

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,¹ 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, fairy-tale-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 encumbrance² –, 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.³

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

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,⁴ 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-Matas⁵ notes and Jochen Greven concurs, almost a program of his entire oeuvre.⁶

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

⁴ 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.

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

⁶ "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 playful⁷ – 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.⁸

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

⁷ 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).

⁸ 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 Schöpfertum 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 industry⁹ and incoming trains,¹⁰ an uncomfortable vista where he doesn’t belong, lashing ironically on the factory workers as a result.¹¹

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

9 “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 unsauberem Dingen abgeben kann.” (FKA, 36)

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

11 “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 others¹² –, 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).

¹² "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.¹³

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 firestorm¹⁴ – 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,¹⁵ 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:

13 “Gedankenreich schreiben ist schön, aber seine Arbeit mit zu vielen Gedanken vollpfropfen 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 manuscripts¹⁶ 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!").

¹⁶ 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 nemesis¹⁷ and thus elicits from the boy’s writing all traits that make the essays noteworthy: humor,¹⁸ irony,¹⁹ distance-taking,²⁰ a still mild and incipient distrust towards institutions,²¹ as well as meta-criticism born out of textual anxiety.²² 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,²³ 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

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 auszuarbeiten. (...) 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.²⁴

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,²⁵ 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.²⁶

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,²⁷ 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.²⁸

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

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 students²⁹). 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

²⁹ “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...”³⁰ (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

³⁰ 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).³¹ 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 Kocher³² – 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

³¹ 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).

³² “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.³³

These questions, which were seldom asked during Walser's writing span (abruptly cut short in 1933, as he was moved to the sanatorium of Herisau³⁴), have been at the basis of Walser's "re-discovery" from the 1970s onwards,³⁵ 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

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".³⁶

³⁶ "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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ Back in Brazil, his youngest son is kidnapped by a gang specialized in such undertakings – Brazil, according to Carvalho's narrator,

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 quando 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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

39 “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)

40 “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)⁴¹; 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).⁴²

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

41 "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."

42 "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,⁴³ 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,⁴⁴ 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,⁴⁵ 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

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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

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.⁴⁸ 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

48 "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.⁴⁹ 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”.⁵⁰

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

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 Walsesian 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 Walsesian tradition subscribes.

Whereas Marxism sees history invested with meaning and reconciliation, and religion ties it with salvation, the Walsesian 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,⁵¹ 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 Walsesian 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

51 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”,⁵² an intellectual

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.⁵³ 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

⁵³ 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,⁵⁴ 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),⁵⁵ 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,⁵⁶ but from its refusal. *Mongólia* is

54 Apropos 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,⁵⁷ art, literature, and religion. *Mongólia* captures an author deliberately

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)

57 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

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.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ Already in Machado de Assis the *couleur locale* had been banished,⁶⁰ the landscape missing – or at least the colorful landscape one would have expected.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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

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 Borgesian, 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,⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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,⁶⁵ but such realization – and its admission – were not immediate, eclipsed as they were by a critical infatuation

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”,⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ One could, however, add an implicit reading to

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

⁶⁷ “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.⁶⁸

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

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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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,⁷¹ a proposition which he then locates not only within Machado's

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 impertinência 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

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,⁷² 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 seducing⁷³ – 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.⁷⁴ *Mongólia*’s narrator thus proceeds to tell a story stripped of what could be called more “human” reverberations, fears,

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 incisivas 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.⁷⁵ Hence the perennial anticlimax, the tales of criminals and victims

75 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).⁷⁶ 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-fonts⁷⁷) and language. Language surfaces as the last source

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).

76 “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)

77 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*,⁷⁸ 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

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 eloqüência, 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.⁷⁹ 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 Japan⁸⁰; when in Japan, they miss Brazil⁸¹; 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

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. Prosseguiu: ‘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,⁸² 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,⁸³ 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-

82 "Generalizando, o instante espiritualizado, 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,⁸⁴ 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.

84 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 toalete” (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).