). From up there the view is so breathtaking and the village down below so helpless that one could, if one so desired, crush it between one's fingers.

Flat terrain is only suitable under two circumstances: be it deep into the forest or by the breeze of a lake. And even then distance and elevation are at play, as the narrator of “Im Wald”, between trunks and branches, sees from above the city lights already shimmering (T, 13), or as the narrator of “Am See” stares with longing and melancholy at the ships balancing on the horizon, “ein Anblick, der mich phantasieren ließ, ich sei in China oder in Japan oder sonst in einem träumerischen, poetischen Land” (T, 15).

A distinction is here made evident: the vertical landscape establishes a Y-axis of movement, a contemplative climbing and admiring and returning, for it is the wont of verticality – a curse of gravity – to eventually reconstitute the ascending traveler to its point of departure. The skyward dislocation, at the end of the day, takes the traveler no further away than his sea-level front door. Thus, one sketch after the other, the same dénouement is quietly sustained: “Nachdenklich, fast glücklich, ging ich heim” (T, 8); “Der Auftritt bewegte mich sehr, und ich nahm mir, wie ich so nach Hause ging, vor, ihn nicht aus dem Gedächtnis zu verlieren” (T, 9); “Zuletzt ging ich doch weg” (T, 13); “...vom Ufer wegzugehen und den Heimweg anzutreten” (T, 15); “Auf einem Umweg durch den Wald ging ich wieder nach Hause” (T, 21)...

Even though Walser’s writer-narrator pines for movement (“nach Bewegung sehnt”), climbs a mountain whenever the air in his room becomes stagnant, dwells in a high-standing, far-outlooking attic (T, 354), suffers from the occasional spell of “Dachstübeneinsamkeit” (T, 92), he remains nevertheless static and incapable of horizontal mileage, finding solace in a rarefied vertical displacement that offers him a safe glimpse of the world yet to be tread. The X-axis is for now but a whim, a lakeside Romantic longing to set off to sea, to be bound somewhere far-east, China or Japan, but before setting sail to unknown lands it might be best to understand a thing or two about his own self, “vom Ufer wegzugehen und den Heimweg anzutreten”. A Herderian new beginning perhaps,<sup>1</sup> but one that will hardly ever leave the docks. Walser’s writer-narrator, in looking for the world, goes back home and finds himself instead.

### 3.1.2 The quest for movement and the use of adjectives

Horizontality is the path of tragedy, to lie down is to be overcome by catastrophe. Melancholy sets in when the body is horizontal, it takes one’s full might every

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<sup>1</sup> As per Rüdiger Safranski’s (2007, 11; 17) reading of Romanticism: “Und deshalb kann man die Geschichte der Romantik mit dem Augenblick beginnen lassen, da Herder 1769 zu einer Seereise nach Frankreich aufbrach, überstürzt und fluchartig. (...) [D]as Pathos eines neuen Anfangs...”

morning to plant two feet on the floor and go out the door. Nearing the skies may be redemptive, but up there is not where human fate lays, it is instead in the space between two houses or two villages, or how this space may be turned into a phrase. Walser's writing – which, according to Sebald (2009, 133), “has the tendency to dissolve upon reading, so that only a few hours later one can barely remember the ephemeral figures, event and things of which it spoke” –, albeit seemingly withholding, weightless, is ultimately interested in life, attempts to walk towards its light, and does so with such resolve that one could even compound on the first secret of Walser's prose: movement is the faintest of his intentions, and life his fascination.

The quest for horizontal displacement, the ulterior fantasy of China or Japan, begins in language before it can reach the closest village and its inhabitants. Movement fuels language in a twofold composition: through adjectives and rhythm.

No book of Walser's is afflicted by a shortage of adjectives. He is in many ways Isaac Babel's nemesis, to whom two attributes for a same noun could only be handled by a certified genius. In doing so, Walser preserves the provocative playfulness of a writing style tinged by Romanticism, taking advantage of its constitutive irony and wordplay to describe the sensible through an exaggerated and stylistically repetitive set of heightened qualifiers.<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of adjectives in Walser serves thus as a counterpoint to the narrator's initial stasis, in a way breathing fantasy into watercolor-like sketches. The adjectives add mild extravagant seasoning to the otherwise limited (albeit here pastoral and there sublime)

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<sup>2</sup> In Alfred de Musset's now famous 1836 letter addressed to the editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and signed by the pseudonym of Dupuis et Cotonet, a barrage of far-fetched definitions for Romanticism is presented, one more eccentric than the last, until a very fitting definition is met – “le romantisme consiste à employer tous ces adjectifs, et non en autre chose” –, and with it Dupuis et Cotonet bid farewell: “Vous savez que Quintilien compare une phrase trop chargée d'adjectifs à une armée où chaque soldat aurait derrière lui son valet-de-chambre. Nous voilà arrivés au sujet de cette lettre; c'est que nous pensons qu'on met trop d'adjectifs dans ce moment-ci. Vous apprécierez, nous l'espérons, la réserve de cette dernière amplification; il y a juste le nécessaire; mais notre opinion concluante est que si on rayait tous les adjectifs des livres qu'on fait aujourd'hui, il n'y aurait qu'un volume au lieu de deux, et donc il n'en coûterait que sept livres dix sous au lieu de quinze francs, ce qui mérite réflexion. Les auteurs vendraient mieux leurs ouvrages, selon toute apparence. Vous vous souvenez, monsieur, des âcres baisers de Julie, dans la nouvelle Héloïse; ils ont produit de l'effet dans leur temps; mais il nous semble que dans celui-ci ils n'en produiraient guère, car il faut une grande sobriété dans un ouvrage, pour qu'une épithète se remarque. Il n'y a guère de romans maintenant où l'on n'ait rencontré autant d'épithètes au bout de trois pages, et plus violentes, qu'il n'y en a dans tout Montesquieu. Pour en finir, nous croyons que le romantisme consiste à employer tous ces adjectifs, et non en autre chose. Sur quoi, nous vous saluons bien cordialement, et signons ensemble” (Musset, 1963, 880).

range of vertical European landscapes. Thus seven qualifiers for the countryside and its riverbed – “durch das grüne Land floß heiter und ruhig und friedlich der gute Strom, dessen Wasser so zierlich glänzte” (T, 7) –, four for the alley at night – “Die behaglichen, breiten alten Gassen strahlten im dunkeln Licht” (T, 16) –, or twelve for a house down the street – “ein entzückend schönes, altes, liebes, eben recht großes und breites kleines, nettes, allerliebstes, fröhliches, freundliches, hellgrün angestrichenes Untergassenstübchen” (T, 27).

Through its neat, echoing declinations, the adjective frenzy stresses even further Walser’s already keen sense of musicality, building onto the language a motion-like rhythm ready to see the world, although ultimately too interested and absorbed in itself to take the next step. Language emerges as the end destination, a performance of its own, like the traveler whose travel-planning checklist becomes so engrossing that each item crossed off the list grows into two new bifurcations, and then four more, each additional preparation only leading further away from its initial goal. Among many examples of his diction, a couple are worthy of notice: how swiftly he deploys three consecutive hard [d] in order to swiftly mix nasal [m] and [n] sounds into a [r]- and [e]-led phrase – “...als solle ein lieber kühner starker Ritter durch die Dornen, Hemmungen und Hindernisse bis zu ihr herdringen” (T, 21) –, or how he pursues the [œ]’s velvety roundness by stacking one such verb after the other – “die Farben tönen hören können” (T, 23) –, or how he modulates the text’s tempo through the echo and the naïve pleasure of simple rhymes – “Herrlich belebte mich mein Schritt. Ein erquickliches Strömen ging mir kühlend durch den Körper. Die Straße mit den zahlreichen Menschen glich einem Gedicht. Jeder verfolgte still seine Absicht” (T, 36).

Language animates the narrator’s first steps along an X-axis, it provides the bassline upon which the text is erected, sets the course for the pursuit of human fate and horizontal tragedy, although weary of superfluous impositions such as climax or plot. When Walser’s narrator finally arrives somewhere concrete across the flat terrain, it is not his own efforts that get him there, but language, as it is the abundance of nasal sounds that accompany him to the nasal-sounding town of Amsterdam: “Gemächlich auf holden, grünen segenreichen Wellen weiterfahrend, landen wir endlich in Amsterdam” (T, 43).

### 3.1.3 Portrayals of people and the ‘what-if’ scenarios of *Konjunktiv II*

His prose’s second secret: Walser misreads the letters but not the literature.

Biel, where he was born and raised, may in like manner be called Bienne. The letters are shuffled but the meaning remains the same. The biggest bilingual city in Switzerland, poised right on the country’s French-German linguistic

divide, it teaches its inhabitants from an early age the chagrined art of cutting their tongues in half, never knowing which sounds they might find. At home he spoke neither German nor French but something in between: a Swiss dialect that made his command over written German almost foreign, a life-long discomfort<sup>3</sup> which forced his many editors and proof-readers to constantly battle against his imprecisions and flavored diction.<sup>4</sup>

His French finesse did also intervene, in his *Wanderungen mit Carl Seelig* his tendency for the Latinate surfaced partout, people and things described as noble, charmant, jaloux; abstract nouns betrayed German's self-proclaimed conceptual genius and wandered right across the Rhine: Courage, Plaisir, Malheur, Noblesse, Milieu; a recurring set of vowel-intensive verbs parried tête-à-tête with the consonants of their Germanic counterparts: arrivieren, arrondieren, exzellieren, flat-tieren, foutieren, illuminieren, molestieren, negieren, ruinieren. The more Seelig tried to poke behind Walser's shadows, the more Walser lost his temper and broke character, peppered his otherwise lucid, guarded German with outbursts of Gallicisms: "Sehen Sie nicht daß ich mich daran foutiere?"; "En avant – zu Bier und Dämmerung!"; "Der Chefarzt! Je m'en fiche!"; "Kümmern Sie sich nicht um mich! C'est mon affaire. Jeder muß sein eigener Kontrolleur sein"; "Assez de ces temps passés!" (Seelig, 1989, 46; 72; 85; 98; 116). So much so that at a certain point Seelig mused over how little it would have taken to make of Walser a francophone writer, or at least a bilingual one – "Spricht man in Biel nicht bald deutsch und bald französisch?" –, to which Walser replied that the thought had never crossed his mind: "Schon ein ordentliches Deutsch zu schreiben, hat mich Sorgen genug gekostet" (Seelig, 1989, 87).

Poetic as it may be to picture a writer's voice defined by the side of the street on which they were born, or to chalk up an entire oeuvre under the geography of an imaginary linguistic line, the actual aftermath of pen meeting paper is not a matter of fate, but of discipline and resolve. Walser refused the cowardly escape route down the path of neutrality, to write in dialect would have meant becoming a regional author, an easy enough solution in the turn-of-the-century provincial Switzerland. Furthermore, "regionalism" implies an uncomfortable proximity, the close range of an enclosed space, as if the writer's front door would be left ajar for all those who wished to knock on it and reminisce about the neighborhood.

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<sup>3</sup> J. M. Coetzee identifies in the impositions of *Hochdeutsch* one of the layers behind Walser's unsettling prose: "Writing in High German—which was, if he wanted to earn a living from his pen, the only choice open to Walser—entailed, unavoidably, adopting an educated, socially refined stance, a stance with which he was not comfortable" (Coetzee, 2007, 28).

<sup>4</sup> A discomfort well and richly documented in Jochen Greven's afterword to the Suhrkamp edition of *Geschwister Tanner*. See Greven, 2008, 337–343.



The proximity would have suffocated Walser, he who, like his characters, could only breathe rarified air:

“I have deliberately never written in dialect. I always found it an unbecoming ingratiation towards the masses. An artist must keep his distance. The masses must have respect for him. Any person whose talent is built on trying to write more like a man of the people than other must be a real dimwit [“Tschalpi“]. – Writers should feel fundamentally obliged to think and act nobly and to strive for greatness [“nach dem Hohen zu streben“].” (Seelig, 1989, 20)

Walser, then, misreads the letters but not the literature. His tongue might be cut in two but his allegiance to German is resolute; his prose may be weightless and evanescent, but unaware it is not. It is thus not naïve that the word “Hantierung” marks *Träumen*’s first encounter with people: “Ich warf auf die Leute sowohl wie auf ihre gemütliche Hantierung meine ruhigen Blicke” (T, 7). Almost a franco-phone writer, Walser must have been perfectly aware of the echoing French verb “*hanter*” haunting his own word choice, and the linguistic juxtaposition is quite fitting, as it sets the broader tone for Walser’s feline stance towards people: half enthralled and half distant.

As language brings Walser’s narrator closer to the city, the city brings him closer to people. The route is nonetheless a tortuous one: it takes the narrator eight idyllic, watercolor-like landscape sketches, one brief incursion into the streets of a village at dusk (“Die Stadt (II)”), one quick retreat to a mountaintop (“Das Frühjahr”), a longer stroll through the village streets (“Abendspaziergang”), before he can finally round up the courage to go into a bar (“Die Kneipe”). The bar is the first closed space he dares enter, and the clatter is immediate: Fuhrleute, poor Lumpenvolk, Räuberpack and Vagabundengesindel, Waldvaganten, the boisterous Wirt, a drunken Frau, an Uhrmacher, a beautiful Mädchen, two joke-cracking Burschen, five Jungen complete with a harpist, a Professor of fine arts. One would imagine that among such an assorted and enticing crowd the narrator would find at least one pair of ears worthy of his voice, but that is not at all the case: the observant narrator wastes not a word before coming up with a feeble excuse to walk away – “Da es inzwischen Zeit zum Abendessen geworden war, so ging ich” (T, 23).

The narrator’s (or, alternatively, the narrators’) inclination towards human contact remains hypothetical throughout most of the book’s sketches, well within the sheltered realm of *Konjunktiv II*: “Ich hätte bei ihr stehen, mit ihr reden und nach ihrem Leben fragen mögen” (T, 8). Opportunity and desire are constantly there, but the crippling fear of proximity, of slipping into dialect, keeps the narrator at bay, a ghost haunted by visions of people, at once protective of their own identity and fascinated by the liveliness of strangers.



*Träumen*'s characters and narrators are cut very close from Walser's own skin, they share his "noble" need for respect and distance while maintaining an honest interest in everyday existence. They climb mountains and, upon returning to flat terrain, they stare at their reflections in the mirror and try to convince themselves nothing has changed: "Der Bescheid traf mich wie ein Keulenschlag aufs Haupt, wollte sagen Kopf, denn ich habe kein Haupt, da ich bloß ein simpler Mensch, aber kein Fürst bin" (T, 57). Although self-portrayed admirers of the common folk, ascribing to them a source of wisdom unmatched by "vornehmen und feinen Räumlichkeiten" (T, 28), a glaring discrepancy between intentions and actions prevails throughout the book's sketches. The motives are virtuous so long as the subjects remain at arm's length, a posture that would allow for a cynical reading of the moralizing author impairing his truth from atop a pedestal, which is not at all the case. Although on a mission of sorts, Walser is not a moralizing author,<sup>5</sup> and a more compelling interpretation to the discrepancy can be offered.

### 3.1.4 The unheimlich and the first signs of a dark and unsettling landscape

Underneath the golden hues of a countryside morning landscape lurks a world of unreality. A hallucinatory substance radiates from solid material in imperceptible whiffs, harmless to humans in small doses, but eventually fatal throughout an entire oeuvre. The exact source may be hard to identify at first, like trying to pin down the last droplet of dew to be consumed by the morning sun, or to single out a foul smell rising from a basket of fruit. The unreal is all that unhinges from the tangible, never mind how negligible; it is a fleeting disconnection immediately re-established, the split-second of life that is lost with every blink of an eye.

The unreal lurks in the details, hides behind one self-effacing word, perhaps two per text at most. If uncovered, these words turn into passwords to a parallel universe, a hypothetical existence unhinged from the immediate depicted reality. Two words, for instance, can take "Kleiner Streifzug" from summery idyll to solitary silence: "almost" [*fast*] and "somber" [*düster*]. "Almost" comes up as a quizzical conclusion to an otherwise joyous stroll along the countryside: "Nachdenklich, fast glücklich, ging ich heim" (T, 8). The adverb is blinded by the sheer solar nature of the text, a tranquil beauty at surface unwilling to tolerate

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<sup>5</sup> As one of *Träumen*'s narrators would have explained: "Da ich jedoch überzeugt bin, dass ein Allzuviel auch in Dingen der Moral ungesund ist, so zügle, bändige, mäßige und bezähme ich mich und sage hierüber nicht zu viel!" (T, 39).

any thoughts of almost-happiness, a conclusion that does not seem to derive from its premises. “Almost” upsets the text almost imperceptibly, demands a re-evaluation of its lines.

“Kleiner Streifzug” resorts to forty adjectives along its page-and-a-half route, only one of which is not the stuff of hymns: somber – “Noch anderswo redete es eine ernste, wenn auch gleich nicht düstere Sprache” (T, 7). The adjective is partially disguised (the language is “honest” before turning “somber”) within a sentence that feels dislocated from the rest of the text, an apparent *non-sequitur* compressed between a remark on the green of the landscape that “schien zu tönen wie eine Musik” (T, 7), and the vertical, wishful feeling that “Himmel und Erde lagen einander so nah” (T, 7). “Somber” qualifies a conversation held somewhere outside the narrator’s immediate focalization, although not distant enough to slide by unannounced. Whoever is producing such somber speech remains concealed by the shadows. Why, moreover, a somber speech is at all mentioned within the idyll of a golden-tinged, “himmlisch” [heavenly] scenery lingers as an unsolved mystery. As the narrator resumes his way, praising all that meets the eye, he comes across a woman described as both beautiful and fine, with whom he could talk but doesn’t, stuck in the realm of hätte/mögen, as if the reticence lodged in the back of his throat were in fact the somber speech he is running from, and thus only “almost happy” makes his way back home.

Reading the hätte/mögen inertia of *Kleiner Streifzug* as the reflective [“nachdenklich”] silence of a black throat allows for a second, darker, hallucinatory reading of *Träumen* as a whole, the literature underneath the letters. Thus, when the narrator of the same sketch claims that “the land became a song, and the song – intolerably beautiful – was to die for” [“und das Lied war zum Sterben schön” (T, 8)], what at first sounded as the poetic license of a clichéd euphemism, now acquires the undertones of a suicide threat, one echoed six sketches down the line in the nocturnal “Im Wald”, where the moon rises like a pale and noble magician from behind a cloud, and like a magician it casts a spell that leaves the narrator so mesmerized that he thinks for a second he might as well be dead [“Ich meinte, ich sei gestorben” (T, 13)]. The same adjective as in “Kleiner Streifzug” is immediately employed, “himmlisch”, an adjective that carries all sorts of vertical connotations and aspirations. The adjective is reiterated towards the text’s apex, as the narrator finds himself alone in the middle of the forest, cradled by a heavenly darkness [“himmlische Finsternis”], surrounded by trees and Konjunktiv II: “Hinlegen hätte ich mich mögen und aus dem Wald nie mehr wieder hinausgehen” (T, 14). If the narrator is not to be consumed by beauty, the fragrant death of a ripe fruit, then he shall perish from contemplative exhaustion. Walser is here once again quite the Romantic,

not bypassing or ignoring words, but meeting them in all their darkness and strangeness.<sup>6</sup>

From these Romantic shadows a third secret to Walser's prose may be glimpsed: underneath the weightless lays the *unheimlich*. The *unheimlich*, following Freud's seminal cue, which in turn tips its hat to Ernst Jentsch, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Schelling, belongs to all that is terrible, to all that provokes dread and blood-curdling fear, but which at the same time leads back to something long known and quite familiar (Freud, 1970, 243; 244). The connection with the homely and familiar – which Freud sieves through dictionaries and etymologies, to the benefit of the German language – is what finally leads him to his famous definition, via Schelling, of the *unheimlich* as that which should have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light. The *unheimlich*, in Walser, surfaces in a drawerful of objects coated in the eerie uncertainty of whether they are living or inanimate; in the familiarity of everyday pieces of furniture which suddenly become frightening, menacing, with the homely components – to adapt from Andreas Huyssen's commentary – both preserved and denied in the uncanny feeling aroused by a shadowy *Schreibtisch*<sup>7</sup>; in the creation of monsters out of previously placid trees, or in the projection of elaborate and deadly accidents onto a (up to that point) serene take on trains and landscapes,<sup>8</sup> as if the text suddenly succumbed to the frightening shadow cast by the universe in a desperate yet recurring attempt of answering the question: How can one survive it?

What Walser does, when his texts slip into the *unheimlich*, is to test hypotheses, to examine parallel realities<sup>9</sup> which might never come to be, and which stem from both his and the universe's threatening foreignness, a foreignness that is

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<sup>6</sup> According to Christopher Strathman (2006, 36) – whose argumentation shall be resumed later on: “Words, [F.] Schlegel suggests, cannot be shrugged off or turned aside but must be encountered in all their darkness, foreignness, or strangeness”.

<sup>7</sup> “That which is heimlich and familiar, the everyday piece of furniture, becomes *unheimlich*, uncanny, but the homely is both preserved and denied in the *unheimlich*...” (Huyssen, 2003, 113)

<sup>8</sup> “Freilich kann das vergnügliche und geschäftliche Reisen mit der Eisenbahn, wie wieder die letztgeschehenen Unfälle lehren, lebensgefährlich werden; Brücken können einstürzen, Schienen sich plötzlich zornig aufbäumen und den Zug umschleudern, zwei Züge können durch Versehen vielleicht eines einzigen verantwortlichen Beamten mitten in einem Wald, wo auf weiter Strecke keine Menschenansiedelungen zu finden sind, aneinanderprallen, welche fürchterlichen Dinge! Oder es kann in einem fliegenden Zug plötzlich Feuer ausbrechen, oder der Zug kann, wie zum Beispiel im heiligen Russland, von Räubern überfallen werden.” (F, 22). Moreover, the breaking out of fire (which also arouses the *unheimlich* in Walser's oeuvre) should not go unnoticed, as it shall be expanded upon in later chapters.

<sup>9</sup> “Es handelt sich hier also rein um eine Angelegenheit der Realitätsprüfung, um eine Frage der materiellen Realität.” (Freud, 1970, 270)

nevertheless disturbingly familiar. Freud's *unheimlich*, however, and despite the fact it derives from a literary (and Romantic) reading, quickly makes its way to the psychoanalytical camp, where it flourishes in discussions regarding repression, the self and, eventually, the not-self. Freud admits his agenda straightaway in the essay's opening paragraph, claiming how rare it is for a psychoanalyst to investigate the subject of aesthetics, thus indicating his ulterior goal of unfolding these aesthetic matters into "other planes of mental life" (Freud, 1970, 243). In order to keep the analysis of Walser's *unheimlich* narrative strategies well within the realm of its stylistic and literary implications (and, later on, of its equally stylistic and literary influence on Carvalho), and not to allow it to be overshadowed by a more psychoanalytical vocabulary, the term "*unheimlich*" shall henceforth be replaced by the more context-appropriate "unreal", which also underlines the fact that Walser's recourse to such strategy aims at projection rather than revelation, thus paving the way to Carvalho's more overtly apocalyptic aesthetic.

The unreal is all that unhinges from the tangible, a parallel universe coexisting with whatever reality the author chooses to call so. A geminate mood sprouts from Walser's weightless prose, as if the language used to describe scenes narrates more than it sees: it narrates what there is and implies all that there could be. Walser is fiercely interested in life, but knows better than to trust it blindly – he interposes language between himself and the world. Through subjunctive formulations Walser's narrators experience layers of existence otherwise unavailable to them; they test the waters the way "Am See"'s narrator does so, by sitting at a bench by the lakeside at dusk and wondering where do all those ships go, China or Japan, himself a nothing<sup>10</sup> shrouded in melancholy, seeing visions of a father and a mother that may have been his own, accepting the night's friendly invitation to stand up from the bench behind the trees – and, in the split-second of a comma, the only possible outcome for this story seems to lead the narrator straight into the dark waters, his silent throat at last filled to the brim with something –, but he ultimately just turns his back and returns home (T, 15).

Beneath landscapes Walser's literature tests hypotheses: What if I talked to that beautiful, fine woman? What if I lied down forever in this forest? What if I thanked you for the apples you sent with a book I might never write? What if I

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<sup>10</sup> "...wollte mir einbilden, daß ich nirgends sei, eine Philosophie, die mich in ein sonderbares reizendes Behagen setze. (...) Der alte Vater mit seinen weißen Haaren stand in Gedanken vor mir, was mich zum nichtsbedeutenden, schüchternen Knaben machte..." (T, 14; 15). The discussion regarding nothingness, or being a nothing (a zero, as opposed to a hero), is further analyzed in the fifth chapter, within the conceptual frame of the novel *Jakob von Gunten*.

had worn a black suit if I had one?<sup>11</sup> What if I sat down on the snow until I fell asleep?<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1.5 The rift between indicative and subjunctive fiction: Walser's penchant for miniaturization

These two extremes suggest a scale along which any work of fiction may be placed, a scale that measures the degree to which a work illuminates (at one end of the scale) the nature of the world outside the work, or (at the other end) the nature of the work's own language and structure. At the latter extreme is that which may be called subjunctive fiction, works concerned with events that can occur only in language, with few or no analogues in the phenomenal world. At the other extreme is indicative fiction (which includes imperative fiction), works that transmit, through no matter how elaborate a transformation, no matter how wide or narrow a focus, information about the emotional and physical world of non-literary experience, including, but not limited to, the experience of language. Of course all indicative fiction has subjunctive elements, or it would be formless and not "fiction"; and all subjunctive fiction has indicative elements, otherwise it could not be understood at all.

—Mendelson, "The Sacred, The Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*"

The road not taken can be more fascinating than the traveled one, liberated as it is from the burdensome constraints of factual outcome. The crossroads should not be regarded as an exercise in possible worlds, but rather as a thought-experiment induced by the transit between the indicative experience of existence and the subjunctive projection of language. The slight discrepancy between Walser's letters and literature, his landscapes and language, sets the unsettling tone for his writing, terribly pretty but on the verge of collapsing, made even more ghostly in his evanescent short prose. The pure subjunctive, where a Borges did thrive, is not where Walser wishes to arrive. He explores instead the very delicate, very frail realm of unreality, that is to say: of necessity, emotion, and desire.

It is within this space, this back-and-forth motion, that Walser's depictions of people should be interpreted: as theories to be expanded on by way of pen strokes, hypotheses he will speculate on and then forget to reach a conclusion as his pen meanders further and further away from the center of the plot. The narrator's eye

<sup>11</sup> "Gerne hätte ich einen schwarzen Anzug angezogen, hatte aber keinen." (T, 55)

<sup>12</sup> "'...Wer sich einschneien ließe und im Schnee begraben läge und sanft verendete. Hübsch ist zwar das Leben auch mit kargen Aussichten.' Ich hätte mich zu Boden setzen und warten mögen, bis ich schlafe." (T, 65)

is enticed by the unreal creatures that appear on the periphery of his vision,<sup>13</sup> lumps of speculative necessity, emotion, and desire to whom he is drawn by way of subjunctive distance. Walser does not so much posit an alterity as he exhausts language. Characters throughout his work are so insubstantial they might as well be ghosts. They are neither harnessed nor harassed by organizations, free by virtue of their detachment from institutions of any kind. As Rochelle Tobias puts it:

They have no familial, religious, or social obligations but also, and more disturbingly, no fraternal bonds. The protagonists in Walser's stories are incapable of forming attachments or returning the affection directed at them since they have no defining traits save that they mirror the characters they meet. They pass through the world with nothing but a mirror in their hands which conceals them, even when they are open, by turning their face into a mask. (Tobias, 2006, 299)

Walser's ghostlike characters are drawn to one another the same way two opposite mirrors conjure an infinite reflection of their own voids. They exhaust themselves in endless spectral projections, stretched beyond reality and Realism and slipping into the unreal. The realm of the subjunctive, when analyzed from the vantage point of the indicative, is made infinite, "a meandering line of ink (or pencil) that emerges under the writing hand", as J.M. Coetzee (2007, 28–29) articulates, a "depressive's appalled vision of endlessness", according to Sontag (1992, viii),<sup>14</sup> to whom Walser's writing "is all voice—musing, conversing, rambling, running on. The important is redeemed as a species of the unimportant, wisdom as a kind of shy, valiant loquacity". The ground beneath his characters' feet is never as solid as it used to be, five paragraphs ago are already a thing of memory, a hazy oblivion consumed and obliterated by the meandering, relentless line of ink.

Hence Benjamin (1961, 371): "Everything seems to be on the verge of disaster; a torrent of words pours from him in which the only point of every sentence is to make the reader forget the previous one". Benjamin's seminal reading of Walser underlines this defeatist compulsion towards language, a torrent of words that washes the next set of words away, not because their meaning is insignificant,

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<sup>13</sup> Sebald (2009, 146), upon comparing Walser to Gogol, presents the following argument: "Der Vergleich mit Gogol ist keineswegs zu weit hergeholt, denn wenn Walser überhaupt einen Verwandten oder Vorfahren hatte, so war es dieser. Beide, Walser und Gogol, verloren nach und nach die Fähigkeit, ihr Augenmerk auf das Zentrum des Romangeschehens zu richten und verschauten sich statt dessen auf eine fast zwanghafte Weise in die an der Peripherie ihres Gesichtsfeldes in Erscheinung tretenden seltsam irrealen Kreaturen, über deren vorheriges und weiteres Leben wir nie auch nur das geringste erfahren".

<sup>14</sup> Sontag projects onto Walser's oeuvre Romanticism's ever-longing, never fully satisfied "Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen." See Millán-Zaibert, 2007, 15.

but because their combinations are hauntingly endless. Walser's narrators seek alterity, find language. They are cursed and crushed by the infinite subjunctive possibilities of the meandering line of ink. Language brings them to life and immediately erases them, and Walser is perfectly aware of their purely typographical existence, as he demonstrates in numerous texts by providing little beyond their narrative structure. The spectral appearances that inhabit his oeuvre are thought-experiments, not fleshed-out characters – they enjoy “only the briefest of lives” (Sebald, 2009, 145). They posit a *hätte/mögen* contingency through which Walser slowly, subterraneously steers his stories towards fantasy, towards unreal<sup>15</sup> visions of necessity, emotion, and desire.

There is some consolation to be had in language for the two seconds it takes before it gains its independence, before the hand that crafted sentences is engulfed by their appalling endlessness. It is halfway over to fantasy that, paradoxically, Walser's fictional world begins to shrink. The scale is dramatically reduced the more one sentence stacks atop the other, the more a “torrent of words” erases the traces of all words before. As language bifurcates away and grows out of hand, leaving behind a trace of fascination, ink, and oblivion, Walser, with a dwindling, minuscule force, still tries to veer it towards some sort of insight, an affirmation of life that must reduce and restrict itself [“beschränken sich”] to its bare minimum in order to become fathomable, like somebody who wishes to know the taste of the ocean by drinking a single drop of it. The sketch “Phantasieren” is a perfect example of Walser's minimalist, defeatist fantasy, above all its concluding paragraph:

Es herrscht niemand, außer jedermann über sich selber. Alles dient dort allem, und der Sinn der Welt geht deutlich dahin, den Schmerz zu beseitigen. Niemand will genießen; die Folge ist, daß alle es tun. Alle wollen arm sein; hieraus folgt, daß niemand arm ist. Dort, dort ist es schön, dort möchte ich leben. Unter Menschen, die sich frei fühlen, weil sie sich beschränken, möchte ich leben. Unter Menschen, die einander achten, möchte ich leben. Unter Menschen, die keine Angst kennen, möchte ich leben. Ich sehe wohl ein, daß ich phantasieren. (T, 99)

If only people could be more like each other, free of the nefarious influence of external institutions, then the divide between the daily world of the indicative and the projected realm of the subjunctive would not be so vertiginous. Beyond the text's childish *naïveté*, its adolescent take on egalitarianism, lies the subtle yet brutal sorrow common to Walser's prose: a vigilant helplessness, filtering life

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<sup>15</sup> Both Coetzee (2007, 28), as already quoted – “the writing (or dreaming) self” –, and Sebald (2009, 144) concur: “In dem Maß, in dem in der Prosa Walsers das Phantastische zunimmt, schwindet auch der Realitätsgehalt oder rauscht, genauer gesagt, die Wirklichkeit unaugaltsam vorüber wie im Traum oder im Filmtheater”.

through language in search for understanding but conscious that the end-result is not life, but language itself. The trap of the intellectual life, a life lived with a pencil in hand, is that it grossly distorts the ratio between bystanding and partaking. Walser's narrators and protagonists are exemplary eyewitnesses well aware of the fatal flaw in their masterplans: from so much observing they forgot to exist.

The sketch "Der Philosoph" is arguably *Träumen's* best example of Walser's vigilant stylistic helplessness, a conceptual self-criticism that also sheds light on his characters' growing opacity, on their expanding nothingness, as if the more they observe and understand the world, the less they mean to it, self-fulfilled prophecies of a Schleiermacher nightmare.<sup>16</sup> The figure of an unnamed philosopher is scrutinized by an "I" who only shows himself twice, remains for the rest of the text very critical of his subject matter. An autobiographical reading of the sketch would be perfectly reasonable, as the philosopher is cut from Walser's own flesh: a poor writer without paper or ink,<sup>17</sup> lost in thoughts that lead nowhere, on the track of "spinnfadendünn" things; a wearer of threadbare – yet proper – suits, who hides in himself "a sort of strange childishness"; an avid breather of fresh air, perhaps too avid, worried that his bourgeois manners ["kleinbürgerliche Lebenlust"] might be tempting him away from his desk; someone who gladly tinkers around with little objects ["hantiert gern an kleinen Gegenständen herum"] as life flies past beyond the windowpane. At some point, the philosopher stands up from his desk and looks outside the window; seeing the world triggers in him the subjunctive and the sorrow: "How vigourously, with his convictions, the strength of his character, his goodness of soul, his sense of justice, and his intuition could he help and effect change by directly engaging with the people, by being a part of the progress, by stepping onto the stage. – It is a pity that his long reflections made him lose so many things" (T, 115-117).

The board is thickest where the world meets language, and it is there that Walser drills his hole.<sup>18</sup> But he does so in a unique, almost counterintuitive fashion, by retreating and starting all over again from the bare minimum, short-circuiting language's infinite vertigo. If excessive vigilance means a meager existence, then the problem might lay not in writing itself, but in its scale. Walser

<sup>16</sup> As penned by Schleiermacher in one of his contributions to the *Athenäum* Fragments (no. 356): "Die Welt kennen, heißt wissen, daß man nicht viel auf derselben bedeutet, glauben, daß kein philosophischer Traum darin realisiert werden kann, und hoffen, daß sie nie anders werden wird, höchstens nur etwas dünner" (Schlegel, 2013, 80).

<sup>17</sup> "An Büchern besaß er, glaube ich, nicht einmal die, die er selber geschrieben hatte. Was er las, war meistens erlehnt. Auch das Schreibpapier, dessen er sich bediente, kam aus zweiter Hand." (Sebald, 2009, 129)

<sup>18</sup> "Man muß das Brett bohren, wo es am dicksten ist." (Schlegel, 2013, 4)



paints the landscape and portrays its inhabitants, and both appalled and fascinated by its endlessness retreats back indoors and closes his eyes, so as not to disturb his imagination<sup>19</sup>; he steadies himself on his desk and restarts from the small. He begins to brew insight from miniatures, from the contents of his drawer. By restricting himself to the minuscule maybe not so much will elude him, maybe he will grasp things better if they start off as prototypes, “spinnfadendünn” samples of the whole, the entire ocean condensed in one gulp.

No subject is unworthy of becoming language, that much Walser has learned from Realism. The totality of the real is already present in the smallest of details, such as ash, a needle, a pencil, or a matchstick. In a deeply metaphorical sense, Walser’s literary project of miniaturization is a scale model of Balzac’s. Walser is the Balzac of the *Bleistiftgebiet*.

### 3.1.6 A defeatist’s answer in face of the unreal: The retreat into a world of objects and the option for the margins

In der Prosaskizze, die er Brentano gewidmet hat, fragt Walser selber: ‘Kann ein Mensch, der so viel und so schön fühlt, zugleich so gefühlsarm sein?’ Die Antwort darauf wäre gewesen, daß es im Leben genau wie im Märchen solche gibt, die sich vor lauter Armut und Angst Gefühle nicht leisten können und die darum, wie Walser in einem seiner traurigsten Prosastücke, ihre anscheinend verkümmerte Liebesfähigkeit erproben müssen an von niemandem sonst beachteten leblosen Substanzen und Dingen, an der Asche, an einer Nadel, einem Bleistift und einem Zündhölzchen. Die Art aber, in der Walser diesen dann eine Seele einhaucht durch einen Art vollkommener Anverwandlung und Empathie, verrät, daß am Ende die Gefühle vielleicht dort am tiefsten sind, wo sie am Nichtigsten sich bewähren.

–Sebald, “Le promeneur solitaire”

The singular elegance of Sebald’s reading of Walser lies in its independence from bureaucracy, from the noumenal impositions of the academic form. Walser’s oeuvre, too insubstantial and indefinable, may deter the analytical critic interested in fitting his texts within the rigid frame of a systematic treatment.<sup>20</sup> Sebald’s approach and style modulate themselves to Walser’s throughout the

<sup>19</sup> As A.W. Schlegel (2013, 46) has provocatively written in the *Athenäum* (no. 175): “Mancher betrachtet Gemälde am liebsten mit verschlossenen Augen, damit die Fantasie nicht gestört werde”.

<sup>20</sup> “Diese, jenseit des Todes noch fortwirkende Ungesicherheit der Walserchen Existenz, die Leere, die überall hindurchweht durch sie, mag, als etwas Gespenstisches, die professionellen Interpreten ebenso abschrecken wie die undefinierbarkeit der Texte. Zweifellos richtig ist Martin Walsers Bemerkung, daß Robert Walser, obschon sein Werk sich zum Dissertieren geradezu anbietet, jedem systematischen Traktament sich entzieht.” (Sebald, 2009, 132)

entire essay, like an illuminating echo that nonetheless understands the importance of shadows, acts more as a well-placed candle than a blinding spotlight. Categories such as “empathy” and “affection” may be employed without fearing a lack of conceptual precision, without a barrage of hand-picked, symbolically-violent quotations, for their meanings are evident to anybody who has searched in literature whatever sentiments life has denied them.

When Sebald resorts to the “Brentano” sketch in order to account for Walser’s ambiguous, counterintuitive quest for empathy, he is referring to a fundamental – although often dismissed by the modern spirit – layer of the narrative experience: pathos. One of the keys to unlock Walser’s writing is to understand it not as a teleologically cerebral and linguistic virtuosity, but as a life-seeking, existence-confronting venture. Life remains Walser’s fascination, despite his erring into ambiguity and atrophy, as Sebald puts it. In “Ein Genie (II)”, yet another thinly veiled autobiographical sketch, ambiguity and atrophy are made evident towards the text’s conclusion: “Von Fühlen will es nichts wissen, obwohl es vielleicht ein gutes Herz besitzt” (T, 123). The genius wants distance from the banality of feelings (they are not the stuff of brilliant language), but that does not mean he does not have a good heart (he can relate to life’s fleeting genial moments).<sup>21</sup> It is such a dichotomy that, according to Sebald, leads Walser into trying out his “seemingly atrophied ability to love on inanimate substances and objects unheeded by anyone else—such as ash, a needle, a pencil, or a matchstick”.

What Walser finds in his drawer allows him to keep a respectful distance from the world all the while maintaining an honest interest in everyday existence. Therein lies the miniaturist’s retreat into the minuscule and seemingly unimportant: the quest for empathy, unable to be achieved in the flesh, is then transferred onto the contents of a drawer, made to fit within the grasp of a fist. The inanimate object arises thus as the repository of affection, a prototype of the world supported by the scaffoldings of Realist language and its more prosaic intentions. The object – i.e.: the exploration of the small detail; i.e.: all that cannot be spotted from atop a mountain –, is Walser’s Lowest Common Denominator. And despite Walser’s undeniable Romantic influence, his prose, in its most basic essence, marks a departure from Romanticism, inasmuch as Walser pursues insight and illumination from a reflection on the world of objects, whereas a proper Romantic author in full regalia would never settle for anything less than the grandiosity of sympoetry. A clean break with Romanticism would be, on the other hand, too

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted, in passing, that *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* is rich in Romantic ‘heart’-related metaphors and expressions, among which the very candid and naïve observation that “Anyone who has a heart is polite” (FKA, 22).

straightforward a solution for Walser's ambiguous nature and soluble prose. An anti-bourgeois with bourgeois aspirations, Walser ends up assuming a similar double agent position as an anti-Romantic Romantic, examining the very role of the Romantic author within a world of objects. He entrenches himself within the plotless, overlapping, fantastical, unhinged realm of details and descriptions, finds poignant pathos in a box of matches and then extrapolates it as a hypothesis to human consciousness.

Two sketches in particular showcase Walser's uncanny ability of extracting empathy and pathos from the smallest – or least expected – of things: "Asche, Nadel, Bleistift und Zündhölzchen", and "Reisekorb, Taschenuhr, Wasser und Kieselstein". The sketches provide descriptive evidence of a mindset evoked since *Träumen's* first pages, on par with the overarching disappearing act of Walser's literary project: "What was imported faded away, and I turned my undivided attention to the most unimportant things and was very happy doing so" (T, 18). The mindset – a detail-oriented *modus operandi* – is once again reiterated in the first of the two sketches: "I do not think I'm very much mistaken if I dare to say that we need only open our eyes and look around carefully to see valuable things, if we look at them closely enough and with a certain degree of attention" (T, 328-329). The same demand made by Walser's meandering language is echoed by his ephemeral choice of subject: namely, the need for a different reading experience. One should not hoist upon a mountain a subject that Walser himself did not place there; one should not read into Walser's fragile, honest prose the delusions of grandeur of a brand of literature that seeks to justify its relevance by aspiring to posthumous eternity. Benjamin's (1961, 370) opening remark in his famous essay on Walser may be understood along these more reasonable lines: Walser's prose should not be read with the intent of ennobling it, of "raising" it above its level so as to fulfill values that are external to the oeuvre's own availability, but should instead be explored in its "contemptible, unassuming potential" in order "to create something which is alive and has a purifying effect".

It is in fact possible to say something meaningful about this apparently uninteresting substance only by deeper penetration; for example: if you blow on ash, it doesn't in the least refuse instantly to disintegrate. Ash is modesty, insignificance, and worthlessness personified, and, best of all, it is filled with the conviction that it is good for nothing. Can one be more unstable, weaker, more wretched than ash? Not very easily. Is there anything more yielding and tolerant? Not likely. (...) Where there is ash, there is really nothing at all. (T, 328)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> And also: "Nun gelange ich mit der ebenso höflichen wie ergebenen Frage an den Leser, ob er vielleicht das eine oder das andere Mal schon mit der flachen Hand auf ein Stück Wasser geschlagen hat. Es ist dies ein sehr interessantes Experiment voll Sonderbarkeit und Eigentümlichkeit.

There are no lessons to be had here other than any lesson the reader may construe out of their own movement towards literature. No proselytizing, no heavy handedness. Just an encounter with the texts' quiet, modest availability. Ashes and water are made into something so ephemeral and yet loquacious, the dismal and graceful image of dust being swallowed by the air, of a smacking hand producing tiny waves on the surface of water, waves that within seconds will disappear. Even the description of being turned into nothing requires typographical materiality, leaves behind a line of ink Walser does not seem all too keen on constraining. Walser makes an object disappear, but describes the process with excessive precision, all tangents and adjectives and retractions, thus subverting his own narrative jurisdiction by constantly overruling it, like a magician whose stage sovereignty is undermined by the amount of rabbits he keeps in his hat.

Walser's fourth secret thus surfaces: especially in his short prose, sound almost comes before semantics. He lets himself get lost in the margins of his own text, in the turns of his own phrase; in the cadence of his simple rhymes; his short prose is all music and no plot, the words are bared in their craft. Words are all that remain after ashes and water fade away. The reader is asked to acknowledge the materiality of their five-lettered existence, to avoid seeing through them, but instead to listen to the sound they make against the paper's grainy surface. And here Walser is once again quite the Romantic, drawn, in the truest Schlegelian fashion, into the dark, seductive material dimension of words.<sup>23</sup> A writer of the margins, Walser becomes also a marginal writer: "To acknowledge the material dimension of words is to become an outsider or an exile from the master narrative, transformed into one who takes a skeptical or nominal view of language, especially one's own" (Strathman, 2006, 86).

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Wasser mit der Hand zu klatschen, halte ich für einen wundervollen sommerlichen Zeitvertreib, falls das nicht Sünde ist. Wasser ist so angenehm, besitzt eine so appetitliche leichte Härte, feste Weichheit, charaktervolle Nachgiebigkeit. Es sträubt sich da sozusagen etwas und gibt dann doch aus Güte nach. So könnte man fast sagen. Wasser ist ja an sich doch wohl schon etwas durchaus Merkwürdiges. Auf welche Art kam Wasser überhaupt zustande? Gab es je eine Zeit, wo kein Wasser war? Kann es kein Wasser geben? Ich gerate da vielleicht in die schwierigsten Forschungen hinein, wenn ich nicht schleunigst den Rückzug antrete" (T, 332).

**23** According to Strathman's (2006, 49) reading of Schlegel and the Romantic poetry, "The worst or most unthinking comprehension, Schlegel says, is one that ignores the material fact of language or remains at a safe distance, disdaining to engage the text at the level of the unregenerate (unreconstructed) word. This attitude toward language ultimately has to do with one's attitude toward reading. For Schlegel, reading is more than comprehension, more than getting clear about one's concepts or ideas, or extracting them from a text; it means, first of all, acknowledging the words of the text, listening to and for them, before anything else; listening to the phonic and material dimensions of words precedes the understanding of ideas".

This marginal stance regarding words and objects is then extrapolated into a mindset towards the world and its inhabitants. Walser's protagonists and narrators, as thought-experiments, share Walser's own constitutive pleasure in shunning institutions and seeking refuge in the margin and in the distance<sup>24</sup>: "The protagonists of Walser's fiction are invariably drifters and ne'er-do-wells who never cease to proclaim their insignificance, indeed who seem to relish their marginal status", notes Tobias (2006, 299), and proceeds: "At the same time, they exert a magnetic force over others, who are drawn to them precisely because in them they see the innocence of their youth and a freedom they long ago surrendered".

The quest for the margins is also a quest for a more unobstructed – i.e. free – view of the bigger picture. Despite ultimately veering towards Cultural Studies, Valerie Heffernan's invested reading of Walser, *Provocation from the Periphery*, pinpoints precisely this counterintuitive move towards the marginal and seemingly unimportant as a distinctive narrative strategy:

However, it is equally important to note that his borderline position, on the fringes of the literary establishment, also affords him the freedom to question those institutions that have such power over his fate as a writer and to challenge the power structures that underlie them. This oscillation between conformity and resistance is reflected in the form and content of Walser's texts and it fuels the writing itself. On all levels, Walser's work represents an attempt to contend with his marginalization – without losing his own distinctive voice in the process. (Heffernan, 2007, 18)

Although precise and relevant (Heffernan's take on Walser makes for a compelling reading), the problem with pursuing such line of argumentation to its fullest extent is that it overreaches the modest availability of Walser's oeuvre, makes it far more combative than it actually is. An interpretation of Walser fuelled by Cultural Studies credits his prose with far more ideology than its scope has ever meant to achieve. Due to the field's ultimately teleological objective of reading into a literary work an underlying and ambitious agenda, the aesthetic ends up subsumed within – not to say blinded by – the political. Enrique Vila-Matas' (2005a, 27) silent rendering of Walser in his novel *Bartleby y Compañía* exposes with writerly sensibility the imprudence of neglecting the aesthetic in the name of politics:

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<sup>24</sup> In Walser's own words, in a conversation with Seelig (1989, 26): "In meiner Umgebung hat es immer Komplote gegeben, um Ungeziefer wie mich abzuwehren. Vornehmhochmütig wurde immer alles abgewehrt, was nicht in die eigene Welt paßte. Mich (in die Welt der Herablassenden) hineinzudrängen, habe ich mich nie getraut. Ich hätte nicht einmal die Courage gehabt, hineinzublitzeln. So habe ich mein eigenes Leben gelebt, an der Peripherie der bürgerlichen Existenzen, und war es nicht gut so? Hat meine Welt nicht auch das Recht, zu existieren, obwohl es eine ärmere, machtlose Welt ist?"

“the vanity he loved had nothing to do with the drive for personal success, but was rather a kind of tender display of what is minimal and fleeting. Walser could not have been further from the lofty heights where power and prestige prevail”. A reading of Walser within the frames of Cultural Studies is perfectly acceptable, albeit ultimately risking too grandiose an approach, the blinding spotlight when shadows would preserve best the dark, seductive material dimension of words.

Within European territory at least brownouts are such unexpected scenes that, whenever electricity is short-circuited by its own violence and power goes out unannounced, to wish for an electric generator would defeat darkness’ swift momentum – one should instead reach for a candle. The flickering shadows provide a moment of respite from the blinding light of everyday language, create a space contiguous to life, detached from it yet vigilant. They allow for the unreal to surface, for the unsettling to sprout, the hoarse menace hidden underneath a child’s mattress, although when the room is lit up no trace of monsters is to be found. Only when darkness returns does one hear once again the call, a weightless voice whispering visions of things both frail and small that vanish as soon as the power comes back on.

Sebald’s (2009, 140) voice echoes here one last time: “[Walser] is no Expressionist visionary prophesying the end of the world, but rather, as he says in the introduction to *Fritz Kocher’s Essays*, a clairvoyant of the small”. The modest availability of Walser’s oeuvre aims not at posthumous prophecy, it does not speak from the inside-out, like somebody who is in on a secret; it speaks instead from the outside-in, through observation and distance, anticipating an apocalypse that will not change the course of things, that will most likely slide by unnoticed, dismissed as the minuscule and rambling coincidences of a disappearing line of ink.

### 3.2 Carvalho: *Aberração* (1993) and the early novels

...tinham parado para olhar a paisagem, o Rio de longe, sob a névoa e a distância, no fim da planície antes do mar e do pôr-do-sol, e ficaram ali admirando a vista de pé diante do precipício e do vento, até Gregório perguntar se não parecia, se os outros não tinham a impressão de ouvir gritos vindos do fundo da paisagem, ao longe, da cidade...

–Carvalho, *Onze*

#### 3.2.1 The Romantic longing for homecoming and the exile of the mind

There is an adolescent misconception in believing that the people and places one leaves behind lie in wait for one’s return; that the news one brings back home of great deeds and faraway lands will be met with even the slightest interest. Such

adolescent belief in one's own centrality, in the reach of one's own voice within a community, such pubescent contradiction of needing at once to stand out and to belong, fuels Romanticism to the fullest extent of its charming delusions of grandeur. It is lucky for Herder, when he left the cold shores of Riga bound for the warmer waters of Nantes in 1769, that he never once returned to whence he came, else the fundamentals of Romanticism might have forever been shaken. On a metaphorical level, the work of Bernardo Carvalho addresses precisely this alternate scenario: what if Herder had indeed returned home and been met with a lukewarm reception, had cleared his throat and fumbled for words, mouth agape as language failed him.

Herder's genius, however, lay in his never looking back, never retracing his steps: he went from Mohrunge to Königsberg; from Königsberg to Riga; from Riga to Paris via Nantes; from Paris to Strasbourg; from Strasbourg to Bückeburg; from Bückeburg to Weimar; from Weimar to his grave. Not once did he return home to find out that his adventures and insights were thwarted by the pressing need to chop down trees for the upcoming winter, or by recent changes in the local parish. In other words: Herder never risked the realization that he no longer possessed the language of the people and places he had left behind. By only traveling forward, in quest of further seeing and discovering the world,<sup>25</sup> Herder managed to cultivate a heroic, self-aggrandizing view of both himself and his craft. His reluctance in going back home is what kept him from intellectual demise – but also (paradoxically) what sowed the emblematic Romantic longing for homecoming.

The solidity of the world Herder sought to uncover still remains – its rivers and mountains and bays –, although the sense of discovery is long since gone, as is the feeling of belonging elicited by such solid feats of nature. The conclusion reached by Carvalho, and placed at the foot of his work, inelegantly spelled out in the back cover of his début book, *Aberração* (1993), is that the Romantic notion of homecoming is no longer an option, either because there is no longer a “home” to begin with, or because the faintest attempt at returning would be thwarted by language. In Carvalho a world is to be found but no discoveries are to be made, whatever has been experienced can hardly be shared with others; distance is measured in memories, not in miles, and the memories (a “hallucination of the past”) are seldom pleasant; departures and arrivals are the realm of airports, not of transcendence, and airports are always one spark away from disaster. Moreover, there would be here, following Safranski's (2007, 346) reading of

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25 “[Herder] ist an Bord gegangen, um *die Welt zu sehen*, schreibt er, doch außer der bewegten Wasserwüste und einigen Küstenlinien sieht er zunächst wenig davon. Dafür aber findet er Zeit und Gelegenheit, sein bisheriges Bücherwissen zu *zerstören, um herauszufinden und zu erfinden, was ich denke und glaube*. Die Begegnung mit einer fremden Welt wird zur Selbstbegegnung.” (Safranski, 2007, 18)



Romanticism, a whiff of Heidegger via Novalis: “How do we return home? Heidegger had asked with Novalis, and then described the homecoming—which for him meant breakthrough to Being (*das Sein*)—as a process that should be carried out ‘in all sobriety and in the complete disenchantment of a purely objective questioning’”. This Heideggerian scent shall not be pursued, although two keywords – central to understanding the work of Carvalho – remain: sobriety (to the borders of madness and depression) and disenchantment.

Carvalho’s refusal of the Romantic notion of homecoming, as well as his overarching (and contradicting) refusal of Romanticism as a whole, are more nuanced than one is led to believe by the maladroitness of *Aberração*’s back cover, which awkwardly – driven almost by an amateurish desire of proving from the get-go one’s intellectual worth, the Goliath a young David seeks to overthrow – states: “The Romantic feeling of homecoming is no longer allowed here: all that is left to these characters, exiled in their own homeland, lost, seeking their origins in a country and a city torn apart, is to hallucinate their own past” [“só resta alucinar o próprio passado”]. Foucault (1994b, 548) has once insightfully claimed that “nous sommes tous néo-kantiens”, even those – or *especially* those – who dispute Kant, for they must incur in Kantian concepts and terminology in order to establish their critiques. Similar predicament is faced by all theories prefixed by a “post-” (post-Metaphysics, post-Romanticism etc.), inasmuch as they set these established traditions as paradigms and touchstones, and are thus forever haunted by the same ghosts they claim to overcome. Carvalho falls prey to same contradiction: he is quite the Romantic in his anti-Romantic crusade.

Carvalho is even Romantic by association, as is made evident – for instance – by the latent undertones of the above-mentioned back cover passage. There is not a single meaning in this passage – not even the phantasmagorical choice of “hallucinate” for a verb connecting to a lost past – that had not already been included in the lean thirteen pages of Edward Said, 1984; essay “Reflections on Exile”. Already the very first paragraph of Said’s essay sets the experience of exile against the backdrop of Romanticism, and the more one delves into the essay, the more Carvalho’s back cover blurb seems like a rearrangement of Said’s (1984; 165) words – and of these ones in particular: “The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidarity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question”. These words underline the contradicting – and therefore all the more compelling – Romantic force behind Carvalho’s work, a singular concern within contemporary Brazilian fiction.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Regina Dalcastagnè – one of the leading researchers within the field of contemporary Brazilian literature – is very vocal in her antipathy towards the lack of theoretical and narrative



Such striking similarity, moreover, sheds light on the affinities between Said's and Carvalho's understanding of exile as a sensible, solitude-stricken, and essentially intellectual experience: despite its sorrows and hardships, exile remains "strangely compelling to think about" (Said, 1984, 159). Said goes as far as to differentiate the condition of an "exile" from that of a 'refugee', claiming "solitude and spirituality" for the former and the realm of "international politics" for the latter (Said, 1984, 166), and thus purging exile from the more practical and pedestrian realm of politics. Exile, in the understanding of these two authors, is closer to a state-of-mind than it is to a political stance. Carvalho, by promptly adhering to such an understanding – and by subsuming the experience of exile into the abstract territory of scholarship –, signals unequivocally that his fictional project seeks to explore and expose the dilemmas of language and representation, rather than those of visas and residency permits. Exile, in Carvalho, entails neither hunger nor physical pain; it is a by-product of estranged intellects that would feel exiled even in their own homelands. Exile functions, instead, as a trigger for disenchantment and displacement, for a narrative mindset kept on an abstract level for as long as possible. Carvalho's work, inscribed under the deceptive sign of 'exile', is more a rumination on the possibilities of fiction as it is on the perversities of geopolitics.

Said and Carvalho part ways there where Said's essay reaches its most idyllic implications – there where a whiff of optimistic self-help infiltrates the literary process: "Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. (...) The novel (...) exists because other worlds may exist, alternatives for bourgeois speculators, wanderers, exiles" (Said, 1984, 167). The novel as a speculative exercise in possible worlds, as the creation of a stage in which to play out familiar dramas, does not resonate with Carvalho. Carvalho's narratives do not create a world akin to our own, but rather subtract from it. Instead of a heightened experience of the world, the reader is presented with a restrained, deformed version of it, a forest minus the trees, a family minus

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ambition behind most of contemporary Brazilian fiction, from which Carvalho tries to set himself apart: "Por fim, falta ambição à nossa literatura. Falta ambição na acomodação com a temática modesta, com o insulamento no mundo doméstico das classes médias brancas, com o apego referencial à realidade mais imediata. Mas falta ambição também no evidente exercício da escrita sem riscos. Com seus recortes miúdos e autocentrados, nossos romances mal espiam para o lado de fora, recusando-se a uma interpretação mais ampla dos fenômenos que nos cercam, como a violência urbana, a exclusão social ou a inserção periférica na globalização capitalista, por exemplo. (...) A falta de ambição é sinalizada justamente pela ausência de crítica e de autocritica, pela ausência de reflexão e pelo medo do risco. Mais uma vez, não se trata de condenar o recorte temático de alguma obra específica, mas de indicar, como sintomático, que (quase) todas optem por um reduzido elenco de recortes" (Dalcastagnè, 2012, 195–196).

the psychology. The fleeting, deceiving moments of Realism in Carvalho's work find here their origins: a resemblance of verisimilitude is offered, only to be then withdrawn and undermined by the text's actual goal, which was itself all along.

Like a mad scientist removing one by one the legs of a spider to see how the animal will cope, so does Carvalho proceed with his fiction: by annulling one of the senses to check if the others shall be enhanced as a result. *Aberração* is, in this sense, a privileged entry point to the author's work, as it portrays through its eleven short stories a miniature world of the subtractions yet to come in subsequent novels. Carvalho's work is very homogeneous in both its recurring themes and influences, and each new book seems to expand on an idea already outlined in previous texts. *Aberração*, as his first literary endeavor, offers a still formative outlook on a provocative – albeit grim – body of work, one which develops Walser's unreal aesthetics into the full-fledged claustrophobia of an impending apocalypse.

### 3.2.2 Carvalho's intellectual and linguistic post-apocalyptic scenario

It starts in the landscape – and it will probably end there too, green pastures turned into grey wastelands and no poems to sing them. Carvalho's work – which could be provocatively described as an intellectual and linguistic post-apocalyptic scenario – consistently shies away from any poetic endeavor as it chronicles, both geographically and metaphorically, the desertification of the land and its effects on humankind. Landscape is always portrayed either through the point of view of irony (the exotic) or of the apocalypse (the barren). Both perspectives are inflamed by disaster,<sup>27</sup> by a conceptual notion of “disaster” as something that has somehow already happened, an apocalypse already set in motion yet unbeknownst to most of us – and as we now deal with its consequences, we mistakenly believe the consequences to be alerts of a catastrophe still to come. Behind this notion are the writings of Maurice Blanchot, yet another Romantic influence of Carvalho's.<sup>28</sup> Blanchot's fragmentary take on disaster in *L'Écriture du Désastre* provides an interesting glimpse on Carvalho's own narrative project, particularly

<sup>27</sup> Paulo C. Thomaz (2009, 44), in his PhD dissertation, speaks of a “catastrophic present”, an argument which he reprises and condenses in the article *A Gestão do Abismo na Literatura Brasileira Recente: A Iminência do Desastre em Bernardo Carvalho*, where he inscribes Carvalho's work under the sign of a “contínua ameaça e perigo de destruição ou dissolução” (Thomaz, 2014, 33).

<sup>28</sup> Carvalho's perhaps unhealthy infatuation with Blanchot has led him into positing that “[o] pensamento de Blanchot está no centro da literatura moderna”, although he promptly – and lucidly – appends that remark with a caveat: “[n]a sua radicalidade, o pensamento de Blanchot

the book's first half, before Blanchot indulges too deeply into the Romantic pleasure he finds in his own demise, in his own pain.

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; 'I' am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – an other than I who passively become other. There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future – that which is yet to come – if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it. (Blanchot, 1991, 7)

Here is Carvalho's literary desolation: disaster has struck but humankind lingers on, not out of resourcefulness or resilience, but out of habit and inertia – out of employing the same vocabulary around a rapidly decaying landscape. The disaster manifests itself in language, in language's ominous capacity of describing and denouncing precisely the everyday formulations and received ideas parroted over decades that corrode it from the inside out. Language is both Carvalho's goal and what he seeks to expose – Carvalho plays the dangerous game of resorting to the same expressions he seeks to dethrone, of consorting with the very mindless parrot he wishes to overthrow. Furthermore, as a militant anti-Realist, his notion of humankind shuns any thoughts of "concreteness", avoids the illusion of flesh and bones. Fiction is the sum of artifice and language; if the landscape withers and the weather turns, it is not because this or that character suffers, or a major plot point is forthcoming. The landscape's demise and revenge is tightly linked to the grim fate of language: as language is drained and dried out, so is the landscape.

The desert is – both as an arid noun and a desolate adjective ["deserted"] –, not surprisingly, as this research demonstrates, Carvalho's ultimate fictional destination, the landscape *par excellence* in which the aesthetic concerns of his literary project culminate and into which they are subsumed, as shall be further discussed in the fifth chapter and towards the conclusion. Already in *Aberração* the first undertones of an increasingly arid landscape – both geographically and metaphorically – surface here and there (A, 14; 26; 160), particularly in the opening short-story "A Valorização", in which a dead man's dying wish is to be

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pôs a literatura diante de um beco sem saída, e acabou sendo tomado por alguns, sobretudo na França, como modelo a ser seguido" (MFE, 214).

carried out “in the most desert-like of places, where no man would be able to see a thing” [“[n]o local mais desértico, onde nenhum homem poderia ver nada”]. The apocalyptic desertification of the land and of the language, however, is here still in its infancy, and it would be too soon to address it as a full-blown phenomenon. Instead, a better example of the first stages towards the decay of landscape within Carvalho’s work may be found in the short-story “O Astrônomo”.

Prophetic by way of death, “O Astrônomo” chronicles the barren self-exiled existence of a man (“o astrônomo”) who was once upon a time warned by a fortune-teller (“a astróloga”) that he would have two sons and then be destroyed by them. Having spent half of his life deflecting romantic advances and marriage proposals, when the astronomer finally decides to settle down and have kids it is to twins that his wife gives birth. Taken over by a genetic horror of sorts, the astronomer abandons the family and seeks exile in a deserted island off the Chilean coast, where an observatory had been built and then abandoned, although the three-country consortium initially in charge of the program had decided, due to the enterprise’s astronomical build cost, to keep at least one person manning the facilities in the unlikely event its antennas and satellites ever picked up on extra-terrestrial signals. Other than the astronomer, the cold, barren island is inhabited by two caretakers, a married couple of few words and furtive behavior. Every day the wife hangs the laundry outside, although it is too cold and humid for it to dry; every day the astronomer checks the computers for alien signals and frequencies, despite the eerie silence since day one. What breaks such silence and such artificial routine is fate: as one and then the other son come to the island in search of their estranged father, many years later, none of them make it back to the mainland. A journal is discovered after the astronomer’s tragic death, in which he had jotted down notes regarding the million-year-old signals he claimed to be receiving and working with, trying to decode the warning these messages bode: a probable alert concerning the end of humankind.<sup>29</sup>

It is against such ominous backdrop that Carvalho conjures *Aberração*’s more detailed landscape descriptions: barren, rugged vistas surrounded by crashing waves and vast expanses of water with only a hint of civilization hidden behind the horizon. The air is cold, the vegetation dried out and sparse,<sup>30</sup> the geography

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<sup>29</sup> “A ironia é que ele anotava tudo nesses diários. Escreveu que estava trabalhando com sinais enviados há milhões de anos. Segundo os diários, até onde ele tinha conseguido entender, eram um alerta, mas ele ainda não sabia contra o quê. Suspeitava que os sinais revelassem a razão do fim de uma espécie, em alguma parte do universo.” (A, 103)

<sup>30</sup> “O ar frio batia em sua testa, a única parte descoberta do rosto, enquanto ele subia e descia as ondulações do relevo, coberto por uma vegetação rasteira, um gramado torto e ralo, quase seco, sozinho no fim do mundo, que era o que ele queria.” (A, 90)

uneven and steep,<sup>31</sup> a curse to every step, and a relentless layer of fog smothers the island like a low-hanging cloud, giving the landscape an unusual, unheimlich (“insólito”) appearance.<sup>32</sup> The seemingly barren and somewhat vindictive landscape (echoing Sebald’s and Armando’s eerie take on it, via Nietzsche, as already discussed) is ambiguously conceived so as to allow for both a metaphorical reading of the main character’s fate, and, more provocatively, for a (still incipient) mirroring of the dominant linguistic register. The same Chilean scenery is reprised in Carvalho’s third novel, *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, in which the inhospitable arid landscape<sup>33</sup> stands for a region geographically and metaphorically poised on the edge of a cliff looking over “the end of the world”, the indescribable nothingness of a barren view, of mountains and earthquakes and shifting tectonic plates, of a crushing, relentless feeling of claustrophobia.<sup>34</sup> Chile doesn’t exist, claims one character, while the other – taken aback by Chile’s rugged, inhospitable, impossible geography, “the geographical representation of dementia”<sup>35</sup> – resorts to reading travel guides but fails to find insight in their manneristic language (BS, 28; 35). Carvalho thus supplies fictional fodder to theoretical remarks on travel guides made by Barthes in *Mythologies* (specifically in the entry “Le Guide Bleu”), and, most crucially to Carvalho (also in its geographical implications), by Said in *Orientalism*:

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31 “O relevo ia descendo, em tênues ondulações, até o lado do continente, onde havia algumas nesgas de praias. Na costa oeste, havia apenas penhascos íngremes e rochedos.” (A, 93)

32 “Uma bruma cobria a superfície do mar e, na ilha, era como uma nuvem baixa, na altura da cintura, dando um aspecto insólito à paisagem.” (A, 99)

33 “Passamos por casas baixas de madeira à entrada da cidade em direção ao centro. Tal como uma cidade de faroeste. O Cardozo fechou o vidro por causa do vento e da terra que levantava. Paramos num sinal. O mundo do lado de fora parecia estar sendo tragado por um redemoinho. (...) Quando chegamos à praça, o vento parou de repente e com ele desapareceram as crianças das ruas e a cidade ficou deserta.” (BS, 38;39)

34 “‘É isso que vocês chamam de Chile? Onde tudo está à beira do abismo? Tudo está à beira do nada. Tudo é sempre quase o fim do mundo. Me diga uma coisa: como é que se pode descrever um lugar desses?’. Olhei para as montanhas ao longe e para os campos. Seguíamos pela Panamericana. A estrada acompanhava o relevo suave, entrecortado por rios tortuosos e de águas claras e pontilhado por bosques de pinheiros. Estávamos esmagados entre a cordilheira e o mar, que não víamos, a um passo do que não víamos (e sem perceber que estávamos esmagados – a claustrofobia era dissimulada pela vastidão das pradarias amarelas e verdes), seguindo pelo indefinido daquela auto-estrada, como qualquer outra, em qualquer lugar, intercambiante, desnorteante, que levava ao mais extremo Sul quando na realidade nosso destino final era o Norte, eu pensava. No meio daquelas frases sobre a geografia, em que eu me embrenhava e que denotavam a sua loucura (tinha se manifestado de uma forma geográfica), havia uma que simplesmente ignorei, talvez por não ter nada a ver com as outras.” (O, 47)

35 “...me veio a idéia (...) do Chile de fato como um lugar desnorteante, por sua própria configuração e disposição física, a representação geográfica da demência.” (BS, 41-42)

Two situations favor a textual attitude. One is when a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant. In such a case one has recourse not only to what in one's previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it. Travel books or guidebooks are about as 'natural' a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book one can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity. (Said, 1979, 93)

Carvalho's apocalypse foretells the exhaustion of language, as opposed to the world's. Hence his option not only for a critique of language, but also for employing a detached, repetitive and relatively simple vocabulary, like that of a still recovering trauma victim. Adjectives are likewise unlikely (Carvalho has a penchant for the foggy dryness of a faux-noir style, tales of criminals and victims minus the corresponding crimes), and among the hundred-odd adjectives employed throughout "O Astrônomo" (averaging around six occurrences per page), almost none is particularly inaccessible ("impassível", "insólito", and "plausível" would qualify as borderline examples) or calls for a higher level of theoretical acumen ("futurista" and "maquiavélico" would be the only exceptions). A quarter of the adjectives are repeated following a systematic approach common to Carvalho's work: if a given person or landscape has been described with a given set of words ("gigantesco", "íngreme", "hippie", "pálida", "ralo", "sozinho"), these exact same words will follow said person or landscape until the story is over, as if they were punitively saddled by language and language's mortal touch – "A name changes everything" ["Um nome muda tudo"] (T, 131), says a character in *Teatro*, and these are his last words in that novel. The only way out of language's punitive burden – Carvalho's work seems to suggest – is through language itself, through an understanding of language that does not rely upon tried-and-tested formulas or cut-and-dried repetitions. These voided utterances, shadows of meanings long since lost, are particularly exploited by Carvalho, who builds upon them a saturated pattern of repetition that borders on the grotesque – as, for instance, by insisting on the empty everyday expression "como diz o outro" ["as they say"] throughout the short-story "A Alemã" (A, 27, 28, 30, 32, 38, 39, 44), or in the sentence "Logo agora que estou aqui, parado, com os braços caídos na frente destes olhares estarecidos" ["Now that I am finally here, frozen, my arms listless by my side in front of these astounded eyes"], in the homonymous story *Aberração* (A, 145, 146, 150, 151, 152, 155, 156, 158, 160, 161, 164, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171), a key-sentence within the complex plot, but one that is entirely drained of significance by the time the plot has advanced enough to shed light on its initial meaning. The maneuver is quite competent, as the stacking of repetition upon repetition undermine and eventually annul altogether the very suspense the same sentence had achieved in initially creating.

Language gives and language takes away, and through language Carvalho's characters meet their doom (but seldom their redemption). Language's retraction first befalls the landscape: its descriptions, at first repetitive, are in due time silenced, as if completely dried out. The same pattern affects the characters, of which "O Astrônomo" is again a good example: the three characters, despite living alone in a deserted island, speak progressively less, only the strictly necessary,<sup>36</sup> at some point refusing even to engage in mindless chitchat with the Coastal Guard during their weekly visits.<sup>37</sup> By having his characters speak less, Carvalho seeks to raise their level of abstraction and to guarantee his narrators' overall authority (only so that he can, like Walser, undermine their authority via language), a twofold strategy of fundamental importance, for it allows Carvalho to constantly and surreptitiously confront the fictional text – its language and status – from the perspective of its artificial existence (as is discussed in the fourth chapter). Landscape is, therefore, a departing gateway to more abstract discussions; it preserves some of the underlying Romantic atmosphere of doom and ruin, the pathos of the suffering (or displaced) traveler, but it rejects any traces of beauty or awe, of discovery and homecoming.

The second overarching discussion triggered by landscape descriptions in Carvalho's work deals with the representations of the exotic, both as a desire imputed from outside and – more crucially – as a narrative reinvigorated from the inside. Aziz Ab'Sáber (2007, 11), one of Brazil's most prominent geographers, observes that not only European explorers during colonization, but also European researchers as late as the beginning of the twentieth century failed to recognize the diversity of Brazilian climate and geography, subsuming it all under a tropical notion that seemed – to them at least – "completely exotic and with apparent little variation". Blinded by dreams almost as mythical as far-fetched, these travelers failed to see what indeed was in front of them, choosing instead to corroborate visions bestowed by a colorful social imaginary. The accusation is as bitter as it is old, a tired litany that regained momentum with the rise of post-colonial discourses. To lend one's voice to the cause might be noble, but to take one step further more profitable: Carvalho's interest lies in what happens when this exotic understanding of the country seeps – almost seamlessly – into its inhabitants' upper middle-class discourses. What happens when the exotic

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**36** "Ele não falava muito. Só o estritamente necessário, como ela e o Rosas, e era assim que se entendiam tão bem e se pareciam, talvez mais ainda do que ela imaginasse, porque nunca tinha parado para pensar no assunto, sentia apenas que era assim, bolhas de óleo procurando umas às outras dentro da água fervente." (A, 92)

**37** "O Rosas virou para o astrônomo e disse que não teriam ido morar na ilha se quisessem receber visitas e, como os guardas faziam sempre as mesmas perguntas, não via razão para repetir a mesma resposta toda semana." (A, 93)



infiltrates everyday language and trickles down from generation to generation, down the social class ladder. A broader understanding of “exoticism” is at play here, one that is but triggered by the landscape and its descriptions, ultimately uninterested in demystifying a rainforest (*Nove Noites*) or the expanses of the steppe (*Mongólia*). Ab’Sáber (2007, 9) notes somewhat in passing, and having the noblest environmental concerns in mind, that the landscape is always an inheritance, and one could do worse than extrapolate this idea to Carvalho’s writings and posit the landscape as a *linguistic* inheritance, the landscape as a slice of language that reveals a deeper, more catastrophic symptom.

The transition from outer exoticism to inner delusion in *Aberração* begins, accordingly, from the outside. The narrator of the book’s opening short-story, “A Valorização”, scoffs at the French tourists bound to Rio de Janeiro in quest of exoticism like children on their way to an amusement park:

The flight 721 to Rio de Janeiro, which I boarded at 11.30pm on a rainy day in April, was practically empty, just a few businessmen, the latest local nouveaux-riches, and a handful of French tourists, whose refinement could be measured by the dreams of exoticism which would pour out of them in sudden bursts, in a sort of collective hysteria that in a way made them look fragile, like children on their way to an amusement park, whereas at home they would most certainly indulge in the traditional sedentary xenophobia that, as a general rule, defines them.<sup>38</sup>

The childish French tourists are but a present-day incarnation of the longstanding exoticizing European regard to which Brazil has been subjected to – and Carvalho seems to find no fault with that, he himself highly informed by the European literary tradition. The main problem to which he lends his literary voice stems from the unchallenged internal acceptance of an exotic truth, which leads æ – “A Valorização”’s Borgean-named main character – to blame the same untrustworthy, French-scoffing character-narrator for his own “Brazilian exile”, claiming the whole country to be inhabited by “the last human beings”, lost souls abandoned in a purgatory that they falsely believe to be a paradise.<sup>39</sup> æ’s story

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**38** “O vôo 721, que tomei às 23:30 num dia chuvoso de abril, para o Rio de Janeiro, estava praticamente vazio, apenas alguns homens de negócios, os últimos novos-ricos locais, e algumas dezenas de turistas franceses, cujo nível se media pelo sonho de exotismo que não conseguiam deixar de extravasar, de repente, numa espécie de histeria súbita que de certa forma os fragilizava, os deixava como crianças a caminho de um parque de diversões, quando, em casa, deviam exercitar-se diariamente na tradicional xenofobia sedentária que, como regra geral, os caracteriza.” (A, 18)

**39** “...e tudo o que pude dizer a ele, dessa vez por telefone, foi que quando saí do Brasil, há mais de trinta anos, tive a impressão de estar deixando um país agradável. æ acabaria falando de exílio, para me culpar, e dos “últimos seres humanos” que tinham sido esquecidos ali numa



is one of treachery and demise, as bitterly chronicled by the unnamed character-narrator entrusted with fulfilling æ's dying wish: to have his body disposed of in the middle of the jungle, in the most deserted of regions, in a pointless and costly spectacle.<sup>40</sup> Beyond combining both of Carvalho's agendas behind the use of landscape description, this opening short-story also sets precedent for the thenceforth recurring critiques of exotic delusion, which Carvalho – through one of his characters – provocatively names “the problem of geography”.<sup>41</sup>

“The problem of geography” – like all successfully controversial labels – has little to do with the words it uses (geography), and more with those it conceals (movement and language). To phrase it in the harmoniously symmetrical spirit of a sandwich: the problem of geography begins and ends in movement, but finds in language its climax. It begins in the persistent external influx of assessments and judgments about the cultural value of a given geography (Brazil a porous sponge to all things European), but only finds its roots when such assessments and judgments imperceptibly make their way into everyday language, where they slowly flourish as half-misguided, half-automated worldviews, and later on leave the country in the luggage of roaming characters. What these aimless globe-trotters

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espécie de purgatório, como ele, depois de terem acreditado ter nascido no paraíso” (A, 17). Moreover – and this is particularly relevant to Carvalho's aesthetics (as demonstrated throughout this chapter), the constant allusions (covert or not) to this image of “the last human beings” refer back to the book's epigraph, a passage taken from a 1903 unpublished manuscript by Lloyd Harold Billings called *Humans*. Neither the book nor the author have ever existed, an artifice highly reminiscent of Borges. The passage nevertheless alludes to a group of travelers crossing what seems to be a desertified landscape (the group is referred to as a “caravan”) and their shock as they come across human footprints. In disbelief – for presumably they thought themselves to be the last remaining human beings – they look at each other not knowing what to do, petrified at the sound of that word: “Humanos!” (A, 7).

**40** “Sua última carta me incumbiu finalmente de realizar seu último desejo, o que significava dispor de todo o dinheiro que tinha deixado, sem herdeiros, após as mais sórdidas negociações, as operações mais escusas, para um espetáculo sem espectadores: todo o dinheiro que depositou em bancos suíços antes de se enfurnar no Brasil, seguindo um conselho que hoje me arrependo de ter dado, absolutamente todo o dinheiro deveria ser gasto num espetáculo de balões, centenas de balões, com a condição de que ninguém o presenciasse, um festival de balões no meio da selva, desgovernados, sem ninguém para dirigi-los ou vê-los, como ele que, morto, não veria nada, teria perdido tudo, um espetáculo fabuloso que não seria visto por ninguém (...), para igualar o resto do mundo à sua morte ou à perda que foi ter morrido no meio da vida, à perda que foi a vida, æ tinha decidido cada detalhe, me dado o mapa com a região mais desértica, onde teria menos chances de esbarrar em olhares humanos, de onde deveriam sair os balões, como foguetes, antes de se desintegrarem.” (A, 14)

**41** “Ela me contou que, como tudo no Brasil, o que fazia era imitar o que via em Londres, Paris ou Nova York. Viajava uma vez por ano, fotografava o que via, comprava revistas e roubava as idéias. ‘Aqui ninguém pode ter idéias’, ela disse. ‘É o problema da geografia. Não dá pra ser original.’ Eu ri. Eu disse que ela continuava louca. Ela disse que não.” (A, 81)

carry in their luggage is the feeling of exile they picked up alongside their vocabulary. These are the characters and narrators that inhabit Carvalho's fiction, and this outbound movement coupled with language the core of Carvalho's literary project.

Language in Carvalho is thus revolving, almost circular, retracing its own steps, exposing its contradictions, revealing the artificiality of its conventions (Carvalho's novels are, in their essence, conversations about what constitutes a novel). Already in "A Valorização" the normative power of language – of received ideas petrified through everyday discourse – surfaces as the character-narrator identifies himself as an "old homosexual", promptly crediting the label as the creation of those who wish to portray themselves as "civilized" and thus avoid prejudice by way of a neutral term (i.e.: "old homosexual"), although they are also the ones who define the term's neutrality in the first place.<sup>42</sup> This insight into language's elusive grasp ("they" are never named, but the result of "their" actions nevertheless discernible) is then applied more systematically to the following short-story, "A Alemã" (which, as already mentioned, is built upon the repetition of the meaningless popular expression "as they say", a specimen of the corrosive automatic language Carvalho seeks to expose, although risking having his own text infected by it). The urgent short-story, partly set in an elegant villa nestled in the forested hills outside Rio de Janeiro, inserts a Doppelgänger twist to a confrontation between past and present, as a couple cut apart by the Nazi regime meets again decades later in Brazil. The surrounding lush landscape, enhanced by Rousseauesque suspicions of man-made interference,<sup>43</sup> triggers once again the problem of geography, voiced this time by a reminiscing narrator who, upon returning to Brazil and driving by the villa, recalls a childhood story that only now he is capable of understanding.

Although the short-story deals with the reencounter of the couple struck by disaster and trauma (the inbound movement), the narrator constantly insinuates

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<sup>42</sup> "Quando o conheci era um garoto e eu já um velho homossexual, como dizem agora quando querem ser civilizados, para evitar os preconceitos, dizem, como se os evitassem usando um termo neutro – mas são eles que dizem que é neutro" (A, 11). Or even elsewhere, in *Onze*: "... retórica de universitários que lutam por uma cadeira cativa numa instituição de prestígio, mas são eles mesmos que definem o que tem prestígio..." (O, 119)

<sup>43</sup> "Acho que quando perguntei já era porque tinha reconhecido alguma coisa e quando a mulher me disse o nome Rothman logo me lembrei da estrada de cascalho também que, do outro lado do muro, além do portão, levava por mais ou menos um quilômetro, dentro de um bosque, até a casa, e da casa no terreno plano, um enorme gramado, com um riacho correndo ao lado, como se fosse um riacho artificial de tão perfeito em suas curvas, o salgueiro curvado sobre a água, os pinheiros em volta e os morros cobertos de árvores" (A, 29); "As paredes da casa eram cor de tijolo com heras subindo por quase todo lado e os umbrais das portas e das janelas eram de pedra-sabão." (A, 32)

himself in the plot, intertwining his own story through a discourse that both employs and condemns petrified received ideas (the linguistic layer), progressively adding his own personal tragedy to the mix: his disheartening and temporary return to Brazil (the outbound movement). What the narrator finds in Brazil is, again, those “last human beings”, crazed yet contented, disconnected from reality like self-medicated mental patients. Geography might explain the delusion, but it might also be the antidote: maybe if he stayed in Brazil long enough he would end up crazed and contented like the rest of them.

The distance from the world has effected a loss of reality in this country, as they say. It became a kind of granary of madness and neuroses. It's all fine for those who have stayed. They too went crazy just by staying here. Maybe it was the geography and all that it took was stepping here once again to end up like the others.<sup>44</sup>

After having bought Europe's turn-of-the-century civilizing package, Brazil cut the cord and forgot to check for updates. Thus the declared anti-Semitism of the narrator's own father, parroting ideas that would (perhaps) be shunned in present-day Europe, but which in disconnected, exotic Brazil were seen rather as a perverse sign of status<sup>45</sup>; thus the narrator's own feeling that staying in Brazil would mean his demise, his debasement to the same level of those who were left behind<sup>46</sup>; thus the narrator's angry rhetoric (a recurring trait among Carvalho's narrators), mirroring the style of an op-ed piece he reads in a newspaper upon arriving in Brazil, and about which he remarks: “[The author] had better write it angrily, like a madman, so that he could believe in it, since he was scared to death of seeing what was right in front of him: that, just like the others, he too had gone mad” (A, 28). What the narrator believes to be chronicling, as in a panic he calls his old acquaintances one by one and discovers they all have left, as the emptied

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**44** “A distância do mundo funcionou para este país como uma perda de realidade, como diz o outro. Virou uma espécie de celeiro de loucuras e neuroses. Para quem ficou está bom. Também ficaram loucos ficando aqui. Talvez fosse a geografia e bastasse pisar aqui de novo para acabar como os outros.” (A, 27)

**45** “Meu pai sempre foi um anti-semite declarado, o que era mais fácil assumir no Brasil que na Europa do pós-guerra. Enquanto foi do conselho do Country Club, vetou a entrada de pelo menos uns cinco nomes, só porque eram judeus e, por causa dele eu acho, o conselho ganhou fama de anti-semite, o que era visto aqui mais como um sinal de qualidade e status que de preconceito e racismo...” (A, 29)

**46** “Foi quando percebi que ter voltado a este país tinha me feito sentir de novo vergonha de expressar os meus sentimentos – estava ficando como os outros –, vergonha de abraçá-lo ou mesmo de mostrar as lágrimas nos olhos, de alegria ao vê-lo se aproximando, antes mesmo que dissesse o meu nome.” (A, 36)

country he finds upon his return seems to be on the brink of disaster, is the “rise and fall” of a nation ruined by its metaphorical geography.<sup>47</sup>

Like a boat adrift or tectonic plates running amok, Carvalho’s Brazil appears to distance itself from the world with each passing day.<sup>48</sup> Traveling, in Carvalho – the dislocation and the accompanying exile –, erupts both as a movement towards obliteration and self-effacement, and, more problematically, as an attempt at keeping the country in check. The first phenomenon, needless to say, is not restricted to Brazil, but rather portrays a common mentality among Carvalho’s characters, who are, regardless of their nationalities, united by a profound distrust of tourism and deeply cursed by a geographical homelessness, which, again, connects Carvalho back to Blanchot (2008, 63), for whom “the proud exile is turned into the misfortune of infinite migration”.<sup>49</sup>

Two suitable examples should illustrate the implications of traveling in Carvalho’s work, the first of which may be found in Guilherme, the protagonist of the novel *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, who serves in the Brazilian army and is sent to Chile to perform a medical repatriation, a way of bringing back to the country Brazilians who went inexplicably mad abroad, as if Brazil were once again this cursed paradise from where there is no way out, a burden no amount of traveling will ever undo.<sup>50</sup> A second example is to be found in the ending of “A Alemã”, as the

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47 “Esqueci o jornal e liguei para deus e o mundo, mas não havia mais ninguém. Todos tinham ido embora. Voltei na hora errada. Saí antes de começar a derrocada. Por isso não entendi nada, porque todos foram embora. Só me lembro de quando tudo ainda era normal e todos estavam aqui e agora tudo estava vazio – pior, ficaram esses ensandecidos. Não vivi a transição entre a ascensão e a queda.” (A, 28)

48 Carvalho, who tackles the subject with the pungency of an embittered critic fallen out of favor, does not forgo the eventual humorous remark, as exemplified twice in the otherwise less notable short-story “Paz”: first as the clashing expectations of a customer who has travelled the world and a postal worker who has not – “Depois de consultar um colega, a moça do guichê disse que levava mais de uma semana até Barcelona e ele agradeceu, disse que não tinha importância, quando na verdade ela só estava querendo dizer como era rápido” (A, 58) [“After consulting with a colleague, the clerk told him the package would take over a week to reach Barcelona. He thanked her and said it didn’t matter, when in fact she was just pointing out how fast it was”]; and later on as a stunned question: “Você vai voltar para o Brasil?” (A, 65) [“You are going back to Brazil?”], as if merely mentioning the country were a curse unto itself.

49 One might similarly point out Said’s (1984, 169) echoing words: “There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness”.

50 “Em geral, eram pessoas que saíam do Brasil para uma temporada mais longa fora – acontecia raramente com turistas em férias – e surtavam durante a ausência do país. Muitas vezes eram

Jewish character ironically referred to as “the German” (and one of the few characters within Carvalho’s work who has a last name, Appelfeld) reveals that her decision of fleeing Germany for Palestine in 1943 had nothing to do with politics or religion, but with the desire of forsaking all familiar elements, of finding herself amidst foreign terrain (incidentally a desert) and thus allowing herself to forget everything.<sup>51</sup> This movement in quest of obliteration and self-effacement shall be addressed in detail later on, for its stylistic and conceptual repercussions are bound to the second maneuver – this one restricted indeed to the author’s depiction of Brazil and, to some extent, Latin America –: Carvalho’s civilizing project.

### 3.2.3 The problem of geography: Carvalho’s civilizing project

Bernardo Carvalho’s fiction celebrates irony over pathos. The constitutive irony of his work is inserted in an ambitious – and rare, within contemporary Brazilian literature – anti-Realist and anti-Romantic program, seeking to both undermine the emotional, heroic, nationalistic outcries of the first half of the nineteenth century, and dismantle the scaffoldings of bourgeois normalcy erected from the second half onwards. The constant backtracking to the nineteenth century – challenging it, reassessing it from a contemporary (and marginal) vantage point – sets Carvalho’s work apart also inasmuch as he tries to subsume these two conflicting movements under his own ideology: the belief in language.

For the Romantics, and especially for Schiller (and even for Hegel, who would later on deny the Romantic impetus of his joyous youth), beauty would lead to freedom<sup>52</sup>; Carvalho, following Wittgenstein et al., opts for a more sober worldview: *if* there is freedom to be had, it can only be conquered

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peessoas sem histórico psicótico, o que era pior, pois estavam despreparadas, desprevenidas. Enlouqueciam de repente. Era preciso buscá-los, trazê-los de volta. Era preciso que um acompanhante viajasse com eles, um estudante de medicina no mínimo. Era aconselhável que falasse a mesma língua; servia como um tipo de conforto.” (BS, 23-24)

51 “Ela disse ao pai dele tudo o que pôde, que sobreviveu, ele estava vendo, não sabia nem como e, depois de tentar achá-lo, desistiu e foi embora para sempre daquele lugar, que ela não podia mais ver, para outro onde não pudesse reconhecer nada, ao contrário dos que diziam que voltavam à terra que sempre tinha sido deles, ela não voltava a lugar nenhum, não teria ido para a Palestina se fosse assim, ia para onde não pudesse ter nenhum tipo de reconhecimento, onde tudo fosse estranho, o suficiente para não deixá-la lembrar o que quer que fosse.” (A, 42)

52 To briefly quote a beautiful sentence, object of a much more complex – and frequently re-pressed – discussion than the one proposed here: “Analogie einer Erscheinung mit der Form des reinen Willens oder der Freiheit ist Schönheit (in weitester Bedeutung). Schönheit also ist nichts anders, als Freiheit in der Erscheinung” (Schiller, 2004, 400).

through language. And language, being what it is (a set of random and fallible conventions), cannot promise nor deliver anything beyond itself. Carvalho dismisses the “psychologizing” impulse of those authors who wish to create “life-like” characters,<sup>53</sup> who still believe in heroic deeds, who insist in copying reality as if literature were but a seamless continuation of everyday life, as if little had changed since the heyday of Romanticism and Realism.<sup>54</sup> Instead of establishing a retrospective dialogue with the nineteenth century, these authors would be altogether dismissing the twentieth century. Accordingly – and ideologically –, Carvalho’s characters seem to forcefully shun their corporeity, Cartesian specters who prefer the loftier and more flattering connotations of a mind, bodiless intellects roaming through lands of not-belonging. Carvalho’s characters are islands of language and critique that neither need nor seek community – the understanding of history that fuels Carvalho’s narratives does not depict individuals as constitutive parts of a broader notion of society, but rather as singular occurrences of an analytical, secular, disenchanting worldview, less interested in engaging with alterity than in decoding the particular sign system of a given society. Carvalho’s characters do not “experience” history Romantically; history happens to them the way a crowded bus happens to a lone car driver: the distance allows for irony, applied not collectively, but on an individual basis.

Carvalho’s *mestiço* approach to irony finds unexpected theoretical resonance in Thomas Mann. Throughout his very political *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* [*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*], first published in 1918, Mann deals precisely – and without the benefit of a century worth of hindsight – with the Romantic-Realist legacy within a bellic and turbulent sociopolitical context. The long, rambling essay, which is both wildly obsolete and eerily up-to-date on certain political aspects of present-day Germany, mixes a slightly out of touch Mann favoring the Russian over the French (although what he admires in Russia are not so much its political figures as its fictional ones), with keen – albeit pessimistic – reflections on the highly convoluted notions of culture and civilization (a discussion made even more fleeting by all that is lost when translating these

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<sup>53</sup> As he vehemently argues, for instance, in an essay on the notion of cultural exceptions: “É lugar-comum na cultura americana, hoje dominante, exigir da boa literatura personagens psicologicamente verossímeis, ‘de carne e osso’” (MFE, 46).

<sup>54</sup> As he posits in yet another essay, this one on the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy: “A ausência alusiva tão marcante nos textos de Beckett, para citar o exemplo mais evidente, deu lugar a um novo naturalismo, em que o principal volta a ser a idéia de representação da realidade, seja no retrato da sociedade, seja na construção psicológica dos personagens. Entre outras conseqüências, essa tendência faz o leitor esquecer que a arte é o que não está lá. E se perder na busca de alguma segurança superficial, na ilusão do reconhecimento de alguma realidade, como um crente” (MFE, 70).

terms). Moreover, by heavily quoting Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (and Goethe, and – God forbid – Wagner), Mann formulates a handful of remarks on irony which perfectly encompasses Carvalho’s own use of the technique.

Mann the moralist thus informs Carvalho the cynic, inasmuch as the German author considers irony

an ethos that is not completely of a passive nature. The self-denial of the intellect can never be completely serious, completely accomplished. Irony *woos*, even if secretly; it seeks to win for the intellect, even if in vain. It is not animal but intellectual, not gloomy but witty. But it is still weak in will and fatalistic, and it is at any rate very far from placing itself seriously and actively in the service of desirability and of ideals. *Above all, however, it is a completely personal ethos, not a social one*, just as Schopenhauer’s ‘pity’ was not social; not a means of improvement in the intellectual-political sense, not exalted, because it does not believe in the possibility of winning life for the intellect – and precisely for this reason it is a form of play (...) of nineteenth-century mentality. (Mann, 1974, 26)

Irony (and *esprit*), continues Mann (1974, 98), with a pungency again lost in translation, are “westliche (...), zivilisationsliterarische Mächte”, and with these two remarks he perfectly captures what seems to lurk behind Carvalho’s somewhat obscure ironic rhetoric: a highly intellectualized civilizing project with dissimulated moralizing implications which do not seek sociopolitical solutions (in the tradition of the social novel), but rather a judge-like criticism on an individual basis (a literary Sprachkritik of sorts).

In the essay’s concluding chapter, appropriately titled “Ironie und Radikalismus”, Mann expounds his final hypothesis on the subject: human beings have the choice (*if* they have any choice at all) between an ironic or a radical demeanor, and, by making such choice (a seemingly binary and literary choice), they shall determine where their allegiance lies: with life [“Leben”], or with intellect [“Geist”] (Mann, 1974, 568). Irony – as previously stated by Mann, and here reiterated through a supplementary erotic argument (“Die erotische Ironie des Geistes”) – belongs to the realm of the intellect; thus, echoing Kierkegaard (whom Mann does not quote), to be ironic would mean to be conservative,<sup>55</sup> and one might construe this conservatism as irony’s lack of a propositional impetus: it destroys before it creates; it doesn’t contribute to any cyclical understanding of history, but rather to an apocalyptic one, history as an agonizingly eternal present. By opposing irony to radicalism, Mann identifies in irony an artificial

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<sup>55</sup> “Der Geist, welcher liebt, ist nicht fanatisch, er ist geistreich, er ist politisch, er wirbt, und sein Werben ist erotische Ironie. Man hat dafür einen politischen Terminus; er lautet ‘Konservatismus’. Was ist Konservatismus? Die erotische Ironie des Geistes.” (Mann, 1974, 420)



element, a trope of distance and not of engagement. Mann sees sterility in irony, since it keeps the world at arm's length, avoids the pathos of passionate postures.

Whence Carvalho's celebration of irony over pathos, his inclination for the apocalyptic, scavenging for material in the ruins, at a safe distance, like a TV channel helicopter hovering over a burning house, feasting on remnants – for what is irony, after all, and in Safranski's (2007, 84) words, if not the pleasure derived from annihilation? Carvalho's notion of irony is – as are all – profoundly shaped by Romanticism,<sup>56</sup> despite his weariness towards those traits that – in his judgment – have become more or less obsolete over time. Carvalho's civilizing project is not quite pedagogical as it is linguistic; he stands against Novalis' "Romantisierung der Welt" and its lofty attempts at instilling life with poetry, at finding the magic word ["Zauberwort"] that would thus raise one above the wretched objectivity of one's daily life, ultimately leading to a stupefaction of the senses, a fanciful inebriation capable of re-enchanting the world. Carvalho, if anything, wishes to disenchant magic, find the word itself. He rejects fighting torpor by way of yet another form of torpor. From his writings the very opposite emerges: sobriety, the character (or the narrator) in full possession of their critical faculties (but not necessarily their mental ones). Carvalho aims at stimulating the reader's critical capacities (of a contemporary inclination, *bien entendu*), and not at creating a colorful world – or even a Realist one – that would achieve the same alienating results.<sup>57</sup> Carvalho is a cynic before being a humanist: he gives the diagnosis but offers no prescription.<sup>58</sup>

Lastly, the option for the purposefully controversial (and slightly *passé*) notion of "civilizing project" deserves an additional – and final – remark by way of Norbert Elias's foreword to his influential 1939 opus *The Civilizing Process*, in which Elias (2000, 5–6) argues that the concept of civilization "expresses the

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56 To quote it in Millán-Zaibert's (2007, 168) graceful formulation: "Irony is a literary tool that lifts the rigid confines of language. Irony is a sort of play that reveals the limitations of a view of reality that presumed to have the last word. With the use of romantic irony, Schlegel showed that there was no last word. And once we give up a last word, aesthetic methods become sensible alternatives to the methods of mathematics and the natural sciences".

57 Arguing against Realism, in a much quoted passage, Carvalho writes: "O romance é o que se faz dele, e as possibilidades são infinitas. Um bom romance não precisa ter necessariamente, como querem Franzen e outros neoconservadores, uma boa história com personagens psicologicamente bem construídos e verossímeis. Pode ser também um livro sem história, em que os personagens são pretexto para o desenho de uma visão de mundo. Cada caso é um caso" (MFE, 27).

58 Rather quizzically and violently anachronically, should one wish to give Novalis the opportunity of defending himself against Carvalho's (supposed) accusations, one might feel tempted to point out Novalis' criticism of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*: a prosaic novel lacking in poetic audacity, limited to criticizing the world instead of postulating a new one (see Safranski, 2007, 40). Carvalho is not, nor shall ever be (as anybody ever again will) a figure of Goethe's stature, or even remotely close to Goethe's might, although the criticism – all due oceanic reservations kept – rings remarkably true.



self-consciousness of the West. (...) By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of". From there on (and echoing Mann's emphasis on the prevailing "westliche, zivilisationsliterarische Mächte"), and before embarking on a meticulous historical analysis of cultural customs and practices (which corresponds to the book's actual goal, rather than to broadly and abstractly elaborate on the subject), Elias voices a clichéd disclaimer by today's standards: Civilization means different things to different nations, and particularly (among Western countries) to the English, the French, and the Germans.

To a certain extent, the concept of civilization plays down the national differences between peoples; it emphasizes what is common to all human beings or – in the view of its bearers – should be. (...) In contrast, the German concept of *Kultur* places special stress on national differences and the particular identity of groups; (...) the concept of *Kultur* mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as a spiritual sense, and again and again had to ask itself: "What really is our identity?" (Elias, 2000, 7)

The term "civilizing project", when applied specifically to Carvalho's literary venture, should therefore be understood as a combination of both the normative character of *Civilization*, and the identitary nature of *Kultur*. This theoretical appropriation updates the term to some extent (inasmuch as the concept of "civilization" can at all be updated), and, more importantly, reflects Carvalho's conceptual bias towards both affirming and denying an idea of nation.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the fictional representation of a nation is depleted of political relevance; nationalities are annulled as characters rarely seem at loss in foreign lands or languages (except if they happen to be non-Western, such as Japanese, in *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo*, or Mongolian – and Chinese, to a lesser extent – in *Mongólia*), as visas and borders seem trivial matters not worthy of mention (with Russia as the only notable exception in *O Filho da Mãe*, and a very brief passage in *Onze* in which a French visa is denied to a Brazilian character living in the United States). Such perception further reiterates the predominantly intellectual aspect of Carvalho's take on exile, while at the same time shedding light on the fiercely (and, to the

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<sup>59</sup> A contradiction Carvalho further explores in an essay on Witold Gombrowicz: "Para o escritor de um país aniquilado pela guerra, exilado numa terra estrangeira que não o reconhece, desiludido com a idéia de nação e com a civilização que a inventou, nada mais contraditório do que um artista que procura escapar ao convencional e, querendo ser verdadeiro, vai se agarrar justamente a uma convenção tão traiçoeira e ilusória quanto a de uma 'identidade nacional'" (MFE, 127).

European eye, perhaps puzzling) Western element subjacent to the author's civilizing project.

Which is not to say that the displaced characters in Carvalho's fiction do not experience intense estrangement or undergo a disorienting loss of cultural (or moral) compass, but that the impenetrability of foreign lands and languages does not invoke in them neither a post-colonial nor a semiotic-poetic reaction (neither Bhabha nor Barthes, two paragons amongst contemporary Brazilian intellectuals). Instead, the sense of loss, of longing, of entrapment, of anguish, of oppression is both conceived and conveyed linguistically, in a Walserian manner of wide open spaces abruptly shrunk to the size of a drawer or a cage.

The claustrophobia of progressively shrinking realities is prototypically rendered in one of *Aberração's* most somber stories, "O Arquiteto". A cautionary tale of rogue architecture and modernist cul-de-sacs, it draws from Le Corbusier and Niemeyer, from Escher and De Chirico, as it conjures a labyrinthine city projected by an architect both unnamed and unknown by the city's miserable inhabitants. The story has also a bitter ironic undertone, as the architect confesses that the idea for the project came to him as he sat constipated on the toilet, and that the whole city was thus built in its image.<sup>60</sup> Although perfect from an urbanistic point of view, the cage-like city, with its symmetrical parks and artificial sky, has one compromising flaw: a blind spot, a drain the architect could not seamlessly retrofit from bathroom into city (A, 52). From his apartment window, the architect notices increasing waves of people carrying flashlights at night near the approximate location of the blind spot. He then ventures into the park and finds abandoned baby strollers near the site and realizes people have been trying to escape, to save their children from that architectonic prison. The only problem is that they are wrong, the drain does not lead to an exit, but rather into an even deeper subterranean labyrinth.<sup>61</sup> What people believed to be a way out was, in fact, the project's perverse frailty: to be able to see the blind spot leads not to freedom, but to a whole other prison. Underneath language lies only more language, seems to be the metaphoric moral of the story at hand.

<sup>60</sup> "Eu tive a idéia desta cidade sentado na privada com prisão de ventre. (...) Hoje, dizem que o palácio do governo fica no alto, suspenso, para evitar uma revolução. Toda a oposição repete a mesma coisa. Como é possível não verem que toda a cidade foi inspirada num banheiro e o palácio do governo, por ser a pia, só podia mesmo estar no alto? Você vê? Querem dizer que fui ideológico, mas nem sabem mais quem fui." (A, 45; 46)

<sup>61</sup> "Enganaram-se e só eu sei que agora estão perdidas nos túneis que iam ser usados para um sistema de transportes subterrâneos mas não foram. Só eu sei que não há saída daqui... (...) Acharam que era uma saída. Mas era toda a fragilidade." (A, 54)

“O Arquiteto” is an important short-story within Carvalho’s body of work, as it depicts what could be called the author’s *Ur-city*, an oppressive arena where European ideals and tropical entropy clash in search of a precarious balance, and where humanity writ large is at risk of dissolution (“the last human beings”) – a clash highly reminiscent of Max Bense’s take on Brazil, minus Bense’s melancholy and reconciling tone:

The organization of humankind becomes a decisive problem when nature’s extra-human oppression rises, like it happens in the tropics, or when progress reaches a point from which it may dispose of humankind as a whole. There, in the limits between urbanism and existentialism, between safety and fear, revolt’s inclination towards transforming cities and languages settles in. (Bense 1985, 16)

*O Arquiteto* reveals a defining range of Carvalho’s literary and conceptual influences, establishing therewith a claustrophobic atmosphere and underlying theoretical agenda common to his depiction of traveling and displacement, in which the national element in its political implications is replaced by layers of language and oppression with strong apocalyptic undertones and covert moralizing ones. Carvalho’s civilizing project abstains from a systematic discussion on belonging and identity in favor of a moral and narrative fault-finding process infused by a defeatist noir flavor (the criminal and the victim are equally corrupt – homecoming is impossible for so is redemption).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The foundation of Carvalho’s fiction lies on the intertwining of landscape, movement (traveling), and language, through which an overarching apocalyptic atmosphere surfaces, and into which concerns of marginality (broadly understood) ultimately flow. This foundational triad – in its arising apocalyptic and marginal specificities – reveals also structurally the extent of Walser’s influence within Carvalho’s writings. However, whereas Walser leads his fiction and his characters up to the brink of a moralizing stance only to ultimately abdicate from it (see chapter 3.1.3 and, more specifically, footnote 5), Carvalho does not forgo judgment and chooses instead to address moral concerns full-on (thus here more aligned to Kafka, whose prose carries the weight of moral and religious implications). And although both authors radically part ways in this particular point, both paths lead right back to a very similar approach to the insubstantial nature of their fictional characters (Walser’s as a miniaturist’s effort and Carvalho’s as a refusal of psychology). Furthermore, this crossroads between identity and defeatism, or between one’s own roots and one’s belonging to a culture that has somehow “been defeated” – a recurring theme in all of Carvalho’s books – could be further explored in terms of its connection to the concept of World Literature, a concept which this research does not resort to, but which finds fertile ground in Joachim Küpper’s satisfyingly controversial essay – particularly in relation to Carvalho’s own work – “Some Remarks on World Literature”. In it, Küpper addresses the “fashionable post-modern split identities” with an irony akin to Carvalho’s take on his own split characters, and moves on to discuss whether or not “the dominant culture is the culture of those who are in power” (Küpper, 2013, 167; 170).

What is here being deemed as Carvalho's civilizing project helps placing into evidence the two basic complementing lines running throughout his work: on the one hand the literary legacy stemming from what could be considered Carvalho's foundational set of influences, Borges, Kafka, and Walser – the labyrinthine and the oppressive, the marginal and apocalyptic worldview, the skeptical, faux-detective figure investigating intellectual crimes –; and, on the other, the moralizing, pessimistic, somehow apolitical but yet highly European perspective endorsed by Mann. The civilizing project proper corresponds to the second half of the equation, while the first provides the latent stylistic and narrative elements.

All these elements are combined in *Aberração's* most ambitious and intricate story, aptly titled “Aberração” so as to fend off any doubts regarding its aspirations.<sup>63</sup> The story – whose plotline is an abridged version of what would later become the author's second novel, 1996's *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos* – follows the first-person vertigo of yet another unnamed male character<sup>64</sup> as he is overtaken by a raging erection in front of a De Kooning painting at a Dutch museum. He tries to conceal his love of art by exiting through the gift shop, where he fakes interest in a selection of postcards so as to further deflate his enthusiasm, but instead finds a familiar image. Shaken, overcome by the eerie feeling of having once been *inside* that picture,<sup>65</sup> the unnamed protagonist (one hand still in his pocket, cornered by the disgusted scrutiny of all bystanders) buys the postcard and embarks on an enigmatic journey involving family secrets, the art world, real and fake biographies, plane crashes, and the premonitory power of the past. The story, as previously mentioned, works by repetition and accumulation, revolving around a sentence that paradoxically loses significance the closer it gets from its climax, in which it plays a central role. Moreover, it observes Carvalho's triangular narrative structure consisting of a traumatic inbound movement (the narrator's unwilling return to Brazil, fueled by a mysterious occurrence in the

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<sup>63</sup> In passing, it should be noted that all stories in *Aberração* feature the word “aberração” exactly once, except for the homonymous story, in which the word has been promoted to the title. The flourish seems to serve no purpose other than a heavy-handed attempt at giving the short-story collection a thematic unity, when such unity had already been achieved through homogenous stylistic and narrative choices (despite the less homogenous level of quality among the stories).

<sup>64</sup> Carvalho's fiction, as Walser's, suffers from an alarming absence of leading female characters, which should deserve its own in-depth research.

<sup>65</sup> “...girando um dos suportes de cartões-postais, acabei batendo com os olhos num que reconheci imediatamente, para minha surpresa, sem saber nem mesmo de onde nem por quê. Não foi bem um reconhecimento, mas uma confusão de tudo, de todos os sentidos, de todos os tempos e lugares, a impressão, tão real quanto uma alucinação, de já ter estado dentro da foto.” (A, 146-147)

past which becomes his inescapable obsession); a swelling linguistic layer (the repetitions and the fake biographies intensify the more the narrator is drawn into the mysterious chain of events); and an expertly ambiguous outbound movement (the narrator leaves Brazil and flies to France, uncovers part of the enigma and, as he does so – as a calloused detective in a whodunit novel would –, it becomes clear that it was his fate that was the story’s actual mystery all along).

The narrator’s unwilling return to Brazil triggers once again the “problem of geography” (the distant, the exotic) and the suspicion of being surrounded by “the last human beings” (disconnected spectators, deluded speculators). These impressions are almost always voiced with disgust by angry narrators or characters (at times diluted in the complimentary dosage of bitter humor), thus acquiring their civilizing status:

I don’t know when my problems with the city began. It happened little by little. There was a time when I couldn’t even hear about it. The disaster that is today’s reality has been, from a certain moment onwards, far too associated with my own subjective unrest and with what I thought of everything; the decadence, upon recognizing my most intimate disappointments, upon further plunging into this unpleasant reality, has always existed without me even realizing it. Everybody says it was different back then. I for one know that it was. Quite different. That was what I recognized in the post-card (although yet unaware of how precisely so!). I suppose the downfall of which its own victims speak of today, as mere spectators, was already being foretold then...<sup>66</sup>

The impressions (or, alternatively, provocations) gain in virulence as the narrative progresses, for instance as the narrator states his disgust of Rio de Janeiro as seen from aboard a plane (a sterile contraption contrasting with the tropical, fetid scenery below),<sup>67</sup> or upon noticing traces of the ascending (and culturally dubious, as the narrator seems to imply) lower classes.<sup>68</sup> The narrator, on the

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**66** “Não sei quando começou o meu problema com a cidade. Foi aos poucos. Houve um tempo em que nem conseguia ouvir falar nela. O desastre que hoje é a realidade esteve, a partir de um determinado momento, por demais associado ao meu próprio mal-estar subjetivo e ao que pensava das coisas; a decadência, ao reconhecimento das minhas decepções mais íntimas, à queda progressiva nessa realidade desagradável, que sempre foi sem que eu me desse conta. Todos dizem que antes era diferente. Eu mesmo sei que era. Muito diferente. Foi o que reconheci no cartão-postal (mas sem saber ainda com que precisão!). Acho que a derrocada de que falam hoje as próprias vítimas, como meros espectadores, já se anunciava ali...” (A, 149)

**67** “E enquanto a observava devo ter esquecido o meu horror pela cidade já aos meus pés, por muito pouco, esquecido o fedor e a lama dos mangues que brilhava com o sol da manhã. Esquecido o lodo e a sujeira e as palafitas em cima do lodo e da sujeira.” (A, 153)

**68** “A estrada de Búzios continua um horror. Talvez tenha melhorado um pouco desde aquela época, porque asfaltaram, mas foi pior, porque, com o acesso mais fácil, é a cidade que ficou um lixo.” (A, 163)

other hand, has been contemplating paintings by De Kooning and Matisse at a Dutch museum (A, 145), comparing a clerk's neck to a Modigliani and her face to a Bacon (A, 147), traveling the world in search of the (fictional) French photographer whose photos were then made into eerie postcards, some of which pictured the narrator's tragically deceased aunt. The aunt herself had had, prior to disappearing, a successful career as an upper-class globetrotter, traveling to Paris, Rome, Florence, Munich, San Diego, before ultimately dying in a plane crash somewhere in the depths of the Brazilian hinterland<sup>69</sup> (A, 155). And when the investigation points the narrator to France, he immediately buys a plane ticket to Paris, and then proceeds to fend off questions as to why by simply stating he needed vacations, refusing altogether to answer the ensuing question: vacations from what?, as if his actions were beyond inquiry.<sup>70</sup>

Carvalho's civilizing project is further brought into evidence by the striking contrast between his characters and the reality they depict, as if their financial liberty to roam the world or their cultured intellectual acumen placed them above geography and "the last human beings". It is here that irony – a fickle notion within Carvalho's work; a fickle notion by any measure – plays a crucial role, determining on which side of the political spectrum the author's reception shall fall: should Carvalho's civilizing project be understood ironically – as a judge exerting the distanced and destructive powers of irony; as the fierce critic feigning ignorance and fomenting critical thinking through provocation –, then it acquires decidedly critical contours; should the civilizing project be understood without the benefit of irony – thus within the very eager and post-modern realm of post-ironic sincerity –, then it falls prey to yet another reactionary agenda. The second reading, although tempting (a good *j'accuse* is never out of fashion<sup>71</sup>), would betray an unfamiliarity

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<sup>69</sup> It should be noted, in passing, that such globetrotter frenzy is a constant throughout Carvalho's work, and particularly in *Aberração*, where it carries the hint of a thinly covert Eurocentric crusade against what is perceived as perhaps a Brazilian provincialism. Thus, among the fifty different cities mentioned in the book, more than half are found in the Old Continent: Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Breauté-Beuzeville, Colliure, Dubrovnik, Edinburgh, Elba, Étretat, Florence, Frankfurt, Gerona, Hamburg, Jena, Lisbon, London, Milan, Munich, Paris, Perpignan, Piombino, Pisa, Portoferraio, Roma, Rouen, Trieste, Zurich (not to mention those pertaining to the North American grand tour: Athens (GA), Berkeley, Bradenton, Gainesville, Los Angeles, Miami, New Jersey, New York, San Diego).

<sup>70</sup> "Comprei minha passagem para Paris no mesmo dia. Quando me perguntaram o que eu ia fazer lá, disse que estava apenas precisando de umas férias. Quando me perguntaram férias de quê, não respondi, porque não respondo a provocações." (A, 165)

<sup>71</sup> F. Schlegel's (2013, 70) words come to mind, should one be looking for a resounding *j'accuse* of Romantic extraction: "Leute die Bücher schreiben, und sich dann einbilden, ihre Leser wären

with Carvalho's theoretical writings, in which his characters' and narrators' dubious, inflammatory, controversial worldviews give way to the author's own straightforward, unequivocal voice.<sup>72</sup> The use of irony in Carvalho is not so much humorous as it is critical, the foundation upon which his fiction is built. The ironic inception, furthermore, seems to stem from a feeling of marginality and impotence towards the world at large, culminating in a depressed, defeatist fictional approach – a set of attributes which once again links Carvalho's writings back to Walser's, although whereas Walser ultimately veers irony towards humor, Carvalho uses it to let off anger. Carvalho's characters navigate the world as self-declared paragons of rationality and freedom (typical European ideals), when in fact their excessive lucidity betrays a deeply rooted conceptual depression (which is also rather European).

Their supposed clear-sighted lucidity<sup>73</sup> is further accentuated by the dominant labyrinthine, obscure *décor* common to Carvalho's fiction. The urgency in tone of a detective story, the intricate mental deductions, the accumulation of evidence building up to a surprising climax – these are all recurrent techniques within Carvalho's work, albeit with an important twist: whereas the genre's convention would presuppose the detective's decisive knowledge, in Carvalho the detective-like figure is revealed, in the end, to know very little, to have lost more than gained from the investigation. The ultimate and inescapable failure – which enjoys the underlying Romantic taste for the mystery rather than for its unraveling – sheds light on the faux-detective's outsider status, a marginal figure relying on his intellect amidst the alienated conventions of society (a figure perhaps best typified in recent Latin American literature by Ricardo

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das Publikum, und sie müßten das Publikum bilden: diese kommen sehr bald dahin, ihr sogenannte Publikum nicht bloß zu verachten, sondern zu hassen; welches zu gar nichts führen kann. Interestingly enough, Carvalho seems to address – ironically – such impetus towards a moralizing stance in *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo* by having a character say: “No fundo, sou um moralista. O mundo está cheio deles. É um azar quando se tornam escritores. Estão sempre prontos a dar opinião sobre tudo” (SP, 16).

<sup>72</sup> Secondly, any reading of Carvalho under non-ironic duress would inevitably refer back to David Foster Wallace, a founding voice behind what now seems to answer by the clunky label of post-ironic sincerity (see his 1993s essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”). The legacy of David Foster Wallace is also tightly linked – following the genealogy of contemporary American fiction – to an array of Realist authors championed by Jonathan Franzen, whose literary prowess is systematically dismissed by Carvalho (see in particular MFE, 26-27, an excerpt of which has been quoted under footnote 57 in subchapter 3.2.3.).

<sup>73</sup> *Aberração's* narrator, for instance, boasts about his discerning faculties towards the short-story's climax: “Menosprezaram o mundo achando que nunca ninguém ia descobrir. Eu nunca fui um idiota, longe disso” (A, 171).



Piglia in his 1991 short essay “La Ficción Paranoica”); the anti-climactic failure further undermines any claims for Realism, itself already deeply shaken by the constitutive anti-Realist nature of a detective story. Two undeniable influences are at stake here, the first of which – a Nouveau-Romanesque touch – is perfectly embodied in the novel *As Iniciais*, in which a series of mysteries and misunderstandings bring twelve people together in search of answers, like the set-up for an Agatha Christie novel, but when the time comes for the detective to showcase his or her deductive skills, what Carvalho offers instead is a profusion of doubt and deceit, of false accusations and wordplays (I, 102). Nouveau Roman’s despairing feeling of abandon and helplessness is mimicked in the novel, in the constant not-knowing of the hours, of the names, of the places,<sup>74</sup> in the characters’ growing opacity and obsolescence as they – who were never more than mere initials, from A to Z – are annulled by language and by a world beyond their control.

Secondly, it is also clear that Carvalho is yet again reporting back to Borges, and specifically to Borges’ successive readings and criticisms and emulations of Poe, as perhaps best summarized in his 1978 conference “El Cuento Policial”. In it, Borges addresses fundamental questions of utmost importance to Carvalho’s approach to fiction (which, of course, have long since been present in Borges’ fictional production): the very basic intellectual, anti-Realist nature of the detective genre<sup>75</sup>; the divergent lifestyle of an outsider<sup>76</sup>; the philosophical potential of

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74 “...pelas leis daquele país, que ela também não sabia me dizer qual...” (I, 99); “Disse que D. se apaixonou por uma moça, e ela também por ele, e que pouco antes de se casarem descobriram que ela estava condenada por uma doença incurável e rara, de cujo nome a antropóloga já não se lembrava, como os outros, sempre que eu perguntava alguma coisa mais específica, fossem datas, nomes ou lugares.” (I, 121)

75 “Poe no quería que el género policial fuera un género realista, quería que fuera un género intelectual, un género fantástico si ustedes quieren, pero un género fantástico de la inteligencia, no de la imaginación solamente; de ambas cosas desde luego, pero sobre todo de la inteligencia. (...) Tenemos, pues, al relato policial como un género intelectual. Como un género basado en algo totalmente ficticio; el hecho es que un crimen es descubierto por un razonador abstracto y no por delaciones, por descuidos de los criminales. Poe sabía que lo que él estaba haciendo no era realista, por eso sitúa la escena en París; y el razonador era un aristócrata, no la policía; por eso pone en ridículo a la policía. Es decir, Poe había creado un genio de lo intelectual.” (Borges, 2011, 237; 239)

76 “Por eso el primer detective de la ficción es un extranjero, el primer detective que la literatura registra es un francés. ¿Por qué un francés? Porque el que escribe la obra es un americano y necesita un personaje lejano. Para hacer más raros a esos personajes, hace que vivan de un modo distinto del que suelen vivir los hombres.” (Borges, 2011, 237)



deserted streets<sup>77</sup>; the call for a suspicious, inquiring reader.<sup>78</sup> Borges' influence over Carvalho (in what regards the subject of this particular conference) seems to wane only when Borges reacts negatively to the perceived chaos of post-Romantic fragmentation (to which the detective story would provide opposition),<sup>79</sup> whereas Carvalho (true to the core to Blanchot) readily incorporates the fragmentation in his narratives, often using it to juxtapose extra layers of narrative voices which will in turn be frustrated by their absolute lack of closure (see particularly his early novels *Onze*, *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, and *As Iniciais*).

Needless to say that Carvalho is not a detective writer, nor does he aspire to be one. Instead, he applies the genre's agreed-upon basic outlines in order to create a dubious, claustrophobic atmosphere and underscore the intellectual, anti-Realist elements of his writing technique. He doesn't go as far as to subvert the genre, nor does he spoof it (although he never refrains from a meta-comment whenever the narrative hints too much at the genre it references<sup>80</sup>). The detective story presupposes a trauma, a disaster, a chaotic situation that shall, in due time, through highly civilized intellectual acumen (near a fireplace, for instance, in a Tudor mansion – or, as the next-best-thing in line, in a lush villa outside Rio de Janeiro), be put to rights. Carvalho accepts the disaster but rejects the unambiguous resolution. He doesn't seek order but truth; he exposes the problem but offers no solutions; his irony-tinged criticism is destructive rather than constructive. The typically bleak atmosphere of a detective story adds to the barren landscape and to the repetitive storytelling. A circular, exhausting logic prevails, and with each turn of the screw the impending doom is undermined by a repetitive numbness.

77 “Yo me imagino a los dos amigos recorriendo las calles desiertas de Paris, de noche, y hablando ¿sobre qué? Hablando de filosofía, sobre temas intelectuales.” (Borges, 2011, 237)

78 “...y ya ese lector está lleno de sospechas, porque el lector de novelas policiales es un lector que lee con incredulidad, con suspicacias, una suspicacia especial.” (Borges, 2011, 232)

79 “En esta época nuestra, tan caótica, hay algo que, humildemente, ha mantenido las virtudes clásicas: el cuento policial.” (Borges, 2011, 241–242)

80 For example, in the short-story *Aberração*: “Tudo reconstituído pelas fotos do fotógrafo francês, com a ironia talvez de quem não pensa mais naquilo, e por isso mesmo, porque está longe demais. Que ele tenha recebido entre os mais diversos prêmios o da Associação dos Advogados Criminalistas da Normandia, uma liga filantrópica de amantes da arte da fotografia, como eles se autodenominavam em suas reuniões mensais no clube de golfe de Etretat em homenagem a Arsène Lupin ou na cerimônia de entrega do prêmio, não é nada comparado ao fato de que uma menção ao prêmio foi feita logo antes da introdução do livro...” (A, 169-170). Another suitable example is found in the novel *As Iniciais*, in which an enigma worthy of a Hercule Poirot prompts a character to make the following remark: “‘É uma espécie de Agatha Christie?’, perguntou H., inocente, mas obrigando a herdeira a responder, sem conseguir controlar de todo a irritação, que pensava mais na questão psicológica e social do que realmente na questão policial” (I, 58). See also footnote 59 in subchapter 4.2.3.

Carvalho excels at simultaneously shocking and anesthetizing, thus underlying his anti-Romantic but yet idealistically Romantic project of denouncing a brand of literature that caters to a society that has learned to live – quite resignedly – in a permanent state of emergency.

The inevitable Romantic echo of such strategy – and the accompanying apocalyptic implications – is best summed up by Safranski's Romantic analysis of Adorno and Gehlen:

It is remarkable how readily they both [Gehlen and Adorno] agree on the premise that the whole makeup of society is genuinely catastrophic. Yet it is a catastrophe that causes no alarm. People can live quite happily with it. Adorno concludes from this that people are doubly alienated: they have lost all awareness of their alienation. For Gehlen, civilization is in any case nothing but catastrophe in a livable condition [“die Katastrophe im Zustand ihrer Lebbarkeit”]. And both, despite their critique of society's foundations [“Fundamentalkritik”], have made themselves very comfortable with the ‘dreadful state of affairs’ [“das Unwesen”] they criticize. They have given up—one with a good, the other with a bad conscience. (Safranski, 2007, 384)

### 3.2.4 The last human beings: On Carvalho's poetics of subtraction

The fate of humankind, as told by Bernardo Carvalho: financial crisis and mass murder (*Onze*); nuclear testing and suicide pacts (*Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*); chemical warfare and paranoia (*Teatro*); solitude and epidemics (*As Iniciais*); betrayal and madness (*Medo de Sade*). But life goes on, as they say, a cloud of torpor and resignation keeps people from complete despair. Characters roam from one catastrophe to the next like tourists on a cruise ship, only a handful aware of the shipwreck ahead, the rest deaf, or dead, or worse.<sup>81</sup> The muted

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<sup>81</sup> In *Teatro*, a so-called terrorist writes a letter to justify his terrorist actions, and its manifesto-like lines could be read – in light of Carvalho's civilizing project – as an thinly disguised authorial jab at the world, with strong Benjaminian undertones (the poverty of experience) muddled by the novel's thematic paranoia: “Não era um homem burro, longe disso; seu raciocínio era claríssimo e lógico, porém obviamente paranóico, vendo o país como um sistema orquestrado em seus mínimos detalhes para a destruição do ser humano em nome dos interesses do capital industrial e tecnológico. Explicava que seu atentado visava apenas alertar as pessoas sobre o fato de terem se transformado em vítimas inconscientes nas mãos dessa rede terrível. Eram brinquedos de sua própria destruição. Faltava, segundo ele, reflexão, os anticorpos. A reflexão seria o antídoto para a passividade funcionalista. O atentado era uma forma de instigar a consciência contra o estado em que viviam e de instalar o pânico entre aqueles que mais colaboravam inconscientemente para aquela situação. (...) Na carta, o ‘terrorista’, porque agora era assim que o chamavam nas investigações, sem qualquer reserva, dizia que o mundo havia sido deturpado pelo capitalismo tardio e que os principais valores humanistas conquistados ao longo de séculos de história

apocalypse underscoring Carvalho's writings has – as any critical or theoretical approach to apocalypse does – close ties to the tradition of postwar German metaphysics and philosophy of history, best embodied by Benjamin's "angel of history" or any one of Adorno's most quoted and incendiary passages, such as the very Carvalho-appropriate: "Art today is hardly conceivable if not as a form of reaction that anticipates the apocalypse" (Adorno, 1998, 131). Adorno provides Carvalho – at least formally – with the outlines of an undeniable worldview, although Carvalho, if pushed in that direction, will choose to quote Benjamin instead,<sup>82</sup> whose meticulous attention to the small and overlooked, to the victors' debris, resonates better within Carvalho's own literary project of marginal extraction. Whereas Adorno tends to react with prophetic anger to concrete traumatic events, Carvalho settles for a linguistic account of human demise, the way language has of wrapping itself around the worst of events and calmly supplying words that should never exist. Carvalho deals with trauma only obliquely, implicitly, through narrative circularity and repetition; he is far more interested in what predates it, the space that precedes trauma, the catastrophe as it unfolds, the catastrophe in a livable condition ("die Katatrophe im Zustand ihrer Lebbarkeit").

Huyssen, in *Present Pasts*, is wary of the "newfound popularity" of thinkers such as Adorno and Benjamin, among others, when such newfound popularity seems to rely on a Freudian (rather than Hegelian or Marxist) approach to philosophy of history and to history as trauma:

What is at stake when we consider, as we seem to do ever more frequently, the whole history of the twentieth century under the sign of trauma, with the Holocaust increasingly functioning as the ultimate cipher of traumatic unspeakability or unrepresentability? And what if this assessment is then extended-under the guise of various forms of apocalyptic and anarchic thinking-to the whole history of enlightenment modernity: modernity as the trauma that victimizes the world, that we cannot leave behind, that causes all of our symptoms? The newly found popularity of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the cult status of Benjamin's angel of history, and the trauma work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and others all raise the suspicion that we are simply rearticulating Freudian phylogenetic fantasies in a different, significantly darker key. Ultimately, this is philosophy of history entering through the back door – not via Hegel or Marx, to be sure, but via Freud. This approach to history as trauma, I would suggest, does not help much to understand the political layers of memory discourse in our time, although it may well represent one of its major articulations. (Huyssen, 2003, 8–9)

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estavam se perdendo; dizia que a publicidade estava substituindo a realidade (...) e que o mercado e a especulação haviam massacrado todos os valores reais. (...) [A]s palavras eram suas, mas também podiam ser minhas, porque para mim, no fundo, era difícil não concordar..." (T, 25-27).  
**82** See the essays "O Natal de Robert Walser" (MFE, 36-39), and "Cinema do Presente" (MFE, 104-106).

Huyssen's ultimate concern in his book is to investigate the role played by memory in piecing together meaning within urban scenarios, in making sense of everyday life in light of globalization's ever-expanding and all-consuming impositions (a whiff of apocalypse via the rhetoric of late capitalism is never completely absent from Huyssen's otherwise sober, definition-driven writing style). Huyssen's book, although distant in its essence from Carvalho, is nevertheless instrumental in a twofold manner: on the one hand swiftly eliminating the psychological element so despised by Carvalho, and, on the other, positing Sebald as a central figure in his study. All political and contextual observations aside – which Huyssen readily provides, but whose specificity is of little import to a reading of Carvalho's work –, Huyssen builds up his analysis of Sebald (on a stylistic and narrative level) by constantly referring to the author's intricate web of rewritings and repetitions; to his choice for a slower-paced writing strategy which creates a rift between the elegant, subdued, nineteenth-century-reminiscent language and the catastrophes it depicts; as well as to the overarching apocalypse-via-Benjamin imagery. Combined, these traits lead to the apex of Huyssen's reading of Sebald:

A kind of poetic freedom emerges precisely from Sebald's relentless explorations of individual life histories caught in the slow death of exile. (...) [T]hese stories [do not] aestheticize the individual catastrophes they depict. Aesthetically and historically precise, Sebald's investigations of the past in *Die Ausgewanderten* permit the reader to envision the catastrophes of the twentieth century without sentimentality and without ideology and abstraction. Sebald's is a unique voice on the literary scene, the voice of a latecomer (Nachgeborener) in a new sense, of one who rewrites the texts of the past and who remembers the concrete texture of the lives lost. Thus it is not surprising that there is no strong notion of a new beginning in Sebald's writings, which are so aware of the palimpsestic nature of all écriture. (Huyssen, 2003, 154)

The slow death of exile, the lack of sentimentality, the absence of new beginnings – here are traits that could be easily applied to explain Carvalho's fiction, and to further shed light on the author's broader literary project. Each of Carvalho's books – particularly those pertaining to the first half of his writing career – posit a different, unsentimental ending to an already estranged and decaying humanity, while never engaging in the more hopeful fantasy of new beginnings. The narratives aim at subtraction, destruction, erasure, disappearance.<sup>83</sup> When discussing

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<sup>83</sup> *As Iniciais* is particularly suggestive in its constant intertwining of disappearance and language, of death and literature, as perhaps best embodied in the excerpt: “Porque mesmo num mundo de pura sugestão, a morte continua sendo a única verdade, o que resta, o que não pode ser controlado por nenhuma razão ou sistema” (I, 125). Elsewhere, in *Teatro*, the deceptively named porn star Ana C. indulges in her/his favorite obsession: imagining his disappearance – “O

Sebald on a politically charged text about Brazilian landscape and environment, Carvalho quotes from Sebald's *Ringe des Saturn*: "A catástrofe nunca está tão próxima como quando o futuro se anuncia como o mais radioso dos dias"<sup>84</sup> (MFE, 146). Applied to Carvalho's fictional universe, the quote not only underlines the author's recurring critique of the notion of progress (a notion that quickly adheres to everyday language in Brazil, as Carvalho has consistently pointed out throughout his novels – and more insistently in 2013's *Reprodução*), but also serves as an aphoristic statement to the already discussed exotic delusion suffered by "the last human beings", dissociated by geography and annulled by language. Carvalho's stories are much more vicious than Walser's, but both authors – connected by Kafka and Sebald – are performing their own disappearing acts, with each sentence bringing their characters closer to dissolution.

The dissolution – the slow death of exile – begins already with the first main character in *Aberração*'s opening short-story ("A Valorização"): æ's fate, after having traveled the world and found his place in it, is to disappear like a gust of wind that suddenly ceases to blow (A, 16). Carvalho's characters pay with their own paper-thin existence for their aimless, intellectual roaming, doomed if they stay, doomed if they don't. "Setting out on a quest means that one is alive. The risk has to be taken", remarks Safranski (2007, 212) in passing, and that risk in Carvalho's fictional universe is: disappearance. Unexplained and mysterious disappearances are the ultimate horizon of Carvalho's characters, like the only possible reward to a truly committed player of a game of hide-and-seek.<sup>85</sup> Thus the death of the character known as "the German" before she could learn the truth ("A Alemã"); thus the inhabitants' failed mass exodus from the city designed by the nameless architect, trapped in an even deeper labyrinth and never heard of again ("O Arquiteto"); thus the unexplained disappearance of the island's caretaker couple after the astronomer and his two sons are found dead ("O Astrônomo"); thus *Aberração*'s didactic last sentence, following a tale of artistic deceit and staged dissolution: "e toda a minha história desaparece num instante"

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tema de um dia largar a pornografia era uma obsessão recorrente nas nossas conversas, assim como o de sumir para sempre, 'como quem morre' (o que ensaiava a cada noite, retornando como um morto-vivo), sem que ninguém suspeitasse para onde tinha ido" (T, 110), which s/he fulfils by the end of the narrative.

**84** In the – slightly less straightforward – German original: "Der reale Verlauf der Geschichte ist dann natürlich ein ganz anderer gewesen, weil es ja immer, wenn man gerade die schönste Zukunft sich ausmalt, bereits auf die nächste Katastrophe zugeht" (Sebald, 1997, 270).

**85** Which is, incidentally, the game played by the eleven characters in *Onze*'s opening section, an activity suggestively and menacingly referred to by the group as 'brincar de morto', a pun somewhere in between 'play the dead' and 'play dead' (O, 13). It is a game, sums up a character, "in which no-one is to be trusted" ["é um jogo onde não se deve confiar em ninguém" (O, 14)].

(A, 171). Disappearance is, after all, the only possible horizon once the Romantic notion of homecoming is taken out of the picture, once a house is no longer a home, nor a country a homeland – hence linking back to this chapter’s initial argument, and to the suspicion, formulated in its opening lines, that attributing any sort of value to homecoming is an endeavor both futile and puerile.<sup>86</sup> There is nothing heroic about coming back, there is only language and language’s betrayal. The estrangement of exile has already settled in, it is a byproduct of an intellectual mind, and only complete disappearance might undo it. Compassion and empathy are, in any case, misplaced literary emotions for Carvalho’s disenchanting brand of literature.

The lack of sentimentality in Carvalho’s work de-humanizes the characters and turns them into cogs supporting a given theory or thesis. They exist for only as long as they can add to the discussion; they are incapable of finding alterity, for language gets in the way<sup>87</sup>; they are spectral linguistic appearances, not fleshed-out characters<sup>88</sup>; they possess no psychology but a set of principles<sup>89</sup>; they are conceived from the same growing opacity typical of Walser, which dictates that the more they observe and understand the world, the less they mean to it. Walser’s approach to character construction – their evanescence, insubstan-

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**86** Carvalho’s first novel, *Onze* – to employ a concept popularized by Marc Augé (1992) –, ends in a non-place, a Parisian airport, and in disgrace, alluding to the impossibility of homecoming and to the failed project that is, ultimately, traveling. The author’s latest novel, *Reprodução*, is set entirely in an unidentified Brazilian airport, and the use of such non-places (hotels, highways...) is recurrent throughout Carvalho’s novels.

**87** Recurrent in Carvalho’s work, and perhaps best crystallized in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, is the difficulty experienced by characters in recognizing one another, as if they were to such extent deprived of physical attributes and consumed by their own problems and paranoias, that the simple act of recognizing alterity (or admitting to it) results nearly impossible (BS, 12; 66; 107; 130).

**88** An ingenious example to illustrate Carvalho’s bodiless characters – perhaps the most ingenious among them all – may be found in *Onze*, in which the eleven characters of the novel’s first section are described not physically, but in terms of logistics (as each character takes a seat at a table) and of relationships (who knows whom from where and why) (O, 11-13).

**89** Psychology as a literary device, as well as psychiatry as a treatment aiming at preventing mental disorders, are two concepts thoroughly ridiculed by Carvalho’s characters, perhaps most ostensibly by Guilherme in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, who pursued a career in psychiatry so as to avoid the prospect of eventually winding up as a patient – “Os loucos me chamavam. Optei pela psiquiatria mais por precaução. Teria a garantia de não ser enfiado a contragosto ali dentro eu também. Pensei em entrar por vontade própria, como médico, para evitar ser pego de surpresa, como paciente” (BS, 22). The same character remarks, later on: “...como eu tinha lido num artigo de psicanálise, que para mim era o fim dos mistérios humanos, a psicanálise é uma forma canhestra de encobri-los” (BS, 123), and, more incisively: “o discurso da psicanálise é na realidade um discurso canhestro, um fim pobre para os mistérios humanos e, por conseguinte, romanesco” (BS, 126).

tiality, recurrence in different stories, misleading (auto)biographical nature – is emulated in Carvalho’s work through a myriad of bodiless, nameless, recurrent,<sup>90</sup> faux-biographical figures (whose implications are discussed in the fifth chapter), although the authors’ final objectives once again differ: whereas Walser aims for empathy, Carvalho shuns all traces of sentimentality in benefit of sober (if not bitter) criticism. Carvalho burns bridges as the world burns, the way a frustrated scientist would destroy their failed experiments.

### 3.2.5 Um romance sem descendência: The politics of epidemics in Carvalho’s early novels in light of Susan Sontag’s take on the “rise in apocalyptic thinking”

The absence of new beginnings, the very impossibility of returning home and starting over, is ingrained in the ceaseless and contagious waves of epidemics and mental illnesses that sweep across the landscape, sparing only a handful. Left and right Carvalho’s characters fall prey to all manner of invisible menaces, maladies of psychological, rather than mechanical implications (cancer rather than heart failure, to use Susan Sontag’s typification). Weakness and demise come by way of cancer (A, 35), coma (A, 38), straitjackets (A, 74), mysterious symptoms of an unnamed disease (A, 96), AIDS, although still unnamed (A, 129<sup>91</sup>), and plague (A, 141) in *Aberração*; carbon monoxide poisoning (O, 43), AIDS from both a statistical and a conspiratorial point of view (O, 95<sup>92</sup>; 121<sup>93</sup>), and later on

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<sup>90</sup> The two main examples of recurring characters in Carvalho’s fiction stem precisely from *Aberração*, as a character from the short-story “Atores” is hinted at in the novel *Onze* (O, 96), and as the character-narrator of *As Iniciais* mentions some of the characters from *Aberração* as his own fictional creation (I, 22). Moreover, *As Iniciais* eerily predicts the novel *Mongólia* by at least four years (I, 96), and an excerpt of an essay originally reprinted in *O Mundo Fora dos Eixos* is quoted almost verbatim in *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo* (SP, 127).

<sup>91</sup> “A. teve um choque com B. B. estava em pé, ao lado de uma cadeira de frente para a janela. Tinha acabado de se levantar. Apoiava-se numa bengala. Sorriu, como um mau ator, e disse que A. tinha escapado de boa. A. sorriu também, mas só porque não sabia o que fazer. Já tinha tido um choque antes com B., que tinha mudado tanto, e não teve coragem de perguntar, com medo de ouvir o que estava vendo, que dissesse o nome da doença, qualquer outra menos aquela...”

<sup>92</sup> “No dia 11 de novembro, às onze da manhã, quando publicaram o relatório, Nova York era a capital da AIDS, com 235 mil soropositivos e 42 454 casos registrados da doença, dos quais 70% já tinham morrido. A previsão mais realista calculava que 110 milhões seriam atingidos em todo o planeta até o ano 2000.”

<sup>93</sup> “...criaram o vírus da AIDS, por exemplo, em laboratórios, para conter o crescimento das populações miseráveis do Terceiro Mundo, todo mundo sabe, o Pentágono sabe, a CIA sabe...” – In this regard, see Sontag, 1989, 52.



as the unnamed disease that kills a character (O, 145; 159) in *Onze*; a hereditary, personality-changing tumor (BS, 11; 14), dementia (BS, 24), and paranoia (BS, 31) in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*; the anthrax-like substance CLN45TC (T, 24) sent by mail in a series of terrorist attacks in *Teatro*; aerial warfare (I, 7), typhus and yellow fever (I, 15), and unnamed infectious diseases (I, 15; 129–130) in *As Iniciais*. The outbursts of disease are never aestheticized, never given a melancholy, Romantic aura, but rather portrayed as omens, the end of the line for “the last human beings”, undone by their own hands.

In her complementing treatises on illness and metaphor, 1978s *Illness as metaphor* and 1989s *AIDS and its metaphors*, Sontag, drawing upon notorious literary examples and most notably on the Romantic legacy (and rejecting most of it), draws the baseline for Carvalho’s own usage of disease throughout his work (although Carvalho would ultimately disagree with Sontag’s vehement, combative rejection of using illness as a figure or metaphor). Speaking initially of tuberculosis, Sontag draws the fundamental parallel between illness and insanity, the way both infectious and mental illnesses ultimately force a self-imposed state of exile, and are literarily coated in the Romantic prescription of traveling away from the city and towards the mountains or the desert:

The fancies associated with tuberculosis and insanity have many parallels. With both illnesses, there is confinement. Sufferers are sent to a “sanatorium” (the common word for a clinic for tuberculars and the most common euphemism for an insane asylum). Once put away, the patient enters a duplicate world with special rules. Like TB, insanity is a kind of exile. The metaphor of the psychic voyage is an extension of the romantic idea of travel that was associated with tuberculosis. To be cured, the patient has to be taken out of his or her daily routine. (...) The TB patient was thought to be helped, even cured, by a change in environment. There was a notion that TB was a wet disease, a disease of humid and dank cities. (...) Doctors advised travel to high, dry places—the mountains, the desert. (Sontag, 1978, 35–36; 15)

Thus, in Carvalho, the desert surfaces both as an ongoing process – the herald of a looming apocalypse – and as the inescapable end-destination for those seeking a cure. It is both what – geographically and metaphorically – his characters are running away from and what they will find, stuck in a circular, self-defeating project with no cure in sight. The repetitive cadence of Carvalho’s prose also alludes to this doomed dynamics, in which a strong rejection of the city is contrasted with an equally strong mistrust of nature, the exhaustion of both point A and point B, leaving nothing but the futile dislocation in between, and thus thrusting the characters deeper still into their exiles and further away from any national or nationalistic certainties. And if tuberculosis was the epitome of illness in the nineteenth century, then cancer surfaces as the emblem of twentieth



century afflictions, but with a decisive inversion in its logistics: traveling is no longer how one might cure the disease, but how one might escape from it: “But no change of surroundings is thought to help the cancer patient. The fight is all inside one’s own body. It may be, is increasingly thought to be, something in the environment that has caused the cancer. But once cancer is present, it cannot be reversed or diminished by a move to a better (that is, less carcinogenic) environment” (Sontag, 1978, 15–16).

Carvalho incorporates this ‘doomed if you do, doomed if you don’t’ logic to his own writings, building upon the lack of empathy with which epidemics spread<sup>94</sup> and the pointlessness of trying to outrun them, airborne and invisible and unfair as they are. The disease – and its psychic or psychological implications – only add to the intellectual and linguistic post-apocalyptic scenario that constitutes the background of Carvalho’s work, whose approximate science-fiction imagery Sontag resorts to – alluding to the very telling image of “death in the air”<sup>95</sup> – while discussing cancer, and, most pointedly, AIDS: “And the science-fiction flavor already present in cancer talk is even more pungent in accounts of AIDS” (Sontag, 1989, 18). The looming and invisible science-fiction threat of a “death in the air” – it should also be noted – is explored by Carvalho with premonitory sensibility in *Teatro*, in which a hypothetical and spectral future with strong Benjaminian undertones is postulated: “The supposed ‘terrorist’ was the personification, albeit absent, immaterial, ghostlike [“fantasmagórica”], of the death threat within everyone’s reach” (T, 25). Thomaz, in his already mentioned analysis of Carvalho’s work, equates the author’s spectral eloquence and propensity to images of ruin and disaster to the writings of Benjamin, and, more specifically, to the 1925 piece “Die Waffen von morgen”, in which Benjamin foretells the irreversible path of spectral destruction of an invisible

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<sup>94</sup> “‘Why me?’ (meaning ‘It’s not fair’) is the question of many who learn they have cancer.” (Sontag, 1978, 38)

<sup>95</sup> “One standard science-fiction plot is mutation, either mutants arriving from outer space or accidental mutations among humans. Cancer could be described as a triumphant mutation, and mutation is now mainly an image for cancer. As a theory of the psychological genesis of cancer, the Reichian imagery of energy checked, not allowed to move outward, then turned back on itself, driving cells berserk, is already the stuff of science fiction. And Reich’s image of death in the air—of deadly energy that registers on a Geiger counter—suggests how much the science-fiction images about cancer (a disease that comes from deadly rays, and is treated by deadly rays) echo the collective nightmare. The original fear about exposure to atomic radiation was genetic deformities in the next generation; that was replaced by another fear, as statistics started to show much higher cancer rates among Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors and their descendants.” (Sontag, 1978, 68)

menace.<sup>96</sup> The idea of a hidden yet powerfully devastating force is strong within Carvalho, whose fiction is more often than not set against the backdrop of an ongoing and seemingly irreversible entropic process. *Teatro* serves as one of the best examples to such looming and invisible science-fiction threat of a “death in the air”, as it foreshadows by three years the 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States, in which contaminated letters were mailed to a number of American news media outlets and political figures. Moreover, the terrorist attack in the United States highlights Carvalho’s belief in literature’s “power of anticipation”, a power whose literary inception he locates in Walser, as conveyed not only through his essays, but also in the voice of the narrator of *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*:

This is not fiction, although it may look like it. In fact, I have always believed in literature’s power of anticipation. Robert Walser, the Swiss writer, was found dead, lying on the snow in the middle of a field, decades after having one of his characters die this exact same way. (...) Literature’s power of anticipation does not come from choice. More than once I have written about men with no scruples, no morals, no character, willing to do anything in order to carry out acts of curious perversion, in which money and sex are inseparable.<sup>97</sup>

The same belief in fiction’s power of anticipation, featuring once again Walser as its main paladin (and with a subsequent Adornian echo), recurs in *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo*, a novel published eleven years after *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*. In it, however, the belief is voiced by a deeply disillusioned narrator, who, having fallen short of becoming a writer, decided to try his hand in the quicksand

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**96** “Sendo assim, em diferentes narrativas de Carvalho, os âmbitos da expressão artística distinguem-se, por um lado, por uma eloquência retórica muitas vezes espectral, no sentido benjaminiano de um hipotético futuro fantasmagórico (...), e, por outro, paradoxal, em curto circuito, que tende para a ruína e para o desastre. (...) Ao mencionar a ideia de eloquência espectral desde a perspectiva benjaminiana queremos nos referir ao poder simbólico desta noção observado, por exemplo, no texto ‘As armas do futuro’. Neste ensaio de 1925, Benjamin trata das dinâmicas bélicas que seriam impostas pelo uso das armas químicas num hipotético futuro europeu. As ruínas urbanas resultantes da aplicação dessas armas apontariam para uma guerra espectral, que operaria em várias frentes e avançaria de maneira invisível: ‘A guerra vindoura terá um front espectral. Um front que será deslocado fantasmagoricamente ora para esta ora para aquela metrópole, para suas ruas, diante da porta de cada uma de suas casas.’” (Thomaz, 2014, 36)

**97** “Isto não é uma ficção, embora pareça. Na verdade, sempre acreditei num poder antecipatório da literatura. Robert Walser, o escritor suíço, foi encontrado morto, deitado na neve, no meio do campo, décadas depois de fazer um de seus personagens morrer da mesma forma. (...) Esse poder antecipatório da literatura justamente não vem da escolha. Mais de uma vez escrevi sobre homens sem escrúpulos, sem moral, sem caráter, dispostos a qualquer coisa para executar atos de uma curiosa perversão, em que dinheiro e sexo eram inseparáveis.” (BS, 116)

of academic research with a thesis on “fiction as premonition”. Neither was the thesis finished, nor did the author eventually become a writer – although he did consider, for scientific purposes and in order to provide a Brazilian counterpart to Walser, to write about his own death and then kill himself accordingly. But also this project went unfinished, thus leaving the narrator with nothing but the bitterness of his own reminiscing words:

While I was still working at the advertising agency, and likely in order to compensate for my frustration, I came up with an absurd Master’s thesis project on literature as premonition. Since I wasn’t a writer, I could at least try and understand the object of my fantasy. I wished to make a summary of literature as prognosis and anticipation, singling out some exemplary cases. (...) I actually only knew of one case (and to say that I knew is already a bit of a stretch, since I had never read any of his books), and it was nevertheless, like almost everything in this field, open to interpretation: as far as I could recall from a newspaper article, there was once a writer who died alone, in the snow, decades after having described the death of a character, also alone, also in the snow, under the exact same circumstances. (...) I wished to prove the thesis that literature is (or was) a dissimulated way of prophesying the world of reason, a world deprived of myths; that it is (or was) a modern-day replacement for prophecies now that they have become ridiculous, and before literature itself became ridiculous [“que ela é (ou foi) um substituto moderno das profecias, agora que elas se tornaram ridículas, antes que a própria literatura também se tornasse ridícula”].<sup>98</sup>

What fiction anticipates – seems to be Carvalho’s constant prediction, on the verge of ironic dismissal – is disappearance and destruction, and within the realm of invisible yet devastating threats, cancer and AIDS fit comfortably and menacingly within the author’s aesthetics as they inhibit Romanticism and sentimentality, while simultaneously veering the discourse and the narrative mood towards “the

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**98** “Quando ainda trabalhava na agência de publicidade, e provavelmente para compensar a minha frustração, me saí com o projeto estapafúrdio de uma tese de mestrado sobre a literatura como premonição. Já que não era escritor, que pelo menos tentasse entender o objeto da minha fantasia. Queria fazer um arrazoado da literatura como prognose e antecipação, tomando alguns casos exemplares. (...) Na verdade, eu só conhecia um caso (conhecer é modo de dizer, já que nunca tinha lido nenhum dos seus livros) e ainda assim, como quase tudo nessa área, passível de interpretação: pelo que me lembrava de um artigo de jornal, houve uma vez um escritor que morreu sozinho, na neve, décadas depois de ter descrito a morte de um personagem, também sozinho, na neve, nas mesmíssimas circunstâncias. (...) Queria provar a tese de que a literatura é (ou foi) uma forma dissimulada de profetizar no mundo da razão, um mundo esvaziado de mitos; que ela é (ou foi) um substituto moderno das profecias, agora que elas se tornaram ridículas, antes que a própria literatura também se tornasse ridícula.” (SP-22-23) Not surprisingly, Enrique Vila-Matas (2005, 39) also draws upon the same premonitory coincidence in his Walserian novel *Doctor Pasavento*, furthering therewith his argument that Walser’s art was, first and foremost, the art of disappearing.

language of political paranoia” (Sontag, 1989, 23; 18). There is a lingering quality to the recurrent invisible threats and epidemics in Carvalho’s work, their lethality being not immediate but slow-paced, death certain but delayed, so as to allow for the mentally unstable, paranoid, conspiratorial process to settle in. “Notions of conspiracy translate well into metaphors of implacable, insidious, infinitely patient viruses”, writes Sontag (1989, 68; 87), for whom the language of political paranoia, combined to the science-fiction imagery, are tightly linked to a “rise in apocalyptic thinking”, while also expressing “an imaginative complicity with disaster”. And Sontag’s use of the word “disaster” is not lost within Carvalho’s literary project, as it brings back to the apocalyptic and catastrophic word-constellation the echo of Blanchot’s (1991, 10) take on disaster – “The disaster: not thought gone mad; not even, perhaps, thought considered as the steady bearer of its madness” –, which only further resonates Carvalho’s underlying interest in states of mental distress and in postulating, through language and fiction, oppressive, spectral scenarios where disease and paranoia ultimately lead to a self-imposed state of apocalyptic exile.

With the inflation of apocalyptic rhetoric has come the increasing unreality of the apocalypse. A permanent modern scenario: apocalypse looms... and it doesn’t occur. And it still looms. We seem to be in the throes of one of the modern kinds of apocalypse. (...) Apocalypse has become an event that is happening and not happening. It may be that some of the most feared events, like those involving the irreparable ruin of the environment, have already happened. But we don’t know it yet, because the standards have changed. Or because we do not have the right indices for measuring the catastrophe. Or simply because this is a catastrophe in slow motion. (Or *feels* as if it is in slow motion, because we know about it, can anticipate it; and now have to wait for it to happen, to catch up with what we think we know.) (Sontag, 1989, 87–88)

The ever-looming apocalypse, as an event that is both happening and not happening, as an epidemics that shall prove itself deadly but not immediately, that fosters hope and crushes it by the same token, feeds back allegorically into the premise of language as a virus which informs Carvalho’s entire literary project, and which finds in AIDS, specifically, a powerful and compelling image of contamination and failure. The epidemics in Carvalho do not postulate *tabula rasa*, but outright failure, the pessimism of a misplaced sense of stoicism. They portray – and AIDS in particular – a vulnerability that is both individual and social, a fate that one might have brought upon oneself through one’s own actions, but a fate which is nonetheless inflicted and endured by the society as a whole,<sup>99</sup> in all its political

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<sup>99</sup> “It is usually epidemics that are thought of as plagues. And these mass incidences of illness are understood as inflicted, not just endured. (...) More than cancer, but rather like syphilis, AIDS

and prejudicial implications. AIDS, which often enough remains unnamed in Carvalho's fiction, as if its very name had a devastating power, also plays a fundamental role in the politics of gender and sexuality explored by the author throughout his work.<sup>100</sup> The erotic component in Carvalho's fiction, in its refusal of romantic love and emphasis on the destructive, boundary-pushing energy of sexual instincts, stems from two of the author's recurring influences: Sade and Bataille. Sade – around whose oeuvre Carvalho has loosely based a novel that may also be read as a play but that is unfortunately not accomplished as neither (2000s *Medo de Sade*) – is praised as an advocate of sexual instincts “as a force against the hypocrisy of social and cultural conventions” (MFE, 157), and by his insistence on associating eroticism with death. Bataille, as – according to Carvalho – Sade's direct heir, further emphasizes the tragic that lurks behind the erotic by decisively stripping his characters from any Realist or psychological traits, basing on their animalistic sexual impulses the last token of their humanity, foreshadowing in the impersonality of an orgy the anonymity of their inevitable deaths.<sup>101</sup> Bataille's characters, in Carvalho's reading, are stretched to the point where they may no longer be called ‘characters’, but rather spectral embodiments of a worldview that borders on the essayistic, the mystical, and the deadly. Carvalho's own characters are likewise conceived on the brink of their humanity, unadorned by any pretense of fictional empathy; they are in themselves perfectly uninteresting, only their actions worthy of attention; they are prone to respond with abandon to sexual instincts rather than to norm-abiding and tradition-conforming notions of love, the consequences of such attack on social

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seems to foster ominous fantasies about a disease that is a marker of both individual and social vulnerabilities.” (Sontag, 1989, 45; 65)

**100** The issue, which will not be analyzed in full in this research, has been addressed (albeit still insufficiently) by a few scholars, among which Paulo C. Thomaz in the article “A Desarticulação do Gênero: O Desejo, o Delírio e a Loucura em *Teatro* de Bernardo Carvalho”, and Diana Klinger in her influential *Escritas de Si, Escritas do Outro: O Retorno do Autor e a Virada Etnográfica*.

**101** In this respect, see Carvalho's (2014) online entry on Bataille, *Sexo, Religião e Política*, a text which, incidentally, rehashes Carvalho's distaste for well-rounded, Realist characters: “A diferença entre Bataille e os surrealistas vem da sua recusa a se deixar circunscrever ao âmbito ‘literário’ do romance, do imaginário e do sonho. Sob influência de Sade, a associação entre erotismo e morte (a correspondência entre a impessoalidade da orgia e o anonimato da morte, por exemplo) pôs Bataille em rota de colisão com os surrealistas. Sua literatura está impregnada de uma visão demasiado radical da antropologia e da experiência mística para poder comportar sem problemas a ideia de autor. Seu erotismo tem a ver com Deus e com a morte de Deus. O desejo dos personagens, a impulsividade sexual que os guia e que a muitos pode parecer animalesca, é precisamente o que os torna tão humanos, sem que para isso eles precisem ser psicológicos, sem que precisem obedecer às regras de uma verossimilhança realista, sem que precisem fazer a narrativa romanesca ‘funcionar’, sem que precisem parecer ‘de carne e osso’”.

and cultural conventions being what makes them remarkable. A state of emergency – artistically speaking – is much more interesting than a state of conformity, and thus Carvalho’s characters – who only seldom have a first name, and who almost never have a last – are more prone to AIDS than they are to pregnancy, for instance. Epidemics bring about an urgency that procreation only tries to delay, postponing by one extra generation the inevitable and bitter end. Accordingly, the characters in Carvalho’s fiction neither possess a lineage nor do they leave behind a progeny. They are “the last human beings” to whom the only possible outcome is to disappear leaving no traces behind, like one of the HIV-positive characters in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*: “It was a man disturbed by sex. He had no heirs” (BS, 132). AIDS, and illnesses in general, are therefore instrumental in bringing the characters even closer to the worldview and to the fate they are meant to illustrate. Characters, as conceived and practiced by Carvalho, are cogs in a *romance sem descendência*, a barren, childless form of fiction.

In Carvalho’s fiction, epidemics speak metaphorically (to Sontag’s dismay) of betrayal, not only of one’s body, but of one’s humanity (Sontag, 1989, 38); they disfigure and dehumanize characters already lacking in figure and humanity, pushing them further into the margins of their already ill-fated existences, further into the limits of the narrative itself, further into an increasingly desertified and barren landscape, further into the depths of the imminent, yet not really graspable, disaster. Returning home and starting over and continuing on is impossible for all that remains, all that matters, is the virus, which is to say: all that remains is language.

## 4 The disappearing act: Moving towards the margins

By comparing Walser's *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (1904) and Carvalho's *Mongólia* (2003) in light of the century in between them, this chapter continues to examine the role played by Romanticism in the authors' oeuvres as they try, through a balancing act of sorts, to come to terms with its legacy. Two topics in particular are pursued in this chapter within a Romantic frame: (1) the role of irony in each author's work and its transmutations over a century and across an ocean; and (2) the implications of the recurring refusal of manual labor voiced by Walser's and Carvalho's characters, of which Fritz Kocher and the main characters in *Mongólia* are clear-cut examples.

Such recurring refusal of manual labor presupposes two oeuvres that deal primarily with the life of the mind, with characters who keep a certain distance from the world, who take stock rather than action. By building upon an idea derived from Said in the third chapter ("the exile of the mind"), this chapter seeks to establish how Walser and Carvalho portray the fate of intellectuals in the turn of two centuries (which are, ultimately, Walser and Carvalho themselves) without ever indulging in cumbersome meta-literary devices.

The contention towards manual labor and the penchant towards depicting the Romantic-yet-not-entirely-Romantic life of the mind are combined throughout the chapter in order to posit – echoing the previous chapter's take on Carvalho's "civilizing project" and building upon this chapter's reading of *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* – a shared view by both authors of "history as failure", and how such worldview further fuels the aesthetics of marginality championed by Walser and embraced by Carvalho (that is to say: to openly pursue marginality instead of blaming the world for one's own "off-centeredness").

While the previous chapter has already explored some shared similarities in the process of character construction between Walser and Carvalho, this chapter takes the analysis one step further by focusing on the vicissitudes and particularities of a central figure in this research and in both authors' oeuvres: the narrator. Walser's original, obscure, hesitant narrators are set as the foundation around which discussions on "narrative authority", "writerly agency" (the "writer-narrator-editor" triad), and the use of "hearsay" as a narrative device are organized. It is then shown, in the corresponding Carvalho subchapter, how Walser's narrator materializes – with a complimentary detour through the Brazilian literary tradition – in Carvalho's never omniscient, always untrustworthy narrator, and how this narrator, both in Walser's and in Carvalho's case, surfaces as the central

pillar in the triangulation between character, narrator, and author, as articulated in the fifth and last chapter.

A final theme here – which runs parallel to the entire chapter, making a dent in each topic of discussion – deals with language’s ever-looming presence in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* and *Mongólia*, two works which are, above all and inasmuch as such a thing can be stated, *about* language, *about* writing and narration, and which succeed in constantly alluding to language’s presence and artificiality without ever indulging in meta-narrative interventions. The artifice of language and the conscience thereof manifest themselves from the very onset of both *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* and *Mongólia* – more playfully in the former, more seriously in the latter. Both novels, set in the turn of two centuries, speak of a world that undoes itself faster than language can stabilize it; a world populated by characters who have no psychological depth, who are sheer intellect, who are pure language: they do not exist as individuals, but as text. In the text they fulfill their own subjective, subjunctive movement towards the margins, finding in this disappearing act solace and triumph. Combined, this recurring awareness of language’s artificiality and of its inescapable presence leads to a questioning of the text’s own boundaries and mimesis, thus mirroring Walser’s and Carvalho’s literary quest towards the margins. This chapter seeks to show how both authors are trying, one century apart, to subtly answer the question of what is literature and where does it happen.

#### 4.1 Walser: *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (1904)

En Walser, el discreto príncipe de la sección angélica de los escritores, pensaba yo a menudo. Y hacía ya años que era mi héroe moral. Admiraba de él la extrema repugnancia que le producía todo tipo de poder y su temprana renuncia a toda esperanza de éxito, de grandeza. Admiraba su extraña decisión de querer ser como todo el mundo cuando en realidad no podía ser igual a nadie, porque no deseaba ser nadie, y eso era algo que sin duda le dificultaba aún más querer ser como todo el mundo. Admiraba y envidiaba esa caligrafía suya que, en el último periodo de su actividad literaria (cuando se volcó en esos textos de letra minúscula conocidos como microgramas), se había ido haciendo cada vez más pequeña y le había llevado a sustituir el trazo de la pluma por el del lápiz, porque sentía que éste se encontraba ‘más cerca de la desaparición, del eclipse’. Admiraba y envidiaba su lento pero firme deslizamiento hacia el silencio.

–Vila-Matas, *Doctor Pasavento*

##### 4.1.1 A Romantic death fifty years too late: *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* as a program of Walser’s entire oeuvre

Walser’s oeuvre begins with a funeral, the death of the adolescent hero and exclamation mark enthusiast Fritz Kocher. His unripe passing deeply shapes Walser’s



writing, as he attempts – in his subsequent books – to mourn the green casualty of a Romantic late bloomer. Fritz’s cause of death is a mystery best left undisclosed, insofar as it stands symbolically for a ball of yarn Walser never ceased to unravel. The closest his death gets to a *corpus delicti* is a recollection of the boy’s solemn smile, his big, bright eyes, and the fact that he never got to see the world,<sup>1</sup> probably because the world he was trying to see no longer existed. Fritz vows to stay sober and find fame (FKA, 10); wishes to become a landscape painter (FKA, 11), or a ship captain (FKA, 29), or anything for that matter that should keep him away from manual labor (FKA, 29); dreams of climbing mountains (FKA, 23; 32); wants to excel heroically in combat (FKA, 33); fantasizes a colorful, fairytale-like (FKA, 26) existence in which a boy such as himself would row a noble countess down a sunlit, picturesque lake (FKA, 28). But the dream is disrupted by the piecemeal impositions made by the present – which are to Fritz Kocher a narrative encumbrance<sup>2</sup> –, and the picturesque scene starts to fade as the boy realizes he is knee-deep in his own outdated delusion:

Plus of course she’s also a distinguished countess from bygone times. The boy is a figure from an earlier century too. There aren’t pages anymore. Our era no longer needs them. The lake, on the other hand, is the very same lake. The same blurry distances and colors as back then shine across it now, and the same sun. The castle still stands too, but it’s empty.<sup>3</sup>

The more Fritz Kocher realizes the state of his anachronism, the closer he gets from disappearing. A speculative death report could have said: poisoned by obsolescence, the castle by the lake looming empty over his head. The fact that the castle remains there is not negligible, it plays a part in Walser’s autopsy of the world as it rushed into a new century before everybody had had the chance of procuring themselves the appropriate attire. All would have been different had Fritz been born a few decades prior, his budding Romanticism would have blossomed like an orchid in an orchard, pink and frail and capricious like the rest of them. He would have then chaperoned countesses back to their castles, lead a

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**1** “Er hat früh sterben müssen, die lustige ernste Lacher. Seine Augen, die gewiß groß und glänzend waren, haben von der großen Welt, nach der er sich hinausgesehnt hat, nichts sehen dürfen.” (FKA, 7-8)

**2** “Die Gegenwart, die einen singend und lärmend umgibt, ist in keine genügende Form schriftlich zu fassen.” (FKA, 19)

**3** “Auch ist sie ja eine vornehme Gräfin aus verschwundenen Zeiten. Der Knabe ist auch eine Gestalt aus früheren Jahrhunderten. Pagen gibt es keine mehr. Unser Zeitalter bedarf ihrer nicht mehr. Dagegen ist der See der nämliche. Dieselben verschwommenen Fernen und Farben wie ehemals leuchten jetzt noch über ihm, dieselbe Sonne. Das Schloß steht auch noch, aber leer.” (FKA, 28)

life less than memorable. The fact that the castle looms empty over his head, that the countess and the page are images from a time past, is what establishes the significance of Fritz Kocher's testament: his heirloom to Walser are the remnants of Romanticism and the need to come to terms with the turn of the century.

The memory of Fritz's death, of a funeral very few people attended,<sup>4</sup> does also heavily underline the text every time the boy describes one of his juvenile aspirations to its last detail, or when he proves himself simultaneously capable of the wise and the foolish, bares his teeth in bouts of unguarded humor and his heart as he presents his excuses. The passing of such an endearing boy, the memory of it, the entire world forever uncharted before him, instills in the narrative a heartfelt depth shaped as empathy. Empathy, as already discussed via Sebald, plays an important role within Walser's work, it keeps his thought-experiments in check, prevents his verbose tendency towards language from engulfing the whole text. The fact that the reader can empathize with Fritz Kocher makes his plight all the more poignant, an open wound still in need of tending.

Walser's writing will forever after abide by Fritz Kocher's heirloom. *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* is, after all, as Vila-Matas<sup>5</sup> notes and Jochen Greven concurs, almost a program of his entire oeuvre.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1.2 The nature of the *Aufsatz*: From Romantic idyll to language's artifice

Schon in den Gefühlen des Knaben mag jene Ambivalenz gegeben gewesen sein, die sich in den späteren literarischen Spiegelungen dieses Motivs ausdrückt: Aggression, Spott und Kritik auf der einen Seite (...), Wunsch nach Identifikation auf der anderen Seite.

–Greven, "Nachwort", in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*

Adolescence is best condensed in the concurrent and ambivalent needs of belonging and of setting oneself apart. It is both wise and foolish, it seeks to partake but on its own terms; its passionate criticism and fault-finding near solipsism and one-sidedness. One's desire of becoming an island and one's fear of being alone in said island may calcify into hostility and derision. The resentful, unresolved wish to belong might lead to aggression, and despite his endearing nature, Fritz

<sup>4</sup> A grand total of 47 copies of the book (out of 1300) had been sold one year after its publication, in 1904. See FKA, 118.

<sup>5</sup> "*Las composiciones de Fritz Kocher*, ese primer libro suyo que sentó las bases de su futura deserción de la escritura." (Vila-Matas, 2005b, 260)

<sup>6</sup> "So enthält der kleine und, verfolgt man seine Vorgeschichte in der Korrespondenz zwischen Autor und Verlag, recht zufällig zustande gekommene Erstlingsband, wenn man will, fast ein Programm des Gesamtwerks." (FKA, 122)

Kocher can also be fairly vicious, as for instance when he dismisses manual labor as being below his intellectual stature: “Such manual labor [“Handwerk”] is not suited to an essayist [“Aufsatzschreiber”] of my caliber” (FKA, 29). The statement should of course be read with a generous pinch of irony, since irony is born out of these tearing adolescent contradictions, out of distance and frustration, although the shape it will eventually take depends on which turn of the century is closest at hand. Walser’s irony is markedly Romantic, it’s eventual aggression is a defense mechanism, not an offensive posture. It implies awareness – at times acid, at times playful<sup>7</sup> – of a bigger picture, of an overarching complexity that language cannot wholly account for. According to Safranski’s (2007, 63) take on Romanticism, “[e]very specific utterance means a reduction of complexity vis-à-vis the overcomplexity of the world. And anyone who lets it be seen that he is aware of this reduction of complexity will lend his in truth undercomplex utterance the tone of ironic reservation”.

From adolescence irony obtains a permanent self-awareness, like a teenager whose body makes itself constantly known, imposes its sheer physical presence and ambiguous demeanor in rooms through which it has once paraded in unison. Irony mourns an invisibility lost, an innocence past, by pointing a finger to its own chest and immediately pointing the same finger elsewhere. It is an “exuberant emergence from oneself and self-critical retreat into oneself”, according to Fichte, upon which F. Schlegel expanded by deeming it a “constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction” (Behler, 1988, 58). But before irony can either construct or destruct, it must first draw a blueprint of its project, it must acknowledge that a work of any kind (manual or otherwise) does not derive from thin air.<sup>8</sup>

In irony lies reflection, and in reflection awareness. Discussing Romanticism’s most cabalistic number, the 116, Safranski eventually arrives at Schlegel’s all-comprising notion of *Poesie der Poesie*, which is to be achieved when poetry itself – in all its universal and transcendental glory – finally becomes its own

<sup>7</sup> Fritz dismisses the occupations of “Schlosser [locksmith], Schreiner [carpenter] oder Drechsler [turner]” (FKA, 29); but entertains the idea of becoming an irreverent “Gaukler” [traveling artist] (FKA, 30) or a wildly Romanticized “Förster” [forest ranger] (FKA, 30).

<sup>8</sup> Again within the Romantic frame echoes Safranski’s sober take on artistic creation and artifice: “Der Künstler müsse sich, hieß es, von außerkünstlerischen Bezugspunkten befreien, sein Gegenstand sind die Töne, die Worte, die Farben. Gedichte, sagte Benn, der damals zum Star aufstieg, werden nicht aus Gefühlen sondern aus Worten gemacht. Vor allem: Sie werden *gemacht*, so wie auch alles andere gemacht wird. Das emphatische oder betuliche Schöpferum stand nicht hoch im Kurs” (Safranski, 2007, 379).

topic, when the finger-pointing subject finds its own chest in self-referential bliss and proclaims it exists:

Schlegel calls it the ‘poetry of poetry’ (*Poesie der Poesie*) when not only invented worlds but the inventing of worlds becomes its theme, when poetry, that is, relates to itself. Self-relation is reflection. Poetry that reflects itself is ironic because it breaks through the appearance of self-sufficiency, through the magically closed circle of the poetic. Poetry may be a gift of the gods, but it is still an artifact. (Safranski, 2007, 67–68)

An artifact. Fritz’s recreational use of irony hints at the presence of an underlying textual layer, it stands as one of the strategies employed throughout the narrative to detach the text from itself, to make it exist on its own terms. Fritz’s realization that the castle looms empty over the landscape is not only a structural comment on the times, on the dawn of the twentieth century, but also on the castle’s cardboard existence, built out of letters and syntax. As his fantasies of a world past gradually melt between his fingers, Fritz realizes that the castle is a painting behind which lies a different painting. His idyllic dreams are in a Rousseauesque manner disrupted by industry<sup>9</sup> and incoming trains,<sup>10</sup> an uncomfortable vista where he doesn’t belong, lashing ironically on the factory workers as a result.<sup>11</sup>

Rousseau, whose philosophy was ultimately interested in calculating to the last millimeter the best distance separating two bodies, serves as a Swiss archetype to Fritz Kocher’s own adolescent struggle between derision and identification. As previously seen, Rousseau, in his seventh *Promenade*, believes himself to be strolling through the most virgin of wildernesses, when in fact, to his surprise, he is but twenty feet away of a nearby manufactory, prompting his shocked exclamation that “in the whole world, only Switzerland presents this mixture of wild nature and human industry” (Rousseau, 2012d, 480), to which Swenson (2000, 145), in his already quoted reading of Rousseau, adds: an *English garden* – “Switzerland is a *jardin anglais*. It appears to be entirely natural but is in fact a pure artifice, its flowers the traditional flowers of rhetoric”. That is to say: behind the castle lies a factory, and behind the factory, language. A soothing artificiality fuels Fritz’s daydreams, which makes it all the more cruel when reality finally wakes him up. Fritz reacts to the disruption by means of irony, of detachment and reflection, by not only writing school compositions – some of

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<sup>9</sup> “Undere Stadt hat viel Industrie, das kommt, weil sie Fabriken hat. Fabriken und ihre Umgebung sehen unschön aus. Da ist die Luft schwarz und dick, und ich begreife nicht, warum man sich mit so unsauberen Dingen abgeben kann.” (FKA, 36)

<sup>10</sup> “Von der Ebene drang Geklingel und Eisenbahnlärm herauf.” (FKA, 34)

<sup>11</sup> “Ich weiß nur, daß alle armen Leute in der Fabrik arbeiten, vielleicht zur Strafe, daß sie so arm sind.” (FKA, 36)

which are ironically deemed better than the others<sup>12</sup> –, but by pondering on the nature of the *Aufsatz* itself.

The essays of Fritz Kocher float in a space unhindered by linear chronology; seasons are randomly dispersed through what may or may not be one full school year. There is no trace of a Bildungsroman edifying sense of character development. Fritz never gets closer to knowing himself; instead, he gets closer to language, and thus must embrace language's fate: self-awareness and disappearance. In the end, the consciousness that language is a simplification of an overarching chain of complexity is Fritz's undoing. It is a gradual process, as the anachronic fantasies give way in each new essay to more abstract concepts, such as music ["Musik"], the nature of an essay ["Der Schulaufsatz"], or the organization of a classroom ["Die Schulklasse"], hinting that, should there be an underlining chronology to the essays, it is not the dismal documentation of an academic term, but in fact the chronology of Fritz's death and all it stands for. Giorgio Agamben, in his *The Coming Community* (which is not properly a writing of youth but that nevertheless basks in a rather youthful Romantic nostalgia), speaks of "limbo" in order to refer to Walser's – and his characters' – constitutive state of suspension, his and their condition as outcasts floating in the margins, in a region beyond perdition and salvation:

This nature of limbo is the secret of Robert Walser's world. His creatures are irreparably astray, but in a region that is beyond perdition and salvation: Their nullity, of which they are so proud, is principally a neutrality with respect to salvation – the most radical objection that has ever been levied against the very idea of redemption. (Agamben, 2007, 6)

Fritz dies upon nearing the realization of what it means to write; he dies as he tries to chase the text, to venture beyond the castle and the factory and towards the endless, uncharted margins of limbo. The world proper he might not see, but what good is there in seeing it if to speak of it means compressing it back into whatever words one might at a given time possess. Better to stick with the words in the first place, to embrace language's fate to its fullest. It is telling that Fritz dies shortly after graduating from school (FKA, 7), as if refusing the real world – where no more compositions are to be written, no more teachers to read and grade them – and thus retreating back into the artifice, leaving behind his tombstone inscription duly written: "the slothful schoolboy believes that words will arise from other words. That is nothing but a vain and dangerous idea" (FKA, 45).

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<sup>12</sup> "Aber ich erkläre: Dies ist dennoch mein bester Aufsatz, den ich jemals geschrieben habe." (FKA, 9)

Words do not reproduce the way microbes and some humans do, out of boredom and adjacency. They are the product of an intention, of a hand at least. Such a statement may sound somewhat pedestrian, naïve playground philosophy, but the mere awareness of language's artificiality does impregnate Walser's oeuvre from its very inception, and it does link back to the already mentioned Romantic interest in language's dark, seductive materiality. Fritz Kocher stands by the principle that an essay should not be clogged with concepts or ideas, but instead be allowed some breathing room by way of its form:

Writing something thoughtful is good, but wanting to stuff your work too full of thoughts is something you should avoid. An essay, like any other work for that matter, should be pleasant to read and to use. Too many thoughts and opinions make the simple framework, in other words the form on which every essay must be draped, just collapse.<sup>13</sup>

A piece of writing can go to waste should the wrong word find its way along one of its lines. An essay – which at a certain point Fritz compares to the magnificence and the misery of a firestorm<sup>14</sup> – should use wit with parsimony (FKA, 46), given that its spoken elegance may not always be seamlessly transferred onto paper (FKA, 46). A single misplaced word might collapse the entire building,<sup>15</sup> and must thus be carefully weighed before being granted written materiality. Walser, in a more roundabout way, echoes here Schlegel (2006, 6) once again: “The flame of the most brilliantly witty idea should radiate warmth only after it has given off light; it can be quenched suddenly by a single analytic word, even when it is meant as praise”. Each word must give off light, even the ones that are playful and irreverent. The warmth comes afterwards, provided it hasn't been quenched by a misplaced remark. Walser's care for each individual word, first showcased – timidly, conceptually – through Fritz Kocher's essays, displays an utmost respect towards the world. His use of irony should not be mistaken for hatred or uncalled-for aggression, but instead understood as stemming from frustration and desire, the wish to grasp reality and to somehow deal with its endlessness, a losing battle. Strathman explores this facet of Romantic irony in one striking passage:

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**13** “Gedankenreich schreiben ist schön, aber seine Arbeit mit zu vielen Gedanken vollpropfen wollen, davor hüte man sich. Ein Aufsatz, sowie überhaupt eine Arbeit will angenehm zum Lesen und Gebrauch sein. Zu viele Gedanken und Meinungen machen das leichte Gerüst, das heißt die Form, in die ein jener Aufsatz gekleidet sein muß, nur zusammenbrechen.” (FKA, 46)

**14** For an in-depth discussion on the motif of fire within Walser's work, see subchapters 5.1.6 and 5.1.7.

**15** “Einem Gedenkenlosen brauche ich diese Worte nicht unter die Nase zu halten; denn er wird sein Gebäude gewiß nicht überladen.” (FKA, 46)

Nothing is complete, and irony is the tool used to make the inherent incompleteness of human experience apparent. Romantic irony is playful and irreverent, but it is not the result of any lack of respect that Schlegel had for the world and reality. It is rather the result of a deep respect for and commitment to understanding reality. Romantic irony makes no mockery of the world; it is not a disparaging attitude toward the world; rather, it is the ultimate show of humility; it is used to show how little all humans know. (Strathman, 2006, 167–168)

It is not because Fritz Kocher cannot or shall not see the world that he belittles or dismisses it, and such commitment to the world, through language, is what defines Walser's oeuvre: each word counts, but the sum of each individual word does not lead into a cerebral labyrinth in which language becomes its own prolific exercise; instead, the warm flame of empathy is kept burning beneath the text. Hence surfaces – timidly at first – the unhinged and the unreal in Walser's work, as it tries to cope with the chasm between the indicative experience of existence and the subjunctive projection of language.

The essays of Fritz Kocher are deeply torn not only by the transition between two centuries, but also by the already explored conflict between outer world and inner sensibility: "And anyway, why should I worry at all about something that hasn't even happened yet? Only the present moment should and must concern me deeply" (FKA, 11). The essays constantly slip into subjunctive constructions (as discussed in the previous chapter), although here for the most part of school-bench refinement, almost like they were textbook exercises assigned by a Ionesco-esque teacher: "Wenn wir alle wären, wie wir sein sollten..." (FKA, 8); "wenn ich arm wäre..." (FKA, 10); "Wenn ich ein Maler wäre..." (11); "hätte ich der brave tapfere Mann sein können..." (FKA, 14); "wenn er arm wäre..." (FKA, 16); "Nichts wäre langweiliger, als..." (FKA, 20); "Weihnachten ohne Schnee wäre..." (FKA, 36). Fritz completes each one of these blanks with colorful, naïve thought-experiments, although not as naïve as to inhibit a very ironic remark about their content (and, subsequently, about the contents of the finished composition): "Well, the teacher will surely be so kind as to correct it!" (FKA, 11).

The remark exposes once again the fundamental artificiality of writing ("der Lehrer wird (...) es korrigieren"), while at the same time undermines the teacher's position as proofreader and truth-teller. The teacher – from Fritz's perspective – would be deluded in thinking possible to explain (and even worse: correct!) how everything in the world works; deluded if he believes even for a second that the world, and the activity of writing about it, are not infinite endeavors. The teacher becomes of fundamental conceptual importance as Fritz finds himself addressing him directly in almost every essay, presupposing him as his audience and thereupon instigating a discussion on narrative authority and writerly agency. Fritz Kocher does not die an adolescent, but that is likely not his own merit.

### 4.1.3 The found manuscript: Fritz's unnamed teacher as the narrative mastermind behind the *Aufsätze*

Fritz Kocher must die so that his essays might be of relevance. In itself, however, his death would not suffice, too small an effigy to appease the famished gods of the *Zeitgeist*. The genius behind the text lies in its one-page introduction, in which an unidentified figure (according to the long-standing lore of found manuscripts<sup>16</sup> either a compiler or an editor, although the unidentified figure does not establish his professional connection to the essays) claims to have taken upon himself the task of convincing Fritz's mother to have the compositions printed in book form, which he does under the condition of publishing them "unchanged", a promise the unidentified figure keeps by insisting upon his good-faith: "But please keep in mind that my hand has not altered them anywhere" (FKA, 7). The unidentified figure exempts himself from any textual responsibility and yields writerly authority to Fritz Kocher, and in doing so interposes an additional narrative layer between Fritz and the reader before theatrically bidding both of the farewell: "Adieu, mein Kleiner! Adieu Leser!" (FKA, 8).

The introduction, in one swift page, allows for the following threefold effect: (a) it amplifies a turn-of-the-century *esprit du temps*, a slow-paced change of mentality (one might even speak, in Walser's case, of a slow-paced modernism) which takes one step back and tries to analyze the bigger picture by means of well-placed ironic distancing; thus (b) preventing the essays from falling into the trap of their own Romantic anachronism, exploring instead this moment of transition; as well as (c) additionally exposing the intrinsic materiality of a text: Fritz Kocher's essays are, to begin with, a (fictional) tangible artifact that took some *corps-à-corps* effort before it could be wrangled out of his mother's hands and made into a book – which is, on its turn, as the more attentive reader might perceive, also a (real) tangible artifact.

And here comes the speculative plot twist: the fictional mastermind behind *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* is not Fritz Kocher himself, but the unnamed teacher. Furthermore, it could also be posited that the teacher is in fact the unidentified figure behind the introduction, as he is the only one who could fulfill the following criteria: having had previous access to the essays, being acquainted with Fritz's mother, and caring for the boy on an apparent intimate level ("Adieu, mein Kleiner!").

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<sup>16</sup> A lore best typified in all of its ramifying branches between narrator and author, implied or otherwise, as well as all of the author's varying degrees of trustworthiness and distance, in Wayne Booth's by now canonical *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1963).



In his silent proofreading and deluded truth-telling, the teacher – an invisible creature of the margins – metamorphoses himself into Fritz’s nemesis<sup>17</sup> and thus elicits from the boy’s writing all traits that make the essays noteworthy: humor,<sup>18</sup> irony,<sup>19</sup> distance-taking,<sup>20</sup> a still mild and incipient distrust towards institutions,<sup>21</sup> as well as meta-criticism born out of textual anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Fritz strikes back whenever possible, battling the teacher’s evil authority and worldview through ingenious ploys such as replacing an essay with a letter allegedly sent to him by his brother,<sup>23</sup> in which the brother compliments Fritz for writing “like two professors put together. A real professional writer couldn’t say it any better” (FKA, 38). The antagonism, however, reaches its zenith in two crucial essays: first in “Freithema”, and then in the closing piece, “Die Schulklasse”.

Fight back as he may, Fritz loses his cool whenever the teacher doesn’t tell him what to do. “Freithema” finds the young (anti-)hero struggling back onto his feet after the teacher has dealt him a conceptual blow. The teacher appears to be this profoundly anti-Romantic figure concerned with content above all, whose analytical posture forces Fritz to confront the written text as an artifice made of more than just form. Whereas to Fritz it would suffice to fill lines with fine words and an elevated spirit, the teacher has an altogether different plan in mind: he

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17 “Der Lehrer behandelt sie [die arme Knaben] rauher als uns, und er hat recht. Ein Lehrer weiß, was er tut.” (FKA, 16); “Der Lehrer ist sehr reizbar. Er fährt oft wild auf, wenn ein Schüler mit Nichtskönnen ihn ärgert.” (FKA, 25-26)

18 “Ich habe es nötig, mich im Stil zu verbessern. Letztes Mal bekam ich die Note: Stil erbärmlich” (FKA, 10); “Es ist schwer, über die Natur zu schreiben, besonders für einen Schüler der zweiten A-Klasse.” (FKA, 22)

19 “Noten sind eine dumme Einrichtung. Im Singen habe ich die Note eins und ich singe doch keinen Ton. Wie kommt das? Man sollte uns lieber Äpfel geben, statt Noten. Aber da würden schließlich doch zu viel Äpfel verteilt werden müssen. Ach!” (FKA, 12); “Nichts beglückt so sehr meine Seele, als das Gefühl, den Lehrer mit einer klugen Antwort überrascht zu haben.” (FKA, 19)

20 “Lehrer soll man von weitem grüßen. Aber es steht Lehrern an, ebenfalls zu grüßen, wenn man sie grüßt. Sie setzen sich nur in der Wertschätzung ihrer Schüler herab, wenn sie meinen, ihren Wert dadurch erkennen zu geben, daß sie unhöflich sind” (FKA, 21); “Den Lehrer behellige man lieber nicht mit Fragen und Seufzen. Dergleichen ist nicht tapfer und zeigt nur, wie sehr man wegen Kenntnissen, die man besitzen sollte, in Verlegenheit ist. Der Lehrer verachtet solches.” (FKA, 46)

21 “Ich behalte, die Schule ist nützlich. Sie behält mich sechs bis acht Stunden im Tag zwischen ihren eisernen oder hölzernen Klauen (Schulbänke) und behütet meinen Geist, in Lierlichkeiten auszuarten. (...) Ich gehe gern zur Schule und verlasse sie gern.” (FKA, 18)

22 “Der Lehrer lächelt über meine Aufsätze, und wenn er dieses lesen wird, wird er doppelt lächen.” (FKA, 17); “Hier sehe ich die Lippen des Lehrers ein Lächeln umschweben.” (FKA, 24)

23 “Diesen Brief meines Bruders verwende ich als Aufsatz, da ich heute gänzlich gedankenfaul bin. Ich bitte den Lehrer, sofern man ihn als einen Ehrenmann um einen Gefallen ersuchen darf, nichts zu plaudern, sondern gütigst Schweigen zu beobachten.” (FKA, 40)

wants his students to take issue with the “what”, with the subject of their writing, perhaps deep down hinting that no subject is unworthy of becoming language.

This time, the teacher said, each of you can write whatever comes to mind. To be honest, nothing comes to mind. I don't like this kind of freedom. I am happy to be tied to a set subject. I am too lazy to think of something myself. And what would it be? I'm equally happy to write about anything. I don't like hunting around for a topic, I like looking for beautiful, delicate words. I can come up with ten, even a hundred ideas from one idea, but the original idea never comes to me. What do I know. I write because it's nice to fill up the lines with pretty little letters like this. The “what” makes no difference to me at all. – Aha, I've got it. I will try to give a description of our schoolroom. No one has ever done that before. I'll definitely get an Excellent for that.<sup>24</sup>

Backed against a corner, Fritz retaliates by threatening to pull a mirror against the classroom itself, as if attempting to short-circuit it through its own reflection. Fritz goes meta-textual and aims for the margins as he tries to find his nemesis' weak spot. He pursues this strategy by painting an excessively Romantic picture of the classroom and the teacher,<sup>25</sup> and then immediately undermining it by slipping a derogative comment regarding the teacher's un-heroic physical appearance – a snide remark Fritz is quick to cover with another set of ironic compliments: “The teacher is a short, frail, feeble man. I've heard it said that men like that are the smartest and most learned. That may well be true. I am firmly convinced that this teacher is infinitely smart. I wouldn't want to bear the burden of his knowledge” (FKA, 25). The teacher is here negatively compared to Fritz himself, who is a self-portrayed belligerent hero, rough but fair, as the boy points out in detail in other essays.<sup>26</sup>

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**24** “Diesmal, sagte der Lehrer, dürft ihr schreiben, was euch gerade einfällt. Ehrlich gestanden, mir will nichts einfallen. Ich liebe diese Art von Freiheit nicht. Ich bin gern an einen vorgeschriebenen Stoff gebunden. Ich bin zu faul, etwas zu ersinnen. Und was könnte das auch sein? Ich schreibe über alles gleich gern. Mich reizt nicht das Suchen eines bestimmten Stoffes, sondern das Aussuchen feiner, schöner Worte. Ich kann aus einer Idee zehn, ja hundert Ideen bilden, aber mir fällt keine Grundidee ein. Was weiß ich, ich schreibe, weil ich es hübsch finde, so die Zeilen mit zierlichen Buchstaben auszufüllen. Das ‚Was‘ ist mir vollständig gleichgültig. – Aha, da habe ich es. Ich werde ein Porträt der Schulstube zu zeichnen versuchen. Das ist noch nie dagewesen. Die Note ‚vortrefflich‘ kann mir nicht entgehen.” (FKA, 24-25)

**25** “An seinem Pult sitzt der Lehrer wie ein Einsiedler zwischen Felsen. Die Wandtafeln sind schwarze unergründliche Seen. Die Ritze, die darin sind, sind der weiße Schaum der Wellen. Der Einsiedler ist ganz versunken in Betrachtungen. Nichts rührt ihn, was in der weiten Welt, das heißt, in der Schulstube vorgeht.” (FKA, 25)

**26** First in “Das Vaterland” – “Man kann immer noch ein Held sein. Das Heldetum hat nur ein anderes Aussehen bekommen” (FKA, 32) –, and then in “Mein Berg” – “Beim Spielen gibt's oft genug Zänkereien, ja Prügel. Die letzteren liebe ich mehr als die ersteren. Streitereien

Curiously enough, it is mostly when Fritz is cornered into texts of a meta-reflexive nature (“Freithema”, “Der Schulaufsatz”, “Die Schulklasse”) that he arrives at a makeshift understanding of alterity,<sup>27</sup> underwriting the idea that, in Walser’s oeuvre, characters are thought-experiments located in the crossroads between the subjunctive projection of language (form, roughly understood) and the indicative experience of the world (content, idem). After criticizing the teacher’s anger towards his students’ “Nichtskönnen”, Fritz – in full-fledged subjunctive mode – puts himself in the teacher’s position, although offering no amicable truce:

If I had to be in his place, I might have an even shorter temper. You need a very special kind of talent to be a teacher. To keep your dignity faced with rascals like us all day long requires a lot of willpower. All things considered our teacher has good self-control. He has a gentle, intelligent way of telling stories, which you can’t give him enough credit for. He is very properly dressed, and it’s true that we laugh behind his back a lot. A back is always a little ridiculous. There’s nothing you can do about it. He wears high boots, as though just returning from the Battle of Austerlitz. These boots that are so grand, only the spurs are missing, give us a lot to think about. The boots are practically bigger than he is. When he’s really mad, he stamps his feet with them. I’m not very happy with my portrait.<sup>28</sup>

Fritz wraps up the essay by stating his discontent with the finished text, inasmuch as he had to abandon the heedless purity of fine words in order to prove a point perceived as mundane. Some lesson, however small, is nevertheless retained and germinates with each new essay. By the time Fritz gets to the penultimate text, the

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sind unausstehlich, während Prügel heiß und toll machen. Ich bin gern erhitzt und voll Blut. Manchmal artet ein Spiel in eine wilde Schlacht aus. Eine Schlacht ist köstlich, und der Held in der Schlacht sein noch herrlicher” (FKA, 33).

27 “Der Gedanke, daß in all den Köpfen fleißige, hüpfende, sich sputende Gedanken sind, ist geheimnisvoll genug. Die Aufsatzstunde ist vielleicht aus eben diesem Grunde die schönste und anziehendste” (FKA, 25); “Unsere Schulstube ist die verkleinerte, verengte Welt. Unter dreißig Menschen können doch gewiß ebensogut alle Empfindungen und Leidenschaften vorkommen, wie unter dreißigtausend.” (FKA, 47)

28 “Wenn ich an seiner Stelle sein müsste, täte ich vielleicht noch unbesonnener. Man muss ein besonderes Talent haben, um Lehrer zu sein. Immer seine Würde behaupten vor solchen Schlingeln, wie wir sind, das braucht viel Selbstüberwindung. Im ganzen beherrscht sich unser Lehrer gut. Er hat eine feine, kluge Art zu erzählen, was man nicht genug in Anrechnung bringen kann. Er geht sehr sauber gekleidet, und es ist wahr, wir lachen oft hinter seinem Rücken. Ein Rücken hat immer etwas Lächerliches. Dagegen kann man nichts machen. Er geht in hohen Stiefeln, als käme er aus der Schlacht bei Austerlitz. Diese Stiefel, die so grandios sind, und denen nur noch die Sporen fehlen, geben uns viel zu denken. Die Stiefel sind fast größer als er selbst. Wenn er in Wut ist, stampft er mit ihnen. Ich bin mit meinem Porträt nicht besonders zufrieden.” (FKA, 26)

already discussed “Der Schulaufsatz”, he very discreetly revises the conception of form previously articulated in “Freithema”, suggesting now that form might collapse under the weight of too many adrift words, as fine or witty as they may be. That does not mean his mistrust of the teacher subsides, even if a subtle yet substantial shift marks the very last essay, “Die Schulklasse”, in which Fritz’s antagonism towards the teacher – perhaps colored by his previous attempt at walking in the teacher’s shoes – is translated into advice: “Often the teacher in fact hates one or another of us in the most violent way. Maybe he shouldn’t do that. We are maybe not worth being taken so seriously. He really does stand a bit too high, too far superior to us. It seems to me at least that it would make more sense for him to mock us than hate us” (FKA, 47).

The teacher, according to Fritz, should not waste that much analytical energy in downright hating his students, but instead bestow upon them the distanced, playful ways of satire and mockery [“verspotten”]. This balancing act performed here between the navel-gazing adolescent divide and the teacher-induced conscience of the world outside encapsulates Fritz Kocher’s late take on irony and on writing. It is hardly a coincidence that the sedimentation of Fritz’s textual breakthrough triggers for the first time a smile on the teacher’s stern face: “Even the teacher can’t help laughing along with us sometimes, probably because he’s touched by so much humor” (FKA, 48). Furthermore, Fritz and the teacher share a laugh [“mitlachen”] at the expenses of another student (FKA, 47), as if indicating a decisive shift in the teacher’s antagonism away from Fritz and towards a new apprentice (who becomes the essay’s unexpected primary focus, and who, in a final blow to the already crumbling classroom, is crowned king among the students<sup>29</sup>). The former configuration of the classroom is thus severely compromised, its power structure exposed and subverted, and for a moment Fritz glimpses right through the teacher’s masterplan and into his analytical and scheming soul. His lesson learned, the teacher neutered, a new king crowned in the classroom, Fritz still manages to formulate with his last breath a closing statement before forever letting go of the pencil: “The teacher is like someone from the bigger outside world [“aus der großen andern”]. But really he is too small to seem big to us” (FKA, 48).

The teacher’s masterplan consisted in granting Fritz – by way of the introduction – apparent narrative authority over the essays, while surreptitiously never ceasing to guide Fritz’s textual efforts by dictating the thematic agenda behind each one of them, thus reinforcing his main point (“Freithema”) that no

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<sup>29</sup> “Er ist wie eine Art König unter uns” (FKA, 48): the subversive figure is crowned a schoolyard anti-role model, perhaps an early sketch of the yet unborn Jakob von Gunten. (See also subchapter 5.1.3., and, more specifically, footnote 53.)

text is ever innocent, an uninterested chain of self-reproducing, fine-sounding words. Through his masterplan, by making Fritz acknowledge the vanity of pure form and by forcing him to hold his own ground, the teacher ultimately gets the boy out of adolescence – a *narrative* adolescence, by all means, since Walser’s characters neither mature nor allow for a psychological reading (one that does not ultimately read into Walser himself, that is). Fritz claims power over the teacher, finds out he holds a double-edged sword in his hands: it is when he finally pinpoints the teacher’s conceptual weak spot and thus manages to infiltrate the text’s margins, therefore attaining a more comprehensive awareness of his own surroundings, that Fritz realizes his existence has become fictionally redundant. He must make room for a new king to rule.

#### 4.1.4 The bared text: Walser’s interweaving of narrative voices and displacement of narrative authority

Wenn Diderot im ‘Jakob’ etwas recht Genialisches gemacht hat, so kömmt er gewöhnlich gleich selbst hinterher, und erzählt seine Freude dran, daß es so genialisch geworden ist.

–F. Schlegel, *Lycée*

Given that writing is artifice, it therefore entails a wide range of extra-textual turbulence. The blank page is a battlefield waiting for the battle to be over and for the victor to claim its land; it is a schizophrenic attempt at reconciling all opposing voices and influences into one single stable frequency. The final level of stability is a matter of style and of authorial resolve, as it determines whether a text shall be presented as a seamless, self-standing device, or whether it shall bear the conflicting marks of its creation. Walser, beginning already with *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, never completely silences the dissonant voices: they haunt his texts in hushed tones, whispers hidden in the margins outside the reader’s earshot, although easily overheard by Walser’s narrators.

These voices provide a running commentary to the narrative, a live feature of sorts that complements or criticizes the text while it is being written. An important and recurring motif within Walser’s oeuvre, for instance, the conflict between outer world and inner sensibility, finds its first clear formulation in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, where it appears to have been whispered in the backstage by Fritz’s brother: “Only the present moment should and must concern me deeply. Where did I hear that? I must have heard it somewhere, maybe from my older brother, who is in college [“der ein Student ist”]” (FKA, 11). A range of half-hidden voices follow this preliminary hearsay, from lessons learnt in books – “There is one good thing about poverty, I’ve read in books...” (FKA, 17) – to commonsense knowledge

overheard along the way – “Nothing is impossible, I have heard it said somewhere or another. That may be a slightly superficial way to put it, but a streak of truth and fact runs through these words” (FKA, 22); “Life is a strict schoolmaster, they tell you...”<sup>30</sup> (FKA, 28). The superimposing voices bare the many discursive layers that shape a text, they help undressing it in front of the reader’s eyes.

In subtle strokes Walser works towards exposing the artificial mechanisms of a text without breaking its narrative charm. He walks on a tightrope under which a safety net is missing, the frailty of his own endeavor unveiled. His increasingly marginal position within the literary establishment – which is not yet the case in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* – allows him to poke holes at more conventional narratives without allowing for cumbersome meta-fiction to swallow his text whole. Walser manages to tease literature from the margins with one hand, while the other spins a fascinating tale about something very small and nonetheless captivating.

Some of Walser’s strategies – such as the hearsay of opposing (or submerged) voices – are already discreetly in place in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, as is his pleasure in interrupting his own narration. This pleasure may also be traced back to Romanticism, and more specifically to a fragment by A.W. Schlegel (2006, 51): “No matter how good a lecture delivered from the height of the podium might be, the best of it is dissipated because one can’t interrupt the speaker”. Walser’s oeuvre is permeated by instances of interruption which either provide further commentary on the text or abruptly burst its narrative illusion. Both techniques are used by Fritz in very specific occasions: the latter, for instance, whenever the bell rings and the Aufsatzstunde comes to an end, at which point Fritz abandons the text no matter how high he was flying: “Und haben sie Ursache – – ja, da ist leider die Stunde schon aus” (FKA, 18); “...leicht blaue Aussicht von der Bank aus, an das Gespräch über Kunst und an... es läutet” (FKA, 24).

The former technique, on the other hand, has the narrator (here Fritz) acting as his own editor, thus reinforcing the fact that narrative authority has been yielded to him by means of the introduction: “When Autumn comes, the leaves fall off of the trees onto the ground. Actually, I should say it like this: When the

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<sup>30</sup> These conflicting, superimposing voices can be abundantly heard throughout Walser’s entire oeuvre, as, for instance, in his most important works: in *Geschwister Tanner* – “Ich würde hier vielleicht ein guter, zarter Mensch werden, wenn es wahr ist, wie man sagen hört, daß Umgebungen den Menschen verändern können” (GT, 26-27); “...daß ich mich heute, wie man sich ausdrückt, unstatthaft benommen habe” (GT, 42) –; in *Jakob von Gunten* – “Er tauchte, wie man so sagt, in der Masse unter” (JvG, 42) –; in *Der Spaziergang*: “Ich schlüpfte notdürftig durch, wie man sagt” (S, 48) –; in *Der Räuber* – “Aus den Urwäldern, so liest man in Zeitungen, ragen vor den Augen staunender Reisender riesige Bauten auf” (R, 31). This is but a small sampling of a recurring technique within Walser’s oeuvre.

leaves fall, Autumn is here. I have to work on improving my style” (FKA, 10); “This is all very badly written, isn’t it? But at least I said in advance that it would be, so the criticism can’t take me by surprise” (FKA, 38). Heffernan, commenting on Walser’s *Mikrogramme*, remarks:

The narrator makes explicit this balancing act, which is integral to literary production, by commenting on the writing process as it happens. This means that he often corrects himself and revises his expression as he is composing his narrative. In many cases, this involves reconsidering his choice of words. Thus, in one *Mikrogramm*, the narrator chastises himself for his choice of wording: “In Augsburg, der alten Kaufmannstadt, war’s. Der alten? Warum alten? Sollte das eine jener billigen Schreibwendungen sein?” (BG I, 100) Walser could have chosen to cross out the offensive word in his manuscript and replace it with a more appropriate phrase, but he elects instead to let the narrator take on this job for him within the piece. In this way, the *Mikrogramm* gives voice to the opposing forces that influence the writing process at all stages. (Heffernan, 2007, 84)

The schizophrenia of the opposing voices that influence the writing process at all stages is not free from the eventual dose of self-aware irony. Fritz, upon realizing he has slipped into the most schizophrenic discursive mode of all, the first-person plural, denounces his own writerly affectation: “We have already described it, even if we have not said enough. We? Good grief, am I speaking in the plural? That’s a habit authors have, and whenever I write essays I always feel like a real author” (FKA, 28).<sup>31</sup> Combined, this recurring playfulness regarding the text’s artificiality, this modulation between frequencies, leads to a questioning of the text’s own boundaries and mimesis, mirrors Fritz’s personal quest towards the margins. *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* stands as a haunted three-story house in which the first level is occupied by Fritz as the narrator, the second by the teacher as the compiler, and the third by Walser as the actual writer.

Walser is not only present in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* as its obvious author, but also in covert autobiographical details described in Jochen Greven’s informative afterword. These circumstantial details – such as the fact that Walser indeed had a classmate called Fritz Kocher<sup>32</sup> – are utterly superfluous to the comprehension or the appreciation of the narrative as it stands; they do not play a direct role in the text, although they add fuel to the fire by further instigating the question (nowadays inevitable) of what is literature and where does it happen. Greven posits that the deceiving autobiographical prose in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* embodies a sort of unmediated mimetic and linguistic shaping of reality which not only

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, Jakob von Gunten does also pick on the falsely scholar first-person plural, saying: “Ich Schafskopf, da rede ich wie eine ganze würdevolle Lehrerschaft per wir” (JvG, 54).

<sup>32</sup> “Walser hatte allerdings einen Schulkameraden gehabt, der so [Fritz Kocher] hieß.” (FKA, 118)



questions and undermines the very reality it depicts, but also hides even further Walser's own voice amid the voices he criticizes or imitates.<sup>33</sup>

These questions, which were seldom asked during Walser's writing span (abruptly cut short in 1933, as he was moved to the sanatorium of Herisau<sup>34</sup>), have been at the basis of Walser's "re-discovery" from the 1970s onwards,<sup>35</sup> and explain why he has become such a seminal figure among contemporary writers as diverse as Carvalho, Coetzee, Sebald, and Vila-Matas, an influence which was beautifully articulated by the latter of the four in his *Bartleby y Compañía*, in which Walser features prominently:

I am willing, therefore, to make my way down the labyrinth of the No, down the roads of the most unsettling and attractive tendency of contemporary literature: a tendency in which is to be found the only path still open to authentic literary creation; a tendency that asks the question of what is writing and where is it, and that lurks around its very impossibility and tells the truth about the grave – yet highly stimulating – prognosis of literature at the end of the millennium. (Vila-Matas, 2005a, 4)

Walser walks a fine line between autobiography and metafiction, between the performative and the authentic, without, however, ever taking a step in their

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**33** "Fritz Kochers Aufsätze stellen Rollenprosa dar – eine Weise unmittelbar 'mimetischer' sprachlicher Formung von Wirklichkeit, die zugleich Auseinandersetzung mit ihr ist und die für Walser von besonderem Reiz und besonderer Fruchtbarkeit war. (...) Wo spricht Walser selbst – und wo ironisiert, kritisiert oder entlarvt er durch sein Nachsprechen das andere, das er imitiert?" (FKA, 120)

**34** These questions only started to be asked afterwards, but by then Walser had no longer interest in them, nor in their possible answers – Seelig's conversations with Walser are testaments to that. Elsewhere, on the realm of fiction, Vila-Matas conjures a compelling image of a committed Walser slowly sliding into definitive silence and disappearance: "‘Qué extraña depravación alegrarse secretamente al comprobar que uno se oculta un poco’, recuerdo ahora que escribió Walser en cierta ocasión. Fue un escritor que supo deslizarse lentamente hacia el silencio y que, al entrar en el sanatorio de Herisau, se liberó de los oficios que había tenido que practicar hasta entonces y también se desprendió del agobio de una identidad contundente de escritor, sustituyéndolo todo por una feliz identidad de anónimo paseante en la nieve. Para él sus largas caminatas alrededor del sanatorio de Herisau no eran sino un modo de abandonar el 'cuarto de los escritos o de los espíritus'. Y, en cuanto a su estilo, fue más bien de prosas breves y tentativas de fuga, un estilo hecho de aire libre y de un muy personal sentido del vagabundeo: 'Yo no voy errando, vivo sin sentir, no tengo acceso a ningún tipo de experiencia.' No es raro que alguien que decía cosas así deseara ser 'una entidad perdida y olvidada en la inmensidad de la vida'" (Vila-Matas, 2005b, 47).

**35** For an informative and surprisingly statistical assessment of Walser's rediscovery in the second half of the twentieth century, see Jochen Greven, "‘Wenn Robert Walser hunderttausend Leser hätte...’: Robert Walsers literarische Wirkung", in *Immer dicht vor dem Sturze' – Zum Werk Robert Walsers*, ed. Paolo Chiarini and Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987), 271–294.



direction that may not be taken back, as if simultaneously and impossibly accepting and denying these two impulses. Walser subtly disarranges narrative elements, stacks dissonant layers upon one another, resorts to autobiographies both real and fictional, displaces narrative authority, discreetly calls attention to the inherent artificiality of any literary text, but never to the point where these narrative elements become the sole focus of his writing. He elicits consciousness without slipping into monotone indoctrination. Such elegant – and yet intricate – approach, which both allows for an empathetic reading while also inquiring what is literature and where does it happen, might help explain why Carvalho, among others, have chosen Walser as an underappreciated emblem of early twentieth-century Western literature.

## 4.2 Carvalho: *Mongolia* (2003)

### 4.2.1 The overlapping of narrative voices and the systemic refusal of manual labor

Marginality is a burden unless it is a choice, then it is bliss. To be inevitably stranded so many hours behind Greenwich Mean Time is a blessing in disguise: by the time one has woken up, most of the world has already played its hand, history is ripe for picking. Before becoming Argentina's seventh president, in 1868, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento spent long stretches of time exiled in Chile, where he nevertheless engaged in cultural and political activism, founding in 1842 the newspaper *El Progreso*, a translated compilation of the international media's top stories. The local readers, however, were not as forthcoming, and did not flock to the newspaper's tardy pages, which would only make their way to the newsstands well after the same international media they were so generously transliterating. Facing the competition of these well-established, better reputed, more punctual international tabloids, Sarmiento resorted to the best of Argentinean wit in order to salvage his enterprise, declaring that *El Progreso's* merit lied precisely in its tardiness, for the very obvious reason that, by the time the sun broke over Chile, daily news would be a matter of telling the hit from the misses among the pages printed in less fortunate time zones. *El Progreso's* secret weapon, according to Sarmiento, was being "one of the last newspapers in the world".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Y cuando todo esto nos falte, ocurriremos a los folletines que embellecen las páginas de los diarios franceses y españoles de más nombradía; pudiendo sin jactancia decir desde ahora que en esta parte nuestro diario aventajará a los más afamados de Europa y América, por la razón muy obvia de que, siendo uno de los últimos periódicos del mundo, tendremos a nuestra

A similar mindset lurks behind Bernardo Carvalho's seventh novel, *Mongólia*, first published in 2003. *Mongólia* is a book about editing, about narrative authority, about having the last word. What happened matters less than how it got reported; the plot is but a decoy for what makes the novel noteworthy: the overlapping of three narrative voices whose growing antagonism is eventually annulled by chronology – the narrator who lives the longest is also the one who gets final editing rights, although he was never the one with either first-hand experience or original insights. Put simply, *Mongólia* tells the story of a Brazilian photographer who mysteriously disappears in Mongolia while obsessively chasing a mythical landscape.<sup>37</sup> A Brazilian diplomat stationed in China is – somewhat unwillingly – sent to investigate the matter, as Brazil has no diplomatic representation in Mongolia. The diplomat keeps a journal of both his turbulent stay in China and of his rescue mission, and, upon finding the missing photographer's own journals – which were being kept by his disgraced tour guide alongside his remaining personal possessions –, the diplomat starts quoting them in his own writings. A second, higher-ranked diplomat also stationed in China, who was overseeing the whole rescue mission, rediscovers these journals many years later, already retired and back in Brazil, and turns the whole story into the book he had always meant to write. Thus, three overlapping narrative voices – identified throughout the novel by three different type-fonts – play a game of narrative authority, of metaphorical time zones, undermining with each entry the entry before. These withering voices are re-staging – polyphonically – a recurring story in Carvalho's work, a story of failure, deception, and violence.

To the observant reader, Carvalho's recurring set-up is already mostly concluded by the novel's third page, as epidemics, violence, death, and a troubled return to Brazil parade in quick succession one after the other. The reader is informed – by means of a newspaper article, another recurring strategy in Carvalho's fiction – that the lower-ranked diplomat formerly stationed in China had returned to Brazil some five years ago, just as an outbreak of the acute respiratory syndrome better known as SARS ravaged eastern Asia.<sup>38</sup> Back in Brazil, his youngest son is kidnapped by a gang specialized in such undertakings – Brazil, according to Carvalho's narrator,

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disposición, y para escoger como en peras, lo que han publicado todos los demás diarios..." (Sarmiento, 1885, 3)

37 "O filho, que era fotógrafo profissional, tinha sido contratado por uma revista de turismo no Brasil para atravessar a Mongólia de norte a sul. Segundo o guia mongol, o rapaz deixara um diário. Ninguém sabia onde tinham ido para as fotos. (...) Diz que ele desapareceu na neve quanto tentava fazer o trajeto de volta, determinado a encontrar uma paisagem. Se é que conseguiu voltar até aqui, eles não viram." (M, 33; 130)

38 Syphilis, twice (M, 50, 93), and cancer (M, 93) also make their due appearances in the novel.

seems to always be the place where efficiency is to be found primarily outside the law – and the lower-ranked diplomat is shot to death in a failed attempt at rescuing him (M, 9). The novel is barely eight lines in by this point. The following two pages witness a deadly hit-and-run and a murder in broad daylight, both within walking distance of the scenic, tree-lined Rio de Janeiro beachfront, which prompts the narrator – the higher-ranked, outlasting diplomat – to ask himself where has he come to die.<sup>39</sup> The novel begins with both diplomats facing the reality of their homeland, and whereas one found misery by way of death, the other found misery by way of writing. Besieged by violence, forgotten by family, the surviving diplomat decides to indulge in an age-old project: to write a book.

Little is left for me to do but to postpone once again the writing project I have been pushing back ever since I joined the diplomatic service at age twenty-five, and now, at sixty-nine, I don't even have the lame excuse of having to work, or the reserve of seeing myself compared to real writers. Literature no longer matters. I should just start writing. No one will pay attention to what I'm doing. I have no excuses left for the most blatant and obvious lack of willpower and talent.<sup>40</sup>

The book will nevertheless be a failure because all writing is doomed to fail, to fail and deceive. The living diplomat's book will be as much of a failure as was the dead diplomat's diplomatic career, as much of a failure as his rescue missions, the first of which – the missing photographer's – unearthed a secret family history, and the second of which – his son's – led to his violent death. The book will fail just as the photographer's obsessive quest for a mythical landscape has failed, because even if they succeeded, the book and the landscape, their essence would still be ineffable, their truth fickle. The original experience is gone the second one turns one's back to it. Only the Realist novel holds the belief in an unhindered

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<sup>39</sup> “Aonde é que eu vim morrer?” (M, 11). Also, it should be noted that both the tree species (“coqueiro” [coconut tree]) and the specific beach (“Copabana”) are mentioned, two highly exploited signs of tropical, exotic Brazil which Carvalho is from the very beginning placing under a radically different, unflattering light. The same approach applies to the way both the photographer and the lower-ranked diplomat refer to Brazil while in Mongolia: “Pergunta de onde venho. Nunca ouviu falar do Brasil” (M, 45); “Diz que gostaria de conhecer o Brasil. Digo que é um país violento. E ele me pergunta: ‘Mais que a Mongólia?’ . Fico sem resposta” (M, 106); “Digo a Purevbaatar que, se fosse no Brasil, podia ter sido um assalto. ‘Estamos na Mongólia’, ele responde.” (M, 118)

<sup>40</sup> “Não me resta muito a fazer senão protelar mais uma vez o projeto de escritor que venho adiando desde que entrei para o Itamaraty aos vinte e cinco anos, sendo que agora, aos sessenta e nove, já não tenho nem mesmo a desculpa esfarrapada das obrigações do trabalho ou o pudor de me ver comparado com os verdadeiros escritores. A literatura já não tem importância. Bastaria começar a escrever. Ninguém vai prestar atenção no que eu faço. Já não tenho nenhuma desculpa para a mais simples e evidente falta de vontade e de talento.” (M, 11)

access to the original, or at least tries to. This is why the writer-to-be declares, towards the novel's conclusion, that, in the end, writing proper got overshadowed by a very different beast: copying, pasting, and editing: "I wrote this text in seven days, beginning on the day after the funeral up until last night, after forty years of postponing my writing project. In fact, I didn't do more than transcribe and paraphrase the journals, and to add to them my opinion. Literature is made by others ["A literatura quem faz são os outros"]" (M, 182).

Failure in fiction is to be reckoned with in its inevitability, lest it catches the writer unawares; to accept the intrinsic failure of fiction would mean restoring the fragile possibility of writing fiction. Such conception of literature hints at Carvalho's broader mistrust of the mimetic project, a project which the author tends to handle condescendingly, the way an adult would handle a teenager who still believes in monsters. The book ultimately written by the diplomat is but a transcription of diaries tied up with his own second-hand opinion; there is no starting point, no finishing line, just the overlapping of voices and the multiplying discourses and the vague suspicion that it might have been better not to have written anything at all.

Carvalho pushes this conception even further in the novel that followed *Mongólia*, 2007's *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo*. In it, conversations around fiction are peppered by polysemic one-liners that would make Blanchot blush with pride: "O senhor é escritor?" (...) "Na verdade, nunca escrevi nada" (SP, 11; 12); "O melhor escritor é sempre o que nunca escreve nada" (SP, 12); "O melhor escritor é sempre o que nunca escreveu nada" (SP, 37); "Quem nunca escreveu não tem nada a perder. Por que não continuam assim?" (SP, 32); "A literatura é o que não se vê. A literatura se engana. Enquanto os escritores escrevem, as histórias acontecem em outro lugar. Eles não enxergam" (SP, 31)<sup>41</sup>; and, most crucially: "Queria provar a tese de que a literatura é (ou foi) uma forma dissimulada de profetizar no mundo da razão, um mundo esvaziado de mitos; que ela é (ou foi) um substituto moderno das profecias, agora que elas se tornaram ridículas, antes que a própria literatura também se tornasse ridícula" (SP, 23).<sup>42</sup>

These last two remarks offer valuable insight into Carvalho's overarching conception of fiction, and shed light upon a constitutive trait common to most

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<sup>41</sup> "Are you a writer?" (...) "I actually never wrote anything."; "The best writer is always the one who has never written anything."; "Those who have never written have nothing to lose. Why don't they stay that way?"; "Literature is what one does not see. Literature deceives itself. While the writers write, the stories happen elsewhere. They can't see it."

<sup>42</sup> "I wished to prove the thesis that literature is (or was) a dissimulated way of prophesying the world of reason, a world deprived of myths; that it is (or was) a modern-day replacement for prophecies now that they have become ridiculous, and before literature itself became ridiculous."

of his characters, a trait particularly visible in *Mongólia* and highly reminiscent of Walser's Fritz Kocher: the refusal of manual labor. Beyond the obvious and inevitable Romantic suggestion that manual labor does not agree with the nature of the true poet, Carvalho's recurring choice for intellectual, on occasion well-off, but invariably unhindered characters, free to chase their obsessions,<sup>43</sup> reveals a secular critique rather than a Marxist one. By insisting on characters whose occupations are as ethereal as their bodies, or who find themselves free to pursue an equally abstract goal, such as is the case with *Mongólia*'s scribe diplomat,<sup>44</sup> Carvalho seems to be taking a jab at the Christian creed in the dignity of labor, at how Christianity – and Protestantism in particular – actively endorsed the ethical righteousness of manual labor just as labor itself became increasingly alienating,<sup>45</sup> thus promoting, through liturgy and industry, an almost permanent state of uncritical thinking, which is allegedly what literature should be rebelling against, and what Carvalho is pursuing through his own brand of fiction.

*Mongólia* is incidentally, if not outright *against*, then at least deeply distrustful of organized religion, and the three narrative voices that make up the book take turns voicing their contempt for it. The lower-ranked diplomat, the most caustic of the three, dismisses the Buddhist belief in one long passage and, as a bonus, brings the Catholic Church down with it: "Authoritarian and repressive, the Buddhist Church [sic], much like the Catholic Church or any other Church, can be equally moralizing and extremely hypocrite" (M, 58). The missing photographer goes out of his way in order to explain that modern art is impossible in the East because of

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43 "Dá pra entender o que se passou na cabeça dele? Por uma coincidência sinistra, a história o chamava" (M, 90) – an obsession, or a sinister coincidence, that takes in *Mongólia* the shape of the landscape sought out by the photographer, the mythic, tragic landscape to which he is willing to sacrifice his own life without really being able – or allowed – to give a more rational reason as to why, and which carries the fatalistic echoes of Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* (1980, 67): "Devant ces paysages de prédilection, tout se passe comme si j'étais sûr d'y avoir été ou de devoir y aller".

44 "Quando li a notícia, já tinha perdido a hora. Desde que me aposentei, não tenho hora para me acordar." (M, 10)

45 "The creed of the dignity of labour is not wholly modern: in classical times the Cynics and Stoics had opposed the denigration of manual labour which is a necessary part of a slaveowning society's scale of values; and later, Christianity, originally associated mainly with slaves and the poor, had done much to remove the odium on manual labour. The idea, however, was only fully developed in the modern period, presumably because its compensatory affirmation became the more necessary as the development of economic specialisation made manual labour more stultifying; and the creed itself is closely associated with the advent of Protestantism. Calvinism in particular tended to make its adherents forget the idea that labour was God's punishment for Adam's disobedience, by emphasising the very different idea that untiring stewardship of the material gifts of God was a paramount religious and ethical obligation." (Watt, 1957, 73)

religion, that any Eastern attempt at modern art will result “grotesque”, for it will either create a copy without context, or be subsumed into religion, and thus made into a means and not an end.<sup>46</sup> And the scribe diplomat, who is not only holding the pen but also the eraser, is, of course, much like a calloused academic, using the well-placed quotations in order to advance his own criticism, which is that organized religions, and Buddhism above all, undermine the value and importance of the intellect in the name of transcendence.<sup>47</sup> If there is no intellect, if there is no critical thinking, then there is no creation and no metaphysics – and the notion of artistic creation in particular is fundamental to each of the author’s characters who have a say on art, and to Carvalho himself most of all. “What matters is not so much the final product as are the issues and the questions raised by its creation”, writes Carvalho in one of his often-quoted short essays (MFE, 154), a notion he frequently returns to and which was already present – albeit satirically – in his first texts, as is the case with *Aberração*’s short-story “Atores”.

“Atores” revolves around the doomed love affair between A. and B.. A. is an up-and-coming author whose book rights had just been sold to Hollywood, and B., perhaps intellectually intimidated and feeling the need to rationalize his own (failed) career choices, shares with A. his love for submission, his utter fear of creation and authorship. This is why, he claims, he became an actor (A, 121). A. agrees, enthusiastically, almost hysterically, when in truth he is only trying to have sex with B.. Their paths will slowly drift apart after that; by the time they reconnect, many years later, B. is suffering through the last stages of a deadly HIV infection.

“Atores” is a tale of sin and damnation, of excess and deviance, of sex and drugs – and above all of an intellectual milieu far removed from the reality of manual labor. Each and every narrative element seems to be individually conceived as a slap against religious values, as an insurrection that fundamentally

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46 “Para mim, é a confirmação que faltava de que a arte moderna é uma invenção ocidental que mal se adapta a estas paragens. Não tem nada a ver com estas culturas. Eles entendem a arte como tradição. Quando tentam macaquear a arte moderna, o resultado é grotesco. A própria noção de estética, uma arte reflexiva, é uma invenção genial do Ocidente, a despeito dos que hoje tentam denegri-la. É um dos alicerces de um projeto de bem-estar iluminista. Estas sociedades desconhecem esse mundo – e daí a prevalência do budismo como um caminho para a iluminação. É impossível haver arte, no sentido ocidental, num mundo budista (...). A arte aqui só pode ser folclore ou instrumento religioso para atingir outro estágio de percepção. Ela é meio, não fim.” (M, 102)

47 “Não é preciso saber o que a divindade significa para se servir do poder de sua imagem. A especulação metafísica e a idéia ocidental de arte como criação e do artista como criador também só atrapalham. O intelecto é ilusão. O que importa não é a criação, mas a transcendência, já que só o movimento é verdadeiro.” (M, 100)

seeks to dethrone religion in the name of artistic creation and of a freed intellect. The invective is reprised in the novel *As Iniciais*, as a parade of intellectuals and globe-trotters flock to a seventeenth century church turned into a cultural-center-slash-artist's-residence (I, 8). The setting notwithstanding, another argument concerning submission, religion, and artistic creation breaks out between a writer and a vaguely titled "manager of large fortunes" (I, 33–35), the gist of which – which neither seem to grasp, being instead spelled out by the narrator – is that any eventual literary prowess displayed by the writer derives from his fashioning himself as both Creator and creature, and thus sole master of his art, to which he subjects everyone around him as he makes his acquaintances into characters and himself into the supreme character above them all.<sup>48</sup> Two central elements are at play here: a penchant for deceiving autobiography, which shall be discussed in the next chapter; and the solitary, individualistic fate of intellectuals, which corresponds to a second development of Carvalho's provocative refusal of manual labor, and one which brings him closer to Walser, to whom (unlike Kafka) a critique of religion was never a goal.

Still in *As Iniciais*, the manager of large fortunes, after antagonizing with the writer, segues unfazed into a monologue about his own life and dealings with the rich and wealthy, an aside bearing no connection to the abruptly ended altercation. The entire novel operates on a polyphonic level of voices interweaving in and out of ethereal, abstract, solitary life-stories, barely held together by a faux-mystery and an anticlimactic conclusion. This recurring *modus operandi* – which is similarly implemented in *Mongólia*, only less ethereally structured, with a more overt emphasis on narrative authority and hierarchy – should suffice in fencing off speculations of a Marxist critique (be it for or against it) behind Carvalho's take on manual labor: the author shows little interest in bringing about a materialist awareness to the frictions and implications following the historical event of the division between mental and manual labor (Eagleton, 1991, 74–75). He is not drawing attention to the fact that there can be no mental labor without manual labor, that, as Eagleton further formulates it elsewhere, "every work of philosophy presupposes an obscure army of manual labourers, just as every symphony and cathedral does" (Eagleton, 2011, 154). The delicate equilibrium between base and superstructure is certainly not what Carvalho is trying to get at, even when

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<sup>48</sup> "O que o administrador talvez não vise – e provavelmente nem o próprio M., que nesse ponto agia inconsciente – era que, ao passar por Criador e criatura, de certa forma M. tentava usurpar de um Criador exterior e superior o poder da criação. Rebelava-se contra a passividade a que tinha sido submetido ao nascer, recriava o mundo (...), e se os outros apenas transferiam para ele esse poder de um Criador superior, e prosseguiam passivos, satisfeitos de ser personagens do texto de outro, o problema era deles." (I, 34–35)



he indulges in social criticism. Despite having an inevitable political connotation, especially within a Latin American context, Carvalho's ethereal, intellectual characters are not politically conceived, they are rather instrumental in creating a narrative space which allows for the production of a certain range of discourses, as well as for keeping track of how these discourses flow and are corrupted over time.<sup>49</sup> They are also providing a running commentary on the bleakness of the intellectual life in the turn of the twenty-first century amidst its spasmodic outbursts of anti-intellectualism.

By constantly having artists, intellectuals, and dilettantes as main characters, Carvalho, like Walser, manages to discuss the fate of the writing life and of literature itself without indulging too deeply in clumsy meta-literary devices. At their best – when they overcome, even for the briefest of moments, the impulse towards imposing a programmatic worldview –, Carvalho's narratives capture both the glory and the agony of an intellect unencumbered by neither manual labor nor the prosaic impositions of daily life. They perform, albeit from distinct ideological perspectives, what Jameson provocatively described as an unwillingness “to trust a sinful human race with the poisoned gift of free time”.<sup>50</sup>

The poisoned gift of free time – where “free” stands for “liberated” rather than “idle” –, and the machinations it entails, is precisely what Carvalho achieves when his readings of Walser – and of the solitary, frail, marginal tradition Walser stands for – shine through the heavy-handedness of a moralizing stance. It is then that Carvalho manages to capture the moment when the intellect glimpses a fleeting truth about itself and the world, and in pursuing it falters into madness and oblivion. By “refusing” the status of manual labor, Carvalho might not be addressing the

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**49** Any literary tradition, as dominant or as marginal as it is (or is perceived), spirals for decades or even centuries at a time around recurring concerns and themes, and Carvalho is no exception within the Brazilian literary tradition. Writing from the standpoint of 1979 – that is, roughly ten years before Carvalho's literary début –, Antonio Candido notices a common trait to the fiction being written in the seventies, and which could be easily – and successfully – applied to Carvalho's own work: “Pelo dito, vê-se que estamos ante uma literatura do contra. Contra a escrita elegante, antigo ideal castiço do País; contra a convenção realista, baseada na verossimilhança e o seu pressuposto de uma escolha dirigida pela convenção cultural; contra a lógica narrativa, isto é, a concatenação graduada das partes pela técnica da dosagem dos efeitos; finalmente, contra a ordem social, sem que com isso os textos manifestem uma posição política determinada (embora o autor possa tê-la). Talvez esteja aí mais um traço dessa literatura recente: a negação implícita sem afirmação explícita da ideologia” Candido, 1989b, 212.

**50** “Meanwhile, in the nightmare of social life as one long televised orgy (...) the opposition between puritanism and hedonism returns with a vengeance, suggesting that the Utopia of full employment and even of non-alienated labor as such is motivated by an idealism unwilling to trust a sinful human race with the poisoned gift of free time.” (Jameson, 2005, 155)



tensions between base and superstructure, but probing instead the delicate balance between outer world and inner sensibility, exploring the meanderings of an intellect as alone it tries to navigate through an ominous, unwelcoming landscape.

The apocalyptic view of history to which Carvalho subscribes in his fiction possesses an underlying secondary component which is not properly existential – as it both lacks a more sustained discussion on (and representation of) alterity, and downplays all psychological implications –, but is rather attuned to the most essential story told by the Walserian tradition: the story of the solitary individual. And the solitude, here, is both externally imposed and self-inflicted, or, rather, self-inflicted *because* it is externally imposed, like a defense mechanism or a desperate last resort. Upon discovering themselves marginalized from and by society, from and by the world at large, their backs against the wall, these individuals embrace their marginal fate and they do so like it was their decision all along, fueled by the short-lived insolence of underdogs.

These individuals are pure language. Their actions are doomed, their fate cannot be changed. They have no psychological depth, they are sheer intellect. All they have got left are their wits. The landscape upon which they walk is undoing itself, and they have no control over it. If the sun cannot be rushed across the globe, if every day is destined to start five or six hours too late, then maybe a few well-placed words might buy them some extra time. But even at their very best words can only mitigate a problem, delay ever so slightly the inevitable, which is history, or the understanding of history to which the Walserian tradition subscribes.

Whereas Marxism sees history invested with meaning and reconciliation, and religion ties it with salvation, the Walserian tradition views history as failure – and does so also failingly, quietly, far from a grandiose approach encompassing from Dürer to Hegel, from the Trauerspiel to Enlightenment,<sup>51</sup> from the blind belief in progress to the curbed spirit of skepticism, through the depletion of optimism foisted by the first and the second world wars, drifting away from the belief in mimetic representation and towards fragmentation. The Walserian tradition is undoubtedly informed by such names and events, it writes from within its conceptual despair, but its outcome has none of the ambition, none of the enthusiasm for grand narratives. It recoils within itself and probes around its own solitude, settling for something at first sight very small and unassuming. Carvalho, in particular, seems

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<sup>51</sup> Commenting on Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Jeremy Tambling (2004, 11) notes: "Dürer's engraving is at the heart of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* which reads the *Trauerspiel* – plays of mourning – as a contrast to the Enlightenment which succeeded them. Their mourning records history as failure and fragmentation, and only to be thought through allegory. Enlightenment history, as with Hegel, has repressed such a reading of history in favour of developmental progress and the belief in mimetic representation, using not allegory but symbolism".

further informed by Jean-François Lyotard, who – as concisely summed up by Craig Hovey (2011, 35) – “described the condition of postmodernity as foremost marked by ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ and in its place, owing to human finitude (and epistemological humility), recommended limiting our strivings to ‘little narratives’ that drastically reduce the size of contexts of historical events”.

A layer of historical background or geographical context is supplied by Carvalho in most of his narratives, with varying degrees of depth (*Nove Noites* and *Mongólia* being the deepest amongst all), but they serve no real purpose, they do not lead to a redemption of any kind, they are not what the narratives are “about” – these historical backgrounds and geographical contexts are, if anything, smoke screens, devices to lure the reader in and then entrap her or him in the narrative’s true obsession, which is language and narration. Historical context in Carvalho’s work is as much of a ruse as Fritz Kocher’s cardboard castle by the lake, built out of letters and syntax. What is indeed at play can be easily overlooked, having the size and the magnitude of a synapse. The narratives do not span decades, they do not trace the education of a character, they do not offer any clear explanations at the end. What they do, at their fleeting best, is to depict the solitary individual on the brink of his demise, and follow his mind as he loses it, track his marginal condition as he embraces it.

Carvalho’s characters are thus writers, photographers, painters, vague intellectuals, retired diplomats, exiled globe-trotters, well-read terrorists. Ana Ligia Matos de Almeida (2008, 83) notes that any given novel written by Carvalho features narrators – usually unsuccessful and frustrated writers – whose lives revolve around sorting out their own existence, and whose precarious, unstable condition allows them to ponder the connection between literature and reality, or the absence thereof. These characters have somehow failed history, failed reality, failed to comply with a world made of harder matter than themselves are, and in their failure, in accepting its inevitability, they will have experienced something ephemeral and nameless about the outer world and their inner sensibility.

What is this nameless “something” that the characters experience is a very hard thing to define, it rubs closely with obsession and insanity, with language and narration, and its ineffability is ultimately a constitutive part of what Carvalho’s novels are ‘about’, which is, perhaps, that writing is a failure unto itself, and only through its own undoing it may achieve something. Sontag, referring to Walser, would ascribe this “something” to a “fellowship of sadness”,<sup>52</sup> an intellectual

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52 “In Walser’s fiction one is (as in so much of modern art) always inside a head, but this universe – and this despair – is anything but solipsistic. It is charged with compassion: awareness of the creatureliness of life, of the fellowship of sadness.” (Sontag, 1992, ix)

despair seeking some kind of company in solitude, resigned in face of a world that cannot be changed. Agamben, in a book also vastly written around Walser, concurs by highlighting the vocal powerlessness of these solitary, marginalized characters, who are nevertheless committed to an idea of community that ultimately unravels itself in a neutral space of endurance:

The root of all pure joy and sadness is that the world is as it is. Joy or sadness that arises because the world is not what it seems or what we want it to be is impure or provisional. But in the highest degree of their purity, in the *so be it* said to the world when every legitimate cause of doubt and hope has been removed, sadness and joy refer not to negative or positive qualities, but to a pure *being-thus* without any attributes. (Agamben, 2007, 90)

The ultimate disappearing act is to do as one is told but pretending otherwise, to aim at subversion in order to achieve submission. As a handful of characters throughout Carvalho's work point out, creation entails some degree of passivity, of resignation in face of what cannot be changed. To create is to annul the *status quo*, even if it means, in its purest state, to reach a neutral space of erasure.<sup>53</sup> As vociferous and opinionated as these characters are, they are also, in the end, perfectly self-effacing, ludicrously powerless. They learn how to scream and then choose silence. Learning how to scream is a good ability to have in case one ever needs to scream. And *Mongólia*, beneath its non-empathetic, thesis-oriented style, is a book of screams, of overlapping voices that have little in common beyond the artifice of their juxtaposition – overlapping voices that have little in common beyond the realm of fiction.

In the end, it is perhaps not quite sadness what these characters are feeling; they are rather feeling the vibration of their voices disappearing from the world. And it is not so much the fact that their voices disappear that matters, but how.

#### 4.2.2 A minor literature: The case for marginality

In conceptual terms, the influence of Blanchot over Carvalho's disappearing act is undeniable. The very essence of Blanchot's *Le Livre à Venir* – and likely of his entire oeuvre – could be captured in the following passage: “la littérature va vers elle-même, vers son essence qui est la disparition” (Blanchot, 1959, 265), a passage that could, in turn, be applied to Carvalho's own work. The motif of

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<sup>53</sup> A notion that could further illuminate Agamben's (2007, 37) very dense formulation that “The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act”.

disappearance, however, much like Blanchot's writing, may too easily be spun into poetic utterances of abstract meaning,<sup>54</sup> and must therefore be tread carefully. As influential as Blanchot may be over Carvalho's broader aesthetic concerns, one would gain more by merely acknowledging the French author as an undeniable background influence, and focusing instead on the specificity of how the motif of disappearance manifests itself both in Carvalho's writing ethos and in *Mongólia* in particular.

Carvalho is, in many respects, the odd man out in recent Brazilian fiction. He appears to be stylistically and conceptually estranged from his contemporaries, and his work is most usually likened to the writings of Caio Fernando Abreu (1948–1996), Chico Buarque (1944–), and João Gilberto Noll (1946–2017), although some critics go as far as to inscribe Carvalho under the direct legacy of Clarice Lispector (1920–1977),<sup>55</sup> which seems a bit of a stretch. Although perfectly true from an aesthetic point of view, the comparison with Caio Fernando Abreu and Chico Buarque would be ultimately unfair and inaccurate should one take into account extra-literary elements that are nevertheless fundamental to Carvalho's fictional project, and which have to do with a “blissful” choice for marginality. Caio Fernando Abreu has achieved cult status ever since his untimely death in 1996, and Chico Buarque enjoys overwhelming fame as a musician. As a result, the former has lost his outsider status, and the latter has never had it. João Gilberto Noll is, in all likelihood, Carvalho's true kindred spirit, insofar as both fashion themselves as accursed outsiders even though they are critically acclaimed, published by prominent publishing houses, recipient of the country's main literary prizes, and perfectly inserted within the cultural and academic *milieux*. Their self-styled outsider statuses – and particularly Carvalho's – come not so much from a lack of commercial or widespread success,<sup>56</sup> but from its refusal. *Mongólia* is

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54 A propos Blanchot's novel *Le Dernier Homme*, Emil Cioran (1997, 622) insightfully remarked that: “Le livre est admirablement écrit, chaque phrase est splendide en elle-même, mais ne signifie rien. Il n'y a pas de sens qui vous accroche, qui vous arrête. Il n'y a que des mots”.

55 Yudith Rosenbaum (2002, 90–91), for instance, argues that: “Se de um lado Clarice Lispector representou uma ruptura com a tradição literária de seu tempo, de outro sua marca tem influenciado as novas gerações de escritores brasileiros, sensíveis às nuances do cotidiano urbano. (...) Mais recentemente, os textos de Caio Fernando Abreu, Adélia Prado, Fernando Bonassi e Bernardo Carvalho, entre outros, recriam, de algum modo, o legado clariciano, que penetra as vivências mais sutis em busca do núcleo essencial do ser. Em cada um, parece vibrar a nota da escrita dissonante de Clarice, rompendo o pacto do esperado e desvendando uma nova sensibilidade”.

56 “Em alguns casos, esses escritores forjaram os moldes também estéticos para uma nova geração de sucesso que viria a se consolidar no fim da década de 1980 e no início da de 1990, como, por exemplo (...) João Gilberto Noll e Bernardo Carvalho. Seria injusto, no entanto, acusar essa

the beginning of Carvalho's conscious descent into self-imposed exile, his definitive steps towards a Walserian kind of disappearance. *Nove Noites*, the novel that preceded *Mongólia*, was the novel that every author dreams of writing: critical acclaim, commercial success, literary awards – the trifecta of the writing life. And yet, faced with this Bermuda Triangle of authorial accomplishment, Carvalho chose the most Walserian way to proceed forward, which was to altogether back away from it and return to his core beliefs:

At a certain point I realized that what was really alluring to most people in those two novels (*Mongólia* and *Nove Noites*) was the effect of reality [“o efeito da realidade”], the idea that they were reading a true story based on actual events, as if the novel were reduced to reporting reality, as if invention, creation, and imagination were its least important elements. And that began to bother me, because it denied the very thing I believe in the most, it denied literature itself. (Resende 2007)

*Nove Noites*, more than *Mongólia*, is a novel of more palatable pacing and straightforward plotting, inhabited by characters that are, for the first time in Carvalho's work, memorable, corporeal, graced with a first and a last name. In it, the effect of reality is so seductively and provocatively interwoven in the narrative that the less attentive reader might even overlook Carvalho's intention of undermining it from the inside and end up reading the book well within the Realist tradition. *Nove Noites* is, in this sense, in its well-balanced reader-friendliness, a book that has failed. It is a book that presented Carvalho with a successful formula, a formula which was partly applied to *Mongólia*, but only half-heartedly, with the waning conviction of a torn allegiance. The second-guessing is visible throughout *Mongólia*, as the narrative oscillates between a Conrad-inspired adventure novel, and a thesis-oriented diatribe on architecture,<sup>57</sup> art, literature, and religion. *Mongólia* captures an author deliberately

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geração de sucumbir à tentação do best seller, principalmente porque entre os romancistas, pelo menos, até quem tentou não conseguiu a resposta esperada do público leitor.” (Schøllhammer, 2009, 47)

<sup>57</sup> An additional and meaningful connection between Carvalho and Sebald, by way of architecture, should merit its own investigation, which, unfortunately, in the interest of length, shall not be contemplated by this research. However, Wolfgang Hallet's (2009, 145) narratological studies should suffice in providing an initial clue in this direction: “Austerlitz in Sebald's novel, for instance, is obsessed with architecture. To him, architecture is a central cultural activity, since buildings and their design represent the world that humans create in order to organize their civic and social lives. Studying buildings and their underlying design enables him to read entire social histories and social systems—to the extent, however, that he is permanently unable to write the cultural history of architecture he intended. In Sebald's narratives, photographic documentation of the man-made world, including gardens, cemeteries, a concentration camp, interior rooms

trying to be marginal in face of a successful formula, choosing, out of principle, obscurity over fame. Marginality, after all, is a burden unless it is a choice. By choosing marginality, by shunning the very elements that opened the doors to a wider audience, Carvalho attempts to cast himself as an exile within his own literary generation. In this choice lies fetishism but also affectation. Eagleton, in his *Exiles and Émigrés*, has quite effectively defended the thesis that what is generally considered to be the English literary canon consists mostly of marginalized, socially outcast, or downright foreign authors – a thesis that may be easily exported to other lands and traditions. Marginality, be it externally imposed or self-inflicted, becomes a perverse prerequisite to a certain brand of literature and a certain kind of author.

The longstanding and renewed success of Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Pour une Littérature Mineure*, has less to do with a brilliant analysis of Kafka's work, and more with the empowerment it provides to the underdog as it struggles (or chooses to struggle) in the margins of the literary establishment. The beauty of *Pour une Littérature Mineure* – even making up for the abuse of psychoanalytical jargon – is that it reopens the question of what is and what can become “canon”. It postulates the notion of “minor literature” as a process of displacement, of internal – rather than geographic – deterritorialization. As far as theories go, Deleuze and Guattari's is rather an introspective one, drawing potential from fragility instead of fighting it off by means of politics. To the slightly off-centered author in particular, the author that is neither in France nor in Fiji, but somewhere in between, the notion of a minor literature provides an excellent alternative to post-colonial theories, inasmuch as it disrupts the post-colonial discourse by positing marginality as the very way out of marginality. It short-circuits the vociferous and robust strategy of post-colonial discourse by attempting the very opposite: whereas post-colonialism dons the author in ring mail and helmet, hands them sword and shield, the notion of a minor literature seeks to remove all these protective layers and to expose the author in his or her fragile availability, aims at summoning a community for the author in need of one, even if it is a community of him or her alone: “and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975, 31–32).

Through beautiful metaphors (“écrire comme un chien qui fait son trou”) and memorable concepts (“déterritorialisation”, “devenir-mineur”) (Deleuze

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and whole panoramas of cities, not only contextualizes the story, it represents a literary character's attempts to understand and structure his world”.

and Guattari, 1975, 33; 29; 49–50), what *Pour une Littérature Mineure* is saying to these authors with one foot in Europe and the other in their homelands (for it says something quite different – if at all – to the author with both feet in the same place) is that the kingdom of literature can also be theirs if they take full responsibility for their work and fate. The author is not forcibly marginalized, helplessly subdued by geography; rather, the author chooses marginality, actively pursues it, and thus regains power by letting it go, by becoming-minor, by writing like a dog digging a hole and disappearing in it if needs be. A minor literature teaches the author the most valuable lesson there is: how to enjoy one’s own company. It invites the author to be his or her own failure within a broader territory, to be points outside the established curve. Hence Deleuze and Guattari’s warning that “a minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975, 29). Marginality surfaces in opposition to an established order, or, better yet, the established order is what ultimately allows marginality to surface. Becoming-minor is thus a choice, even if it is the loneliest of choices. And it is a choice that not only empowers Carvalho’s work, but one that also allows for a slightly less fatalistic reading of the Brazilian literary tradition and of Carvalho’s position therein.

#### 4.2.3 A “minor” reading of Machado de Assis’ narrators and their influence on Carvalho’s work

Comparing the two unavoidable paragons of South American literature, Machado de Assis and Jorge Luis Borges, and their possible retro-influence on European territory, Antonio Candido arrives at the following assessment:

It is thus possible to say that Jorge Luis Borges, through his original approach to writing, represents the first case of unquestionable original influence largely and admittedly exerted over the European ‘source-countries’ [“países-fontes”]. Machado de Assis, whose originality is by no means lesser in this regard, being even superior as an outlook on mankind, could have tread new ground for the source-countries in the end of the nineteenth century. But instead he got lost in the sands of an unknown language, in a country then completely unimportant. (Candido, 2004, 153)

This is, however poetically formulated, or even historically accurate, the gentle sound of fatalism: to be lost in the sands of an unknown language, in a country completely unimportant. Which is not to say that the global reception of Machado de Assis hasn’t been damped by his “lackluster” nationality – no such historical revisionism is being posited here –, but rather that a retrospective and very punctual reading of Machado de Assis under the guise of a minor literature sheds light



on Carvalho's own approach to writing, inasmuch as the fatalism of geography is replaced by the resolution of becoming-minor.

Portuguese, the underappreciated language spoken by over 250 million people, is by a large margin a major language. And yet – so seems to be Carvalho's astute positioning within this tradition – all truly great Portuguese-speaking authors ultimately come across as unsung heroes, niche market winners of a battle against the odds. Carvalho, who possesses neither the breath nor the breadth of these great names, stands nevertheless for a seemingly counterintuitive – but highly provocative – maneuver, especially within Brazilian literature: to pursue the discomfort zone of becoming-minor instead of blaming the world for one's own marginality. Carvalho's rejection of *Nove Noites* and *Mongólia* – as mild and performative as it may be –, his distancing from the broader success found therewith, his choice in plunging into something smaller still, into a Walserian kind of oblivion, displays the paradoxical commitment of a brand of literature that no longer wishes to be victimized, that understands the limits of its fragile availability and organizes itself around it. Disappearance, in this context, surfaces thus not as a whimper but as resistance, as a critical consternation both perplexed and horrified, as an alternative out of the *status quo*. Carvalho's maneuver, his own disappearing act, is once again tinged by the connection between Sebald and Walser, as eloquently articulated by Vila-Matas:

If Walser wrote elegant poetic fantasies and was deeply familiar with the art of disappearing, W.G. Sebald's literature, on its turn, refers to a sort of poetics of extinction, of a writer's consternation in seeing everything around him in the throes of either dehumanization or disappearance, including History itself. "This is not a general lament", says W.G. Sebald, "because disappearance has always been around, but not at this rate. It is terrifying to see how much damage and extinction has been done in the last twenty years, and the increasing pace seems unstoppable. Literature should take this consternation upon itself." W.G. Sebald was aware of the necessity of a literature that would denounce this deadly pace of disappearances, and he harbored some doubts but also some hope regarding writing's penchant for resistance and the fundamental role it could play in preserving the history of human memory. (Vila-Matas 2015b, 39–40)

All throughout Carvalho's work elements are amiss, missing: characters are stripped of their psychology and names, minds of their health, plots of their linearity, climaxes of their closure, the landscape of its fertility. Each and every element conceived or supposed as central, as essential, is dislocated, suppressed, and by means of subtraction the focus is slowly shifted to the margins, to that which is either not there or ceasing to be. The disappearance is its own performance, and the process of writing about it, around it, like Sebald, the only way of making it tangible. And it all begins in the landscape for in its description – or in the glaring absence thereof – surfaces the first clear indication that something is



out of place, desynchronized, like the audio track of a movie that doesn't match its lines.<sup>58</sup>

In the landscape also surfaces the first punctual influence of Machado de Assis over Bernardo Carvalho, an influence that should be read with a grain of salt, as it deals primarily with the sense of positioning of the Brazilian writer within its own tradition.<sup>59</sup> Already in Machado de Assis the *couleur locale* had been banished,<sup>60</sup> the landscape missing – or at least the colorful landscape one would have expected.<sup>61</sup> The missing landscape – as most central traits in Machado de Assis' oeuvre – serves as a balancing act *vis-à-vis* Romanticism, as a means of critically taking it apart and redeploying only the best and most effective pieces.<sup>62</sup> Machado de Assis bypassed altogether the exotic curse of Brazilian literature; he did not confront it, he did not try to combat it or subvert it, he simply ignored it and wrote the stories he wished to write in the first place. In doing so, according to Candido, (1989b, 207), Machado de Assis “had shown that it was possible, in a young and uncultured country, to write fiction that was

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**58** Landscape's revenge (see again the notes on Sebald, Armando, and Nietzsche), its imminent undoing, not only erupts on the exotic Brazilian beachfront, but also pulses underneath the menacing and desolate Mongolian terrain: “Fico com a impressão de que, na paz dessas paisagens despovoadas, a qualquer momento pode explodir a violência mais sangrenta, do atrito entre indivíduos alterados” (M, 107).

**59** A good rule of thumb to determine an overt influence in Carvalho's work is to scout his books for a very intent name-dropping, like a victim anxiously identifying the perpetrator. When Carvalho's narratives become too self-aware of an influence weighing on their shoulders, they do not shy away from calling it out, like the character in *Onze* who hysterically screams: “É Kafka! É Kafka!” (O, 108), or the recurring presence of Gogol in *Mongólia* – “Toda a situação tem um quê de peça de Gogol” (M, 40); “sentia-se como um personagem desavisado numa peça de Gogol” (M, 109). Likewise, Borges, Conrad, Walser are duly invoked when the narrative becomes too Borgean, Conrad-esque, or Walserian. Machado de Assis is no exception, making an appearance in *Nove Noites* (NN, 133).

**60** “Os melhores produtos da ficção brasileira foram sempre urbanos, as mais das vezes desprovidos de qualquer pitoresco, sendo que o seu maior representante, Machado de Assis, mostrava desde os anos de 1880 a fragilidade do descritivismo e da cor local, que banuiu dos seus livros extraordinariamente requintados.” (Candido, 1989b, 160)

**61** Candido (2004, 82) notes that “já no século XX muitos admiradores de Machado de Assis lamentavam que ele descrevesse tão pouco a paisagem”. Elsewhere, Chagas and dos Santos (2015, 356) add to the discussion by arguing that “Ao desestabilizar a solidez do narrador, Machado desestabilizava a paisagem narrada como referencial simbólico possível – da origem ou da essência –, que simplesmente não podia se afirmar”.

**62** “Por outro lado, se viermos ao Brasil e pensarmos em Machado de Assis, lembraremos com Antonio Candido que ele soube ver e aproveitar meticulosamente os acertos de nosso romance romântico, de resto tão fraco.” (Schwarz, 1990b, 21)

meaningful, universally valid, and above the temptation of exoticism (which was almost inevitable in his days)”.

Carvalho, in his turn, does not ignore the exotic, but rather misplaces it. The exotic causes discomfort when it appears – as caustic mock anthropological assessments – and a strange sense of foreboding when it does not – as the apocalypse on a sunny Sunday afternoon by the beach. In *Mongólia* in particular, the nomadic tribes are treated not with a certain exotic and indulgent deference, but with downright impatience; the tree-lined beachfront in Rio de Janeiro is not teeming with beachgoers, but with murders and murderers. From a narrative point of view, the results are often truncated, but in broader conceptual terms Carvalho stages with *Mongólia* a very deft disappearing act, the cancelling out of two equal forces: the Brazilian exotic annuls its Mongolian – and also, to a lesser extent, Chinese – counterpart. Both displays of exoticism are grossly misplaced, and made to look ridiculous when piled upon one another. *Mongólia* is a novel that denies the reader many pleasures and expectations, that denies the off-centered literature many European traditions for the sake of it, that is inserted in a body of work that seeks to be defined in the negative, defined by what is not there. It is a book that disparages all that it touches: Brazilian diplomacy, off-centered Western traditions, Eastern customs and religions, the European adventure novel and the right Europe reserves itself to freely write about other cultures. *Mongólia* is a book about burning bridges and trying to find one’s place in the scorched earth; it is – if one wishes to abuse of Deleuze and Guattari’s line – another step taken by Carvalho in search of his own point of underdevelopment, his own third world, his own desert.

Carvalho’s body of work has, since its inception, elicited a weary feeling of being out of synch, and such assessment of a reality progressively tilted off its axis seems only to confirm itself with Carvalho’s later novels (with the exception of 2009s subpar *O Filho da Mãe*), as the movement towards deterritorialization gains momentum. Starting more clearly with *Nove Noites*, Carvalho is very quietly but systematically probing around the “off-centeredness” of Brazil and of its literary tradition and ideology, expanding on elements already delineated in *Aberração* and his early novels. Brazil’s “off-centeredness” is, likewise, the core of Roberto Schwarz’s classic assessment of Machado de Assis in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas; Forma Literária e Processo Social nos Inícios do Romance Brasileiro*, which is not to say that Carvalho’s and Machado’s *descentramento* are at all comparable, for they respond to wildly different historical and aesthetic contexts, but that Carvalho’s literary project channels on its own terms the everlasting spirit of Machado de Assis in its desire (at times heavy-handed) of finding a balance between Western values and local resources, of picking traditions apart and reusing only the sharpest of components, of subtracting narrative elements in

search of the degree zero, in search of literature itself. The underlying question buried deep into Carvalho's later work bears not the mark of nationalism,<sup>63</sup> but of language: what is the sound of a literature produced off-center, in the margins, and how far can it dare to go before it is no longer heard.

Lacking the master's terse elegance, the "crisp pessimism" – as John Updike (2008, 393) called it – of Machado de Assis' worldview is replaced by Carvalho's derisive civilizing project, and, as directly incomparable as these two authors may be, one should at least acknowledge Carvalho's structural attempt at continuing a discussion that found in Machado de Assis its epitome and that has been kept in motion ever since by the country's leading authors. Machado de Assis is a weight upon the shoulders of every serious writer in Brazil, a force to be reckoned with – or, in the fittingly sadistic words of poet Paulo Leminski (2001, 127): "this black sphinx that to this day laughs at us" –, and each writer must either extract a lesson from his legacy, or try to ignore it completely.<sup>64</sup> In Carvalho's case, and in what concerns this research, the second punctual influence – which is in a way external to Machado de Assis himself, insofar as it hinges on posthumous hindsight – has to do with the course of an author's body of work, with the ebb and flow of chronology.

Machado de Assis' best commentators picked up on the gap between the author's early novels and his mature output,<sup>65</sup> but such realization – and its admission – were not immediate, eclipsed as they were by a critical infatuation

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**63** For a further and very competent analysis of Carvalho's work and the downfall of the project of a national literature as a guiding force in the Brazilian novel, see again Chagas and dos Santos 2015, 343–361.

**64** It is very telling, for instance, that Ana Ligia Matos de Almeida's already cited *Não sou Machado de Assis: Narrativas de Bernardo Carvalho*, which apparently seeks to deny "a forte tradição brasileira de pautar o valor literário dos seus escritores a partir do selo de um dos maiores autores nacionais" (2008, 139), ends up finding more convergence than divergence between Machado de Assis and Bernardo Carvalho. Moreover, the main divergence it finds is deceptively derived from a text written by Carvalho (MFE, 185-187) in which he criticizes a newspaper's disingenuous experiment of anonymously sending a lesser-known novel by Machado de Assis to a publishing house, and then denouncing the publishing house's decision of turning it down. According to Carvalho, it is ultimately only fair – from a literary and historic point of view – that a publishing house in the twenty-first century should outright reject Machado de Assis, and that the experiment in itself proves nothing other than the media's pandering to a shallow and hypocrite mass-consensus.

**65** For instance Schwarz, who speaks of the "acanhamento dos romances da primeira fase" in his seminal article "A Viravolta Machadiana" (2004, 21), a topic explored in greater depth in *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo* (2000, 8): "Que pensar do imenso desnível entre as *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* e a nossa ficção anterior, incluídas aí as obras iniciais do mesmo Machado de Assis?"

with – and insistence on – Machado’s masterpieces. Silviano Santiago expertly reverses this trend by praising what he considers to be the author’s essential quality: his craft, not his genius:

The quest – be it for originality at every step, or for intellectual stimulation on a purely emotional basis; a guided emphasis on the author’s ‘best of’ – has hindered that which may be Machado de Assis’ essential quality: the creator’s slow and controlled quest for a depth that comes not from innate talent, but from the conscious exercising of the imagination and the means of expression from which each and every author draws upon. (Santiago, 2000, 28)

The notion of genius, from its Renaissance conflation with the Latin *ingenium* to the Enlightened Kantian emphasis on the “natural endowments of an individual in the free employment of his cognitive faculties”,<sup>66</sup> achieves with Romanticism the perverse status of being *superior* to skill or ability, awash with inspiration and bordering the holy and the divine. Without neither seeking nor indulging in a thorough discussion on the notion of genius, Santiago attempts to rescue Machado’s legacy from the harmful echoes of a persistent “born this way” eulogy – which would serve no other purpose than to further mystify his oeuvre and existence –, and to nudge it instead towards the healthier and more productive assumption that literature is muscle and not muse, process and not prowess. Such emphasis on the process of creation, on striving for solutions as the text develops, on exerting pressure over the text, is of fundamental importance to Carvalho, as it allows for a brushing with failure, for fallibility to seep into the text and expose it to the undulation and slow-pace of a research which aims, upon completion, at becoming not a product, but a fallible assessment waiting to be overtaken, like steps on a staircase. The image of the self-sustaining genius, the genius as its own ecosystem, would work against Carvalho’s lucid, almost depressive commitment to an idea of literary community based on endurance (Agamben) and deterritorialized kinship (Deleuze & Guattari). Literature might be a lonely business, but it is not a business shouldered by one person alone.

Santiago’s explicit intention with his text is to stretch Machado’s entire oeuvre over chronology and thus showcase its constitutive interconnectedness, how the same elements and structures return and are rearranged with greater complexity and dexterity in his later novels.<sup>67</sup> One could, however, add an implicit reading to

<sup>66</sup> “Nach diesen Voraussetzungen ist Genie: die musterhafte Originalität der Naturgabe eines Subjekts im freien Gebrauche seiner Erkenntnisvermögen.” (Kant, 2004, 254)

<sup>67</sup> “Já é tempo de se começar a compreender a obra de Machado de Assis como um todo coerentemente organizado, percebendo que à medida que seus textos se sucedem cronologicamente certas estruturas primárias e primeiras se desarticulam e se rearticulam sob forma de estruturas diferentes, mais complexas e mais sofisticadas.” (Santiago, 2000, 27)

Santiago's argument: that, by denying Machado's genius – but not his ingenuity –, he is subverting an ingrained habit in Brazilian literary criticism, that of claiming a genius under every rock, or, in the incendiary formulation of Rodrigo Gurgel (2012, 68), of crying wolf every time someone writes something half-decent, in a desperate attempt of finding enough geniuses to populate such a disproportionately vast country. Santiago, instead, distances Machado de Assis from the Romantic myth of the creative genius and, through a careful and comparative analysis, demonstrates how the writer worked for it, toiled for his craft. Schwarz, in his *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo*, similarly argues – although nevertheless succumbing to the unfortunate expression “burst of genius” [“o estalo do gênio”] – that Machado's “uninterrupted progress” came from increased maturity and constant, relentless effort, and goes as far as to itemize the elements which might explain such turning point in the author's career: biographical circumstances, a philosophical coincidence between his writings and his times, a break from Realism, and, chief among all, Machado's great contribution to literature: his narrator.<sup>68</sup>

Critics don't make a name for themselves by deferring to each other, which makes it all the more telling when the leading experts in Machado de Assis unanimously pinpoint the narrator as the source of the author's breakthrough. The truce is naturally short-lived, as each critic then ventures into their own theories and explanations, which Schwarz is quick to itemize in yet another list – Machado's own psychological disposition; a deficiency in the narrative; a display of superior intelligence; a loan from English literature; metalanguage –, dismissing none entirely but himself veering towards a more compelling direction: the local

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68 “A descontinuidade entre as *Memórias póstumas* e a literatura apagada da primeira fase machadiana é irrecusável, sob pena de desconhecemos o fato qualitativo, afinal de contas a razão de ser da crítica. Mas há também a continuidade rigorosa, aliás mais difícil de estabelecer. Os dois aspectos foram assinalados ainda em vida do Autor, e desde então se costumam comentar, cada qual por seu lado, no âmbito ilusório da biografia: a crise dos quarenta anos, a doença da vista, o encontro com a morte ou o estalo do gênio explicam a ruptura; ao passo que o amadurecimento pessoal e o esforço constante dão conta do progresso ininterrupto. Levada ao terreno objetivo, da comparação dos romances, a questão muda de figura e os dois pontos de vista deixam de se excluir. Em lugar do percurso de um indivíduo, em particular a sua evolução psicológica ou doutrinária, observamos as alterações mediante as quais uma obra de primeira linha surgiu de um conjunto de narrativas médias e provincianas. Em que termos conceber a diferença? Para situar o interesse da pergunta, digamos que ela manda refletir sobre os aprofundamentos de forma, conteúdo e perspectiva que se mostraram capazes de corrigir a irrelevância de uma parte de nossa cultura, ou de lhe vencer o acanhamento histórico. (...) A novidade dos romances da segunda fase está no seu narrador. A vários críticos o humor inglês e a inspiração literária sem fronteiras pareceram sugerir, para mal ou para bem, um espaço alheio a balizas nacionais.” (Schwarz, 2000, 139)

and historical specificities.<sup>69</sup> It is based on such methodological protectionism that Schwarz very elegantly tackles Booth's ever-looming and all-encompassing theory of the unreliable narrator, claiming it not to be inaccurate – far from it –, but rather too universal and therefore too generic, imbued – one might add – with an encyclopedic thirst that only an English-speaking author might attempt in all seriousness nowadays. Machado's narrator is undoubtedly unreliable, but its unreliability is historically- and context-specific, as are the effects produced by it, and Booth's theory – despite tipping its hat to Machado with a direct quotation (Booth, 1963, 148) – does not do it full justice.<sup>70</sup> Instead, Schwarz postulates the narrator's so-called “unreliability” – its apparent arbitrariness, its constant interference, its subversion of the narrative authority – as blatant infractions against the norm that nonetheless fail completely at overthrowing said norm. Machado's narrator tries to topple the narrative norm but the narrative norm stands still, invisibly supported by canonic forces much stronger than the narrator's own puny strength. Schwarz reads into this dynamics of a norm that is simultaneously valid and yet overtly affronted (which he aptly calls, in bureaucratic Portuguese, “estatuto de meia-vigência”) the underlying positioning of modernity in peripheral countries,<sup>71</sup> a proposition which he then locates not only within Machado's

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69 “A persistência na afronta, sem a qual as *Memórias* ficariam privadas de seu ritmo próprio, funciona como um requisito técnico. Para cumpri-lo o narrador a todo momento invade a cena e ‘perturba’ o curso do romance. Essas intromissões, que alguma regra sempre infringem, são o recurso machadiano mais saliente e famoso. A crítica as tratou como traço psicológico do Autor, deficiência narrativa, superioridade de espírito, empréstimo inglês, metalinguagem, nada disso estando errado. Neste ensaio serão vistas enquanto forma, tomado o termo em dois sentidos, a) como regra de composição da narrativa, e b) como estilização de uma conduta própria à classe dominante brasileira.” (Schwarz, 2000, 14)

70 “Um bom exemplo é a teoria do narrador que não é confiável (a *Retórica da ficção* de Wayne Booth), que ajuda a ler Machado de Assis, pois mostra que ele faz parte de uma tradição ilustre e pouco conhecida. Por outro lado, é certo também que ela atrapalha, pois funciona como uma espécie de gramática geral das posições dos narradores. Operando com Narrador e Leitor, Confiança e Desconfiança, com termos universalistas, ela cega para articulações historicamente mais específicas, que esteticamente são as decisivas. Bentinho certamente não é fidedigno como narrador, mas isto é dizer pouco. A sua deslealdade narrativa tem coordenadas históricas e de classe precisas, que pertencem à configuração social brasileira, um quadro de dominação e iniquidade que é onde ela adquire o seu alcance próprio. A constelação formal moderna tem chão histórico particular.” (Schwarz, 1990b, 233–234)

71 “A novidade está no narrador, humorística e agressivamente arbitrário, funcionando como um princípio formal, que sujeita as personagens, a convenção literária e o próprio leitor, sem falar na autoridade da função narrativa, a desplantes periódicos. As intrusões vão da imperinência ligeira à agressão desabrida. Muito deliberadas, as infrações não desconhecem nem cancelam as normas que afrontam, as quais entretanto são escarnecidas e designadas como

oeuvre, but, more importantly, in relation to the society and the class struggles of the time.

What is so compelling about the first half of Schwarz's proposition, in what concerns Carvalho's work, is that it preserves some of the fallibility intrinsic to the author's own narrative project, a non-defeatist, Walserian sense of powerlessness. Carvalho's narrators are profoundly unreliable in the way that they lie, break with linearity, shuffle chronology, conceal names and identities, choose reported speech over direct speech, but, above all, in the way that they blend themselves into the narrative, confounding it. Their unreliability stems from such juxtaposition, from making themselves into the very thing they claim to distrust and seek to overthrow, but lacking both the power and – more symptomatically – the will to do so, since completely overthrowing the narrative (even if it were possible) would mean overthrowing themselves, letting go of the tiniest screaming voices they found amidst the silence. In the powerlessness of their marginal position they find the feeblest of powers and hold onto it for as long as they can, seeking ruptures in the linearity of the master narrative like the meanderings of a rambling line of ink.

#### 4.2.4 What is literature and where does it happen?:

##### The displacement of reality into the act of representing

Carvalho's narrators are informed by a tacit understanding of both the invisible canonic forces that hold narrative conventions together, and of the marginal position they find themselves in, thus replacing far-fetched dreams of total narrative subversion for a more attainable sustained disruption, and ultimately steering the narration towards the less Socratic pleasures of rhetoric, of artifice and creation – towards the deeply unreliable pleasures of narcissism. Carvalho's narrators, like most of Walser's and some of Machado's, are deeply in love with the sound of their own voices, with what they can do with it, with the extent to which they can manipulate appearances and distort reality. Narcissism, much like representation, is never innocent, and Schwarz (2000, 18) remarks that such mistrust in representation, by means of an inversion that lies at the heart of modern literature, does not abolish reality, but rather displaces it into the very act of representing, which becomes its ultimate foundation. What happened, as previously stated, matters less than how it got reported, and Carvalho's narrators, unwilling

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inoperantes, relegadas a um estatuto de meia-vigência, que capta admiravelmente a posição da cultura moderna em países periféricos." (Schwarz, 2004, 16)



to indulge in a seamless, straightforward narration,<sup>72</sup> take one step further and turn the act of representing into the story itself, and the story itself into themselves, thus further prolonging it and further distancing it from any set of fool-proof certainties.

Ana Ligia Matos de Almeida – although professing her hopeful belief in the subversive power of Carvalho’s prose – correctly points out that narrative, in Carvalho, aims not at convincing, but at seducing<sup>73</sup> – despite it being quite the anticlimactic seduction. The anticlimactic nature of Carvalho’s dénouements has already been discussed in a previous chapter; what *Mongólia* offers, in its turn, is a strong example of the author’s equally anticlimactic beginnings, as conveyed by a disingenuously unimpressed narrator. The story told in *Mongólia* ends in partial tragedy, with the brutal and seemingly gratuitous death of one of its main characters, a death which is “spoiled” in the novel’s opening paragraphs and which has nothing to do with Mongolia itself, nothing to do with the exotic adventure promised by the topographic map of Mongolia printed in the book’s first pages. The death was actually home-brewed, a senseless murder which not only puts the upcoming and eventual exoticism of a Mongolian expedition in perspective, but that also perfectly frames the novel’s narrative attitude. What the narrator does, when choosing to start the story at the end, in blood and death, is to say: this story ends in tragedy; now here’s the story minus the pathos, here’s the intellectual skeleton of days past. Such inversion, as notes Schwarz elsewhere, disarms the curiosity-inducing devices typical of a novel and, therefore, in its anti-illusionary posture, exposes its mechanisms.<sup>74</sup> *Mongólia*’s narrator thus proceeds to tell a story stripped of what could be called more “human” reverberations, fears,

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72 A most appropriate echo may be heard here in the background, that of Tristram Shandy as he wittingly comments on his own narrative style: “Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself, – of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them” (Sterne, 2010, 48).

73 “A narratividade ganha fôlego não mais orientada para construir um sistema de convencimento inviolável, mas para desmorná-lo, através de uma representação que se torna tema, de uma representação que se assume como tal e de um leitor que entende que está sendo seduzido. Na verdade, ela se torna modo de construção de escrita e de possíveis subjetividades. Permanentemente reelaborada nos limites entre o real e a ficção, acomoda-se no simulacro.” (Almeida, 2008, 86)

74 “A inversão das seqüências desarma o dispositivo da curiosidade romanesca e lhe põe à mostra o mecanismo, com efeito antiilusionista, ou crítico, no plano da forma. A outra face da moeda contudo é anticrítica, já que o desrespeito à ordem narrativa se alinha com naturalidade entre as relações incíveis e “inaceitáveis” mencionadas acima, as quais estetiza e prestigia.” (Schwarz, 2000, 47)



and ambitions, focusing instead on intellectual quibbles and broad treaties on art, religion, and society, as if saying: do not grow fond of the main character, for he too shall die. Moreover, the narrator, despite admitting to writing a book, does not consider himself a writer, but rather an editor, or a compiler, and thus avoids the writerly presumption of reading into the characters' personalities, or even of attributing psychological traits to fictionalized figures. By doing so, the narrator further sidesteps the psychological construction of characters, denies the reader any form of identification that strays away from the polarized intellectual arguments conducted throughout the narrative. Little room is given to empathy or identification. Empathy or identification are only possible intellectually, if at all, via the increasingly radical debates that the editor-narrator pastes together. These rapidly escalating arguments are, of course, developments of Carvalho's civilizing project, by way of which he posits increasingly controversial positions, making it harder and harder with each page for the reader to identify and relate, subtracting with each new argument – as he does with the landscape – one more relatable element, of which there have never been many to begin with. *Mongólia's* anticlimactic opening paragraphs and narration set the novel's overall tone of failure and frustration, a tone meant to additionally disappoint those readers looking for a mirror in its pages. Instead of a flattering confirmation of their solipsism, these readers will be confronted with the narrator's proud narcissism, behind which seems to lurk Carvalho's belief that an intellectual argument is a valid criterion of value, whereas relatability is not. At its core, the quest for relatability only exposes the reader's inability in engaging with the text beyond his or her comfort zone; it highlights the reader's lack of interest in approaching the text from its margins rather than from its center.

Carvalho's narrators do not have access to their characters' psychology or inner thoughts, nor do they benefit from a distanced and comprehensive view of the story they are narrating. The characters' obsessions and biases, their precarious grasp on reality, their lapses into insanity are never soothed by an all-knowing narrator who is carefully navigating the reader through the story with a firm hand. The narrator is as biased and untrustworthy and ignorant as the characters, allowing no distance between a character's troubled mind and the overarching story being told.<sup>75</sup> Hence the perennial anticlimax, the tales of criminals and victims

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<sup>75</sup> The untrustworthiness of *Mongólia's* narrative project – which ultimately aims to instill in the reader a corresponding degree of mistrust and wariness – is reflected in each of its narrative levels, with the main narrator casting doubt on the other two characters, and the two characters casting doubt on the people around them: “Não sei até que ponto posso confiar no que escreveu, já que ele mesmo, como acabei entendendo, não confiava nas próprias palavras” (M, 34); “Estou nas mãos de Purvebaatar [the Mongolian guide]. Dependo dele para tudo e não confio no que diz

minus the corresponding crimes: the deeply unknowing narrator in Carvalho – and here Carvalho starts drifting away from Machado de Assis and back towards Walser and Kafka – speaks of a world where neither totality nor transparency nor even stability are possible, where all narration is a matter of hierarchy and point of view. The narrator, in Carvalho, only suspects the apocalypse but cannot be sure, otherwise he would betray his own narrative function.

The fact that Carvalho never resorts to an omniscient narrator is not a particularly difficult realization to come to. The better angle here is to be found precisely in *Mongólia*, where Carvalho reverse-engineers an omniscient narrator and then chooses not to. The retired diplomat has access to not only his side of the story, but also to the journals of the two other parties and to confidential diplomatic documents (M, 9-14).<sup>76</sup> He is quite literally *given* omniscience, he has it within the reach of his fingers, and still he walks away from it. “A literatura já não tem importância” (M, 11), he claims at the beginning of the novel, and then builds upon it towards the end: “A literatura quem faz são os outros” (M, 182). Literature is always elsewhere, by which the narrator means, provocatively, that “literature” entails the very same curiosity-inducing devices he seeks to disarm, exchanging the illusionary tricks of narration for the bare-bones of its mechanisms. By rejecting the soothing and enthralling powers of omniscience, by not digging into the journals in search of what a journal offers first and foremost, which is intimacy, the narrator strips the text down to the two sole elements that the reader may hold on to: narrative structure (further emphasized by the three different and aesthetically displeasing type-fonts<sup>77</sup>) and language. Language surfaces as the last source

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ou traduz. (...) Dependo dele. Sinto que estou sendo enganado. E não me faltam indícios” (M, 119; 133); “Fico com a impressão de estar avançando numa rede de mentiras que se auto-reproduz. Tenho a sensação de estar me perdendo a cada passo” (M, 147-148).

<sup>76</sup> “Virei a noite a ler os papéis, na verdade um diário que ele escreveu na forma de uma longa carta à mulher no Brasil, e que nunca enviou. E foi só então que toda a história se esclareceu aos meus olhos.” (M, 14)

<sup>77</sup> The use of different type-fonts in Carvalho’s novel may be approached as well from a narratological point of view, benefiting from its handily available set of technical nomenclatures: “Although this is by no means a new phenomenon (Victorian novel, epistolary novel), the post-modern novel in particular often consists of different textual elements and identifiable parts, often related by different narrators or voices and represented in the form of a narrative collage. These independent narratives within the novel are frequently reproduced in a different font. This not only indicates the specific position of a narrative within a distinct frame narrative, but it also serves to identify different narrative voices. Various narrative voices may be identified through their respective graphic style or font-type, or a homodiegetic narrator may present a literary or textual product of his or her own that belongs to the different (distant) time-level of the frame narrative and can thus be regarded as a (fictional) document or trace from the narrative world. These different modes and styles of writing and representation can be regarded as a form of

of stability and some comfort in a seemingly apocalyptic and fractured world, a world that undoes itself faster than language can stabilize it. At heart, Carvalho's apocalyptic aesthetic conveys, in the stead of Walser's unreal (*unheimlich*) strategies, albeit with an inverted valence, an odd praise of language, which makes all the more interesting the fact that the language used by his narrators is consistently conservative – ironically so, but conservative nevertheless.

Such ingrained conservatism should be understood in a twofold fashion: firstly – as already discussed in a previous chapter – as the conservatism of the language itself, of the restricted and repetitive vocabulary employed, which eschews not only complex and roundabout grammatical structures, but also the Brazilian (and by extension Portuguese, and by extension French) literary tendency towards belletristic tours-de-force (a tendency well subsumed in Brazil under the seemingly untranslatable term *bacharelismo*, a self-aggrandizing academic posture which was duly mocked by Oswald de Andrade in his seminal *A Utopia Antropofágica*,<sup>78</sup> alongside other sad Brazilian -ismos). Carvalho's language is, therefore, only conservative on the surface, but very misleadingly so, since it is further debased by a second wave of conservativeness, one which has to do with the controversial and civilizing postures and opinions of his characters and narrators. Combined, these two influxes of conservatism concoct narrators that are not only quite untrustworthy, but also deeply unlikable – and such unlikability is fundamental to understanding Carvalho's narrative project.

Carvalho's narrators are not “good people”, nor would it be possible to measure them in such terms, as if they were one's next-door neighbors. They possess neither flesh nor home. They are unrelatable, uncharismatic, and proudly so. They draw back, once again, to Machado de Assis, whose breakthrough novel, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), introduced a narrator who, for the first time in Brazilian literature, according to Schwarz, was not an upright and praiseworthy fellow citizen to whom the local customs, the national identity, and the

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materialized multiperspectivity, with each style or mode representing a different perspective and a different history of production and distribution” (Hallet, 2009, 146).

78 “O idealismo da camada ilustrada aparece como o *lado doutor* com que o Manifesto representa o estilo importado da vida intelectual e da cultura literária e artística – estilo imitativo, que se desafogou na erudição e na eloquência, na mentalidade bacharelesca, comum ao nosso jurista e ao nosso gramático, o primeiro imaginando o império das leis sobre a sociedade e o segundo, o da gramática sobre a linguagem. O bacharelismo, o gabinetismo e o academismo, as frases feitas da sabedoria nacional, a mania das citações, tudo isso serviria de matéria à poesia *pau-brasil*, que decompõe, humoristicamente, o arcabouço intelectual da sociedade brasileira, para retomar, através dele ou contra ele, no amálgama primitivo por esse arcabouço recalçado, a originalidade nativa e para fazer desta o ingrediente de uma arte nacional exportável.” (Andrade, 1990, 11–12)

exuberant landscape were to be applauded and placed at the center of the narration. Brás Cubas, on the other hand, is provocative, partial, nosy, capricious, aggressive towards both the characters and the reader, but unquestionably and gracefully literate.<sup>79</sup> His disarming elegance – more than his erudition – is, in a way, his redeeming quality – his dark humor, his dry wit, his human vulnerability (he might, after all, have been cuckolded by his best friend) turn Brás Cubas into a very charismatic figure, despite his aggressive stance against the *bom-mocismo* of his fellow citizens and narrators. Carvalho's narrators, however, who are equally well-read, controversial, biased, fickle, untrustworthy, are never allowed the redeeming power of charisma, and thus come across as overly intellectual, embittered, solitary souls, whose disillusioned quest for identity and angry anti-nationalism are constantly at odds with whatever consensus surrounds them. When in China, they praise Japan<sup>80</sup>; when in Japan, they miss Brazil<sup>81</sup>; and when in Brazil they seek to upset a country and a people that vastly define themselves by their likability, a country with no enemies, a peaceful folk.

Carvalho's characters and narrators scorch whatever land they walk upon, removing themselves even further from the realms of likability, relatability, and plausibility. They do not set out to convince the reader of a given reality, but to draw attention, on the one hand, to the received ideas and linguistic aberrations

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79 “Até as *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* – a obra da viravolta machadiana – o romance brasileiro era narrado por um compatriota digno de aplauso, a quem a beleza de nossas praias e florestas, a graça das mocinhas e dos costumes populares, sem esquecer os progressos estupendos do Rio de Janeiro, desatavam a fala. Além de artista, a pessoa que direta ou indiretamente gabava o país era um aliado na campanha cívica pela identidade e a cultura nacionais. Já o narrador das *Memórias póstumas* é outro tipo: desprovido de credibilidade (uma vez que se apresenta na impossível condição de defunto), Brás Cubas é acintoso, parcial, intrometido, de uma inconstância absurda, dado a mistificações e insinuações indignas, capaz de baixezas contra as personagens e o leitor, além de ser notavelmente culto – uma espécie de padrão de elegância – e escrever a melhor prosa da praça. A disparidade interna é desconcertante, problemática em alto grau, compondo uma figura inadequada ao acordo nacional precedente.” (Schwarz, 2004, 17–18)

80 “Bastou eu pôr os pés de novo nas ruas para voltar a impressão de que estava diante de uma sociedade sem nenhum interesse pela arte e pelos prazeres estéticos. Um povo pragmático e tosco, ao contrário dos japoneses; como se o sentido estético lhes fosse completamente estranho. (...) Nunca, em nenhum outro país onde estive, a arte me pareceu tão supérflua.” (M, 21)

81 “Nós dois lutávamos como podíamos contra o sono. E foi só por isso que, já sem saber o que dizer, perguntei como era afinal viver no Japão. Tentava ficar acordado, já que era isso que ela também parecia fazer desde que tinha posto os pés lá. Não podíamos parar de falar. (...) Não entendia o que ela queria dizer. E ela não parava de falar. Prossegui: ‘É sempre cada um por si, em qualquer lugar’. (Já tínhamos discutido aquele assunto. Ela rebatia os meus argumentos, o que eu lhe relatara sobre o Brasil.) ‘A única diferença é que a religião aqui é a corporação.’ É incrível como uma nova perspectiva sempre pode piorar aquela em que você acreditava viver.” (SP, 113-114)

that populate everyday discourse, and, on the other, to the narrative itself, the traps it deploys and the deception it entails as it revolves like a venomous serpent around these artificially assembled words. The overarching unlikability of Carvalho's characters and narrators – which is tributary of Machado de Assis but that ultimately flows in a different, more overtly combative direction – serves to highlight once again their constitutive untrustworthiness. By means of controversy and interruption,<sup>82</sup> the narrators narcissistically draw attention to themselves and then become opaque, slippery. They do not exist as individuals; all there is is the text. In the text they fulfill their subjective movement, they accomplish their own point of underdevelopment, finding in this disappearing act solace and triumph.

Carvalho's narrators belong to a long and marginal line of eccentric and ex-centric narrators, which encompasses some of Machado's and most of Walser's. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (1996, 66), commenting on Walser's work, notes that the off-centeredness of Walser's fiction is directly related to the author's fascination with subsidiary objects, by way of which he constantly creates ruptures and interruptions in the master narrative: "Walser showed us fragments and details no longer bound to a fixed point of view. Walser's *walking eye*, or *walking vision*, created a presence for his subjects which is perceived as an *in-between-space*". Through his narrators' fascination with inanimate, minimal objects, Walser disrupts the text's balance by not making it last, by constantly shifting the reader's attention elsewhere, farther and farther away from any central axis or middle ground. Carvalho's narrators seek to similarly undermine the text's center, although not by adding, like Walser's, but by subtracting: there is progressively less for the reader to hold on to, less guarantees, less trust, less relatability, less charisma, and, at some point, as words and expressions begin to repeat themselves, less vocabulary. With each subtracting operation, Carvalho's narrative gets closer to itself and closer to narrating only itself,<sup>83</sup> closer to finding its degree zero. Like two mirrors that are slowly adjusted until they face only each other, the question asked by Carvalho changes from "What is the world?" to "What is litera-

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**82** "Generalizando, o instante espiritual, aquele que sem descanso a narrativa procura produzir e renovar, está na interrupção. É através desta que o narrador busca reconhecimento, e é nela – uma espécie de vitória – que se completa o seu movimento subjetivo." (Schwarz, 2000, 34)

**83** Almeida speaks of a narrative that "não relata senão a si própria", and quotes straightaway a very suitable passage by the Brazilian writer Tatiana Salem Levy: "A literatura promove assim um movimento de pensar a si própria. Enquanto linguagem do duplo, ela fala de si mesma incessantemente. A questão 'O que é literatura?' não se coloca fora do texto literário, na crítica ou na história, mas em seu próprio interior. Perguntar 'O que é literatura?' é o próprio gesto de escrever, é a maneira de a linguagem chegar mais perto de suas fontes" (Almeida, 2008, 98).

ture and where does it happen?”, thus achieving the last stage of its self-reflective movement and fulfilling its Blanchotian objective of going towards itself, towards its essence, which is disappearance.

The essence of *Mongólia* can be distilled down to the suspicion that literature is always elsewhere, like a finger-pointing game that ultimately points at itself. The three narrative voices indulge in a controlled and inconclusive game of hide-and-seek, with the first and main narrator granting and revoking narrative authority to the second, the second doing the same with the third, and the third, the missing photographer, turning out to be a Doppelgänger of the second,<sup>84</sup> thus feeding back into the loop and driving the narrative even further away from answers or conclusions of any kind. Despite enjoying different degrees of narrative authority, the three narrators are in the end equally powerless and incapable of answering the very question they are posing with their intertwined narrative. Even though each narrative voice feeds into the next one, and vice-versa, they are not ultimately cancelled out and raised up into a new type of structure. Carvalho is no Hegelian, his ethos is neither Protestant nor edifying. *Mongólia* – not coincidentally – finds Carvalho at his nomadic best, continually displacing the answer to *where is literature* elsewhere, making it dribble down inconclusively from one narrator to the next, as if flowing out of the book altogether. And it does, in a way, as Carvalho goes up one more narrative level and turns a few episodes of *Mongólia* into first-person incidents he himself experienced as he traveled through Mongolia on a fiction writing grant. In these episodes – “Nunca Tive Tanto Orgulho de Ser Ateu” (MFE, 13-15) and “Entre o Paternalismo e o Medo” (MFE, 50-52) –, Carvalho experiences a fear and a religious disgust similar to those described by his characters, at times even *verbatim*. The suspension of disbelief is irreversibly lifted as Carvalho outsources once again the answer to the question of *where is literature*, hinting – with a certain Structuralist or, rather, post-Structuralist flair – that an answer to that question, if at all possible, cannot be found without going through the conflation between character, narrator, and author.

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<sup>84</sup> Upon locating the missing photographer, the lower-ranked diplomat is taken aback by how alike they look, as if they were the one and same person: “Não era o que eu esperava. Não era o que tinha imaginado. Não era assim que eu o via. Estou há dias sem me ver, já dias sem me olhar no espelho, e, de repente, é como se me visse sujo, magro, barbado, com o cabelo comprido, esfarrapado. Sou eu na porta, fora de mim. É o meu rosto em outro corpo, que se assusta ao nos ver. (...) Não consigo mais me separar dele. (...) Empresto-lhe minhas roupas. Ofereço-lhe a minha bolsa de toaletes” (M, 176; 179), a resemblance that had already been called out on an intellectual level by the higher-ranked diplomat: “Parecia que eu estava ouvindo a mesma pessoa. De alguma forma, o desaparecido [the photographer] e o Ocidental [the lower-ranked diplomat] tinham uma afinidade sinistra nas suas idéias etnocêntricas” (M, 50).

## 5 How to do things with fire: The desert as landscape's final revenge and as the culmination of Walser's and Carvalho's literary projects

Through a comparative close reading of both authors' masterpieces, Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) and Carvalho's *Nove Noites* (2002), this chapter seeks, on one hand, to establish the final key-elements for a comparison between these two writers, and, on the other, to unravel recurring themes and motifs and to steer them towards a conclusion. By drawing back from the literature review and the opening chapter, this chapter aims at coming full-circle and showing how the landscape provides not only a valuable and original pathway to the oeuvres of Walser and Carvalho, but also how these two authors set the landscape (as defined throughout this research – as a function of the authors' language and narrative agenda) as the horizon towards which their literary projects flow.

This chapter draws upon previous discussions on epidemics and their connection to the landscape in order to explore how first Walser's and then Carvalho's characters and narrators fall prey to spells of madness and sickness, and how these spells not only underline the role of language in the work of these two authors, but also mark the irreversible path of their protagonists towards the margins, thus consolidating their status as outsiders and returning once again to the conclusion, via Said, that exile is an affair of the mind and marginality a privileged literary space.

Always toeing the line of Romanticism, its echoes and ruptures, the chapter then explores the departure from the Romantic *topoi* of sickness and madness towards the decidedly un-Romantic and fickle notion of the anti-hero, investigating how it manifests itself in Walser's work and is later reappropriated by Carvalho. Jakob von Gunten's self-proclaimed, ambiguous "Künstlernatur" serves as the basis for an argument as to how the Walserian view of "history as failure" and the recurring conflict between outer world and inner sensibility among Walser's characters and narrators culminate in a discussion on the ethics of heroes and, ultimately, in a refusal of power and an utter disdain for heroic deeds.

Building upon Jakob's fallible, anti-heroic, marginal stance, this chapter then shows how Carvalho fashions a Walserian character out of Buell Quain and a Walserian narrator out of his own fictional self, seeking therefore to further consolidate a Walserian – rather than the prevailing and repetitive Structuralist – reading of *Nove Noites*. To that effect, this chapter posits Walser as the unlikely middleman between the French Structuralists and Carvalho himself; it also resorts to Carvalho's reading into Walser's biography in order to make a final



point on the figure of the author and on the use of (deceiving) autobiographical strategies in fiction, thus adding the last leg to the ongoing discussion on the articulation between author, character, and narrator.

This discussion on autobiographical strategies also prompts a supplementary point on the notions of truth and historical truth (which also hinges on the authors' preference – particularly Carvalho's – for unreliable narration), and how this leads back to Walser's persona as read by Carvalho and incorporated by him in his own fiction.

Finally, the chapter draws some conclusions from the recurring debate on nature versus culture as framed throughout this research by means of Walser's rather naïve and still embryonic take on the matter, on one hand, and Carvalho's more cynical and deceptively anthropologic approach on the other. Through a mirrored comparison between *Jakob von Gunten* and *Nove Noites*, the chapter demonstrates how Jakob's internal conflict between his own idealistic "Künstlernatur" and the hierarchical impositions of family and society may be read in light of the "deception of anthropology" orchestrated in Carvalho's *Nove Noites*, and how the fundamental quest for a paternal figure in Carvalho's own novel may benefit from a detour from the Lévi-Straussian structures of kinship or the Freudian Oedipal theory in favor of a Walserian postulation of *tabula rasa*, of characters who are cast in a state of abandonment and isolation from which they must fashion their own traditions and cultural affiliations, thus freeing themselves from the vexing impositions of society and of family traditions, and therefore allowing them to pursue an artistic or intellectual (but in any case marginal) path.

Such decisive quest for paternal figures and independence, for symbolic affiliations and disappearance, a feature that in many ways subsumes both authors' main conceptual concerns, triggers once again the *unheimlich* in the authors' narratives (Walser's unreal strategies, Carvalho's apocalyptic aesthetics), prompting with it the return of the landscape as the novels move from closed, claustrophobic spaces to open, phantasmatic landscapes – vengeful, barren, seemingly sentient sceneries prone to apparently arbitrary conflagrations (in Walser) and explosions (in Carvalho). Both novels end in the desert, or in a linguistic representation of a desert (the landscape, once again, as a function of language and narrative) which is neither random nor naïve, but the culmination of the trajectory which this research sought to uncover and analyze.

## 5.1 Walser: *Jakob von Gunten* (1909)

Sie kommen aus der Nacht, wo sie am schwärzesten ist, einer venezianischen, wenn man will, von dürrtigen Lampions der Hoffnung erhellten, mit etwas Festglanz im Auge, aber verstört und zum Weinen traurig. Was sie weinen, ist Prosa. Denn das Schluchzen ist die Melodie von Walsers



Geschwätzigkeit. Es verrät uns, woher seine Lieben kommen. Aus dem Wahnsinn nämlich und nirgendher sonst. Es sind Figuren, die den Wahnsinn hinter sich haben und darum von einer so zerreißen, so ganz unmenschlichen, unbeirrbar oberflächlich bleiben. Will man das Beglückende und Unheimliche, das an ihnen ist, mit einem Worte nennen, so darf man sagen: sie sind alle geheilt. Den Prozess dieser Heilung erfahren wir freilich nie...

–Benjamin, “Robert Walser”

### 5.1.1 A dreamlike atmosphere

The last leaf on an autumn tree watches, dried branches washed down by rain as heavy as lead long after the remaining foliage, which once hung unnaturally onto the trees, has already fallen and met its fate on cold concrete, unlike him. At times it feels as if everything were made of metal and thin iron,<sup>1</sup> slippery sharp surfaces to which one cannot hold on to, although under which weight one can be crushed flat.<sup>2</sup> Burden also weighs upon hallways made of stone and shadows and apparent endlessness, as each minute swells up to the size of an entire century,<sup>3</sup> each hour a chorus of the same sixty minutes of the hour just past. A single class is taught at the Institute, and that class is constantly repeated<sup>4</sup> by teachers who are asleep, or dead, or seemingly dead, or they are petrified – it makes no difference,<sup>5</sup> stone and shadows are both patient and persistent, especially while one sleeps. Sometimes his whole stay there between stone walls and metal ground feels like an incomprehensible dream.<sup>6</sup> But if it were a dream, wouldn't he be able to simply wake up? The fear of being lied to, the paranoia of deception, grows ever more intense. He even nurtures secret thoughts of murder, of being slowly

<sup>1</sup> “Die Bäume der Anlage sind ganz farblos. Die Blätter hängen unnatürlich bleiern herunter. Es ist, als wenn hier manchmal alles aus Blech und dünnem Eisen sei. Dann stürzt wieder Regen und netzt das alles.” (JvG, 22)

<sup>2</sup> “Wir stecken noch immer in den eisernen Klauen der zahlreichen Vorschriften und ergehen uns immer noch in lehrhaften, eintönigen Wiederholungen.” (JvG, 130)

<sup>3</sup> “Wir schritten einen langen, finstern Gang entlang (...) Ah, diese Gänge des Not-Leidens und der furchtbaren Entsagung schienen mir endlos, und sie waren es vielleicht auch. Die Sekunden waren wie ganze Lebensläufe, und die Minuten nahmen die Größe von leidvollen Jahrhunderten an.” (JvG, 100)

<sup>4</sup> “Es gibt nur eine einzige Stunde, und die wiederholt sich immer.” (JvG, 8–9)

<sup>5</sup> “Es fehlt eben, wie ich schon sagte, an Lehrkräften, d. h. die Herren Erzieher und Lehrer schlafen, oder sie sind tot, oder nur scheintot, oder sie sind versteinert, gleichviel, jedenfalls hat man gar nichts von ihnen.” (JvG, 9)

<sup>6</sup> “...manchmal will mir mein ganzer hiesiger Aufenthalt wie ein unverständlicher Traum vorkommen.” (JvG, 9–10)

strangled to death.<sup>7</sup> The hallways multiply behind closed doors, at least in the turbulent confines of his own mind.<sup>8</sup> He goes to the courtyard outside and things feel real enough, although deserted, and for minutes or centuries he practices the sacred art of standing on one leg, or just holds his breath for as long as he can bear.<sup>9</sup> Inquiring on the reality of things is pointless when good food awaits on the table, the charms of a single apple might lure one from the civilized world of culture right back into the lands of fairytale.<sup>10</sup> He reassesses those walls again: Is it a morgue, or is it a supernatural house of delight?<sup>11</sup> Are the teachers dead or are they statues or are they sleeping? The students leave one by one; little explanation is given. Things become increasingly fragile, as if he were standing in mid-air and not on firm ground,<sup>12</sup> as if all those one-leg-standing exercises had been pointless and vain. The iron, which once was thin, now caves in. A sense of alertness endures even though nothing ever happens, far-off sounding sirens of a nonexistent emergency. A prolonged and unfulfilled period of waiting weakens the soul.<sup>13</sup> Unless it was a dream all along – and if so, is the dream over by now?<sup>14</sup>

Walser's characters begin where fairytales end, writes Benjamin (1999, 373), their paper-thin lives are jolted into being as they are ushered into a disenchanted world and told they should be wary, else delusion might claim back their meager existence. They are constantly one step away from collapsing into *Wahnsinn*; their nightly stride both lunar and lunatic.

From the depths of this same night comes Jakob von Gunten, and all that remains from his nocturnal days is a diary displaced in time. For he does not

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7 "Meine Furcht, betrogen zu werden, stieg aufs höchste. Ich dachte sogar an geheime Ermordung, stückweises Erdrosseln." (JvG, 12)

8 "...und Korridore, lange heitere, mattenbedeckte Korridore zogen sich in meiner Phantasie von einem Ende des 'Gebäudes' zum andern. Ich kann mit all meinen Ideen und Dummheiten bald eine Aktiengesellschaft zur Verbreitung von schönen, aber unzuverlässigen Einbildungen gründen." (JvG, 131)

9 "Der Hof liegt verlassen da wie eine viereckige Ewigkeit, und ich stehe meist aufrecht und übe mich, auf einem Bein zu stehen. Oft halte ich zur Abwechslung den Atem lang an. Auch eine Übung, und es soll sogar, wie mir einmal ein Arzt sagte, eine gesundheitsfördernde sein." (JvG, 71)

10 "Träumte ich? Aber wozu mich fragen, wenn es jetzt doch ans Abendessen geht? Es gibt Zeiten, wo ich entsetzlich gern esse. Ich kann dann in die dümmsten Speisen hineinbeißen wie ein hungriger Handwerksbursche, ich lebe dann wie in einem Märchen und nicht mehr als Kulturmensch in einem Kulturzeitalter." (JvG, 103)

11 "Lebe ich in einem Toten- oder in einem überirdischen Freuden- und Wonnenhause? Etwas ist los, aber ich fasse es noch nicht." (JvG, 120)

12 "Es ist hier alles so zart, und man steht wie in der bloßen Luft, nicht wie auf festem Boden." (JvG, 126)

13 "Man wartet hier immer auf etwas, nun, das schwächt doch schließlich." (JvG, 126–7)

14 "Oder träumte ich, und habe ich jetzt ausgeträumt?" (JvG, 131)

arrive, this Jakob von Gunten, he merely happens in time the way dust, if left unsupervised, will find its way atop all things horizontal. The first entry on the *Tagebuch* finds him already there, enrolled in a class locked in infinite loop, and only four entries later does he take the time to think back on the day he arrived and Kraus opened him the door and he behaved like a fool,<sup>15</sup> expecting a guidance forever silenced. But realizing one acted the fool is a future-pending enlightenment only discernible in retrospect. Jakob, however, is already there: he reports not from the present but from the future, which makes his diary not a diary at all but something circular, revolving, indifferent to linear chronology. There lacks, even more intensely than in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, a sense of character development. Jakob von Gunten does not evolve, his so-called diary portrays no such displacement from point A to point B, on the contrary: the level of knowledge that he possesses, as he pens the diary's first entry, is the exact same of its very last line. The causality between a first and a last reflects a mere narrative two-dimensional imposition, since the diary's last line feeds right back into the first one as the diary folds onto itself in a loop similar to the classes taught at the Institute Benjamenta. Jakob fasts-forward and doubles back, he cuts and jumps and backtracks as he narrates. He does not move logically through time and space, but makes sure that past, present, and future coexist each step of the way.<sup>16</sup> Symbolically enough, Jakob sells his watch upon realizing he no longer needs it, with the money buys prison-currency: tobacco.<sup>17</sup>

The Institute Benjamenta – with its vaguely foreign-sounding name reminiscent of youth, sorrow, and spirituality – is a dream both lucid and nightmarish, one in which time-telling is impossible, the numbers on a clock all blurred beyond recognition. In its grey hallways Jakob dreams of terrible things,<sup>18</sup> accepts, with

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**15** “Wie dumm ich mich doch benommen habe, als ich hier ankam” (JvG, 11); “Nun hatte ich geredet. Heute muß ich mich beinahe krümmen vor Lachen, wenn ich mir dieses dumme Betragen wieder ins Gedächtnis zurückrufe. Mir war es damals aber durchaus heilig ernst zumut.” (JvG, 19)

**16** The present-tense narration is constantly and almost simultaneously disrupted both by a hazy past – “Ich muß noch einmal ganz zum Anfang zurückkehren, zum ersten Tag” (JvG, 29) –, and by a premonitory future – “Kraus soll ja bald einmal ins Leben hinaus- und in Stellung treten. Ich fürchte mich vor dem Augenblick seines Austrittes aus der Schule. Aber es wird nicht so rasch gehen. (...) Es würde mir so viel fehlen, wenn er abginge. Er kann noch früh genug zu einem Herrn kommen, der seine Qualitäten nicht zu schätzen wissen wird, und ich werde früh genug einen Menschen, den ich liebe, ohne daß er es weiß, entbehren müssen” (JvG, 33).

**17** “Ich habe meine Uhr verkauft, um Zigaretten tabak kaufen zu können. Ich kann ohne Uhr, aber nicht ohne Tabak leben, das ist schändlich, aber es ist zwingend.” (JvG, 50)

**18** “Ich träume oft furchtbare Dinge.” (JvG, 34)

each coming night, his doomed fate as a slave and a tree and a yellowed leaf.<sup>19</sup> His imagery throughout the diary is slightly off-color, here tragic and there whimsical, as if some nocturnal trace remained – as posits Benjamin – of his previous existence in a land of fairytale.<sup>20</sup> All pupils are imprisoned within the same walls, although they seldom find themselves numerous in the same room. Only rarely do more than two people occupy the same space – *Jakob von Gunten*'s encounters usually follow a dynamics between Jakob plus one, like a RSVP of a dialogical nature. The rare occasions of collective co-existence take place during one of the forever repeating lessons, as all pupils are locked in the same classroom with the seemingly sole purpose of allowing for the slow contagion that lurks in the Institute's corridors to spread.<sup>21</sup> The contagion resembles a ruthless energy that triggers sirens no-one is quite able to hear, an alarm clock buried deep in REM sleep, a looming apocalypse gaining momentum. All pupils are in a constant state of alertness, listening for what is to come, unable to quite make out its contours. The task is made all the more arduous by the ambiguous atmosphere conjured by Jakob, subsuming in its murky haziness the real within the dreamed, or vice-versa, with one swift sleight of hand shuffling the one card marked with "truth" within a deck of fifty-one other delusions. Jakob's dreams near the edge of madness, and there is relief to be had in waking up from them.<sup>22</sup> To wake up one morning from unsettling dreams, however, is a feat without guarantees, one which may as well lead straight into an altogether similar labyrinth: the possibility of a dream within a dream. Jakob's eventual sense of happiness and relief are as dreary as they are short lived, they smell here of violets<sup>23</sup> and there of madness.<sup>24</sup>

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**19** "Nun ja, Eleven sind Sklaven, junge, den Zweigen und Stämmen entrissene, dem unbarmherzigen Sturmwind überlieferte, übrigens schon ein wenig gelbliche Blätter." (JvG, 140)

**20** "Unser Unterricht besteht aus zwei Teilen, einem theoretischen und einem praktischen Teil. Aber beide Abteilungen muten mich auch noch heute wie ein Traum, wie ein sinnloses und zugleich sehr sinnreiches Märchen an." (JvG, 62)

**21** "Ja, das ist es, das nicht ganz Gesunde und Natürliche, was hier webt: wir alle, Herrschaft sowohl wie Elevenschaft, wir leben beinahe schon anderswo. Es ist, als wenn wir nur noch vorübergehend hier atmeten, äßen, schliefen und wach stunden und Unterricht erteilten und genössen. Etwas wie treibende, schonungslose Energie schlägt hier rauschend die Flügel zusammen. Horchen wir alle hier auf das Spätere?" (JvG, 127)

**22** "Und erwachte schweißtriefend, – wie froh war ich doch, daß es nur ein böser Traum war. Mein Gott, ich darf noch hoffen, es werde noch eines Tages etwas aus mir. Wie im Traum doch alles an die Grenze des Wahnsinns streift." (JvG, 89)

**23** "Die Sonne schien. Es war prächtiges Frühlingswetter. In den Straßen duftete es nach Veilchen." (JvG, 69)

**24** "Was ist das? Warum bin ich so seltsam glücklich? Bin ich verrückt?" (JvG, 53)

### 5.1.2 The slow onset of madness and the ghost of truth

The constant battling between outer world and inner sensibility takes its toll in waves of sickness. At the root of the contagion at the Institute Benjamenta is a disease to which Jakob is not immune – as neither are most of Walser’s narrators.<sup>25</sup>

Tobold, a recurring character in Walser’s oeuvre, the protagonist of various short pieces and of a novel lost to fire or to a drawer,<sup>26</sup> runs into a scoundrel [“Schurke”] in a proto-Faustian encounter. The scoundrel promptly begs for Tobold’s understanding by stating that he is not wicked, just sick – “Ich bin nicht schlecht;/nur krank” (KD, 45) –, to which Tobold replies that if such is the case, then it is probably a doctor he should seek – “Krank bist du? Ich glaub’s./Doch warum gehst du nicht zum Arzt?” (KD, 46). Maybe you are the doctor, muses the scoundrel – “Vielleicht bist du der Arzt. Du bist/jed’falles gut” (KD, 46) –, but Tobold pays little heed as he continues his journey in search of fresh air and identity: “‘Was bist du’ (...)/‘Weiß es selber nicht./Muß erst erfahren, was ich bin” (KD, 54; 55; 56).

Elsewhere, on a different journey, the narrator of *Der Spaziergang* suffers from a similar disease, feels inwardly sick, without faith, without confidence or trust, without any finer sort of hope, a stranger to the world and to himself, and hostile to both – until he can finally find a place to once again breathe, quietly and free.<sup>27</sup> A Romantic gasp for air underscores Walser’s plight, his characters echo F. Schlegel’s (2006, 153) altisonant caution: “Like animals, the spirit can only breathe in an atmosphere made up of life-giving oxygen mixed with nitrogen. To be unable to tolerate and understand this fact is the essence of foolishness; to simply not want to do so, is the beginning of madness”. The gasp for air is also Jakob’s curse, buried alive within narrow corridors depleted of life-giving oxygen.

<sup>25</sup> Beyond the examples employed here, it should not be forgotten that both *Geschwister Tanner* and *Der Gehülfe* are disease-ridden novels, although the malady, in those two cases, appears to be somewhat subdued when compared to *Jakob von Gunten*.

<sup>26</sup> “Ein Roman ‘Tobold’, 1919 abgeschlossen, ist verloren” (P, 139), notes Jochen Greven, who also remarks on the connection – via Walser himself and his “Besuch einer Dienerschule in Berlin” in 1905 – between the characters of Tobold and Jakob von Gunten. Tobold appears not only in *Poetenleben* (“Aus Tobolds Leben”), but also in *Kleine Dichtungen* (“Tobold (I)”; “Spazieren”), in *Kleine Prosa* (“Tobold (II)”), and in *Aufsätze* (“Der fremde Geselle”).

<sup>27</sup> “Ich bin vor einiger Zeit in diese Gegend aus kalten, traurigen, engen Verhältnissen, krank im Innern, ganz und gar ohne Glauben, ohne Zuversicht und Zutrauen, ohne jegliche schönere Hoffnung hergekommen, mit der Welt und mit mir selber entfremdet und verfeindet. Ängstlichkeit und Mißtrauen nahmen mich gefangen und begleiteten jeden meiner Schritte. Stück um Stück verlor ich dann das unedle, häßliche Vorurteil. Ich atmete hier wieder ruhiger und freier – und wurde wieder ein schönerer, wärmerer, glücklicherer Mensch.” (S, 24)

The lack of breathing air makes Jakob imperceptibly light-headed, fatigued, confused, disoriented, prone to hallucinations. His diary is the written evidence of a slow-onset madness. Language is the first casualty of delusion, as it tries – and fails – to capture a ghost: truth.

The madness-like contagion that spreads among Walser's characters is induced by language, and in language finds its fulfillment. One of *Prosastücke's* most intriguing pieces, "Schwendimann", seizes language as it is about to break, as it once again toys with narrative authority and conventions.<sup>28</sup> The borderline manic, distraught narrator forces the homonymous Schwendimann to constantly defend himself, to interrupt the fast-paced flow of the text in order to breathe, to claim he is not sick, but something else: "Ich bin nicht krank, ich bin anders. Ich habe keine Krankenpflege nötig, ich habe etwas ganz Anderes nötig" (Ps, 121). The narrator is restless, frantically dragging Schwendimann from place to place, from the Rathaus to the Armenhaus to the Spritzenhaus to the Pfandhaus to the Badhaus to the Schulhaus to the Zuchthaus to the Krankenhaus to the Elternhaus to the Kaufhaus to the Tanzhaus to the Arbeitshaus to the Gerichtshaus to the Schlachthaus to the Schauspielhaus to the Konzerthaus to the Trauerhaus to the Gotteshaus to the Gasthaus until Schwendimann can at last find some peace, and this he does in the Totenhaus.

Death is never out of question in Walser's texts, it looms in the horizon like a disease-ridden tribute or an everlasting threat, and Schwendimann took his chances by following the narrator all the way to his deathbed. The clash between narrator and character under the sign of sickness and death reaches its apex in Walser's posthumous novel, *Der Räuber*.<sup>29</sup> In it, a journey is once again set in

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<sup>28</sup> "Einmal war ein sonderbarer Mann. Hallo, hallo, was denn für ein sonderbarer Mann? Wie alt war er, und woher kam er? Das weiss ich nicht. So kannst du mir vielleicht sagen, wie er hiess? Er hiess Schwendimann. Aha, Schwendimann! Gut, sehr gut, très bien, très bien. Fahre also fort, wenn es dir gefällt und sage uns: was wollte denn der Schwendimann? Was er wollte? Hm, das wusste er wohl selber nicht recht. Er wollte nicht viel, aber er wollte etwas Rechtes. Was suchte, nach was forschte Schwendimann? Er suchte nicht viel, aber er suchte etwas Rechtes. Zerfahren, verloren in weiter Welt war er. So, so? Verloren? Aha, zerfahren! Grosser Gott, wo hinaus soll es denn mit dem armen Mann? Ins Nichts, ins All oder in was sonst? Bange Frage!" (Ps, 120)

<sup>29</sup> *Der Räuber* is one of Walser's most compelling and enticing novels (although it was not originally prepared for publication, but pieced together by Jochen Greven and Martin Jürgens and first published in 1972), one in which Walser enacts a distancing effect between the narrator and the character of the robber, both nevertheless cut from the author's own autobiographical skin. Coetzee magnificently sums up the novel's plot thusly: "It concerns the sentimental entanglements of a middle-aged man known simply as the Robber, a man without employment but manages to subsist on the fringes of polite society in Berne on the basis of a modest legacy", and who gets tangled in an amorous pursuit that leaves him wounded and amidst a "flurry of gleeful

motion, a journey towards self-discovery and language (*Der Räuber*, according to Coetzee, is “‘about’ nothing more than the adventure of its own writing”<sup>30</sup>), towards fresh air and the elusive promise of health. The Robber – a childish spirit akin to Fritz and Jakob – is plagued by “inner voices”, and thus seeks refuge in the world of quaint citizenship, hinting yet again at the constant battle between outer world and inner sensibility to which Walser’s characters are prey<sup>31</sup>: “He was surely ill in ‘those days,’ when he arrived in our city, filled with a curious disequilibrium, agitation. Certain inner voices, so to speak, tormented him. Had he come here to recover, to transform himself into a cheerful, contented member of society?” (R, 60–61).

The final destination for any “adventure of writing itself” can only be language. Language is both the source and the symptom of the Robber’s malady; his disease is not madness *per se*, but an invitation to it, one which he irrevocably accepts by trusting a professional writer with the task of organizing the narrative to his own life. What separates reality from fiction, after all, is nothing more than the displacement of letters along a line. *Der Räuber*’s narrator, the professional author, the maker of words, is not there to set the record straight and tell the truth behind the turn of events which lead up to the Robber’s demise, but to problematize a deceptively simple equation: where there once was unequivocal narration (and thus, to all intents and purposes, unequivocal truth), now reigns a tangle of dead-ends and artificial suspicions. The Robber (and Fritz Kocher, and Jakob von Gunten, and Tobold, and Schwendimann, and...) was infected by a writerly disease, an artificial condition which affects those who are willing to venture – and create – outside the boundaries of quaint citizenship, who dare look inside themselves and face their own labyrinths. The writer – and both Fritz and Jakob

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gossip. When the dust clears, the Robber is collaborating with a professional author to tell his side of the story” (Coetzee, 2007, 23; 24).

**30** “Fundamentally *The Robber* is ‘about’ no more than the adventure of its own writing. Its charm lies in its surprising twists and turns of direction, its delicately ironic handling of the formulas of amatory play, and its supple and inventive exploitation of the resources of German. Its author figure, flustered by the multiplicity of narrative strands he suddenly has to manage now that the pencil in his hand is moving, is reminiscent above all of Laurence Sterne, the gentler, later Sterne, without the leering and the double entendres.” (Coetzee, 2007, 24–25)

**31** Regarding the Robber’s disease, a further link between his ailment and an unquenchable, although poorly managed, ability to love – connecting back to Sebald’s reading as elaborated in subchapter 3.1.6. –, should be evoked: “Aus gewisse Weise, liebe Herr Doktor, vermag ich alles Erdenkliche, und vielleicht besteht meine Krankheit, falls ich meinen Zustand so nennen kann, in einem zu vielen Liebhaben. Ich habe einen ganz entsetzlich großen Fonds an Liebeskraft in mir, und jedesmal, wenn ich auf die Straße trete, fange ich an, irgend etwas, irgend jemand lieb zu gewinnen, und darum gelte ich allenthalben als charakterloser Mensch...” (R, 143).



are writers – is the one who walks outside the perimeter of sanity, risking their own mental health – as well as the civilized pains of social ostracism – for the sake of a book, or for a bit of nocturnal wisdom:

But how prosaically I speak, though there is perhaps a dose of poetry after all in these unadorned nature descriptions. I now address an appeal to the healthy: don't persist in reading nothing but healthy books, acquaint yourselves also with so-called pathological literature, from which you may derive considerable edification. Healthy people should always, so to speak, take certain risks. For what other reason, blast and confound it, is a person healthy? Simply in order to stop living one day at the height of one's health? A damned bleak fate....<sup>32</sup>

To become an artist means to succumb to madness, a heroic Romantic despair if there ever was one. Peter Watson (2010, 238), in his ambitious historical tracing of the German genius throughout the last four centuries, notes that “Goethe once described Romanticism as ‘hospital-poetry’ and Novalis pictured life as ‘a disease of the mind’”. The secretive atmosphere conjured by Jakob von Gunten proves to be fertile terrain for all the unhealthy and unearthly scents that sprout from the mysterious, the nocturnal, the ghostlike, and the creative. As the infection spreads, sparing nobody, not even Herr Benjamenta,<sup>33</sup> confounding life-affirming certainties,<sup>34</sup> one pupil seems to be particularly afflicted by the disease, perhaps even the source behind the contagion, since he is sick from the journal's very beginning and bears the rather nonchalant name of Schacht – ‘shaft’, or ‘duct’; in short: that which conducts.

The first thing the reader is told about Schacht, other than that he is one of Jakob's classmates, is that he is a strange being who dreams of becoming a musician. He enjoys a laugh now and then, although prone to soulful bouts of melancholy which suit his pale, suffering face. He is sickly, and not afraid of breaking the rules, much like Jakob himself. Both boys enjoy telling each other stories drawn from their own lives, and enjoy even more making them up out of

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**32** “Aber wie prosaisch ich das alle sage, aber vielleicht liegt ja gerade in dieser nüchternen Naturwiedergabe ein Stück Poesie. Ich richte an die Gesunden folgenden Appell: Leset doch nicht immer nur diese gesunden Bücher, machet euch doch auch mit sogenannter krankhafter Literatur näher bekannt, aus der ihr vielleicht wesentliche Erbauung schöpfen könnt. Gesunde Menschen sollten stets gewissermaßen etwas riskieren. Wozu, heilandhagelnochmal, ist man denn gesund? Bloß um eines Tages so aus der Gesundheit heraus zu sterben? Eine verflucht trostlose Bestimmung...” (R, 83)

**33** “Vielleicht ist Herr Benjamenta verrückt.” (JvG, 108)

**34** “Es sieht hier aus, als wenn so etwas wie ‘die Tage gezählt’ wären. Aber man irrt sich. Vielleicht irrt sich auch Fräulein Benjamenta. Vielleicht auch Herr Vorsteher. Wir irren uns vielleicht alle.” (JvG, 140)



thin air.<sup>35</sup> When they do so, the claustrophobia of ever-narrowing corridors subsides for a moment, a whole world opens up instead: “When we do so, it seems to us that a soft music plays all up and down the walls. The narrow dark room expands, streets appear, palatial rooms, cities, chateaux, unknown people and landscapes, there are thunders and whisperings, voices speak and weep, et cetera” (JvG, 14). Jakob enjoys immensely talking to Schacht, he has soul and is sick, he is an artist in the making, owner of a true artistic nature. Schacht begs Jakob not to tell anybody he suffers from an unspecified and improper disease,<sup>36</sup> and out of brotherly love Jakob agrees,<sup>37</sup> never daring however to put in big words his affection towards the ailing colleague.<sup>38</sup>

The reader receives a detailed update on Schacht’s state of mind and whereabouts later on, as he returns, angry and depressed, from an incursion in the outside world, where the job he was assigned to perform was sabotaged by his own sensitive constitution. The world is harder than we are, seems to be Jakob’s assessment regarding his friends demise, after which he seems to lose interest in him and only mentions his name one last time, as all pupils are gathered together to bid the deceased Fräulein Benjamenta goodbye (JvG, 153).

Didn’t I say earlier that things would go badly for Schacht out in the world? (...) He has now had his first disappointment, and I’m convinced that he’ll have twenty disappointments, one after the other. Life with its savage laws is in any case for certain people a succession

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**35** “Mein Schulkamerad Schacht ist ein seltsames Wesen. Er träumt davon, Musiker zu werden. Er sagt mir, er spiele vermittle seiner Einbildungskraft wundervoll Geige, und wenn ich seine Hand anschau, glaube ich ihm das. Er lacht gern, aber dann versinkt er plötzlich in schmachende Melancholie, die ihm unglaublich gut zu Gesicht und Körperhaltung steht. Schacht hat ein ganz weißes Gesicht und lange schmale Hände, die ein Seelenleiden ohne Namen ausdrücken. Schwächig, wie er von Körperbau ist, zappelt er leicht, es ist ihm schwer, unbeweglich zu stehen oder zu sitzen. Er gleicht einem kränklichen, eigensinnigen Mädchen, er schmolzt auch gern, was ihn einem jungen, etwas verzogenen weiblichen Wesen noch ähnlicher macht. Wir, ich und er, liegen oft zusammen in meiner Schlafkammer, auf dem Bett, in den Kleidern, ohne die Schuhe auszuziehen, und rauchen Zigaretten, was gegen die Vorschriften ist. Schacht tut gern das Vorschriften-Kränkende, und ich, offen gesagt, leider nicht minder. Wir erzählen uns ganze Geschichten, wenn wir so liegen, Geschichten aus dem Leben, d. h. Erlebtes, aber noch viel mehr erfundene Geschichten, deren Tatsachen aus der Luft gegriffen sind.” (JvG, 13–14)

**36** “Schacht hat Seele. Wer weiß, vielleicht ist er eine Künstlernatur. Er hat mir anvertraut, daß er krank ist, und da es sich um ein nicht ganz anständiges Leiden handelt, hat er mich dringend gebeten, Schweigen zu beobachten, was ich ihm natürlich auf Ehrenwort versprochen habe, um ihn zu beruhigen.” (JvG, 14)

**37** “Wie liebe ich solche Menschen, die diesen wehmütigen Eindruck hervorrufen. Ist das Bruderliebe? Ja, kann sein.” (JvG, 15)

**38** “Natürlich sage ich ihm so etwas nie. Wir reden Dummheiten miteinander, oft auch Ernstes, aber unter Vermeidung großer Worte. Schöne Worte sind viel zu langweilig.” (JvG, 15)

of discouragements and terrifying bad impressions. People like Schacht are born to feel and suffer a continuous sense of aversion. He would like to admit and welcome things, but he just can't. (...) His hands are made for light gestures, not for work. Before him breezes should blow, and behind him sweet, friendly voices should be whispering. His eyes should be allowed to remain blissfully closed, and Schacht should be allowed to go quietly to sleep again, after being wakened in the morning in the warm, sensuous cushions. For him there is, at root, no proper activity, for every activity is for him, the way he is, improper, unnatural, and unsuitable. Compared with Schacht I'm the trueblue rawboned laborer. Ah, he'll be crushed, and one day he'll die in a hospital, or he'll perish, ruined in body and soul, inside one of our modern prisons.<sup>39</sup>

The metaphorical softness of Schacht's hands mirrors Jakob's own, his demise is foreboding: neither pair of hands is suited for manual labor; Jakob too has concealed an artistic constitution all along. It is Kraus, the insightful, lucid Kraus, who first dares saying it out loud, accusing Jakob of believing to reign above the rules, an ill-affected king who should watch out, lest the coming storms of fate should wash him ashore<sup>40</sup>: "The storms and lightning and thunder and blows of fate certainly haven't yet been done away with, so as to save you the trouble. Just because of your gracefulness, you artists, for that's what you are, there certainly hasn't been any dropping-off in the difficulties facing anyone who really does something, who's really alive" (JvG, 138). It is fitting that Kraus should be the one to expose Jakob's greatest fear and secret, for Kraus is the only soul among the Institute's corridors immune to the contagion. Kraus is the perfect pupil, his face redolent of a vague orient (JvG, 77), his demeanor medieval (JvG, 49). Moreover,

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**39** "Habe ich es nicht früh schon gesagt, daß es Schacht draußen in der Welt übel ergehen wird? (...) Er hat jetzt eine erste Enttäuschung erlebt, und ich bin überzeugt, daß er zwanzig Enttäuschungen hintereinander erleben wird. Das Leben mit seinen wilden Gesetzen ist überhaupt für gewisse Personen nur eine Kette von Entmutigungen und schreckenerregenden bösen Eindrücken. Menschen wie Schacht sind zur fortlaufenden, leidenden Abneigung geboren. (...) Seine Hände taugen zu leichten Gebärden, nicht zur Arbeit. Vor ihm sollten Winde wehen, und hinter ihm sollten süße freundliche Stimmen flüstern. Seine Augen sollten selig geschlossen bleiben dürfen, und Schacht sollte wieder ruhig einschlummern dürfen, wenn er des Morgens in den warmen, lüsternen Kissen erwachte. Für ihn gibt es im Grunde genommen keine ziemliche Tätigkeit, denn jede Beschäftigung ist für ihn, der so aussieht, unziemlich, widernatürlich und unpassend. Ich bin der reine grobknochige Knecht gegen Schacht. Ah, zerschmettert wird er werden, und eines Tages wird er im Krankenhaus verenden, oder er wird, verdorben an Leib und Seele, in einem von unsern modernen Gefängnissen schmachten." (JvG, 122–124)

**40** "...du gehörst zu denen, die sich, so wertlos sie sein mögen, über gute Lehren erhaben vorkommen wollen. Ich weiß es schon, schweig' nur. (...) Und was fühlst du denn, du und deinesgleichen, Prahlhanse, was ihr seid, was ernst-sein und achtsam-sein eigentlich sagen will. Du bildest dir auf deine springerische und tänzerische Leichtfertigkeit ganz gewiß, und mit ohne Zweifel ebenso viel Recht, nicht wahr, Königreiche ein?" (JvG, 138)

he is the only one who tries to shake Jakob out of the dream, who repeatedly tells him: get up, even when Jakob believes to be already awake<sup>41</sup> (and even though Jakob never does wake up, he keeps going back to sleep, a dream within a dream). After scolding Jakob for his condescending and free-spirited behavior, Kraus compounds three times on a same piece of advice: “Do something! (...) Go and make your conquests! (...) Make yourself invisible, or get busy with something” (JvG, 139). And what Jakob does, what Walser’s characters are always prone to do, is to grab any advice by its least accessible end and disappear.<sup>42</sup>

### 5.1.3 The anti-hero: A departure from Romanticism

Fearing being suffocated by his father’s noble excellence,<sup>43</sup> Jakob von Gunten fled his home in search of fresh air. So goes Jakob’s official excuse for joining the Institute Benjamenta, given that he refrains from divulging too much about his previous civilian existence. But when Kraus exposes Jakob’s greatest fear, a secret and unspoken reason for his enrollment at the Institute may be glimpsed: the youngest of the von Guntens sought to quench his diseased *Künstlernatur* through the Institute’s repetitive diet of physical, menial teachings.

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<sup>41</sup> “Beinahe jeden frühen Morgen setzt es zwischen mir und Kraus ein geflüstertes Redegefecht ab. Kraus glaubt immer, mich zur Arbeit antreiben zu sollen. Vielleicht irrt er sich auch gar nicht, wenn er annimmt, daß ich nicht gern früh aufstehe. (...) Kraus ist der Vertreter aller hier im Institut Benjamenta bestehenden Vorschriften, folglich fordere ich den besten aller Mitschüler beständig ein bißchen zum Kampf auf. Ich zanke so furchtbar gern. Ich würde krank werden, wenn ich nicht zanken könnte, und zum Zanken und Reizen eignet sich Kraus wundervoll. Er hat immer recht: ‘Willst du jetzt endlich aufstehen, du faules Tuch!’” (JvG, 28); “Wir Zöglinge müssen morgens früh, bevor die Herrschaften erwachen, Schulstube und Kontor aufräumen. Je zwei Leute besorgen das abwechslungsweise. ‘Steh doch auf. Wird’s bald? ‘ – Oder: ‘Jetzt hört aber bald die Genügsamkeit auf.’ Oder: ‘Steh auf, steh auf. Es ist Zeit. Solltest schon längst den Besen in der Hand haben.’ – Wie ist das amüsant. Und Kraus, der ewig böse Kraus, wie lieb ist er mir.” (JvG, 29); “...noch immer klopft morgens früh Kraus mit seinem ärgerlichen ‘Steh auf, Jakob’ und mit seinem zornig gebogenen Finger an meine Kammertüre...” (JvG, 130)

<sup>42</sup> Vila-Matas speaks novelistically of an ethics of disappearance in Walser’s oeuvre: “...y acabé durmiéndome recordando un proverbio suizo que en Oberbüren, en la pared de una casa que estaba junto a un prado, había visto Robert Walser en compañía de Carl Seelig: ‘La desdicha y la dicha / sobrellévalas, / que las dos pasarán / igual que has de pasar tú.’ Me dormí pensando en alguien que, hablando de Walser en sugerentes términos, escribió que éste encarnaba la bella desdicha, pulcras palabras para describir una forma de vivir que yo conocía muy bien. Se trataba de todo un estilo de vida, de una ciencia, de un alegre deslizamiento hacia el silencio, de una ética de las desesperaciones” (Vila-Matas, 2005b, 146).

<sup>43</sup> “Ich sagte unter anderem, mein Vater sei Großrat, und ich sei ihm davongelaufen, weil ich gefürchtet hätte, von seiner Vortrefflichkeit erstickt zu werden.” (JvG, 12)

The practical or physical part of our instruction is a kind of perpetually repeated gymnastics or dancing, or whatever you want to call it. The salutation, the entrance into a room, behavior toward women or whatever, is practiced, and the practice is very long drawn out, often boring, but here too, as I now observe, and feel, there lies a deeply hidden meaning. We pupils are to be trained and shaped, as I observe, not stuffed with sciences.<sup>44</sup>

The pupils are not to be stuffed with lofty and far-seeing sciences; the sheer physicality and seeming pointlessness of the Institute's calisthenics is meant to extinguish the treacherous fires of intellectualism, to suppress artistic deeds or grandiose turns of phrase such as these. Jakob tries his best to enact the Institute's policy, secretly hoping therewith to purge himself from his own artistic leanings, to convince himself he can become as menial and subordinate as the rest of them, to finally join the world a healthy, quaint citizen. Throughout his diary he insists – and the irony here should not go amiss – on the futility of words, especially the polysyllabic ones<sup>45</sup>; he insists on being a changed man, a commoner at last,<sup>46</sup> although whenever he lets go of the Institute's philistine textbook, he immediately falls prey to his own rich inner life: “To be robust means not spending time on thought but quickly and quietly entering into what has to be done. To be wet with the rains of exertion, hard and strong from the knocks and rubs of what necessity demands. I hate such clever turns of phrase. I was intending to think of something quite different” (JvG, 127).

Jakob must forcibly control his hand so as to avoid big words and clever turns of phrase, for – according to the Benjamentas' pedagogy – they make one's soul susceptible to the corrosiveness of intellectualism, one's body vulnerable to the disease of idle contemplation. Schacht may be the contagion's primary source, but Jakob's diary the poisonous account of its outbreak, as it both spreads the infection and documents its path of destruction. The tormenting challenge of keeping a journal without trusting the institution of language, without fully allowing oneself inner immersion, begins to corrode Jakob's already precarious

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<sup>44</sup> “Der praktische oder körperliche Teil unseres Unterrichtes ist eine Art fortwährend wiederholtes Turnen oder Tanzen, ganz gleich, wie man das nennen will. Der Gruß, das Eintreten in eine Stube, das Benehmen gegenüber Frauen oder ähnliches wird geübt, und zwar sehr langfädig, oft langweilig, aber auch hier, wie ich jetzt merke und empfinde, steckt ein tiefverborgener Sinn. Uns Zöglinge will man bilden und formen, wie ich merke, nicht mit Wissenschaften vollpfropfen.” (JvG, 63)

<sup>45</sup> “Wir reden Dummheiten miteinander, oft auch Ernstes, aber unter Vermeidung großer Worte. Schöne Worte sind viel zu langweilig.” (JvG, 15); “Wie hasse ich all die treffenden Worte” (JvG, 50); “Man irrt sich stets, wenn man große Worte in den Mund nimmt.” (JvG, 140); “Wozu sich in großen Worten ergehen?” (JvG, 155)

<sup>46</sup> “...ich bin ja ein ganz, ganz anderer geworden, ein gewöhnlicher Mensch bin ich geworden, und daß ich gewöhnlich geworden bin, das verdanke ich Benjamentas, und das erfüllt mich mit einer unnennbaren, vom Tau der Zufriedenheit glänzenden und tropfenden Zuversicht.” (JvG, 114)

mental health; by trying to escape his *Künstlernatur* and time and again failing to do so, Jakob is dangerously split into two: “I’m leading a strange double life, a life that is regular and irregular, controlled and uncontrolled, simple and highly complicated” (JvG, 140).<sup>47</sup> Out of a survival instinct Jakob is forced to lead a double existence, like a secret agent, or an artist disguised as a servant. Redemption would still be possible were he able to focus and choose, and thus display the courage, the resolve, the high moral ground of a trueborn hero. An apathetic conception of morality and idealism is what does it for Jakob von Gunten, what disavows any eventual claims to heroism. His surprising lack of moral concern prevents him from becoming a hero, but also a villain. Jakob is neither moral nor immoral, but rather an amoral misfit who simply refuses to position himself along the heroic spectrum.

“For the Romantics”, points out Watson (2010, 237), “martyrs, tragic heroes who fought for their beliefs against overwhelming odds, became the ideal. The artist or hero as outsider was born in this way”. Here one of Walser’s most pronounced breaks from Romanticism surfaces, for although artistic-minded and convicted outsiders, his protagonists are in no way heroes – they might even, under a certain light, be considered downright cowards. The connection between cowardice and the anti-hero is eloquently pursued by Peter Sloterdijk in his equally eloquent *Critique of Cynical Reason*:

The third stance toward the heroic ideal is adopted by the coward. Of course, under the unavoidable pressure of the heroic image, he must seek refuge in the hesitatingly brave masses. He must hide the fact that he is really the anti-hero; he must camouflage himself and make himself as unobtrusive as possible. As muddler, improviser, and man of few words, he cannot even afford to internalize the image of the hero in any rigid way because otherwise self-contempt would crush him. In him, a slight decomposition of the ‘superego’ is already under way. In the coward’s consciousness lie simultaneously the germs of military cynicism and of a higher critical realism! For through his experience and self-experience, the coward is forced to reflect and look twice. He can confess his cowardice aloud just as little—otherwise he would be even more despised—as he can simply give it up. In him, to be sure often poisoned by a drop of self-contempt, a critical potential against the ethics of heroes begins to grow. Because he himself has to dissemble, he will be more sensitive to the pretense of others. When heroes and hesitators succumb to a superior power, the coward, who allows himself to flee, is the sole survivor. Hence the sarcastic saying: Heroes are the survivors of heroes. (Sloterdijk, 1988, 221–222)

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<sup>47</sup> In a harrowing realization shortly after, Jakob realizes his state of mind is not his own privilege – the contagion is not exclusive to the Institute’s hallways: “Und was das Doppelleben betrifft, so führt jedermann eigentlich ein solches” (JvG, 141).

Walser's oeuvre engenders a critical potential against the ethics of heroes. Simon, for instance, the main protagonist of *Geschwister Tanner*, is constantly afraid of his own cowardice, like a boy secretly scared of a menacing shadow.<sup>48</sup> Simon resents being reminded of his cowardice<sup>49</sup> as much as he resents acting upon it, promptly leaping to his feet at the stroke of the clock (GT, 42). As he obliquely investigates the causes for such craven behavior, Simon tentatively concludes that cowardice is a by-product of maturity, that is to say: of being wicked and selfish.<sup>50</sup> Simon is here a vessel to Walser's much rehashed praise of the puerile spirit of children – simultaneously wise and naïve<sup>51</sup> –, whose lack of self-aggrandizing self-importance allows them to be “enforcers of the [promised] word”. This leads Simon, some fifty pages further into the narrative, to reiterate that a child he might even obey, but never a man, and, in a rather quizzical *non-sequitur*, report that it is *therefore* his duty to also obey a woman.<sup>52</sup>

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48 Even Kasper, one of Simon's older brothers, who is not only artistic-minded but also a proper painter, feels cowardice creep around his fingers: “Was nützt es mir, wenn ich mich an vergangenen Kulturen berausche? Habe ich damit meinen Geist, wenn ich ehrlich mit mir abrechnen will, bereichert? Nein, ich habe ihn bloß verpuscht und feige gemacht” (GT, 75) – he is uninterested in traveling abroad in search for bygone cultures, for it would only highlight the cowardice of his own spirit, he who prefers instead to observe them from a sheltered distance: “sondern betrachte sie eben, wenn es angeht und es mir Spaß macht, aus Büchern, die mir zu jeder Zeit zu Diensten sind” (GT, 76).

49 “Ich freue mich, zeugnislos von Ihnen wegzugehen, denn ein Zeugnis von Ihnen würde mich nur an meine eigene Feigheit und Furcht erinnern...” (GT, 44); “Aber jetzt noch feige zurückkehren und die Eisenbahn benutzen, das mochte er doch nicht.” (GT, 104)

50 “Ein Knabe besitzt Tugenden der Ritterlichkeit, die der vernünftig und reif denkende Mann immer zur Seite wirft als unnütze Beigaben zum Feste der Liebe. Ein Knabe ist weniger feige als ein Mann, weil er weniger reif ist, denn die Reife macht leicht niederträchtig und selbstisch. Man muß nur die harten, bösen Lippen eines Knaben betrachten: der ausgesprochene Trotz und das bildliche Versteifen auf ein einmal sich selber im stillen gegebenes Wort. Ein Knabe hält Wort, ein Mann findet es passender, es zu brechen. Der Knabe findet Schönheit an der Härte des Worthaltens (Mittelalter) und der Mann findet Schönheit darin, ein gegebenes Versprechen in ein neues aufzulösen, das er männlich verspricht zu halten. Er ist der Versprecher, jener ist der Vollstrecker des Wortes.” (GT, 140–141)

51 A dichotomy already explicitly formulated in the introduction to *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*: “[Die Aufsätze] mögen vielen an vielen Stellen zu knabenhaft und an vielen andern Stellen zu knabenhaft erscheinen” (FKA, 7).

52 “Einem Kinde zu gehorchen, wenn es reizend befiehlt, ist mir etwas Leichtes, dagegen einem Mann: Pfui! Nur Feigheit und geschäftliche Interessen mögen einen Mann dazu veranlassen, vor einem andern Mann zu kriechen: Niedrige Gründe, das! Aus diesem Grunde bin ich froh, daß ich einer Frau zu gehorchen habe; denn das ist natürlich, weil es niemals ehrverletzend sein kann.” (GT, 193–194)

A similar quest for an authority figure, an umbrella under which to crouch, is what directly links the characters of Fritz Kocher and Jakob von Gunten within Walser's Balzacian Bleistiftgebiet – and this through a most peculiar sketch, "Tagebuch eines Schülers", originally written in 1908. In it, the reader is acquainted with a series of teachers – Bergen, Blösch, Blur, Merz, Wächli, Wyß – who later on turn out to be Jakob's own instructors at the Institute Benjamenta (JvG, 58–59), although it is not Jakob who attends this particular class, but Fritz.<sup>53</sup> Fritz is but a character in the sketch ("Unsere lustige und kühnster Schulkamerad heißt Fritz Kocher" – Gsch, 110), which is narrated by a self-identified "secondary-school student" who alternates between the first person singular and plural. The entire sketch, its many ironic tirades aimed at the teachers, is written under the influence of a statement made in its very first paragraph: "We schoolboys are decidedly not noble creatures; we lack the beautifully proper social graces many times over. Why is it that we overwhelm precisely a Wächli with our jokes? We are cowards; we deserve an Inquisitor to discipline us" (Gsch, 104). The narrator then proceeds with his gallery of notable teachers ["Galerie sehenswerter Lehebilder"] (Gsch, 112) by undermining their authority one by one: Neumann, the gym teacher, who doubles surprisingly as the penmanship instructor, is completely under the students' control: "Wir haben ihn vollständig in unserer Hand, wir sind ihm vollkommen überlegen" (Gsch, 106); Wyß, the rector, is feared and respected, "two boring upstanding feelings". He physically punishes the students, and his blows carry something proper, fitting, even justly pleasant about them, which cannot be held against him: "Der Mann, der so meisterlich prügeln kann, muß gewissermaßen human sein" (Gsch, 107); Huseler has been dismissed for inappropriately stroking and caressing the boys; Herr von Bergen used to be a gym teacher and is now an insurance agent; and at a certain point the narrator even calls for dancing lessons, an *avant la lettre* tip of the hat to the Benjamenta's pedagogy: "Apropos: warum erhalten wir keinen Tanzunterricht? Ich finde, man tut gar nichts, uns zur Anmut und zu einem schönen Benehmen zu bewegen. Wir sind und bleiben sehr wahrscheinlich die reinen Flegel" (Gsch, 109).

The secondary-school student simultaneously calls for authority and proceeds to undermine it, a back-and-forth movement exemplary of Walser's ambiguously coward protagonists: indeed do they continually seek an authority figure

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<sup>53</sup> The connection between both students, as well as its many autobiographical resonances, is further discussed in Whittaker, 2013, 206–208. Alternatively, if one is to accept the hypothesis first posited in subchapter 4.1.3., under footnote 29, that Fritz Kocher is alluding to Jakob von Gunten as the unruly, unnamed classmate (FKA, 48), then it could be further posited that Jakob is indeed the narrator behind "Tagebuch eines Schülers", and is thus referencing back to his classmate Fritz.



and claim to obey it, but only if it presents the opportunity of later on refusing their ethics. Walser's protagonists do not succumb to power, but rather lure it and then subvert it. Sontag (1992, vii) has pinned this movement in two swift sentences: "The moral core of Walser's art is the refusal of power; of domination. I'm ordinary – that is, nobody – declares the characteristic Walser persona". Neither do they seek, via subversion, to flip the table and grab the upper hand. Their refusal of power is complete, their disdain for heroism whole. Neither heroes nor villains, but survivors of both, the last men standing like the proverbial horses in Sloterdijk's saying.

Heffernan, still commenting on the *Mikrogramme*, also underlines Walser's quiet subversion:

Walser presents an image of a society and a culture that is founded on power, and then proceeds to call into question that power. Within the framework of his *Mikrogramm*, if nowhere else, he can fantasize about a literary world in which such hierarchies are undermined and overthrown. In these short dramas, the characters go against the norms and conventions of society and make fun of ordered society and its authority. (Heffernan, 2007, 75)

The derision, however, is more cynic that it is overt, like a hand trying to determine the precise limit between a caress and a blow. Jakob von Gunten's *modus operandi*, to return to Sloterdijk's words, consists in him "seek[ing] refuge in the hesitatingly brave masses" of the Institute Benjamenta and there "camouflag[ing] himself and mak[ing] himself as unobtrusive as possible". What he must learn at the Institute, what drove him there, what keeps him there, that which will free him from his Künstlernatur, is the art of no longer being a child at heart. For a proper child he has never been, and therefore childhood will always cling to him,<sup>54</sup> as it does to all pupils other than Kraus<sup>55</sup>: "Here in the Benjamenta Institute one learns to suffer and endure losses, and that is in my view a craft [*ein Können*], an exercise without which any person will always remain a big child, a sort of crybaby, however important he may be" (JvG, 92). Should he finally manage to suppress – through menial repetitions and subservient tasks – his enduring inner child, then maturity (or, in Sloterdijk's psychoanalytical terms, "superego") will grace him with a Walserian variant of cowardice. The Walserian coward – i.e: the anti-hero –, owner of a slightly decomposed superego, welcomes and embraces,

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<sup>54</sup> "Ich war eigentlich nie Kind, und deshalb, glaube ich zuversichtlich, wird an mir immer etwas Kindheitliches haften bleiben." (JvG, 144)

<sup>55</sup> "Sogar Schilinski, der doch noch ein vollkommenes Kind ist" (JvG, 9); "Heinrich ist noch ganz Kind, aber er spricht und benimmt sich schon wie ein erwachsener Mensch von guter Führung" (JvG, 10); "Armer Schacht. Er ist ein Kind." (JvG, 123)



according to Sloterdijk, both cynicism and a higher degree of critical realism. He grows observant rather than active, ironic and not constructive, mistrustful of all models based on domination and power. Vila-Matas places Walser's characters within the constellation of naysayers, which is exactly what Jakob does by refusing to face the world head first, retreating instead over and over again down corridors and hallways until he can flee on his own terms. Herr Benjamenta, who is at first described as a giant supreme,<sup>56</sup> slowly loses his throne,<sup>57</sup> and finally his whole kingdom.<sup>58</sup> But he does not fall so that Jakob may rise: they are both, as the journal comes to an end, equally defeated and reduced to very little. Jakob achieves the degree zero of heroism by never prematurely committing to anything, and thus millimetrically positioning himself on the anti-hero mark, where "the hero" is an obsolete image to be laughed at: "All the ancient heroic virtues you unpack", Jakob dreams of retorting to one of his teachers, "have lost their importance long ago, you know it yourself" (JvG, 59).

Incidentally, the first sentence on Jakob's journal gives a straightforward answer to the question left open by the last words written by the secondary-school student in "Tagebuch eines Schülers": "How will it go in later life? I wonder" (Gsch, 113) – to which Jakob offers this piece of anti-heroic advice:

One learns very little here, there is a shortage of teachers, and none of us boys of the Benjamenta Institute will come to anything, that is to say, we shall all be something very small and subordinate later in life. The instruction that we enjoy consists mainly in impressing patience and obedience upon ourselves, two qualities that promise little success, or none at all. Inward successes, yes. But what does one get from such as these? Do inward acquisitions give one food to eat?<sup>59</sup>

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**56** "Herr Benjamenta ist ein Riese, und wir Zöglinge sind Zwerge gegen diesen Riesen, der stets etwas mürrisch ist. Als Lenker und Gebieter einer Schar von so winzigen, unbedeutenden Geschöpfen, wie wir Knaben sind, ist er eigentlich auf ganz natürliche Weise zur Verdrießlichkeit verpflichtet, denn das ist doch nie und nimmer eine seinen Kräften entsprechende Aufgabe: über uns herrschen." (JvG, 17–18)

**57** "Ich bin ein abgesetzter König. Du lächelst? Ich finde es einfach köstlich, weißt du, daß dir jetzt gerade, wo ich von abgesetzten, ihrer Throne enthobenen Königen spreche, ein Lächeln, solch ein spitzbübisches Lächeln entflieht. Du hast Verstand, Jakob." (JvG, 107)

**58** "Ich bitte dich, kleiner Zuhörer, um Entschuldigung, wenn ich dich an Szepter und Purpurmantel habe glauben machen. Doch glaube ich, daß du es eigentlich wußtest, wie es mit diesen gestammelten und geseufzten Königreichen im Grunde gemeint war. Nicht wahr, ein wenig gemütlicher komme ich dir jetzt vor? Jetzt, da ich kein König mehr bin? Denn das gibst du doch selbst zu, daß solche Herrscher, wenn sie genötigt sind, Unterricht usw. zu erteilen und Institute zu eröffnen, gewiß unheimliche Patrone wären." (JvG, 159)

**59** "Man lernt hier sehr wenig, es fehlt an Lehrkräften, und wir Knaben vom Institut Benjamenta werden es zu nichts bringen, d. h., wir werden alle etwas sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes im

What use are there for inward successes if one cannot be fed by them, if even the most accomplished products of inward efforts – a painting, for instance, or a book – offer no nutritional value. Jakob mocks the idealism of those living off flowers and heroic clichés; he distrusts – or wishes to distrust – the self-important artist who deems art a matter of life and death, like a war hero in a battlefield. The closest he gets from acting the hero is when he asks for a receipt – “Da fand ich den Heldenmut, schüchtern um eine Quittung zu ersuchen” (JvG, 12) –, perhaps attempting, through irony, to further repress his own diseased leanings, to convince himself of the futility of being drawn inward, towards the center of things. Jakob desperately clings to the margins, it is there where he thrives. Only in the margins can the anti-hero come to life:

And of course we aren't heroes. And why should we be? First, we have no chance to behave like heroes, and second: I doubt if Schilinski, for example, or Beanpole Peter, could be inveigled into making sacrifices. Even without kisses, heroes, and pillared pavilions, our garden is a nice arrangement, I think. Talking of heroes gives me the shivers. I'd rather not say anything on that.

There's so much that comforts us, because we are, in general, very zealous and inquiring people, and because we set little value on ourselves. A person who sets a high value on himself is never safe from discouragements and humiliations, for confronting a self-conscious person there is always something hostile to consciousness.<sup>60</sup>

Jakob's journal stands for a detailed account of his journey towards the degree zero of heroism, his retreat into the corridors of marginality; it chronicles Jakob's alleged distrust of inner successes and artistic endeavors and juvenile candor through an artifact that is constitutively poisoned by inner successes and artistic endeavors and juvenile candor. Almost every eloquent argument against greatness and heroism is simultaneously – in the same sentence even – undermined

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späteren Leben sein. Der Unterricht, den wir genießen, besteht hauptsächlich darin, uns Geduld und Gehorsam einzuprägen, zwei Eigenschaften, die wenig oder gar keinen Erfolg versprechen. Innere Erfolge, ja. Doch was hat man von solchen? Geben einem innere Errungenschaften zu essen?” (JvG, 7)

**60** “Und wir sind ja doch keine Helden. Wozu auch! Erstens fehlt uns die Gelegenheit, uns heroisch zu benehmen, und zweitens, ich weiß nicht recht, ob z. B. Schilinski oder der lange Peter für Aufopferungen zu haben wären. Unser Garten ist auch ohne Küsse, Helden und Säulenpavillons eine hübsche Einrichtung, glaube ich. Mich friert es, wenn ich von Helden rede. Da schweige ich lieber.” (JvG, 85) “Uns tröstet so vieles, weil wir im allgemeinen sehr eifrige, sucherische Leute sind, und weil wir uns selber wenig schätzen. Wer sich selbst sehr schätzt, ist vor Entmutigungen und Herabwürdigungen nie sicher, denn stets begegnet dem selbstbewußten Menschen etwas Bewußtseinfeindliches.” (JvG, 92–93)

by a pervasive doubt: Jakob (and the other pupils) may be small all the way down to utter worthlessness, an absolute zero, but maybe in his veins runs not the blood of a commoner, but that of an aristocrat<sup>61</sup>; what is taught at the Institute is menial, repetitive, laughable, but maybe there is some secret hidden behind these nullities<sup>62</sup>; Jakob is convinced he shall become something quite lowly and puny, but all the same an odd, confident courage animates his being<sup>63</sup>; he must never forget he is the progeny of very low regions, destitute of any qualities necessary for him to rise to the top, but perhaps deep down he does possess them<sup>64</sup> – perhaps what people call greatness is actually something quite humble and grey.<sup>65</sup>

Before Jakob, a thoroughly torn individual, an anti-hero in the making, can actually give up on the Institute and flee, he must also exhaust the possibilities of the world outside.

#### 5.1.4 Jakob's conflict between the world of culture and the world of nature

Jakob's entire anti-heroic stance may be summed up in one detached sentence: he does not feel responsible for the *Zeitgeist*: "Bin ich verantwortlich für den Geist des Zeitalters? Ich nehme die Zeit, wie sie ist, und behalte mir nur vor, im stillen meine Beobachtungen zu machen" (JvG, 70). Such uncommitted posture allows him to stand back and observe, the man who bets on the horses only after they have already crossed the finishing line. He will – somewhat ironically – claim to feel a child of his times whenever he partakes in the world of technique,<sup>66</sup>

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61 "Klein sind wir, klein bis hinunter zur Nichtswürdigkeit. (...) Aber auch in dieser Beziehung bin ich mir vorläufig noch ein Rätsel. Vielleicht steckt ein ganz, ganz gemeiner Mensch in mir. Vielleicht aber besitze ich aristokratische Adern. Ich weiß es nicht. Aber das Eine weiß ich bestimmt: Ich werde eine reizende, kugelrunde Null im späteren Leben sein." (JvG, 8)

62 "Welch ein Unterricht! Doch ich würde lügen, wenn ich ihn kurios fände. Nein, ich finde das, was Fräulein Benjamenta uns lehrt, beherzigenswert. Es ist wenig, und wir wiederholen immer, aber vielleicht steckt ein Geheimnis hinter all diesen Nichtigkeiten und Lächerlichkeiten." (JvG, 9)

63 "Ich, ich werde etwas sehr Niedriges und Kleines sein. Die Empfindung, die mir das sagt, gleicht einer vollendeten, unantastbaren Tatsache. Mein Gott, und ich habe trotzdem so viel, so viel Mut, zu leben? Was ist mit mir? Oft habe ich ein wenig Angst vor mir, aber nicht lange. Nein, nein, ich vertraue mir. Aber ist das nicht geradezu komisch?" (JvG, 43)

64 "Ich vergesse nie, daß ich ein Abkömmling bin, der nun von unten, von ganz unten anfängt, ohne doch die Eigenschaften, die nötig sind, emporzugelangen, zu besitzen. Vielleicht, ja. Es ist alles möglich..." (JvG, 117)

65 "Nie und nimmer erreicht man mit Empfindungen, wie die sind, mit denen ich der Welt gegenüberstehe, je Großes, es sei denn, man pfeife aufs glitzernde Große und nenne das groß, was ganz grau, still, hart und niedrig ist." (JvG, 117)

66 "Wenn ich Lift fahre, komme ich mir so recht wie das Kind meiner Zeit vor." (JvG, 26)

thus reinforcing his hope – nay, conviction – of being modern, and proudly so,<sup>67</sup> although being modern, for him, carries the weight of subservience and a whiff of slavery: “Of course, too, there are very very many slaves in the midst of us arrogantly ready-made modern people. Perhaps all we present-day people are something like slaves, ruled by an angry, whip-wielding, unrefined idea of the world” (JvG, 78).

Perhaps, ventures Jakob, the modern man is a slave of an unrefined idea of the world. The way unrefined ideas come into being is through too rushed an adoption, too impatient and eager, set forth in heroic bouts of bovine confidence. Jakob – shaped after Walser’s shadow – is a slow modernist after all, not a reactionary willing to promptly dismiss his times, but neither an enthusiast praising its every crime. Jakob is a late adopter of the world; he does not rush to meet it halfway, but rather waits until it has played its hand, and only then decides on the best course of action. Jakob’s wait is nonetheless unintuitive, as are his actions: they are never explicitly confrontational, although they turn out to be remarkably subversive. Perhaps, ventures Jakob, man is not born a slave, but unawares made into one, to which conundrum the single viable solution would be to confront one’s own captive ignorance and therefore willingly becoming a servant, and only then attain freedom. From atop the watchtower that is his journal, Jakob seeks to answer anthropology’s most convulsive question: are we products of culture or children of nature?

Are we products of a higher culture, or are we nature-boys [*Naturkinder*]? I don’t know that either. One thing I do know for certain: we are waiting! That’s our value. Yes, we’re waiting, and we are, as it were, listening to life, listening out into that plateau which people call the world, out across the sea with its storms.<sup>68</sup>

Again the evasive and the noncommittal – the most Jakob is prepared to say is that we must wait, listen to life, which is synonymous with a wary, observant posture, an overly cautious heed: we shall not be pioneers, we will wait until the die is cast before making our move. And therein lies culture for Jakob: in reflection and repression. To be cultivated means to be uninterested in the self-seeking

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**67** “Allerdings ist er stolz, denn es ist ihm unmöglich, die angeborne Natur zu verleugnen, aber er versteht unter Stolz etwas ganz Neues, gewissermaßen der Zeit, in der er lebt, Entsprechendes. Er hofft, daß er modern, einigermaßen geschickt zu Dienstleistungen und nicht ganz dumm und unbrauchbar ist, aber er lügt, er hofft das nicht nur, sondern er behauptet und weiß es.” (JvG, 51)

**68** “Sind wir Produkte einer höheren Kultur, oder sind wir Naturkinder? Auch das kann ich nicht sagen. Das eine weiß ich bestimmt: wir warten! Das ist unser Wert. Ja, wir warten, und wir horchen gleichsam ins Leben hinaus, in diese Ebene hinaus, die man Welt nennt, aufs Meer mit seinen Stürmen hinaus.” (JvG, 93)

and strive towards the self-disciplining, to withhold one's word and avoid blabbing too much, to take in more than to idly talk<sup>69</sup>; to be eyes and ears, not mouths. Not surprisingly, Kraus is Jakob's poster boy for culture, despite the fact that the world will take him for an uncultivated, yet useful person. Kraus stands for culture in human form: no fanciful fluttering of knowledge flies about him, but instead solid trust and loyalty, reticence of speech, a holdback personality, and above all a deep, constant thoughtfulness manifested in a lack of ego and a surplus of discipline.<sup>70</sup>

The fact that the world shall misinterpret Kraus' cultured qualities should not be overlooked: Jakob draws a clear line between his own conception of culture and the one commonly held by the world. He resorts to the so-called cultivated circles of society – to the “Kreisen der fortschrittlichen Bildung” made up by artists and likewise-minded people – in order to illustrate his point. The unmistakable fatigue of the “healthy-unhealthy person”<sup>71</sup> runs rampant among these “society people”: book-knowledgeable, for certain, pleasant and well-mannered

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**69** Therefore, upon writing his Lebenslauf, Jakob praises himself for being reticent of speech and a trustworthy confidante: “Er ist wortkarg und wird Vertraulichkeiten niemals ausplaudern” (JvG, 52).

**70** “Der liebe Kraus. Immer zieht es mich in Gedanken wieder nach ihm hin. An ihm sieht man so recht, was das Wort Bildung eigentlich bedeutet. Kraus wird später im Leben, wohin er auch kommen wird, immer als brauchbarer, aber als ungebildeter Mensch angesehen werden, für mich aber ist gerade er durchaus gebildet, und zwar hauptsächlich deshalb, weil er ein festes, gutes Ganzes darstellt. Man kann gerade ihn eine menschliche Bildung nennen. Das flattert um Kraus herum nicht von geflügelten und lispelnden Kenntnissen, dafür ruht etwas in ihm, und er, er ruht und beruht auf etwas. Man kann sich mit der Seele selber auf ihn verlassen. Er wird nie jemanden hintergehen oder verleumden, nun, das vor allen Dingen, dieses Nicht-Schwatzhafte, nenne ich Bildung. Wer schwatzt, ist ein Betrüger, er kann ein ganz netter Mensch sein, aber seine Schwäche, alles, was er gerade denkt, so herauszuschwatzen, macht ihn zum gemeinen und schlechten Gesellen. Kraus bewahrt sich, er behält immer etwas für sich, er glaubt, es nicht nötig zu haben, so drauf los zu reden, und das wirkt wie Güte und lebhaftes Schonen. Das nenne ich Bildung. Kraus ist unliebenswürdig und oft ziemlich grob gegen Menschen seines Alters und seines Geschlechtes, und gerade deshalb mag ich ihn so gern, denn das beweist mir, daß er sich auf den brutalen und gedankenlosen Verrat nicht versteht. Er ist treu und anständig gegen alle. Denn das ist es ja: aus gemeiner Liebenswürdigkeit pflegt man meist hinzugehen und Ruf und Leben seines Nachbarn, seines Kameraden, ja seines Bruders auf die entsetzlichste Weise zu schänden. Kraus kennt wenig, aber er ist nie, nie gedankenlos, er unterwirft sich immer gewissen selbstgestellten Geboten, und das nenne ich Bildung. Was an einem Menschen liebevoll und gedankenvoll ist, das ist Bildung. Und dann ist ja noch so vieles. So von aller und jeder, auch der kleinsten Selbstsucht entfernt, dagegen aber der Selbstzucht so nah zu sein...” (JvG, 79–80)

**71** “Es herrscht unter diesen Kreisen der fortschrittlichen Bildung eine kaum zu übersehende und mißzuverstehende Müdigkeit. Nicht die formelle Blasiertheit etwa des Adels von Abstammung, nein, eine wahrhafte, eine ganz wahre, auf höherer und lebhafterer Empfindung

to say the least, but fundamentally too caught up in their own selves, driven by success to such an extent that they all end up having the same non-descript, vapid face, and due to their self-serving ambitions become susceptible to the consuming fear of being debunked and losing their fiefdom:

These people are cavaliers. And they seem never to feel quite right. Whoever can feel right if he places value on the tokens of respect and the distinctions conferred by the world? And then I think that these people, who are, after all, society people and not living in a state of nature, are always feeling that some successor is pursuing them.<sup>72</sup>

These falsely cultivated people are, too, slaves of their unrefined ideas of the world, letting their egos run amok and thus enticing all manners of ambushes and rivalries, naïvely installing the world as the meter against which they shall measure their worth. Jakob accuses these people of not living in a state of nature, although this statement should not be taken at face value, as it reveals how counterintuitive his notions of culture and nature are, and how profoundly torn between them he is.

Nature, to Jakob, is the domain of pride, of defiance, of mischief, of the untamed spirit that needs to be tamed.<sup>73</sup> It is that with which Kraus was not graced, so as to hinder any “mischievous outward successes” that might disrupt his commitment to obedience and discipline. Kraus shall remain “monotonous, monosyllabic, unambiguous”, repressed by what Jakob wants to believe is culture, devoid of all traits that might lead to success and recognition, but merely “going on living without enjoying attention” so that he can be a nothing a last, a complete zero. Nature is neither to be trusted nor left unchecked by culture, as it

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beruhende Müdigkeit, die Müdigkeit des gesunden-ungesunden Menschen. Sie sind alle gebildet, aber achten sie einander?” (JvG, 116)

**72** “Diese Leute sind Kavaliere. Und sie scheinen sich nie ganz wohl zu befinden. Wer kann sich wohl befinden, wer auf die Achtungsbezeugungen und Auszeichnungen der Welt Wert legt? Und dann, glaube ich, fühlen diese Menschen, da sie doch einmal Gesellschafts- und durchaus keine Naturmenschen mehr sind, stets den Nachfolger hinter sich.” (JvG, 115)

**73** “Allerdings ist er stolz, denn es ist ihm unmöglich, die angeborne Natur zu verleugnen, aber er versteht unter Stolz etwas ganz Neues, gewissermaßen der Zeit, in der er lebt, Entsprechendes. Er hofft, daß er modern, einigermaßen geschickt zu Dienstleistungen und nicht ganz dumm und unbrauchbar ist, aber er lügt, er hofft das nicht nur, sondern er behauptet und weiß es. Er hat einen Trotzkopf, in ihm leben eben noch ein wenig die ungebändigten Geister seiner Vorfahren, doch er bittet, ihn zu ermahnen, wenn er trotz, und wenn das nichts nützt, zu züchtigen, denn dann glaubt er, nützt es.” (JvG, 51)

may, in all its prideful mischievousness, inflate one's idea of oneself, lead to complacency, vanity, and, worst of all, to "being recognized by the crowd".<sup>74</sup>

The instruction that Jakob seeks at the Institute Benjamenta, which he deems culture, thrives exactly in repetition, given that repetition sheds excesses and flourishes. Thus the Institute's unrelenting dancing lessons act not as a repertoire of new movements, but as the institution of a wooden routine in which any undue show of skill – an untamed product of nature – is severely frowned upon: "Sehr amüsant sind manchmal unsere Turn- und Tanzstunden. Geschick zeigen zu müssen, das ist nicht ohne Gefahr. Wie kann man sich doch blamieren" (JvG, 103). The real problem here, the core of Jakob von Gunten's dilemma, the flame behind the pages of his journal, lies in the fact that one cannot fully repress nature: "So ganz die Natur zu unterdrücken, das geht eben doch nicht. Und doch geht's. Aber hat man sich auch die Natur total abgewöhnt, es bleibt immer ein Hauch, ein Rest übrig, das zeigt sich immer" (JvG, 103–104). An undying breath of nature remains all throughout culture, and despite all self-discipline it always shows, an outburst of laughter that cannot be repressed, although it must be repressed, the untamed spirit that begs for taming, the rule that beckons bending, and in this stop-and-go motion Jakob finds a masochist pleasure in submitting himself to precisely that which offends him the most:

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74 "Ich verstehe jetzt auch, warum Kraus keine äußern Vorzüge, keine körperlichen Zierlichkeiten besitzt, warum ihn die Natur so zwerghaft zerdrückt und verunstaltet hat. Sie will irgend etwas mit ihm, sie hat etwas mit ihm vor, oder sie hat von Anfang an etwas mit ihm vorgehabt. Dieser Mensch ist der Natur vielleicht zu rein gewesen, und deshalb hat sie ihn in einen unansehnlichen, geringen, unschönen Körper geworfen, um ihn vor den verderblichen äußern Erfolgen zu bewahren. (...) Er glänzt nicht mit Gaben, aber mit dem Schimmer eines guten und unverdorbenen Herzens, und seine schlechten, schlichten Manieren sind vielleicht trotz alles Hölzernen, das ihnen anhaftet, das Schönste, was es an Bewegung und Manier in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geben kann. Nein, Erfolg wird Kraus nie haben, weder bei den Frauen, die ihn trocken und häßlich finden werden, noch sonst im Weltleben, das an ihm achtlos vorübergehen wird. Achtlos? Ja, man wird Kraus nie achten, und gerade das, daß er, ohne Achtung zu genießen, dahinleben wird, das ist ja das Wundervolle und Planvolle, das An-den-Schöpfer-Mahnende. (...) Ja, Kraus ist ein Bild rechtlichen, ganz, ganz eintönigen, einsilbigen und eindeutigen Wesens. Niemand wird die Schlichtheit dieses Menschen verkennen, und deshalb wird ihn auch niemand achten, und er wird durchaus erfolglos bleiben. (...) Nein, kein Erfolg, kein Ruhm, keine Liebe werden Kraus je blühen, das ist sehr gut, denn die Erfolge haben nur die Zerfahrenheit und einige billige Weltanschauungen zur unabstreifbaren Begleitschaft. Man spürt es sofort, wenn Menschen Erfolge und Anerkennung aufzuweisen haben, sie werden quasi dick von sättigender Selbstzufriedenheit, und ballonhaft bläst sie die Kraft der Eitelkeit auf, zum Niewiedererkennen. Gott behüte einen braven Menschen vor der Anerkennung der Menge." (JvG, 80–82)

I very much like stopping the outburst of laughter. It tickles, marvelously: not letting it go, the thing that so much wants to come shooting out, I like things that aren't allowed to be, things that have to go, down into my inside. It makes these repressed things more awkward, but at the same time more valuable. Yes, yes, I admit I like being repressed. To be sure. No, not always to be sure. On your way, Toby Shaw! What I mean is: if you aren't allowed to do something, you do it twice as much somewhere else. Nothing's more insipid than an indifferent, quick, cheap bit of permission. I like earning everything, experiencing everything, and a laugh, for example, also needs to be thoroughly experienced. When inside me I'm bursting with laughter, when I hardly know what to do with all this hissing gunpowder, then I know what laughing is, then I have laughed most laughishly, then I have a complete idea of what was shaking me. So I must firmly suppose and keep it as my strong conviction that rules do gild existence, or at least they silver it, in a word, they make it delectable. For certainly it's the same with almost all other things and pleasures as it is with the forbidden delectable laugh. Not being allowed to cry, for example, well, that makes crying larger.<sup>75</sup>

What Jakob grudgingly holds against the “circles of progressive culture” by denying them a state of nature is twofold: on the one hand a misguided conception of culture (vapid pleasantries in lieu of self-discipline), and, on the other, an over-indulgent behavior towards their own nature (the untamed spirit in service of the ego). For deep down, on a basic level still unspoiled by the world, Jakob does identify with them, with their “healthy-unhealthiness”, which is – as already mentioned – the main reason behind his enrollment at the Institute, to hinder his mischievously loud, dangerously artistic nature. Jakob puts himself in a position where all successes – negligible and fleeting as they might be – have no place to go but inwards (“Was nicht sein darf, was in mich hinab muß, ist mir lieb”): they disappear in the dark depths of his own private insignificance. He does not need to measure himself against the world and his peers, thus invalidating altogether

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75 “Ich mag mich sehr, sehr gern am Herausschallen des Lachens verhindern lassen. Das kitzelt so wunderbar: es nicht loslassen zu dürfen, was doch so gern herausschießen möchte. Was nicht sein darf, was in mich hinab muß, ist mir lieb. Es wird dadurch peinlicher, aber zugleich wertvoller, dieses Unterdrückte. Ja ja, ich gestehe, ich bin gern unterdrückt. Zwar. Nein, nicht immer zwar. Herr Zwar soll mir abmarschieren. Was ich sagen wollte: etwas nicht tun dürfen, heißt, es irgendwo anders doppelt tun. Nichts ist fader als eine gleichgültige, rasche, billige Erlaubnis. Ich verdiene, erfahre gern alles, und z. B. ein Lachen bedarf auch der Durch-Erfahrung. Wenn ich innerlich zerspringe vor Lachen, wenn ich kaum noch weiß, wo ich all das zischende Pulver hintun soll, dann weiß ich, was Lachen ist, dann habe ich am lächerigsten gelacht, dann habe ich eine vollkommene Vorstellung dessen gehabt, was mich erschütterte. Ich muß demnach unbedingt annehmen und es als feste Überzeugung aufbewahren, daß Vorschriften das Dasein versilbern, vielleicht sogar vergolden, mit einem Wort reizvoll machen. Denn wie mit dem verbotenen reizenden Lachen ist es doch sicher mit fast allen andern Dingen und Gelüsten ebenfalls.” (JvG, 104–105)



the concept of idealism: Jakob von Gunten cannot be held as a moral example as the stuff of which he is made of cannot be molded into an archetype.

Jakob submits his mischievous nature to the cultured hallways of the Institute Benjamenta, where he wishes for it to be tamed and repressed. But upon realizing, in the journal's last entry, that the Benjamentas shall never make a Kraus out of him, that he cannot be tamed after all, Jakob finally manages to escape not only nature, but culture altogether – both his conception of it and the European variant, the one held by the high circles of society: “It looked as if we had both escaped forever, or at least for a very long time, from what people call European culture” (JvG, 162). He is finally, beyond any doubt, an absolute anti-hero – he becomes that which he already was in the journal's first entry: a charming, spherical zero. Jakob has walked the fine line between nature and culture and found no answer, or categorically refused to give one; he instead observed it until he could flee from it, flee, of all places, to an outlandish desert,<sup>76</sup> as if hearing Benjamin's prophetic call: the night is over, and fairytale claims back Jakob's paper-thin existence.

### 5.1.5 Brother ex-machina: The role of the eldest brother in *Jakob von Gunten*

A second and more decisive anxiety lurks behind the deception of anthropology: the enduring conflict between the inner and the outer to which Walser's characters are fatally exposed, a slow contamination like asbestos in the walls. Jakob's nature-culture divide is a travesty of a more pressing question, the urgency of life versus the rumination of concepts: how to reconcile the inward pull of existence – a gravitational force that draws Jakob further and deeper and darker inside his own mind – to the alluring and deceptive charms of the world outside?

Despite its misleading chronology, the diary does account for a transition between its first and second halves, as Jakob's fairytale- or dream-like fascination for the streets subsides and then completely disappears. At first, Jakob is enthralled by the crowd, by the whizzing and humming of the streets,<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> “Ich einzelner Mensch bin nur eine Null. Aber weg jetzt mit der Feder. Weg jetzt mit dem Gedankenleben. Ich gehe mit Herrn Benjamenta in die Wüste. Will doch sehen, ob es sich in der Wildnis nicht auch leben, atmen, sein, aufrichtig Gutes wollen und tun und nachts schlafen und träumen läßt. Ach was. Jetzt will ich an gar nichts mehr denken. Auch an Gott nicht? Nein! Gott wird mit mir sein. Was brauche ich da an ihn zu denken? Gott geht mit den Gedankenlosen. Nun denn adieu, Institut Benjamenta.” (JvG, 164)

<sup>77</sup> “Oft gehe ich aus, auf die Straße, und da meine ich, in einem ganz wild anmutenden Märchen zu leben. Welch ein Geschiebe und Gedränge, welch ein Rasseln und Prasseln. Welch ein Geschrei, Gestampf, Gesurr und Gesumme. Und alles so eng zusammengepfercht. (...) Ich liebe den Lärm und die fortlaufende Bewegung der Großstadt.” (JvG, 37; 46)

constantly – to the point of impertinence – begging Herr Benjamenta for a position outside the hallways of the Institute,<sup>78</sup> urging Kraus – of all people – to go outside, to get to know the world a little,<sup>79</sup> claiming that “[t]he city educates, it cultivates, and by examples, what’s more, not by arid precepts from books. There is nothing professorial about it, and that is flattering, for the towering gravity of knowledge discourages one” (JvG, 46). But then, as the diary’s first half comes to a close, something starts to break, at first slowly, through tentative subjunctive formulations, and later on more seriously, as the convictions of a seasoned young man. Jakob claims to no longer wish to travel far and wide, that he would refuse to educate himself any further and would instead be attracted by deep things rather than by distance.<sup>80</sup> In doing so, he echoes Kasper, Simon’s brother in *Geschwister Tanner*, who similarly finds no use in investigating things far off, but chooses instead to focus on what is near at hand (although Kasper wouldn’t have dismissed books as provocatively as Jakob did). Jakob’s interest in what people call “the world” withers as his fascination for his own inner, private world blossoms (JvG, 116). Herr Benjamenta confesses he never intended to find a job for Jakob, that people like him would do better to stay put at the Institute,<sup>81</sup> stuck between the dreamlike and the real, and this suits Jakob rather well now that he has given up on any thoughts of greatness.<sup>82</sup>

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**78** “Ich habe mich nicht bezwingen können, ich bin ins Bureau gegangen, habe mich gewohnheitsgemäß tief verbeugt und habe zu Herrn Benjamenta folgendes gesprochen: ‘Ich habe Arme, Beine und Hände, Herr Benjamenta, und ich möchte arbeiten, und daher erlaube ich mir, Sie zu bitten, mir recht bald Arbeit und Geldverdienst zu verschaffen. Sie haben allerlei Beziehungen, ich weiß es.’” (JvG, 61)

**79** “Komme ich heim, so sitzt Kraus da und spottet mich aus. Ich sage ihm, man müsse doch ein wenig die Welt kennen lernen.” (JvG, 39)

**80** “Wenn ich reich wäre, würde ich keineswegs um die Erde reisen. Zwar, das wäre ja gar nicht so übel. Aber ich sehe nichts Berauschendes dahinter, das Fremde flüchtig kennen zu lernen. Im allgemeinen würde ich es verschmähen, mich, wie man so sagt, weiter auszubilden. Mich würde eher die Tiefe, die Seele, als die Ferne und Weite locken. Das Naheliegende zu untersuchen würde mich reizen.” (JvG, 75)

**81** “In die Arbeit hinaus willst du treten, Jakob? Ich aber sage dir, bleib du lieber noch. Hier ist es doch für dich und deinesgleichen ganz schön. Oder nicht? (...). Willst du? Sagst du ja? Mich würde es freuen, dich ein wenig den Träumereien verfallen zu sehen. (...) Was denkst du dir eigentlich? Meinst du, in der offenen Welt Großes erreichen, erringen zu können? Zu müssen? Hast du ernstliche Absichten auf etwas Bedeutungsvolles? (...) Oder dann willst du vielleicht, vielleicht wie zum Trotz, ganz klein bleiben? Auch das mute ich dir zu. Du bist ein bißchen zu festlich, zu heftig, zu triumphatorisch aufgelegt. Doch das alles ist ja so gleichgültig, du bleibst noch, Jakob. Dir gebe ich keine Stelle, dir verschaffe ich noch lange nichts derartiges.” (JvG, 129)

**82** “Ich hasse alles zukünftige Wohlergehen, ich verabscheue das Leben. (...) Nein, ich mag nicht in das Leben, nicht in die Welt hinaustreten.” (JvG, 125)

Both the break that takes place halfway through Jakob's diary and the overarching nature-culture/inner-outer divide that fuel the narrative are instigated by the pivotal figure of Johann, Jakob's brother, whose perfectly timed intermezzo between pages 65 and 70 profoundly shapes the novel's conceptual background.

First introduced some ten pages prior on a dubious and tentative note – Jakob has neither visited his brother, nor (or so he claims) does he wish to do so –, Johann is described as something like a rather famous painter, whom Jakob would only agree to meet if they happened upon one another on the streets.<sup>83</sup> Johann is five labors short of being Herculean, as he prompts, through both his character and his dialogue, the bare-boned schematizing of seven recurring theoretical pillars in Walser's oeuvre, hence summing up the main thematic lines discussed thus far.

a) *Johann's first and second labors: The artist's role, the zero's lesson*

If Johann is an artist, then Jakob is his opposite: a nothing – “Was bin ich, und was ist er? Was ein Zögling des Institutes Benjamenta ist, das weiß ich, es liegt auf der Hand. Solch ein Zögling ist eine gute runde Null, weiter nichts. Aber was mein Bruder zur Stunde ist, das kann ich nicht wissen” (JvG, 53). Such nothings, the pupils, that even if a writer were to stumble upon their classroom and catch them in all their glory and littleness, said writer would no more than laugh at their expenses and immediately move on, and rightly so, for home is the best place for such windbags who can only absorb life through a veneer of some sort, never directly, like Jakob claims to do.<sup>84</sup> An artist's take on life is more concerned with art than it is with life; it is tainted by thoughts of greatness when it should be addressing the dire needs of existence. Jakob thus construes what his brother says, when they finally meet, as a confirmation that he should remain true to himself and start from all the way down (he is a von Gunten after all, “von ganz

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**83** “Ich muß jetzt etwas berichten, was vielleicht einigen Zweifel erregt. Und doch ist es durchaus Wahrheit, was ich sage. Es lebt ein Bruder von mir in dieser gewaltigen Stadt, mein einziger Bruder, ein meiner Ansicht nach außerordentlicher Mensch, Johann heißt er, und er ist so etwas wie ein namhaft bekannter Künstler. Ich weiß um seine jetzige Stellung in der Welt nichts Bestimmtes, da ich es vermieden habe, ihn zu besuchen. Ich werde nicht zu ihm gehen. Begegnen wir uns zufällig auf der Straße und erkennt er mich und tritt auf mich zu: schön, dann ist es mir lieb, seine brüderliche Hand kräftig zu schütteln.” (JvG, 53)

**84** “Und daher, weil wir so reizend frisiert und gescheitelt sind, sehen wir uns alle eigentlich ähnlich, was für einen Schriftsteller z. B. zum Totlachen wäre, wenn er uns besuchte, um uns in unserer Herrlichkeit und Wenigkeit zu studieren. Mag dieser Herr Schriftsteller zu Hause bleiben. Windbeutel sind das, die nur studieren, malen und Beobachtungen anstellen wollen. Man lebe, dann beobachtet sich's ganz von selber.” (JvG, 57)

unten”), that it is hardly worth it at the top, where the atmosphere is stifling and self-important, that it befits a young man to be a zero, for nothing would be more ruinous than being important from an early age on. And although for the world Jakob remains insignificant, to himself he is rather important, and there is value to be had in that.<sup>85</sup> What Jakob takes from this exchange, by positing Johann-the-artist as his antithesis, is that the dissimulated, mediated truth of art is not the truth he is primarily interested in uncovering, that life itself should come before its representation, and this despite the fact that Jakob’s chosen method of expression are the blank pages of a journal.

b) *Johann’s third labor: The sober bourgeois-bohème*

Before effectively meeting him, Jakob suspects Johann of being surrounded by fine, cultivated, formal people, which is enough reason for Jakob not to visit him, lest he should be approached by a well-groomed gentleman sporting a forced smile on his face. He also suspects his brother to have become a very refined, cigar-smoking, cushion-lying individual, a reality that does not suit in the least Jakob’s newfound un-bourgeoisie,<sup>86</sup> that only further aggravates the symbolic distance separating a well-situated artist from a lowly, unimportant pupil. Worst of all, should Jakob knock on the exclusive saloon doors where Johann and his *confrères* take refuge from the world, he would risk being mistaken for a beggar and pitied upon, a ghastly prospect if there ever was one. And nevertheless Jakob still wishes to meet his brother, very much so, while simultaneously not daring

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**85** “‘Bleib nur der, der du bist, Bruder,’ sprach Johann zu mir, ‘fange von tief unten an, das ist ausgezeichnet. (...) Denn sieh, oben, da lohnt es sich kaum noch zu leben. Sozusagen nämlich. Versteh mich recht, lieber Bruder. (...) Oben, da herrscht solch eine Luft. Nun, es herrscht eben eine Atmosphäre des Genugetanhabens, und das hemmt und engt ein. (...) Du bist jetzt sozusagen eine Null, bester Bruder. Aber wenn man jung ist, soll man auch eine Null sein, denn nichts ist so verderblich wie das frühe, das allzfrühe Irgendetwasbedeuten. Gewiß: dir bedeutest du etwas. Bravo. Vortrefflich. Aber der Welt bist du noch nichts, und das ist fast ebenso vortrefflich.’” (JvG, 65–66)

**86** “Er ist vielleicht umgeben von lauter feinen, gebildeten Menschen und von weiß Gott was für Formalitäten, und ich respektiere Formalitäten, deshalb suche ich nicht einen Bruder auf, wo mir möglicherweise ein soignierter Herr unter gezwungenem Lächeln entgegentritt. (...) Ich stelle mir ihn sehr fein vor, die beste Zigarette der Welt rauchend, und liegend auf den Kissen und Teppichen der bürgerlichen Behaglichkeit. Und wie? Ja, es ist jetzt in mir so etwas Unbürgerliches, so etwas durchaus Entgegengesetzt-Wohlanständiges, und vielleicht ruht mein Herr Bruder mitten drinnen im schönsten, prächtigsten Welt-Anstand. Es ist beschlossen: wir beide sehen uns nicht, vielleicht nie!” (JvG, 53–54)

to take the first step towards it.<sup>87</sup> For the bourgeois is none other than he or she who first inherits and then bestows the maintenance of the *status quo*, whereas Jakob's hidden agenda seeks submission as a means of subverting it, of turning hierarchical tables (despite his – and Walser's – repressed captivation for the velvety and perfumed halls of high-society).

c) *Johann's fourth labor: To be marginal*

Johann's words to his brother are contradictory as they are inspiring: Jakob should never think of himself as an outcast, for there are no outcasts whatsoever in a world where nothing is worth aspiring to. Jakob must at the same time aspire to something, even passionately so, and be aware that the world is rotten and nothing is worth his time or effort.<sup>88</sup> All efforts are therefore either vain or artificial. Bravery or heroism have no place in Walser's slow modernism – Jakob's importance or usefulness lies in him being almost completely unnecessary. A marginal figure if there ever was one, Jakob writes a diary and disappears from the world of culture.

d) *Johann's fifth labor: A slave of the world and of the masses*

The vaguely apocalyptic, slow modernist implications of Walser's oeuvre – and specifically of *Jakob von Gunten* – obliquely foreshadow key twentieth-century theoretical developments, as for instance in Johann's profoundly sober admonishment to his younger brother – and especially in the eerie question that concludes it:

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**87** “Um meinen Bruder herum gibt es sicher das beste, gewählteste Salon-Benehmen. Merci. O, ich danke. Da werden Frauen sein, die den Kopf zur Türe herausstrecken und schnippisch fragen: ‘Wer ist denn jetzt wieder da? Wie? Ist es vielleicht ein Bettler?’ – Verbindlichsten Dank für solch einen Empfang. Ich bin zu gut, um bemitleidet zu werden. Duftende Blumen im Zimmer! O ich mag gar keine Blumen. Und gelassenes Weltwesen? – Scheußlich. Ja, gern, sehr gern sähe ich ihn. Aber wenn ich ihn so sähe, so sähe im Glanz und im Behagen: futsch wäre die Empfindung, hier stehe ein Bruder, und ich würde nur Freude lügen dürfen, und er auch. Also nicht.” (JvG, 54–55)

**88** “‘Höre. Paß gut auf. Was ich dir sage, kann dir vielleicht eines Tages von Nutzen sein. Vor allen Dingen: komme dir nie verstoßen vor. Verstoßen, Bruder, das gibt es gar nicht, denn es gibt vielleicht auf dieser Welt gar, gar nichts redlich Erstrebenswertes. Und doch sollst du streben, leidenschaftlich sogar. Aber damit du nie allzu sehnsüchtig bist: präge dir ein: nichts, nichts Erstrebenswertes gibt es. Es ist alles faul. Verstehst du das?’” (JvG, 66–67)

“Of course there’s progress on earth, so called, but that’s only one of the many lies which the business people put out, so that they can squeeze money out of the crowd more blatantly and mercilessly. The masses are the slaves of today, and the individual is the slave of the vast mass-ideas. There’s nothing beautiful and excellent left. You must dream up beauty and goodness and justice. Tell me, do you know how to dream?”<sup>89</sup>

Therein germinates part of Jakob’s conviction that the modern man might be a slave to an unrefined idea of the world, and hence his own self-skinned and whole-hearted attempt at uncovering a deeper truth. Jakob is torn – and his brother’s intervention only puts him under added strain – between his own allegiances and those of his family, between his own cultural identity and that of the world around him. He must choose between giving up on his ideals and thus joining the masses, or giving up on the masses and thus becoming the master of own his fate. The question that Johann is asking Jakob with his somewhat lordly critique of modernity is a variation on the very same question Jakob is urged to answer throughout the entire novel: to choose between assimilation and obliteration.

e) *Johann’s sixth labor: To be independent*

Johann’s words may once again sound counter-intuitive at first sight: his counsel to Jakob is to try and earn lots and lots of money, for money is the only thing in the world that has not yet gone rotten. Even if there are still traces of a high-society that sets the intellectual and artistic tone, such society is no longer capable of striking the notes of dignity and subtlety of mind. Luckily, there are still books. Books and money. But after earning all this money, Jakob should just give up on the pecuniary idea as well. Rich people, according to Johann, are very unsatisfied and unhappy, they’ve got nothing left other than their own hunger.<sup>90</sup> Money, then,

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**89** “Es gibt ja allerdings einen sogenannten Fortschritt auf Erden, aber das ist nur eine der vielen Lügen, die die Geschäftemacher austreuen, damit sie um so frecher und schonungsloser Geld aus der Menge herauspressen können. Die Masse, das ist der Sklave von heute, und der Einzelne ist der Sklave des großartigen Massengedankens. Es gibt nichts Schönes und Vortreffliches mehr. Du mußt dir das Schöne und Gute und Rechtschaffene träumen. Sage mir, verstehst du zu träumen?” (JvG, 67)

**90** “Versuche es, fertig zu kriegen, viel, viel Geld zu erwerben. Am Geld ist noch nichts verpfuscht, sonst an allem. Alles, alles ist verdorben, halbiert, der Zier und der Pracht beraubt. Unsere Städte verschwinden unaufhaltsam vom Erdboden. Klötze nehmen den Raum ein, den Wohnhäuser und Fürstenpaläste eingenommen haben. Das Klavier, lieber Bruder, und das damit verbundene Klimpern! Konzert und Theater fallen von Stufe zu Stufe, auf einen immer tieferen Standpunkt. Es gibt ja allerdings noch so etwas wie eine tonangebende Gesellschaft, aber sie hat nicht mehr die Fähigkeit, Töne der Würde und des Feinsinnes anzuschlagen. Es gibt Bücher – mit einem Wort, sei niemals verzagt. Bleib arm und verachtet, lieber Freund. Auch den

should be pursued only to its bare minimum, to its breaking point, only up to the point where it can provide with creative freedom and peace of mind, but not a dime further. A small amount of money buys independence; a large sum enslaves. Jakob should strive to find the exact point of independence where it would be possible for him to create his own symbolic affiliation as he makes his way into the world.

### 5.1.6 Johann's seventh labor: To become a tree

Trees are vicious creatures, doomed to either grow tall forever or to perish under the shadow of their siblings. There is no functional purpose behind their growth other than survival; they must hope and yet hope for naught, their blind quest for light will be rewarded with mere permanence. Should one day a single tree convince a whole forest to stop growing, nothing in their ecosystem will change but their collective heights. In the end, only two things kill trees: men, through fire and blade, and trees themselves.

The root of Johann's intervention – regarding Walser's overarching oeuvre – comes to surface as he readies himself to bid Jakob farewell, when he likens his younger brother to a tree:

“You must hope and yet hope for nothing. Look up to something, yes, do that, because that is right for you, you're young, terribly young, Jakob, but always admit to yourself that you despise it, the thing that you're looking up to with respect. Nodding again, are you? Lord, what an intelligent listener you are. You're like a tree hung with understanding. Be content, dear brother, strive, learn, do whatever good and kind things you can for people. Look, I've got to go. When shall we meet again? Frankly, you interest me.”<sup>91</sup>

Beyond the obvious Romantic fascination, as a sight to be contemplated and painted and pined for and turned into poetry,<sup>92</sup> trees play a symbolically decisive

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Geld-Gedanken schlage dir weg. Es ist das Schönste und Triumphierendste, man ist ein ganz armer Teufel. Die Reichen, Jakob, sind sehr unzufrieden und unglücklich. Die reichen Leute von heutzutage: sie haben nichts mehr. Das sind die wahren Verhungerten.” (JvG, 67–68)

**91** “Du mußt hoffen und doch nichts hoffen. Schau empor an etwas, ja gewiß, denn das ziemt dir, du bist jung, unverschämt jung, Jakob, aber, gesteh' dir immer, daß du's verachtest, das, an dem du respektvoll emporschaust. Du nickst schon wieder? Teufel, was bist du für ein verständnisvoller Zuhörer. Du bist geradezu ein Baum, der voll Verständnis behangen ist. Sei zufrieden, lieber Bruder, strebe, lerne, tu womöglich irgend jemandem etwas Liebes und Gutes. Komm, ich muß gehen. Sag, wann treffen wir uns wieder? Du interessierst mich, offen gesagt.” (JvG, 68–69)

**92** As is the case with Walser's artistically infatuated characters, more specifically in the aptly-titled *Geschwister Tanner*, where the trees are not only cause for endless fascination and melancholy, but also the trigger for theoretical reflection: “Was hat die Kunst für Mittel, wenn sie

role within Walser's writing. On a more impressionistic level, as a recurring image in Walser's oeuvre, they offer solace and shadow, a moment of (individualistic) respite away from people, but also conceal uneasy dreams under their branches.<sup>93</sup> Following a more eerie reading, however, and one already alluded to when discussing Walser's unreal narrative strategies, trees are the first entities endowed with a vaguely ominous sentience, a metamorphosis particularly evident in *Träumen*, as, from one sketch to the next, trees surreptitiously acquire human traits as if slowly gathering means for a revenge, providing fodder to Sebald's and Armando's (via Nietzsche) unearthly post-war take on guilty and vindictive landscapes. In the novels and the longer pieces, on the other hand, trees generally set the tone for melancholy and empathy,<sup>94</sup> they color in the landscape beneath the character's feet as they mark the passage of seasons.<sup>95</sup> All of these elements are

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einen blühenden, duftenden Baum darstellen will, oder das Gesicht eines Menschen?" (GT, 289). Romanticism also runs rampant in Walser's début piece "Der Wald", published alongside (and in a similar tone to) *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* – a chronologically significant event, as it establishes both his oeuvre's golden milestone, and its tongue-in-cheek irony: although highly Romantic in its imagery, "Der Wald" is here and there coated in playful Walserian self-awareness – "Ist der Wald poetisch? Ja, das ist er, aber nicht mehr, als alles andere Lebendige auf der Welt. Besonders poetisch ist er nicht, er ist nur besonders schön! Von Dichtern wird er gern aufgesucht, weil es still ist darin, und man wohl in seinem Schatten mit einem guten Gedicht fertig werden kann. Er ist viel in Gedichten, der Wald, deshalb glauben gewisse, sonst gänzlich poesielose Menschen, ihn als etwas besonders Poesievolles verehren und beachten zu müssen. (...) Den Wald liebt man am Wald, nicht das Poetische daran" (FKA, 102; 103).

**93** In particular, the short stories "Germer" – "Den halben Tag könnte er unter einem Baume im Gras liegen und 'Weg von mir!' sagen" (A, 340) – and "Percy" – "Wenn sie ihm, abends, nach der Schlacht, wenn er sich ermüdet an einen Baum anlehnt, ertönt, will ihm das Herz, von Tränen getragen, wegschwimmen" (A, 263) – in *Aufsätze*; and "Der Kuß" – "Was ist der Kuß, den ich freundlich gebe, am hellen Tag oder bei Mondschein, in der friedlich-glücklichen Liebesnacht, unter einem Baum oder sonstwo, verglichen mit der Raserei des eingebildet-aufgezwungenen Kusses, geküßt von den Dämonen" (KD, 25–26) – and "Der Schäfer" – "Es liegt einer in der Sonne, nein, nicht ganz. Er liegt unter einem hohen Baum, die Beine und faulenzenden Füße an der Sonne und den Kopf, der ein träumerischer Kopf ist, im Schatten" (KD, 78) – in *Kleine Dichtungen*.

**94** Joseph, *Der Gehülfe's* homonymous assistant, is frequently carried into a tree-induced realm of melancholy – "Schaute man in die gelbliche Baumwelt hinein, so regte sich eine zarte Melancholie in einem" (G, 162) – to the point where just seeing a young pine tree being unnaturally transported from a greenhouse to a cellar, like a helpless prisoner (much like himself in the situation), triggers his heartfelt sympathy – "Das junge edle Tännchen mußte an Schnüren befestigt werden, damit es in den für sein schlankes und stolzes Wachstum zu niedern Gewölben wenigstens schräg stehen konnte. Es tat dem Gehülfe weh, den Baum derart untergebracht zu schauen, aber, was war da zu machen?" (G, 219–220).

**95** In *Geschwister Tanner*, for instance: "Das Gras wird bald wieder wachsen, die Bäume werden ihr Grün bald wieder über die niederen Hausdächer schütten und den Fenstern die Aussicht nehmen. Der Wald wird prangen, üppig, schwer, o, der Wald" (GT, 34).



in themselves potentially relevant for an arboreal interpretation of Walser's work, and they underline – albeit obliquely – this research's more arid and apocalyptic reading, an echo of Johann's prophetic words: that of endurance and flammability.

Jakob von Gunten (1909) is, in this aspect, the direct link between Simon Tanner (1907) and the narrator of *Der Spaziergang* (1917). In one swift breath Simon defines himself as an outlandish figure in his own homeland, stuck in a dead-end job as a lowly copy clerk. Unlike other people, he sees no point in travelling to distant lands, bound to a country where he slowly chokes to death. He must make an effort to go on breathing beneath the sky of his homeland if he wishes to survive at all,<sup>96</sup> he is a tree forever condemned to stationary growth, and it is in the shape of a tree that he finds vertical peace:

“Does nature go abroad? Do trees wander off to procure for themselves greener leaves in other places so they can come home and flaunt their new splendor? Rivers and clouds are always leaving, but this is a different, more profound sort of leave-taking, without any returning. It's not really a departure anyhow, just a flying, flowing way of being at rest. Such a departure—how beautiful it is, if I may say so! I'm always looking at the trees and telling myself: They aren't leaving either, so why shouldn't I be permitted to remain?”<sup>97</sup>

Do trees travel?, Simon asks himself, through his question making clear that he is not employing the word “tree” (static, modest entities) as a lazy synonym for “nature” (consisting also of wandering clouds and rivers), but fundamentally underscoring his union with the former rather than the latter. Simon rejects the

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**96** “‘Ich bin in meinem eigenen Lande ein sonderbarer Geselle’, antwortete Simon, ‘ich bin eigentlich Schreiber, und Sie können sich leicht denken, was ich da für eine Rolle in meinem Vaterlande spiele, wo der Schreiber so ziemlich der letzte Mensch ist, den es in der Rangordnung der Klassen gibt. Andere junge Handelsbflissene reisen, um sich auszubilden, in das ferne Ausland, und kommen dann mit einem ganzen Sack voller Kenntnisse wieder heim, wo ihnen ehrenvolle Stellen offen gehalten werden. Ich nun, müssen Sie wissen, bleibe immer im Lande. Es ist gerade so, als fürchte ich, daß in anderen Ländern keine oder nur eine minderwertige Sonne scheine. Ich bin wie festgebunden und sehe immer Neues im Alten, deshalb vielleicht gehe ich so ungern fort. Ich verkomme hier, ich sehe es wohl, und trotzdem, ich muß, so scheint es, unter dem Himmel meiner Heimat atmen, um überhaupt leben zu können. Ich genieße natürlich wenig Achtung, man hält mich für liederlich, aber das macht mir so nichts, so gar nichts aus. Ich bleibe und werde wohl bleiben. Es ist so süß, zu bleiben.’” (GT, 254–255)

**97** “‘Geht denn die Natur etwa ins Ausland? Wandern Bäume, um sich anderswo grünere Blätter anzuschaffen und dann heimzukommen und sich prahlend zu zeigen? Die Flüsse und die Wolken gehen, aber das ist ein anderes, tieferes Davongehen, das kommt nie mehr wieder. Es ist auch kein Gehen sondern nur ein fliegendes und fließendes Ruhen. Ein solches Gehen, das ist schön, meine ich! Ich blicke immer die Bäume an, und sage mir, die gehen ja auch nicht, warum sollte ich nicht bleiben dürfen?’” (GT, 255)

idea of wandering off in order to procure himself abroad something to brag about upon his return (be it greener leaves or higher education). If the trees cannot leave, then why should he? If in their wooden resolve they endure rain and cold, why can't he too grow roots and explore "the unfathomable depths of the world"? There where he has withered he shall once again blossom,<sup>98</sup> on the same strip of land he shall die many deaths.

There is a quest for depth in Simon, exemplarily fulfilled in Jakob, which still echoes throughout *Der Spaziergang*. As the walk comes to a close, the narrator is consumed by all he has seen and felt as he went along, by the burden of evil memories, of self-accusations that turn sour and then into sorrow, of long-past failures, of uncontrolled passion, of wild desire, of countless frailties, of bouts of unfriendliness and lovelessness, until the torment of such violent and unbeautiful thoughts finally takes hold of him, brings him to a halt<sup>99</sup>:

I felt the need to lie down somewhere, and since a friendly, cosy little place by the lakeside was nearby, I made myself comfortable, somewhat tired as I was, on the soft ground under the artless branches of a tree. As I looked at earth and air and sky the melancholy unquestioning thought came to me that I was a poor prisoner between heaven and earth, that all men were miserably imprisoned in this way, that for all men there was only the one dark path into the other world, the path down into the pit, into the earth, that there was no other way into the other world than that which led through the grave.<sup>100</sup>

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**98** "Wenn ich im Winter in einer Stadt bin, so reizt es mich, sie auch im Frühling zu sehen, einen Baum im Winter, ihn auch im Frühling prangen und seine ersten, entzückenden Blätter ausbreiten zu sehen. Nach dem Frühling kommt immer der Sommer, unerklärlich schön und leise, wie eine glühende, große, grüne Welle aus dem Abgrund der Welt herauf, und den Sommer will ich doch hier genießen, verstehen Sie mich, mein Herr, hier, wo ich den Frühling habe blühen sehen." (GT, 255)

**99** "Warum sammle ich hier Blumen', fragte ich mich und schaute nachdenklich zu Boden, und der zarte Regen vergrößerte meine Nachdenklichkeit, die er bis zur Trauer steigerte. Alte vergangene Verfehlungen fielen mir ein, Treubruch, Haß, Trotz, Falschheit, Hinterlist, Bosheit und vielerlei heftige, unschöne Auftritte. Ungezügelter Leidenschaft, wilde Wünsche, und wie ich gar manchen Leuten wehgetan hatte, wie ich Unrecht getan hatte. Wie eine Schaubühne voll dramatischer Szenen öffnete sich mir das vorübergegangene Leben, und ich mußte über meine zahlreichen Schwächen, über alle Unfreundlichkeiten und Lieblosigkeiten, die ich hatte fühlen lassen, unwillkürlich staunen." (S, 75)

**100** "Ich fühlte das Bedürfnis, mich irgendwo hinzulegen, und da gerade ein freundliches, trauliches Uferplätzchen in der Nähe war, so machte ich es mir, gewissermaßen erschöpft wie ich war, auf dem weichen Boden unter dem treuherzigen Geäste eines Baumes bequem. Erde, Luft und Himmel anschauend, kam mich der betrübliche, unweigerliche Gedanke an, daß ich zwischen Himmel und Erde ein armer Gefangener sei, daß alle Menschen auf diese Art und Weise kläglich gefangen seien, daß es für alle nur den einen finsternen Weg gebe, nämlich in das Loch

The narrator finds refuge beneath the branches of a tree by the lakeside, under which shadow he comes to the somber realization that he is a prisoner between heaven and earth, and that the only way out is downwards, through layers of darkness and damp earth, like tree roots digging their own grave, or children buried by their own misconceptions of how to get to China or Japan.

Jakob von Gunten has mastered the art of digging, although he was never a child nor has he sought China. But nevertheless something childish remains about him, the tree-like vertical endurance of he who cannot – and will not – mature, for maturity leads to selfishness and empty thoughts of greatness. Instead of putting out twigs and branches, like a proper grownup, like a burgeoning hero, Jakob submits himself instead to the pains of only growing upwards and downwards, trunk and roots, simultaneously pulled towards light and darkness as if stretched on an upright torture bed. Such tormented and arboreal mindset frames the diary's most seminal, excruciating passage:

I was never really a child, and therefore something in the nature of childhood will cling to me always, I'm certain. I have simply grown, become older, but my nature never changed. I enjoy mischief just as I did years ago, but that's just the point, actually I never played mischievous tricks. Once, very early on, I gave my brother a knock on the head. That just happened, it wasn't mischief. Certainly there was plenty of mischief and boyishness, but the idea always interested me more than the thing itself. I began, early on, to look for deep things everywhere, even in mischief. I don't develop. At least, that's what I claim. Perhaps I shall never put out twigs and branches. One day some fragrance or other will issue from my nature and my originating, I shall flower, and the fragrance will shed itself around a little, then I shall bow my head, which Kraus calls my stupid arrogant pig-head. My arms and legs will strangely sag, my mind, pride, and character, everything will crack and fade, and I shall be dead, not really dead, only dead in a certain sort of way, and then I shall vegetate and die for perhaps another sixty years. I shall grow old. But I'm not afraid of myself. I couldn't possibly inspire myself with dread. For I don't respect my ego at all, I merely see it, and it leaves me cold. Oh, to come in from the cold! How glorious! I shall be able to come into the warmth, over and over again, for nothing personal or selfish will ever stop me from becoming warm and catching fire and taking part. How fortunate I am, not to be able to see in myself anything worth respecting and watching! To be small and to stay small. And if a hand, a situation, a wave were ever to raise me up and carry me to where I could command power and influence, I would destroy the circumstances that had favored me, and I would hurl myself down into the humble, speechless, insignificant darkness. I can only breathe in the lower regions.<sup>101</sup>

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hinab, in die Erde, daß es keinen andern Weg in die andere Welt gebe als den, der durch das Grab geht." (S, 76)

**101** "Ich war eigentlich nie Kind, und deshalb, glaube ich zuversichtlich, wird an mir immer etwas Kindheitliches haften bleiben. Ich bin nur so gewachsen, älter geworden, aber das Wesen blieb. Ich finde an dummen Streichen noch ebenso viel Geschmack wie vor Jahren, aber das

The crux of *Jakob von Gunten*, both the character and the book, lies in these magnificent lines. An open wound shaped like letters, they exude the smell of death and darkness as they face nothingness with mischief in their eyes. Jakob's diary tells the story of a first flowering gone astray, of an interrupted childhood interrupted again by the pains of growth and the fragrance of death and the time it takes – six to eight decades on average – for a vegetating body to wither and perish. In its lines he articulates the yearning for a warmth, the warmth of warmth that would turn him back to dust, from ashes to ashes like he could already taste them in his mouth. He would rise and fall in the spirit of Herr Benjamenta, only still young: at first a king, then nothing. Outside all chronology Jakob writes his chronicles – the chronicles of a body that sags, a mind that fades, a head that bows; the chronicles of a submission so intense that no lord can ever claim possession over it, a submission so low that breathing is only possible in the lower regions. Jakob metamorphoses into a dry, leafless tree and then seeks warmth, sets his nature on glorious fire. If they are not already, Walser's characters will find a way to become flammable.

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ist es ja, ich habe eigentlich nie dumme Streiche gemacht. Meinem Bruder habe ich ganz früh einmal ein Loch in den Kopf geschlagen. Das war ein Geschehnis, kein dummer Streich. Gewiß, Dummheiten und Jungenhaftigkeiten gab es die Menge, aber der Gedanke interessierte mich immer mehr als die Sache selber. Ich habe früh begonnen, überall, selbst in den dummen Streichen, Tiefes herauszuempfinden. Ich entwickle mich nicht. Das ist ja nun so eine Behauptung. Vielleicht werde ich nie Äste und Zweige ausbreiten. Eines Tages wird von meinem Wesen und Beginnen irgend ein Duft ausgehen, ich werde Blüte sein und ein wenig, wie zu meinem eigenen Vergnügen, duften, und dann werde ich den Kopf, den Kraus einen dummen, hochmütigen Trotzkopf nennt, neigen. Die Arme und Beine werden mir seltsam erschlaffen, der Geist, der Stolz, der Charakter, alles, alles wird brechen und welken, und ich werde tot sein, nicht wirklich tot, nur so auf eine gewisse Art tot, und dann werde ich vielleicht sechzig Jahre so dahinleben und -sterben. Ich werde alt werden. Doch ich habe kein Bangen vor mir. Ich flöße mir durchaus keine Angst ein. Ich respektiere ja mein Ich gar nicht, ich sehe es bloß, und es läßt mich ganz kalt. O in Wärme kommen! Wie herrlich! Ich werde immer wieder in Wärme kommen können, denn mich wird niemals etwas Persönliches, Selbstisches am Warmwerden, am Entflammen und am Teilnehmen verhindern. Wie glücklich bin ich, daß ich in mir nichts Achtens- und Sehenswertes zu erblicken vermag. Klein sein und bleiben. Und höbe und trüge mich eine Hand, ein Umstand, eine Welle bis hinauf, wo Macht und Einfluß gebieten, ich würde die Verhältnisse, die mich bevorzugten, zerschlagen, und mich selber würde ich hinabwerfen ins niedrige, nichts-sagende Dunkel. Ich kann nur in den untern Regionen atmen." (JvG, 144–145)

### 5.1.7 Walser's politics of fire and the desert as the inevitable end

A sublime sight the orange hues of distant fire, the more sublime the farther it burns from one's backyard. Throughout his oeuvre, however, Walser's politics of fire have been consistently inviting the flames in, the quest of an arsonist for a primeval warmth long lost, Walser the man holding a full matchbox. The apocalypse, when it comes, if it does, shall not be a deluge, but a wildfire. Fire is the only antidote to writing, a bitter potion Walser has tasted himself as he set some of his manuscripts ablaze.<sup>102</sup>

The first fire has burned all throughout *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, and its smoldering embers have been glowing ever since. Walser's début work, since its original publication in 1904, has been traditionally bundled with three other short texts of a very similar nature – “Der Commis”, “Ein Maler”, and “Der Wald” –, of which *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* remains nonetheless the most accomplished piece. Fire burns twofold throughout the book: as the prophetic antidote from which a disillusioned painter (“Der Maler”) threatens to drink – “Dies soll eine Art Tages- oder Notizbuch werden. Ich werde die Blätter, wenn sie zu Ende geschrieben sind, verbrennen” (FKA, 66) –; or, more importantly, as the conflagration of enduring heat.

The fourth essay penned by Fritz Kocher is titled “Die Feuersbrunst”. It opens with a lonely wanderer as he sees on the sky ahead a dark red stain and immediately knows it: a fire has broken out. As he runs back towards the city, Fritz's narration expertly outruns him and zooms in on the city dwellers and describes their cries as they react to the calamity. The fire – like a monster with one hundred tentacles – lashes and hisses and burns; the fire brigade is not yet there and meanwhile the fire does what it does best: “Das Feuer, das, wie alle wilden Elemente, keine Besinnung hat, tut ganz verrückt” (FKA, 13). Both Fritz and the teacher as well as the whole class stand there and watch, astonished and helpless, gaping at the fire as it gorges and tears and devours and rages, a glowing red drunkard devastating (“verwüstet” – a desert in the making) all it lays its fingers on. A house collapses under the fire's heavy tongue and the voice of a girl echoes from the smoke. Her mother faints and the helpless Fritz Kocher exclaims: if only he were tall and strong, then he would brave into the flames like a hero and save the damsel in distress. But before Fritz can play the hero (a word that comes quickly to his fingers, slowly to his feet), a young, slender man jumps ahead and brings

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<sup>102</sup> The information is confirmed by Walser's most prominent scholars, as well as by Walser himself in one of his walks with Carl Seelig: “Ich frage Robert, ob es wahr sei, daß er in Berlin drei Romane ungedruckt verbrannt habe. ‚Das ist wohl möglich...’” (Seelig, 1989, 57).

the girl to safety, disappears mysteriously into the crowd without leaving a trace. Fritz Kocher exclaims once again: if only he could have been that valiant man.<sup>103</sup>

Other than articulating a (powerless) view of heroism to be deconstructed piecemeal in Walser's later works, Fritz's essay first imprints the cleansing image of fire, or, more specifically, of a recurring *Feuersbrunst* that appears to blaze forever throughout Walser's oeuvre, from text to text, scorching the same earth over and over as different characters bask in its flames. Thus, the same firestorm returns in "Der Commis", but as if seen from the other side of the square where Fritz and his classmates gaped in awe. As the text's narrator praises the quiet, humble, unappreciated honor of being a clerk, he mentions that he even knows one that once played a decisive role in a firestorm, a true hero out of a novel that has only rarely – if ever – been written:

Ein Commis kann ein sehr herzlicher und herzhafter Mensch sein. Ich kenne einen, der bei einer Feuersbrunst eine hervorragende Rolle im Rettungswesen gespielt hat. Ein Commis ist im Handumdrehen ein Lebensretter, geschweige denn ein Romanheld. Warum werden Commis so spärlich zu Helden in Novellen gemacht? Ein Fehler offenbar, der endlich einmal ernstlich der vaterländischen Literatur unter die Nase gehalten werden muß.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps Fritz's riddle is hereby solved: the mysterious hero was in fact a clerk, too humble to stick around for compliments.<sup>105</sup> The conflagration was in any case so intense that it drew the attention of those living in a neighboring village, like the Tanners for instance, who were still schoolboys back then, although after the fire things quickly changed.

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**103** "Ist kein Held da? Jetzt wäre Gelegenheit, sich als in braver mutiger Mensch zu zeigen. Aber was ist das? Ein junger schlanker Mann (...) steigt immer höher, in den Rauch, in die Glut hinein... (...) O hätte ich der brave tapfere Mann sein können! O so ein Mann zu sein, so ein Mann zu werden! Das Haus brennt ganz nieder. Auf der Straße halten sich Mutter und Tochter umschlungen, und der sie ihr herettet hat, ist spurlos verschwunden." (FKA, 14)

**104** "Ein Commis kann ein sehr herzlicher und herzhafter Mensch sein. Ich kenne einen, der bei einer Feuersbrunst eine hervorragende Rolle im Rettungswesen gespielt hat. Ein Commis ist im Handumdrehen ein Lebensretter, geschweige denn ein Romanheld. Warum werden Commis so spärlich zu Helden in Novellen gemacht? Ein Fehler offenbar, der endlich einmal ernstlich der vaterländischen Literatur unter die Nase gehalten werden muß." (FKA, 50)

**105** One of "Der Commis"' touchstones is the attempt at elevating the lowly figure of a clerk to a hero-like character worthy of a novel: "Er ist schlank, hat schwarzes Lockenhaar, das um seine Stirne wie lebendig spielt, und feine schmale Hände: ein Commis für einen Roman" (FKA, 60). Read with the hindsight of Walser's complete oeuvre, the striking feature behind his strategy is that he ultimately refused to elevate or heroicize objects and characters so that they could be made into the stuff of books, but instead subverted the equation and filled his texts with as many apparently insignificant and lowly objects and characters as possible.

Once we had a conflagration, not in the town itself, but in a neighboring village. The entire sky all around was reddened by the flames, it was an icy winter night. People ran upon the frozen, crunching snow, including Kaspar and me; for our mother had sent us to find out where the fire was. We reached the flames, but it bored us to spend so long gazing into the burning beams, besides which we were freezing, and so we soon ran back home again, where Mother received us with all the severity of one who's been made to worry. My mother was already unwell in those days. Not long afterward, Kaspar left school, where he was no longer prospering. I still had one more year ahead of me, but a certain melancholy took hold of me and bid me look with bitterness upon all things scholastic. I saw the end approaching and the imminent start of something new.<sup>106</sup>

Fire, which in *Geschwister Tanner* has a mirage-inducing, fairytale-like, leave-taking quality, foreshadows tragedy and the onset of long-lasting melancholy<sup>107</sup>; it is a rite of passage that signals a purging departure into the unknown realm of the new. *Jakob von Gunten* represents, accordingly, the journey towards combustion upon which a young man embarks in quest for either healing or, that failing, quiet

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**106** “Einmal hatten wir eine Feuersbrunst, und zwar nicht in der Stadt selber, sondern in einem Nachbardorfe. Der ganze Himmel in der Runde war gerötet von den Flammen, es war eine eisige Winternacht. Die Menschen liefen auf dem gefrorenen, knirschenden Schnee, auch ich und Kaspar; denn unsere Mutter schickte uns weg, um zu erfahren, wo es brenne. Wir kamen zu den Flammen, aber es langweilte uns, so lang in das brennende Gebälk zu schauen, auch froren wir, und so liefen wir bald wieder nach Hause, wo uns Mutter mit all der Strenge einer Geängstigten empfing. Meine Mutter war damals schon krank. Kaspar trat ein wenig später aus der Schule aus, in der er keinen Erfolg mehr hatte. Ich hatte noch ein Jahr vor mir, aber eine gewisse Melancholie ergriff mich und hieß mich auf die Dinge der Schule mit Bitterkeit herabsehen. Ich sah das nahe Ende kommen und den nahen Anfang von etwas Neuem.” (GT, 121–122)

**107** For instance, in similar descriptions of sunsets burning over the city: “Die untergehende Sonne flammte in den Fenstern und machte sie zu strahlenden Augen, die starr und schön in die Ferne blickten” (GT, 39), and: “Es gab einen herrlichen Abend nach diesem Tag. Alle Welt lustwandelte am schönen Seeufer entlang, unter den breiten, großblättrigen Bäumen. Wenn man hier, unter so vielen aufgeräumten, leise plaudernden Menschen, spazierte, fühlte man sich in ein Märchen versetzt. Die Stadt loderte im Feuer der untergehenden Sonne und später brannte sie, schwarz und dunkel, in der Glut und Nachglut der Untergegangenen” (GT, 70). Or, in what has now become Walser’s prophetic passage par excellence – banking on biographical circumstances more than literary merits –, upon Simon’s discovery of his brother Sebastian’s dead body in the snow and beneath a pile of fir branches: “Grüße die lieben, stillen Toten unter der Erde und brenne nicht zu sehr in den ewigen Flammen des Nichtmehrseins. Du bist anderswo. Du bist sicher an einem herrlichen Ort, du bist jetzt ein reicher Kerl, und es lohnt sich, die Gedichte eines reichen, vornehmen Kerls herauszugeben. Lebe wohl. Wenn ich Blumen hätte, ich schüttete sie über dich aus. Für einen Dichter hat man nie Blumen genug. Du hattest zu wenig. Du erwartetest welche, aber du hörtest sie nicht über deinem Nacken schwirren, und sie fielen nicht auf dich nieder, wie du geträumt hast...’ (...) – Simon schritt von dem Toten weg, warf einen letzten Blick auf das Häufchen Tannenäste, unter denen jetzt der Dichter schlief (...) Das Feuer des Lebens trug ihn vom sanften, blassen Bild des Todes stürmisch hinweg” (GT, 131–132).



subversion (and Sontag should come to mind here once again). Jakob's symptomatic bonding with Schacht in the journal's fifth entry takes place over burning candles,<sup>108</sup> and from there onwards he will strive towards ignition, will try at all costs to keep the fire burning and the flames stoked. Fiery is the power and the effect his older brother has over him as they compare worldviews and share a laugh: "We laughed again. It was very jolly. A strange fire began to animate me. My eyes were burning. I like it very much, by the way, when I feel so burned up. My face gets quite red. And then thoughts full of purity and loftiness usually assail me" (JvG, 66); fire is also what betrays Jakob's quiet subversion, the methodological image behind his master plan, inasmuch as he admits that great and audacious things must happen in silence and secrecy, else they should perish and fall away, condemning the fire thereby awakened to die again: "Etwas Großes und Kühnes muß in aller Verschwiegenheit und Stille geschehen, sonst verdirbt und verflaut es, und das Feuer, das schon lebendig erwachte, stirbt wieder" (JvG, 69). Fire – the burning of houses, the trail of scorched land – is part of what animates Jakob's gruesome imagination of his hypothetical life as a soldier under Napoleon (and he claims to be an excellent one by nature): "Burning villages would be a daily sight for the eyes, no longer even interesting, and one would not be surprised by cruelties of an inhuman sort" (JvG, 135). Fire is what burns and chars Herr Benjamenta's heart as he places his deposed fate in Jakob's hands,<sup>109</sup> unaware perhaps of the black earth beneath the boy's fingers, the spark in his eyes dreaming of the warmth of ashes. Whatever little remains from this scorched land policy, from Walser's – and Jakob's – politics of fire, is the desolation of a desert.

Behind the fumes, like a blistering mirage on the horizon, the yellow desert looms as the only remaining option for a ruined man in a once impregnable castle, now a ruined man down to the last living vassal not to have deserted the hallways of his barren land. Herr Benjamenta will comply to whatever gentle sounds come out of his own docile mouth, a voodoo doll held hostage by Jakob's pen, a bonfire sacrifice made in the name of his journal. On the blank page Jakob

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**108** "Ich und Schacht zünden in der Kammer zu unserem Vergnügen oft Kerzen an, das ist streng verboten. Aber gerade deshalb macht es uns Spaß, es zu tun. Vorschriften hin, Vorschriften her: Kerzen brennen so schön, so geheimnisvoll. Und wie sieht doch das Gesicht meines Kameraden aus, wenn die rötliche kleine Flamme es zart beleuchtet." (JvG, 15)

**109** "Allerdings kommen mir immer wieder die dunklen, grauenhaft dunklen Stunden, wo mir alles schwarz vor den Augen und hassenswert vor dem gleichsam, versteh mich, verbrannten und verkohlten Gemüt wird, und in solchen Stunden zwingt es mich, zu zerreißen, zu töten." (JvG, 159–160)



summons three Romantic clichés: the desert, the sea, the mountain,<sup>110</sup> and Herr Benjamenta, a lion in a cage slowly choked to death by greedy vermin,<sup>111</sup> leaves the decision at Jakob's feet, who in turns leaves it to chance and to dream. Jakob is overcome by sleep and rapt away from reality, propelled towards green meadows on a velvety mountainside, the former pupil and the former principal side by side almost like Quixote and Sancho Panza making their knightly way through green prairies, were Quixote and Sancho Panza also plagued by nightmares such as this which at first lures Jakob with the green promise of happiness' embrace – "I have made my decision!", he exclaims to no avail as Herr Benjamenta looks into the distance and follows the scorching desert down a trail away from their natures and European culture<sup>112</sup> (for in this scenario Jakob is Sancho, sworn to follow, lit-

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**110** "Junge, Knabe, du bist köstlich. Mit dir zusammen in Wüsten oder auf Eisbergen im nördlichen Meere zu leben, das würde mich locken." (JvG, 148)

**111** "Wenn man verzweifelt und trauert, lieber Jakob, ist man so jammervoll klein, und immer mehr Kleinheiten werfen sich über einen, gefräßigem, raschem Ungeziefer gleich, das uns frißt, ganz langsam, das uns ganz langsam zu ersticken, zu entmenschen versteht." (JvG, 159)

**112** "Aber während ich so saß und wachte, überfiel mich doch der Schlaf. Zwar nicht lang, eine halbe Stunde, oder vielleicht noch etwas länger, war ich der Wirklichkeit entrückt. Mir träumte (der Traum schoß von der Höhe, ich erinnere mich, gewaltsam, mich mit Strahlen überwerfend, auf mich nieder), ich befände mich auf einer Bergmatte. Sie war ganz dunkelsamtgrün. Und sie war mit Blumen wie mit blumenhaft gebildeten und geformten Küssen bestickt und besetzt. Bald erschienen mir die Küsse wie Sterne, bald wieder wie Blumen. Es war Natur und doch keine, Bildnis und Körper zugleich. Ein wunderbar schönes Mädchen lag auf der Matte. Ich wollte mir einreden, es sei die Lehrerin, doch sagte ich mir rasch: 'Nein, das kann es nicht. Wir haben keine Lehrerin mehr.' Nun, dann war es halt jemand anderes, und ich sah förmlich, wie ich mich tröstete, und ich hörte den Trost. Es sagte deutlich: 'Ah bah, laß das Deuten.' – Das Mädchen war schwellend und glänzend nackt. An dem einen der schönen Beine hing ein Band, das im Wind, der das Ganze lieb koste, leise flatterte. Mir schien, als wehe, als flatterte der ganze spiegelblanke süße Traum. Wie war ich glücklich. Ganz flüchtig dachte ich an 'diesen Menschen'. Natürlich war es Herr Vorsteher, an den ich so dachte. Plötzlich sah ich ihn, er war hoch zu Roß und war bekleidet mit einer schimmernd schwarzen, edlen, ernsten Rüstung. Das lange Schwert hing an seiner Seite herunter, und das Pferd wieherte kampflustig. 'Ei, sieh da! Der Vorsteher zu Pferd,' dachte ich, und ich schrie, so laut ich konnte, daß es in den Schluchten und Klüften ringsum widerhallte: 'Ich bin zu einem Entschluß gekommen.' – Doch er hörte mich nicht. Qualvoll schrie ich: 'Heda, Herr Vorsteher, hören Sie.' Nein, er wandte mir den Rücken. Sein Blick war in die Ferne, ins Leben hinab- und hinausgerichtet. Und nicht einmal den Kopf bog er nach mir. Mir scheinbar zuliebe rollte jetzt der Traum, als wenn er ein Wagen gewesen wäre, Stück um Stück weiter, und da befanden wir uns, ich und 'dieser Mensch', natürlich niemand anders als Herr Benjamenta, mitten in der Wüste. Wir wanderten und trieben mit den Wüstenbewohnern Handel, und wir waren ganz eigentümlich belebt von einer kühlen, ich möchte sagen, großartigen Zufriedenheit. Es sah so aus, als wenn wir beide dem, was man europäische Kultur nennt, für immer, oder wenigstens für sehr, sehr lange Zeit entschwunden gewesen seien. (...) 'Der Kultur

erature's archetypal antihero<sup>113</sup>) –, and then the dream turns into something else, something disturbing and yet familiar, that which Kraus had been trying to get Jakob to do all along: to wake up.<sup>114</sup> Jakob wakes up and shakes Herr Benjamenta back into consciousness, and all colonial concerns aside they wander off into the exotic orient so that Jakob's limbs may finally sprout that which they couldn't before: twigs and branches, while all around them, before their far-seeing gaze, life flourishes in the shape of trees.<sup>115</sup> In the desert Jakob shall see if he can bow low enough for the air to become once again breathable. He throws away his pen and bids his older brother adieu, achieves with all of his being the degree zero he so longed for,<sup>116</sup> submits his diary to the only fate literature must endure: that of burning and yet being indestructible. Ashes are one of the few things which upon being smashed remain exactly the same.

## 5.2 Carvalho: *Nove Noites* (2002)

Je hais les voyages et les explorateurs.

–Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

### 5.2.1 Buell Quain: A tragic in the tropics

The mysterious aura of a missing person's eyes, what they might have seen before disappearing, the countless secrets they may conceal. Barthes, in *La Chambre Claire* (1980, 13), speaks with such astonishment of Jérôme Bonaparte's eyes, Napoleon's youngest brother: "I am seeing eyes that saw the Emperor", he

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entrücken, Jakob. Weißt du, das ist famos,' sagte von Zeit zu Zeit der Vorsteher, der wie ein Araber aussah." (JvG, 161–163)

113 "Ich war immer der Knappe, und der Vorsteher war der Ritter." (JvG, 163)

114 "Und wie ich das dachte, erwachte ich und schaute mich im Wohnzimmer um. Herr Benjamenta war ebenfalls eingeschlafen. Ich weckte ihn, indem ich ihm sagte: 'Wie können Sie einschlafen, Herr Vorsteher. Doch erlauben Sie mir, Ihnen zu sagen, daß ich mich entschlossen habe, mit Ihnen zu gehen, wohin Sie wollen.' – Wir gaben einander die Hand, und das bedeutete viel" (JvG, 164)

115 "Es war so köstlich zu leben, das fühlte ich in allen Gliedern. Das Leben prangte vor unsern weitausschauenden Blicken wie ein Baum mit Zweigen und Ästen." (JvG, 163)

116 "Und wenn ich zerschelle und verderbe, was bricht und verdirbt dann? Eine Null. Ich einzelner Mensch bin nur eine Null. Aber weg jetzt mit der Feder. Weg jetzt mit dem Gedankenleben. Ich gehe mit Herrn Benjamenta in die Wüste. Will doch sehen, ob es sich in der Wildnis nicht auch leben, atmen, sein, aufrichtig Gutes wollen und tun und nachts schlafen und träumen läßt." (JvG, 164)

exclaims, to no avail. Nobody seems interested in the eyes that saw the Emperor, and Barthes eventually lets go of it. “Life is made of these little touches of solitude”, he muses, before moving on.

The main narrator in Carvalho’s *Mongólia* similarly remarks, as the missing photographer’s fate escalates into a diplomatic manhunt, that there’s little left to go on: all that remains from the missing photographer are some letters and contact information, and a single picture of him clouded by “that aura of mystery that a missing person’s photo acquires without there really being any mystery whatsoever to it”.<sup>117</sup> Carvalho’s infatuation with photographs and photographers dates back from his early writings, be it as a narrative device (*Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*) or as part of a broader reflection on contemporary art (*Onze*). However, it is only in *Nove Noites* that such infatuation acquires more explicitly Sebaldian overtones, which go along nicely with the prevailing Sebaldian echoes of Carvalho’s prose: the mournful tales of self-imposed exiles roaming through anti-Romantic landscapes which can offer neither consolation nor the sublime. In *Nove Noites*, Carvalho incorporates three essential images to the narrative: a head and profile portrait of Buell Quain, an awkwardly tropical group photo featuring Lévi-Strauss et al. in 1939s Rio de Janeiro, and a picture of himself, Bernardo Carvalho, as a six-year-old boy standing next to a Xingu tribesman. The third picture, provocatively replacing the traditional back cover author’s portrait, serves a different, not properly Sebaldian purpose, and shall be analyzed separately further on. It is rather the two remaining images that provide a conceptual frame to this analysis of Carvalho’s seminal novel: the reconstruction of Buell Quain’s marginal and doomed existence, of both his point of view and of his field of vision,<sup>118</sup> as the fulfillment and actualization of the Walserian tradition within Carvalho’s work.

<sup>117</sup> “Disse-lhe que deixaria o dossiê completo na sala dele. Não era muita coisa, alguma correspondência entre o pai do desaparecido e o Itamaraty, o nome e o telefone do guia mongol que havia acompanhado o rapaz em sua viagem e com quem já tínhamos feito um primeiro contato por telefone, e uma fotografia – aliás, com aquela aura de mistério que os retratos dos desaparecidos costumam adquirir sem que no fundo haja mistério nenhum.” (M, 14–15)

<sup>118</sup> “Numa das vezes em que [Quain] me falou de suas viagens pelo mundo, perguntei onde queria chegar e ele me disse que estava em busca de um ponto de vista. Eu lhe perguntei: ‘Para olhar o quê?’. Ele respondeu: ‘Um ponto de vista em que eu já não esteja no campo de visão.’” (NN, 100)

### 5.2.2 The making of a Walserian character

Buell Quain's mysterious portraits, his aloof and disenchanted eyes, tell the story of Bernardo Carvalho's fiction. Who was this man of whom so few pictures remain? Whose biography is barely known? Whose academic pedigree, as he arrived in Brazil in the late 1930s, was vouched for by none other than Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict? Whose ethnographic work has been published in four thin volumes to some immediate critical acclaim and no lasting repercussion? Who believed himself constantly ill, prey to all manner of maladies, particularly to those of the mind? Who traveled the world from Polynesia to Scandinavia,<sup>119</sup> crossed paths with a young Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, tried – and failed – to smuggle a man aboard a ship in China (the man was punished in front of Quain and probably murdered afterwards for his attempted crime), but who never seemed to fit anywhere, an orphan of civilization? Who was this American ethnologist, Buell Halvor Quain, whose name betrays no nationality and evokes no home, who bled and hung himself to death at age 27 in the heartlands of Brazil? This man who wrote seven letters before committing suicide, none of which really explains anything, and so Carvalho had to invent an eighth, which explains even less.<sup>120</sup>

Carvalho's premise behind *Nove Noites* is as Barthesian as it is Sebaldian, on the one hand musing over what Quain's eyes might have seen and silenced, and on the other wondering how much fiction can be added to fill in the blanks before the entire narrative project is bent beyond Realism. The end result, however, is perfectly Walserian, with the two main characters (a fictional Buell Quain and a fictional and unnamed Bernardo Carvalho, who also acts as narrator) lapsing in and out of Realism, in and out of Romanticism, swallowed by fiction, trapped between claustrophobic environments and enigmatic images of the desert, doomed to fail, bound to be consumed by fire (either their own, metaphorical, or

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**119** On Buell's globe-trotting existence, see W. E. Leonard's foreword to Buell's *The Flight of the Chiefs*: "From schooldays on, he used his vacations for travel, at fourteen accompanying his father to a Rotarian convention in Europe and visiting Holland, Germany, and the three Scandinavian Countries; and by the time he had graduated from High School he had covered on auto-trips all of the States of his country and many of the Provinces of Canada. In the vacation of 1928 he held his first job, time-keeper for the Dominion Construction Co., who were building a railroad to James Bay, and in time-off he explored wild islands, making sketch-maps to send home... Before entering Wisconsin in 1929 he was six months traveling in France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, England, Scotland, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine; and in the vacation of the next year he visited Russia... After passing his semester examinations in February of '31, he took time out on his own, and shipped as a common sailor on a freight-steamer to Shanghai..." (Leonard 1942, vi).

**120** "Manoel Perna não deixou nenhum testamento, e eu imaginei a oitava carta." (NN, 121)

a very real one) and disappear leaving behind little beyond the mystery of their writerly existence.

Disappearance, this recurring quest for the margins in both Walser's and Carvalho's work, surfaces early in *Nove Noites* as the novel's photographic focus is shifted from Buell's portrait – whose facial expression is described by different characters as both ironic and defiant (“desafiadora”) (NN, 25), and sad (NN, 105) – to the group photo featuring Lévi-Strauss et al., the most striking feature of which, according to the narrator, is Quell's absence:

There is a photo from 1939 in which Heloísa appears seated on a bench in the gardens of the National Museum, with Charles Wagley, Raimundo Lopes, and Edison Carneiro to her right and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes, and Luiz de Castro Faria to her left. Today, all but Castro Faria and Lévi-Strauss are dead. But even at that time there was an absence in the picture, which I only noticed after I began investigating the story of Buell Quain. At that point, he was still alive and working among the Krahô. The image is a kind of portrait of him, through his absence. In every photograph there is a phantasmagoric element. But it is even more pronounced in this one. Everyone in the picture knew Buell Quain, and at least three of them took to their graves things that I will never be able to learn. In my obsession, I even found myself holding the picture in my hand, fascinated, my eyes glazed over, trying in vain to shake an answer from the eyes of Wagley, Heloísa, or Ruth Landes.<sup>121</sup>

The rather awkward picture – the awkwardness of which is a byproduct of having too many academics squeezed together in a single frame – acquires, via the narrator's all-consuming obsession, phantasmagorical contours: those seven pairs of eyes had all seen Quain at one point or another, had all had a glimpse of Quain's tragic existence and taken their insights with them to their graves – all but two, the then nonagenarians Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Castro Faria (1913–2004). And as that photo was being taken, in 1939s Rio de Janeiro, Quain was still alive some thousand miles north of that bench, inching closer and closer to his definitive disappearing act.

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**121** “Há uma foto, de 1939, em que dona Heloísa aparece sentada no centro de um banco nos jardins do Museu Nacional, entre Charles Wagley, Raimundo Lopes e Edson Carneiro, à sua direita, e Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes e Luiz de Castro Faria, à sua esquerda. Hoje, estão todos mortos, à exceção de Castro Faria e Lévi-Strauss. Mas havia já naquele tempo uma ausência na foto, que só notei depois de começar a minha investigação sobre Buell Quain. Àquela altura, ele ainda estava vivo e entre os Krahô, e a imagem não deixa de ser, de certa forma, um retrato dele, pela ausência. Há em toda fotografia um elemento fantasmagórico. Mas ali isso é ainda mais assombroso. Todos os fotografados conheceram Buell Quain, e pelo menos três deles levaram para o túmulo coisas que eu nunca poderei saber. Na minha obsessão, cheguei a me flagrar várias vezes com a foto na mão, intrigado, vidrado, tentando em vão arrancar uma resposta dos olhos de Wagley, de dona Heloísa ou de Ruth Landes.” (NN, 27–28)

A recurring reticence tinges the scarce accounts of Quain's life, both personal and professional, drawing a picture of a possibly brilliant man who was nevertheless afraid of openly engaging with his surroundings – which was perhaps par for the course for the post-Malinowski, pre-Geertz anthropologist –, choosing instead a voyeuristic approach to existence, taking down deeply insightful notes and wallowing in his loneliness. Charles Wagley, the same neatly-clad Charles Wagley pictured on a summery carioca bench in 1939 and who mourned Quain's death with a very subtle jab at the insatiable Brazilian bureaucracy,<sup>122</sup> recalls a haunting description “of the effect of the tropical dawn on tropical forest peoples” as told to him by Quain, who, he claims, “had an artist's responsiveness both to people and surroundings”.<sup>123</sup> A similar ‘responsiveness’, or artistic sensibility (a “*Künstlernatur*”, to employ the vocabulary of *Jakob von Gunten*), is picked up by early reviewers of Quain's publications, who praised him for being an “obviously (...) sensitive field observer” (Spoehr, 1949, 440), for combining “an easy yet finished style” with “copious footnotes and annotation” (Derrick 1959, 443–440), for the “vividness” of his depictions (Carneiro and Dole, 1956, 747), as well as – with the slightest touch of sorrow in the otherwise cold, direct form of an academic review – for striking “the right balance between concrete reporting and conceptual abstractions, avoiding equally well diffuse gossip and generalization” (Ackerknecht, 1948, 403).

To less artistic-minded reviewers, however, Quain's sensibility ultimately led to a lack of overall systematization – “The account is uneven in excellence” (Spencer, 1949, 112) – and, more problematically, to a lackluster interest in pursuing certain topics, or, rather, of evidently emphasizing the analysis of interpersonal behaviors over equally important spiritual aspects such as witchcraft and

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**122** “In 1938 Buell Quain spent four months, from August to November, among the Trumáí Indians of the upper Xingú River area of central Brazil. In December of 1938 he was recalled to Rio de Janeiro, and failing to obtain governmental permission for his return to the upper Xingú, at least under conditions allowing minimal possibilities for field research, he was unable to continue his studies among the Trumáí. He went instead to do ethnographic and linguistic work among the Gê-speaking Kraho in the state of Maranhão. There, in April [sic] 1939, he died” (Wagley 1955, v).

**123** “Buell Quain had an artist's responsiveness both to people and surroundings. I shall never forget his description of a phenomenon I have later experienced. He told me of the effect of the tropical dawn on tropical forest peoples. Traveling in the dark, he noted, Indians canoemen tend to break the monotony by singing and talking, but just before the sun appears, they suddenly fall silent, as if in expectation of a sacred moment” Wagley 1955, vi-vii. On a personal and anecdotal note, the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux goes as far as to deem Quain “a talented young man, a poet” (Métraux, 1978; 208).

religion<sup>124</sup>: “The work contains penetrating insights into Trumai culture which reflect not only Quain’s ability as a field worker but also (...) is most complete in its treatment of interpersonal behavior, because this was one of Quain’s principal interests” (Carneiro and Dole, 1956, 747). In fact, in these personal and professional assessments made by people he had met at some point in his life or who had only known him through his writings, Buell Quain often comes across as a highly rational and logical individual, himself timid but greatly interested in people, reserved yet insightful, self-effacing yet boisterous,<sup>125</sup> convinced he was riddled with and doomed by disease. It was about disease that Quain and Lévi-Strauss “warmly” conferred, according to Lévi-Strauss’ biographer Patrick Wilcken, as their paths briefly crossed in the seemingly endless prairies of central Brazil, with Quain “explaining that after he had left Rio he had begun to develop disturbing symptoms and was convinced he had contracted syphilis”, and Lévi-Strauss advising him “to return to Rio and seek specialist help”, an advice Quain didn’t take, setting off instead “for his fieldwork site in the Upper Xingu”, a lonely, Malinowskian figure riding alone into oblivion, an insignificant little fly when compared to Lévi-Strauss’ mammoth of an expedition: “a team of twenty men, fifteen mules, thirty oxen, a few horses, tons of equipment and a truck”, an ensemble weighing over 1.470 kilograms (Wilcken, 2010, 76–77). In true marginal fashion, an *écrivain mineur avant la lettre*, Buell Quain chose his own company despite the numerous protests of Heloisa Alberto Torres, the matriarchal figure in the center of the 1939 picture and the then director of the influential Museu Nacional. “He likes to walk”,<sup>126</sup> she eventually wrote down, quizzically coming

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**124** Dorothy Spencer (1949; 112; 113) notes that “throughout the book, Quain has described with a wealth of detail the social, ceremonial, and political role of the chiefs”, but that, however, “[w]e are told that witchcraft is ‘common to almost every native of the region’, but very little more about it.” R.A. Derrick (1959, 439) argues, elsewhere, that Quain’s knowledge and flair seem to wane when it comes to the spiritual, hinting at a certain apathy on the anthropologist’s part in taking the matter seriously: “In discussing Priests and Practitioners the author is on less sure ground. (...) Today occult practices are observed surreptitiously, and the people are half ashamed of them. The most important of Mr. Quain’s informers were so obviously charlatans and imposters that the reader is left with a sense of futility”.

**125** Alfred Métraux, upon meeting Quain in Brazil (and mistaking his name for Cowan), writes the following impression in his journal, translated into English and related by Patrick Wilcken (2010, 89): “Cowan [sic] told us about his journey to the Xingu, and then spoke extravagantly on the subject of his syphilis. I detected a hint of desperate bravado in his brutal frankness and in the jokes he made about his condition . . . Cowan is quite drunk and fills the dining room with his booming voice. Wagley calms him with a delicate, courteous hush, hush”.

**126** “Contaba entonces Quain con apenas 26 años cuando se internó solo, a pesar de la insistencia de Heloísa en que debía ir acompañado con una expedición que incluyera no solo a asistentes sino más recursos económicos y materiales (‘él prefiere andar a pie’, anotó Heloísa),



to terms with Quain's decision and sending him off with a haunting – and unsuspecting – Walserian goodbye.

Upon reaching his destination amidst a dying culture<sup>127</sup> – himself a dwindling force –, Malinowski's ghost sets in and Quain succumbs to loneliness and to the shadows of his own mind<sup>128</sup>: “A feeling of aloneness permeates the Quain notes. He was in the midst of people with whom he had limited communication, due not only to the obstacle of language, but to the cultural gulf separating him from them”, writes Robert Murphy (1955, 2), who was charged with the task of turning Quain's notes on the Trumai Indians into a proper posthumous publication, 1955s *The Trumai Indians of Central Brazil*. Carvalho picks up on Quain's sense of loneliness and displacement and magnifies it, fictionalizes the extent of his marginal condition and foreshadows with every turn of phrase his inevitable doom and demise.<sup>129</sup> Upon reading the many letters Quain sent during his stay in Brazil, one notices how Carvalho focuses on passages that deal with disease, exile, solitude, sexuality, a contrived sense of sociability and belonging – in short, how he carves out of an already Walserian figure an even more Walserian character.

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en la selva del alto Xingú hacia el noreste selvático e inhóspito del Mato Grosso donde habitaban los más elusivos y enigmáticos Trumái [sic.]” (Ashwell, 2011, 5)

**127** “They [the Trumai] are a dying culture”, wrote Quain in a 1938 letter to Ruth Benedict. (Murphy and Quain, 1955, 103).

**128** Malinowski's field diary is overwrought with a sense of loneliness and despair, at times painfully so, at times tinged with a certain Walserian flair: “I lay on the bunk by the cotton bags and the *bêche-de-mer*. Felt sick, lonely, in despair”; “Yesterday, Monday twenty-first, all day at home. Morning and afternoon, Puana; we talked about fishing.–Occasionally in the afternoon–violent fit of dejection; my loneliness weighs upon me”; “Is this because of loneliness and an actual purification of the soul or just tropical madness?”; “I was again alone–emptiness of moonlit night on the lagoon” (Malinowski, 1989, 40; 59; 69; 160).

**129** The foreshadowing is constant throughout *Nove Noites*, and through it Carvalho highlights once again his belief in fiction's “power of anticipation”, which Carvalho would later explore in its full Walserian implications in 2007s *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo*, as has already been discussed in chapter 4.2.5. “O homem que chegou naquela tarde modorrenta de março era um homem atormentado. Na véspera de sua partida para a aldeia, ele estava apreensivo. E já não sei se era por não saber o que o esperava ou justamente por saber” (NN, 22); “Quando o dr. Buell tentou entrar, a irmã do chefe lhe disse que, como elas, ele morreria se pisasse ali dentro. Mas ele a ignorou e entrou assim mesmo. Houve outra ocasião em que lhe falaram da morte, deixando, porém, que tirasse as próprias conclusões. Durante uma caçada em que procuravam aves para tirar-lhes as penas, disseram-lhe que um pássaro de cabeça vermelha a que chamavam ‘lê’ era o anúncio da morte para quem o visse. Pouco depois ele deparou com a aparição fatídica e preferiu acreditar que lhe pregavam uma peça. Não disse nada, embora no íntimo tenha ficado muito impressionado, a ponto de ter sonhado mais de uma vez com a mesma ave dali para a frente. Acordava ofegante e coberto de suor” (NN, 51).



Carvalho's rendering of Quain is that of a troubled soul who had traveled the world with a pen in hand in quest for belonging, finding it nowhere, and drawing from the experience the conclusion that he was doomed and alone. In terms of sociability, Carvalho's Buell Quain is highly reminiscent of Walser's narrators in *Träumen* and their appalled fascination for the "*Hantierung*" of the common folk, their desire of blending in and somehow disappearing in the masses, and their ultimate failure in doing so. To that effect, Carvalho emphasizes a series of events in which Quain tries – and fails – to be 'one of them', as, for instance, in his countless attempts at downplaying his comfortable financial situation ("He was obsessed with not appearing to be what he really was"),<sup>130</sup> or at affecting a Walserian kind of servility and submission, of becoming a zero ("[Quain] took great pains to show that he was nobody, as if he were a servant").<sup>131</sup> Similarly, when the Trumai built Quain a house "fit for white men", Quain insisted, somewhat feverishly, that they built him a haystack house just like theirs instead<sup>132</sup> – only to admit, as time went by, that it didn't matter how much like them he tried to behave, in the end he would always be an "outsider"<sup>133</sup> and a "disturbing element"<sup>134</sup> in their midst. Carvalho prefers the words "desajustado" (NN, 15) and

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**130** "A única miragem que eu posso admitir que ele tivesse era essa de um mundo sem ricos, porque era realmente uma ideologia. Ele não queria parecer rico. Era seu traço de caráter mais marcante. Não tenho dúvidas. Foi uma experiência curiosa ele me convidar para jantar num restaurante de luxo em Copacabana quando morava numa pensão de terceira na Lapa. Ficava essa oposição entre a vida pública e a vida privada, porque ele insistia em negar a possibilidade de viver tranquilamente como rico mas garantia essa situação para os amigos. Ele sempre viveu essa obsessão: não parecer e na realidade ser. Ele tentava preservar a vida privada de todo contato exterior", me disse Castro Faria." (NN, 32)

**131** "Em Cuiabá, para espanto de Castro Faria, o jovem etnólogo americano ajudou a descarregar um caminhão com a bagagem de Lévi-Strauss, o que apenas reforçou na cabeça do brasileiro a idéia de que Buell Quain tinha 'a preocupação constante de demonstrar que não era ninguém, como se fosse só um serviçal.'" (NN, 33)

**132** "House styles and construction were not rigidly conventionalized. The Trumai helped build a house for the missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Young, and they thought that Quain, being a *karahiba* (white man), would like one such as the Youngs had designed for themselves. When they were half finished with the frame, Quain realized what was happening, and asked for a haystack house like theirs" (Murphy and Quain, 1955; 33).

**133** "The reason why it is so difficult to live with these people is that they are so 'impolite'. At least in their dealings with me, an outsider, and with the missionaries, they are unrestrained in physical contact and in the expression of their momentary sentiments. In many instances their motives are kind and helpful. But their complete lack of shyness makes them sometimes bungling efforts troublesome" (1955; 95–96).

**134** "Tremendous interest in property, together with a simple and declining culture, results in my being a seriously disturbing element in their lives" (1955; 104).

“atormentado” (NN, 22),<sup>135</sup> which he also uses to underline Quain’s marginality and malaise within his own American culture (“de alguma forma desajustados em relação ao padrão da cultura americana”), thus removing – as is Carvalho’s wont – the nationalistic component from the equation and arriving once again at the conclusion that exile is an affair of the mind and marginality a privileged literary space.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, in Carvalho’s extensive research into Buell Quain’s life and work,<sup>137</sup> one may also notice how some undocumented gaps in Quain’s state of mind and worldview are filled by Carvalho with Lévi-Straussian sensibility, particularly the Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss is a fundamental theoretical piece behind the puzzle that is *Nove Noites* and also, in some aspects, to Carvalho’s body of work. When Carvalho steers Quain’s growing impatience with the Trumai towards a broader frustration with his own (inconclusive, fallible, subjective) métier, it is Lévi-Strauss that one hears in between the lines<sup>138</sup>; when Carvalho portrays Quain’s almost destructive mistrust towards his own culture and people, it is once again Lévi-Strauss that one hears in between the lines.<sup>139</sup> The Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques* – especially when in “full-throttle

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**135** Perhaps compounding on Heloisa Alberto Torres’ heartfelt letter to Quain in which she somewhat delicately calls him “unstable”: “Escreva e me diga que eu posso realmente confiar em você. Devo confessar que às vezes tenho medo de você; acho você tão instável, que temo por seu futuro. Gostaria que você tivesse tido mais confiança e tivesse falado comigo sobre o que você anda fazendo. Espero que sua estada no Brasil lhe faça muito bem, e acredito que quanto mais tempo você ficar, melhor. Ficarei muito feliz em ajudá-lo e você pode estar certo de que essa sua velha amiga é muito mais compreensiva com as misérias humanas do que parece ser” (Corrêa and Mello, 2008; 59).

**136** The Lévi-Straussian echo rings here once again loud and clear: “Pour plusieurs ethnologues et pas seulement pour moi, la vocation ethnologique fut peut-être, en effet, un refuge contre une civilisation, un siècle, où l’on ne se sent pas à l’aise” (Eribon and Lévi-Strauss, 2009; 98–99).

**137** An investigation so comprehensive that Carvalho’s *Nove Noites* became a source for Quain’s mysterious life in Patrick Wilcken’s acclaimed critical biography of Lévi-Strauss, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*.

**138** “Surtout, on s’interroge: qu’est-on venu faire ici ? Dans quel espoir ? À quelle fin ? Qu’est-ce au juste qu’une enquête ethnographique ? L’exercice normal d’une profession comme les autres, avec cette seule différence que le bureau ou le laboratoire sont séparés du domicile par quelques milliers de kilomètres ? Ou la conséquence d’un choix plus radical, impliquant une mise en cause du système dans lequel on est né et où on a grandi ?” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955; 434)

**139** “La fable qui précède n’a qu’une excuse: elle illustre le dérèglement auquel des conditions anormales d’existence, pendant une période prolongée, soumettent l’esprit du voyageur. Mais le problème demeure: comment l’ethnographe peut-il se tirer de la contradiction qui résulte des circonstances de son choix ? Il a sous les yeux, il tient à sa disposition une société: la sienne; pourquoi décide-t-il de la dédaigner et de réserver à d’autres sociétés – choisies parmi les plus lointaines et les plus différentes – une patience et une dévotion que sa détermination refuse à ses concitoyens ? Ce n’est pas un hasard que l’ethnographe ait rarement vis-à-vis de son propre

rant against the whole genre of travel writing and the midcentury explorers and adventurers”, in Wilcken’s (2010, 173–174) provocative words – also informs to the highest degree Carvalho’s entire narrative project, from his ambiguous civilizing project with vague anthropological undertones to his penchant for depicting intellectualized globe-trotters to whom traveling can only lead to disenchantment and failure – or, in François Dosse’s (1991, 176) succinct formulation: “The adventure proposed by Lévi-Strauss [in *Tristes Tropiques*] does not lead to the promised land, but rather to disenchantment. It is the quest for a discovery that bears within it its own failure”. And even though *Tristes Tropiques* is a central book in Carvalho’s literary project, the “other” Lévi-Strauss – the cautious, systematic, dry Lévi-Strauss, the reluctant father of Structuralism – is equally crucial in providing another entry point to Carvalho’s ultimately Walserian articulation between author, character and narrator.

### 5.2.3 L’auteur avant sa mort: Adding Walser to a Structuralist recipe

The third picture in *Nove Noites* – the back cover picture of Bernardo Carvalho as a six-year-old boy standing next to a Xingu tribesman – tells a different conceptual story, one that flows towards Barthes and Foucault by way of Lévi-Strauss. The juxtaposition of two narrative threads sixty years apart is what grants *Nove Noites* its depth beyond the curiosity-inducing mechanisms of an enigmatic suicide in an exotic setting. A second and decisive voice is added to the subtly fictionalized story of Buell Quain and of his last nights in Brazil: that of the narrator, himself also a character in the novel, and perhaps even its author. The character-narrator remains elegantly unnamed throughout the novel, although upon him are bestowed all manners of coincidences linking his fictional life to that of the author who has created him: both are journalists and writers with professional ties to France and the United States; both have interviewed Lévi-Strauss; both have had a father who owned land in indigenous territory in the heartlands of Brazil; both have been photographed next to indigenous people; both are

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groupe une attitude neutre. S’il est missionnaire ou administrateur, on peut en inférer qu’il a accepté de s’identifier à un ordre, au point de se consacrer à sa propagation; et, quand il exerce sa profession sur le plan scientifique et universitaire, il y a de grandes chances pour qu’on puisse retrouver dans son passé des facteurs objectifs qui le montrent peu ou pas adapté à la société où il est né. En assumant son rôle, il a cherché soit un mode pratique de concilier son appartenance à un groupe et la réserve qu’il éprouve à son égard, soit, tout simplement, la manière de mettre à profit un état initial de détachement qui lui confère un avantage pour se rapprocher de sociétés différentes, à mi-chemin desquelles il se trouve déjà.” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 442)

writing a novel about Buell Quain, and, more importantly, both are reflecting on the novel as they write it (or, as Coetzee puts it: the novel as “nothing more than the adventure of its own writing”).

This second narrative thread, with metanarrative undertones, follows the obsession of this unnamed and provocatively autobiographical figure as he tries, sixty or so years after Quain’s suicide, to decipher the enigma of his existence – and the ambiguity of the possessive pronoun here is perfectly intentional, given that such narrative juxtaposition constantly shifts the focus of the novel from Quain to the narrator, from the failed hero to the fake Doppelgänger, from the observed to the observer. “Bernardo Carvalho’s narrator seeks to understand himself *vis-à-vis* the experience of Buell Quain”, writes Oscar C. Pérez (2011, 117) in his analysis of *Nove Noites*, and even though the statement certainly holds true for most of the novel, it nevertheless crumbles with the novel’s final paragraph: as Carvalho’s fictional counterpart flies back from New York to Brazil, unable to sleep after a frustrating and ultimately inconclusive hunt for answers regarding Quain’s death, fate has it that next to him be seated an eager young man, bursting with excitement for his first trip to South America and therefore also unable to fall sleep, and as the plane flies over “the region where Quain had killed himself”, the young man reveals that it is not tourism what brings him to Brazil, but an altogether different kind of quest: “I’m going to study the Brazilian Indians”, he says, to the narrator’s dismay and foreboding silence.<sup>140</sup>

Beyond the circularity of the ending – an omen of yet another failure to come, a hint at Carvalho’s belief, via Walser, in fiction’s premonitory powers –, there is a broader conceptual shift at play, which becomes even more evident the more one re-reads the novel: the realization that Carvalho’s narrator cannot quite understand himself – nor the eager young man, for that matter – *vis-à-vis* the experi-

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**140** “Eu não conseguia dormir. O rapaz ao meu lado também não. Lia um livro. Era dele a única luz acesa entre as de todos os passageiros. Estavam todos dormindo. Eu não conseguia ler nada. Liguei o vídeo no encosto da poltrona à minha frente. Por coincidência, sobrevoávamos a região onde Quain havia se matado. Foi quando o rapaz, pela primeira vez, fez uma pausa e me perguntou se estava me incomodando com a luz de leitura. Respondi que não, de qualquer jeito não conseguia dormir em aviões. Ele sorriu e disse que com ele era a mesma coisa. Estava muito excitado com a viagem para poder dormir. Era a sua primeira vez na América do Sul. Perguntei se vinha a turismo. Ele sorriu de novo e respondeu orgulhoso e entusiasmado: ‘Vou estudar os índios do Brasil’. Não consegui dizer mais nada. E, diante do meu silêncio e da minha perplexidade, ele voltou ao livro que tinha acabado de fechar, retomando a leitura. Nessa hora, me lembrei sem mais nem menos de ter visto uma vez, num desses programas de televisão sobre as antigas civilizações, que os Nazca do deserto do Peru cortavam as línguas dos mortos e as amarravam num saquinho para que nunca mais atormentassem os vivos. Virei para o outro lado e, contrariando a minha natureza, tentei dormir, nem que fosse só para calar os mortos.” (NN, 150)

ence of Buell Quain; that there might be similarities, general rules and common traits, but never a perfect overlap, never a complete and fulfilling understanding of the other in relation to oneself. The ending in *Nove Noites* – as is usual in Carvalho’s work – plays with this sense of acute displacement and disenchantment, and does, in its own displaced and disenchanted way, provide a very Lévi-Straussian release of tension: “not through a soothing reassurance, but as a result of being cast into the void”.<sup>141</sup>

*Nove Noites* is the most clear-cut example, within Carvalho’s work, of the author’s exposure to Lévi-Strauss, and of his assimilation of Lévi-Strauss’ maxim of “comprendre l’être par rapport à lui-même et non point par rapport à moi” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 77), which is, according to Wilcken (2010, 14–15), “one of the most fundamental shifts in twentieth-century thought—the swing from meaning to form, the self to the system” and a defining pillar of the Structuralist project. Which is not to say that Carvalho is a feverous Lévi-Straussian, or even a Structuralist writer for that matter, but that Lévi-Strauss flows through him like a hot knife on a stick of butter: the reluctant and disenchanted globetrotter Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques*; the Lévi-Strauss of *La Pensée Sauvage* triangulating three keywords very dear to Carvalho’s literary project: nature, culture, and intellect; the Lévi-Strauss of *Les Structures Élémentaires* criticizing Freud and discussing kinship (from which Carvalho abstracts his take on orphanhood, on displaced characters – and in *Nove Noites* in particular, as shall be seen later – who are “orphans of civilization”). But, above all, the conversational Lévi-Strauss, the polemist, who went as far as to claim that “[w]hat matters is the work, not the author who happened to write it; I would say rather that it writes itself through him. The individual person is no more than the means of transmission and survives in the work only as a residue” (Augé, 1990, 86), is the one who offers Carvalho an irresistible avenue towards the Barthes and the Foucault of the late sixties, the murderous Barthes and Foucault who famously announced the death of the author.

The influence and repercussion of Barthes’ “La Mort de l’Auteur” (1968) and Foucault’s “Qu’est-ce qu’un Auteur?” (1969) over Carvalho’s literary project is more than well documented in the author’s secondary literature,<sup>142</sup> and it would be both unnecessary and a deviation from the Walserian core of this research to

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<sup>141</sup> “At once modern and ancient, religious and atheistic, cold and romantic, the structuralist aesthetic signaled an easing off, a release of spiritual tension—not through a soothing reassurance, but as a result of being cast into the void.” (Wilcken, 2010, 239)

<sup>142</sup> Among the plethora of articles and texts exploring the conceptual impact of the death of the author in Carvalho’s work, the best and most consequent contribution remains Diana Klinger’s excellent and already mentioned *Escritas de Si, Escritas do Outro: O Retorno do Autor e a Virada*

go over it once again. Instead, an alternative to Barthes and Foucault shall be presented by way of Walser and of Valerie Heffernan's inspired take on Walser as a precursor of the two French theorists:

Barthes' and Foucault's attempt to overthrow the sovereignty of the author comes a little late for some writers. A half a century earlier, Robert Walser was already eroding his absolute power and authority in his texts, and the author-figure that emerges through Walser's work appears to be a little more ragged and frayed at the edges than his nineteenth century counterpart. At the same time, the author-function in Walser's work is by no means dead. He is an enigmatic presence in and around the text, who is difficult to locate and yet impossible to ignore. (Heffernan, 2007, 92)

The erosion of the narrative power and of the narrator's authority in Carvalho's work has already been assessed in a previous chapter, and such erosion paves the way to one of Walser's central contributions to Carvalho's writing: the enigmatic presence of the author in and around the text. Although it is true that Barthes and Foucault came to soften the deadly blow to the author in later writings,<sup>143</sup> it nevertheless stands that those two seminal texts, when accepted in full, do lead to a radical conception of the literary discourse, one in which the author is all but powerless. Heffernan's (2007, 92) main thesis similarly argues that "whilst Barthes and Foucault open up new directions and avenues for the exploration of literature, we might argue that they go a step too far, in that they strip the author of any authority in literary discourse", and even though Carvalho concurs, here and there, with Barthes' and Foucault's positions (against the deification of the author; in favor of the text and, above all, of language – and of language as a metaphor for cultural inquiry), there are still elements in Carvalho's dealings with the author figure that escape Barthes' and Foucault's radical cul-de-sac, missing elements that may be found in Walser:

Evidently Walser, writing forty years before Barthes and Foucault, is already acutely aware of the discourses on authorship which they also write against. His protest against the deification of the author in literary criticism may not be as explicit as theirs and its effect

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*Etnográfica*. In her book, Klinger maps out not only the death of the author, but also his or her resurrection, and ties it conceptually to Carvalho's own work, with a special emphasis on *Nove Noites*. **143** "No entanto, é justo remarcar que tanto Barthes quanto Foucault, que no auge do estruturalismo criticaram a noção do autor, nos seus trabalhos seguintes deixaram 'cada vez mais pistas para afirmar não novas experiências científicas, que distanciam pesquisador e pesquisado, mas como lidar com o pessoal na escrita, sem recorrer a velhos biografismos' como assinala Denilson Lopes (2002, p.252). De fato, desde os anos setenta, os debates pós-estruturalistas, feministas e pós-coloniais, devedores do pensamento de Foucault, não cessaram de retornar à pergunta pelo lugar da fala." (Klinger, 2007, 31)

may not be as far-reaching. Nonetheless it is apparent that this gesture of over-playing the power of the author expresses a resistance to the underlying authority of this role. Where Barthes and Foucault attack the author's dominance from outside the system, Walser erodes his power from within through a sly process of mimicry. Where they call for the death of the author, he brings him vividly to life. However, the author-figure that is affected in Walser's dramatic scenes seems at times to be just a little too artful and just a touch too practised in his performance, leading us to suspect that he is nothing more than a pretender to the throne. Walser's regeneration of the author in literature envisions a new form of authorship that challenges the authority associated with that figure. (Heffernan, 2007, 95)

What Walser does, when resorting in countless texts to an authorial figure in varying degrees of autobiographical affinity, and from where Carvalho takes his cue, is to split the author figure in two: on the one hand a character who plays on his own authority (or lack thereof) within the text, and on the other an author perfectly in control of the action and of his craft.<sup>144</sup> By feeding off of such dichotomy, and especially when overlapping the fictional author figure with his real author self, Walser spins yet another thread in his already wide web of connections, associations, and layers which add up to the labyrinthine structure of his texts, and which ultimately (and subtly) question the conventions of the reading-process and of the relationship between reader and author:

Walser's narrator is not inclined to make the reading process easier for the unsuspecting reader. If anything, he plays on the reader's naïve expectations regarding the nature of the narrator-reader relationship. Instead of a familiar face, the narrator serves as a point of disorientation, a figure that confuses him further and mocks him constantly in his search for meaning in the text. At all turns, the narrator seems to do the opposite of what the reader expects. As such, he becomes a distorted image of the reader's desires. (Heffernan, 2007, 100)

The author is not dead in Walser's oeuvre, but alive and kicking, acting as a "point of disorientation", disrupting the reader's expectations. And it is when this double-edged authorial figure coincides with the narrator or with a character that

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**144** "This play on authority gains additional momentum when we consider that there is also another, separate author-figure implied in these dramatic texts. The authors that are discussed and even play a role in the dramas cannot be equated with the real author who created them and placed them within this dramatic realm. If we look beyond this stage form of authorship, we find ourselves confronted with a higher authority who is controlling the action from outside the text. Thus, in effect, short scenes such as this one, in which the author plays a role, actually produce two instances of authorship, who vie for authority over the action. Walser's splitting of the author-figure into on the one hand, a character who plays on his own authority within the scene and on the other, a god-like author who controls the action from above offers a curiously doubled parody of the authoritative author." (Heffernan, 2007, 95)



the disruption reaches a productive peak, when fact and fiction blur each other's boundaries – to the advantage of fiction. Carvalho's long-term dissatisfaction with the hypothetical reader who, confronted with a literary text based on real events, values fact over fiction – that is, reality over imagination – is well documented in his essayistic writing. To this hypothetical reader, argues Carvalho, fiction, in a book based on a true story, is the expandable half of the equation.<sup>145</sup> It is also to this effect, in defense of the properly imaginative and narrative, in defense of fiction, that Carvalho particularly (and somewhat sadistically) savors resorting to biographical and autobiographical elements when creating his characters and narrators. It shouldn't come as a surprise that Carvalho's musings on the reader and on the clash between fact and fiction in the (long) age of Realism are also often triggered by his take on Thomas Bernhard, whose work stands for a logical – and even more radical – continuation of Walser's disorienting and disruptive affirmation of the author's presence.

Barthes and Foucault wished to erase all traces of biography from literary criticism, and while Carvalho is decidedly against a biographical or even psychologizing reading, he nevertheless feeds off of Walser's and Bernhard's ambiguous play on their real and fictional personae. Exploring the biographical links between Walser the writer and the “Ich' figure” who appears and reappears in Walser's texts, Heffernan notes that

[w]hilst current trends in narratology would discourage any alignment between author and narrator, we cannot ignore the congruity between the very real circumstances of Walser's own life and the fictional situation of his textual personae. (...) It is clear that Walser plays on this tenuous boundary between fiction and reality.

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**145** “A citação é providencial num tempo em que a imaginação na literatura parece gozar de um prestígio crescente entre os leitores, mesmo entre os mais cultos. Não é preciso muito esforço para notar que não só os livros jornalísticos e as biografias mas também os romances ‘baseados em histórias reais’ interessam mais os leitores do que as ‘obras da imaginação’. O que prende o leitor a um livro em que há ambigüidade entre realidade e ficção é a realidade e não a ficção. A ficção, para ele, é a parte supérflua” (MFE, 122–123); “Não se trata de mais uma dessas ilusões de realidade ‘baseadas numa história real’ (como se o real fosse narrativo) cuja demanda parece crescer na mesma proporção do fascínio pelo mundo virtual” (MFE, 198). Carvalho's assessment of the supremacy of fact over fiction within contemporary literature is not a lone rant: it captures the Zeitgeist of an era in which an author, such as Abraham Verghese, for instance, would symptomatically praise the “great advantages of nonfiction”: “And I had to learn that this is one of the great advantages of nonfiction: when something is true, you automatically have the reader's interest, because we're all inherently curious about things that really happened. In fiction you have to work ten times harder to hold the reader's interest; there's an exuberance or excess that fiction has to have” (Yagoda, 2004, 120–121).



It would certainly seem from his texts that Walser emphasizes and even cultivates his role as author, as origin and architect of the text. Indeed, it appears as if he draws on his own autobiography and material circumstances to establish this authority and mark his territory. (Heffernan, 2007, 93)

Diana Klinger, in *Escritas de Si, Escritas do Outro*, similarly argues in favor of the return of the author and of the author's role in Carvalho's work, with an emphasis on ethnography and contemporary French and Latin American thought, taking it one step further than the usual reception of Carvalho's work within Structuralist and post-Structuralist lines. Although, if one is to continue pursuing the alternative Walserian route suggested by this research, one might find more suitable theoretical grounds to analyze the (auto)biographical elements in Carvalho's fiction in the motifs of failure and of Romanticism. The first part of the equation is once again readily supplied by Heffernan (2007, 94), to whom the ambivalent appearance of the author in Walser's oeuvre "indicates a rather more complex position *vis-à-vis* the inherent authority of the author-function", inasmuch as "his power is not absolute and his word is not infallible. He, too, can make mistakes; he is sometimes unsure of himself and his presentation of his characters is sometimes lacking". The insight plays right into Carvalho's penchant for failure, fallibility, and marginality, fencing off the notion of a godlike figure who shall guide the text toward 'the truth'. The author, both in control of his craft and a failing, marginal force, steers the text – through (auto)biographical incursions and deceptive real events – well away from any factual notions of truth, thus building up on this tension between the logic of everyday common sense and the logic of fiction – to the advantage, once again, of fiction, whose logic (and this is Carvalho's main – and at times misunderstood – intent behind *Nove Noites*) is capable of disrupting and disturbing the more alluring and accessible veneer of the factual, of the relatable, and ultimately of the mimetic project upon which *Nove Noites* is deceptively built.

On the other hand, a second source of influence over Carvalho's (and, of course, Walser's) conflation between their real and fictional selves is to be found in the Romanticism of the Romantics and post-Romantics, of the Schlegels<sup>146</sup>

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146 "Das vermehrte Lesen läßt Lesen und Leben zusammenrücken. Man fahndet im Gelesenen nach dem Leben des Autors, der plötzlich mit seiner Biographie interessant wird, und wenn er es noch nicht ist, sich interessant zu machen versucht. Die Schlegels waren Meister darin, sich interessant zu machen. Ihre Liebesgeschichten waren in Jena Stadtgespräch. Man fahndete nach dem Leben hinter der Literatur und war umgekehrt von der Vorstellung fasziniert, wie die Literatur das Leben formen könnte." (Safranski, 2007, 51)

and of Blanchot,<sup>147</sup> in this fusion between life and work that does not strike too far away from the Greek “*bíos*”, from where biography gets its fame. This may seem like a counterintuitive maneuver, should one be following the “objective” nature of a strictly Structuralist or post-Structuralist reading, which is not the case here, nor should it be when it comes to Carvalho’s work. Carvalho repeatedly (and also somewhat self-aggrandizingly) takes a clear stand against “black and white” dogmatisms, against indulging in “commonsensical dualities”, against blindly accepting a theoretical approach in full.<sup>148</sup> Therefore, even if at

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**147** “Le ‘ je ’ du poète, voilà donc ce qui finalement importerait seul, non plus l’œuvre poétique, mais l’activité, toujours supérieure à l’ouvrage réel, et seulement créatrice lorsqu’elle se sentait capable à la fois d’évoquer et de révoquer l’œuvre dans le jeu souverain de l’ironie. Il en résultera la reprise de la poésie, non seulement par la vie, mais même par la biographie, par conséquent le désir de vivre romantiquement et de rendre poétique jusqu’au caractère, ce caractère dit romantique qui, du reste, est très attrayant, dans la mesure où lui manque précisément tout caractère, s’il n’est rien d’autre que l’impossibilité d’être quoi que ce soit de déterminé, de fixe, de sûr...” (Blanchot, 1969, 524–525)

**148** A posture perhaps best exemplified by Carvalho’s short text on the German art historian Walter Friedlaender (1873–1966), whose highly nuanced take on the departures and similarities between Classicist and Romantic artists triggers in Carvalho a broader homage to the worth and value of grey areas when it comes to critical thinking: “Mas, contrariando os manuais escolares que concebem a arte da primeira metade do século 19 como uma guerra entre o classicismo e o romantismo, Friedlaender mostra que, em termos absolutos, não faz sentido falar nem em uma coisa nem em outra. Tudo é relativo. Não existe uniformidade nos movimentos artísticos e por vezes há mais afinidades entre artistas de movimentos antagônicos do que entre aqueles que acabam sendo associados a uma mesma escola. (...) ‘Toda corrente principal e claramente definida é influenciada e matizada por correntes divergentes e tributárias’. Uma lição para quem insiste em pensar em preto-e-branco” (Carvalho, 2002). To that effect, one should also mention in passing Robert Scholes’ (1974, 170) thesis – which adds to Carvalho’s own position – that “there are important connections between romantic and structuralist views of language, and, indeed, to note that we should not have a structuralism if we had not had a romanticism”. A further critical note (with reconciliatory undertones) in that direction is provided by Andrew Bennett’s (2006, 57) Romantic critique of Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author: “Inasmuch as Barthes’s declaration of the death of the author may be said to be directed against the Romantic-expressive model of authorship, we might conclude, it is misdirected. What Barthes’s attack overlooks or misrepresents are precisely the complexities and self-contradictions that energize Romantic poetic theory. The expressive theory of the author as articulated by writers of the Romantic period interrogates the subjectivity and self-consciousness of the author; it interrogates problems of language, representation, and textuality; it interrogates questions of authorial intention, volition, and agency. And despite the importance of the provocation of his essay, it is, in a sense, Barthes himself who closes down these questions by promoting a reductive version of expressive authorship in order to argue against it, and indeed to argue for a notion of the author that is already at work in the Romantic theory of authorship itself. But, at the same time, Barthes’s essay, and the post-structuralist rethinking of notions of authorship, intentionality, and agency that it may be said to stand for, have been instrumental in a rethinking of the Romantic conception of authorship and expression. Or, to put

times an author prone to bouts of Structuralism, Carvalho never strays too far from Romanticism, from a diffident Romanticism tinged by Walser and Walser's ambiguous author-figure located – according to Renata Buzzo Margari (1987, 123) – in a transitional zone [“Übergangszone”] between the autobiographical and the fictional.

In her study of Walser's transitional “I” between his letters and prose pieces, Buzzo Margari touches on two additional points which shed light on Carvalho's own deceiving (auto)biographical strategies. Buzzo Margari sees a recurring motif in Walser's work: the motif of the beginning, the stylistic repetition of – and obsession with – that moment of inception when written word and personal experience clash, when the fictional and the factual collide, and from such collision this literary, deceptive “I” is released, not as a therapeutic device, but as a function of the poetic consciousness, as a byproduct of the imaginative endeavor.<sup>149</sup> The deception of this “I” lies in that it is not carried over from reality into fiction, but created within the fictional realm and then forged around reality, and thus the “*Motiv des Anfangs*” marks the inception of the fictional – and a victorious one at that – and also, through its constant repetition, serves as a reminder of fiction's supremacy, of the fundamental artificiality of its ruses and charms. Carvalho, who is no stranger to such strategy, resorts to it once again in *Nove Noites*, repeating eight times, throughout the novel, its opening line: “Isto é para quando você vier”. The opening line works on three important levels, the first of which is a premonitory one: “This is for *when* you get here”, writes one of the novel's narrators, Manoel Perna (another figure based on a real person), not *if* you get here – the sense of foreboding, of doom, of that which cannot be avoided, plays into Carvalho's apocalyptic aesthetic and into his retelling of the uncanny parallels between Walser's own silent death in the snow and the death to which he had sentenced one of his characters some 50 years prior, as already discussed in a previous chapter.

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It differently, the importance and influence of Barthes's essay may be seen as an indicator of the importance and influence of the Romantic-expressive theory of authorship in contemporary criticism and theory. Partial and polemical though it is, Barthes's essay offers profound insight into the fundamental values that Romanticism both avows and contests, values that are still avowed and still contested in contemporary criticism and theory”.

**149** “Dieses Motiv des Anfangs, des Beginnens erscheint als eine Anspielung auf den Augenblick, wo sich das Schriftwerk aus der menschlichen Erfahrung bildet, auf den Augenblick, wo innerhalb des dichterischen Bewußtseins das literarische Ich das autobiographische ablöst: wo das eine aufhört, dort beginnt das andere. Der Anfang ist der Augenblick, wo das Erlebte seine schriftliche Form annimmt; die Kurzprosa wie auch der Brief scheinen besonders geeignet, die nötige Unmittelbarkeit zu gewährleisten.” (Buzzo Margari, 1987, 126)

This first implication of the recurring opening line feeds into a second one: the implied autobiographical “you” [“você”] of the sentence. As it turns out, the “you” that eventually comes, that is drawn to the mysterious and aporetic life story of Buell Quain, is none other than the slightly fictionalized version of Bernardo Carvalho. The opening line thus epitomizes the all-consuming obsession of this autobiographical narrator, the ill-fated pursuit of the one who could not do otherwise but to come, to succumb to the calling for a quest doomed to fail. The story told in between the lines of *Nove Noites* is the story of an obsession, of a writer’s obsession with his material, with the poorly-documented life of a historical and marginal figure. By pursuing it, and by constantly returning to this opening line – that is, returning to that moment of fictional inception from within which the entire novel stems –, Carvalho does not only swiftly subsume most of his theoretical and stylistic concerns into one single novel, but also succeeds at creating a metanarrative that, like Walser’s, and inspired by Walser’s, is only *slightly* meta. The metanarrative found in Carvalho<sup>150</sup> and in Walser is as discreet as it is elegant; it thematizes the conflation between an author’s real and fictional personae, between fact and fiction, and does so on a conceptual – rather than exhibitionist – level (that is: one must look for it; an oblivious reader may altogether overlook it). It is almost as if the autobiographical characters and narrators in Walser’s and Carvalho’s writings were deprived of most of their ego and made into servants of fiction, and not of the authors’ real personae. The only ego these characters and narrators have left, the only ostensive display of narcissism they are allowed, is compressed in their voices, in their tireless, driveling, disappearing voices.

A third and final repercussion of the “*Motiv des Anfangs*” in Carvalho’s work, and specifically in the recurring opening line in *Nove Noites*, is the aforementioned conflation between fact and fiction, between the fickle notions of “truth” and “lie”. In order to further analyze such conflation in Carvalho’s work, one should note that the opening line in *Nove Noites* condenses, in its many iterations throughout the novel, the entire essence of the opening paragraph, which reads:

This is for when you get here. You have to be prepared. Somebody has to warn you. You are entering a place where truth and lies no longer have the meanings they had outside. Just ask the Indians. Anything. Whatever crosses your mind. And tomorrow, when you wake

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**150** Oscar Pérez (2011, 85–86) hints at the metanarrative level of Carvalho’s *Nove Noites* by stating that “...by creating a metanarrative that extends throughout the book, Bernardo Carvalho consistently refers back to the action of researching and then writing a fictional account that revolves around the life and mysterious death of Buell Quain. In other words, the narrator’s process supposedly replicates that of the author throughout the course of the novel”.

up, ask them again. And then the day after tomorrow. Each time the same question. And every day you'll get a different answer. The truth is lost among all the contradictions and absurdities.<sup>151</sup>

The paragraph, from there on subsumed into its six first words, triggers not only Carvalho's ominous aesthetic (coated in a Nouveau-Romanesque treatment of time: uncertain, dissolving, opaque), but also the many deceptions the author is staging with the faux-Realism of *Nove Noites*. Through these deceptions – the entangling of fiction and fact, of truth and lie – Carvalho gives another, more well-rounded go at narrative strategies which have already been discussed throughout this research, such as his preference for unreliable narrators who call for the reader's trust only to break it,<sup>152</sup> or the growing progression with which fiction overtakes fact, underlying his belief that the imaginative and the properly narrative are the parts that matter in a novel, not historical or factual truth.<sup>153</sup> Truth, concludes the autobiographical narrator towards the novel's dénouement, is the only thing that should be avoided, the only thing that would ruin his entire project.<sup>154</sup> Such realization – in its full retroactive effect – is key in understanding not only *Nove Noites*, but also the logic behind Carvalho's gradual conversion of truth and fact into fiction and deception. Carvalho – to re-appropriate an expression first used by Roberto Schwarz in connection to the narrator in Machado de Assis

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151 “Isto é para quando você vier. É preciso estar preparado. Alguém terá que preveni-lo. Vai entrar numa terra em que a verdade e a mentira não têm mais os sentidos que o trouxeram até aqui. Pergunte aos índios. Qualquer coisa. O que primeiro lhe passar pela cabeça. E amanhã, ao acordar, faça de novo a mesma pergunta. E depois de amanhã, mais uma vez. Sempre a mesma pergunta. E a cada dia receberá uma resposta diferente. A verdade está perdida entre todas as contradições e os disparates.” (NN, 6)

152 “As histórias dependem antes de tudo da confiança de quem as ouve, e da capacidade de interpretá-las. E quando vier você estará desconfiado. O dr. Buell, à sua maneira, também era incrédulo. Resistiu o quanto pôde. Precisamos de razões para acreditar” (NN, 7) “...mas não lhe peço que acredite em mais nada – a verdade depende apenas da confiança de quem ouve.” (NN, 21)

153 “Aquele altura dos acontecimentos, depois de meses lidando com papéis de arquivos, livros e anotações de gente que não existia, eu precisava ver um rosto, nem que fosse como antídoto à obsessão sem fundo e sem fim que me impedia de começar a escrever o meu suposto romance (o que eu havia dito a muita gente), que me deixava paralisado, com o medo de que a realidade seria sempre muito mais terrível e surpreendente do que eu podia imaginar e que só se revelaria quando já fosse tarde, com a pesquisa terminada e o livro publicado. Porque agora eu já estava disposto a fazer dela realmente uma ficção. Era o que me restava, à falta de outra coisa” (NN, 141); “A ficção começou no dia em que botei os pés nos Estados Unidos.” (NN, 142)

154 “As palavras dali em diante não teriam nenhuma importância. Eu podia dizer o que quisesse, podia não fazer o menor sentido, só não podia dizer a verdade. Só a verdade poria tudo a perder.” (NN, 144)

– is in the business of “perfecting falsehood” [*aperfeiçoar a falsidade*], that is to say, of perfecting exactly that which he intends to eventually bring down, of letting the unsuspecting reader believe that the author himself is invested in a position – as civilizing or controversial as it may be –, that the author himself is speaking through his autobiographical characters, that the author himself is committed to the truth and nothing but the truth, only to subvert all of these expectations at their zenith.<sup>155</sup> Carvalho strings the truth along until it collapses under its own all-encompassing weight, and from its ruins rises fiction, victorious and triumphant, but also disturbing and mischievous.

#### 5.2.4 Carvalho’s Napoleon: Truth, historical truth, and (auto)biography

This leads to Buzzo Margari’s second Walserian argument which sheds light on Carvalho’s own deceiving (auto)biographical strategies: the mischievous and recurring interferences of a deceptively “real” autobiographical “I” within the realm of the fictional work.<sup>156</sup> These recurring interferences of the ‘real’, which Buzzo Margari deems “factual truth”, seem to support and enhance the effectiveness of Walser’s pursuit of an “aesthetic truth”, a term Buzzo Margari borrows from Käte Hamburger. The deceiving moments of truth and of autobiographical overlap in Walser’s oeuvre aim not at highlighting or celebrating the factual, but

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155 “A idéia de aperfeiçoar a falsidade, como parte de um intuito crítico-destrutivo, é artisticamente pérfida. Por que aperfeiçoar o que se quer derrubar? Para derrubar de mais alto? Quando o artista aperfeiçoa uma posição, o público naturalmente pensa que é por coincidir com ela. Ocorre que em Machado o caso não é este, antes pelo contrário. O que dá uma idéia do requinte sarcástico da sua composição. Ele fabricou, digamos, uma prosa discreta, distinta, em meios-tons, ideal para... confirmar preconceitos conservadores e funcionar como ideologia no pior sentido da palavra. Um modelo de simplicidade visando esconder uma configuração social muito desigual e difícil de defender. Isso é coisa que se faça? Por outro lado, ao depurar a prosa conservadora e ao colocá-la em circunstâncias indefensáveis, Machado lhe sublinhava os mecanismos, com sarcasmo verdadeiramente máximo.” (Schwarz, 1990b, 230)

156 “In der Berner Zeit findet man dagegen – sowohl in den Briefen als auch in der Kurzprosa – eine ganze Fülle von Hinweisen auf die gestrige Zeit als Mitteilung einer ‘wahren’ Nachricht. Diese chronologische Bestimmung wirkt in der brieflichen Form überflüssig, weil die mitgeteilte Nachricht keinen Anspruch haben kann, ein Erlebnis auszumachen; in der Kurzprosa wirkt sie störend, als unnötige, ‘unartige’ Einmischung des autobiographischen ‘Ich’ in die dichterische Arbeit. Die Erwähnung einer solchen banalisierenden Zeitangabe scheint insbesondere einen Versuch darzustellen, die faktische Wahrheit (die Wahrheit des ‘der-Fall-Seins’, wie es Käte Hamburger definiert hat) als Unterstützung für die ästhetische Wahrheit einspringen zu lassen. Die Begegnungen und Erlebnisse des Spaziergängers werden in eine Zeitangabe eingesperrt, die den ‘Spaziergang’ zu einem zwischen vier Wänden geschriebenen ‘Brief’ umgestaltet.” (Margari 1987, 127)

at empowering the fictional. As is the case in Carvalho's work, the instances of autobiography in Walser do not represent an overflowing of ego, but a literary ("dichterisch") strategy.

Buzzo Margari's recourse to Käte Hamburger is doubly providential, as it allows for a seemingly counterintuitive coupling between Hamburger and Carvalho. Hamburger, in her excruciatingly precise and accurate analysis of the problem of truth in literature, attempts, in a way, the very opposite of Carvalho's own literary project: whereas one wishes to conceal, the other wishes to reveal; whereas Carvalho aims at entangling truth and aesthetics to the advantage of aesthetics, Hamburger calls out those writers (be it Schiller or Schopenhauer) who dared to haphazardly equate these two notions. Hamburger eventually posits – with exacting Wittgensteinian restraint – that "truth is not what is, but what is the case" (Hamburger, 1979, 28), a rather anticlimactic – or at least aporetic – conclusion: that the very concept of "truth" is ultimately too wild and mischievous to quietly yield to historical, cultural, and social contents.<sup>157</sup> And in her fierce rejection of the Romantics, themselves too wild and mischievous for her taste, and from whose rebelliousness she might have been able to glimpse a more nuanced insight into the problem of truth in literature, Hamburger ends up wallowing in a semantic problem too hermetic to be of any use to either Carvalho or Walser.

A better contribution to the dialogue between Hamburger and Carvalho comes by way of her seminal study *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957), in which Hamburger posits the concept of reality ("Wirklichkeit") – truth's poor cousin – as a confrontational force between fact and fiction, freed from the restraining and unproductive (in what concerns Walser and Carvalho) strings spun by Epistemology.<sup>158</sup> Hamburger's take on the notion of reality does strike a few chords with

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<sup>157</sup> Hamburger (1979, 86) is here building upon Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*: "Ist es die Unbestimmtheit, ja die Inkommensurabilität der Begriffe Wahrheit und Wahrheitsgehalt der Kunst, die in der 'Ästhetischen Theorie' zu widersprüchlichen Aussagen führen? Derart daß in dem Kapitel 'Gesellschaft' gesagt wird: 'Noch in Kunstwerken, die bis ins Innerste mit Ideologie versetzt wird, vermag der Wahrheitsgehalt sich zu behaupten' (345 (...)), und in dem Abschnitt 'Paralipomena': 'Was gesellschaftlich unwahr, brüchig, ideologisch ist, teilt sich dem Bau der Kunstwerke mit' (420). Eine frühere Stelle erscheint fast als Synthese aus diesen antithetischen Aussagen: 'Manche Kunstwerke sehr hohen Ranges sind wahr als Ausdruck eines an sich falschen Bewußtseins', wobei der 'Wahrheitsgehalt' eben 'die vollkommene Darstellung falschen Bewußtseins' ist (196)".

<sup>158</sup> "Der Begriff der Wirklichkeit ist besonders vom Standpunkt der modernen Naturwissenschaft und Logistik her problematisch geworden; und von ihm aus könnte gegen seine Verwendung in der vorliegenden Untersuchung der Vorwurf erhoben werden, daß er im Sinne eines (überholten) 'naiven Realismus' auftritt. Gegen einen solchen möglichen Einwand soll hier jedoch betont werden, daß der Begriff Wirklichkeit in seinem Gegensatz bzw. seinem Verhältnis zu dem der Dichtung, als der er hier ausschließlich behandelt wird, nicht als Gegenstand und



Carvalho, to whom the semantic distinction between “truth” and “reality” is not as important as its usage, within fiction, as a confrontational mechanism that carries in its core the vehement rejection of any form of naïve Realism.

Building upon her initial argument, Hamburger resorts to Napoleon in order to explain how this very Napoleon, when made into the object of a historical novel, is necessarily transmuted into a fictional Napoleon, no matter how attuned to the “historical truth” said novel may or may not be. Napoleon is thus transposed from a system of possible reality (“aus einem möglichen Wirklichkeitssystem”) to a system of fiction (“in ein Fiktionssystem”),<sup>159</sup> and within this system of fiction Napoleon’s biography no longer serves reality: it too becomes fiction.

As does Walser’s. In a fairly roundabout way, Hamburger’s illustration of her argument via Napoleon adds one final piece to Carvalho’s Walserian (auto)biographical puzzle: Walser serves him not only as a theoretical, written influence, but also, and undeniably, as a biographical model, as a biography twice removed from reality, twice turned into fiction – first by Walser himself, then by Carvalho. Robert Walser is Bernardo Carvalho’s Napoleon – he is to the Brazilian author what the French monarch was to Barthes and Hamburger: a source of wonder and renewed insight.

It should come as no surprise, for instance, that in an attempt to pinpoint the specific stylistic or thematic influences of Walser on contemporary visual artists, on the occasion of a 2014 art exhibition organized around the Swiss author by the Aargauer Kunsthaus, Konrad Teller (2014, 21), in a text included in the catalogue, arrives at the following formulation: “It is ultimately Walser’s personality and life

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Problem der philosophischen Erkenntnistheorie und damit auch nicht unter dem Gesichtspunkt des naiven Realismus erscheint. Er meint, wie aus den folgenden Darlegungen gewiß genügend deutlich wird, nichts als die Wirklichkeit des menschlichen Lebens (der Natur, der Geschichte, des Geistes) im Gegensatz zu dem, was wir als den ‘Inhalt’ von Dichtungen erleben, die Seinsweise des Lebens im Unterschied zu der, die die Dichtung erschafft und repräsentiert. Und es scheint mir nicht ganz abwegig zu behaupten, daß gerade in der exakten Bestimmung dieses Unterschiedes sich das Phänomen Wirklichkeit jenseits aller wissenschaftstheoretischen Definition besonders prägnant hervorkonturiert.” (Hamburger, 1957, 6)

**159** “Als Gegenstand eines historischen Werkes ist Napoleon als Objekt geschildert, von dem etwas ausgesagt wird. Als Gegenstand eines historischen Romans wird auch Napoleon ein fiktiver Napoleon. Und dies nicht darum, weil der historische Roman von der historischen Wahrheit abweichen darf. Auch historische Romane, die sich ebenso genau wie ein historisches Dokument an die historische Wahrheit halten, verwandeln die historische Person in eine nicht-historische, fiktive Figur, versetzen sie aus einem möglichen Wirklichkeitssystem in ein Fiktionssystem. Denn dieses ist nur dadurch definiert, daß die Gestalt nicht als Objekt sondern als Subjekt, in ihrer fiktiven Ich-Originalität dargestellt wird (oder wie es auch möglich ist, als Objekt des Erlebnisfeldes einer anderen Romanperson). Dies sind die ‘verkörpernden Sachverhalte’, die in Ingardens Theorie von den Quasi-Urteilen übersehen sind: es ist der Prozeß der Fiktionalisierung, der jeden noch so historischen Stoff eines Romans zu einem nicht-historischen macht.” (Hamburger, 1957, 58–59)



that serve as sources of inspiration”. Part of the effectiveness of Walser’s oeuvre lies in that it was written by none other than Walser himself.

It is also in that sense that the author is not entirely dead in Carvalho’s work, and that Structuralism does not convey the entire nuance of Carvalho’s (auto)biographical strategies. A whiff of the author’s life well beyond the inane biographism of ‘because such life, therefore such work’ remains about. It is not Walser’s actual, factual life that interests Carvalho, but its fictional transmutation, its transposition into the realm of fiction. Carvalho is as interested in Walser’s usage of language and adjectives, disruptive narrative authority, unreal and apocalyptic aesthetics, landscape portrayals, Romantic echoes, Realist deceptions, subtle metanarrative stratagems, as he is in the fictional personae that Walser created for himself and in drowning these personae even deeper still in the waters of fiction – this time his own, from where Carvalho himself emerges as a seemingly marginal, powerless, doomed, restless, disappearing voice left of center of the *status quo*.

### 5.2.5 Orphans of civilization: The quest for a paternal figure

It has already been posited, in chapter 3.2.5., that the aesthetics of Carvalho’s literature is that of a *romance sem descendência*, a novel *sine prole* built around characters who are themselves without issue: they represent the end of a line, they are the last of their names. Carvalho’s characters carry in their brains and bodies the apocalypse of infertility, the ever-looming menace of being “the last human beings on earth”. Walser’s characters are similarly barren and childless, afraid of touching apples lest they poison them, afflicted by black thumbs that cannot create life, only write.

From the damnation of infertility – both self-imposed and not; both nurtured by the brain or imposed by the body – emerges another common trait between Walser and Carvalho, and most notably between *Jakob von Gunten* and *Nove Noites*: the quest for a paternal figure. The scope of this common trait (a thousand-year-old complex) within the reach of this research should be clearly stated, lest it allows for too broad an approach or too numerous speculations: the quest for a paternal figure in Walser and in Carvalho shall neither brave the stormy waters of biographism, nor cross the threshold of psychology; it shall not resort to either Freud, Sacher-Masoch, or the Bible.<sup>160</sup> Instead, the quest for a paternal

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<sup>160</sup> For a slightly Freudian and highly Masochist reading of Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten*, see Pister, 2013, 113–126. For a biblical approach on the issue of a father-son relationship (with overt biographical undertones) in Walser’s work, see Camenzind-Herzog, 1981.

figure shall be here understood as a narrative strategy of positing *tabula rasa*: having no proper fathers to speak of, either by their own volition or by external circumstances, these characters are cast in a state of abandonment and isolation from which they must fashion their own traditions and cultural affiliations, thus freeing themselves from the vexing impositions of society and of family traditions, and therefore allowing them to pursue an artistic or intellectual (but in any case marginal) path. There is a strong early Bernhardian scent to this quest, which is to be expected, given Carvalho's rather Bernhardian reading of Walser:

This imagined scenario of orphanage re-appears again and again in Bernhard's novels, producing a tale of the zero hour in which the hero has to re-invent himself along with his newly elected cultural affinities for the lack of not possessing a tradition. This gruesome scenario works to liberate the hero from unwanted dependence, sending him on the lonely path of artistic and intellectual self-discovery. Along this path, the hero often destroys the entire remaining legacy of the family, squanders the inherited estate, and sometimes even kills himself in a final act of self-cancellation. In early tales and novels of Bernhard, the inherited legacy is often construed in the biological terms of disease and madness. (Konzett, 2002, 9)

The scent disappears in Bernhard's later works, as the son becomes the father and the Oedipal takes over,<sup>161</sup> but before it does, a helpful conceptual frame to the quest for a paternal figure undertaken by Jakob von Gunten and Buell Quain is set: by rejecting their actual fathers and their legacy, Jakob and Quain go out into the world as blank slates in search of a new role model, that is to say, in search of a new paradigm to guide their torn existences. The quest invariably buckles under the strain of its Rousseauesque ambiguity of wanting something and being denied this very thing,<sup>162</sup> which adds to the recurring enigmatic or downright anticlimactic *dénouements* of both Walser and Carvalho, a sort of Romantic fairytale in reverse, in which the expectation that in the end the tide will turn in the characters' favor is subverted. The tide does not turn – Walser, in particular, can at times derive sardonic pleasure in sounding like Hans Christian Andersen's evil *Doppelgänger* – and the characters find themselves stuck in a dead-end,

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<sup>161</sup> “Bernhard brilliantly exaggerated the dilemma of the son who can't catch his breath due to his father/grandfather. He burdened his characters with the weight of Oedipal problematics and seduced them into the extinction of abstraction.” (Streeruwitz, 2002; 224)

<sup>162</sup> “Already in Rousseau, a dubious artfulness is observed that is supposed to conceal a double standard. That he combined nature and childhood in a new idea of education and, at the same time, denied his own children and stuck them in an orphanage, has long been understood as a discrepancy between theory and practice. Rousseau was a master of an artful reflexivity that skillfully found fault with others on every point but in itself always discovered only the purest of intentions.” (Sloterdijk, 1988, 57)

estranged from their old families and not quite welcomed by their new, chosen ones. Oftentimes befallen by disease and madness, these characters then do as is their wont: they think not of starting their own biological family, but of burying its remnants, which are themselves. Thus the Bernhardian maneuver of self-cancellation, or, as has been posited throughout this research, the more properly Walserian disappearing act.

The outcome of the quest for a paternal figure in Walser and in Carvalho only reinforces an aesthetic trait of their work already sufficiently explored in this research, which are the motifs of marginality and disappearance. It is not the outcome of the quest but the quest itself that brings new material to the comparison between the authors, and between the two novels in particular. Jakob's quest has already been explored in the previous chapter – his ambiguous and claustrophobic search for a paternal figure in Herr Benjamenta and, later on, in his eldest brother (the elder brother, it bears reminding, serves as a recurring role model in Walser's oeuvre). Therefore, it is based on – and starting from – Jakob's quest that Quain's own plight should be analyzed, as a mirror that once again fulfills and actualizes the Walserian legacy within Carvalho's work.

*Nove Noites*, as concisely summed up by Klinger, is fundamentally a novel about paternity and kinship – unsurprisingly so for such a Lévi-Straussian project:

Everything in the novel revolves around the parental lineage; every character in the novel is looking for a father. According to Carvalho, the indigenous people are looking for a father, because in a way they are the orphans of civilization. On the other hand, Quain had a very complicated relationship with his own father, his own fatherhood is brought into question (the hearsay that he had a son is not confirmed in the novel), and at the same time he played the part of the father among the natives. The narrator fuses the anthropologist's story with that of his own deceased father, hinting at having uncovered who was in fact Quain's son. "It is rather curious – says Bernardo Carvalho –: it is a work of fiction that has to do with anthropology and ends up being about kinship relations". It bears reminding that the study of kinship relations is the foundation upon which anthropology is built. But in the novel, the kinship relations are portrayed as dubious and truncated. (Klinger, 2007, 152–153)

The main conceptual layer to be derived from such summary of Carvalho's novel is that Carvalho stages with *Nove Noites* his own anticlimactic version of five characters in search of a father or a son, with each character standing for a variation on the theme of paternity and of choosing their own symbolic fathers. These variations could – and should – be read as mirrors to Jakob von Gunten's own conversations with his eldest brother, as they articulate a similar conflict – albeit inevitably disfigured by the century that divides them – between nature and culture, between the characters' inner sensibility and the pressures exerted by the outer world, as well as a similar pull towards becoming a nothing, towards making *tabula rasa*.

a) *Buell Quain: The orphan of culture*

As already seen, Carvalho's portrayal of Quain is that of an American citizen estranged and smothered not only by his own American culture, but also by its far-reaching Western counterpart.<sup>163</sup> What lures Quain to anthropology – other than an intellectually accepted way of publicly distrusting and even rejecting one's own cultural heritage – is also that which, under the grave guidance of Lévi-Strauss, sets it apart: the in-depth study of kinship structures.<sup>164</sup> Quain quenches in anthropology his cultural malaise, citing the indigenous people of Nakoroka, among whom he lived, as the supreme example of liberation and of *tabula rasa*: in their society, people are free to choose what they want to be in relation to each other: brother, sister, cousin – each individual gets to choose the role they wish to perform in society.<sup>165</sup> Quain's fascination for kinship structures, as mirrored throughout *Nove Noites*,<sup>166</sup> keeps his cultural malaise at bay for a time, and Carvalho expertly captures Quain's dawning realization that understanding the

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**163** When reviewing Quain's globetrotting itinerary, Carvalho draws attention to how little Eurocentric – or Western – his destinations were, ranging from Syria to Russia, from Palestine to Fiji: “Ao terminar o ginásio, aos dezesseis anos, Buell já tinha atravessado os Estados Unidos de carro. Em 1929, antes de entrar para a universidade, passou seis meses na Europa e no Oriente Médio, percorrendo Egito, Síria e Palestina. Nas férias do ano seguinte, foi para a Rússia. Depois de prestar os exames, em fevereiro de 1931, embarcou numa viagem de seis meses, como marinheiro, num vapor para Xangai. Em 1935, estava em Nova York, e no ano seguinte, em Fiji” (NN, 15–16).

**164** “Lévi-Strauss réalise avec cette étude exemplaire [*Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*] l'affranchissement de l'anthropologie des sciences de la nature en la plaçant d'emblée sur le terrain exclusif de la culture. (...) La phonologie a pour objet de dépasser le stade des phénomènes linguistiques conscients, elle ne se contente pas d'envisager les termes dans leur spécificité mais entend les saisir dans leurs relations internes, elle introduit la notion de système et cherche à construire des lois générales. Toute la démarche structuraliste est inscrite dans cette ambition.” (Dosse, 1991, 40)

**165** “Me falou do tempo que passou entre esses índios e de uma aldeia, que chamou Nakoroka, onde cada um decide o que quer ser, pode escolher sua irmã, seu primo, sua família, e também sua casta, seu lugar em relação aos outros. Uma sociedade muito rígida nas suas leis e nas suas regras, onde, no entanto, cabe aos indivíduos escolher os seus papéis.” (NN, 41)

**166** “Além do núcleo familiar consanguíneo, os índios estabelecem entre si relações simbólicas de parentesco, que servem para organizar a sociedade, suas interdições e as obrigações de cada indivíduo. Nessas relações de ‘parentesco classificatório’ se manifestam a lei e a lógica dessas sociedades. O parentesco passa a ser um código extremamente complexo, cujo principal objetivo é evitar o incesto em comunidades predominantemente endogâmicas e às vezes reduzidas a algumas dezenas de indivíduos” (NN, 47); “Quando relatei o caso à antropóloga que me despertara para a história com seu artigo de jornal, ela me alertou sobre o fato de os termos irmão e cunhado poderem ter, entre os índios, um sentido simbólico ou classificatório, ou seja, estar ligados à

structures of kinship in a given indigenous society does not make him any less of a foreigner, that the courtesy of freely choosing your own family is not extended to him; that he already has a family (which he has rejected), and that a new one is not really in the cards for him.<sup>167</sup> Adrift in between cultures, between the ones that he rejected and the ones that won't fully take him in, Quain becomes a being of many names (throughout the novel Quain goes by Quain Buele, Bill Cohen, Cowan, Cãmtwýon, depending on the cultural background of his interlocutor) to whom all that is left to do is to passively observe, to become an observer, a borderline orphan of culture – in a perverse way fulfilling his vocation for the margins.<sup>168</sup>

As an orphan or an observer – in either way an impotent figure, a shadow deprived of a state of belonging –, Quain's already instable mind, as highlighted by Carvalho, takes a turn for the worse and becomes even more susceptible to all manner of diseases, from syphilis to malaria, from real risks to imaginary symptoms, which nobody else but him seems to be aware of.<sup>169</sup> Quain's corollary of

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transmissão do nome, e nada terem a ver com o parentesco consanguíneo. Irmão o cunhado, segundo ela, poderia ser apenas um amigo, alguém do círculo de relações de Quain.” (NN, 76)

**167** “Segundo o relato do velho Diniz, corroborado pela carta que Buell Quain escreveu a Ruth Benedict em 15 de setembro de 1938, o jovem etnólogo também não queria participar ou se envolver nesse tipo de relação (‘Não gosto da idéia de me tornar nativo. As concessões que fazia nesse sentido, em Fiji, aqui não só são aceitas como são esperadas’), não queria outra família. Já tinha uma. Ao que parece, tinha razões de sobra para evitar os laços de parentesco. A julgar por algumas de suas últimas cartas, eles foram a razão da sua morte.” (NN, 98)

**168** “A ele, só restava observar, que em princípio era a única razão da sua presença entre os Trumai. Quando chegou aqui, estava cansado desse papel. Mas também tinha horror da idéia de ser confundido com as culturas que observava. (...) Me falou das crianças Trumai como exceção, das quais se aproximou na tentativa de compreender os seus jogos, e entre elas, talvez por uma estranha afinidade decorrente do lugar incômodo que ele próprio ocupava na aldeia, justamente como observador, logo percebeu um órfão de dez ou doze anos que era mantido à margem. Era um desajustado. O único ali que, como ele, não tinha família.” (NN, 49)

**169** “‘Prezada dona Heloísa, estou morrendo de uma doença contagiosa. A senhora receberá esta carta depois da minha morte. A carta deve ser desinfetada...’” (NN, 19); “Segundo os índios, o etnólogo não mostrava nenhum sintoma de doença física” (NN, 20); “A julgar por certos sintomas na pele, achava que tinha contraído sífilis em consequência de uma aventura casual com uma moça que teria encontrado durante o Carnaval no Rio” (NN, 35); “Ainda na carta a Benedict, ele diz: ‘Minha doença me deixa especialmente angustiado e inseguro em relação ao futuro’, sem especificar do que está falando” (NN, 48); “De volta a Cuiabá, Buell Quain sofreu um ataque de malária” (NN, 53); “Nas notas que deixou sobre os Krahô, Quain se refere a ‘doenças introduzidas’: ‘O estado de saúde na aldeia requer atenção urgente do governo. Além de gripes comuns, as doenças sérias são tuberculose, lepra e provavelmente sífilis. A minha incerteza quanto à sífilis se deve à ausência de manifestações avançadas da doença, tais como mal de Parkinson, ataxia ou paresia. A maioria dos sintomas que observei pode ser causada por tuberculose’. Na sua obsessão, não é impossível que já visse a si mesmo por toda parte.” (NN, 99)

diseases and delusions – a field day for Carvalho – steers the narrative closer and closer to its inevitable conclusion: Bernhardian self-cancellation or Walsearian disappearance. Quain claims the Trumai to be a “dying culture”, to be going through, by killing off their own offspring, a “process of collective self-destruction”, and what Carvalho does with his novel is to show how Quain sees himself in the Trumai and in their fate, how they stand for his own helpless desperation.<sup>170</sup> Having failed in finding a symbolic father under whose umbrella he could thrive, Quain slowly begins his own disappearing act first by claiming “not to have anything else to see in this world”,<sup>171</sup> and then – and here the echo of Jakob von Gunten and of Jakob’s conversations with his elder brother is haunting – by stating that what he had truly wanted was to find a place where he wouldn’t be able to see himself, where he would be able to annul his own existence.<sup>172</sup> And that would be death: an excess that cancels itself out, the act of reducing oneself to less than a zero: “On his twenty-seventh birthday, he told me that he knew what death was: an excess that finally goes too far. It’s getting more tired than fatigue allows, exceeding one’s own capacities, reducing oneself to less than zero, using up the twenty-four hours in one day without making it to the next” (NN, 118).

b) *The fictional Bernardo Carvalho: The disruptor of a bourgeois legacy*

The fictional Bernardo Carvalho, as is usual with the author’s characters, is made aware of Buell Quain through a newspaper article, sixty-two years after his death,<sup>173</sup> and the discovery sends him on an obsessive quest for Quain’s

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**170** “Me lembro ainda de ele ter comentado, perplexo, que os Trumai, apesar de estarem em vias de extinção, continuavam fazendo abortos e matando recém-nascidos. E que, talvez sem saber, estivessem cometendo um suicídio coletivo, vivendo um processo coletivo de autodestruição... (...) Ele me disse: ‘Uma cultura está morrendo’. Agora, quando penso nas suas palavras cheias de entusiasmo e tristeza, me parece que ele tinha encontrado um povo cuja cultura era a representação coletiva do desespero que ele próprio vivia como um traço de personalidade. E compreendo por que quisesse tanto voltar aos Trumai e ao inferno que me relatou. Como se estivesse cego por algum tipo de obstinação. Queria impedir que desaparecessem para sempre. O livro que escreveria sobre eles seria uma forma de mantê-los vivos, e a si mesmo.” (NN, 50–51)

**171** “Uma vez ele me disse: ‘Castro Faria, eu não tenho mais nada para ver no mundo.’” (NN, 36)

**172** “Numa das vezes em que me falou de suas viagens pelo mundo, perguntei onde queria chegar e ele me disse que estava em busca de um ponto de vista. Eu lhe perguntei: ‘Para olhar o quê?’. Ele respondeu: ‘Um ponto de vista em que eu já não esteja no campo de visão’. (...) Via-se como um estrangeiro e, ao viajar, procurava apenas voltar para dentro de si, de onde não estaria mais condenado a se ver. Sua fuga foi resultado do seu fracasso. De certo modo, ele se matou para sumir do seu campo de visão, para deixar de se ver.” (NN, 100)

**173** “Não posso dizer que nunca tivesse ouvido falar nele, mas a verdade é que não fazia a menor idéia de quem ele era até ler o nome de Buell Quain pela primeira vez num artigo de

life story.<sup>174</sup> Quain's fate in the hinterlands of the Xingu region also allows the fictional Carvalho to fold the narrative upon itself and to autobiographically mirror – but only deceptively so – his own “infernal” childhood (hence the novel's back cover picture) in the same region that witnessed Quain's death.<sup>175</sup> Carvalho's father, both real and fictional – and naturally only the fictional counterpart is of relevance here –, was one of the land-owning pioneers subsidized by the Brazilian government to bring ‘economic development’ into the woods (and to consequently push the indigenous tribes out of it), and whose paternalistic dealings with the surrounding indigenous tribes and overall capitalistic, ruthless aura serve as a counterpoint to the narrator's own literary and journalistic sensibilities (as in Jakob's “*Künstlernatur*” versus his brother's familial bourgeoisie). Aboard his father's appallingly Scotch-taped twin-engined monoplane, the young Carvalho not only observes the ominous first signs of desertification in the rainforest (a fundamental and recurring aesthetic trait of Carvalho's fiction, which will be shortly expanded on), but also eludes death in at least two of the many aircraft- and fire-related disasters scattered throughout *Nove Noites* – and throughout Carvalho's work as a whole.<sup>176</sup> The fictional Carvalho and his fictional father grow estranged as the novel progresses, as it moves from the hinterlands to the urban centers, and in a state of resentful yet detached narration Carvalho

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jornal, na manhã de 12 de maio de 2001, um sábado, quase sessenta e dois anos depois da sua morte às vésperas da Segunda Guerra.” (NN, 11)

174 As Klinger (2007, 145) correctly points out, the narrator's infatuation with Quain has to do not only with the comings and goings of Quain's own mysterious life, but also with the broader universe it stands for: the history of anthropology in Brazil. “Bell [sic] Quain não é um personagem construído a partir de um modelo real, como o é qualquer personagem de um relato realista, mas é um personagem que aponta para um outro universo (a história da antropologia no Brasil”.

175 “Ninguém nunca me perguntou, e por isso nunca precisei responder que a representação do inferno, tal como a imagino, também fica, ou ficava, no Xingu da minha infância.” (NN, 53)

176 It is worth noting, as mentioned before, how Carvalho seems to weave his fictional worlds into one single and disaster-ridden universe, where all of his characters are subjected to the same apocalyptic fate. To accomplish that effect, Carvalho resorts in *Nove Noites* to a plot-point which closely and eerily resembles one of his early novels, *Onze*: “Eu mesmo participei, como espectador e vítima, de duas dessas histórias, sendo que a menos grave foi quando meu pai se esqueceu de fazer uma mistura de óleo, um procedimento de praxe que devia ser realizado durante o voo, enquanto atravessávamos já fazia quase uma hora uma tempestade de granizo e raios, entre São Miguel do Araguaia e Goiânia, e o motor direito congelou. (...) No dia em que acordei, a manchete dos jornais era a tragédia de um avião da Varig que se incendiara misteriosamente na rota de descida para Orly, matando boa parte dos tripulantes e todos os passageiros, à exceção de um. O jornal trazia as fotos das celebridades mortas. E de alguma forma associei a grande tragédia ao nosso pequeno acidente, como se houvesse alguma conexão incompreensível entre os dois. O Xingu, em todo caso, ficou guardado na minha memória como a imagem do inferno” (NN, 56; 64).



observes his father's sickly descent into death. The father's passing is coated in heavy apocalyptic and premonitory imagery,<sup>177</sup> and throughout the whole ordeal the narrator avoids all atoning gestures and words – the closest he gets to a kind and understanding remark towards his deceased father, perhaps the only trait that bound them together biologically in the end, is the suspicion that he too was consumed by the fires of self-destruction: “And though he was not a liberal man, I always thought that deep down he had some kind of understanding for and sympathy with people who let themselves be carried away by desire, down paths they cannot choose, paths which often lead to their own destruction” (NN, 121).

The fictional Carvalho finds in Quain a mirror of his own story and of his troubled relationship with his father, seeking, through his obsessive and ultimately unfruitful quest, a rupture with the legacy of privilege and paternalism of his both his father and of his grandfather on his mother's side.<sup>178</sup> By – somewhat foolishly – positing fiction (that is: his own craft; the marginal antidote to his father's Government-approved imperialism) as his mythology,<sup>179</sup> Carvalho articulates – albeit ultimately powerlessly, failingly – a counter-narrative to his privileged youth of bourgeois undertones. The fictional Carvalho, who is set to inherit his father's material and – above all – symbolic estate, finds in Quain, in writing a novel around Quain, a way of disrupting the *status quo* of his own bourgeoisie, first by rejecting his father's and grandfather's legacy, and then by setting

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177 “Meu pai morreu há mais de onze anos, às vésperas da guerra que antecedeu a atual e que de certa forma a anunciou. Hoje, as guerras são permanentes. Eu não morava no Brasil.” (NN, 121)

178 Carvalho, both real and fictional, is the grandson of Marechal Cândido Rondon (1865–1958), a well-known explorer of the Western Amazon basin and advocate of indigenous populations. A Marshal in the Brazilian army and an engineer by trade, Rondon oversaw the construction of roads and pioneering telegraph lines, was appointed the first director of Brazil's Indian Protection Service (the then SPI and now FUNAI), and actively supported the creation of the Xingu National Park, where the few remaining Trumai now live. And, as if this wasn't enough of a haunting legacy, the north-western state of Rondônia was also named after him: “Meu pai me fez o favor de anunciar que eu era bisneto do marechal Rondon por parte de mãe. Uma informação que, dali em diante, ele usaria sempre que achasse necessário, como cartão de visita, toda vez que me levava para a selva. A revelação teve um efeito quase imediato, e antes mesmo que eu pudesse entender o que estava acontecendo, o cacique bêbado já tinha ido à aldeia, tomado do próprio filho vários presentes que lhe havia dado (me lembro sobretudo de um tacape e de um cocar) e agora insistia, contra a vontade do gerente na portaria, em subir ao nosso quarto para oferecê-los a mim em sinal de boas-vindas” (NN, 58–59).

179 “Eu tentava dizer que, para os brancos que não acreditam em deuses, a ficção servia de mitologia, era o equivalente dos mitos dos índios, e antes mesmo de terminar a frase, já não sabia se o idiota era ele ou eu.” (NN, 86)



himself up for failure and disaster, like Quain and Jakob, thus assuring that the family legacy dies with him.<sup>180</sup>

c) *Manoel Perna: The pathetic paternal figure*

Alongside the fictional Carvalho and the letters of Quain, Manoel Perna stands in as the novel's third narrative voice, identified throughout the novel in italics. Also based on a real person, Perna is portrayed as a baroque figure of outdated vocabulary, caring yet powerless, who acts paternally towards both the Trumai and Quain himself – who, claims Perna, could have been his son: “Podia ser meu filho” (NN, 8). Perna is a pathetic figure who is thoroughly annihilated by a combination of his powerless paternal instincts and the mercilessness of Brazilian bureaucracy. He wishes to help but has no means of doing so. He triggers the novel's more sentimental passages, a marked counterpoint to the detached and decidedly non-paternalistic narration of the fictional Carvalho. He is entrusted with giving a proper burial to Quain's body but is never wired the money to do so, and as a result Quain's grave is forever lost in the forest; he is tasked with helping the local indigenous tribes but all that he has that they don't is his literacy and an old address book. Perna is an absolute outcast who does not understand his marginal condition, who believes himself to be in a position to effect change, who tries to do right by the indigenous tribes and by Quain by writing one letter after the other to the competent authorities, most of which go unanswered. Perna does not understand how far away from Brazil he is, how cut off from any place where actual power is held and actual change can be effected. By believing himself central, Perna is completely silenced. Betrayed by his paternal instincts, Perna loses everything he once held dear,<sup>181</sup> and on top of that is silenced in the most

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**180** To that effect, see also Pérez (2011, 96): “Prior to his death, Quain's incessant search was part of seeking a rupture with his own history, with the narrative of privilege and, to a degree, dependence into which he was born and which is associated with western ideals of wealth and social status. Initially, Quain's voyages abroad are brought about by his search for a place where social status and wealth are not the measure of an individual's value, which is why he embarks on the ship in which he sails around the world as a common sailor, and why he chose one of the least reputable places as his home when he first arrives in Brazil. However, in seeking to find himself and his own narrative through finding an external, physical place that would offer him what he was seeking, Quain was setting himself up for disaster”.

**181** “Não há nada mais valioso do que a confiança de um amigo. Por isso aprecio os índios, com os quais convivo desde criança, desde o tempo em que o meu avô os amansou. Sempre os recebi na minha casa. Sempre soube o que diziam de mim pelas costas, que me consideravam um pouco louco, aliás como a todos os brancos. Mas a mim importava apenas que pudessem contar comigo. E que soubessem que eu não esperava nada em troca. De mim teriam tudo o que pedissem, e

nefarious way possible: he is allowed to keep on speaking, but nobody listens to him anymore. The fictional Carvalho is the only one who can hear Perna's ghost, who heeds his calling – recurring, impotent, addressed to an unknown future – of “[t]his is for when you get here”. Resorting to the only real power he has ever had, his literacy, the baroque Perna commits to paper the legacy of his nine nights with Quain – a combination of fact and fiction,<sup>182</sup> a sum of efforts either vain or artificial –, and after doing so disappears in his long overdue silence.

d) *The Trumai: The “orphans of civilization”*

The underlying (and refreshingly provocative) assessment of *Nove Noites* is that the typical attitude towards the Brazilian indigenous populations – be it out of guilt or pure negligence – is one of insidious paternalism, and as a result the cold, impatient tone employed by the fictional Carvalho can be easily misread and misconstrued. The voice that echoes behind Carvalho's fictional persona is, of course, that of Lévi-Strauss, by all measures an enigmatic, uncharismatic figure hemmed in his own analytical competence.

Under the teasing guise of not being an anthropologist and therefore not having a good soul – “Não sou antropólogo e não tenho boa alma”<sup>183</sup> (NN, 98) –,

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Deus sabe que seus pedidos não têm fim. Fiz tudo o que pude por eles. E também pelo dr. Buell. Dei a ele o mesmo que aos índios. A mesma amizade. Porque, como os índios, ele estava só e desamparado. E, a despeito do que pensou ou escreveu, não passava de um menino. Podia ser meu filho. Nada me abalou tanto. Nem mesmo quando fui destituído das funções de encarregado do posto indígena Manoel da Nóbrega pelo sr. Cildo Meireles, inspetor do Serviço de Proteção aos índios, três anos depois da tragédia, quando ele me recomendou que dali em diante eu deixasse o meu coração a cinco léguas de distância do posto e me afastasse para sempre dos índios – não queria me ver pela frente. Nem mesmo a humilhação de ter sido dispensado do cargo que ocupei por pouco mais de um ano e que o próprio dr. Buell tinha me ajudado a conquistar em defesa dos índios, graças às cartas de recomendação que enviou ao Rio de Janeiro. E nem mesmo o massacre da aldeia de Cabeceira Grossa, que o dr. Buell talvez tivesse podido impedir se ainda estivesse vivo e entre eles quando os fazendeiros prepararam a emboscada um ano depois do seu suicídio. Nada me entristeceu tanto quanto o fim do meu amigo, cuja memória decidi honrar. Eu o acolhi quando chegou. Nada do que tenha pensado ou escrito pode me causar rancor, nunca esperei nada em troca, porque sei que, no fundo, fui a última pessoa com quem ele pôde contar.” (NN, 8-9)

**182** “O que ele me contou era para eu guardar como se não tivesse ouvido. E foi o que fiz. Era a minha herança. (...) O que lhe conto é uma combinação do que ele me contou e do que imaginei. Assim também, deixo-o imaginar o que nunca poderei lhe contar ou escrever.” (NN, 119)

**183** How not to hear the echo of Lévi-Strauss' growing irritation towards the display of “bons sentiments” that periodically befalls the French intellectual arena? “...et surtout, beaucoup de choses s'étaient passées pendant ces vingt années, dont, en ce qui me concerne, un agacement croissant devant un étalage périodique de bons sentiments comme si cela pouvait suffire” (Eribon and Lévi-Strauss, 2009, 206).

the fictional Carvalho draws an unflattering picture of the Trumai, bouncing them back and forth like a ping-pong ball between the helpless paternalism of Manoel Perna and his own annoyed indifference, with these two narrative instances coated by outbreaks of inefficient Brazilian bureaucracy and by Quain's own frustration *vis-à-vis* the Trumai, whose laziness and crippling paranoia he could hardly stomach.<sup>184</sup>

Carvalho builds on such unflattering – and at times disdainful – picture in order to portray to which extent the Trumai are a dying and self-destructing culture in desperate search for a father, clutching at straws, trying at all costs to forge alliances in the world of white people, to be adopted into the family:

I had been a child, and now I was suddenly like a lapsed father who finally has a chance to make up for his absences and past failures. It's hard to make sense of such a relationship. They are the orphans of civilization. They are abandoned. They need allies in the white world, a world they make an effort, usually vain, to understand. And a relationship based on mutual adoption is by definition unbalanced, since the Krahô go to the whites much more often than the whites go to the Krahô. The world belongs to the whites. Their neediness is irremediable. They don't want to be forgotten. They attach themselves to anyone who comes through the village, as if visitors were long-lost parents. They want you to be part of the family. They need you to be a father, mother, and brother.<sup>185</sup>

It may momentarily slip one's mind, due to the novel's painstaking research and deceiving historical Realism, but the problems stated in *Nove Noites* are of a literary – and not anthropologic – nature, and in that sense the plight of the Trumai

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**184** “O fato é que no começo Quain achou os Trumai ‘chatos e sujos’ (‘Essa gente está entediada e não sabe’), o contrário dos nativos com quem convivera em Fiji e que transformara num modelo de reserva e dignidade. Julgava os Trumai por oposição a sua única outra experiência de campo: ‘Dormem cerca de onze horas por noite (um sono atormentado pelo medo) e duas horas por dia. Não têm nada mais importante a fazer além de me vigiar. Uma criança de oito ou nove anos parece já saber tudo o que precisa na vida. Os adultos são irrefreáveis nos seus pedidos. Não gosto deles. Não há nenhuma cerimônia em relação ao contato físico e, assim, passo por desagradável ao evitar ser acariciado. Não gosto de ser besuntado com pintura corporal. Se essas pessoas fossem bonitas, não me incomodaria tanto, mas são as mais feias do Coliseu.’” (NN, 48)

**185** “De criança eu tinha passado a pai relapso a quem finalmente é dada a chance de reparar seus erros passados e sua ausência. É difícil entender a relação. São os órfãos da civilização. Estão abandonados. Precisam de alianças no mundo dos brancos, um mundo que eles tentam entender com esforço e em geral em vão. O problema é que a relação de adoção mútua já nasce desequilibrada, uma vez que a frequência com que os Krahô vêm aos brancos é muito maior do que a frequência com que os brancos vão aos Krahô. Uma vez que o mundo é dos brancos. Há neles uma carência irreparável. Não querem ser esquecidos. Agarram-se como podem a todos os que passam pela aldeia, como se os visitantes fossem os pais há muito desaparecidos. Querem que você faça parte da família. Precisam que você seja pai, mãe e irmão.” (NN, 97)

plays into Carvalho's penchant for depicting "the last human beings", but with a cruel twist: what the Trumai yearn for is exactly that which Carvalho's characters cannot give. *Nove Noites* is not a well-meaning novel that wishes to atone for past sins or to set the world to rights, but rather a caustic novel about imploding microcosms and how they can domino each other into the ground.<sup>186</sup> Like Walser's characters in *Träumen* trying to determine the smallest possible – yet still manageable – distance between themselves and their fellow citizens, Carvalho, basking in the ambiguity of his civilizing project and empowered by an older, controversial Lévi-Strauss,<sup>187</sup> articulates with *Nove Noites* a provocative question: how – when trying to determine one's own cultural identity, one's own symbolic affiliation – to strike a balance between oneself and the world, between not communicating enough and communicating too much.

e) *The orphaned American and the triumph of fiction*

Wrapped in apocalyptic and paranoid undertones (the immediate post-9/11, the invisible anthrax menace), the novel's dénouement finds the fictional Carvalho in a heavily surveilled New York City burning the last of his bridges regarding

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**186** "Na mesma carta, encontrada entre seus pertences levados pelos Krahô para Carolina, Quain reclamava das dificuldades de trabalhar com os índios no Brasil: 'Acredito que isso possa ser atribuído à natureza indisciplinada e invertebrada da própria cultura brasileira. Meus índios estão habituados a lidar com o tipo degenerado de brasileiro rural que se estabeleceu nesta vizinhança – é terra marginal e a escória do Brasil vive dela. Tanto os brasileiros como os índios que tenho visto são crianças mimadas que berram se não obtêm o que desejam e nunca mantêm as suas promessas, uma vez que você lhes dá as costas. O clima é anárquico e nada agradável. A sociedade parece ter se esgarçado. Minha dificuldade aqui pode ser atribuída em grande parte à influência brasileira. O Brasil, por sua vez, sem dúvida absorveu muitas das marcas mais desagradáveis das culturas indígenas com as quais teve contato inicialmente.'" (NN, 108)

**187** "Duas vezes entrevistei Lévi-Strauss em Paris, muito antes de me passar pela cabeça que um dia viria a me interessar pela vida e pela morte de um antropólogo americano que ele conheceu em sua breve passagem por Cuiabá, em 1938. Muito antes de eu ouvir falar em Buell Quain. Numa das entrevistas, a propósito de uma polêmica sobre o racismo e a xenofobia na França, em que tinha sido mal interpretado, Lévi-Strauss reafirmou a sua posição: 'Quanto mais as culturas se comunicam, mais elas tendem a se uniformizar, menos elas têm a comunicar. O problema para a humanidade é que haja comunicação suficiente entre as culturas, mas não excessiva. Quando eu estava no Brasil, há mais de cinquenta anos, fiquei profundamente emocionado, é claro, com o destino daquelas pequenas culturas ameaçadas de extinção. Cinquenta anos depois, faço uma constatação que me surpreende: também a minha própria cultura está ameaçada'. Dizia que toda cultura tenta defender a sua identidade e originalidade por resistência e oposição ao outro, e que havia chegado a hora de defender a originalidade ameaçada da sua própria cultura. Falava da ameaça do islã, mas podia estar falando igualmente dos americanos e do imperialismo cultural anglo-saxão.'" (NN, 46)

Quain's mysterious existence. Fate had it that his dying father should share a hospital room with an equally dying American photographer, who, with his final breath, uttered the name "Bill Cohen" (NN, 130), which the fictional Carvalho construes as a mispronunciation of Buell Quain. Upon tracking down the photographer's son in New York, one awkwardly named Schlomo Parsons, the fictional Carvalho learns about the son's many orphanhoods: after his mother's death, his father – either crazed or a deserter<sup>188</sup> – left for Brazil and gave him up to his paternal grandfathers, who, in turn, by the time he was seventeen, kicked him out of the house following a letter in which his father claimed not to be his biological father. His actual father had supposedly "died in the middle of Brazil when he was trying to come back to see [him]"<sup>189</sup>.

The perfectly ambiguous and perversely inconclusive set-up gives the final and decisive fictional twist to *Nove Noites*, which had already been clearly stated – and duly reiterated – as the fictional Carvalho first set foot in New York.<sup>190</sup> Through his fictional Doppelgänger, deeply rooted in reality and therefore deeply misleading, Carvalho starts digging his way out of – while simultaneously burying himself in – the steep Realist trap he conceived with *Nove Noites*: by having him announce that his only option out of his all-consuming Quain-obsession was to indeed write the novel he was expected to write – and what's more: to turn the whole story into fiction –, Carvalho is both emphasizing the identity-defining role the act of novel-writing plays for his Doppelgänger, and, more importantly, hiding in plain sight the fact that the fiction began with novel's very first word.

At that point, after months of digging through the archives, poring through books, and reading the notes of people who no longer existed, I needed to see a face, even if only as an antidote to the endless, bottomless obsession that was keeping me from writing my so-called novel (the justification I had used whenever people asked), that was paralyzing me, making

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**188** "Disse que sabia apenas que o pai tinha vindo para o Brasil pouco antes de os Estados Unidos entrarem na Segunda Guerra, sem maiores explicações, e nunca mais dera notícias, pelo que a família havia concluído que se tratava de um ato de loucura ou que houvesse desertado." (NN, 140)

**189** "Na carta, o meu pai dizia que não era meu pai e me pedia desculpas. Achava que agora eu já era um homenzinho e precisava saber das coisas. Dizia que eu não tinha sido abandonado por ele, que o meu pai de verdade tinha morrido no coração do Brasil, quando tentava voltar para me conhecer." (NN, 147)

**190** "A ficção começou no dia em que botei os pés nos Estados Unidos" (NN, 142); "As palavras dali em diante não teriam nenhuma importância. Eu podia dizer o que quisesse, podia não fazer o menor sentido, só não podia dizer a verdade. Só a verdade poria tudo a perder" (NN, 144); "A realidade é o que se compartilha." (NN, 149)

me fear that the reality would be much more terrible and surprising than I could imagine and would only be revealed when it was already too late, when the research was done and the book was published. Because now I really was ready to write a work of fiction.<sup>191</sup>

With von Gunten-esque pathos, or with a broader Walserian pleasure for projecting and aestheticizing his own *Lebenspraxis*,<sup>192</sup> Carvalho instills in the orphaned American the roundest of zeros, the blankest of slates, the most *rasa* of all *tabulae*: a many times fatherless character uncertain of his real history and allegiances, his past wide open for the deception of fiction, for creating his own symbolic affiliation.

### 5.2.6 “Daqui para frente, é o deserto”: The fire and the desert in Carvalho’s work

Ich komme mir nur selbst entgegen  
In einer leeren Wüstenei.

—Tieck, *William Lovell*

As far as landscapes go, *Nove Noites* ends on a contradicting juxtaposition: flying over the Brazilian rainforest, near where Quain killed himself, the fictional Carvalho thinks of the Peruvian desert: “I suddenly remembered learning, on one of those television shows about ancient civilizations, that the Nazca of the Peruvian desert cut out the tongues of the dead and tied them up in a bag so that they could never return to torment the living” (NN, 150). The novel ends on this seemingly unexpected imagery of the desert, and what *Jakob von Gunten*’s arid ending had of exotic, Carvalho’s has of anthropologic. The scenic juxtaposition plays into Carvalho’s already discussed strategy of emptying out landscapes of their exotic or exoticizing component, leaving in its stead a

<sup>191</sup> “Àquela altura dos acontecimentos, depois de meses lidando com papéis de arquivos, livros e anotações de gente que não existia, eu precisava ver um rosto, nem que fosse como antídoto à obsessão sem fundo e sem fim que me impedia de começar a escrever o meu suposto romance (o que eu havia dito a muita gente), que me deixava paralisado, com o medo de que a realidade seria sempre muito mais terrível e surpreendente do que eu podia imaginar e que só se revelaria quando já fosse tarde, com a pesquisa terminada e o livro publicado. Porque agora eu já estava disposto a fazer dela realmente uma ficção.” (NN, 140–141)

<sup>192</sup> “Das bindet Walsers Schicksal an den Charakter seiner Romanfiguren. Der Souveränitätsgestus des ‘Ich bin nichts’ gehört zur Ästhetisierung seiner eigenen Lebenspraxis. Er ist Ausdruck einer gesellschaftlichen Distanzierung, wie der spezifische Einsamkeitsstatus der Romanhelden sie bestätigt.” (Hinz, 1987, 159)

barren setting thinly populated by a dying breed. The motif of the desert in Carvalho is neither sublime nor Biblical; it is, in fact, quite the opposite: it stands for a total and complete lack of paradise, for a world without safe haven. What draws Carvalho to the desert are not images of a distant and mystical Orient, or the alien, awe-inspiring undulations of its terrain – it is rather its barren emptiness, the combination of fire and infertility: a charred, scorched expanse of endless, hopeless land.

Carvalho's infatuation with the desert is more linguistic than imagetic; it builds upon a feeling of isolation and abandonment, of desertion and deserted places, of being left to one's own devices, to fend for oneself in a world that is undoing itself. The first appearance of the desert in Carvalho's work dates back to his *début* short-story collection, *Aberração*, in the guise of a costly burial to be held in "the most deserted of regions", the only suitable place for a definitive disappearing act, and a very pregnant indication of what the desert would later on mean in his work. With the exception of *Medo de Sade*, Carvalho's first cycle of novels all feature in one way or another a linguistic depiction of the desert, either as deserted or arid places (O, 116; I, 7, 12, 25, 128–130), or as central plot-points and conceptual backdrops, such as in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*<sup>193</sup> and *Teatro*,<sup>194</sup> or in the 1996 short-story *Quatro Movimentos Progressivos do Calor*, in

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**193** In *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, the desert stands for the highly symbolic and recurring scenery of a novel that intertwines the motifs of visual arts, photography, obsession, and apocalypse: "...Sempre achei essa paisagem estranha. Mas não sei dizer. Essa gente nessa paisagem. Essa gente não podia estar nessa paisagem!", disse quase indignada. Tinha uma certa razão. O que estavam fazendo aqueles banhistas no meio de um deserto? E além do mais de olhos fechados?" (BS, 21); "Perguntei que quadro era aquele e ele me pediu para imaginar uma mulher sentada numa paisagem inóspita, uma espécie de deserto. Enquanto me falava, me lembrei do quadro no apartamento da testemunha. Quando eu disse que uma vez tinha visto um quadro assim, só que com cinco pessoas deitadas ao sol, ele me interrompeu, mudou de assunto" (BS, 67). The desert represents a "desolate landscape" par excellence: "Era um descampado, uma paisagem desolada. Podia ser uma praia ou um deserto" (BS, 85). See also BS, 38–39, 70.

**194** The desert, in *Teatro*, is the stretch of land that stands between the center and the periphery, the hopeless limbo between the First and Third worlds: "Quando atravessou a fronteira, fugindo da miséria e da insanidade de um mundo à margem, não podia imaginar que o filho que a mulher carregava na barriga um dia faria o mesmo caminho, só que em sentido contrário, fugindo ele também, só que agora para o mais longe do bem-estar que os pais buscaram; que eu teria de fugir de volta para a periferia... (...) Vim pelo deserto. (...) Não imaginam que alguém como eu possa querer fugir dali, daquele 'paraíso sobre a terra', dizia o meu pai. Somente os bandidos e os assassinos recorrem a essa última solução. Não matei ninguém. Não roubei nada. Só ouvi. Durante anos a fio. Ouvi como se fosse mudo. É isso o que roubei: o que ouvi e o que escrevi. Não trago nada nos meus bolsos. Tudo está na minha cabeça" (T, 10–11). See also T, 20, 22, 78, 79, 99, 106, 111.

which four characters experience the effects of a progressively warming environment: a slightly feverish masochist reveling in the 39 degrees Celsius of a never-before-seen heat wave; a reclusive botanist living far away from the city at 45 degrees, there where the vegetation becomes sparser, the woods turn into a savanna, and the savanna into nothing at all; a prophetic student from Lapland (50 degrees) who had been gifted a book with pictures of the desert and to whom subsequently the desert became an obsession, leaving her no other option than to go to the desert looking for what she couldn't see in the pictures; a doomed fireman trying to both rescue and soothe a voice coming from the rubbles of a fire at a boiling 90 degrees by telling it a story, going further and further down into the flames until realizing that it was the voice that was telling *him* a story, and that now there was no way out from the fire.<sup>195</sup>

Fire is a recurring theme in both Walser and Carvalho, but whereas in Walser fire possesses a redeeming aesthetic quality, in Carvalho it merely obeys the logic of disaster and subtraction: one after the other planes are crashing in Carvalho's work, buildings catching fire, the flames engulfing the nearby area. And even if deprived of an aesthetic component, as in Walser's auto-combusting fictional world, Carvalho's politics of fire achieves in the end a similar goal to that of Walser: it creates space.<sup>196</sup> *Nove Noites* stands out in that sense, a novel which builds upon the unreal and at times dystopian effect elicited by the fire in Wal-

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**195** “O masoquista (39 graus) (...) Na televisão eles diziam que a situação era drástica, que a cidade nunca tinha passado por um tal onda de calor...” (MFE, 220–221); “O botânico (45 graus) Conforme os jornalistas se afastavam da cidade, a vegetação se rarefazia, passando de mata a cerrado, e de cerrado a nada” (MFE, 221); “A estudante lapônia (50 graus) (...) O cronista lhe perguntou o que D.M. [the student] tinha ido fazer no Saara, uma espécie de suicídio, afinal, e a irmã lhe respondeu que a desde menina, no curso complementar, o deserto havia sido uma obsessão, que D. tentara aplacar inutilmente folheando as páginas de um livro. ‘Foi ao deserto atrás do que não podia ver nas fotografias’” (MFE, 222–223); “O bombeiro (90 graus) (...) Para acalmá-la, enquanto não a alcança, resolve contar-lhe uma história, a única que conhece, a sua própria vida, que avança à medida que ele também avança pelas colunas de fogo e a fumaça que o intoxica, aproximando-se da voz, cada vez mais para dentro do calor. E, enquanto conta a sua história, ouve a voz. Mas, de repente, dá-se conta de que, na realidade, é a voz que está lhe contando a história, que a voz é sua e que, portanto, sua história termina ali.” (MFE, 223)

**196** “Walser's fire does not destroy. It transforms, embellishes, offers room for contemplation. And, more than that, it leads to innovation. (...) Fire not only provides the audience with an ephemeral show, but also yields enduring results, namely the creation of space...” (Gomes, 2013, 116).



ser's oeuvre and uses it to create space following the apocalyptic logic of deforestation,<sup>197</sup> explosions<sup>198</sup> and conflagrations.<sup>199</sup>

From the point of view of landscape and of what this landscape metonymically means to the characters, *Nove Noites* is a novel about desertification in which the opening imageries of exotic forests and vegetations are progressively emptied out throughout the narrative and replaced with barrenness and desolation. Quain and the fictional Carvalho are further bound by their travels and complex relationships towards the exotic – whereas Quain sought salvation in the exotic, Carvalho equates it with hell.<sup>200</sup> And the more the fictional Carvalho subsumes his own story and worldview into Quain's, the more the novel follows the path of fire and destruction, the burning up of the exotic, of dead and unheimlich landscapes

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**197** “Dizem que hoje tudo mudou e que a região está irreconhecível. A floresta tropical se transformou em campos de fazendas. A mata desapareceu, caiu e foi queimada, mas na época impunha-se como uma ameaça aterrorizante, a ponto de ser difícil para uma criança entender o que os homens podiam ter ido buscar naquele fim de mundo. (...) A sede da Vitoriosas, suspensa no meio do nada e da floresta, era parada obrigatória quando o meu pai resolvia avaliar o estado das obras da estrada que pretendia abrir no meio da selva entre as terras do Chiquinho e a Santa Cecília, e que teria concluído não fosse o literal mar de lama que a engoliu depois da derrubada das árvores e da passagem resfolegante dos tratores, niveladoras e caminhões da civilização.” (NN, 54); “O desmatamento deixava a selva em polvorosa. Animais e pássaros gritavam por toda parte, e havia enxames de abelhas pretas, que cobriam os braços dos homens” (NN, 62).

**198** “Recomendou ao mecânico que abrisse a porta antes de o avião tocar o solo e disse que, assim que batêssemos no chão, nós dois devíamos nos atirar, porque o avião podia explodir” (NN, 63).

**199** “Em julho de 1967, o hotel tinha se transformado em cenário de uma fotonovela exótica da revista Sétimo Céu. Era um prédio moderno, de dois andares, que lembrava Brasília à beira do Araguaia. Dizem que foi abandonado pouco depois e que pegou fogo. Deve estar caindo aos pedaços, se é que ainda existe” (NN, 58).

**200** “Buell Quain também havia acompanhado o pai em viagens de negócios. Quando tinha catorze anos, foram a uma convenção do Rotary Club na Europa. Visitaram a Holanda, a Alemanha e os países escandinavos. E daí em diante nunca mais parou de viajar. Mas se para Quain, que saía do Meio-Oeste para a civilização, o exótico foi logo associado a uma espécie de paraíso, à diferença e à possibilidade de escapar ao seu próprio meio e aos limites que lhe haviam sido impostos por nascimento, para mim as viagens com o meu pai proporcionaram antes de mais nada uma visão e uma consciência do exótico como parte do inferno. (...) O Xingu, em todo caso, ficou guardado na minha memória como a imagem do inferno” (NN, 57; 64).

(“sensação sinistra de reconhecimento”),<sup>201</sup> of fire-and-cinders metaphors,<sup>202</sup> of deserted villages in the scorching heat of 40 degrees Celsius.<sup>203</sup> The immediate victims of these increasingly urgent instances of desertification and desolation are the indigenous tribes, cornered in a desert of their own whose depiction draws back to *Aberração*’s “most deserted of regions”: “Why are the Indians there? Because they were pushed and pursued and fled into the most inhospitable and inaccessible place, the most terrible place imaginable for their survival, and yet the only, and last, place they could survive” (NN, 64–65). The disaster announced in *Nove Noites*, however, does not end in these pockets of helpless, marginalized populations; it slowly starts to spread like wildfire or a curse, and as the surrounding areas become increasingly barren and the land worthless, the more this subtle suggestion of superstition, of prophecy and doom, seeps into the narrative: “The previous site had been abandoned because it had become infertile. I don’t know how much superstition was involved in the decision. They said the ground was bad” (NN, 80–81). It is thus not that unexpected that the novel – like Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* – should end not in an *actual* desert, but heavily immersed in oneiric or phantasmatic images of the desert. And neither should it come as a surprise that *Mongólia*, Carvalho’s follow-up novel published only one year after *Nove Noites* (and both novels are deeply, if not intrinsically, connected), should be a novel ostensibly *about* the desert.

The desert surfaces in both authors’ works as a linguistic representation which is neither random nor naïve, neither truly idyllic nor exotic, but the culmination of the trajectory which this research sought to uncover and analyze. In the desert the landscape achieves its conceptual climax as a function of the authors’ language and narrative agenda.

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**201** “Carolina é um lugar morto, como disse Quain ao desembarcar ali pela primeira vez, mas que tem a sua graça, ainda mais hoje, por ser resultado de uma tranqüila decadência e abandono, como se tudo tivesse parado e sido preservado no tempo. A estrada que vem de Araguaína desemboca em frente à cidade, do outro lado do Tocantins, no que a rigor não passa de um povoadado, não mais que umas poucas ruas, mas ao qual deram o nome extraordinário e inverossímil de Filadélfia. Quando o rio, caudaloso mesmo na estiagem, se abriu à nossa frente, conforme descíamos para pegar a balsa, e eu pude ver o pequeno porto na margem oposta e o estaleiro Pipes, fui imediatamente tomado por uma sensação sinistra de reconhecimento, como se eu já tivesse avistado aquela paisagem antes.” (NN, 67–68)

**202** “Não achei nada entre os papéis que se esfacelavam como pó entre os dedos, processos de homicídios, crimes passionais e por dinheiro, brigas familiares e suicídios, esmagados em pastas empoeiradas no alto de estantes esquecidas em cômodos sem janelas, verdadeiras fornalhas nos fundos de casas antigas e térreas no meio do sertão.” (NN, 69)

**203** “Perambulei pela cidade deserta. Fazia um calor de quarenta graus. (...) Volta e meia uma figura solitária passava lá embaixo, escondida sob uma sombrinha. Eu estava só.” (NN, 69)

## 6 The desert for conclusion

Die Wüste wächst: weh Dem, der Wüsten birgt!

–Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*

Verschwendung ist eine tropische Kategorie. Auch die Wüste ist eine Verschwendung. Sand ist immer zuviel, ein selbsterzeugendes, iterierendes Prinzip wie Wildnis, Feuchtigkeit, Staub, Korruption und Nichtstun.

–Bense, *Brasilianische Intelligenz*

Nietzsche's desert grows in language, it is nature's revenge, the price to pay for the sickness of language, for its lack of depth and ambition, for the loss of enthusiasm for detours and excesses and magic words. No longer capable of seeking the *Zauberwort*, language is then made a slave of reality, chained to the materialistic belief in progress and labor, hostage to a naïve, self-defeating optimism. With spectral arms this poor and sickly language pushes and shoves the individual towards the desert, towards the horrors of an endless expanse that goes on forever, for as far as the eye can see, and still, urges Nietzsche, and still one must cross this endless landscape should one wish to recover from the disease.<sup>1</sup>

The phantasmagoria and pessimism of Nietzsche's linguistic desert, on par with his vengeful view of nature ("*die Grausamkeit der Natur*") and with the

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<sup>1</sup> "Nietzsche hält sich nicht lange auf bei den mythologischen Einzelheiten in Wagners Dichtung. Das Mythische der Wagnerschen Kunst entdeckt er fast ausschließlich in der Musik, die er die Sprache der *richtigen Empfindung* nennt. Man muß, sagt er, die Krankheit unserer Kultur durchlitten haben, um das Geschenk der Wagnerschen Musik dankbar empfangen zu können. Wagners Musikdrama also als romantische Antwort auf das große Unbehagen an einer flachen, eindimensionalen Kultur. Wagner habe bemerkt, schreibt Nietzsche, daß die Sprache erkrankt ist. Der Fortschritt der Wissenschaften habe die anschaulichen Weltbilder zerstört. Wir sehen die Sonne täglich aufgehen, wissen aber, daß sie das nicht tut. Das Reich der Gedanken reicht bis ins Unanschauliche im Großen wie im Kleinen. Und zugleich wird die Zivilisation immer komplexer und unübersichtlicher. Spezialisierung und Arbeitsteilung nehmen zu, die Handlungsketten, durch die jeder mit dem Ganzen verbunden ist, werden länger und verwirren sich. Wer versucht, das Ganze, in dem er lebt, zu erfassen, dem versagt schließlich die Sprache ihren Dienst. Sie erfaßt nicht mehr das Ganze, sie reicht aber auch nicht mehr in die Tiefe des Einzelnen. Sie erweist sich als zu arm und zu begrenzt. Gleichzeitig aber bringt es die dichtere Verknüpfung des gesellschaftlichen Gewebes mit sich, daß die Sprache einen öffentlichen Machtzuwachs erfährt. Sie wird ideologisch, Nietzsche nennt das den *Wahnsinn der allgemeinen Begriffe*, die den Einzelnen wie mit Gespensterarmen packen und hinschieben, wohin er nicht will. Wohin aber drängt der Geist der Zeit? Für Nietzsche besteht kein Zweifel daran, daß es eine Wüste ist, die da wächst, es sind die Schrecken eines Flachlandes, das sich unabsehbar vor einem ausdehnt." (Safranski, 2007, 277–278)

European melancholy it exudes,<sup>2</sup> are constant staples behind the Germanic influence that binds Walser and Carvalho together. Nietzsche's desert subsumes in one mirific image<sup>3</sup> the anguished Romanticism, mistrust towards manual labor, critique of the notion of progress (Walser's "slow modernism"; Carvalho's "civilizing project"), cunning and wary use of Realism, seemingly pointless or superfluous plot-developments, the slow death of exile, the absence of new beginnings, the penchant towards disappearance that are triggered by the close analysis of the usage and the implications of the landscape in both Walser's and Carvalho's oeuvres, as shown throughout this research.

Nietzsche's philosophy also marks the definitive transition between Romanticism proper and what Safranski calls 'the Romantic', that is to say: Romanticism's contrived, long-lasting legacy, a legacy with which both Walser and Carvalho try to come to terms, and whose oscillations within the two authors' oeuvres served as one of the central leitmotifs behind this book. Furthermore, in the wake of Nietzsche and of the twentieth century, the renewed emphasis on the fragmentary and the imperfect has presented the post-Romantic author – to put it in Strathman's (2006, 5) graceful words – with "an invitation to traverse the world with the humility of a desert thinker or an exile rather than a debater (who, after all, desires to win) or an officially anointed poet laureate". This post-Romantic invitation, an invitation to roam the desert as an exile and not a victor, carries with it not humbleness or modesty *per*

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2 "Nietzsche a écrit lui-même contre la mélancolie européenne (*Parmi les filles du désert*): 'Car, auprès d'elles, il y avait aussi de bon air clair d'Orient; c'est là-bas que j'ai été le plus loin de la vieille Europe, nuageuse, humide et mélancolique.' (...) [Il] y a dans la vieille Europe des pays clairs, secs et joyeux. En revanche, il passe des nuages au-dessus du désert oriental, mais le penseur qui médite une sagesse anti-européenne, une sagesse orientale, ou plus exactement la sagesse d'un nouvel Orient, sait, avec la partialité énergique de l'imagination matérielle, que ces nuages de désert vivant d'un air clair et aimé ne sont pas nuageux." (Bachelard, 2007, 168–169)

3 "*In der Wüste der Wissenschaft*. – Dem wissenschaftlichen Menschen erscheinen auf seinen bescheidenen und mühsamen Wanderungen, die oft genug Wüstenreisen sein müssen, jene glänzenden Lufterscheinungen, die man 'philosophische Systeme' nennt: sie zeigen mit zauberischer Kraft der Täuschung die Lösung aller Rätsel und den frischesten Trunk wahren Lebenswassers in der Nähe; das Herz schwelgt, und der Ermüdete berührt das Ziel aller wissenschaftlichen Ausdauer und Not beinahe schon mit den Lippen, so daß er wie unwillkürlich vorwärts drängt. Freilich bleiben andere Naturen, von der schönen Täuschung wie betäubt, stehen: die Wüste verschlingt sie, für die Wissenschaft sind sie tot. Wieder andere Naturen, welche jene subjektiven Tröstungen schon öfter erfahren haben, werden wohl aufs äußerste mißmutig und verfluchen den Salzgeschmack, welchen jene Erscheinungen im Munde hinterlassen und aus dem ein rasender Durst entsteht – ohne daß man nur einen Schritt damit irgendeiner Quelle nähergekommen wäre." (Nietzsche, 2000, 331)

se, but a call for failure, an appeal towards the margins, an encouragement for viewing history as failure and for finding value in one's own marginality (a desert thinker rather than a poet laureate). This book was deeply guided by such an invitation in the way it approached literature and its *corpus*, as well as in the way it tried to bypass post-colonial studies without undermining their importance or worth.

In Blanchot, the foremost representative of post-Romanticism within this research, the desert, this highly linguistic and symbolic desert, also surfaces as literature's final frontier, "a privileged zone of freedom and solitude", although simultaneously an unreachable, treacherous literary space, as Ann Smock notes in her introduction to the English translation of *L'Espace Littéraire*:

With considerable regularity, literature's 'space' is described as exile or banishment, and the writer as one wandering in the desert, like Kafka far from Canaan, too weak to collaborate in the active concerns of competent men; but then, too, the desert is a privileged zone of freedom and solitude, and if literature is exiled from the world of valuable achievements, it is also exempted from the world's demands. It has to bear no responsibility for anything; it is kept safe to itself: the desert is its refuge. Or it would be, if to be so gratuitous were not a grave danger for literature, and also if the desert were a here one could actually reach. Kafka is never quite convinced that he isn't still in Canaan after all. (Blanchot, 1989, 11)

The desert, in Blanchot, and particularly in *Le Livre à Venir*, articulates the space between prophecy and the infinite, between language and disaster. Language, according to Blanchot, is "desert-like" inasmuch as it endlessly awakens in one the terror, the understanding, and the memory of a time when it stood for a "more complex, more anguishing, and less determined experience". Such desert-like language triggers a prophetic, anticipatory speech that does not quite predict the future, but rather subtracts from the present, "and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence". This prophetic speech and the sense of a world that is undoing itself, of a landscape that is plotting revenge, of an anguished and perhaps doomed quest for a lost complexity, is another central element linking the two authors in this study – the notion that disaster, even if literature can anticipate it, comes faster than language can stabilize it, a notion that finds in this post-Romantic, Blanchotian impulse towards the desert a suitable yet untenable position on the outside, on the margins of the *status quo*.<sup>4</sup> In this linguistic desert one can but wonder, wander for days and then

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<sup>4</sup> "Mais la parole prophétique annonce un impossible avenir, ou fait de l'avenir qu'elle annonce et parce qu'elle l'annonce quelque chose d'impossible, qu'on ne saurait vivre et qui doit bouleverser les données sûres de l'existence. Quand la parole devient prophétique, ce n'est pas l'avenir qui est donné, c'est le présent qui est retiré et toute possibilité d'une présence ferme,

ages through an infinite space that will last exactly a little longer than one's own life, and during this time of erring and error one may glimpse a fleeting truth about oneself and the world,<sup>5</sup> and in pursuing it – as Walser's and Carvalho's characters and narrators are wont to do – one falters into madness and oblivion.

The desert, then, becomes an existential theme, “un thème d'existence”, as pointedly articulated by the late Barthes: “a joyous place of solitude”, but also a “demonic, sterile region”, which, taken to its ultimate degree of intensity, leads to total and complete reclusion,<sup>6</sup> to an absolute – and, therefore, demonic – immersion in oneself. Barthes' formulation is providential not only

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stable, durable. Même la Cité éternelle et le Temple indestructible sont tout à coup – incroyablement – détruits. C'est à nouveau comme le désert, et la parole aussi est désertique, cette voix qui a besoin du désert pour crier et qui sans cesse réveille en nous l'effroi, l'entente et le souvenir du désert. (...) Sans doute, mais l'on peut se demander si l'expérience du désert et le rappel des jours nomades où la terre n'était que promesse n'expriment pas une expérience plus complexe, plus angoissante et moins déterminée. Le désert, ce n'est encore ni le temps, ni l'espace, mais un espace sans lieu et un temps sans engendrement. Là, on peut seulement errer, et le temps qui passe ne laisse rien derrière soi, est un temps sans passé, sans présent, temps d'une promesse qui n'est réelle que dans le vide du ciel et la stérilité d'une terre nue où l'homme n'est jamais là, mais toujours au-dehors. Le désert, c'est ce dehors, où l'on ne peut demeurer, puisque y être c'est être toujours déjà au-dehors, et la parole prophétique est alors cette parole où s'exprimerait, avec une force désolée, le rapport nu avec le Dehors, quand il n'y a pas encore de rapports possibles, impuissance initiale, misère de la faim et du froid, qui est le principe de l'alliance, c'est-à-dire d'un échange de parole d'où se dégage l'étonnante justice de la réciprocité.” (Blanchot, 1959, 98–100)

5 “La vérité de la littérature serait dans l'erreur de l'infini. Le monde où nous vivons et tel que nous le vivons est heureusement borné. Il nous suffit de quelques pas pour sortir de notre chambre, de quelques années pour sortir de notre vie. Mais supposons que, dans cet étroit espace, soudain obscur, soudain aveugles, nous nous égarions. Supposons que le désert géographique devienne le désert biblique: ce n'est plus quatre pas, ce n'est plus onze jours qu'il nous faut pour le traverser, mais le temps de deux générations, mais toute l'histoire de toute l'humanité, et peut-être davantage. Pour l'homme mesuré et de mesure, la chambre, le désert et le monde sont des lieux strictement déterminés. Pour l'homme désertique et labyrinthique, voué à l'erreur d'une démarche nécessairement un peu plus longue que sa vie, le même espace sera vraiment infini, même s'il sait qu'il ne l'est pas et d'autant plus qu'il le saura.” (Blanchot, 1959, 116)

6 “Une seconde forme, antinomique au labyrinthe, mais encore espace archétypique de la clôture: clôture, encore plus archétypique, puisque sans aucune cloison: le Désert (...). Le désert anachorétique présente l'ambivalence fondamentale de la clôture: a) lieu heureux de la solitude, de la pacification (...); b) région stérile et démoniaque (...). Ce que je veux noter: le désert = un thème d'existence: *vita eremitica*. Donc, susceptible de variations d'intensité. Il existe une intensité dernière du désert, qui l'identifie à la réclusion absolue: le ‘désert-absolu’ (panérèmos) qu'a connu Antoine.” (Barthes, 2002, 99)

in its literary sensibility and stylistic refinement – two guiding forces behind this book’s approach to its own language –, but also because it succinctly addresses yet another of this study’s central elements: the extrapolation of such a radical “immersion in oneself” into the constitutive narcissism of Walser’s and Carvalho’s characters and narrators, which, alongside their real and projected (and unreliable) personae as authors, make up the core of the Structuralist character–narrator–author triptych, a triangulation explored throughout the entire research. Moreover, Barthes’ communion between the desert (or, broadly understood, landscape) and “the existential” underscores what has been one of the book’s central conceptual concerns: that of equating literature with existence, i.e.: to rapport literature first and foremost to the existential aspects of human experience, rather than to a purely cerebral or belletristic enterprise.

The “intensité dernière du désert” to which Barthes alludes gains an even more existential veneer via Bachelard, to whom the experience of the desert echoes and emerges in an *inner* intensity as it erodes and unarms those who venture in its immensity,<sup>7</sup> bringing them face-to-face with their own selves and limitations. This pivotal connection between an existential Barthes (via a philosophically awed Bachelard) and the hard truths of Structuralism (to which Barthes is an heir) prompts a final figure of equal importance to this book: the Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques*, the Lévi-Strauss who allowed for a sense of the literary and of the existential to seep into his text, who permitted himself to be awed by the very same landscapes the other, more analytical Lévi-Strauss would then try to tame, systemize, and explain. With Lévi-Strauss this book explored the anthropological traps left behind by Carvalho in his fiction (“the deception of anthropology”), as well as the recurring clash between nature and culture as articulated by both Walser and Carvalho with varying degrees of anthropological insight and hindsight. The theme of traveling, of dislocation and discovery, also finds solid footing in the Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques* and in his at times aesthetic, at times anthropologic exploration of the landscape, but most of all when, frustrated, he finally accepts and even embraces his fallibility, when he sees in the landscape a projection of his own aspirations and shortcomings, when he turns the landscape into a function of language and puts it at the service of his narrative, thus asking, in this anguished yet lucid state of mind, the most central question lurking behind this research, a question which feeds right back into Said’s thesis of the exile of the mind posited in the opening

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7 “L’immensité dans le désert vécu retentit en une intensité de l’être intime.” (Bachelard, 2008, 185)

chapter. Lévi-Strauss asks himself, towards the end of his arguably unsuccessful Brazilian sojourn: “Perhaps, then, this was what traveling was, an exploration of the deserts of my mind rather than of those surrounding me?”<sup>8</sup> and this question – or, rather, due to its rhetorical nature, this *suspicion* – seems to quite sensibly subsume the approach that was given to the oeuvre of two authors who at all costs avoid definitive statements, and who would rather end it all in a well-placed question mark.

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<sup>8</sup> “Était-ce donc cela, le voyage ? Une exploration des déserts de ma mémoire, plutôt que de ceux qui m’entouraient ?” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 436)



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