

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.1 Walser: *Jakob von Gunten* (1909)

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

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

–Benjamin, “Robert Walser”

5.1.1 A dreamlike atmosphere

The last leaf on an autumn tree watches, dried branches washed down by rain as heavy as lead long after the remaining foliage, which once hung unnaturally onto the trees, has already fallen and met its fate on cold concrete, unlike him. At times it feels as if everything were made of metal and thin iron,¹ slippery sharp surfaces to which one cannot hold on to, although under which weight one can be crushed flat.² Burden also weighs upon hallways made of stone and shadows and apparent endlessness, as each minute swells up to the size of an entire century,³ each hour a chorus of the same sixty minutes of the hour just past. A single class is taught at the Institute, and that class is constantly repeated⁴ by teachers who are asleep, or dead, or seemingly dead, or they are petrified – it makes no difference,⁵ stone and shadows are both patient and persistent, especially while one sleeps. Sometimes his whole stay there between stone walls and metal ground feels like an incomprehensible dream.⁶ But if it were a dream, wouldn't he be able to simply wake up? The fear of being lied to, the paranoia of deception, grows ever more intense. He even nurtures secret thoughts of murder, of being slowly

1 “Die Bäume der Anlage sind ganz farblos. Die Blätter hängen unnatürlich bleiern herunter. Es ist, als wenn hier manchmal alles aus Blech und dünnem Eisen sei. Dann stürzt wieder Regen und netzt das alles.” (JvG, 22)

2 “Wir stecken noch immer in den eisernen Klauen der zahlreichen Vorschriften und ergehen uns immer noch in lehrhaften, eintönigen Wiederholungen.” (JvG, 130)

3 “Wir schritten einen langen, finstern Gang entlang (...) Ah, diese Gänge des Not-Leidens und der furchtbaren Entsagung schienen mir endlos, und sie waren es vielleicht auch. Die Sekunden waren wie ganze Lebensläufe, und die Minuten nahmen die Größe von leidvollen Jahrhunderten an.” (JvG, 100)

4 “Es gibt nur eine einzige Stunde, und die wiederholt sich immer.” (JvG, 8–9)

5 “Es fehlt eben, wie ich schon sagte, an Lehrkräften, d. h. die Herren Erzieher und Lehrer schlafen, oder sie sind tot, oder nur scheintot, oder sie sind versteinert, gleichviel, jedenfalls hat man gar nichts von ihnen.” (JvG, 9)

6 “...manchmal will mir mein ganzer hiesiger Aufenthalt wie ein unverständlicher Traum vorkommen.” (JvG, 9–10)

strangled to death.⁷ The hallways multiply behind closed doors, at least in the turbulent confines of his own mind.⁸ He goes to the courtyard outside and things feel real enough, although deserted, and for minutes or centuries he practices the sacred art of standing on one leg, or just holds his breath for as long as he can bear.⁹ Inquiring on the reality of things is pointless when good food awaits on the table, the charms of a single apple might lure one from the civilized world of culture right back into the lands of fairytale.¹⁰ He reassesses those walls again: Is it a morgue, or is it a supernatural house of delight?¹¹ Are the teachers dead or are they statues or are they sleeping? The students leave one by one; little explanation is given. Things become increasingly fragile, as if he were standing in mid-air and not on firm ground,¹² as if all those one-leg-standing exercises had been pointless and vain. The iron, which once was thin, now caves in. A sense of alertness endures even though nothing ever happens, far-off sounding sirens of a nonexistent emergency. A prolonged and unfulfilled period of waiting weakens the soul.¹³ Unless it was a dream all along – and if so, is the dream over by now?¹⁴

Walser's characters begin where fairytales end, writes Benjamin (1999, 373), their paper-thin lives are jolted into being as they are ushered into a disenchanting world and told they should be wary, else delusion might claim back their meager existence. They are constantly one step away from collapsing into *Wahnsinn*; their nightly stride both lunar and lunatic.

From the depths of this same night comes Jakob von Gunten, and all that remains from his nocturnal days is a diary displaced in time. For he does not

7 "Meine Furcht, betrogen zu werden, stieg aufs höchste. Ich dachte sogar an geheime Ermordung, stückweises Erdrosseln." (JvG, 12)

8 "...und Korridore, lange heitere, mattenbedeckte Korridore zogen sich in meiner Phantasie von einem Ende des 'Gebäudes' zum andern. Ich kann mit all meinen Ideen und Dummheiten bald eine Aktiengesellschaft zur Verbreitung von schönen, aber unzuverlässigen Einbildungen gründen." (JvG, 131)

9 "Der Hof liegt verlassen da wie eine viereckige Ewigkeit, und ich stehe meist aufrecht und übe mich, auf einem Bein zu stehen. Oft halte ich zur Abwechslung den Atem lang an. Auch eine Übung, und es soll sogar, wie mir einmal ein Arzt sagte, eine gesundheitsfördernde sein." (JvG, 71)

10 "Träumte ich? Aber wozu mich fragen, wenn es jetzt doch ans Abendessen geht? Es gibt Zeiten, wo ich entsetzlich gern esse. Ich kann dann in die dümmsten Speisen hineinbeißen wie ein hungriger Handwerksbursche, ich lebe dann wie in einem Märchen und nicht mehr als Kulturmensch in einem Kulturzeitalter." (JvG, 103)

11 "Lebe ich in einem Toten- oder in einem überirdischen Freuden- und Wonnenhause? Etwas ist los, aber ich fasse es noch nicht." (JvG, 120)

12 "Es ist hier alles so zart, und man steht wie in der bloßen Luft, nicht wie auf festem Boden." (JvG, 126)

13 "Man wartet hier immer auf etwas, nun, das schwächt doch schließlich." (JvG, 126–7)

14 "Oder träumte ich, und habe ich jetzt ausgeträumt?" (JvG, 131)

arrive, this Jakob von Gunten, he merely happens in time the way dust, if left unsupervised, will find its way atop all things horizontal. The first entry on the *Tagebuch* finds him already there, enrolled in a class locked in infinite loop, and only four entries later does he take the time to think back on the day he arrived and Kraus opened him the door and he behaved like a fool,¹⁵ expecting a guidance forever silenced. But realizing one acted the fool is a future-pending enlightenment only discernible in retrospect. Jakob, however, is already there: he reports not from the present but from the future, which makes his diary not a diary at all but something circular, revolving, indifferent to linear chronology. There lacks, even more intensely than in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, a sense of character development. Jakob von Gunten does not evolve, his so-called diary portrays no such displacement from point A to point B, on the contrary: the level of knowledge that he possesses, as he pens the diary's first entry, is the exact same of its very last line. The causality between a first and a last reflects a mere narrative two-dimensional imposition, since the diary's last line feeds right back into the first one as the diary folds onto itself in a loop similar to the classes taught at the Institute Benjamenta. Jakob fasts-forward and doubles back, he cuts and jumps and backtracks as he narrates. He does not move logically through time and space, but makes sure that past, present, and future coexist each step of the way.¹⁶ Symbolically enough, Jakob sells his watch upon realizing he no longer needs it, with the money buys prison-currency: tobacco.¹⁷

The Institute Benjamenta – with its vaguely foreign-sounding name reminiscent of youth, sorrow, and spirituality – is a dream both lucid and nightmarish, one in which time-telling is impossible, the numbers on a clock all blurred beyond recognition. In its grey hallways Jakob dreams of terrible things,¹⁸ accepts, with

15 “Wie dumm ich mich doch benommen habe, als ich hier ankam” (JvG, 11); “Nun hatte ich geredet. Heute muß ich mich beinahe krümmen vor Lachen, wenn ich mir dieses dumme Betragen wieder ins Gedächtnis zurückrufe. Mir war es damals aber durchaus heilig ernst zumut.” (JvG, 19)

16 The present-tense narration is constantly and almost simultaneously disrupted both by a hazy past – “Ich muß noch einmal ganz zum Anfang zurückkehren, zum ersten Tag” (JvG, 29) –, and by a premonitory future – “Kraus soll ja bald einmal ins Leben hinaus- und in Stellung treten. Ich fürchte mich vor dem Augenblick seines Austrittes aus der Schule. Aber es wird nicht so rasch gehen. (...) Es würde mir so viel fehlen, wenn er abginge. Er kann noch früh genug zu einem Herrn kommen, der seine Qualitäten nicht zu schätzen wissen wird, und ich werde früh genug einen Menschen, den ich liebe, ohne daß er es weiß, entbehren müssen” (JvG, 33).

17 “Ich habe meine Uhr verkauft, um Zigarettentabak kaufen zu können. Ich kann ohne Uhr, aber nicht ohne Tabak leben, das ist schändlich, aber es ist zwingend.” (JvG, 50)

18 “Ich träume oft furchtbare Dinge.” (JvG, 34)

each coming night, his doomed fate as a slave and a tree and a yellowed leaf.¹⁹ His imagery throughout the diary is slightly off-color, here tragic and there whimsical, as if some nocturnal trace remained – as posits Benjamin – of his previous existence in a land of fairytale.²⁰ All pupils are imprisoned within the same walls, although they seldom find themselves numerous in the same room. Only rarely do more than two people occupy the same space – *Jakob von Gunten*’s encounters usually follow a dynamics between Jakob plus one, like a RSVP of a dialogical nature. The rare occasions of collective co-existence take place during one of the forever repeating lessons, as all pupils are locked in the same classroom with the seemingly sole purpose of allowing for the slow contagion that lurks in the Institute’s corridors to spread.²¹ The contagion resembles a ruthless energy that triggers sirens no-one is quite able to hear, an alarm clock buried deep in REM sleep, a looming apocalypse gaining momentum. All pupils are in a constant state of alertness, listening for what is to come, unable to quite make out its contours. The task is made all the more arduous by the ambiguous atmosphere conjured by Jakob, subsuming in its murky haziness the real within the dreamed, or vice-versa, with one swift sleight of hand shuffling the one card marked with “truth” within a deck of fifty-one other delusions. Jakob’s dreams near the edge of madness, and there is relief to be had in waking up from them.²² To wake up one morning from unsettling dreams, however, is a feat without guarantees, one which may as well lead straight into an altogether similar labyrinth: the possibility of a dream within a dream. Jakob’s eventual sense of happiness and relief are as dreary as they are short lived, they smell here of violets²³ and there of madness.²⁴

19 “Nun ja, Eleven sind Sklaven, junge, den Zweigen und Stämmen entrissene, dem unbarmherzigen Sturmwind überlieferte, übrigens schon ein wenig gelbliche Blätter.” (JvG, 140)

20 “Unser Unterricht besteht aus zwei Teilen, einem theoretischen und einem praktischen Teil. Aber beide Abteilungen muten mich auch noch heute wie ein Traum, wie ein sinnloses und zugleich sehr sinnreiches Märchen an.” (JvG, 62)

21 “Ja, das ist es, das nicht ganz Gesunde und Natürliche, was hier webt: wir alle, Herrschaft sowohl wie Elevenschaft, wir leben beinahe schon anderswo. Es ist, als wenn wir nur noch vorübergehend hier atmeten, äßen, schliefen und wach stünden und Unterricht erteilten und genossen. Etwas wie treibende, schonungslose Energie schlägt hier rauschend die Flügel zusammen. Horchen wir alle hier auf das Spätere?” (JvG, 127)

22 “Und erwachte schweißtriefend, – wie froh war ich doch, daß es nur ein böser Traum war. Mein Gott, ich darf noch hoffen, es werde noch eines Tages etwas aus mir. Wie im Traum doch alles an die Grenze des Wahnsinns streift.” (JvG, 89)

23 “Die Sonne schien. Es war prächtiges Frühlingswetter. In den Straßen duftete es nach Veilchen.” (JvG, 69)

24 “Was ist das? Warum bin ich so seltsam glücklich? Bin ich verrückt?” (JvG, 53)

5.1.2 The slow onset of madness and the ghost of truth

The constant battling between outer world and inner sensibility takes its toll in waves of sickness. At the root of the contagion at the Institute Benjamenta is a disease to which Jakob is not immune – as neither are most of Walser's narrators.²⁵

Tobold, a recurring character in Walser's oeuvre, the protagonist of various short pieces and of a novel lost to fire or to a drawer,²⁶ runs into a scoundrel ["Schurke"] in a proto-Faustian encounter. The scoundrel promptly begs for Tobold's understanding by stating that he is not wicked, just sick – "Ich bin nicht schlecht;/nur krank" (KD, 45) –, to which Tobold replies that if such is the case, then it is probably a doctor he should seek – "Krank bist du? Ich glaub's./Doch warum gehst du nicht zum Arzt?" (KD, 46). Maybe you are the doctor, muses the scoundrel – "Vielleicht bist du der Arzt. Du bist/jed'falles gut" (KD, 46) –, but Tobold pays little heed as he continues his journey in search of fresh air and identity: "'Was bist du' (...)/'Weiß es selber nicht./Muß erst erfahren, was ich bin'" (KD, 54; 55; 56).

Elsewhere, on a different journey, the narrator of *Der Spaziergang* suffers from a similar disease, feels inwardly sick, without faith, without confidence or trust, without any finer sort of hope, a stranger to the world and to himself, and hostile to both – until he can finally find a place to once again breathe, quietly and free.²⁷ A Romantic gasp for air underscores Walser's plight, his characters echo F. Schlegel's (2006, 153) altisonant caution: "Like animals, the spirit can only breathe in an atmosphere made up of life-giving oxygen mixed with nitrogen. To be unable to tolerate and understand this fact is the essence of foolishness; to simply not want to do so, is the beginning of madness". The gasp for air is also Jakob's curse, buried alive within narrow corridors depleted of life-giving oxygen.

²⁵ Beyond the examples employed here, it should not be forgotten that both *Geschwister Tanner* and *Der Gehülfe* are disease-ridden novels, although the malady, in those two cases, appears to be somewhat subdued when compared to *Jakob von Gunten*.

²⁶ "Ein Roman 'Tobold', 1919 abgeschlossen, ist verloren" (P, 139), notes Jochen Greven, who also remarks on the connection – via Walser himself and his "Besuch einer Dienerschule in Berlin" in 1905 – between the characters of Tobold and Jakob von Gunten. Tobold appears not only in *Poetenleben* ("Aus Tobolds Leben"), but also in *Kleine Dichtungen* ("Tobold (I)"; "Spazieren"), in *Kleine Prosa* ("Tobold (II)"), and in *Aufsätze* ("Der fremde Geselle").

²⁷ "Ich bin vor einiger Zeit in diese Gegend aus kalten, traurigen, engen Verhältnissen, krank im Innern, ganz und gar ohne Glauben, ohne Zuversicht und Zutrauen, ohne jegliche schönere Hoffnung hergekommen, mit der Welt und mit mir selber entfremdet und verfeindet. Ängstlichkeit und Mißtrauen nahmen mich gefangen und begleiteten jeden meiner Schritte. Stück um Stück verlor ich dann das unedle, häßliche Vorurteil. Ich atmete hier wieder ruhiger und freier – und wurde wieder ein schönerer, wärmerer, glücklicherer Mensch." (S, 24)

The lack of breathing air makes Jakob imperceptibly light-headed, fatigued, confused, disoriented, prone to hallucinations. His diary is the written evidence of a slow-onset madness. Language is the first casualty of delusion, as it tries – and fails – to capture a ghost: truth.

The madness-like contagion that spreads among Walser's characters is induced by language, and in language finds its fulfillment. One of *Prosastücke's* most intriguing pieces, "Schwendimann", seizes language as it is about to break, as it once again toys with narrative authority and conventions.²⁸ The borderline manic, distraught narrator forces the homonymous Schwendimann to constantly defend himself, to interrupt the fast-paced flow of the text in order to breathe, to claim he is not sick, but something else: "Ich bin nicht krank, ich bin anders. Ich habe keine Krankenpflege nötig, ich habe etwas ganz Anderes nötig" (Ps, 121). The narrator is restless, frantically dragging Schwendimann from place to place, from the Rathaus to the Armenhaus to the Spritzenhaus to the Pfandhaus to the Badhaus to the Schulhaus to the Zuchthaus to the Krankenhaus to the Elternhaus to the Kaufhaus to the Tanzhaus to the Arbeitshaus to the Gerichtshaus to the Schlachthaus to the Schauspielhaus to the Konzerthaus to the Trauerhaus to the Gotteshaus to the Gasthaus until Schwendimann can at last find some peace, and this he does in the Totenhaus.

Death is never out of question in Walser's texts, it looms in the horizon like a disease-ridden tribute or an everlasting threat, and Schwendimann took his chances by following the narrator all the way to his deathbed. The clash between narrator and character under the sign of sickness and death reaches its apex in Walser's posthumous novel, *Der Räuber*.²⁹ In it, a journey is once again set in

28 "Einmal war ein sonderbarer Mann. Hallo, hallo, was denn für ein sonderbarer Mann? Wie alt war er, und woher kam er? Das weiss ich nicht. So kannst du mir vielleicht sagen, wie er hiess? Er hiess Schwendimann. Aha, Schwendimann! Gut, sehr gut, très bien, très bien. Fahre also fort, wenn es dir gefällt und sage uns: was wollte denn der Schwendimann? Was er wollte? Hm, das wusste er wohl selber nicht recht. Er wollte nicht viel, aber er wollte etwas Rechtes. Was suchte, nach was forschte Schwendimann? Er suchte nicht viel, aber er suchte etwas Rechtes. Zerfahren, verloren in weiter Welt war er. So, so? Verloren? Aha, zerfahren! Grosser Gott, wo hinaus soll es denn mit dem armen Mann? Ins Nichts, ins All oder in was sonst? Bange Frage!" (Ps, 120)

29 *Der Räuber* is one of Walser's most compelling and enticing novels (although it was not originally prepared for publication, but pieced together by Jochen Greven and Martin Jürgens and first published in 1972), one in which Walser enacts a distancing effect between the narrator and the character of the robber, both nevertheless cut from the author's own autobiographical skin. Coetzee magnificently sums up the novel's plot thusly: "It concerns the sentimental entanglements of a middle-aged man known simply as the Robber, a man without employment but manages to subsist on the fringes of polite society in Berne on the basis of a modest legacy", and who gets tangled in an amorous pursuit that leaves him wounded and amidst a "flurry of gleeful

motion, a journey towards self-discovery and language (*Der Räuber*, according to Coetzee, is “‘about’ nothing more than the adventure of its own writing”³⁰), towards fresh air and the elusive promise of health. The Robber – a childish spirit akin to Fritz and Jakob – is plagued by “inner voices”, and thus seeks refuge in the world of quaint citizenship, hinting yet again at the constant battle between outer world and inner sensibility to which Walser’s characters are prey³¹: “He was surely ill in ‘those days,’ when he arrived in our city, filled with a curious disequilibrium, agitation. Certain inner voices, so to speak, tormented him. Had he come here to recover, to transform himself into a cheerful, contented member of society?” (R, 60–61).

The final destination for any “adventure of writing itself” can only be language. Language is both the source and the symptom of the Robber’s malady; his disease is not madness *per se*, but an invitation to it, one which he irrevocably accepts by trusting a professional writer with the task of organizing the narrative to his own life. What separates reality from fiction, after all, is nothing more than the displacement of letters along a line. *Der Räuber*’s narrator, the professional author, the maker of words, is not there to set the record straight and tell the truth behind the turn of events which lead up to the Robber’s demise, but to problematize a deceptively simple equation: where there once was unequivocal narration (and thus, to all intents and purposes, unequivocal truth), now reigns a tangle of dead-ends and artificial suspicions. The Robber (and Fritz Kocher, and Jakob von Gunten, and Tobold, and Schwendimann, and...) was infected by a writerly disease, an artificial condition which affects those who are willing to venture – and create – outside the boundaries of quaint citizenship, who dare look inside themselves and face their own labyrinths. The writer – and both Fritz and Jakob

gossip. When the dust clears, the Robber is collaborating with a professional author to tell his side of the story” (Coetzee, 2007, 23; 24).

30 “Fundamentally *The Robber* is ‘about’ no more than the adventure of its own writing. Its charm lies in its surprising twists and turns of direction, its delicately ironic handling of the formulas of amatory play, and its supple and inventive exploitation of the resources of German. Its author figure, flustered by the multiplicity of narrative strands he suddenly has to manage now that the pencil in his hand is moving, is reminiscent above all of Laurence Sterne, the gentler, later Sterne, without the leering and the double entendres.” (Coetzee, 2007, 24–25)

31 Regarding the Robber’s disease, a further link between his ailment and an unquenchable, although poorly managed, ability to love – connecting back to Sebald’s reading as elaborated in subchapter 3.1.6. –, should be evoked: “Aus gewisse Weise, liebe Herr Doktor, vermag ich alles Erdenkliche, und vielleicht besteht meine Krankheit, falls ich meinen Zustand so nennen kann, in einem zu vielen Liebhaben. Ich habe einen ganz entsetzlich großen Fonds an Liebeskraft in mir, und jedesmal, wenn ich auf die Straße trete, fange ich an, irgend etwas, irgend jemand lieb zu gewinnen, und darum gelte ich allenthalben als charakterloser Mensch...” (R, 143).

are writers – is the one who walks outside the perimeter of sanity, risking their own mental health – as well as the civilized pains of social ostracism – for the sake of a book, or for a bit of nocturnal wisdom:

But how prosaically I speak, though there is perhaps a dose of poetry after all in these unadorned nature descriptions. I now address an appeal to the healthy: don't persist in reading nothing but healthy books, acquaint yourselves also with so-called pathological literature, from which you may derive considerable edification. Healthy people should always, so to speak, take certain risks. For what other reason, blast and confound it, is a person healthy? Simply in order to stop living one day at the height of one's health? A damned bleak fate....³²

To become an artist means to succumb to madness, a heroic Romantic despair if there ever was one. Peter Watson (2010, 238), in his ambitious historical tracing of the German genius throughout the last four centuries, notes that “Goethe once described Romanticism as ‘hospital-poetry’ and Novalis pictured life as ‘a disease of the mind’”. The secretive atmosphere conjured by Jakob von Gunten proves to be fertile terrain for all the unhealthy and unearthly scents that sprout from the mysterious, the nocturnal, the ghostlike, and the creative. As the infection spreads, sparing nobody, not even Herr Benjamenta,³³ confounding life-affirming certainties,³⁴ one pupil seems to be particularly afflicted by the disease, perhaps even the source behind the contagion, since he is sick from the journal's very beginning and bears the rather nonchalant name of Schacht – ‘shaft’, or ‘duct’; in short: that which conducts.

The first thing the reader is told about Schacht, other than that he is one of Jakob's classmates, is that he is a strange being who dreams of becoming a musician. He enjoys a laugh now and then, although prone to soulful bouts of melancholy which suit his pale, suffering face. He is sickly, and not afraid of breaking the rules, much like Jakob himself. Both boys enjoy telling each other stories drawn from their own lives, and enjoy even more making them up out of

³² “Aber wie prosaisch ich das alle sage, aber vielleicht liegt ja gerade in dieser nüchternen Naturwiedergabe ein Stück Poesie. Ich richte an die Gesunden folgenden Appell: Leset doch nicht immer nur diese gesunden Bücher, machet euch doch auch mit sogenannter krankhafter Literatur näher bekannt, aus der ihr vielleicht wesentliche Erbauung schöpfen könnt. Gesunde Menschen sollten stets gewissermaßen etwas riskieren. Wozu, heilandhagelnochmal, ist man denn gesund? Bloß um eines Tages so aus der Gesundheit heraus zu sterben? Eine verflucht trostlose Bestimmung...” (R, 83)

³³ “Vielleicht ist Herr Benjamenta verrückt.” (JvG, 108)

³⁴ “Es sieht hier aus, als wenn so etwas wie ‘die Tage gezählt’ wären. Aber man irrt sich. Vielleicht irrt sich auch Fräulein Benjamenta. Vielleicht auch Herr Vorsteher. Wir irren uns vielleicht alle.” (JvG, 140)

thin air.³⁵ When they do so, the claustrophobia of ever-narrowing corridors subsides for a moment, a whole world opens up instead: “When we do so, it seems to us that a soft music plays all up and down the walls. The narrow dark room expands, streets appear, palatial rooms, cities, chateaux, unknown people and landscapes, there are thunders and whisperings, voices speak and weep, et cetera” (JvG, 14). Jakob enjoys immensely talking to Schacht, he has soul and is sick, he is an artist in the making, owner of a true artistic nature. Schacht begs Jakob not to tell anybody he suffers from an unspecified and improper disease,³⁶ and out of brotherly love Jakob agrees,³⁷ never daring however to put in big words his affection towards the ailing colleague.³⁸

The reader receives a detailed update on Schacht’s state of mind and whereabouts later on, as he returns, angry and depressed, from an incursion in the outside world, where the job he was assigned to perform was sabotaged by his own sensitive constitution. The world is harder than we are, seems to be Jakob’s assessment regarding his friends demise, after which he seems to lose interest in him and only mentions his name one last time, as all pupils are gathered together to bid the deceased Fräulein Benjamenta goodbye (JvG, 153).

Didn’t I say earlier that things would go badly for Schacht out in the world? (...) He has now had his first disappointment, and I’m convinced that he’ll have twenty disappointments, one after the other. Life with its savage laws is in any case for certain people a succession

35 “Mein Schulkamerad Schacht ist ein seltsames Wesen. Er träumt davon, Musiker zu werden. Er sagt mir, er spiele vermittle seiner Einbildungskraft wundervoll Geige, und wenn ich seine Hand anschau, glaube ich ihm das. Er lacht gern, aber dann versinkt er plötzlich in schmachthende Melancholie, die ihm unglaublich gut zu Gesicht und Körperhaltung steht. Schacht hat ein ganz weißes Gesicht und lange schmale Hände, die ein Seelenleiden ohne Namen ausdrücken. Schwächling, wie er von Körperbau ist, zappelt er leicht, es ist ihm schwer, unbeweglich zu stehen oder zu sitzen. Er gleicht einem kränklichen, eigensinnigen Mädchen, er schmolzt auch gern, was ihn einem jungen, etwas verzogenen weiblichen Wesen noch ähnlicher macht. Wir, ich und er, liegen oft zusammen in meiner Schlafkammer, auf dem Bett, in den Kleidern, ohne die Schuhe auszuziehen, und rauchen Zigaretten, was gegen die Vorschriften ist. Schacht tut gern das Vorschriften-Kränkende, und ich, offen gesagt, leider nicht minder. Wir erzählen uns ganze Geschichten, wenn wir so liegen, Geschichten aus dem Leben, d. h. Erlebtes, aber noch viel mehr erfundene Geschichten, deren Tatsachen aus der Luft gegriffen sind.” (JvG, 13–14)

36 “Schacht hat Seele. Wer weiß, vielleicht ist er eine Künstlernatur. Er hat mir anvertraut, daß er krank ist, und da es sich um ein nicht ganz anständiges Leiden handelt, hat er mich dringend gebeten, Schweigen zu beobachten, was ich ihm natürlich auf Ehrenwort versprochen habe, um ihn zu beruhigen.” (JvG, 14)

37 “Wie liebe ich solche Menschen, die diesen wehmütigen Eindruck hervorrufen. Ist das Bruderverliebe? Ja, kann sein.” (JvG, 15)

38 “Natürlich sage ich ihm so etwas nie. Wir reden Dummheiten miteinander, oft auch Ernstes, aber unter Vermeidung großer Worte. Schöne Worte sind viel zu langweilig.” (JvG, 15)

of discouragements and terrifying bad impressions. People like Schacht are born to feel and suffer a continuous sense of aversion. He would like to admit and welcome things, but he just can't. (...) His hands are made for light gestures, not for work. Before him breezes should blow, and behind him sweet, friendly voices should be whispering. His eyes should be allowed to remain blissfully closed, and Schacht should be allowed to go quietly to sleep again, after being wakened in the morning in the warm, sensuous cushions. For him there is, at root, no proper activity, for every activity is for him, the way he is, improper, unnatural, and unsuitable. Compared with Schacht I'm the trueblue rawboned laborer. Ah, he'll be crushed, and one day he'll die in a hospital, or he'll perish, ruined in body and soul, inside one of our modern prisons.³⁹

The metaphorical softness of Schacht's hands mirrors Jakob's own, his demise is foreboding: neither pair of hands is suited for manual labor; Jakob too has concealed an artistic constitution all along. It is Kraus, the insightful, lucid Kraus, who first dares saying it out loud, accusing Jakob of believing to reign above the rules, an ill-affected king who should watch out, lest the coming storms of fate should wash him ashore⁴⁰: "The storms and lightning and thunder and blows of fate certainly haven't yet been done away with, so as to save you the trouble. Just because of your gracefulness, you artists, for that's what you are, there certainly hasn't been any dropping-off in the difficulties facing anyone who really does something, who's really alive" (JvG, 138). It is fitting that Kraus should be the one to expose Jakob's greatest fear and secret, for Kraus is the only soul among the Institute's corridors immune to the contagion. Kraus is the perfect pupil, his face redolent of a vague orient (JvG, 77), his demeanor medieval (JvG, 49). Moreover,

39 "Habe ich es nicht früh schon gesagt, daß es Schacht draußen in der Welt übel ergehen wird? (...) Er hat jetzt eine erste Enttäuschung erlebt, und ich bin überzeugt, daß er zwanzig Enttäuschungen hintereinander erleben wird. Das Leben mit seinen wilden Gesetzen ist überhaupt für gewisse Personen nur eine Kette von Entmutigungen und schreckenerregenden bösen Eindrücken. Menschen wie Schacht sind zur fortlaufenden, leidenden Abneigung geboren. (...) Seine Hände taugen zu leichten Gebärden, nicht zur Arbeit. Vor ihm sollten Winde wehen, und hinter ihm sollten süße freundliche Stimmen flüstern. Seine Augen sollten selig geschlossen bleiben dürfen, und Schacht sollte wieder ruhig einschlummern dürfen, wenn er des Morgens in den warmen, lüsternen Kissen erwachte. Für ihn gibt es im Grunde genommen keine ziemliche Tätigkeit, denn jede Beschäftigung ist für ihn, der so aussieht, unziemlich, widernatürlich und unpassend. Ich bin der reine grobknochige Knecht gegen Schacht. Ah, zerschmettert wird er werden, und eines Tages wird er im Krankenhaus verenden, oder er wird, verdorben an Leib und Seele, in einem von unsern modernen Gefängnissen schmachten." (JvG, 122–124)

40 "...du gehörs't zu denen, die sich, so wertlos sie sein mögen, über gute Lehren erhaben vorkommen wollen. Ich weiß es schon, schweig' nur. (...) Und was fühlst du denn, du und deinesgleichen, Prahlhanse, was ihr seid, was ernst-sein und achtsam-sein eigentlich sagen will. Du bildest dir auf deine springerische und tänzerische Leichtfertigkeit ganz gewiß, und mit ohne Zweifel ebenso viel Recht, nicht wahr, Königreiche ein?" (JvG, 138)

he is the only one who tries to shake Jakob out of the dream, who repeatedly tells him: get up, even when Jakob believes to be already awake⁴¹ (and even though Jakob never does wake up, he keeps going back to sleep, a dream within a dream). After scolding Jakob for his condescending and free-spirited behavior, Kraus compounds three times on a same piece of advice: “Do something! (...) Go and make your conquests! (...) Make yourself invisible, or get busy with something” (JvG, 139). And what Jakob does, what Walser’s characters are always prone to do, is to grab any advice by its least accessible end and disappear.⁴²

5.1.3 The anti-hero: A departure from Romanticism

Fearing being suffocated by his father’s noble excellence,⁴³ Jakob von Gunten fled his home in search of fresh air. So goes Jakob’s official excuse for joining the Institute Benjamenta, given that he refrains from divulging too much about his previous civilian existence. But when Kraus exposes Jakob’s greatest fear, a secret and unspoken reason for his enrollment at the Institute may be glimpsed: the youngest of the von Guntens sought to quench his diseased *Künstlernatur* through the Institute’s repetitive diet of physical, menial teachings.

41 “Beinahe jeden frühen Morgen setzt es zwischen mir und Kraus ein geflüstertes Redegefecht ab. Kraus glaubt immer, mich zur Arbeit antreiben zu sollen. Vielleicht irrt er sich auch gar nicht, wenn er annimmt, daß ich nicht gern früh aufstehe. (...) Kraus ist der Vertreter aller hier im Institut Benjamenta bestehenden Vorschriften, folglich fordere ich den besten aller Mitschüler beständig ein bißchen zum Kampf auf. Ich zanke so furchtbar gern. Ich würde krank werden, wenn ich nicht zanken könnte, und zum Zanken und Reizen eignet sich Kraus wundervoll. Er hat immer recht: ‘Willst du jetzt endlich aufstehen, du faules Tuch!’” (JvG, 28); “Wir Zöglinge müssen morgens früh, bevor die Herrschaften erwachen, Schulstube und Kontor aufräumen. Je zwei Leute besorgen das abwechslungsweise. ‘Steh doch auf. Wird’s bald?’ – Oder: ‘Jetzt hört aber bald die Genügsamkeit auf.’ Oder: ‘Steh auf, steh auf. Es ist Zeit. Solltest schon längst den Besen in der Hand haben.’ – Wie ist das amüsant. Und Kraus, der ewig böse Kraus, wie lieb ist er mir.” (JvG, 29); “...noch immer klopft morgens früh Kraus mit seinem ärgerlichen ‘Steh auf, Jakob’ und mit seinem zornig gebogenen Finger an meine Kammertüre...” (JvG, 130)

42 Vila-Matas speaks novelistically of an ethics of disappearance in Walser’s oeuvre: “...y acabé durmiéndome recordando un proverbio suizo que en Oberbüren, en la pared de una casa que estaba junto a un prado, había visto Robert Walser en compañía de Carl Seelig: ‘La desdicha y la dicha / sobrellévalas, / que las dos pasarán / igual que has de pasar tú.’ Me dormí pensando en alguien que, hablando de Walser en sugerentes términos, escribió que éste encarnaba la bella desdicha, pulcras palabras para describir una forma de vivir que yo conocía muy bien. Se trataba de todo un estilo de vida, de una ciencia, de un alegre deslizamiento hacia el silencio, de una ética de las desesperaciones” (Vila-Matas, 2005b, 146).

43 “Ich sagte unter anderem, mein Vater sei Großrat, und ich sei ihm davongelaufen, weil ich gefürchtet hätte, von seiner Vortrefflichkeit erstickt zu werden.” (JvG, 12)

The practical or physical part of our instruction is a kind of perpetually repeated gymnastics or dancing, or whatever you want to call it. The salutation, the entrance into a room, behavior toward women or whatever, is practiced, and the practice is very long drawn out, often boring, but here too, as I now observe, and feel, there lies a deeply hidden meaning. We pupils are to be trained and shaped, as I observe, not stuffed with sciences.⁴⁴

The pupils are not to be stuffed with lofty and far-seeing sciences; the sheer physicality and seeming pointlessness of the Institute's calisthenics is meant to extinguish the treacherous fires of intellectualism, to suppress artistic deeds or grandiose turns of phrase such as these. Jakob tries his best to enact the Institute's policy, secretly hoping therewith to purge himself from his own artistic leanings, to convince himself he can become as menial and subordinate as the rest of them, to finally join the world a healthy, quaint citizen. Throughout his diary he insists – and the irony here should not go amiss – on the futility of words, especially the polysyllabic ones⁴⁵; he insists on being a changed man, a commoner at last,⁴⁶ although whenever he lets go of the Institute's philistine textbook, he immediately falls prey to his own rich inner life: "To be robust means not spending time on thought but quickly and quietly entering into what has to be done. To be wet with the rains of exertion, hard and strong from the knocks and rubs of what necessity demands. I hate such clever turns of phrase. I was intending to think of something quite different" (JvG, 127).

Jakob must forcibly control his hand so as to avoid big words and clever turns of phrase, for – according to the Benjamentas' pedagogy – they make one's soul susceptible to the corrosiveness of intellectualism, one's body vulnerable to the disease of idle contemplation. Schacht may be the contagion's primary source, but Jakob's diary the poisonous account of its outbreak, as it both spreads the infection and documents its path of destruction. The tormenting challenge of keeping a journal without trusting the institution of language, without fully allowing oneself inner immersion, begins to corrode Jakob's already precarious

44 "Der praktische oder körperliche Teil unseres Unterrichtes ist eine Art fortwährend wiederholtes Turnen oder Tanzen, ganz gleich, wie man das nennen will. Der Gruß, das Eintreten in eine Stube, das Benehmen gegenüber Frauen oder ähnliches wird geübt, und zwar sehr langfädig, oft langweilig, aber auch hier, wie ich jetzt merke und empfinde, steckt ein tiefverborgener Sinn. Uns Zöglinge will man bilden und formen, wie ich merke, nicht mit Wissenschaften vollpfropfen." (JvG, 63)

45 "Wir reden Dummheiten miteinander, oft auch Ernstes, aber unter Vermeidung großer Worte. Schöne Worte sind viel zu langweilig." (JvG, 15); "Wie hasse ich all die treffenden Worte" (JvG, 50); "Man irrt sich stets, wenn man große Worte in den Mund nimmt." (JvG, 140); "Wozu sich in großen Worten ergehen?" (JvG, 155)

46 "...ich bin ja ein ganz, ganz anderer geworden, ein gewöhnlicher Mensch bin ich geworden, und daß ich gewöhnlich geworden bin, das verdanke ich Benjamentas, und das erfüllt mich mit einer unnennbaren, vom Tau der Zufriedenheit glänzenden und tropfenden Zuversicht." (JvG, 114)

mental health; by trying to escape his *Künstlernatur* and time and again failing to do so, Jakob is dangerously split into two: “I’m leading a strange double life, a life that is regular and irregular, controlled and uncontrolled, simple and highly complicated” (JvG, 140).⁴⁷ Out of a survival instinct Jakob is forced to lead a double existence, like a secret agent, or an artist disguised as a servant. Redemption would still be possible were he able to focus and choose, and thus display the courage, the resolve, the high moral ground of a trueborn hero. An apathetic conception of morality and idealism is what does it for Jakob von Gunten, what disavows any eventual claims to heroism. His surprising lack of moral concern prevents him from becoming a hero, but also a villain. Jakob is neither moral nor immoral, but rather an amoral misfit who simply refuses to position himself along the heroic spectrum.

“For the Romantics”, points out Watson (2010, 237), “martyrs, tragic heroes who fought for their beliefs against overwhelming odds, became the ideal. The artist or hero as outsider was born in this way”. Here one of Walser’s most pronounced breaks from Romanticism surfaces, for although artistic-minded and convicted outsiders, his protagonists are in no way heroes – they might even, under a certain light, be considered downright cowards. The connection between cowardice and the anti-hero is eloquently pursued by Peter Sloterdijk in his equally eloquent *Critique of Cynical Reason*:

The third stance toward the heroic ideal is adopted by the coward. Of course, under the unavoidable pressure of the heroic image, he must seek refuge in the hesitatingly brave masses. He must hide the fact that he is really the anti-hero; he must camouflage himself and make himself as unobtrusive as possible. As muddler, improviser, and man of few words, he cannot even afford to internalize the image of the hero in any rigid way because otherwise self-contempt would crush him. In him, a slight decomposition of the ‘superego’ is already under way. In the coward’s consciousness lie simultaneously the germs of military cynicism and of a higher critical realism! For through his experience and self-experience, the coward is forced to reflect and look twice. He can confess his cowardice aloud just as little—otherwise he would be even more despised—as he can simply give it up. In him, to be sure often poisoned by a drop of self-contempt, a critical potential against the ethics of heroes begins to grow. Because he himself has to dissemble, he will be more sensitive to the pretense of others. When heroes and hesitators succumb to a superior power, the coward, who allows himself to flee, is the sole survivor. Hence the sarcastic saying: Heroes are the survivors of heroes. (Sloterdijk, 1988, 221–222)

⁴⁷ In a harrowing realization shortly after, Jakob realizes his state of mind is not his own privilege – the contagion is not exclusive to the Institute’s hallways: “Und was das Doppelleben betrifft, so führt jedermann eigentlich ein solches” (JvG, 141).

Walser's oeuvre engenders a critical potential against the ethics of heroes. Simon, for instance, the main protagonist of *Geschwister Tanner*, is constantly afraid of his own cowardice, like a boy secretly scared of a menacing shadow.⁴⁸ Simon resents being reminded of his cowardice⁴⁹ as much as he resents acting upon it, promptly leaping to his feet at the stroke of the clock (GT, 42). As he obliquely investigates the causes for such craven behavior, Simon tentatively concludes that cowardice is a by-product of maturity, that is to say: of being wicked and selfish.⁵⁰ Simon is here a vessel to Walser's much rehashed praise of the puerile spirit of children – simultaneously wise and naïve⁵¹ –, whose lack of self-aggrandizing self-importance allows them to be “enforcers of the [promised] word”. This leads Simon, some fifty pages further into the narrative, to reiterate that a child he might even obey, but never a man, and, in a rather quizzical *non-sequitur*, report that it is *therefore* his duty to also obey a woman.⁵²

48 Even Kasper, one of Simon's older brothers, who is not only artistic-minded but also a proper painter, feels cowardice creep around his fingers: “Was nützt es mir, wenn ich mich an vergangenen Kulturen berausche? Habe ich damit meinen Geist, wenn ich ehrlich mit mir abrechnen will, bereichert? Nein, ich habe ihn bloß verpuscht und feige gemacht” (GT, 75) – he is uninterested in traveling abroad in search for bygone cultures, for it would only highlight the cowardice of his own spirit, he who prefers instead to observe them from a sheltered distance: “sondern betrachte sie eben, wenn es angeht und es mir Spaß macht, aus Büchern, die mir zu jeder Zeit zu Diensten sind” (GT, 76).

49 “Ich freue mich, zeugnislos von Ihnen wegzugehen, denn ein Zeugnis von Ihnen würde mich nur an meine eigene Feigheit und Furcht erinnern...” (GT, 44); “Aber jetzt noch feige zurückkehren und die Eisenbahn benutzen, das mochte er doch nicht.” (GT, 104)

50 “Ein Knabe besitzt Tugenden der Ritterlichkeit, die der vernünftig und reif denkende Mann immer zur Seite wirft als unnütze Beigaben zum Feste der Liebe. Ein Knabe ist weniger feige als ein Mann, weil er weniger reif ist, denn die Reife macht leicht niederträchtig und selbstisch. Man muß nur die harten, bösen Lippen eines Knaben betrachten: der ausgesprochene Trotz und das bildliche Versteifen auf ein einmal sich selber im stillen gegebenes Wort. Ein Knabe hält Wort, ein Mann findet es passender, es zu brechen. Der Knabe findet Schönheit an der Härte des Worthaltens (Mittelalter) und der Mann findet Schönheit darin, ein gegebenes Versprechen in ein neues aufzulösen, das er männlich verspricht zu halten. Er ist der Versprecher, jener ist der Vollstrecker des Wortes.” (GT, 140–141)

51 A dichotomy already explicitly formulated in the introduction to *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*: “[Die Aufsätze] mögen vielen an vielen Stellen zu knabenhaft und an vielen andern Stellen zu knabenhaft erscheinen” (FKA, 7).

52 “Einem Kinde zu gehorchen, wenn es reizend befiehlt, ist mir etwas Leichtes, dagegen einem Mann: Pfui! Nur Feigheit und geschäftliche Interessen mögen einen Mann dazu veranlassen, vor einem andern Mann zu kriechen: Niedrige Gründe, das! Aus diesem Grunde bin ich froh, daß ich einer Frau zu gehorchen habe; denn das ist natürlich, weil es niemals ehrverletzend sein kann.” (GT, 193–194)

A similar quest for an authority figure, an umbrella under which to crouch, is what directly links the characters of Fritz Kocher and Jakob von Gunten within Walser's Balzacian Bleistiftgebiet – and this through a most peculiar sketch, “Tagebuch eines Schülers”, originally written in 1908. In it, the reader is acquainted with a series of teachers – Bergen, Blösch, Blur, Merz, Wächli, Wyß – who later on turn out to be Jakob's own instructors at the Institute Benjamenta (JvG, 58–59), although it is not Jakob who attends this particular class, but Fritz.⁵³ Fritz is but a character in the sketch (“Unsere lustige und kühnster Schulkamerad heißt Fritz Kocher” – Gsch, 110), which is narrated by a self-identified “secondary-school student” who alternates between the first person singular and plural. The entire sketch, its many ironic tirades aimed at the teachers, is written under the influence of a statement made in its very first paragraph: “We schoolboys are decidedly not noble creatures; we lack the beautifully proper social graces many times over. Why is it that we overwhelm precisely a Wächli with our jokes? We are cowards; we deserve an Inquisitor to discipline us” (Gsch, 104). The narrator then proceeds with his gallery of notable teachers [“Galerie sehenswerter Lehbilder”] (Gsch, 112) by undermining their authority one by one: Neumann, the gym teacher, who doubles surprisingly as the penmanship instructor, is completely under the students' control: “Wir haben ihn vollständig in unserer Hand, wir sind ihm vollkommen überlegen” (Gsch, 106); Wyß, the rector, is feared and respected, “two boring upstanding feelings”. He physically punishes the students, and his blows carry something proper, fitting, even justly pleasant about them, which cannot be held against him: “Der Mann, der so meisterlich prügeln kann, muß gewissermaßen human sein” (Gsch, 107); Huseler has been dismissed for inappropriately stroking and caressing the boys; Herr von Bergen used to be a gym teacher and is now an insurance agent; and at a certain point the narrator even calls for dancing lessons, an *avant la lettre* tip of the hat to the Benjamenta's pedagogy: “Apropos: warum erhalten wir keinen Tanzunterricht? Ich finde, man tut gar nichts, uns zur Anmut und zu einem schönen Benehmen zu bewegen. Wir sind und bleiben sehr wahrscheinlich die reinen Flegel” (Gsch, 109).

The secondary-school student simultaneously calls for authority and proceeds to undermine it, a back-and-forth movement exemplary of Walser's ambiguously coward protagonists: indeed do they continually seek an authority figure

⁵³ The connection between both students, as well as its many autobiographical resonances, is further discussed in Whittaker, 2013, 206–208. Alternatively, if one is to accept the hypothesis first posited in subchapter 4.1.3., under footnote 29, that Fritz Kocher is alluding to Jakob von Gunten as the unruly, unnamed classmate (FKA, 48), then it could be further posited that Jakob is indeed the narrator behind “Tagebuch eines Schülers”, and is thus referencing back to his classmate Fritz.

and claim to obey it, but only if it presents the opportunity of later on refusing their ethics. Walser's protagonists do not succumb to power, but rather lure it and then subvert it. Sontag (1992, vii) has pinned this movement in two swift sentences: "The moral core of Walser's art is the refusal of power; of domination. I'm ordinary – that is, nobody – declares the characteristic Walser persona". Neither do they seek, via subversion, to flip the table and grab the upper hand. Their refusal of power is complete, their disdain for heroism whole. Neither heroes nor villains, but survivors of both, the last men standing like the proverbial horses in Sloterdijk's saying.

Heffernan, still commenting on the *Mikrogramme*, also underlines Walser's quiet subversion:

Walser presents an image of a society and a culture that is founded on power, and then proceeds to call into question that power. Within the framework of his *Mikrogramm*, if nowhere else, he can fantasize about a literary world in which such hierarchies are undermined and overthrown. In these short dramas, the characters go against the norms and conventions of society and make fun of ordered society and its authority. (Heffernan, 2007, 75)

The derision, however, is more cynic than it is overt, like a hand trying to determine the precise limit between a caress and a blow. Jakob von Gunten's *modus operandi*, to return to Sloterdijk's words, consists in him "seek[ing] refuge in the hesitatingly brave masses" of the Institute Benjamenta and there "camouflag[ing] himself and mak[ing] himself as unobtrusive as possible". What he must learn at the Institute, what drove him there, what keeps him there, that which will free him from his *Künstlernatur*, is the art of no longer being a child at heart. For a proper child he has never been, and therefore childhood will always cling to him,⁵⁴ as it does to all pupils other than Kraus⁵⁵: "Here in the Benjamenta Institute one learns to suffer and endure losses, and that is in my view a craft [*ein Können*], an exercise without which any person will always remain a big child, a sort of crybaby, however important he may be" (JvG, 92). Should he finally manage to suppress – through menial repetitions and subservient tasks – his enduring inner child, then maturity (or, in Sloterdijk's psychoanalytical terms, "superego") will grace him with a Walserian variant of cowardice. The Walserian coward – i.e. the anti-hero –, owner of a slightly decomposed superego, welcomes and embraces,

⁵⁴ "Ich war eigentlich nie Kind, und deshalb, glaube ich zuversichtlich, wird an mir immer etwas Kindheitliches haften bleiben." (JvG, 144)

⁵⁵ "Sogar Schilinski, der doch noch ein vollkommene Kind ist" (JvG, 9); "Heinrich ist noch ganz Kind, aber er spricht und benimmt sich schon wie ein erwachsener Mensch von guter Führung" (JvG, 10); "Armer Schacht. Er ist ein Kind." (JvG, 123)

according to Sloterdijk, both cynicism and a higher degree of critical realism. He grows observant rather than active, ironic and not constructive, mistrustful of all models based on domination and power. Vila-Matas places Walser's characters within the constellation of naysayers, which is exactly what Jakob does by refusing to face the world head first, retreating instead over and over again down corridors and hallways until he can flee on his own terms. Herr Benjamenta, who is at first described as a giant supreme,⁵⁶ slowly loses his throne,⁵⁷ and finally his whole kingdom.⁵⁸ But he does not fall so that Jakob may rise: they are both, as the journal comes to an end, equally defeated and reduced to very little. Jakob achieves the degree zero of heroism by never prematurely committing to anything, and thus millimetrically positioning himself on the anti-hero mark, where "the hero" is an obsolete image to be laughed at: "All the ancient heroic virtues you unpack", Jakob dreams of retorting to one of his teachers, "have lost their importance long ago, you know it yourself" (JvG, 59).

Incidentally, the first sentence on Jakob's journal gives a straightforward answer to the question left open by the last words written by the secondary-school student in "Tagebuch eines Schülers": "How will it go in later life? I wonder" (Gsch, 113) – to which Jakob offers this piece of anti-heroic advice:

One learns very little here, there is a shortage of teachers, and none of us boys of the Benjamenta Institute will come to anything, that is to say, we shall all be something very small and subordinate later in life. The instruction that we enjoy consists mainly in impressing patience and obedience upon ourselves, two qualities that promise little success, or none at all. Inward successes, yes. But what does one get from such as these? Do inward acquisitions give one food to eat?⁵⁹

56 "Herr Benjamenta ist ein Riese, und wir Zöglinge sind Zwerge gegen diesen Riesen, der stets etwas mürrisch ist. Als Lenker und Gebieter einer Schar von so winzigen, unbedeutenden Geschöpfen, wie wir Knaben sind, ist er eigentlich auf ganz natürliche Weise zur Verdrießlichkeit verpflichtet, denn das ist doch nie und nimmer eine seinen Kräften entsprechende Aufgabe: über uns herrschen." (JvG, 17–18)

57 "Ich bin ein abgesetzter König. Du lächelst? Ich finde es einfach köstlich, weißt du, daß dir jetzt gerade, wo ich von abgesetzten, ihrer Throne enthobenen Königen spreche, ein Lächeln, solch ein spitzbübisches Lächeln entflieht. Du hast Verstand, Jakob." (JvG, 107)

58 "Ich bitte dich, kleiner Zuhörer, um Entschuldigung, wenn ich dich an Szepter und Purpurmantel habe glauben machen. Doch glaube ich, daß du es eigentlich wußtest, wie es mit diesen gestammelten und geseufzten Königreichen im Grunde gemeint war. Nicht wahr, ein wenig gemütlicher komme ich dir jetzt vor? Jetzt, da ich kein König mehr bin? Denn das gibst du doch selbst zu, daß solche Herrscher, wenn sie genötigt sind, Unterricht usw. zu erteilen und Institute zu eröffnen, gewiß unheimliche Patrone wären." (JvG, 159)

59 "Man lernt hier sehr wenig, es fehlt an Lehrkräften, und wir Knaben vom Institut Benjamenta werden es zu nichts bringen, d. h., wir werden alle etwas sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes im

What use are there for inward successes if one cannot be fed by them, if even the most accomplished products of inward efforts – a painting, for instance, or a book – offer no nutritional value. Jakob mocks the idealism of those living off flowers and heroic clichés; he distrusts – or wishes to distrust – the self-important artist who deems art a matter of life and death, like a war hero in a battlefield. The closest he gets from acting the hero is when he asks for a receipt – “Da fand ich den Heldenmut, schüchtern um eine Quittung zu ersuchen” (JvG, 12) –, perhaps attempting, through irony, to further repress his own diseased leanings, to convince himself of the futility of being drawn inward, towards the center of things. Jakob desperately clings to the margins, it is there where he thrives. Only in the margins can the anti-hero come to life:

And of course we aren't heroes. And why should we be? First, we have no chance to behave like heroes, and second: I doubt if Schilinski, for example, or Beanpole Peter, could be inveigled into making sacrifices. Even without kisses, heroes, and pillared pavilions, our garden is a nice arrangement, I think. Talking of heroes gives me the shivers. I'd rather not say anything on that.

There's so much that comforts us, because we are, in general, very zealous and inquiring people, and because we set little value on ourselves. A person who sets a high value on himself is never safe from discouragements and humiliations, for confronting a self-conscious person there is always something hostile to consciousness.⁶⁰

Jakob's journal stands for a detailed account of his journey towards the degree zero of heroism, his retreat into the corridors of marginality; it chronicles Jakob's alleged distrust of inner successes and artistic endeavors and juvenile candor through an artifact that is constitutively poisoned by inner successes and artistic endeavors and juvenile candor. Almost every eloquent argument against greatness and heroism is simultaneously – in the same sentence even – undermined

späteren Leben sein. Der Unterricht, den wir genießen, besteht hauptsächlich darin, uns Geduld und Gehorsam einzuprägen, zwei Eigenschaften, die wenig oder gar keinen Erfolg versprechen. Innere Erfolge, ja. Doch was hat man von solchen? Geben einem innere Errungenschaften zu essen?” (JvG, 7)

60 “Und wir sind ja doch keine Helden. Wozu auch! Erstens fehlt uns die Gelegenheit, uns heroisch zu benehmen, und zweitens, ich weiß nicht recht, ob z. B. Schilinski oder der lange Peter für Aufopferungen zu haben wären. Unser Garten ist auch ohne Küsse, Helden und Säulenpavillons eine hübsche Einrichtung, glaube ich. Mich friert es, wenn ich von Helden rede. Da schweige ich lieber.” (JvG, 85) “Uns tröstet so vieles, weil wir im allgemeinen sehr eifrige, sucherische Leute sind, und weil wir uns selber wenig schätzen. Wer sich selbst sehr schätzt, ist vor Entmutigungen und Herabwürdigungen nie sicher, denn stets begegnet dem selbstbewußten Menschen etwas Bewußtseinfeindliches.” (JvG, 92–93)

by a pervasive doubt: Jakob (and the other pupils) may be small all the way down to utter worthlessness, an absolute zero, but maybe in his veins runs not the blood of a commoner, but that of an aristocrat⁶¹; what is taught at the Institute is menial, repetitive, laughable, but maybe there is some secret hidden behind these nullities⁶²; Jakob is convinced he shall become something quite lowly and puny, but all the same an odd, confident courage animates his being⁶³; he must never forget he is the progeny of very low regions, destitute of any qualities necessary for him to rise to the top, but perhaps deep down he does possess them⁶⁴ – perhaps what people call greatness is actually something quite humble and grey.⁶⁵

Before Jakob, a thoroughly torn individual, an anti-hero in the making, can actually give up on the Institute and flee, he must also exhaust the possibilities of the world outside.

5.1.4 Jakob's conflict between the world of culture and the world of nature

Jakob's entire anti-heroic stance may be summed up in one detached sentence: he does not feel responsible for the *Zeitgeist*: "Bin ich verantwortlich für den Geist des Zeitalters? Ich nehme die Zeit, wie sie ist, und behalte mir nur vor, im stillen meine Beobachtungen zu machen" (JvG, 70). Such uncommitted posture allows him to stand back and observe, the man who bets on the horses only after they have already crossed the finishing line. He will – somewhat ironically – claim to feel a child of his times whenever he partakes in the world of technique,⁶⁶

61 "Klein sind wir, klein bis hinunter zur Nichtswürdigkeit. (...) Aber auch in dieser Beziehung bin ich mir vorläufig noch ein Rätsel. Vielleicht steckt ein ganz, ganz gemeiner Mensch in mir. Vielleicht aber besitze ich aristokratische Adern. Ich weiß es nicht. Aber das Eine weiß ich bestimmt: Ich werde eine reizende, kugelrunde Null im späteren Leben sein." (JvG, 8)

62 "Welch ein Unterricht! Doch ich würde lügen, wenn ich ihn kurios fände. Nein, ich finde das, was Fräulein Benjamenta uns lehrt, beherzigenswert. Es ist wenig, und wir wiederholen immer, aber vielleicht steckt ein Geheimnis hinter all diesen Nichtigkeiten und Lächerlichkeiten." (JvG, 9)

63 "Ich, ich werde etwas sehr Niedriges und Kleines sein. Die Empfindung, die mir das sagt, gleicht einer vollendeten, unantastbaren Tatsache. Mein Gott, und ich habe trotzdem so viel, so viel Mut, zu leben? Was ist mit mir? Oft habe ich ein wenig Angst vor mir, aber nicht lange. Nein, nein, ich vertraue mir. Aber ist das nicht geradezu komisch?" (JvG, 43)

64 "Ich vergesse nie, daß ich ein Abkömmling bin, der nun von unten, von ganz unten anfängt, ohne doch die Eigenschaften, die nötig sind, emporzugelangen, zu besitzen. Vielleicht, ja. Es ist alles möglich..." (JvG, 117)

65 "Nie und nimmer erreicht man mit Empfindungen, wie die sind, mit denen ich der Welt gegenüberstehe, je Großes, es sei denn, man pfeife aufs glitzernde Große und nenne das groß, was ganz grau, still, hart und niedrig ist." (JvG, 117)

66 "Wenn ich Lift fahre, komme ich mir so recht wie das Kind meiner Zeit vor." (JvG, 26)

thus reinforcing his hope – nay, conviction – of being modern, and proudly so,⁶⁷ although being modern, for him, carries the weight of subservience and a whiff of slavery: “Of course, too, there are very very many slaves in the midst of us arrogantly ready-made modern people. Perhaps all we present-day people are something like slaves, ruled by an angry, whip-wielding, unrefined idea of the world” (JvG, 78).

Perhaps, ventures Jakob, the modern man is a slave of an unrefined idea of the world. The way unrefined ideas come into being is through too rushed an adoption, too impatient and eager, set forth in heroic bouts of bovine confidence. Jakob – shaped after Walser’s shadow – is a slow modernist after all, not a reactionary willing to promptly dismiss his times, but neither an enthusiast praising its every crime. Jakob is a late adopter of the world; he does not rush to meet it halfway, but rather waits until it has played its hand, and only then decides on the best course of action. Jakob’s wait is nonetheless unintuitive, as are his actions: they are never explicitly confrontational, although they turn out to be remarkably subversive. Perhaps, ventures Jakob, man is not born a slave, but unawares made into one, to which conundrum the single viable solution would be to confront one’s own captive ignorance and therefore willingly becoming a servant, and only then attain freedom. From atop the watchtower that is his journal, Jakob seeks to answer anthropology’s most convulsive question: are we products of culture or children of nature?

Are we products of a higher culture, or are we nature-boys [*Naturkinder*]? I don’t know that either. One thing I do know for certain: we are waiting! That’s our value. Yes, we’re waiting, and we are, as it were, listening to life, listening out into that plateau which people call the world, out across the sea with its storms.⁶⁸

Again the evasive and the noncommittal – the most Jakob is prepared to say is that we must wait, listen to life, which is synonymous with a wary, observant posture, an overly cautious heed: we shall not be pioneers, we will wait until the die is cast before making our move. And therein lies culture for Jakob: in reflection and repression. To be cultivated means to be uninterested in the self-seeking

⁶⁷ “Allerdings ist er stolz, denn es ist ihm unmöglich, die angeborne Natur zu verleugnen, aber er versteht unter Stolz etwas ganz Neues, gewissermaßen der Zeit, in der er lebt, Entsprechendes. Er hofft, daß er modern, einigermaßen geschickt zu Dienstleistungen und nicht ganz dumm und unbrauchbar ist, aber er lügt, er hofft das nicht nur, sondern er behauptet und weiß es.” (JvG, 51)

⁶⁸ “Sind wir Produkte einer höheren Kultur, oder sind wir Naturkinder? Auch das kann ich nicht sagen. Das eine weiß ich bestimmt: wir warten! Das ist unser Wert. Ja, wir warten, und wir horchen gleichsam ins Leben hinaus, in diese Ebene hinaus, die man Welt nennt, aufs Meer mit seinen Stürmen hinaus.” (JvG, 93)

and strive towards the self-disciplining, to withhold one's word and avoid blabbing too much, to take in more than to idly talk⁶⁹; to be eyes and ears, not mouths. Not surprisingly, Kraus is Jakob's poster boy for culture, despite the fact that the world will take him for an uncultivated, yet useful person. Kraus stands for culture in human form: no fanciful fluttering of knowledge flies about him, but instead solid trust and loyalty, reticence of speech, a holdback personality, and above all a deep, constant thoughtfulness manifested in a lack of ego and a surplus of discipline.⁷⁰

The fact that the world shall misinterpret Kraus' cultured qualities should not be overlooked: Jakob draws a clear line between his own conception of culture and the one commonly held by the world. He resorts to the so-called cultivated circles of society – to the “Kreisen der fortschrittlichen Bildung” made up by artists and likewise-minded people – in order to illustrate his point. The unmistakable fatigue of the “healthy-unhealthy person”⁷¹ runs rampant among these “society people”: book-knowledgeable, for certain, pleasant and well-mannered

69 Therefore, upon writing his Lebenslauf, Jakob praises himself for being reticent of speech and a trustworthy confidante: “Er ist wortkarg und wird Vertraulichkeiten niemals ausplaudern” (JvG, 52).

70 “Der liebe Kraus. Immer zieht es mich in Gedanken wieder nach ihm hin. An ihm sieht man so recht, was das Wort Bildung eigentlich bedeutet. Kraus wird später im Leben, wohin er auch kommen wird, immer als brauchbarer, aber als ungebildeter Mensch angesehen werden, für mich aber ist gerade er durchaus gebildet, und zwar hauptsächlich deshalb, weil er ein festes, gutes Ganzes darstellt. Man kann gerade ihn eine menschliche Bildung nennen. Das flattert um Kraus herum nicht von geflügelten und lispelnden Kenntnissen, dafür ruht etwas in ihm, und er, er ruht und beruht auf etwas. Man kann sich mit der Seele selber auf ihn verlassen. Er wird nie jemanden hintergehen oder verleumden, nun, das vor allen Dingen, dieses Nicht-Schwatzhafte, nenne ich Bildung. Wer schwatzt, ist ein Betrüger, er kann ein ganz netter Mensch sein, aber seine Schwäche, alles, was er gerade denkt, so herauszuschwatzen, macht ihn zum gemeinen und schlechten Gesellen. Kraus bewahrt sich, er behält immer etwas für sich, er glaubt, es nicht nötig zu haben, so drauf los zu reden, und das wirkt wie Güte und lebhaftes Schonen. Das nenne ich Bildung. Kraus ist unliebenswürdig und oft ziemlich grob gegen Menschen seines Alters und seines Geschlechtes, und gerade deshalb mag ich ihn so gern, denn das beweist mir, daß er sich auf den brutalen und gedankenlosen Verrat nicht versteht. Er ist treu und anständig gegen alle. Denn das ist es ja: aus gemeiner Liebenswürdigkeit pflegt man meist hinzugehen und Ruf und Leben seines Nachbarn, seines Kameraden, ja seines Bruders auf die entsetzlichste Weise zu schänden. Kraus kennt wenig, aber er ist nie, nie gedankenlos, er unterwirft sich immer gewissen selbstgestellten Geboten, und das nenne ich Bildung. Was an einem Menschen liebevoll und gedankenvoll ist, das ist Bildung. Und dann ist ja noch so vieles. So von aller und jeder, auch der kleinsten Selbstsucht entfernt, dagegen aber der Selbstzucht so nah zu sein...” (JvG, 79–80)

71 “Es herrscht unter diesen Kreisen der fortschrittlichen Bildung eine kaum zu übersehende und mißzuverstehende Müdigkeit. Nicht die formelle Blasiertheit etwa des Adels von Abstammung, nein, eine wahrhafte, eine ganz wahre, auf höherer und lebhafterer Empfindung

to say the least, but fundamentally too caught up in their own selves, driven by success to such an extent that they all end up having the same non-descript, vapid face, and due to their self-serving ambitions become susceptible to the consuming fear of being debunked and losing their fiefdom:

These people are cavaliers. And they seem never to feel quite right. Whoever can feel right if he places value on the tokens of respect and the distinctions conferred by the world? And then I think that these people, who are, after all, society people and not living in a state of nature, are always feeling that some successor is pursuing them.⁷²

These falsely cultivated people are, too, slaves of their unrefined ideas of the world, letting their egos run amok and thus enticing all manners of ambushes and rivalries, naïvely installing the world as the meter against which they shall measure their worth. Jakob accuses these people of not living in a state of nature, although this statement should not be taken at face value, as it reveals how counterintuitive his notions of culture and nature are, and how profoundly torn between them he is.

Nature, to Jakob, is the domain of pride, of defiance, of mischief, of the untamed spirit that needs to be tamed.⁷³ It is that with which Kraus was not graced, so as to hinder any “mischievous outward successes” that might disrupt his commitment to obedience and discipline. Kraus shall remain “monotonous, monosyllabic, unambiguous”, repressed by what Jakob wants to believe is culture, devoid of all traits that might lead to success and recognition, but merely “going on living without enjoying attention” so that he can be a nothing a last, a complete zero. Nature is neither to be trusted nor left unchecked by culture, as it

beruhende Müdigkeit, die Müdigkeit des gesunden-ungesunden Menschen. Sie sind alle gebildet, aber achten sie einander?” (JvG, 116)

72 “Diese Leute sind Kavaliere. Und sie scheinen sich nie ganz wohl zu befinden. Wer kann sich wohl befinden, wer auf die Achtungsbezeugungen und Auszeichnungen der Welt Wert legt? Und dann, glaube ich, fühlen diese Menschen, da sie doch einmal Gesellschafts- und durchaus keine Naturmenschen mehr sind, stets den Nachfolger hinter sich.” (JvG, 115)

73 “Allerdings ist er stolz, denn es ist ihm unmöglich, die angeborne Natur zu verleugnen, aber er versteht unter Stolz etwas ganz Neues, gewissermaßen der Zeit, in der er lebt, Entsprechendes. Er hofft, daß er modern, einigermaßen geschickt zu Dienstleistungen und nicht ganz dumm und unbrauchbar ist, aber er lügt, er hofft das nicht nur, sondern er behauptet und weiß es. Er hat einen Trotzkopf, in ihm leben eben noch ein wenig die ungebändigten Geister seiner Vorfahren, doch er bittet, ihn zu ermahnen, wenn er trotzt, und wenn das nichts nützt, zu züchtigen, denn dann glaubt er, nützt es.” (JvG, 51)

may, in all its prideful mischievousness, inflate one's idea of oneself, lead to complacency, vanity, and, worst of all, to "being recognized by the crowd".⁷⁴

The instruction that Jakob seeks at the Institute Benjamenta, which he deems culture, thrives exactly in repetition, given that repetition sheds excesses and flourishes. Thus the Institute's unrelenting dancing lessons act not as a repertoire of new movements, but as the institution of a wooden routine in which any undue show of skill – an untamed product of nature – is severely frowned upon: "Sehr amüsant sind manchmal unsere Turn- und Tanzstunden. Geschick zeigen zu müssen, das ist nicht ohne Gefahr. Wie kann man sich doch blamieren" (JvG, 103). The real problem here, the core of Jakob von Gunten's dilemma, the flame behind the pages of his journal, lies in the fact that one cannot fully repress nature: "So ganz die Natur zu unterdrücken, das geht eben doch nicht. Und doch geht's. Aber hat man sich auch die Natur total abgewöhnt, es bleibt immer ein Hauch, ein Rest übrig, das zeigt sich immer" (JvG, 103–104). An undying breath of nature remains all throughout culture, and despite all self-discipline it always shows, an outburst of laughter that cannot be repressed, although it must be repressed, the untamed spirit that begs for taming, the rule that beckons bending, and in this stop-and-go motion Jakob finds a masochist pleasure in submitting himself to precisely that which offends him the most:

74 "Ich verstehe jetzt auch, warum Kraus keine äußern Vorzüge, keine körperlichen Zierlichkeiten besitzt, warum ihn die Natur so zwerghaft zerdrückt und verunstaltet hat. Sie will irgend etwas mit ihm, sie hat etwas mit ihm vor, oder sie hat von Anfang an etwas mit ihm vorgehabt. Dieser Mensch ist der Natur vielleicht zu rein gewesen, und deshalb hat sie ihn in einen unansehnlichen, geringen, unschönen Körper geworfen, um ihn vor den verderblichen äußern Erfolgen zu bewahren. (...) Er glänzt nicht mit Gaben, aber mit dem Schimmer eines guten und unverdorbenen Herzens, und seine schlechten, schlichten Manieren sind vielleicht trotz alles Hölzernen, das ihnen anhaftet, das Schönste, was es an Bewegung und Manier in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geben kann. Nein, Erfolg wird Kraus nie haben, weder bei den Frauen, die ihn trocken und häßlich finden werden, noch sonst im Weltleben, das an ihm achtlos vorübergehen wird. Achtlos? Ja, man wird Kraus nie achten, und gerade das, daß er, ohne Achtung zu genießen, dahinleben wird, das ist ja das Wundervolle und Planvolle, das An-den-Schöpfer-Mahnende. (...) Ja, Kraus ist ein Bild rechtlichen, ganz, ganz eintönigen, einsilbigen und eindeutigen Wesens. Niemand wird die Schlichtheit dieses Menschen verkennen, und deshalb wird ihn auch niemand achten, und er wird durchaus erfolglos bleiben. (...) Nein, kein Erfolg, kein Ruhm, keine Liebe werden Kraus je blühen, das ist sehr gut, denn die Erfolge haben nur die Zerfahrenheit und einige billige Weltanschauungen zur unabstreifbaren Begleitschaft. Man spürt es sofort, wenn Menschen Erfolge und Anerkennung aufzuweisen haben, sie werden quasi dick von sättigender Selbstzufriedenheit, und ballonhaft bläst sie die Kraft der Eitelkeit auf, zum Niewiedererkennen. Gott behüte einen braven Menschen vor der Anerkennung der Menge." (JvG, 80–82)

I very much like stopping the outburst of laughter. It tickles, marvelously: not letting it go, the thing that so much wants to come shooting out, I like things that aren't allowed to be, things that have to go, down into my inside. It makes these repressed things more awkward, but at the same time more valuable. Yes, yes, I admit I like being repressed. To be sure. No, not always to be sure. On your way, Toby Shaw! What I mean is: if you aren't allowed to do something, you do it twice as much somewhere else. Nothing's more insipid than an indifferent, quick, cheap bit of permission. I like earning everything, experiencing everything, and a laugh, for example, also needs to be thoroughly experienced. When inside me I'm bursting with laughter, when I hardly know what to do with all this hissing gunpowder, then I know what laughing is, then I have laughed most laughishly, then I have a complete idea of what was shaking me. So I must firmly suppose and keep it as my strong conviction that rules do gild existence, or at least they silver it, in a word, they make it delectable. For certainly it's the same with almost all other things and pleasures as it is with the forbidden delectable laugh. Not being allowed to cry, for example, well, that makes crying larger.⁷⁵

What Jakob grudgingly holds against the “circles of progressive culture” by denying them a state of nature is twofold: on the one hand a misguided conception of culture (vapid pleasantries in lieu of self-discipline), and, on the other, an over-indulgent behavior towards their own nature (the untamed spirit in service of the ego). For deep down, on a basic level still unspoiled by the world, Jakob does identify with them, with their “healthy-unhealthiness”, which is – as already mentioned – the main reason behind his enrollment at the Institute, to hinder his mischievously loud, dangerously artistic nature. Jakob puts himself in a position where all successes – negligible and fleeting as they might be – have no place to go but inwards (“Was nicht sein darf, was in mich hinab muß, ist mir lieb”): they disappear in the dark depths of his own private insignificance. He does not need to measure himself against the world and his peers, thus invalidating altogether

75 “Ich mag mich sehr, sehr gern am Herausschallen des Lachens verhindern lassen. Das kitzelt so wunderbar: es nicht loslassen zu dürfen, was doch so gern herausschießen möchte. Was nicht sein darf, was in mich hinab muß, ist mir lieb. Es wird dadurch peinlicher, aber zugleich wertvoller, dieses Unterdrückte. Ja ja, ich gestehe, ich bin gern unterdrückt. Zwar. Nein, nicht immer zwar. Herr Zwar soll mir abmarschieren. Was ich sagen wollte: etwas nicht tun dürfen, heißt, es irgendwo anders doppelt tun. Nichts ist fader als eine gleichgültige, rasche, billige Erlaubnis. Ich verdiene, erfahre gern alles, und z. B. ein Lachen bedarf auch der Durch-Erfahrung. Wenn ich innerlich zerspringe vor Lachen, wenn ich kaum noch weiß, wo ich all das zischende Pulver hintun soll, dann weiß ich, was Lachen ist, dann habe ich am lächerigsten gelacht, dann habe ich eine vollkommene Vorstellung dessen gehabt, was mich erschütterte. Ich muß demnach unbedingt annehmen und es als feste Überzeugung aufbewahren, daß Vorschriften das Dasein versilbern, vielleicht sogar vergolden, mit einem Wort reizvoll machen. Denn wie mit dem verbotenen reizenden Lachen ist es doch sicher mit fast allen andern Dingen und Gelüsten ebenfalls.” (JvG, 104–105)

the concept of idealism: Jakob von Gunten cannot be held as a moral example as the stuff of which he is made of cannot be molded into an archetype.

Jakob submits his mischievous nature to the cultured hallways of the Institute Benjamenta, where he wishes for it to be tamed and repressed. But upon realizing, in the journal's last entry, that the Benjamentas shall never make a Kraus out of him, that he cannot be tamed after all, Jakob finally manages to escape not only nature, but culture altogether – both his conception of it and the European variant, the one held by the high circles of society: “It looked as if we had both escaped forever, or at least for a very long time, from what people call European culture” (JvG, 162). He is finally, beyond any doubt, an absolute anti-hero – he becomes that which he already was in the journal's first entry: a charming, spherical zero. Jakob has walked the fine line between nature and culture and found no answer, or categorically refused to give one; he instead observed it until he could flee from it, flee, of all places, to an outlandish desert,⁷⁶ as if hearing Benjamin's prophetic call: the night is over, and fairytale claims back Jakob's paper-thin existence.

5.1.5 Brother ex-machina: The role of the eldest brother in *Jakob von Gunten*

A second and more decisive anxiety lurks behind the deception of anthropology: the enduring conflict between the inner and the outer to which Walser's characters are fatally exposed, a slow contamination like asbestos in the walls. Jakob's nature-culture divide is a travesty of a more pressing question, the urgency of life versus the rumination of concepts: how to reconcile the inward pull of existence – a gravitational force that draws Jakob further and deeper and darker inside his own mind – to the alluring and deceptive charms of the world outside?

Despite its misleading chronology, the diary does account for a transition between its first and second halves, as Jakob's fairytale- or dream-like fascination for the streets subsides and then completely disappears. At first, Jakob is enthralled by the crowd, by the whizzing and humming of the streets,⁷⁷

76 “Ich einzelner Mensch bin nur eine Null. Aber weg jetzt mit der Feder. Weg jetzt mit dem Gedankenleben. Ich gehe mit Herrn Benjamenta in die Wüste. Will doch sehen, ob es sich in der Wildnis nicht auch leben, atmen, sein, aufrichtig Gutes wollen und tun und nachts schlafen und träumen läßt. Ach was. Jetzt will ich an gar nichts mehr denken. Auch an Gott nicht? Nein! Gott wird mit mir sein. Was brauche ich da an ihn zu denken? Gott geht mit den Gedankenlosen. Nun denn adieu, Institut Benjamenta.” (JvG, 164)

77 “Oft gehe ich aus, auf die Straße, und da meine ich, in einem ganz wild anmutenden Märchen zu leben. Welch ein Geschiebe und Gedräge, welch ein Rasseln und Prasseln. Welch ein Geschrei, Gestampf, Gesurr und Gesumme. Und alles so eng zusammengepfercht. (...) Ich liebe den Lärm und die fortlaufende Bewegung der Großstadt.” (JvG, 37; 46)

constantly – to the point of impertinence – begging Herr Benjamenta for a position outside the hallways of the Institute,⁷⁸ urging Kraus – of all people – to go outside, to get to know the world a little,⁷⁹ claiming that “[t]he city educates, it cultivates, and by examples, what’s more, not by arid precepts from books. There is nothing professorial about it, and that is flattering, for the towering gravity of knowledge discourages one” (JvG, 46). But then, as the diary’s first half comes to a close, something starts to break, at first slowly, through tentative subjunctive formulations, and later on more seriously, as the convictions of a seasoned young man. Jakob claims to no longer wish to travel far and wide, that he would refuse to educate himself any further and would instead be attracted by deep things rather than by distance.⁸⁰ In doing so, he echoes Kasper, Simon’s brother in *Geschwister Tanner*, who similarly finds no use in investigating things far off, but chooses instead to focus on what is near at hand (although Kasper wouldn’t have dismissed books as provocatively as Jakob did). Jakob’s interest in what people call “the world” withers as his fascination for his own inner, private world blossoms (JvG, 116). Herr Benjamenta confesses he never intended to find a job for Jakob, that people like him would do better to stay put at the Institute,⁸¹ stuck between the dreamlike and the real, and this suits Jakob rather well now that he has given up on any thoughts of greatness.⁸²

78 “Ich habe mich nicht bezwingen können, ich bin ins Bureau gegangen, habe mich gewohnheitsgemäß tief verbeugt und habe zu Herrn Benjamenta folgendes gesprochen: ‘Ich habe Arme, Beine und Hände, Herr Benjamenta, und ich möchte arbeiten, und daher erlaube ich mir, Sie zu bitten, mir recht bald Arbeit und Geldverdienst zu verschaffen. Sie haben allerlei Beziehungen, ich weiß es.’” (JvG, 61)

79 “Komme ich heim, so sitzt Kraus da und spottet mich aus. Ich sage ihm, man müsse doch ein wenig die Welt kennen lernen.” (JvG, 39)

80 “Wenn ich reich wäre, würde ich keineswegs um die Erde reisen. Zwar, das wäre ja gar nicht so übel. Aber ich sehe nichts Berausches dahinter, das Fremde flüchtig kennen zu lernen. Im allgemeinen würde ich es verschmähen, mich, wie man so sagt, weiter auszubilden. Mich würde eher die Tiefe, die Seele, als die Ferne und Weite locken. Das Naheliegende zu untersuchen würde mich reizen.” (JvG, 75)

81 “‘In die Arbeit hinaus willst du treten, Jakob? Ich aber sage dir, bleib du lieber noch. Hier ist es doch für dich und deinesgleichen ganz schön. Oder nicht? (...). Willst du? Sagst du ja? Mich würde es freuen, dich ein wenig den Träumereien verfallen zu sehen. (...) Was denkst du dir eigentlich? Meinst du, in der offenen Welt Großes erreichen, erringen zu können? Zu müssen? Hast du ernstliche Absichten auf etwas Bedeutungsvolles? (...) Oder dann willst du vielleicht, vielleicht wie zum Trotz, ganz klein bleiben? Auch das mute ich dir zu. Du bist ein bißchen zu festlich, zu heftig, zu triumphatorisch aufgelegt. Doch das alles ist ja so gleichgültig, du bleibst noch, Jakob. Dir gebe ich keine Stelle, dir verschaffe ich noch lange nichts derartiges.’” (JvG, 129)

82 “Ich hasse alles zukünftige Wohlergehen, ich verabscheue das Leben. (...) Nein, ich mag nicht in das Leben, nicht in die Welt hinaustreten.” (JvG, 125)

Both the break that takes place halfway through Jakob's diary and the overarching nature-culture/inner-outer divide that fuel the narrative are instigated by the pivotal figure of Johann, Jakob's brother, whose perfectly timed intermezzo between pages 65 and 70 profoundly shapes the novel's conceptual background.

First introduced some ten pages prior on a dubious and tentative note – Jakob has neither visited his brother, nor (or so he claims) does he wish to do so –, Johann is described as something like a rather famous painter, whom Jakob would only agree to meet if they happened upon one another on the streets.⁸³ Johann is five labors short of being Herculean, as he prompts, through both his character and his dialogue, the bare-boned schematizing of seven recurring theoretical pillars in Walser's oeuvre, hence summing up the main thematic lines discussed thus far.

a) *Johann's first and second labors: The artist's role, the zero's lesson*

If Johann is an artist, than Jakob is his opposite: a nothing – “Was bin ich, und was ist er? Was ein Zögling des Institutes Benjamenta ist, das weiß ich, es liegt auf der Hand. Solch ein Zögling ist eine gute runde Null, weiter nichts. Aber was mein Bruder zur Stunde ist, das kann ich nicht wissen” (JvG, 53). Such nothings, the pupils, that even if a writer were to stumble upon their classroom and catch them in all their glory and littleness, said writer would no more than laugh at their expenses and immediately move on, and rightly so, for home is the best place for such windbags who can only absorb life through a veneer of some sort, never directly, like Jakob claims to do.⁸⁴ An artist's take on life is more concerned with art than it is with life; it is tainted by thoughts of greatness when it should be addressing the dire needs of existence. Jakob thus construes what his brother says, when they finally meet, as a confirmation that he should remain true to himself and start from all the way down (he is a von Gunten after all, “von ganz

83 “Ich muß jetzt etwas berichten, was vielleicht einigen Zweifel erregt. Und doch ist es durchaus Wahrheit, was ich sage. Es lebt ein Bruder von mir in dieser gewaltigen Stadt, mein einziger Bruder, ein meiner Ansicht nach außerordentlicher Mensch, Johann heißt er, und er ist so etwas wie ein namhaft bekannter Künstler. Ich weiß um seine jetzige Stellung in der Welt nichts Bestimmtes, da ich es vermieden habe, ihn zu besuchen. Ich werde nicht zu ihm gehen. Begegnen wir uns zufällig auf der Straße und erkennt er mich und tritt auf mich zu: schön, dann ist es mir lieb, seine brüderliche Hand kräftig zu schütteln.” (JvG, 53)

84 “Und daher, weil wir so reizend frisiert und gescheitelt sind, sehen wir uns alle eigentlich ähnlich, was für einen Schriftsteller z. B. zum Totlachen wäre, wenn er uns besuchte, um uns in unserer Herrlichkeit und Wenigkeit zu studieren. Mag dieser Herr Schriftsteller zu Hause bleiben. Windbeutel sind das, die nur studieren, malen und Beobachtungen anstellen wollen. Man lebe, dann beobachtet sich's ganz von selber.” (JvG, 57)

unten”), that it is hardly worth it at the top, where the atmosphere is stifling and self-important, that it befits a young man to be a zero, for nothing would be more ruinous than being important from an early age on. And although for the world Jakob remains insignificant, to himself he is rather important, and there is value to be had in that.⁸⁵ What Jakob takes from this exchange, by positing Johann-the-artist as his antithesis, is that the dissimulated, mediated truth of art is not the truth he is primarily interested in uncovering, that life itself should come before its representation, and this despite the fact that Jakob’s chosen method of expression are the blank pages of a journal.

b) *Johann’s third labor: The sober bourgeois-bohème*

Before effectively meeting him, Jakob suspects Johann of being surrounded by fine, cultivated, formal people, which is enough reason for Jakob not to visit him, lest he should be approached by a well-groomed gentleman sporting a forced smile on his face. He also suspects his brother to have become a very refined, cigar-smoking, cushion-lying individual, a reality that does not suit in the least Jakob’s newfound un-bourgeoisie,⁸⁶ that only further aggravates the symbolic distance separating a well-situated artist from a lowly, unimportant pupil. Worst of all, should Jakob knock on the exclusive saloon doors where Johann and his *confrères* take refuge from the world, he would risk being mistaken for a beggar and pitied upon, a ghastly prospect if there ever was one. And nevertheless Jakob still wishes to meet his brother, very much so, while simultaneously not daring

85 “Bleib nur der, der du bist, Bruder,” sprach Johann zu mir, ‘fange von tief unten an, das ist ausgezeichnet. (...) Denn sieh, oben, da lohnt es sich kaum noch zu leben. Sozusagen nämlich. Versteh mich recht, lieber Bruder. (...) Oben, da herrscht solch eine Luft. Nun, es herrscht eben eine Atmosphäre des Genuggetanhabens, und das hemmt und engt ein. (...) Du bist jetzt sozusagen eine Null, bester Bruder. Aber wenn man jung ist, soll man auch eine Null sein, denn nichts ist so verderblich wie das frühe, das allzufrühe Irgendetwasbedeuten. Gewiß: dir bedeutest du etwas. Bravo. Vortrefflich. Aber der Welt bist du noch nichts, und das ist fast ebenso vortrefflich.’” (JvG, 65–66)

86 “Er ist vielleicht umgeben von lauter feinen, gebildeten Menschen und von weiß Gott was für Formalitäten, und ich respektiere Formalitäten, deshalb suche ich nicht einen Bruder auf, wo mir möglicherweise ein soignierter Herr unter gezwungenem Lächeln entgegentritt. (...) Ich stelle mir ihn sehr fein vor, die beste Zigarette der Welt rauchend, und liegend auf den Kissen und Teppichen der bürgerlichen Behaglichkeit. Und wie? Ja, es ist jetzt in mir so etwas Unbürgerliches, so etwas durchaus Entgegengesetzt-Wohlanständiges, und vielleicht ruht mein Herr Bruder mitten drinnen im schönsten, prächtigsten Welt-Anstand. Es ist beschlossen: wir beide sehen uns nicht, vielleicht nie!” (JvG, 53–54)

to take the first step towards it.⁸⁷ For the bourgeois is none other than he or she who first inherits and then bestows the maintenance of the *status quo*, whereas Jakob's hidden agenda seeks submission as a means of subverting it, of turning hierarchical tables (despite his – and Walser's – repressed captivation for the velvety and perfumed halls of high-society).

c) *Johann's fourth labor: To be marginal*

Johann's words to his brother are contradictory as they are inspiring: Jakob should never think of himself as an outcast, for there are no outcasts whatsoever in a world where nothing is worth aspiring to. Jakob must at the same time aspire to something, even passionately so, and be aware that the world is rotten and nothing is worth his time or effort.⁸⁸ All efforts are therefore either vain or artificial. Bravery or heroism have no place in Walser's slow modernism – Jakob's importance or usefulness lies in him being almost completely unnecessary. A marginal figure if there ever was one, Jakob writes a diary and disappears from the world of culture.

d) *Johann's fifth labor: A slave of the world and of the masses*

The vaguely apocalyptic, slow modernist implications of Walser's oeuvre – and specifically of *Jakob von Gunten* – obliquely foreshadow key twentieth-century theoretical developments, as for instance in Johann's profoundly sober admonishment to his younger brother – and especially in the eerie question that concludes it:

87 “Um meinen Bruder herum gibt es sicher das beste, gewählteste Salon-Benehmen. Merci. O, ich danke. Da werden Frauen sein, die den Kopf zur Türe herausstrecken und schnippisch fragen: ‘Wer ist denn jetzt wieder da? Wie? Ist es vielleicht ein Bettler?’ – Verbindlichsten Dank für solch einen Empfang. Ich bin zu gut, um bemitleidet zu werden. Duftende Blumen im Zimmer! O ich mag gar keine Blumen. Und gelassenes Weltwesen? – Scheußlich. Ja, gern, sehr gern sähe ich ihn. Aber wenn ich ihn so sähe, so sähe im Glanz und im Behagen: futsch wäre die Empfindung, hier stehe ein Bruder, und ich würde nur Freude lügen dürfen, und er auch. Also nicht.” (JvG, 54–55)

88 “‘Höre. Paß gut auf. Was ich dir sage, kann dir vielleicht eines Tages von Nutzen sein. Vor allen Dingen: komme dir nie verstoßen vor. Verstoßen, Bruder, das gibt es gar nicht, denn es gibt vielleicht auf dieser Welt gar, gar nichts redlich Erstrebenswertes. Und doch sollst du streben, leidenschaftlich sogar. Aber damit du nie allzu sehnsüchtig bist: präge dir ein: nichts, nichts Erstrebenswertes gibt es. Es ist alles faul. Verstehst du das?’” (JvG, 66–67)

“Of course there’s progress on earth, so called, but that’s only one of the many lies which the business people put out, so that they can squeeze money out of the crowd more blatantly and mercilessly. The masses are the slaves of today, and the individual is the slave of the vast mass-ideas. There’s nothing beautiful and excellent left. You must dream up beauty and goodness and justice. Tell me, do you know how to dream?”⁸⁹

Therein germinates part of Jakob’s conviction that the modern man might be a slave to an unrefined idea of the world, and hence his own self-skinned and whole-hearted attempt at uncovering a deeper truth. Jakob is torn – and his brother’s intervention only puts him under added strain – between his own allegiances and those of his family, between his own cultural identity and that of the world around him. He must choose between giving up on his ideals and thus joining the masses, or giving up on the masses and thus becoming the master of own his fate. The question that Johann is asking Jakob with his somewhat lordly critique of modernity is a variation on the very same question Jakob is urged to answer throughout the entire novel: to choose between assimilation and obliteration.

e) *Johann’s sixth labor: To be independent*

Johann’s words may once again sound counter-intuitive at first sight: his counsel to Jakob is to try and earn lots and lots of money, for money is the only thing in the world that has not yet gone rotten. Even if there are still traces of a high-society that sets the intellectual and artistic tone, such society is no longer capable of striking the notes of dignity and subtlety of mind. Luckily, there are still books. Books and money. But after earning all this money, Jakob should just give up on the pecuniary idea as well. Rich people, according to Johann, are very unsatisfied and unhappy, they’ve got nothing left other than their own hunger.⁹⁰ Money, then,

89 “Es gibt ja allerdings einen sogenannten Fortschritt auf Erden, aber das ist nur eine der vielen Lügen, die die Geschäftemacher austreuen, damit sie um so frecher und schonungsloser Geld aus der Menge herauspressen können. Die Masse, das ist der Sklave von heute, und der Einzelne ist der Sklave des großartigen Massengedankens. Es gibt nichts Schönes und Vortreffliches mehr. Du mußt dir das Schöne und Gute und Rechtschaffene träumen. Sage mir, verstehst du zu träumen?” (JvG, 67)

90 “Versuche es, fertig zu kriegen, viel, viel Geld zu erwerben. Am Geld ist noch nichts verpuscht, sonst an allem. Alles, alles ist verdorben, halbiert, der Zier und der Pracht beraubt. Unsere Städte verschwinden unaufhaltsam vom Erdboden. Klötze nehmen den Raum ein, den Wohnhäuser und Fürstenpaläste eingenommen haben. Das Klavier, lieber Bruder, und das damit verbundene Klimpern! Konzert und Theater fallen von Stufe zu Stufe, auf einen immer tieferen Standpunkt. Es gibt ja allerdings noch so etwas wie eine tonangebende Gesellschaft, aber sie hat nicht mehr die Fähigkeit, Töne der Würde und des Feinsinnes anzuschlagen. Es gibt Bücher – – mit einem Wort, sei niemals verzagt. Bleib arm und verachtet, lieber Freund. Auch den

should be pursued only to its bare minimum, to its breaking point, only up to the point where it can provide with creative freedom and peace of mind, but not a dime further. A small amount of money buys independence; a large sum enslaves. Jakob should strive to find the exact point of independence where it would be possible for him to create his own symbolic affiliation as he makes his way into the world.

5.1.6 Johann's seventh labor: To become a tree

Trees are vicious creatures, doomed to either grow tall forever or to perish under the shadow of their siblings. There is no functional purpose behind their growth other than survival; they must hope and yet hope for naught, their blind quest for light will be rewarded with mere permanence. Should one day a single tree convince a whole forest to stop growing, nothing in their ecosystem will change but their collective heights. In the end, only two things kill trees: men, through fire and blade, and trees themselves.

The root of Johann's intervention – regarding Walser's overarching oeuvre – comes to surface as he readies himself to bid Jakob farewell, when he likens his younger brother to a tree:

“You must hope and yet hope for nothing. Look up to something, yes, do that, because that is right for you, you're young, terribly young, Jakob, but always admit to yourself that you despise it, the thing that you're looking up to with respect. Nodding again, are you? Lord, what an intelligent listener you are. You're like a tree hung with understanding. Be content, dear brother, strive, learn, do whatever good and kind things you can for people. Look, I've got to go. When shall we meet again? Frankly, you interest me.”⁹¹

Beyond the obvious Romantic fascination, as a sight to be contemplated and painted and pined for and turned into poetry,⁹² trees play a symbolically decisive

Geld-Gedanken schlage dir weg. Es ist das Schönste und Triumphierendste, man ist ein ganz armer Teufel. Die Reichen, Jakob, sind sehr unzufrieden und unglücklich. Die reichen Leute von heutzutage: sie haben nichts mehr. Das sind die wahren Verhungerten.” (JvG, 67–68)

91 “Du mußt hoffen und doch nichts hoffen. Schau empor an etwas, ja gewiß, denn das ziemt dir, du bist jung, unverschämt jung, Jakob, aber, gesteh' dir immer, daß du's verachtetest, das, an dem du respektvoll emporschaust. Du nickst schon wieder? Teufel, was bist du für ein verständnisvoller Zuhörer. Du bist geradezu ein Baum, der voll Verständnis behangen ist. Sei zufrieden, lieber Bruder, strebe, lerne, tu womöglich irgend jemandem etwas Liebes und Gutes. Komm, ich muß gehen. Sag, wann treffen wir uns wieder? Du interessierst mich, offen gesagt.” (JvG, 68–69)

92 As is the case with Walser's artistically infatuated characters, more specifically in the aptly-titled *Geschwister Tanner*, where the trees are not only cause for endless fascination and melancholy, but also the trigger for theoretical reflection: “Was hat die Kunst für Mittel, wenn sie

role within Walser's writing. On a more impressionistic level, as a recurring image in Walser's oeuvre, they offer solace and shadow, a moment of (individualistic) respite away from people, but also conceal uneasy dreams under their branches.⁹³ Following a more eerie reading, however, and one already alluded to when discussing Walser's unreal narrative strategies, trees are the first entities endowed with a vaguely ominous sentience, a metamorphosis particularly evident in *Träumen*, as, from one sketch to the next, trees surreptitiously acquire human traits as if slowly gathering means for a revenge, providing fodder to Sebald's and Armando's (via Nietzsche) unearthly post-war take on guilty and vindictive landscapes. In the novels and the longer pieces, on the other hand, trees generally set the tone for melancholy and empathy,⁹⁴ they color in the landscape beneath the character's feet as they mark the passage of seasons.⁹⁵ All of these elements are

einen blühenden, duftenden Baum darstellen will, oder das Gesicht eines Menschen?" (GT, 289). Romanticism also runs rampant in Walser's debut piece "Der Wald", published alongside (and in a similar tone to) *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* – a chronologically significant event, as it establishes both his oeuvre's golden milestone, and its tongue-in-cheek irony: although highly Romantic in its imagery, "Der Wald" is here and there coated in playful Walserian self-awareness – "Ist der Wald poetisch? Ja, das ist er, aber nicht mehr, als alles andere Lebendige auf der Welt. Besonders poetisch ist er nicht, er ist nur besonders schön! Von Dichtern wird er gern aufgesucht, weil es still ist darin, und man wohl in seinem Schatten mit einem guten Gedicht fertig werden kann. Er ist viel in Gedichten, der Wald, deshalb glauben gewisse, sonst gänzlich poesielose Menschen, ihn als etwas besonders Poesievolles verehren und beachten zu müssen. (...) Den Wald liebt man am Wald, nicht das Poetische daran" (FKA, 102; 103).

93 In particular, the short stories "Germer" – "Den halben Tag könnte er unter einem Baume im Gras liegen und 'Weg von mir!' sagen" (A, 340) – and "Percy" – "Wenn sie ihm, abends, nach der Schlacht, wenn er sich ermüdet an einen Baum anlehnt, ertönt, will ihm das Herz, von Tränen getragen, wegschwimmen" (A, 263) – in *Aufsätze*; and "Der Kuß" – "Was ist der Kuß, den ich freundlich gebe, am hellen Tag oder bei Mondschein, in der friedlich-glücklichen Liebesnacht, unter einem Baum oder sonstwo, verglichen mit der Raserei des eingebildet-aufgezwungenen Kusses, geküßt von den Dämonen" (KD, 25–26) – and "Der Schäfer" – "Es liegt einer in der Sonne, nein, nicht ganz. Er liegt unter einem hohen Baum, die Beine und faulenzenden Füße an der Sonne und den Kopf, der ein träumerischer Kopf ist, im Schatten" (KD, 78) – in *Kleine Dichtungen*.

94 Joseph, *Der Gehülfe's* homonymous assistant, is frequently carried into a tree-induced realm of melancholy – "Schaute man in die gelbliche Baumwelt hinein, so regte sich eine zarte Melancholie in einem" (G, 162) – to the point where just seeing a young pine tree being unnaturally transported from a greenhouse to a cellar, like a helpless prisoner (much like himself in the situation), triggers his heartfelt sympathy – "Das junge edle Tännchen mußte an Schnüren befestigt werden, damit es in den für sein schlankes und stolzes Wachstum zu niedern Gewölben wenigstens schräg stehen konnte. Es tat dem Gehülfen weh, den Baum derart untergebracht zu schauen, aber, was war da zu machen?" (G, 219–220).

95 In *Geschwister Tanner*, for instance: "Das Gras wird bald wieder wachsen, die Bäume werden ihr Grün bald wieder über die niederen Hausdächer schütten und den Fenstern die Aussicht nehmen. Der Wald wird prangen, üppig, schwer, o, der Wald!" (GT, 34).

in themselves potentially relevant for an arboreal interpretation of Walser's work, and they underline – albeit obliquely – this research's more arid and apocalyptic reading, an echo of Johann's prophetic words: that of endurance and flammability.

Jakob von Gunten (1909) is, in this aspect, the direct link between Simon Tanner (1907) and the narrator of *Der Spaziergang* (1917). In one swift breath Simon defines himself as an outlandish figure in his own homeland, stuck in a dead-end job as a lowly copy clerk. Unlike other people, he sees no point in travelling to distant lands, bound to a country where he slowly chokes to death. He must make an effort to go on breathing beneath the sky of his homeland if he wishes to survive at all,⁹⁶ he is a tree forever condemned to stationary growth, and it is in the shape of a tree that he finds vertical peace:

“Does nature go abroad? Do trees wander off to procure for themselves greener leaves in other places so they can come home and flaunt their new splendor? Rivers and clouds are always leaving, but this is a different, more profound sort of leave-taking, without any returning. It's not really a departure anyhow, just a flying, flowing way of being at rest. Such a departure—how beautiful it is, if I may say so! I'm always looking at the trees and telling myself: They aren't leaving either, so why shouldn't I be permitted to remain?”⁹⁷

Do trees travel?, Simon asks himself, through his question making clear that he is not employing the word “tree” (static, modest entities) as a lazy synonym for “nature” (consisting also of wandering clouds and rivers), but fundamentally underscoring his union with the former rather than the latter. Simon rejects the

96 “Ich bin in meinem eigenen Lande ein sonderbarer Geselle’, antwortete Simon, ‘ich bin eigentlich Schreiber, und Sie können sich leicht denken, was ich da für eine Rolle in meinem Vaterlande spiele, wo der Schreiber so ziemlich der letzte Mensch ist, den es in der Rangordnung der Klassen gibt. Andere junge Handelsbeflissene reisen, um sich auszubilden, in das ferne Ausland, und kommen dann mit einem ganzen Sack voller Kenntnisse wieder heim, wo ihnen ehrenvolle Stellen offen gehalten werden. Ich nun, müssen Sie wissen, bleibe immer im Lande. Es ist gerade so, als fürchte ich, daß in anderen Ländern keine oder nur eine minderwertige Sonne scheine. Ich bin wie festgebunden und sehe immer Neues im Alten, deshalb vielleicht gehe ich so ungern fort. Ich verkomme hier, ich sehe es wohl, und trotzdem, ich muß, so scheint es, unter dem Himmel meiner Heimat atmen, um überhaupt leben zu können. Ich genieße natürlich wenig Achtung, man hält mich für liederlich, aber das macht mir so nichts, so gar nichts aus. Ich bleibe und werde wohl bleiben. Es ist so süß, zu bleiben.” (GT, 254–255)

97 “Geht denn die Natur etwa ins Ausland? Wandern Bäume, um sich anderswo grünere Blätter anzuschaffen und dann heimzukommen und sich prahlend zu zeigen? Die Flüsse und die Wolken gehen, aber das ist ein anderes, tieferes Davongehen, das kommt nie mehr wieder. Es ist auch kein Gehen sondern nur ein fliegendes und fließendes Ruhen. Ein solches Gehen, das ist schön, meine ich! Ich blicke immer die Bäume an, und sage mir, die gehen ja auch nicht, warum sollte ich nicht bleiben dürfen?” (GT, 255)

idea of wandering off in order to procure himself abroad something to brag about upon his return (be it greener leaves or higher education). If the trees cannot leave, then why should he? If in their wooden resolve they endure rain and cold, why can't he too grow roots and explore "the unfathomable depths of the world"? There where he has withered he shall once again blossom,⁹⁸ on the same strip of land he shall die many deaths.

There is a quest for depth in Simon, exemplarily fulfilled in Jakob, which still echoes throughout *Der Spaziergang*. As the walk comes to a close, the narrator is consumed by all he has seen and felt as he went along, by the burden of evil memories, of self-accusations that turn sour and then into sorrow, of long-past failures, of uncontrolled passion, of wild desire, of countless frailties, of bouts of unfriendliness and lovelessness, until the torment of such violent and unbeautiful thoughts finally takes hold of him, brings him to a halt⁹⁹:

I felt the need to lie down somewhere, and since a friendly, cosy little place by the lakeside was nearby, I made myself comfortable, somewhat tired as I was, on the soft ground under the artless branches of a tree. As I looked at earth and air and sky the melancholy unquestioning thought came to me that I was a poor prisoner between heaven and earth, that all men were miserably imprisoned in this way, that for all men there was only the one dark path into the other world, the path down into the pit, into the earth, that there was no other way into the other world than that which led through the grave.¹⁰⁰

98 "Wenn ich im Winter in einer Stadt bin, so reizt es mich, sie auch im Frühling zu sehen, einen Baum im Winter, ihn auch im Frühling prangen und seine ersten, entzückenden Blätter ausbreiten zu sehen. Nach dem Frühling kommt immer der Sommer, unerklärlich schön und leise, wie eine glühende, große, grüne Welle aus dem Abgrund der Welt herauf, und den Sommer will ich doch hier genießen, verstehen Sie mich, mein Herr, hier, wo ich den Frühling habe blühen sehen." (GT, 255)

99 "Warum sammle ich hier Blumen', fragte ich mich und schaute nachdenklich zu Boden, und der zarte Regen vergrößerte meine Nachdenklichkeit, die er bis zur Trauer steigerte. Alte vergangene Verfehlungen fielen mir ein, Treubruch, Haß, Trotz, Falschheit, Hinterlist, Bosheit und vielerlei heftige, unschöne Auftritte. Ungezügelter Leidenschaft, wilde Wünsche, und wie ich gar manchen Leuten wehgetan hatte, wie ich Unrecht getan hatte. Wie eine Schaubühne voll dramatischer Szenen öffnete sich mir das vorübergegangene Leben, und ich mußte über meine zahlreichen Schwächen, über alle Unfreundlichkeiten und Lieblosigkeiten, die ich hatte fühlen lassen, unwillkürlich staunen." (S, 75)

100 "Ich fühlte das Bedürfnis, mich irgendwo hinzulegen, und da gerade ein freundliches, trauliches Uferplätzchen in der Nähe war, so machte ich es mir, gewissermaßen erschöpft wie ich war, auf dem weichen Boden unter dem treuherzigen Geäste eines Baumes bequem. Erde, Luft und Himmel anschauend, kam mich der betrübliche, unweigerliche Gedanke an, daß ich zwischen Himmel und Erde ein armer Gefangener sei, daß alle Menschen auf diese Art und Weise kläglich gefangen seien, daß es für alle nur den einen finsternen Weg gebe, nämlich in das Loch

The narrator finds refuge beneath the branches of a tree by the lakeside, under which shadow he comes to the somber realization that he is a prisoner between heaven and earth, and that the only way out is downwards, through layers of darkness and damp earth, like tree roots digging their own grave, or children buried by their own misconceptions of how to get to China or Japan.

Jakob von Gunten has mastered the art of digging, although he was never a child nor has he sought China. But nevertheless something childish remains about him, the tree-like vertical endurance of he who cannot – and will not – mature, for maturity leads to selfishness and empty thoughts of greatness. Instead of putting out twigs and branches, like a proper grownup, like a burgeoning hero, Jakob submits himself instead to the pains of only growing upwards and downwards, trunk and roots, simultaneously pulled towards light and darkness as if stretched on an upright torture bed. Such tormented and arboreal mindset frames the diary's most seminal, excruciating passage:

I was never really a child, and therefore something in the nature of childhood will cling to me always, I'm certain. I have simply grown, become older, but my nature never changed. I enjoy mischief just as I did years ago, but that's just the point, actually I never played mischievous tricks. Once, very early on, I gave my brother a knock on the head. That just happened, it wasn't mischief. Certainly there was plenty of mischief and boyishness, but the idea always interested me more than the thing itself. I began, early on, to look for deep things everywhere, even in mischief. I don't develop. At least, that's what I claim. Perhaps I shall never put out twigs and branches. One day some fragrance or other will issue from my nature and my originating, I shall flower, and the fragrance will shed itself around a little, then I shall bow my head, which Kraus calls my stupid arrogant pig-head. My arms and legs will strangely sag, my mind, pride, and character, everything will crack and fade, and I shall be dead, not really dead, only dead in a certain sort of way, and then I shall vegetate and die for perhaps another sixty years. I shall grow old. But I'm not afraid of myself. I couldn't possibly inspire myself with dread. For I don't respect my ego at all, I merely see it, and it leaves me cold. Oh, to come in from the cold! How glorious! I shall be able to come into the warmth, over and over again, for nothing personal or selfish will ever stop me from becoming warm and catching fire and taking part. How fortunate I am, not to be able to see in myself anything worth respecting and watching! To be small and to stay small. And if a hand, a situation, a wave were ever to raise me up and carry me to where I could command power and influence, I would destroy the circumstances that had favored me, and I would hurl myself down into the humble, speechless, insignificant darkness. I can only breathe in the lower regions.¹⁰¹

hinab, in die Erde, daß es keinen andern Weg in die andere Welt gebe als den, der durch das Grab geht." (S, 76)

101 "Ich war eigentlich nie Kind, und deshalb, glaube ich zuversichtlich, wird an mir immer etwas Kindheitliches haften bleiben. Ich bin nur so gewachsen, älter geworden, aber das Wesen blieb. Ich finde an dummen Streichen noch ebenso viel Geschmack wie vor Jahren, aber das

The crux of *Jakob von Gunten*, both the character and the book, lies in these magnificent lines. An open wound shaped like letters, they exude the smell of death and darkness as they face nothingness with mischief in their eyes. Jakob's diary tells the story of a first flowering gone astray, of an interrupted childhood interrupted again by the pains of growth and the fragrance of death and the time it takes – six to eight decades on average – for a vegetating body to wither and perish. In its lines he articulates the yearning for a warmth, the warmth of warmth that would turn him back to dust, from ashes to ashes like he could already taste them in his mouth. He would rise and fall in the spirit of Herr Benjamenta, only still young: at first a king, then nothing. Outside all chronology Jakob writes his chronicles – the chronicles of a body that sags, a mind that fades, a head that bows; the chronicles of a submission so intense that no lord can ever claim possession over it, a submission so low that breathing is only possible in the lower regions. Jakob metamorphoses into a dry, leafless tree and then seeks warmth, sets his nature on glorious fire. If they are not already, Walser's characters will find a way to become flammable.

ist es ja, ich habe eigentlich nie dumme Streiche gemacht. Meinem Bruder habe ich ganz früh einmal ein Loch in den Kopf geschlagen. Das war ein Geschehnis, kein dummer Streich. Gewiß, Dummheiten und Jungenhaftigkeiten gab es die Menge, aber der Gedanke interessierte mich immer mehr als die Sache selber. Ich habe früh begonnen, überall, selbst in den dummen Streichen, Tiefes herauszuempfinden. Ich entwickle mich nicht. Das ist ja nun so eine Behauptung. Vielleicht werde ich nie Äste und Zweige ausbreiten. Eines Tages wird von meinem Wesen und Beginnen irgend ein Duft ausgehen, ich werde Blüte sein und ein wenig, wie zu meinem eigenen Vergnügen, duften, und dann werde ich den Kopf, den Kraus einen dummen, hochmütigen Trotzkopf nennt, neigen. Die Arme und Beine werden mir seltsam erschlaffen, der Geist, der Stolz, der Charakter, alles, alles wird brechen und welken, und ich werde tot sein, nicht wirklich tot, nur so auf eine gewisse Art tot, und dann werde ich vielleicht sechzig Jahre so dahinleben und -sterben. Ich werde alt werden. Doch ich habe kein Bangen vor mir. Ich flöße mir durchaus keine Angst ein. Ich respektiere ja mein Ich gar nicht, ich sehe es bloß, und es läßt mich ganz kalt. O in Wärme kommen! Wie herrlich! Ich werde immer wieder in Wärme kommen können, denn mich wird niemals etwas Persönliches, Selbstisches am Warmwerden, am Entflammen und am Teilnehmen verhindern. Wie glücklich bin ich, daß ich in mir nichts Achtens- und Sehenswertes zu erblicken vermag. Klein sein und bleiben. Und höbe und trüge mich eine Hand, ein Umstand, eine Welle bis hinauf, wo Macht und Einfluß gebieten, ich würde die Verhältnisse, die mich bevorzugten, zerschlagen, und mich selber würde ich hinabwerfen ins niedrige, nichts-sagende Dunkel. Ich kann nur in den untern Regionen atmen." (JvG, 144–145)

5.1.7 Walser's politics of fire and the desert as the inevitable end

A sublime sight the orange hues of distant fire, the more sublime the farther it burns from one's backyard. Throughout his oeuvre, however, Walser's politics of fire have been consistently inviting the flames in, the quest of an arsonist for a primeval warmth long lost, Walser the man holding a full matchbox. The apocalypse, when it comes, if it does, shall not be a deluge, but a wildfire. Fire is the only antidote to writing, a bitter potion Walser has tasted himself as he set some of his manuscripts ablaze.¹⁰²

The first fire has burned all throughout *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, and its smoldering embers have been glowing ever since. Walser's début work, since its original publication in 1904, has been traditionally bundled with three other short texts of a very similar nature – “Der Commis”, “Ein Maler”, and “Der Wald” –, of which *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* remains nonetheless the most accomplished piece. Fire burns twofold throughout the book: as the prophetic antidote from which a disillusioned painter (“Der Maler”) threatens to drink – “Dies soll eine Art Tages- oder Notizbuch werden. Ich werde die Blätter, wenn sie zu Ende geschrieben sind, verbrennen” (FKA, 66) –; or, more importantly, as the conflagration of enduring heat.

The fourth essay penned by Fritz Kocher is titled “Die Feuersbrunst”. It opens with a lonely wanderer as he sees on the sky ahead a dark red stain and immediately knows it: a fire has broken out. As he runs back towards the city, Fritz's narration expertly outruns him and zooms in on the city dwellers and describes their cries as they react to the calamity. The fire – like a monster with one hundred tentacles – lashes and hisses and burns; the fire brigade is not yet there and meanwhile the fire does what it does best: “Das Feuer, das, wie alle wilden Elemente, keine Besinnung hat, tut ganz verrückt” (FKA, 13). Both Fritz and the teacher as well as the whole class stand there and watch, astonished and helpless, gaping at the fire as it gorges and tears and devours and rages, a glowing red drunkard devastating (“verwüstet” – a desert in the making) all it lays its fingers on. A house collapses under the fire's heavy tongue and the voice of a girl echoes from the smoke. Her mother faints and the helpless Fritz Kocher exclaims: if only he were tall and strong, then he would brave into the flames like a hero and save the damsel in distress. But before Fritz can play the hero (a word that comes quickly to his fingers, slowly to his feet), a young, slender man jumps ahead and brings

¹⁰² The information is confirmed by Walser's most prominent scholars, as well as by Walser himself in one of his walks with Carl Seelig: “Ich frage Robert, ob es wahr sei, daß er in Berlin drei Romane ungedruckt verbrannt habe. „Das ist wohl möglich...”” (Seelig, 1989, 57).

the girl to safety, disappears mysteriously into the crowd without leaving a trace. Fritz Kocher exclaims once again: if only he could have been that valiant man.¹⁰³

Other than articulating a (powerless) view of heroism to be deconstructed piecemeal in Walser's later works, Fritz's essay first imprints the cleansing image of fire, or, more specifically, of a recurring *Feuersbrunst* that appears to blaze forever throughout Walser's oeuvre, from text to text, scorching the same earth over and over as different characters bask in its flames. Thus, the same firestorm returns in "Der Commis", but as if seen from the other side of the square where Fritz and his classmates gaped in awe. As the text's narrator praises the quiet, humble, unappreciated honor of being a clerk, he mentions that he even knows one that once played a decisive role in a firestorm, a true hero out of a novel that has only rarely – if ever – been written:

Ein Commis kann ein sehr herzlicher und herzhafter Mensch sein. Ich kenne einen, der bei einer Feuersbrunst eine hervorragende Rolle im Rettungswesen gespielt hat. Ein Commis ist im Handumdrehen ein Lebensretter, geschweige denn ein Romanheld. Warum werden Commis so spärlich zu Helden in Novellen gemacht? Ein Fehler offenbar, der endlich einmal ernstlich der vaterländischen Literatur unter die Nase gehalten werden muß.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps Fritz's riddle is hereby solved: the mysterious hero was in fact a clerk, too humble to stick around for compliments.¹⁰⁵ The conflagration was in any case so intense that it drew the attention of those living in a neighboring village, like the Tanners for instance, who were still schoolboys back then, although after the fire things quickly changed.

103 "Ist kein Held da? Jetzt wäre Gelegenheit, sich als in braver mutiger Mensch zu zeigen. Aber was ist das? Ein junger schlanker Mann (...) steigt immer höher, in den Rauch, in die Glut hinein... (...) O hätte ich der brave tapfere Mann sein können! O so ein Mann zu sein, so ein Mann zu werden! Das Haus brennt ganz nieder. Auf der Straße halten sich Mutter und Tochter umschlungen, und der sie ihr herettet hat, ist spurlos verschwunden." (FKA, 14)

104 "Ein Commis kann ein sehr herzlicher und herzhafter Mensch sein. Ich kenne einen, der bei einer Feuersbrunst eine hervorragende Rolle im Rettungswesen gespielt hat. Ein Commis ist im Handumdrehen ein Lebensretter, geschweige denn ein Romanheld. Warum werden Commis so spärlich zu Helden in Novellen gemacht? Ein Fehler offenbar, der endlich einmal ernstlich der vaterländischen Literatur unter die Nase gehalten werden muß." (FKA, 50)

105 One of "Der Commis" touchstones is the attempt at elevating the lowly figure of a clerk to a hero-like character worthy of a novel: "Er ist schlank, hat schwarzes Lockenhaar, das um seine Stirne wie lebendig spielt, und feine schmale Hände: ein Commis für einen Roman" (FKA, 60). Read with the hindsight of Walser's complete oeuvre, the striking feature behind his strategy is that he ultimately refused to elevate or heroicize objects and characters so that they could be made into the stuff of books, but instead subverted the equation and filled his texts with as many apparently insignificant and lowly objects and characters as possible.

Once we had a conflagration, not in the town itself, but in a neighboring village. The entire sky all around was reddened by the flames, it was an icy winter night. People ran upon the frozen, crunching snow, including Kaspar and me; for our mother had sent us to find out where the fire was. We reached the flames, but it bored us to spend so long gazing into the burning beams, besides which we were freezing, and so we soon ran back home again, where Mother received us with all the severity of one who's been made to worry. My mother was already unwell in those days. Not long afterward, Kaspar left school, where he was no longer prospering. I still had one more year ahead of me, but a certain melancholy took hold of me and bid me look with bitterness upon all things scholastic. I saw the end approaching and the imminent start of something new.¹⁰⁶

Fire, which in *Geschwister Tanner* has a mirage-inducing, fairytale-like, leave-taking quality, foreshadows tragedy and the onset of long-lasting melancholy¹⁰⁷; it is a rite of passage that signals a purging departure into the unknown realm of the new. *Jakob von Gunten* represents, accordingly, the journey towards combustion upon which a young man embarks in quest for either healing or, that failing, quiet

106 “Einmal hatten wir eine Feuersbrunst, und zwar nicht in der Stadt selber, sondern in einem Nachbardorfe. Der ganze Himmel in der Runde war gerötet von den Flammen, es war eine eisige Winternacht. Die Menschen liefen auf dem gefrorenen, knirschenden Schnee, auch ich und Kaspar; denn unsere Mutter schickte uns weg, um zu erfahren, wo es brenne. Wir kamen zu den Flammen, aber es langweilte uns, so lang in das brennende Gebälk zu schauen, auch froren wir, und so liefen wir bald wieder nach Hause, wo uns Mutter mit all der Strenge einer Geängstigten empfing. Meine Mutter war damals schon krank. Kaspar trat ein wenig später aus der Schule aus, in der er keinen Erfolg mehr hatte. Ich hatte noch ein Jahr vor mir, aber eine gewisse Melancholie ergriff mich und hieß mich auf die Dinge der Schule mit Bitterkeit herabsehen. Ich sah das nahe Ende kommen und den nahen Anfang von etwas Neuem.” (GT, 121–122)

107 For instance, in similar descriptions of sunsets burning over the city: “Die untergehende Sonne flammte in den Fenstern und machte sie zu strahlenden Augen, die starr und schön in die Ferne blickten” (GT, 39), and: “Es gab einen herrlichen Abend nach diesem Tag. Alle Welt lustwandelte am schönen Seeufer entlang, unter den breiten, großblättrigen Bäumen. Wenn man hier, unter so vielen aufgeräumten, leise plaudernden Menschen, spazierte, fühlte man sich in ein Märchen versetzt. Die Stadt loderte im Feuer der untergehenden Sonne und später brannte sie, schwarz und dunkel, in der Glut und Nachglut der Untergegangenen” (GT, 70). Or, in what has now become Walser’s prophetic passage par excellence – banking on biographical circumstances more than literary merits –, upon Simon’s discovery of his brother Sebastian’s dead body in the snow and beneath a pile of fir branches: “‘Grüße die lieben, stillen Toten unter der Erde und brenne nicht zu sehr in den ewigen Flammen des Nichtmehrseins. Du bist anderswo. Du bist sicher an einem herrlichen Ort, du bist jetzt ein reicher Kerl, und es verlohnt sich, die Gedichte eines reichen, vornehmen Kerls herauszugeben. Lebe wohl. Wenn ich Blumen hätte, ich schüttete sie über dich aus. Für einen Dichter hat man nie Blumen genug. Du hattest zu wenig. Du erwartetest welche, aber du hörtest sie nicht über deinem Nacken schwirren, und sie fielen nicht auf dich nieder, wie du geträumt hast...’ (...) – Simon schritt von dem Toten weg, warf einen letzten Blick auf das Häufchen Tannenäste, unter denen jetzt der Dichter schlief (...) Das Feuer des Lebens trug ihn vom sanften, blassen Bild des Todes stürmisch hinweg” (GT, 131–132).

subversion (and Sontag should come to mind here once again). Jakob's symptomatic bonding with Schacht in the journal's fifth entry takes place over burning candles,¹⁰⁸ and from there onwards he will strive towards ignition, will try at all costs to keep the fire burning and the flames stoked. Fiery is the power and the effect his older brother has over him as they compare worldviews and share a laugh: "We laughed again. It was very jolly. A strange fire began to animate me. My eyes were burning. I like it very much, by the way, when I feel so burned up. My face gets quite red. And then thoughts full of purity and loftiness usually assail me" (JvG, 66); fire is also what betrays Jakob's quiet subversion, the methodological image behind his master plan, inasmuch as he admits that great and audacious things must happen in silence and secrecy, else they should perish and fall away, condemning the fire thereby awakened to die again: "Etwas Großes und Kühnes muß in aller Verschwiegenheit und Stille geschehen, sonst verdirbt und verflaut es, und das Feuer, das schon lebendig erwachte, stirbt wieder" (JvG, 69). Fire – the burning of houses, the trail of scorched land – is part of what animates Jakob's gruesome imagination of his hypothetical life as a soldier under Napoleon (and he claims to be an excellent one by nature): "Burning villages would be a daily sight for the eyes, no longer even interesting, and one would not be surprised by cruelties of an inhuman sort" (JvG, 135). Fire is what burns and chars Herr Benjamenta's heart as he places his deposed fate in Jakob's hands,¹⁰⁹ unaware perhaps of the black earth beneath the boy's fingers, the spark in his eyes dreaming of the warmth of ashes. Whatever little remains from this scorched land policy, from Walser's – and Jakob's – politics of fire, is the desolation of a desert.

Behind the fumes, like a blistering mirage on the horizon, the yellow desert looms as the only remaining option for a ruined man in a once impregnable castle, now a ruined man down to the last living vassal not to have deserted the hallways of his barren land. Herr Benjamenta will comply to whatever gentle sounds come out of his own docile mouth, a voodoo doll held hostage by Jakob's pen, a bonfire sacrifice made in the name of his journal. On the blank page Jakob

108 "Ich und Schacht zünden in der Kammer zu unserem Vergnügen oft Kerzen an, das ist streng verboten. Aber gerade deshalb macht es uns Spaß, es zu tun. Vorschriften hin, Vorschriften her: Kerzen brennen so schön, so geheimnisvoll. Und wie sieht doch das Gesicht meines Kameraden aus, wenn die rötliche kleine Flamme es zart beleuchtet." (JvG, 15)

109 "Allerdings kommen mir immer wieder die dunklen, grauenhaft dunklen Stunden, wo mir alles schwarz vor den Augen und hassenswert vor dem gleichsam, versteh mich, verbrannten und verkohlten Gemüt wird, und in solchen Stunden zwingt es mich, zu zerreißen, zu töten." (JvG, 159–160)

summons three Romantic clichés: the desert, the sea, the mountain,¹¹⁰ and Herr Benjamenta, a lion in a cage slowly choked to death by greedy vermin,¹¹¹ leaves the decision at Jakob's feet, who in turns leaves it to chance and to dream. Jakob is overcome by sleep and rapt away from reality, propelled towards green meadows on a velvety mountainside, the former pupil and the former principal side by side almost like Quixote and Sancho Panza making their knightly way through green prairies, were Quixote and Sancho Panza also plagued by nightmares such as this which at first lures Jakob with the green promise of happiness' embrace – "I have made my decision!", he exclaims to no avail as Herr Benjamenta looks into the distance and follows the scorching desert down a trail away from their natures and European culture¹¹² (for in this scenario Jakob is Sancho, sworn to follow, lit-

110 "Junge, Knabe, du bist köstlich. Mit dir zusammen in Wüsten oder auf Eisbergen im nördlichen Meere zu leben, das würde mich locken." (JvG, 148)

111 "Wenn man verzweifelt und trauert, lieber Jakob, ist man so jammervoll klein, und immer mehr Kleinheiten werfen sich über einen, gefräßigem, raschem Ungeziefer gleich, das uns frißt, ganz langsam, das uns ganz langsam zu ersticken, zu entmenschen versteht." (JvG, 159)

112 "Aber während ich so saß und wachte, überfiel mich doch der Schlaf. Zwar nicht lang, eine halbe Stunde, oder vielleicht noch etwas länger, war ich der Wirklichkeit entrückt. Mir träumte (der Traum schoß von der Höhe, ich erinnere mich, gewaltsam, mich mit Strahlen überwerfend, auf mich nieder), ich befände mich auf einer Bergmatte. Sie war ganz dunkelsamtgrün. Und sie war mit Blumen wie mit blumenhaft gebildeten und geformten Küssen bestickt und besetzt. Bald erschienen mir die Küsse wie Sterne, bald wieder wie Blumen. Es war Natur und doch keine, Bildnis und Körper zugleich. Ein wunderbar schönes Mädchen lag auf der Matte. Ich wollte mir einreden, es sei die Lehrerin, doch sagte ich mir rasch: 'Nein, das kann es nicht. Wir haben keine Lehrerin mehr.' Nun, dann war es halt jemand anderes, und ich sah förmlich, wie ich mich tröstete, und ich hörte den Trost. Es sagte deutlich: 'Ah bah, laß das Deuten.' – Das Mädchen war schwellend und glänzend nackt. An dem einen der schönen Beine hing ein Band, das im Wind, der das Ganze lieboste, leise flatterte. Mir schien, als wehe, als flattere der ganze spiegelblanke süße Traum. Wie war ich glücklich. Ganz flüchtig dachte ich an 'diesen Menschen'. Natürlich war es Herr Vorsteher, an den ich so dachte. Plötzlich sah ich ihn, er war hoch zu Roß und war bekleidet mit einer schimmernd schwarzen, edlen, ernsten Rüstung. Das lange Schwert hing an seiner Seite herunter, und das Pferd wieherte kampflustig. 'Ei, sieh da! Der Vorsteher zu Pferd,' dachte ich, und ich schrie, so laut ich konnte, daß es in den Schluchten und Klüften ringsum widerhallte: 'Ich bin zu einem Entschluß gekommen.' – Doch er hörte mich nicht. Qualvoll schrie ich: 'Heda, Herr Vorsteher, hören Sie.' Nein, er wandte mir den Rücken. Sein Blick war in die Ferne, ins Leben hinab- und hinausgerichtet. Und nicht einmal den Kopf bog er nach mir. Mir scheinbar zuliebe rollte jetzt der Traum, als wenn er ein Wagen gewesen wäre, Stück um Stück weiter, und da befanden wir uns, ich und 'dieser Mensch', natürlich niemand anders als Herr Benjamenta, mitten in der Wüste. Wir wanderten und trieben mit den Wüstenbewohnern Handel, und wir waren ganz eigentümlich belebt von einer kühlen, ich möchte sagen, großartigen Zufriedenheit. Es sah so aus, als wenn wir beide dem, was man europäische Kultur nennt, für immer, oder wenigstens für sehr, sehr lange Zeit entschwunden gewesen seien. (...) 'Der Kultur

erature's archetypal antihero¹¹³) –, and then the dream turns into something else, something disturbing and yet familiar, that which Kraus had been trying to get Jakob to do all along: to wake up.¹¹⁴ Jakob wakes up and shakes Herr Benjamenta back into consciousness, and all colonial concerns aside they wander off into the exotic orient so that Jakob's limbs may finally sprout that which they couldn't before: twigs and branches, while all around them, before their far-seeing gaze, life flourishes in the shape of trees.¹¹⁵ In the desert Jakob shall see if he can bow low enough for the air to become once again breathable. He throws away his pen and bids his older brother adieu, achieves with all of his being the degree zero he so longed for,¹¹⁶ submits his diary to the only fate literature must endure: that of burning and yet being indestructible. Ashes are one of the few things which upon being smashed remain exactly the same.

5.2 Carvalho: *Nove Noites* (2002)

Je hais les voyages et les explorateurs.

–Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

5.2.1 Buell Quain: A tragic in the tropics

The mysterious aura of a missing person's eyes, what they might have seen before disappearing, the countless secrets they may conceal. Barthes, in *La Chambre Claire* (1980, 13), speaks with such astonishment of Jérôme Bonaparte's eyes, Napoleon's youngest brother: "I am seeing eyes that saw the Emperor", he

entrücken, Jakob. Weißt du, das ist famos,' sagte von Zeit zu Zeit der Vorsteher, der wie ein Araber aussah." (JvG, 161–163)

113 "Ich war immer der Knappe, und der Vorsteher war der Ritter." (JvG, 163)

114 "Und wie ich das dachte, erwachte ich und schaute mich im Wohnzimmer um. Herr Benjamenta war ebenfalls eingeschlafen. Ich weckte ihn, indem ich ihm sagte: 'Wie können Sie einschlafen, Herr Vorsteher. Doch erlauben Sie mir, Ihnen zu sagen, daß ich mich entschlossen habe, mit Ihnen zu gehen, wohin Sie wollen.' – Wir gaben einander die Hand, und das bedeutete viel" (JvG, 164)

115 "Es war so köstlich zu leben, das fühlte ich in allen Gliedern. Das Leben prangte vor unsern weitausschauenden Blicken wie ein Baum mit Zweigen und Ästen." (JvG, 163)

116 "Und wenn ich zerschelle und verderbe, was bricht und verdirbt dann? Eine Null. Ich einzelner Mensch bin nur eine Null. Aber weg jetzt mit der Feder. Weg jetzt mit dem Gedankenleben. Ich gehe mit Herrn Benjamenta in die Wüste. Will doch sehen, ob es sich in der Wildnis nicht auch leben, atmen, sein, aufrichtig Gutes wollen und tun und nachts schlafen und träumen läßt." (JvG, 164)

exclaims, to no avail. Nobody seems interested in the eyes that saw the Emperor, and Barthes eventually lets go of it. “Life is made of these little touches of solitude”, he muses, before moving on.

The main narrator in Carvalho’s *Mongólia* similarly remarks, as the missing photographer’s fate escalates into a diplomatic manhunt, that there’s little left to go on: all that remains from the missing photographer are some letters and contact information, and a single picture of him clouded by “that aura of mystery that a missing person’s photo acquires without there really being any mystery whatsoever to it”.¹¹⁷ Carvalho’s infatuation with photographs and photographers dates back from his early writings, be it as a narrative device (*Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*) or as part of a broader reflection on contemporary art (*Onze*). However, it is only in *Nove Noites* that such infatuation acquires more explicitly Sebaldian overtones, which go along nicely with the prevailing Sebaldian echoes of Carvalho’s prose: the mournful tales of self-imposed exiles roaming through anti-Romantic landscapes which can offer neither consolation nor the sublime. In *Nove Noites*, Carvalho incorporates three essential images to the narrative: a head and profile portrait of Buell Quain, an awkwardly tropical group photo featuring Lévi-Strauss et al. in 1939s Rio de Janeiro, and a picture of himself, Bernardo Carvalho, as a six-year-old boy standing next to a Xingu tribesman. The third picture, provocatively replacing the traditional back cover author’s portrait, serves a different, not properly Sebaldian purpose, and shall be analyzed separately further on. It is rather the two remaining images that provide a conceptual frame to this analysis of Carvalho’s seminal novel: the reconstruction of Buell Quain’s marginal and doomed existence, of both his point of view and of his field of vision,¹¹⁸ as the fulfillment and actualization of the Walserian tradition within Carvalho’s work.

117 “Disse-lhe que deixaria o dossiê completo na sala dele. Não era muita coisa, alguma correspondência entre o pai do desaparecido e o Itamaraty, o nome e o telefone do guia mongol que havia acompanhado o rapaz em sua viagem e com quem já tínhamos feito um primeiro contato por telefone, e uma fotografia – aliás, com aquela aura de mistério que os retratos dos desaparecidos costumam adquirir sem que no fundo haja mistério nenhum.” (M, 14–15)

118 “Numa das vezes em que [Quain] me falou de suas viagens pelo mundo, perguntei onde queria chegar e ele me disse que estava em busca de um ponto de vista. Eu lhe perguntei: ‘Para olhar o quê?’. Ele respondeu: ‘Um ponto de vista em que eu já não esteja no campo de visão.’” (NN, 100)

5.2.2 The making of a Walserian character

Buell Quain's mysterious portraits, his aloof and disenchanted eyes, tell the story of Bernardo Carvalho's fiction. Who was this man of whom so few pictures remain? Whose biography is barely known? Whose academic pedigree, as he arrived in Brazil in the late 1930s, was vouched for by none other than Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict? Whose ethnographic work has been published in four thin volumes to some immediate critical acclaim and no lasting repercussion? Who believed himself constantly ill, prey to all manner of maladies, particularly to those of the mind? Who traveled the world from Polynesia to Scandinavia,¹¹⁹ crossed paths with a young Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, tried – and failed – to smuggle a man aboard a ship in China (the man was punished in front of Quain and probably murdered afterwards for his attempted crime), but who never seemed to fit anywhere, an orphan of civilization? Who was this American ethnologist, Buell Halvor Quain, whose name betrays no nationality and evokes no home, who bled and hung himself to death at age 27 in the heartlands of Brazil? This man who wrote seven letters before committing suicide, none of which really explains anything, and so Carvalho had to invent an eighth, which explains even less.¹²⁰

Carvalho's premise behind *Nove Noites* is as Barthesian as it is Sebaldian, on the one hand musing over what Quain's eyes might have seen and silenced, and on the other wondering how much fiction can be added to fill in the blanks before the entire narrative project is bent beyond Realism. The end result, however, is perfectly Walserian, with the two main characters (a fictional Buell Quain and a fictional and unnamed Bernardo Carvalho, who also acts as narrator) lapsing in and out of Realism, in and out of Romanticism, swallowed by fiction, trapped between claustrophobic environments and enigmatic images of the desert, doomed to fail, bound to be consumed by fire (either their own, metaphorical, or

119 On Buell's globe-trotting existence, see W. E. Leonard's foreword to Buell's *The Flight of the Chiefs*: "From schooldays on, he used his vacations for travel, at fourteen accompanying his father to a Rotarian convention in Europe and visiting Holland, Germany, and the three Scandinavian Countries; and by the time he had graduated from High School he had covered on auto-trips all of the States of his country and many of the Provinces of Canada. In the vacation of 1928 he held his first job, time-keeper for the Dominion Construction Co., who were building a railroad to James Bay, and in time-off he explored wild islands, making sketch-maps to send home... Before entering Wisconsin in 1929 he was six months traveling in France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, England, Scotland, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine; and in the vacation of the next year he visited Russia... After passing his semester examinations in February of '31, he took time out on his own, and shipped as a common sailor on a freight-steamer to Shanghai..." (Leonard 1942, vi).

120 "Manoel Perna não deixou nenhum testamento, e eu imaginei a oitava carta." (NN, 121)

a very real one) and disappear leaving behind little beyond the mystery of their writerly existence.

Disappearance, this recurring quest for the margins in both Walser's and Carvalho's work, surfaces early in *Nove Noites* as the novel's photographic focus is shifted from Buell's portrait – whose facial expression is described by different characters as both ironic and defiant (“desafiadora”) (NN, 25), and sad (NN, 105) – to the group photo featuring Lévi-Strauss et al., the most striking feature of which, according to the narrator, is Quell's absence:

There is a photo from 1939 in which Heloísa appears seated on a bench in the gardens of the National Museum, with Charles Wagley, Raimundo Lopes, and Edison Carneiro to her right and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes, and Luiz de Castro Faria to her left. Today, all but Castro Faria and Lévi-Strauss are dead. But even at that time there was an absence in the picture, which I only noticed after I began investigating the story of Buell Quain. At that point, he was still alive and working among the Krahô. The image is a kind of portrait of him, through his absence. In every photograph there is a phantasmagoric element. But it is even more pronounced in this one. Everyone in the picture knew Buell Quain, and at least three of them took to their graves things that I will never be able to learn. In my obsession, I even found myself holding the picture in my hand, fascinated, my eyes glazed over, trying in vain to shake an answer from the eyes of Wagley, Heloísa, or Ruth Landes.¹²¹

The rather awkward picture – the awkwardness of which is a byproduct of having too many academics squeezed together in a single frame – acquires, via the narrator's all-consuming obsession, phantasmagorical contours: those seven pairs of eyes had all seen Quain at one point or another, had all had a glimpse of Quain's tragic existence and taken their insights with them to their graves – all but two, the then nonagenarians Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Castro Faria (1913–2004). And as that photo was being taken, in 1939s Rio de Janeiro, Quain was still alive some thousand miles north of that bench, inching closer and closer to his definitive disappearing act.

121 “Há uma foto, de 1939, em que dona Heloísa aparece sentada no centro de um banco nos jardins do Museu Nacional, entre Charles Wagley, Raimundo Lopes e Edson Carneiro, à sua direita, e Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes e Luiz de Castro Faria, à sua esquerda. Hoje, estão todos mortos, à exceção de Castro Faria e Lévi-Strauss. Mas havia já naquele tempo uma ausência na foto, que só notei depois de começar a minha investigação sobre Buell Quain. Àquela altura, ele ainda estava vivo e entre os Krahô, e a imagem não deixa de ser, de certa forma, um retrato dele, pela ausência. Há em toda fotografia um elemento fantasmagórico. Mas ali isso é ainda mais assombroso. Todos os fotografados conheceram Buell Quain, e pelo menos três deles levaram para o túmulo coisas que eu nunca poderei saber. Na minha obsessão, cheguei a me flagrar várias vezes com a foto na mão, intrigado, vidrado, tentando em vão arrancar uma resposta dos olhos de Wagley, de dona Heloísa ou de Ruth Landes.” (NN, 27–28)

A recurring reticence tinges the scarce accounts of Quain's life, both personal and professional, drawing a picture of a possibly brilliant man who was nevertheless afraid of openly engaging with his surroundings – which was perhaps par for the course for the post-Malinowski, pre-Geertz anthropologist –, choosing instead a voyeuristic approach to existence, taking down deeply insightful notes and wallowing in his loneliness. Charles Wagley, the same neatly-clad Charles Wagley pictured on a summery carioca bench in 1939 and who mourned Quain's death with a very subtle jab at the insatiable Brazilian bureaucracy,¹²² recalls a haunting description “of the effect of the tropical dawn on tropical forest peoples” as told to him by Quain, who, he claims, “had an artist's responsiveness both to people and surroundings”.¹²³ A similar ‘responsiveness’, or artistic sensibility (a “*Künstlernatur*”, to employ the vocabulary of *Jakob von Gunten*), is picked up by early reviewers of Quain's publications, who praised him for being an “obviously (...) sensitive field observer” (Spoehr, 1949, 440), for combining “an easy yet finished style” with “copious footnotes and annotation” (Derrick 1959, 443–440), for the “vividness” of his depictions (Carneiro and Dole, 1956, 747), as well as – with the slightest touch of sorrow in the otherwise cold, direct form of an academic review – for striking “the right balance between concrete reporting and conceptual abstractions, avoiding equally well diffuse gossip and generalization” (Ackerknecht, 1948, 403).

To less artistic-minded reviewers, however, Quain's sensibility ultimately led to a lack of overall systematization – “The account is uneven in excellence” (Spencer, 1949, 112) – and, more problematically, to a lackluster interest in pursuing certain topics, or, rather, of evidently emphasizing the analysis of interpersonal behaviors over equally important spiritual aspects such as witchcraft and

122 “In 1938 Buell Quain spent four months, from August to November, among the Trumái Indians of the upper Xingú River area of central Brazil. In December of 1938 he was recalled to Rio de Janeiro, and failing to obtain governmental permission for his return to the upper Xingú, at least under conditions allowing minimal possibilities for field research, he was unable to continue his studies among the Trumái. He went instead to do ethnographic and linguistic work among the Gê-speaking Kraho in the state of Maranhão. There, in April [sic] 1939, he died” (Wagley 1955, v).

123 “Buell Quain had an artist's responsiveness both to people and surroundings. I shall never forget his description of a phenomenon I have later experienced. He told me of the effect of the tropical dawn on tropical forest peoples. Traveling in the dark, he noted, Indians canoemen tend to break the monotony by singing and talking, but just before the sun appears, they suddenly fall silent, as if in expectation of a sacred moment” Wagley 1955, vi–vii. On a personal and anecdotal note, the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux goes as far as to deem Quain “a talented young man, a poet” (Métraux, 1978; 208).

religion¹²⁴: “The work contains penetrating insights into Trumai culture which reflect not only Quain’s ability as a field worker but also (...) is most complete in its treatment of interpersonal behavior, because this was one of Quain’s principal interests” (Carneiro and Dole, 1956, 747). In fact, in these personal and professional assessments made by people he had met at some point in his life or who had only known him through his writings, Buell Quain often comes across as a highly rational and logical individual, himself timid but greatly interested in people, reserved yet insightful, self-effacing yet boisterous,¹²⁵ convinced he was riddled with and doomed by disease. It was about disease that Quain and Lévi-Strauss “warmly” conferred, according to Lévi-Strauss’ biographer Patrick Wilcken, as their paths briefly crossed in the seemingly endless prairies of central Brazil, with Quain “explaining that after he had left Rio he had begun to develop disturbing symptoms and was convinced he had contracted syphilis”, and Lévi-Strauss advising him “to return to Rio and seek specialist help”, an advice Quain didn’t take, setting off instead “for his fieldwork site in the Upper Xingu”, a lonely, Malinowskian figure riding alone into oblivion, an insignificant little fly when compared to Lévi-Strauss’ mammoth of an expedition: “a team of twenty men, fifteen mules, thirty oxen, a few horses, tons of equipment and a truck”, an ensemble weighing over 1.470 kilograms (Wilcken, 2010, 76–77). In true marginal fashion, an *écrivain mineur avant la lettre*, Buell Quain chose his own company despite the numerous protests of Heloisa Alberto Torres, the matriarchal figure in the center of the 1939 picture and the then director of the influential Museu Nacional. “He likes to walk”,¹²⁶ she eventually wrote down, quizzically coming

124 Dorothy Spencer (1949; 112; 113) notes that “throughout the book, Quain has described with a wealth of detail the social, ceremonial, and political role of the chiefs”, but that, however, “[w]e are told that witchcraft is ‘common to almost every native of the region’, but very little more about it.” R.A. Derrick (1959, 439) argues, elsewhere, that Quain’s knowledge and flair seem to wane when it comes to the spiritual, hinting at a certain apathy on the anthropologist’s part in taking the matter seriously: “In discussing Priests and Practitioners the author is on less sure ground. (...) Today occult practices are observed surreptitiously, and the people are half ashamed of them. The most important of Mr. Quain’s informers were so obviously charlatans and imposters that the reader is left with a sense of futility”.

125 Alfred Métraux, upon meeting Quain in Brazil (and mistaking his name for Cowan), writes the following impression in his journal, translated into English and related by Patrick Wilcken (2010, 89): “Cowan [sic] told us about his journey to the Xingu, and then spoke extravagantly on the subject of his syphilis. I detected a hint of desperate bravado in his brutal frankness and in the jokes he made about his condition . . . Cowan is quite drunk and fills the dining room with his booming voice. Wagley calms him with a delicate, courteous hush, hush”.

126 “Contaba entonces Quain con apenas 26 años cuando se internó solo, a pesar de la asistencia de Heloísa en que debía ir acompañado con una expedición que incluyera no solo a asistentes sino más recursos económicos y materiales (‘él prefiere andar a pie’, anotó Heloísa),

to terms with Quain's decision and sending him off with a haunting – and unsuspecting – Walserian goodbye.

Upon reaching his destination amidst a dying culture¹²⁷ – himself a dwindling force –, Malinowski's ghost sets in and Quain succumbs to loneliness and to the shadows of his own mind¹²⁸: “A feeling of aloneness permeates the Quain notes. He was in the midst of people with whom he had limited communication, due not only to the obstacle of language, but to the cultural gulf separating him from them”, writes Robert Murphy (1955, 2), who was charged with the task of turning Quain's notes on the Trumai Indians into a proper posthumous publication, 1955s *The Trumai Indians of Central Brazil*. Carvalho picks up on Quain's sense of loneliness and displacement and magnifies it, fictionalizes the extent of his marginal condition and foreshadows with every turn of phrase his inevitable doom and demise.¹²⁹ Upon reading the many letters Quain sent during his stay in Brazil, one notices how Carvalho focuses on passages that deal with disease, exile, solitude, sexuality, a contrived sense of sociability and belonging – in short, how he carves out of an already Walserian figure an even more Walserian character.

en la selva del alto Xingú hacia el noreste selvático e inhóspito del Mato Grosso donde habitaban los más elusivos y enigmáticos Trumái [sic].” (Ashwell, 2011, 5)

127 “They [the Trumai] are a dying culture”, wrote Quain in a 1938 letter to Ruth Benedict. (Murphy and Quain, 1955, 103).

128 Malinowski's field diary is overwrought with a sense of loneliness and despair, at times painfully so, at times tinged with a certain Walserian flair: “I lay on the bunk by the cotton bags and the *bêche-de-mer*. Felt sick, lonely, in despair”; “Yesterday, Monday twenty-first, all day at home. Morning and afternoon, Puana; we talked about fishing. –Occasionally in the afternoon – violent fit of dejection; my loneliness weighs upon me”; “Is this because of loneliness and an actual purification of the soul or just tropical madness?”; “I was again alone – emptiness of moonlit night on the lagoon” (Malinowski, 1989, 40; 59; 69; 160).

129 The foreshadowing is constant throughout *Nove Noites*, and through it Carvalho highlights once again his belief in fiction's “power of anticipation”, which Carvalho would later explore in its full Walserian implications in 2007s *O Sol se Põe em São Paulo*, as has already been discussed in chapter 4.2.5. “O homem que chegou naquela tarde modorrenta de março era um homem atormentado. Na véspera de sua partida para a aldeia, ele estava apreensivo. E já não sei se era por não saber o que o esperava ou justamente por saber” (NN, 22); “Quando o dr. Buell tentou entrar, a irmã do chefe lhe disse que, como elas, ele morreria se pisasse ali dentro. Mas ele a ignorou e entrou assim mesmo. Houve outra ocasião em que lhe falaram da morte, deixando, porém, que tirasse as próprias conclusões. Durante uma caçada em que procuravam aves para tirar-lhes as penas, disseram-lhe que um pássaro de cabeça vermelha a que chamavam ‘lê’ era o anúncio da morte para quem o visse. Pouco depois ele deparou com a aparição fatídica e preferiu acreditar que lhe pregavam uma peça. Não disse nada, embora no íntimo tenha ficado muito impressionado, a ponto de ter sonhado mais de uma vez com a mesma ave dali para a frente. Acordava ofegante e coberto de suor” (NN, 51).

Carvalho's rendering of Quain is that of a troubled soul who had traveled the world with a pen in hand in quest for belonging, finding it nowhere, and drawing from the experience the conclusion that he was doomed and alone. In terms of sociability, Carvalho's Buell Quain is highly reminiscent of Walser's narrators in *Träumen* and their appalled fascination for the "*Hantierung*" of the common folk, their desire of blending in and somehow disappearing in the masses, and their ultimate failure in doing so. To that effect, Carvalho emphasizes a series of events in which Quain tries – and fails – to be 'one of them', as, for instance, in his countless attempts at downplaying his comfortable financial situation ("He was obsessed with not appearing to be what he really was"),¹³⁰ or at affecting a Walserian kind of servility and submission, of becoming a zero ("[Quain] took great pains to show that he was nobody, as if he were a servant").¹³¹ Similarly, when the Trumai built Quain a house "fit for white men", Quain insisted, somewhat feverishly, that they built him a haystack house just like theirs instead¹³² – only to admit, as time went by, that it didn't matter how much like them he tried to behave, in the end he would always be an "outsider"¹³³ and a "disturbing element"¹³⁴ in their midst. Carvalho prefers the words "desajustado" (NN, 15) and

130 "A única miragem que eu posso admitir que ele tivesse era essa de um mundo sem ricos, porque era realmente uma ideologia. Ele não queria parecer rico. Era seu traço de caráter mais marcante. Não tenho dúvidas. Foi uma experiência curiosa ele me convidar para jantar num restaurante de luxo em Copacabana quando morava numa pensão de terceira na Lapa. Ficava essa oposição entre a vida pública e a vida privada, porque ele insistia em negar a possibilidade de viver tranqüilamente como rico mas garantia essa situação para os amigos. Ele sempre viveu essa obsessão: não parecer e na realidade ser. Ele tentava preservar a vida privada de todo contato exterior", me disse Castro Faria." (NN, 32)

131 "Em Cuiabá, para espanto de Castro Faria, o jovem etnólogo americano ajudou a descarregar um caminhão com a bagagem de Lévi-Strauss, o que apenas reforçou na cabeça do brasileiro a idéia de que Buell Quain tinha 'a preocupação constante de demonstrar que não era ninguém, como se fosse só um serviçal.'" (NN, 33)

132 "House styles and construction were not rigidly conventionalized. The Trumai helped build a house for the missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Young, and they thought that Quain, being a *karahiba* (white man), would like one such as the Youngs had designed for themselves. When they were half finished with the frame, Quain realized what has happening, and asked for a haystack house like theirs" (Murphy and Quain, 1955; 33).

133 "The reason why it is so difficult to live with these people is that they are so 'impolite'. At least in their dealings with me, an outsider, and with the missionaries, they are unrestrained in physical contact and in the expression of their momentary sentiments. In many instances their motives are kind and helpful. But their complete lack of shyness makes them sometimes bungling efforts troublesome" (1955; 95–96).

134 "Tremendous interest in property, together with a simple and declining culture, results in my being a seriously disturbing element in their lives" (1955; 104).

“atormentado” (NN, 22),¹³⁵ which he also uses to underline Quain’s marginality and malaise within his own American culture (“de alguma forma desajustados em relação ao padrão da cultura americana”), thus removing – as is Carvalho’s wont – the nationalistic component from the equation and arriving once again at the conclusion that exile is an affair of the mind and marginality a privileged literary space.¹³⁶ Furthermore, in Carvalho’s extensive research into Buell Quain’s life and work,¹³⁷ one may also notice how some undocumented gaps in Quain’s state of mind and worldview are filled by Carvalho with Lévi-Straussian sensibility, particularly the Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss is a fundamental theoretical piece behind the puzzle that is *Nove Noites* and also, in some aspects, to Carvalho’s body of work. When Carvalho steers Quain’s growing impatience with the Trumai towards a broader frustration with his own (inconclusive, fallible, subjective) métier, it is Lévi-Strauss that one hears in between the lines¹³⁸; when Carvalho portrays Quain’s almost destructive mistrust towards his own culture and people, it is once again Lévi-Strauss that one hears in between the lines.¹³⁹ The Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques* – especially when in “full-throttle

135 Perhaps compounding on Heloisa Alberto Torres’ heartfelt letter to Quain in which she somewhat delicately calls him “unstable”: “Escreva e me diga que eu posso realmente confiar em você. Devo confessar que às vezes tenho medo de você; acho você tão instável, que temo por seu futuro. Gostaria que você tivesse tido mais confiança e tivesse falado comigo sobre o que você anda fazendo. Espero que sua estada no Brasil lhe faça muito bem, e acredito que quanto mais tempo você ficar, melhor. Ficarei muito feliz em ajudá-lo e você pode estar certo de que essa sua velha amiga é muito mais compreensiva com as misérias humanas do que parece ser” (Corrêa and Mello, 2008; 59).

136 The Lévi-Straussian echo rings here once again loud and clear: “Pour plusieurs ethnologues et pas seulement pour moi, la vocation ethnologique fut peut-être, en effet, un refuge contre une civilisation, un siècle, où l’on ne se sent pas à l’aise” (Eribon and Lévi-Strauss, 2009; 98–99).

137 An investigation so comprehensive that Carvalho’s *Nove Noites* became a source for Quain’s mysterious life in Patrick Wilcken’s acclaimed critical biography of Lévi-Strauss, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*.

138 “Surtout, on s’interroge: qu’est-on venu faire ici ? Dans quel espoir ? À quelle fin ? Qu’est-ce au juste qu’une enquête ethnographique ? L’exercice normal d’une profession comme les autres, avec cette seule différence que le bureau ou le laboratoire sont séparés du domicile par quelques milliers de kilomètres ? Ou la conséquence d’un choix plus radical, impliquant une mise en cause du système dans lequel on est né et où on a grandi ?” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955; 434)

139 “La fable qui précède n’a qu’une excuse: elle illustre le dérèglement auquel des conditions anormales d’existence, pendant une période prolongée, soumettent l’esprit du voyageur. Mais le problème demeure: comment l’ethnographe peut-il se tirer de la contradiction qui résulte des circonstances de son choix ? Il a sous les yeux, il tient à sa disposition une société: la sienne; pourquoi décide-t-il de la dédaigner et de réserver à d’autres sociétés – choisies parmi les plus lointaines et les plus différentes – une patience et une dévotion que sa détermination refuse à ses concitoyens ? Ce n’est pas un hasard que l’ethnographe ait rarement vis-à-vis de son propre

rant against the whole genre of travel writing and the midcentury explorers and adventurers”, in Wilcken’s (2010, 173–174) provocative words – also informs to the highest degree Carvalho’s entire narrative project, from his ambiguous civilizing project with vague anthropological undertones to his penchant for depicting intellectualized globe-trotters to whom traveling can only lead to disenchantment and failure – or, in François Dosse’s (1991, 176) succinct formulation: “The adventure proposed by Lévi-Strauss [in *Tristes Tropiques*] does not lead to the promised land, but rather to disenchantment. It is the quest for a discovery that bears within it its own failure”. And even though *Tristes Tropiques* is a central book in Carvalho’s literary project, the “other” Lévi-Strauss – the cautious, systematic, dry Lévi-Strauss, the reluctant father of Structuralism – is equally crucial in providing another entry point to Carvalho’s ultimately Walserian articulation between author, character and narrator.

5.2.3 L’auteur avant sa mort: Adding Walser to a Structuralist recipe

The third picture in *Nove Noites* – the back cover picture of Bernardo Carvalho as a six-year-old boy standing next to a Xingu tribesman – tells a different conceptual story, one that flows towards Barthes and Foucault by way of Lévi-Strauss. The juxtaposition of two narrative threads sixty years apart is what grants *Nove Noites* its depth beyond the curiosity-inducing mechanisms of an enigmatic suicide in an exotic setting. A second and decisive voice is added to the subtly fictionalized story of Buell Quain and of his last nights in Brazil: that of the narrator, himself also a character in the novel, and perhaps even its author. The character-narrator remains elegantly unnamed throughout the novel, although upon him are bestowed all manners of coincidences linking his fictional life to that of the author who has created him: both are journalists and writers with professional ties to France and the United States; both have interviewed Lévi-Strauss; both have had a father who owned land in indigenous territory in the heartlands of Brazil; both have been photographed next to indigenous people; both are

groupe une attitude neutre. S’il est missionnaire ou administrateur, on peut en inférer qu’il a accepté de s’identifier à un ordre, au point de se consacrer à sa propagation; et, quand il exerce sa profession sur le plan scientifique et universitaire, il y a de grandes chances pour qu’on puisse retrouver dans son passé des facteurs objectifs qui le montrent peu ou pas adapté à la société où il est né. En assumant son rôle, il a cherché soit un mode pratique de concilier son appartenance à un groupe et la réserve qu’il éprouve à son égard, soit, tout simplement, la manière de mettre à profit un état initial de détachement qui lui confère un avantage pour se rapprocher de sociétés différentes, à mi-chemin desquelles il se trouve déjà.” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 442)

writing a novel about Buell Quain, and, more importantly, both are reflecting on the novel as they write it (or, as Coetzee puts it: the novel as “nothing more than the adventure of its own writing”).

This second narrative thread, with metanarrative undertones, follows the obsession of this unnamed and provocatively autobiographical figure as he tries, sixty or so years after Quain’s suicide, to decipher the enigma of his existence – and the ambiguity of the possessive pronoun here is perfectly intentional, given that such narrative juxtaposition constantly shifts the focus of the novel from Quain to the narrator, from the failed hero to the fake Doppelgänger, from the observed to the observer. “Bernardo Carvalho’s narrator seeks to understand himself *vis-à-vis* the experience of Buell Quain”, writes Oscar C. Pérez (2011, 117) in his analysis of *Nove Noites*, and even though the statement certainly holds true for most of the novel, it nevertheless crumbles with the novel’s final paragraph: as Carvalho’s fictional counterpart flies back from New York to Brazil, unable to sleep after a frustrating and ultimately inconclusive hunt for answers regarding Quain’s death, fate has it that next to him be seated an eager young man, bursting with excitement for his first trip to South America and therefore also unable to fall sleep, and as the plane flies over “the region where Quain had killed himself”, the young man reveals that it is not tourism what brings him to Brazil, but an altogether different kind of quest: “I’m going to study the Brazilian Indians”, he says, to the narrator’s dismay and foreboding silence.¹⁴⁰

Beyond the circularity of the ending – an omen of yet another failure to come, a hint at Carvalho’s belief, via Walser, in fiction’s premonitory powers –, there is a broader conceptual shift at play, which becomes even more evident the more one re-reads the novel: the realization that Carvalho’s narrator cannot quite understand himself – nor the eager young man, for that matter – *vis-à-vis* the experi-

140 “Eu não conseguia dormir. O rapaz ao meu lado também não. Lia um livro. Era dele a única luz acesa entre as de todos os passageiros. Estavam todos dormindo. Eu não conseguia ler nada. Liguei o vídeo no encosto da poltrona à minha frente. Por coincidência, sobrevoávamos a região onde Quain havia se matado. Foi quando o rapaz, pela primeira vez, fez uma pausa e me perguntou se estava me incomodando com a luz de leitura. Respondi que não, de qualquer jeito não conseguia dormir em aviões. Ele sorriu e disse que com ele era a mesma coisa. Estava muito excitado com a viagem para poder dormir. Era a sua primeira vez na América do Sul. Perguntei se vinha a turismo. Ele sorriu de novo e respondeu orgulhoso e entusiasmado: ‘Vou estudar os índios do Brasil’. Não consegui dizer mais nada. E, diante do meu silêncio e da minha perplexidade, ele voltou ao livro que tinha acabado de fechar, retomando a leitura. Nessa hora, me lembrei sem mais nem menos de ter visto uma vez, num desses programas de televisão sobre as antigas civilizações, que os Nazca do deserto do Peru cortavam as línguas dos mortos e as amarravam num saquinho para que nunca mais atormentassem os vivos. Virei para o outro lado e, contrariando a minha natureza, tentei dormir, nem que fosse só para calar os mortos.” (NN, 150)

ence of Buell Quain; that there might be similarities, general rules and common traits, but never a perfect overlap, never a complete and fulfilling understanding of the other in relation to oneself. The ending in *Nove Noites* – as is usual in Carvalho’s work – plays with this sense of acute displacement and disenchantment, and does, in its own displaced and disenchanted way, provide a very Lévi-Straussian release of tension: “not through a soothing reassurance, but as a result of being cast into the void”.¹⁴¹

Nove Noites is the most clear-cut example, within Carvalho’s work, of the author’s exposure to Lévi-Strauss, and of his assimilation of Lévi-Strauss’ maxim of “comprendre l’être par rapport à lui-même et non point par rapport à moi” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 77), which is, according to Wilcken (2010, 14–15), “one of the most fundamental shifts in twentieth-century thought—the swing from meaning to form, the self to the system” and a defining pillar of the Structuralist project. Which is not to say that Carvalho is a feverous Lévi-Straussian, or even a Structuralist writer for that matter, but that Lévi-Strauss flows through him like a hot knife on a stick of butter: the reluctant and disenchanted globetrotter Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes Tropiques*; the Lévi-Strauss of *La Pensée Sauvage* triangulating three keywords very dear to Carvalho’s literary project: nature, culture, and intellect; the Lévi-Strauss of *Les Structures Élémentaires* criticizing Freud and discussing kinship (from which Carvalho abstracts his take on orphanhood, on displaced characters – and in *Nove Noites* in particular, as shall be seen later – who are “orphans of civilization”). But, above all, the conversational Lévi-Strauss, the polemist, who went as far as to claim that “[w]hat matters is the work, not the author who happened to write it; I would say rather that it writes itself through him. The individual person is no more than the means of transmission and survives in the work only as a residue” (Augé, 1990, 86), is the one who offers Carvalho an irresistible avenue towards the Barthes and the Foucault of the late sixties, the murderous Barthes and Foucault who famously announced the death of the author.

The influence and repercussion of Barthes’ “La Mort de l’Auteur” (1968) and Foucault’s “Qu’est-ce qu’un Auteur?” (1969) over Carvalho’s literary project is more than well documented in the author’s secondary literature,¹⁴² and it would be both unnecessary and a deviation from the Walserian core of this research to

141 “At once modern and ancient, religious and atheistic, cold and romantic, the structuralist aesthetic signaled an easing off, a release of spiritual tension—not through a soothing reassurance, but as a result of being cast into the void.” (Wilcken, 2010, 239)

142 Among the plethora of articles and texts exploring the conceptual impact of the death of the author in Carvalho’s work, the best and most consequent contribution remains Diana Klinger’s excellent and already mentioned *Escritas de Si, Escritas do Outro: O Retorno do Autor e a Virada*

go over it once again. Instead, an alternative to Barthes and Foucault shall be presented by way of Walser and of Valerie Heffernan's inspired take on Walser as a precursor of the two French theorists:

Barthes' and Foucault's attempt to overthrow the sovereignty of the author comes a little late for some writers. A half a century earlier, Robert Walser was already eroding his absolute power and authority in his texts, and the author-figure that emerges through Walser's work appears to be a little more ragged and frayed at the edges than his nineteenth century counterpart. At the same time, the author-function in Walser's work is by no means dead. He is an enigmatic presence in and around the text, who is difficult to locate and yet impossible to ignore. (Heffernan, 2007, 92)

The erosion of the narrative power and of the narrator's authority in Carvalho's work has already been assessed in a previous chapter, and such erosion paves the way to one of Walser's central contributions to Carvalho's writing: the enigmatic presence of the author in and around the text. Although it is true that Barthes and Foucault came to soften the deadly blow to the author in later writings,¹⁴³ it nevertheless stands that those two seminal texts, when accepted in full, do lead to a radical conception of the literary discourse, one in which the author is all but powerless. Heffernan's (2007, 92) main thesis similarly argues that "whilst Barthes and Foucault open up new directions and avenues for the exploration of literature, we might argue that they go a step too far, in that they strip the author of any authority in literary discourse", and even though Carvalho concurs, here and there, with Barthes' and Foucault's positions (against the deification of the author; in favor of the text and, above all, of language – and of language as a metaphor for cultural inquiry), there are still elements in Carvalho's dealings with the author figure that escape Barthes' and Foucault's radical cul-de-sac, missing elements that may be found in Walser:

Evidently Walser, writing forty years before Barthes and Foucault, is already acutely aware of the discourses on authorship which they also write against. His protest against the deification of the author in literary criticism may not be as explicit as theirs and its effect

Etnográfica. In her book, Klinger maps out not only the death of the author, but also his or her resurrection, and ties it conceptually to Carvalho's own work, with a special emphasis on *Nove Noites*. 143 "No entanto, é justo remarcar que tanto Barthes quanto Foucault, que no auge do estruturalismo criticaram a noção do autor, nos seus trabalhos seguintes deixaram 'cada vez mais pistas para afirmar não novas experiências científicas, que distanciam pesquisador e pesquisado, mas como lidar com o pessoal na escrita, sem recorrer a velhos biografismos' como assinala Denilson Lopes (2002, p.252). De fato, desde os anos setenta, os debates pós-estruturalistas, feministas e pós-coloniais, devedores do pensamento de Foucault, não cessaram de retornar à pergunta pelo lugar da fala." (Klinger, 2007, 31)

may not be as far-reaching. Nonetheless it is apparent that this gesture of over-playing the power of the author expresses a resistance to the underlying authority of this role. Where Barthes and Foucault attack the author's dominance from outside the system, Walser erodes his power from within through a sly process of mimicry. Where they call for the death of the author, he brings him vividly to life. However, the author-figure that is affected in Walser's dramatic scenes seems at times to be just a little too artful and just a touch too practised in his performance, leading us to suspect that he is nothing more than a pretender to the throne. Walser's regeneration of the author in literature envisions a new form of authorship that challenges the authority associated with that figure. (Heffernan, 2007, 95)

What Walser does, when resorting in countless texts to an authorial figure in varying degrees of autobiographical affinity, and from where Carvalho takes his cue, is to split the author figure in two: on the one hand a character who plays on his own authority (or lack thereof) within the text, and on the other an author perfectly in control of the action and of his craft.¹⁴⁴ By feeding off of such dichotomy, and especially when overlapping the fictional author figure with his real author self, Walser spins yet another thread in his already wide web of connections, associations, and layers which add up to the labyrinthine structure of his texts, and which ultimately (and subtly) question the conventions of the reading-process and of the relationship between reader and author:

Walser's narrator is not inclined to make the reading process easier for the unsuspecting reader. If anything, he plays on the reader's naïve expectations regarding the nature of the narrator-reader relationship. Instead of a familiar face, the narrator serves as a point of disorientation, a figure that confuses him further and mocks him constantly in his search for meaning in the text. At all turns, the narrator seems to do the opposite of what the reader expects. As such, he becomes a distorted image of the reader's desires. (Heffernan, 2007, 100)

The author is not dead in Walser's oeuvre, but alive and kicking, acting as a "point of disorientation", disrupting the reader's expectations. And it is when this double-edged authorial figure coincides with the narrator or with a character that

144 "This play on authority gains additional momentum when we consider that there is also another, separate author-figure implied in these dramatic texts. The authors that are discussed and even play a role in the dramas cannot be equated with the real author who created them and placed them within this dramatic realm. If we look beyond this stage form of authorship, we find ourselves confronted with a higher authority who is controlling the action from outside the text. Thus, in effect, short scenes such as this one, in which the author plays a role, actually produce two instances of authorship, who vie for authority over the action. Walser's splitting of the author-figure into on the one hand, a character who plays on his own authority within the scene and on the other, a god-like author who controls the action from above offers a curiously doubled parody of the authoritative author." (Heffernan, 2007, 95)

the disruption reaches a productive peak, when fact and fiction blur each other's boundaries – to the advantage of fiction. Carvalho's long-term dissatisfaction with the hypothetical reader who, confronted with a literary text based on real events, values fact over fiction – that is, reality over imagination – is well documented in his essayistic writing. To this hypothetical reader, argues Carvalho, fiction, in a book based on a true story, is the expandable half of the equation.¹⁴⁵ It is also to this effect, in defense of the properly imaginative and narrative, in defense of fiction, that Carvalho particularly (and somewhat sadistically) savors resorting to biographical and autobiographical elements when creating his characters and narrators. It shouldn't come as a surprise that Carvalho's musings on the reader and on the clash between fact and fiction in the (long) age of Realism are also often triggered by his take on Thomas Bernhard, whose work stands for a logical – and even more radical – continuation of Walser's disorienting and disruptive affirmation of the author's presence.

Barthes and Foucault wished to erase all traces of biography from literary criticism, and while Carvalho is decidedly against a biographical or even psychologizing reading, he nevertheless feeds off of Walser's and Bernhard's ambiguous play on their real and fictional personae. Exploring the biographical links between Walser the writer and the "'Ich' figure" who appears and reappears in Walser's texts, Heffernan notes that

[w]hilst current trends in narratology would discourage any alignment between author and narrator, we cannot ignore the congruity between the very real circumstances of Walser's own life and the fictional situation of his textual personae. (...) It is clear that Walser plays on this tenuous boundary between fiction and reality.

145 “A citação é providencial num tempo em que a imaginação na literatura parece gozar de um desprestígio crescente entre os leitores, mesmo entre os mais cultos. Não é preciso muito esforço para notar que não só os livros jornalísticos e as biografias mas também os romances ‘baseados em histórias reais’ interessam mais os leitores do que as ‘obras da imaginação’. O que prende o leitor a um livro em que há ambigüidade entre realidade e ficção é a realidade e não a ficção. A ficção, para ele, é a parte supérflua” (MFE, 122–123); “Não se trata de mais uma dessas ilusões de realidade ‘baseadas numa história real’ (como se o real fosse narrativo) cuja demanda parece crescer na mesma proporção do fascínio pelo mundo virtual” (MFE, 198). Carvalho's assessment of the supremacy of fact over fiction within contemporary literature is not a lone rant: it captures the *Zeitgeist* of an era in which an author, such as Abraham Verghese, for instance, would sympathetically praise the “great advantages of nonfiction”: “And I had to learn that this is one of the great advantages of nonfiction: when something is true, you automatically have the reader's interest, because we're all inherently curious about things that really happened. In fiction you have to work ten times harder to hold the reader's interest; there's an exuberance or excess that fiction has to have” (Yagoda, 2004, 120–121).

It would certainly seem from his texts that Walser emphasizes and even cultivates his role as author, as origin and architect of the text. Indeed, it appears as if he draws on his own autobiography and material circumstances to establish this authority and mark his territory. (Heffernan, 2007, 93)

Diana Klinger, in *Escritas de Si, Escritas do Outro*, similarly argues in favor of the return of the author and of the author's role in Carvalho's work, with an emphasis on ethnography and contemporary French and Latin American thought, taking it one step further than the usual reception of Carvalho's work within Structuralist and post-Structuralist lines. Although, if one is to continue pursuing the alternative Walserian route suggested by this research, one might find more suitable theoretical grounds to analyze the (auto)biographical elements in Carvalho's fiction in the motifs of failure and of Romanticism. The first part of the equation is once again readily supplied by Heffernan (2007, 94), to whom the ambivalent appearance of the author in Walser's oeuvre "indicates a rather more complex position *vis-à-vis* the inherent authority of the author-function", inasmuch as "his power is not absolute and his word is not infallible. He, too, can make mistakes; he is sometimes unsure of himself and his presentation of his characters is sometimes lacking". The insight plays right into Carvalho's penchant for failure, fallibility, and marginality, fencing off the notion of a godlike figure who shall guide the text toward 'the truth'. The author, both in control of his craft and a failing, marginal force, steers the text – through (auto)biographical incursions and deceptive real events – well away from any factual notions of truth, thus building up on this tension between the logic of everyday common sense and the logic of fiction – to the advantage, once again, of fiction, whose logic (and this is Carvalho's main – and at times misunderstood – intent behind *Nove Noites*) is capable of disrupting and disturbing the more alluring and accessible veneer of the factual, of the relatable, and ultimately of the mimetic project upon which *Nove Noites* is deceptively built.

On the other hand, a second source of influence over Carvalho's (and, of course, Walser's) conflation between their real and fictional selves is to be found in the Romanticism of the Romantics and post-Romantics, of the Schlegels¹⁴⁶

146 "Das vermehrte Lesen läßt Lesen und Leben zusammenrücken. Man fahndet im Gelesenen nach dem Leben des Autors, der plötzlich mit seiner Biographie interessant wird, und wenn er es noch nicht ist, sich interessant zu machen versucht. Die Schlegels waren Meister darin, sich interessant zu machen. Ihre Liebesgeschichten waren in Jena Stadtgespräch. Man fahndete nach dem Leben hinter der Literatur und war umgekehrt von der Vorstellung fasziniert, wie die Literatur das Leben formen könnte." (Safranski, 2007, 51)

and of Blanchot,¹⁴⁷ in this fusion between life and work that does not strike too far away from the Greek “*bíos*”, from where biography gets its fame. This may seem like a counterintuitive maneuver, should one be following the “objective” nature of a strictly Structuralist or post-Structuralist reading, which is not the case here, nor should it be when it comes to Carvalho’s work. Carvalho repeatedly (and also somewhat self-aggrandizingly) takes a clear stand against “black and white” dogmatism, against indulging in “commonsensical dualities”, against blindly accepting a theoretical approach in full.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, even if at

147 “Le ‘ je ’ du poète, voilà donc ce qui finalement importerait seul, non plus l’œuvre poétique, mais l’activité, toujours supérieure à l’ouvrage réel, et seulement créatrice lorsqu’elle se sentait capable à la fois d’évoquer et de révoquer l’œuvre dans le jeu souverain de l’ironie. Il en résultera la reprise de la poésie, non seulement par la vie, mais même par la biographie, par conséquent le désir de vivre romantiquement et de rendre poétique jusqu’au caractère, ce caractère dit romantique qui, du reste, est très attrayant, dans la mesure où lui manque précisément tout caractère, s’il n’est rien d’autre que l’impossibilité d’être quoi que ce soit de déterminé, de fixe, de sûr...” (Blanchot, 1969, 524–525)

148 A posture perhaps best exemplified by Carvalho’s short text on the German art historian Walter Friedlaender (1873–1966), whose highly nuanced take on the departures and similarities between Classicist and Romantic artists triggers in Carvalho a broader homage to the worth and value of grey areas when it comes to critical thinking: “Mas, contrariando os manuais escolares que concebem a arte da primeira metade do século 19 como uma guerra entre o classicismo e o romantismo, Friedlaender mostra que, em termos absolutos, não faz sentido falar nem em uma coisa nem em outra. Tudo é relativo. Não existe uniformidade nos movimentos artísticos e por vezes há mais afinidades entre artistas de movimentos antagônicos do que entre aqueles que acabam sendo associados a uma mesma escola. (...) ‘Toda corrente principal e claramente definida é influenciada e matizada por correntes divergentes e tributárias’. Uma lição para quem insiste em pensar em preto-e-branco” (Carvalho, 2002). To that effect, one should also mention in passing Robert Scholes’ (1974, 170) thesis – which adds to Carvalho’s own position – that “there are important connections between romantic and structuralist views of language, and, indeed, to note that we should not have a structuralism if we had not had a romanticism”. A further critical note (with reconciliatory undertones) in that direction is provided by Andrew Bennett’s (2006, 57) Romantic critique of Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author: “Inasmuch as Barthes’s declaration of the death of the author may be said to be directed against the Romantic-expressive model of authorship, we might conclude, it is misdirected. What Barthes’s attack overlooks or misrepresents are precisely the complexities and self-contradictions that energize Romantic poetic theory. The expressive theory of the author as articulated by writers of the Romantic period interrogates the subjectivity and self-consciousness of the author; it interrogates problems of language, representation, and textuality; it interrogates questions of authorial intention, volition, and agency. And despite the importance of the provocation of his essay, it is, in a sense, Barthes himself who closes down these questions by promoting a reductive version of expressive authorship in order to argue against it, and indeed to argue for a notion of the author that is already at work in the Romantic theory of authorship itself. But, at the same time, Barthes’s essay, and the post-structuralist rethinking of notions of authorship, intentionality, and agency that it may be said to stand for, have been instrumental in a rethinking of the Romantic conception of authorship and expression. Or, to put

times an author prone to bouts of Structuralism, Carvalho never strays too far from Romanticism, from a diffident Romanticism tinged by Walser and Walser's ambiguous author-figure located – according to Renata Buzzo Margari (1987, 123) – in a transitional zone [“Übergangszone”] between the autobiographical and the fictional.

In her study of Walser's transitional “I” between his letters and prose pieces, Buzzo Margari touches on two additional points which shed light on Carvalho's own deceiving (auto)biographical strategies. Buzzo Margari sees a recurring motif in Walser's work: the motif of the beginning, the stylistic repetition of – and obsession with – that moment of inception when written word and personal experience clash, when the fictional and the factual collide, and from such collision this literary, deceptive “I” is released, not as a therapeutic device, but as a function of the poetic consciousness, as a byproduct of the imaginative endeavor.¹⁴⁹ The deception of this “I” lies in that it is not carried over from reality into fiction, but created within the fictional realm and then forged around reality, and thus the “*Motiv des Anfangs*” marks the inception of the fictional – and a victorious one at that – and also, through its constant repetition, serves as a reminder of fiction's supremacy, of the fundamental artificiality of its ruses and charms. Carvalho, who is no stranger to such strategy, resorts to it once again in *Nove Noites*, repeating eight times, throughout the novel, its opening line: “Isto é para quando você vier”. The opening line works on three important levels, the first of which is a premonitory one: “This is for *when* you get here”, writes one of the novel's narrators, Manoel Perna (another figure based on a real person), not *if* you get here – the sense of foreboding, of doom, of that which cannot be avoided, plays into Carvalho's apocalyptic aesthetic and into his retelling of the uncanny parallels between Walser's own silent death in the snow and the death to which he had sentenced one of his characters some 50 years prior, as already discussed in a previous chapter.

It differently, the importance and influence of Barthes's essay may be seen as an indicator of the importance and influence of the Romantic-expressive theory of authorship in contemporary criticism and theory. Partial and polemical though it is, Barthes's essay offers profound insight into the fundamental values that Romanticism both avows and contests, values that are still avowed and still contested in contemporary criticism and theory”.

149 “Dieses Motiv des Anfangs, des Beginnens erscheint als eine Anspielung auf den Augenblick, wo sich das Schriftwerk aus der menschlichen Erfahrung bildet, auf den Augenblick, wo innerhalb des dichterischen Bewußtseins das literarische Ich das autobiographische ablöst: wo das eine aufhört, dort beginnt das andere. Der Anfang ist der Augenblick, wo das Erlebte seine schriftliche Form annimmt; die Kurzprosa wie auch der Brief scheinen besonders geeignet, die nötige Unmittelbarkeit zu gewährleisten.” (Buzzo Margari, 1987, 126)

This first implication of the recurring opening line feeds into a second one: the implied autobiographical “you” [“*você*”] of the sentence. As it turns out, the “you” that eventually comes, that is drawn to the mysterious and aporetic life story of Buell Quain, is none other than the slightly fictionalized version of Bernardo Carvalho. The opening line thus epitomizes the all-consuming obsession of this autobiographical narrator, the ill-fated pursuit of the one who could not do otherwise but to come, to succumb to the calling for a quest doomed to fail. The story told in between the lines of *Nove Noites* is the story of an obsession, of a writer’s obsession with his material, with the poorly-documented life of a historical and marginal figure. By pursuing it, and by constantly returning to this opening line – that is, returning to that moment of fictional inception from within which the entire novel stems –, Carvalho does not only swiftly subsume most of his theoretical and stylistic concerns into one single novel, but also succeeds at creating a metanarrative that, like Walser’s, and inspired by Walser’s, is only *slightly* meta. The metanarrative found in Carvalho¹⁵⁰ and in Walser is as discreet as it is elegant; it thematizes the conflation between an author’s real and fictional personae, between fact and fiction, and does so on a conceptual – rather than exhibitionist – level (that is: one must look for it; an oblivious reader may altogether overlook it). It is almost as if the autobiographical characters and narrators in Walser’s and Carvalho’s writings were deprived of most of their ego and made into servants of fiction, and not of the authors’ real personae. The only ego these characters and narrators have left, the only ostensive display of narcissism they are allowed, is compressed in their voices, in their tireless, driveling, disappearing voices.

A third and final repercussion of the “*Motiv des Anfangs*” in Carvalho’s work, and specifically in the recurring opening line in *Nove Noites*, is the aforementioned conflation between fact and fiction, between the fickle notions of “truth” and “lie”. In order to further analyze such conflation in Carvalho’s work, one should note that the opening line in *Nove Noites* condenses, in its many iterations throughout the novel, the entire essence of the opening paragraph, which reads:

This is for when you get here. You have to be prepared. Somebody has to warn you. You are entering a place where truth and lies no longer have the meanings they had outside. Just ask the Indians. Anything. Whatever crosses your mind. And tomorrow, when you wake

150 Oscar Pérez (2011, 85–86) hints at the metanarrative level of Carvalho’s *Nove Noites* by stating that “...by creating a metanarrative that extends throughout the book, Bernardo Carvalho consistently refers back to the action of researching and then writing a fictional account that revolves around the life and mysterious death of Buell Quain. In other words, the narrator’s process supposedly replicates that of the author throughout the course of the novel”.

up, ask them again. And then the day after tomorrow. Each time the same question. And every day you'll get a different answer. The truth is lost among all the contradictions and absurdities.¹⁵¹

The paragraph, from there on subsumed into its six first words, triggers not only Carvalho's ominous aesthetic (coated in a Nouveau-Romanesque treatment of time: uncertain, dissolving, opaque), but also the many deceptions the author is staging with the faux-Realism of *Nove Noites*. Through these deceptions – the entangling of fiction and fact, of truth and lie – Carvalho gives another, more well-rounded go at narrative strategies which have already been discussed throughout this research, such as his preference for unreliable narrators who call for the reader's trust only to break it,¹⁵² or the growing progression with which fiction overtakes fact, underlying his belief that the imaginative and the properly narrative are the parts that matter in a novel, not historical or factual truth.¹⁵³ Truth, concludes the autobiographical narrator towards the novel's dénouement, is the only thing that should be avoided, the only thing that would ruin his entire project.¹⁵⁴ Such realization – in its full retroactive effect – is key in understanding not only *Nove Noites*, but also the logic behind Carvalho's gradual conversion of truth and fact into fiction and deception. Carvalho – to re-appropriate an expression first used by Roberto Schwarz in connection to the narrator in Machado de Assis

151 “Isto é para quando você vier. É preciso estar preparado. Alguém terá que preveni-lo. Vai entrar numa terra em que a verdade e a mentira não têm mais os sentidos que o trouxeram até aqui. Pergunte aos índios. Qualquer coisa. O que primeiro lhe passar pela cabeça. E amanhã, ao acordar, faça de novo a mesma pergunta. E depois de amanhã, mais uma vez. Sempre a mesma pergunta. E a cada dia receberá uma resposta diferente. A verdade está perdida entre todas as contradições e os disparates.” (NN, 6)

152 “As histórias dependem antes de tudo da confiança de quem as ouve, e da capacidade de interpretá-las. E quando vier você estará desconfiado. O dr. Buell, à sua maneira, também era incrédulo. Resistiu o quanto pôde. Precisamos de razões para acreditar” (NN, 7) “...mas não lhe peço que acredite em mais nada – a verdade depende apenas da confiança de quem ouve.” (NN, 21)

153 “Aquela altura dos acontecimentos, depois de meses lidando com papéis de arquivos, livros e anotações de gente que não existia, eu precisava ver um rosto, nem que fosse como antídoto à obsessão sem fundo e sem fim que me impedia de começar a escrever o meu suposto romance (o que eu havia dito a muita gente), que me deixava paralisado, com o medo de que a realidade seria sempre muito mais terrível e surpreendente do que eu podia imaginar e que só se revelaria quando já fosse tarde, com a pesquisa terminada e o livro publicado. Porque agora eu já estava disposto a fazer dela realmente uma ficção. Era o que me restava, à falta de outra coisa” (NN, 141); “A ficção começou no dia em que botei os pés nos Estados Unidos.” (NN, 142)

154 “As palavras dali em diante não teriam nenhuma importância. Eu podia dizer o que quisesse, podia não fazer o menor sentido, só não podia dizer a verdade. Só a verdade poria tudo a perder.” (NN, 144)

– is in the business of “perfecting falsehood” [*aperfeiçoar a falsidade*], that is to say, of perfecting exactly that which he intends to eventually bring down, of letting the unsuspecting reader believe that the author himself is invested in a position – as civilizing or controversial as it may be –, that the author himself is speaking through his autobiographical characters, that the author himself is committed to the truth and nothing but the truth, only to subvert all of these expectations at their zenith.¹⁵⁵ Carvalho strings the truth along until it collapses under its own all-encompassing weight, and from its ruins rises fiction, victorious and triumphant, but also disturbing and mischievous.

5.2.4 Carvalho’s Napoleon: Truth, historical truth, and (auto)biography

This leads to Buzzo Margari’s second Walserian argument which sheds light on Carvalho’s own deceiving (auto)biographical strategies: the mischievous and recurring interferences of a deceptively “real” autobiographical “I” within the realm of the fictional work.¹⁵⁶ These recurring interferences of the ‘real’, which Buzzo Margari deems “factual truth”, seem to support and enhance the effectiveness of Walser’s pursuit of an “aesthetic truth”, a term Buzzo Margari borrows from Käte Hamburger. The deceiving moments of truth and of autobiographical overlap in Walser’s oeuvre aim not at highlighting or celebrating the factual, but

155 “A idéia de aperfeiçoar a falsidade, como parte de um intuito crítico-destrutivo, é artisticamente pérfida. Por que aperfeiçoar o que se quer derrubar? Para derrubar de mais alto? Quando o artista aperfeiçoa uma posição, o público naturalmente pensa que é por coincidir com ela. Ocorre que em Machado o caso não é este, antes pelo contrário. O que dá uma idéia do requinte sarcástico da sua composição. Ele fabricou, digamos, uma prosa discreta, distinta, em meios-tons, ideal para... confirmar preconceitos conservadores e funcionar como ideologia no pior sentido da palavra. Um modelo de simplicidade visando esconder uma configuração social muito desigual e difícil de defender. Isso é coisa que se faça? Por outro lado, ao depurar a prosa conservadora e ao colocá-la em circunstâncias indefensáveis, Machado lhe sublinhava os mecanismos, com sarcasmo verdadeiramente máximo.” (Schwarz, 1990b, 230)

156 “In der Berner Zeit findet man dagegen – sowohl in den Briefen als auch in der Kurzprosa – eine ganze Fülle von Hinweisen auf die gestrige Zeit als Mitteilung einer ‘wahren’ Nachricht. Diese chronologische Bestimmung wirkt in der brieflichen Form überflüssig, weil die mitgeteilte Nachricht keinen Anspruch haben kann, ein Erlebnis auszumachen; in der Kurzprosa wirkt sie störend, als unnötige, ‘unartige’ Einmischung des autobiographischen ‘Ich’ in die dichterische Arbeit. Die Erwähnung einer solchen banalisierenden Zeitangabe scheint insbesondere einen Versuch darzustellen, die faktische Wahrheit (die Wahrheit des ‘der-Fall-Seins’, wie es Käte Hamburger definiert hat) als Unterstützung für die ästhetische Wahrheit einspringen zu lassen. Die Begegnungen und Erlebnisse des Spaziergängers werden in eine Zeitangabe eingesperrt, die den ‘Spaziergang’ zu einem zwischen vier Wänden geschriebenen ‘Brief’ umgestaltet.” (Margari 1987, 127)

at empowering the fictional. As is the case in Carvalho's work, the instances of autobiography in Walser do not represent an overflowing of ego, but a literary ("dichterisch") strategy.

Buzzo Margari's recourse to Käte Hamburger is doubly providential, as it allows for a seemingly counterintuitive coupling between Hamburger and Carvalho. Hamburger, in her excruciatingly precise and accurate analysis of the problem of truth in literature, attempts, in a way, the very opposite of Carvalho's own literary project: whereas one wishes to conceal, the other wishes to reveal; whereas Carvalho aims at entangling truth and aesthetics to the advantage of aesthetics, Hamburger calls out those writers (be it Schiller or Schopenhauer) who dared to haphazardly equate these two notions. Hamburger eventually posits – with exacting Wittgensteinian restraint – that "truth is not what is, but what is the case" (Hamburger, 1979, 28), a rather anticlimactic – or at least aporetic – conclusion: that the very concept of "truth" is ultimately too wild and mischievous to quietly yield to historical, cultural, and social contents.¹⁵⁷ And in her fierce rejection of the Romantics, themselves too wild and mischievous for her taste, and from whose rebelliousness she might have been able to glimpse a more nuanced insight into the problem of truth in literature, Hamburger ends up wallowing in a semantic problem too hermetic to be of any use to either Carvalho or Walser.

A better contribution to the dialogue between Hamburger and Carvalho comes by way of her seminal study *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957), in which Hamburger posits the concept of reality ("*Wirklichkeit*") – truth's poor cousin – as a confrontational force between fact and fiction, freed from the restraining and unproductive (in what concerns Walser and Carvalho) strings spun by Epistemology.¹⁵⁸ Hamburger's take on the notion of reality does strike a few chords with

157 Hamburger (1979, 86) is here building upon Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*: "Ist es die Unbestimmtheit, ja die Inkommensurabilität der Begriffe Wahrheit und Wahrheitsgehalt der Kunst, die in der 'Ästhetischen Theorie' zu widersprüchlichen Aussagen führen? Derart daß in dem Kapitel 'Gesellschaft' gesagt wird: 'Noch in Kunstwerken, die bis ins Innerste mit Ideologie versetzt wird, vermag der Wahrheitsgehalt sich zu behaupten' (345 (...)), und in dem Abschnitt 'Paralipomena': 'Was gesellschaftlich unwahr, brüchig, ideologisch ist, teilt sich dem Bau der Kunstwerke mit' (420). Eine frühere Stelle erscheint fast als Synthese aus diesen antithetischen Aussagen: 'Manche Kunstwerke sehr hohen Ranges sind wahr als Ausdruck eines an sich falschen Bewußtseins', wobei der 'Wahrheitsgehalt' eben 'die vollkommene Darstellung falschen Bewußtseins' ist (196)".

158 "Der Begriff der Wirklichkeit ist besonders vom Standpunkt der modernen Naturwissenschaft und Logistik her problematisch geworden; und von ihm aus könnte gegen seine Verwendung in der vorliegenden Untersuchung der Vorwurf erhoben werden, daß er im Sinne eines (überholten) 'naiven Realismus' auftritt. Gegen einen solchen möglichen Einwand soll hier jedoch betont werden, daß der Begriff Wirklichkeit in seinem Gegensatz bzw. seinem Verhältnis zu dem der Dichtung, als der er hier ausschließlich behandelt wird, nicht als Gegenstand und

Carvalho, to whom the semantic distinction between “truth” and “reality” is not as important as its usage, within fiction, as a confrontational mechanism that carries in its core the vehement rejection of any form of naïve Realism.

Building upon her initial argument, Hamburger resorts to Napoleon in order to explain how this very Napoleon, when made into the object of a historical novel, is necessarily transmuted into a fictional Napoleon, no matter how attuned to the “historical truth” said novel may or may not be. Napoleon is thus transposed from a system of possible reality (“aus einem möglichen Wirklichkeitssystem”) to a system of fiction (“in ein Fiktionssystem”),¹⁵⁹ and within this system of fiction Napoleon’s biography no longer serves reality: it too becomes fiction.

As does Walser’s. In a fairly roundabout way, Hamburger’s illustration of her argument via Napoleon adds one final piece to Carvalho’s Walserian (auto)biographical puzzle: Walser serves him not only as a theoretical, written influence, but also, and undeniably, as a biographical model, as a biography twice removed from reality, twice turned into fiction – first by Walser himself, then by Carvalho. Robert Walser is Bernardo Carvalho’s Napoleon – he is to the Brazilian author what the French monarch was to Barthes and Hamburger: a source of wonder and renewed insight.

It should come as no surprise, for instance, that in an attempt to pinpoint the specific stylistic or thematic influences of Walser on contemporary visual artists, on the occasion of a 2014 art exhibition organized around the Swiss author by the Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Konrad Teller (2014, 21), in a text included in the catalogue, arrives at the following formulation: “It is ultimately Walser’s personality and life

Problem der philosophischen Erkenntnistheorie und damit auch nicht unter dem Gesichtspunkt des naiven Realismus erscheint. Er meint, wie aus den folgenden Darlegungen gewiß genügend deutlich wird, nichts als die Wirklichkeit des menschlichen Lebens (der Natur, der Geschichte, des Geistes) im Gegensatz zu dem, was wir als den ‘Inhalt’ von Dichtungen erleben, die Seinsweise des Lebens im Unterschied zu der, die die Dichtung erschafft und repräsentiert. Und es scheint mir nicht ganz abwegig zu behaupten, daß gerade in der exakten Bestimmung dieses Unterschiedes sich das Phänomen Wirklichkeit jenseits aller wissenschaftstheoretischen Definition besonders prägnant hervorkonturiert.” (Hamburger, 1957, 6)

159 “Als Gegenstand eines historischen Werkes ist Napoleon als Objekt geschildert, von dem etwas ausgesagt wird. Als Gegenstand eines historischen Romans wird auch Napoleon ein fiktiver Napoleon. Und dies nicht darum, weil der historische Roman von der historischen Wahrheit abweichen darf. Auch historische Romane, die sich ebenso genau wie ein historisches Dokument an die historische Wahrheit halten, verwandeln die historische Person in eine nicht-historische, fiktive Figur, versetzen sie aus einem möglichen Wirklichkeitssystem in ein Fiktionssystem. Denn dieses ist nur dadurch definiert, daß die Gestalt nicht als Objekt sondern als Subjekt, in ihrer fiktiven Ich-Originalität dargestellt wird (oder wie es auch möglich ist, als Objekt des Erlebnisfeldes einer anderen Romanperson). Dies sind die ‘verkörpernden Sachverhalte’, die in Ingardens Theorie von den Quasi-Urteilen übersehen sind: es ist der Prozeß der Fiktionalisierung, der jeden noch so historischen Stoff eines Romans zu einem nicht-historischen macht.” (Hamburger, 1957, 58–59)

that serve as sources of inspiration”. Part of the effectiveness of Walser’s oeuvre lies in that it was written by none other than Walser himself.

It is also in that sense that the author is not entirely dead in Carvalho’s work, and that Structuralism does not convey the entire nuance of Carvalho’s (auto)biographical strategies. A whiff of the author’s life well beyond the inane biographism of ‘because such life, therefore such work’ remains about. It is not Walser’s actual, factual life that interests Carvalho, but its fictional transmutation, its transposition into the realm of fiction. Carvalho is as interested in Walser’s usage of language and adjectives, disruptive narrative authority, unreal and apocalyptic aesthetics, landscape portrayals, Romantic echoes, Realist deceptions, subtle metanarrative stratagems, as he is in the fictional personae that Walser created for himself and in drowning these personae even deeper still in the waters of fiction – this time his own, from where Carvalho himself emerges as a seemingly marginal, powerless, doomed, restless, disappearing voice left of center of the *status quo*.

5.2.5 Orphans of civilization: The quest for a paternal figure

It has already been posited, in chapter 3.2.5., that the aesthetics of Carvalho’s literature is that of a *romance sem descendência*, a novel *sine prole* built around characters who are themselves without issue: they represent the end of a line, they are the last of their names. Carvalho’s characters carry in their brains and bodies the apocalypse of infertility, the ever-looming menace of being “the last human beings on earth”. Walser’s characters are similarly barren and childless, afraid of touching apples lest they poison them, afflicted by black thumbs that cannot create life, only write.

From the damnation of infertility – both self-imposed and not; both nurtured by the brain or imposed by the body – emerges another common trait between Walser and Carvalho, and most notably between *Jakob von Gunten* and *Nove Noites*: the quest for a paternal figure. The scope of this common trait (a thousand-year-old complex) within the reach of this research should be clearly stated, lest it allows for too broad an approach or too numerous speculations: the quest for a paternal figure in Walser and in Carvalho shall neither brave the stormy waters of biographism, nor cross the threshold of psychology; it shall not resort to either Freud, Sacher-Masoch, or the Bible.¹⁶⁰ Instead, the quest for a paternal

160 For a slightly Freudian and highly Masochist reading of Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten*, see Pister, 2013, 113–126. For a biblical approach on the issue of a father-son relationship (with overt biographical undertones) in Walser’s work, see Camenzind-Herzog, 1981.

figure shall be here understood as a narrative strategy of positing *tabula rasa*: having no proper fathers to speak of, either by their own volition or by external circumstances, these characters are cast in a state of abandonment and isolation from which they must fashion their own traditions and cultural affiliations, thus freeing themselves from the vexing impositions of society and of family traditions, and therefore allowing them to pursue an artistic or intellectual (but in any case marginal) path. There is a strong early Bernhardian scent to this quest, which is to be expected, given Carvalho's rather Bernhardian reading of Walser:

This imagined scenario of orphanage re-appears again and again in Bernhard's novels, producing a tale of the zero hour in which the hero has to re-invent himself along with his newly elected cultural affinities for the lack of not possessing a tradition. This gruesome scenario works to liberate the hero from unwanted dependence, sending him on the lonely path of artistic and intellectual self-discovery. Along this path, the hero often destroys the entire remaining legacy of the family, squanders the inherited estate, and sometimes even kills himself in a final act of self-cancellation. In early tales and novels of Bernhard, the inherited legacy is often construed in the biological terms of disease and madness. (Konzett, 2002, 9)

The scent disappears in Bernhard's later works, as the son becomes the father and the Oedipal takes over,¹⁶¹ but before it does, a helpful conceptual frame to the quest for a paternal figure undertaken by Jakob von Gunten and Buell Quain is set: by rejecting their actual fathers and their legacy, Jakob and Quain go out into the world as blank slates in search of a new role model, that is to say, in search of a new paradigm to guide their torn existences. The quest invariably buckles under the strain of its Rousseauesque ambiguity of wanting something and being denied this very thing,¹⁶² which adds to the recurring enigmatic or downright anticlimactic *dénouements* of both Walser and Carvalho, a sort of Romantic fairytale in reverse, in which the expectation that in the end the tide will turn in the characters' favor is subverted. The tide does not turn – Walser, in particular, can at times derive sardonic pleasure in sounding like Hans Christian Andersen's evil *Doppelgänger* – and the characters find themselves stuck in a dead-end,

161 “Bernhard brilliantly exaggerated the dilemma of the son who can't catch his breath due to his father/grandfather. He burdened his characters with the weight of Oedipal problematics and seduced them into the extinction of abstraction.” (Streeruwitz, 2002; 224)

162 “Already in Rousseau, a dubious artfulness is observed that is supposed to conceal a double standard. That he combined nature and childhood in a new idea of education and, at the same time, denied his own children and stuck them in an orphanage, has long been understood as a discrepancy between theory and practice. Rousseau was a master of an artful reflexivity that skillfully found fault with others on every point but in itself always discovered only the purest of intentions.” (Sloterdijk, 1988, 57)

estranged from their old families and not quite welcomed by their new, chosen ones. Oftentimes befallen by disease and madness, these characters then do as is their wont: they think not of starting their own biological family, but of burying its remnants, which are themselves. Thus the Bernhardian maneuver of self-cancellation, or, as has been posited throughout this research, the more properly Walserian disappearing act.

The outcome of the quest for a paternal figure in Walser and in Carvalho only reinforces an aesthetic trait of their work already sufficiently explored in this research, which are the motifs of marginality and disappearance. It is not the outcome of the quest but the quest itself that brings new material to the comparison between the authors, and between the two novels in particular. Jakob's quest has already been explored in the previous chapter – his ambiguous and claustrophobic search for a paternal figure in Herr Benjamenta and, later on, in his eldest brother (the elder brother, it bears reminding, serves as a recurring role model in Walser's oeuvre). Therefore, it is based on – and starting from – Jakob's quest that Quain's own plight should be analyzed, as a mirror that once again fulfills and actualizes the Walserian legacy within Carvalho's work.

Nove Noites, as concisely summed up by Klinger, is fundamentally a novel about paternity and kinship – unsurprisingly so for such a Lévi-Straussian project:

Everything in the novel revolves around the parental lineage; every character in the novel is looking for a father. According to Carvalho, the indigenous people are looking for a father, because in a way they are the orphans of civilization. On the other hand, Quain had a very complicated relationship with his own father, his own fatherhood is brought into question (the hearsay that he had a son is not confirmed in the novel), and at the same time he played the part of the father among the natives. The narrator fuses the anthropologist's story with that of his own deceased father, hinting at having uncovered who was in fact Quain's son. "It is rather curious – says Bernardo Carvalho –: it is a work of fiction that has to do with anthropology and ends up being about kinship relations". It bears reminding that the study of kinship relations is the foundation upon which anthropology is built. But in the novel, the kinship relations are portrayed as dubious and truncated. (Klinger, 2007, 152–153)

The main conceptual layer to be derived from such summary of Carvalho's novel is that Carvalho stages with *Nove Noites* his own anticlimactic version of five characters in search of a father or a son, with each character standing for a variation on the theme of paternity and of choosing their own symbolic fathers. These variations could – and should – be read as mirrors to Jakob von Gunten's own conversations with his eldest brother, as they articulate a similar conflict – albeit inevitably disfigured by the century that divides them – between nature and culture, between the characters' inner sensibility and the pressures exerted by the outer world, as well as a similar pull towards becoming a nothing, towards making *tabula rasa*.

a) *Buell Quain: The orphan of culture*

As already seen, Carvalho's portrayal of Quain is that of an American citizen estranged and smothered not only by his own American culture, but also by its far-reaching Western counterpart.¹⁶³ What lures Quain to anthropology – other than an intellectually accepted way of publicly distrusting and even rejecting one's own cultural heritage – is also that which, under the grave guidance of Lévi-Strauss, sets it apart: the in-depth study of kinship structures.¹⁶⁴ Quain quenches in anthropology his cultural malaise, citing the indigenous people of Nakoroka, among whom he lived, as the supreme example of liberation and of *tabula rasa*: in their society, people are free to choose what they want to be in relation to each other: brother, sister, cousin – each individual gets to choose the role they wish to perform in society.¹⁶⁵ Quain's fascination for kinship structures, as mirrored throughout *Nove Noites*,¹⁶⁶ keeps his cultural malaise at bay for a time, and Carvalho expertly captures Quain's dawning realization that understanding the

163 When reviewing Quain's globetrotting itinerary, Carvalho draws attention to how little Eurocentric – or Western – his destinations were, ranging from Syria to Russia, from Palestine to Fiji: “Ao terminar o ginásio, aos dezesseis anos, Buell já tinha atravessado os Estados Unidos de carro. Em 1929, antes de entrar para a universidade, passou seis meses na Europa e no Oriente Médio, percorrendo Egito, Síria e Palestina. Nas férias do ano seguinte, foi para a Rússia. Depois de prestar os exames, em fevereiro de 1931, embarcou numa viagem de seis meses, como marinheiro, num vapor para Xangai. Em 1935, estava em Nova York, e no ano seguinte, em Fiji” (NN, 15–16).

164 “Lévi-Strauss réalise avec cette étude exemplaire [*Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*] l'affranchissement de l'anthropologie des sciences de la nature en la plaçant d'emblée sur le terrain exclusif de la culture. (...) La phonologie a pour objet de dépasser le stade des phénomènes linguistiques conscients, elle ne se contente pas d'envisager les termes dans leur spécificité mais entend les saisir dans leurs relations internes, elle introduit la notion de système et cherche à construire des lois générales. Toute la démarche structuraliste est inscrite dans cette ambition.” (Dosse, 1991, 40)

165 “Me falou do tempo que passou entre esses índios e de uma aldeia, que chamou Nakoroka, onde cada um decide o que quer ser, pode escolher sua irmã, seu primo, sua família, e também sua casta, seu lugar em relação aos outros. Uma sociedade muito rígida nas suas leis e nas suas regras, onde, no entanto, cabe aos indivíduos escolher os seus papéis.” (NN, 41)

166 “Além do núcleo familiar consanguíneo, os índios estabelecem entre si relações simbólicas de parentesco, que servem para organizar a sociedade, suas interdições e as obrigações de cada indivíduo. Nessas relações de ‘parentesco classificatório’ se manifestam a lei e a lógica dessas sociedades. O parentesco passa a ser um código extremamente complexo, cujo principal objetivo é evitar o incesto em comunidades predominantemente endogâmicas e às vezes reduzidas a algumas dezenas de indivíduos” (NN, 47); “Quando relatei o caso à antropóloga que me despertara para a história com seu artigo de jornal, ela me alertou sobre o fato de os termos irmão e cunhado poderem ter, entre os índios, um sentido simbólico ou classificatório, ou seja, estar ligados à

structures of kinship in a given indigenous society does not make him any less of a foreigner, that the courtesy of freely choosing your own family is not extended to him; that he already has a family (which he has rejected), and that a new one is not really in the cards for him.¹⁶⁷ Adrift in between cultures, between the ones that he rejected and the ones that won't fully take him in, Quain becomes a being of many names (throughout the novel Quain goes by Quain Buele, Bill Cohen, Cowan, Cãmtwýon, depending on the cultural background of his interlocutor) to whom all that is left to do is to passively observe, to become an observer, a borderline orphan of culture – in a perverse way fulfilling his vocation for the margins.¹⁶⁸

As an orphan or an observer – in either way an impotent figure, a shadow deprived of a state of belonging –, Quain's already instable mind, as highlighted by Carvalho, takes a turn for the worse and becomes even more susceptible to all manner of diseases, from syphilis to malaria, from real risks to imaginary symptoms, which nobody else but him seems to be aware of.¹⁶⁹ Quain's corollary of

transmissão do nome, e nada terem a ver com o parentesco consanguíneo. Irmão o cunhado, segundo ela, poderia ser apenas um amigo, alguém do círculo de relações de Quain.” (NN, 76)

167 “Segundo o relato do velho Diniz, corroborado pela carta que Buell Quain escreveu a Ruth Benedict em 15 de setembro de 1938, o jovem etnólogo também não queria participar ou se envolver nesse tipo de relação (‘Não gosto da idéia de me tornar nativo. As concessões que fazia nesse sentido, em Fiji, aqui não só são aceitas como são esperadas’), não queria outra família. Já tinha uma. Ao que parece, tinha razões de sobra para evitar os laços de parentesco. A julgar por algumas de suas últimas cartas, eles foram a razão da sua morte.” (NN, 98)

168 “A ele, só restava observar, que em princípio era a única razão da sua presença entre os Trumai. Quando chegou aqui, estava cansado desse papel. Mas também tinha horror da idéia de ser confundido com as culturas que observava. (...) Me falou das crianças Trumai como exceção, das quais se aproximou na tentativa de compreender os seus jogos, e entre elas, talvez por uma estranha afinidade decorrente do lugar incômodo que ele próprio ocupava na aldeia, justamente como observador, logo percebeu um órfão de dez ou doze anos que era mantido à margem. Era um desajustado. O único ali que, como ele, não tinha família.” (NN, 49)

169 “‘Prezada dona Heloísa, estou morrendo de uma doença contagiosa. A senhora receberá esta carta depois da minha morte. A carta deve ser desinfetada...’” (NN, 19); “Segundo os índios, o etnólogo não mostrava nenhum sintoma de doença física” (NN, 20); “A julgar por certos sintomas na pele, achava que tinha contraído sífilis em consequência de uma aventura casual com uma moça que teria encontrado durante o Carnaval no Rio” (NN, 35); “Ainda na carta a Benedict, ele diz: ‘Minha doença me deixa especialmente angustiado e inseguro em relação ao futuro’, sem especificar do que está falando” (NN, 48); “De volta a Cuiabá, Buell Quain sofreu um ataque de malária” (NN, 53); “Nas notas que deixou sobre os Krahô, Quain se refere a ‘doenças introduzidas’: ‘O estado de saúde na aldeia requer atenção urgente do governo. Além de gripes comuns, as doenças sérias são tuberculose, lepra e provavelmente sífilis. A minha incerteza quanto à sífilis se deve à ausência de manifestações avançadas da doença, tais como mal de Parkinson, ataxia ou paresia. A maioria dos sintomas que observei pode ser causada por tuberculose’. Na sua obsessão, não é impossível que já visse a si mesmo por toda parte.” (NN, 99)

diseases and delusions – a field day for Carvalho – steers the narrative closer and closer to its inevitable conclusion: Bernhardian self-cancellation or Walsearian disappearance. Quain claims the Trumai to be a “dying culture”, to be going through, by killing off their own offspring, a “process of collective self-destruction”, and what Carvalho does with his novel is to show how Quain sees himself in the Trumai and in their fate, how they stand for his own helpless desperation.¹⁷⁰ Having failed in finding a symbolic father under whose umbrella he could thrive, Quain slowly begins his own disappearing act first by claiming “not to have anything else to see in this world”,¹⁷¹ and then – and here the echo of Jakob von Gunten and of Jakob’s conversations with his elder brother is haunting – by stating that what he had truly wanted was to find a place where he wouldn’t be able to see himself, where he would be able to annul his own existence.¹⁷² And that would be death: an excess that cancels itself out, the act of reducing oneself to less than a zero: “On his twenty-seventh birthday, he told me that he knew what death was: an excess that finally goes too far. It’s getting more tired than fatigue allows, exceeding one’s own capacities, reducing oneself to less than zero, using up the twenty-four hours in one day without making it to the next” (NN, 118).

b) *The fictional Bernardo Carvalho: The disruptor of a bourgeois legacy*

The fictional Bernardo Carvalho, as is usual with the author’s characters, is made aware of Buell Quain through a newspaper article, sixty-two years after his death,¹⁷³ and the discovery sends him on an obsessive quest for Quain’s

170 “Me lembro ainda de ele ter comentado, perplexo, que os Trumai, apesar de estarem em vias de extinção, continuavam fazendo abortos e matando recém-nascidos. E que, talvez sem saber, estivessem cometendo um suicídio coletivo, vivendo um processo coletivo de autodestruição... (...) Ele me disse: ‘Uma cultura está morrendo’. Agora, quando penso nas suas palavras cheias de entusiasmo e tristeza, me parece que ele tinha encontrado um povo cuja cultura era a representação coletiva do desespero que ele próprio vivia como um traço de personalidade. E compreendo por que quisesse tanto voltar aos Trumai e ao inferno que me relatou. Como se estivesse cego por algum tipo de obstinação. Queria impedir que desaparecessem para sempre. O livro que escreveria sobre eles seria uma forma de mantê-los vivos, e a si mesmo.” (NN, 50–51)

171 “Uma vez ele me disse: ‘Castro Faria, eu não tenho mais nada para ver no mundo.’” (NN, 36)

172 “Numa das vezes em que me falou de suas viagens pelo mundo, perguntei onde queria chegar e ele me disse que estava em busca de um ponto de vista. Eu lhe perguntei: ‘Para olhar o quê?’. Ele respondeu: ‘Um ponto de vista em que eu já não esteja no campo de visão’. (...) Via-se como um estrangeiro e, ao viajar, procurava apenas voltar para dentro de si, de onde não estaria mais condenado a se ver. Sua fuga foi resultado do seu fracasso. De certo modo, ele se matou para sumir do seu campo de visão, para deixar de se ver.” (NN, 100)

173 “Não posso dizer que nunca tivesse ouvido falar nele, mas a verdade é que não fazia a menor idéia de quem ele era até ler o nome de Buell Quain pela primeira vez num artigo de

life story.¹⁷⁴ Quain's fate in the hinterlands of the Xingu region also allows the fictional Carvalho to fold the narrative upon itself and to autobiographically mirror – but only deceptively so – his own “infernal” childhood (hence the novel's back cover picture) in the same region that witnessed Quain's death.¹⁷⁵ Carvalho's father, both real and fictional – and naturally only the fictional counterpart is of relevance here –, was one of the land-owning pioneers subsidized by the Brazilian government to bring ‘economic development’ into the woods (and to consequently push the indigenous tribes out of it), and whose paternalistic dealings with the surrounding indigenous tribes and overall capitalistic, ruthless aura serve as a counterpoint to the narrator's own literary and journalistic sensibilities (as in Jakob's “*Künstlernatur*” versus his brother's familial bourgeoisie). Aboard his father's appallingly Scotch-taped twin-engined monoplane, the young Carvalho not only observes the ominous first signs of desertification in the rainforest (a fundamental and recurring aesthetic trait of Carvalho's fiction, which will be shortly expanded on), but also eludes death in at least two of the many aircraft- and fire-related disasters scattered throughout *Nove Noites* – and throughout Carvalho's work as a whole.¹⁷⁶ The fictional Carvalho and his fictional father grow estranged as the novel progresses, as it moves from the hinterlands to the urban centers, and in a state of resentful yet detached narration Carvalho

jornal, na manhã de 12 de maio de 2001, um sábado, quase sessenta e dois anos depois da sua morte às vésperas da Segunda Guerra.” (NN, 11)

174 As Klinger (2007, 145) correctly points out, the narrator's infatuation with Quain has to do not only with the comings and goings of Quain's own mysterious life, but also with the broader universe it stands for: the history of anthropology in Brazil. “Bell [sic] Quain não é um personagem construído a partir de um modelo real, como o é qualquer personagem de um relato realista, mas é um personagem que aponta para um outro universo (a história da antropologia no Brasil).”

175 “Ninguém nunca me perguntou, e por isso nunca precisei responder que a representação do inferno, tal como a imagino, também fica, ou ficava, no Xingu da minha infância.” (NN, 53)

176 It is worth noting, as mentioned before, how Carvalho seems to weave his fictional worlds into one single and disaster-ridden universe, where all of his characters are subjected to the same apocalyptic fate. To accomplish that effect, Carvalho resorts in *Nove Noites* to a plot-point which closely and eerily resembles one of his early novels, *Onze*: “Eu mesmo participei, como espectador e vítima, de duas dessas histórias, sendo que a menos grave foi quando meu pai se esqueceu de fazer uma mistura de óleo, um procedimento de praxe que devia ser realizado durante o voo, enquanto atravessávamos já fazia quase uma hora uma tempestade de granizo e raios, entre São Miguel do Araguaia e Goiânia, e o motor direito congelou. (...) No dia em que acordei, a manchete dos jornais era a tragédia de um avião da Varig que se incendiara misteriosamente na rota de descida para Orly, matando boa parte dos tripulantes e todos os passageiros, à exceção de um. O jornal trazia as fotos das celebridades mortas. E de alguma forma associei a grande tragédia ao nosso pequeno acidente, como se houvesse alguma conexão incompreensível entre os dois. O Xingu, em todo caso, ficou guardado na minha memória como a imagem do inferno” (NN, 56; 64).

observes his father's sickly descent into death. The father's passing is coated in heavy apocalyptic and premonitory imagery,¹⁷⁷ and throughout the whole ordeal the narrator avoids all atoning gestures and words – the closest he gets to a kind and understanding remark towards his deceased father, perhaps the only trait that bound them together biologically in the end, is the suspicion that he too was consumed by the fires of self-destruction: “And though he was not a liberal man, I always thought that deep down he had some kind of understanding for and sympathy with people who let themselves be carried away by desire, down paths they cannot choose, paths which often lead to their own destruction” (NN, 121).

The fictional Carvalho finds in Quain a mirror of his own story and of his troubled relationship with his father, seeking, through his obsessive and ultimately unfruitful quest, a rupture with the legacy of privilege and paternalism of his both his father and of his grandfather on his mother's side.¹⁷⁸ By – somewhat foolishly – positing fiction (that is: his own craft; the marginal antidote to his father's Government-approved imperialism) as his mythology,¹⁷⁹ Carvalho articulates – albeit ultimately powerlessly, failingly – a counter-narrative to his privileged youth of bourgeois undertones. The fictional Carvalho, who is set to inherit his father's material and – above all – symbolic estate, finds in Quain, in writing a novel around Quain, a way of disrupting the *status quo* of his own bourgeoisie, first by rejecting his father's and grandfather's legacy, and then by setting

177 “Meu pai morreu há mais de onze anos, às vésperas da guerra que antecedeu a atual e que de certa forma a anunciou. Hoje, as guerras são permanentes. Eu não morava no Brasil.” (NN, 121)

178 Carvalho, both real and fictional, is the grandson of Marechal Cândido Rondon (1865–1958), a well-know explorer of the Western Amazon basin and advocate of indigenous populations. A Marshal in the Brazilian army and an engineer by trade, Rondon oversaw the construction of roads and pioneering telegraph lines, was appointed the first director of Brazil's Indian Protection Service (the then SPI and now FUNAI), and actively supported the creation of the Xingu National Park, where the few remaining Trumai now live. And, as if this wasn't enough of a haunting legacy, the north-western state of Rondônia was also named after him: “Meu pai me fez o favor de anunciar que eu era bisneto do marechal Rondon por parte de mãe. Uma informação que, dali em diante, ele usaria sempre que achasse necessário, como cartão de visita, toda vez que me levava para a selva. A revelação teve um efeito quase imediato, e antes mesmo que eu pudesse entender o que estava acontecendo, o cacique bêbado já tinha ido à aldeia, tomado do próprio filho vários presentes que lhe havia dado (me lembro sobretudo de um tacapeco e de um cocar) e agora insistia, contra a vontade do gerente na portaria, em subir ao nosso quarto para oferecê-los a mim em sinal de boas-vindas” (NN, 58–59).

179 “Eu tentava dizer que, para os brancos que não acreditam em deuses, a ficção servia de mitologia, era o equivalente dos mitos dos índios, e antes mesmo de terminar a frase, já não sabia se o idiota era ele ou eu.” (NN, 86)

himself up for failure and disaster, like Quain and Jakob, thus assuring that the family legacy dies with him.¹⁸⁰

c) *Manoel Perna: The pathetic paternal figure*

Alongside the fictional Carvalho and the letters of Quain, Manoel Perna stands in as the novel's third narrative voice, identified throughout the novel in italics. Also based on a real person, Perna is portrayed as a baroque figure of outdated vocabulary, caring yet powerless, who acts paternally towards both the Trumai and Quain himself – who, claims Perna, could have been his son: “Podia ser meu filho” (NN, 8). Perna is a pathetic figure who is thoroughly annihilated by a combination of his powerless paternal instincts and the mercilessness of Brazilian bureaucracy. He wishes to help but has no means of doing so. He triggers the novel's more sentimental passages, a marked counterpoint to the detached and decidedly non-paternalistic narration of the fictional Carvalho. He is entrusted with giving a proper burial to Quain's body but is never wired the money to do so, and as a result Quain's grave is forever lost in the forest; he is tasked with helping the local indigenous tribes but all that he has that they don't is his literacy and an old address book. Perna is an absolute outcast who does not understand his marginal condition, who believes himself to be in a position to effect change, who tries to do right by the indigenous tribes and by Quain by writing one letter after the other to the competent authorities, most of which go unanswered. Perna does not understand how far away from Brazil he is, how cut off from any place where actual power is held and actual change can be effected. By believing himself central, Perna is completely silenced. Betrayed by his paternal instincts, Perna loses everything he once held dear,¹⁸¹ and on top of that is silenced in the most

180 To that effect, see also Pérez (2011, 96): “Prior to his death, Quain's incessant search was part of seeking a rupture with his own history, with the narrative of privilege and, to a degree, dependence into which he was born and which is associated with western ideals of wealth and social status. Initially, Quain's voyages abroad are brought about by his search for a place where social status and wealth are not the measure of an individual's value, which is why he embarks on the ship in which he sails around the world as a common sailor, and why he chose one of the least reputable places as his home when he first arrives in Brazil. However, in seeking to find himself and his own narrative through finding an external, physical place that would offer him what he was seeking, Quain was setting himself up for disaster”.

181 “Não há nada mais valioso do que a confiança de um amigo. Por isso aprecio os índios, com os quais convivo desde criança, desde o tempo em que o meu avô os amansou. Sempre os recebi na minha casa. Sempre soube o que diziam de mim pelas costas, que me consideravam um pouco louco, aliás como a todos os brancos. Mas a mim importava apenas que pudessem contar comigo. E que soubessem que eu não esperava nada em troca. De mim teriam tudo o que pedissem, e

nefarious way possible: he is allowed to keep on speaking, but nobody listens to him anymore. The fictional Carvalho is the only one who can hear Perna's ghost, who heeds his calling – recurring, impotent, addressed to an unknown future – of “[t]his is for when you get here”. Resorting to the only real power he has ever had, his literacy, the baroque Perna commits to paper the legacy of his nine nights with Quain – a combination of fact and fiction,¹⁸² a sum of efforts either vain or artificial –, and after doing so disappears in his long overdue silence.

d) *The Trumai: The “orphans of civilization”*

The underlying (and refreshingly provocative) assessment of *Nove Noites* is that the typical attitude towards the Brazilian indigenous populations – be it out of guilt or pure negligence – is one of insidious paternalism, and as a result the cold, impatient tone employed by the fictional Carvalho can be easily misread and misconstrued. The voice that echoes behind Carvalho's fictional persona is, of course, that of Lévi-Strauss, by all measures an enigmatic, uncharismatic figure hemmed in his own analytical competence.

Under the teasing guise of not being an anthropologist and therefore not having a good soul – “Não sou antropólogo e não tenho boa alma”¹⁸³ (NN, 98) –,

Deus sabe que seus pedidos não têm fim. Fiz tudo o que pude por eles. E também pelo dr. Buell. Dei a ele o mesmo que aos índios. A mesma amizade. Porque, como os índios, ele estava só e desamparado. E, a despeito do que pensou ou escreveu, não passava de um menino. Podia ser meu filho. Nada me abalou tanto. Nem mesmo quando fui destituído das funções de encarregado do posto indígena Manoel da Nóbrega pelo sr. Cildo Meireles, inspetor do Serviço de Proteção aos índios, três anos depois da tragédia, quando ele me recomendou que dali em diante eu deixasse o meu coração a cinco léguas de distância do posto e me afastasse para sempre dos índios – não queria me ver pela frente. Nem mesmo a humilhação de ter sido dispensado do cargo que ocupei por pouco mais de um ano e que o próprio dr. Buell tinha me ajudado a conquistar em defesa dos índios, graças às cartas de recomendação que enviou ao Rio de Janeiro. E nem mesmo o massacre da aldeia de Cabeceira Grossa, que o dr. Buell talvez tivesse podido impedir se ainda estivesse vivo e entre eles quando os fazendeiros prepararam a emboscada um ano depois do seu suicídio. Nada me entristeceu tanto quanto o fim do meu amigo, cuja memória decidi honrar. Eu o acolhi quando chegou. Nada do que tenha pensado ou escrito pode me causar rancor, nunca esperei nada em troca, porque sei que, no fundo, fui a última pessoa com quem ele pôde contar.” (NN, 8–9)

182 “O que ele me contou era para eu guardar como se não tivesse ouvido. E foi o que fiz. Era a minha herança. (...) O que lhe conto é uma combinação do que ele me contou e do que imaginei. Assim também, deixo-o imaginar o que nunca poderei lhe contar ou escrever.” (NN, 119)

183 How not to hear the echo of Lévi-Strauss' growing irritation towards the display of “bons sentiments” that periodically befalls the French intellectual arena? “...et surtout, beaucoup de choses s'étaient passées pendant ces vingt années, dont, en ce qui me concerne, un agacement croissant devant un étalage périodique de bons sentiments comme si cela pouvait suffire” (Eribon and Lévi-Strauss, 2009, 206).

the fictional Carvalho draws an unflattering picture of the Trumai, bouncing them back and forth like a ping-pong ball between the helpless paternalism of Manoel Perna and his own annoyed indifference, with these two narrative instances coated by outbreaks of inefficient Brazilian bureaucracy and by Quain's own frustration *vis-à-vis* the Trumai, whose laziness and crippling paranoia he could hardly stomach.¹⁸⁴

Carvalho builds on such unflattering – and at times disdainful – picture in order to portray to which extent the Trumai are a dying and self-destructing culture in desperate search for a father, clutching at straws, trying at all costs to forge alliances in the world of white people, to be adopted into the family:

I had been a child, and now I was suddenly like a lapsed father who finally has a chance to make up for his absences and past failures. It's hard to make sense of such a relationship. They are the orphans of civilization. They are abandoned. They need allies in the white world, a world they make an effort, usually vain, to understand. And a relationship based on mutual adoption is by definition unbalanced, since the Krahô go to the whites much more often than the whites go to the Krahô. The world belongs to the whites. Their neediness is irremediable. They don't want to be forgotten. They attach themselves to anyone who comes through the village, as if visitors were long-lost parents. They want you to be part of the family. They need you to be a father, mother, and brother.¹⁸⁵

It may momentarily slip one's mind, due to the novel's painstaking research and deceiving historical Realism, but the problems stated in *Nove Noites* are of a literary – and not anthropologic – nature, and in that sense the plight of the Trumai

184 “O fato é que no começo Quain achou os Trumai ‘chatos e sujos’ (‘Essa gente está entediada e não sabe’), o contrário dos nativos com quem convivera em Fiji e que transformara num modelo de reserva e dignidade. Julgava os Trumai por oposição a sua única outra experiência de campo: ‘Dormem cerca de onze horas por noite (um sono atormentado pelo medo) e duas horas por dia. Não têm nada mais importante a fazer além de me vigiar. Uma criança de oito ou nove anos parece já saber tudo o que precisa na vida. Os adultos são irrefreáveis nos seus pedidos. Não gosto deles. Não há nenhuma cerimônia em relação ao contato físico e, assim, passo por desagradável ao evitar ser acariciado. Não gosto de ser besuntado com pintura corporal. Se essas pessoas fossem bonitas, não me incomodaria tanto, mas são as mais feias do Coliseu.’” (NN, 48)

185 “De criança eu tinha passado a pai relapso a quem finalmente é dada a chance de reparar seus erros passados e sua ausência. É difícil entender a relação. São os órfãos da civilização. Estão abandonados. Precisam de alianças no mundo dos brancos, um mundo que eles tentam entender com esforço e em geral em vão. O problema é que a relação de adoção mútua já nasce desequilibrada, uma vez que a frequência com que os Krahô vêm aos brancos é muito maior do que a frequência com que os brancos vão aos Krahô. Uma vez que o mundo é dos brancos. Há neles uma carência irreparável. Não querem ser esquecidos. Agarram-se como podem a todos os que passam pela aldeia, como se os visitantes fossem os pais há muito desaparecidos. Querem que você faça parte da família. Precisam que você seja pai, mãe e irmão.” (NN, 97)

plays into Carvalho's penchant for depicting "the last human beings", but with a cruel twist: what the Trumai yearn for is exactly that which Carvalho's characters cannot give. *Nove Noites* is not a well-meaning novel that wishes to atone for past sins or to set the world to rights, but rather a caustic novel about imploding microcosms and how they can domino each other into the ground.¹⁸⁶ Like Walser's characters in *Träumen* trying to determine the smallest possible – yet still manageable – distance between themselves and their fellow citizens, Carvalho, basking in the ambiguity of his civilizing project and empowered by an older, controversial Lévi-Strauss,¹⁸⁷ articulates with *Nove Noites* a provocative question: how – when trying to determine one's own cultural identity, one's own symbolic affiliation – to strike a balance between oneself and the world, between not communicating enough and communicating too much.

e) *The orphaned American and the triumph of fiction*

Wrapped in apocalyptic and paranoid undertones (the immediate post-9/11, the invisible anthrax menace), the novel's dénouement finds the fictional Carvalho in a heavily surveilled New York City burning the last of his bridges regarding

186 “Na mesma carta, encontrada entre seus pertences levados pelos Krahô para Carolina, Quain reclamava das dificuldades de trabalhar com os índios no Brasil: ‘Acredito que isso possa ser atribuído à natureza indisciplinada e invertebrada da própria cultura brasileira. Meus índios estão habituados a lidar com o tipo degenerado de brasileiro rural que se estabeleceu nesta vizinhança – é terra marginal e a escória do Brasil vive dela. Tanto os brasileiros como os índios que tenho visto são crianças mimadas que berram se não obtêm o que desejam e nunca mantêm as suas promessas, uma vez que você lhes dá as costas. O clima é anárquico e nada agradável. A sociedade parece ter se esgarçado. Minha dificuldade aqui pode ser atribuída em grande parte à influência brasileira. O Brasil, por sua vez, sem dúvida absorveu muitas das marcas mais desagradáveis das culturas indígenas com as quais teve contato inicialmente.” (NN, 108)

187 “Duas vezes entrevistei Lévi-Strauss em Paris, muito antes de me passar pela cabeça que um dia viria a me interessar pela vida e pela morte de um antropólogo americano que ele conhecera em sua breve passagem por Cuiabá, em 1938. Muito antes de eu ouvir falar em Buell Quain. Numa das entrevistas, a propósito de uma polêmica sobre o racismo e a xenofobia na França, em que tinha sido mal interpretado, Lévi-Strauss reafirmou a sua posição: ‘Quanto mais as culturas se comunicam, mais elas tendem a se uniformizar, menos elas têm a comunicar. O problema para a humanidade é que haja comunicação suficiente entre as culturas, mas não excessiva. Quando eu estava no Brasil, há mais de cinquenta anos, fiquei profundamente emocionado, é claro, com o destino daquelas pequenas culturas ameaçadas de extinção. Cinquenta anos depois, faço uma constatação que me surpreende: também a minha própria cultura está ameaçada’. Dizia que toda cultura tenta defender a sua identidade e originalidade por resistência e oposição ao outro, e que havia chegado a hora de defender a originalidade ameaçada da sua própria cultura. Falava da ameaça do islã, mas podia estar falando igualmente dos americanos e do imperialismo cultural anglo-saxão.” (NN, 46)

Quain's mysterious existence. Fate had it that his dying father should share a hospital room with an equally dying American photographer, who, with his final breath, uttered the name "Bill Cohen" (NN, 130), which the fictional Carvalho construes as a mispronunciation of Buell Quain. Upon tracking down the photographer's son in New York, one awkwardly named Schlomo Parsons, the fictional Carvalho learns about the son's many orphanhoods: after his mother's death, his father – either crazed or a deserter¹⁸⁸ – left for Brazil and gave him up to his paternal grandfathers, who, in turn, by the time he was seventeen, kicked him out of the house following a letter in which his father claimed not to be his biological father. His actual father had supposedly "died in the middle of Brazil when he was trying to come back to see [him]"¹⁸⁹.

The perfectly ambiguous and perversely inconclusive set-up gives the final and decisive fictional twist to *Nove Noites*, which had already been clearly stated – and duly reiterated – as the fictional Carvalho first set foot in New York.¹⁹⁰ Through his fictional Doppelgänger, deeply rooted in reality and therefore deeply misleading, Carvalho starts digging his way out of – while simultaneously burying himself in – the steep Realist trap he conceived with *Nove Noites*: by having him announce that his only option out of his all-consuming Quain-obsession was to indeed write the novel he was expected to write – and what's more: to turn the whole story into fiction –, Carvalho is both emphasizing the identity-defining role the act of novel-writing plays for his Doppelgänger, and, more importantly, hiding in plain sight the fact that the fiction began with novel's very first word.

At that point, after months of digging through the archives, poring through books, and reading the notes of people who no longer existed, I needed to see a face, even if only as an antidote to the endless, bottomless obsession that was keeping me from writing my so-called novel (the justification I had used whenever people asked), that was paralyzing me, making

188 "Disse que sabia apenas que o pai tinha vindo para o Brasil pouco antes de os Estados Unidos entrarem na Segunda Guerra, sem maiores explicações, e nunca mais dera notícias, pelo que a família havia concluído que se tratava de um ato de loucura ou que houvesse desertado." (NN, 140)

189 "Na carta, o meu pai dizia que não era meu pai e me pedia desculpas. Achava que agora eu já era um homenzinho e precisava saber das coisas. Dizia que eu não tinha sido abandonado por ele, que o meu pai de verdade tinha morrido no coração do Brasil, quando tentava voltar para me conhecer." (NN, 147)

190 "A ficção começou no dia em que botei os pés nos Estados Unidos" (NN, 142); "As palavras dali em diante não teriam nenhuma importância. Eu podia dizer o que quisesse, podia não fazer o menor sentido, só não podia dizer a verdade. Só a verdade poria tudo a perder" (NN, 144); "A realidade é o que se compartilha." (NN, 149)

me fear that the reality would be much more terrible and surprising than I could imagine and would only be revealed when it was already too late, when the research was done and the book was published. Because now I really was ready to write a work of fiction.¹⁹¹

With von Gunten-esque pathos, or with a broader Walserian pleasure for projecting and aestheticizing his own *Lebenspraxis*,¹⁹² Carvalho instills in the orphaned American the roundest of zeros, the blankest of slates, the most *rasa* of all *tabulae*: a many times fatherless character uncertain of his real history and allegiances, his past wide open for the deception of fiction, for creating his own symbolic affiliation.

5.2.6 “Daqui para frente, é o deserto”: The fire and the desert in Carvalho’s work

Ich komme mir nur selbst entgegen
In einer leeren Wüstenei.

—Tieck, *William Lovell*

As far as landscapes go, *Nove Noites* ends on a contradicting juxtaposition: flying over the Brazilian rainforest, near where Quain killed himself, the fictional Carvalho thinks of the Peruvian desert: “I suddenly remembered learning, on one of those television shows about ancient civilizations, that the Nazca of the Peruvian desert cut out the tongues of the dead and tied them up in a bag so that they could never return to torment the living” (NN, 150). The novel ends on this seemingly unexpected imagery of the desert, and what *Jakob von Gunten*’s arid ending had of exotic, Carvalho’s has of anthropologic. The scenic juxtaposition plays into Carvalho’s already discussed strategy of emptying out landscapes of their exotic or exoticizing component, leaving in its stead a

191 “Àquela altura dos acontecimentos, depois de meses lidando com papéis de arquivos, livros e anotações de gente que não existia, eu precisava ver um rosto, nem que fosse como antídoto à obsessão sem fundo e sem fim que me impedia de começar a escrever o meu suposto romance (o que eu havia dito a muita gente), que me deixava paralisado, com o medo de que a realidade seria sempre muito mais terrível e surpreendente do que eu podia imaginar e que só se revelaria quando já fosse tarde, com a pesquisa terminada e o livro publicado. Porque agora eu já estava disposto a fazer dela realmente uma ficção.” (NN, 140–141)

192 “Das bindet Walsers Schicksal an den Charakter seiner Romanfiguren. Der Souveränitätsgestus des ‘Ich bin nichts’ gehört zur Ästhetisierung seiner eigenen Lebenspraxis. Er ist Ausdruck einer gesellschaftlichen Distanzierung, wie der spezifische Einsamkeitsstatus der Romanhelden sie bestätigt.” (Hinz, 1987, 159)

barren setting thinly populated by a dying breed. The motif of the desert in Carvalho is neither sublime nor Biblical; it is, in fact, quite the opposite: it stands for a total and complete lack of paradise, for a world without safe haven. What draws Carvalho to the desert are not images of a distant and mystical Orient, or the alien, awe-inspiring undulations of its terrain – it is rather its barren emptiness, the combination of fire and infertility: a charred, scorched expanse of endless, hopeless land.

Carvalho's infatuation with the desert is more linguistic than imagetic; it builds upon a feeling of isolation and abandonment, of desertion and deserted places, of being left to one's own devices, to fend for oneself in a world that is undoing itself. The first appearance of the desert in Carvalho's work dates back to his *début* short-story collection, *Aberração*, in the guise of a costly burial to be held in "the most deserted of regions", the only suitable place for a definitive disappearing act, and a very pregnant indication of what the desert would later on mean in his work. With the exception of *Medo de Sade*, Carvalho's first cycle of novels all feature in one way or another a linguistic depiction of the desert, either as deserted or arid places (O, 116; I, 7, 12, 25, 128–130), or as central plot-points and conceptual backdrops, such as in *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*¹⁹³ and *Teatro*,¹⁹⁴ or in the 1996 short-story *Quatro Movimentos Progressivos do Calor*, in

193 In *Os Bêbados e os Sonâmbulos*, the desert stands for the highly symbolic and recurring scenery of a novel that intertwines the motifs of visual arts, photography, obsession, and apocalypse: "...Sempre achei essa paisagem estranha. Mas não sei dizer. Essa gente nessa paisagem. Essa gente não podia estar nessa paisagem!", disse quase indignada. Tinha uma certa razão. O que estavam fazendo aqueles banhistas no meio de um deserto? E além do mais de olhos fechados?" (BS, 21); "Perguntei que quadro era aquele e ele me pediu para imaginar uma mulher sentada numa paisagem inóspita, uma espécie de deserto. Enquanto me falava, me lembrei do quadro no apartamento da testemunha. Quando eu disse que uma vez tinha visto um quadro assim, só que com cinco pessoas deitadas ao sol, ele me interrompeu, mudou de assunto" (BS, 67). The desert represents a "desolate landscape" par excellence: "Era um descampado, uma paisagem desolada. Podia ser uma praia ou um deserto" (BS, 85). See also BS, 38–39, 70.

194 The desert, in *Teatro*, is the stretch of land that stands between the center and the periphery, the hopeless limbo between the First and Third worlds: "Quando atravessou a fronteira, fugindo da miséria e da insanidade de um mundo à margem, não podia imaginar que o filho que a mulher carregava na barriga um dia faria o mesmo caminho, só que em sentido contrário, fugindo ele também, só que agora para o mais longe do bem-estar que os pais buscaram; que eu teria de fugir de volta para a periferia... (...) Vim pelo deserto. (...) Não imaginam que alguém como eu possa querer fugir dali, daquele 'paraíso sobre a terra', dizia o meu pai. Somente os bandidos e os assassinos recorrem a essa última solução. Não matei ninguém. Não roubei nada. Só ouvi. Durante anos a fio. Ouvi como se fosse mudo. É isso o que roubei: o que ouvi e o que escrevi. Não trago nada nos meus bolsos. Tudo está na minha cabeça" (T, 10–11). See also T, 20, 22, 78, 79, 99, 106, 111.

which four characters experience the effects of a progressively warming environment: a slightly feverish masochist reveling in the 39 degrees Celsius of a never-before-seen heat wave; a reclusive botanist living far away from the city at 45 degrees, there where the vegetation becomes sparser, the woods turn into a savanna, and the savanna into nothing at all; a prophetic student from Lapland (50 degrees) who had been gifted a book with pictures of the desert and to whom subsequently the desert became an obsession, leaving her no other option than to go to the desert looking for what she couldn't see in the pictures; a doomed fireman trying to both rescue and soothe a voice coming from the rubbles of a fire at a boiling 90 degrees by telling it a story, going further and further down into the flames until realizing that it was the voice that was telling *him* a story, and that now there was no way out from the fire.¹⁹⁵

Fire is a recurring theme in both Walser and Carvalho, but whereas in Walser fire possesses a redeeming aesthetic quality, in Carvalho it merely obeys the logic of disaster and subtraction: one after the other planes are crashing in Carvalho's work, buildings catching fire, the flames engulfing the nearby area. And even if deprived of an aesthetic component, as in Walser's auto-combusting fictional world, Carvalho's politics of fire achieves in the end a similar goal to that of Walser: it creates space.¹⁹⁶ *Nove Noites* stands out in that sense, a novel which builds upon the unreal and at times dystopian effect elicited by the fire in Wal-

195 “O masoquista (39 graus) (...) Na televisão eles diziam que a situação era drástica, que a cidade nunca tinha passado por um tal onda de calor...” (MFE, 220–221); “O botânico (45 graus) Conforme os jornalistas se afastavam da cidade, a vegetação se rarefazia, passando de mata a cerrado, e de cerrado a nada” (MFE, 221); “A estudante lapônia (50 graus) (...) O cronista lhe perguntou o que D.M. [the student] tinha ido fazer no Saara, uma espécie de suicídio, afinal, e a irmã lhe respondeu que a desde menina, no curso complementar, o deserto havia sido uma obsessão, que D. tentara aplacar inutilmente folheando as páginas de um livro. ‘Foi ao deserto atrás do que não podia ver nas fotografias’” (MFE, 222–223); “O bombeiro (90 graus) (...) Para acalmá-la, enquanto não a alcança, resolve contar-lhe uma história, a única que conhece, a sua própria vida, que avança à medida que ele também avança pelas colunas de fogo e a fumaça que o intoxica, aproximando-se da voz, cada vez mais para dentro do calor. E, enquanto conta a sua história, ouve a voz. Mas, de repente, dá-se conta de que, na realidade, é a voz que está lhe contando a história, que a voz é sua e que, portanto, sua história termina ali.” (MFE, 223)

196 “Walser's fire does not destroy. It transforms, embellishes, offers room for contemplation. And, more than that, it leads to innovation. (...) Fire not only provides the audience with an ephemeral show, but also yields enduring results, namely the creation of space...” (Gomes, 2013, 116).

ser's oeuvre and uses it to create space following the apocalyptic logic of deforestation,¹⁹⁷ explosions¹⁹⁸ and conflagrations.¹⁹⁹

From the point of view of landscape and of what this landscape metonymically means to the characters, *Nove Noites* is a novel about desertification in which the opening imageries of exotic forests and vegetations are progressively emptied out throughout the narrative and replaced with barrenness and desolation. Quain and the fictional Carvalho are further bound by their travels and complex relationships towards the exotic – whereas Quain sought salvation in the exotic, Carvalho equates it with hell.²⁰⁰ And the more the fictional Carvalho subsumes his own story and worldview into Quain's, the more the novel follows the path of fire and destruction, the burning up of the exotic, of dead and unheimlich landscapes

197 “Dizem que hoje tudo mudou e que a região está irreconhecível. A floresta tropical se transformou em campos de fazendas. A mata desapareceu, caiu e foi queimada, mas na época impunha-se como uma ameaça aterrorizante, a ponto de ser difícil para uma criança entender o que os homens podiam ter ido buscar naquele fim de mundo. (...) A sede da Vitoriosas, suspensa no meio do nada e da floresta, era parada obrigatória quando o meu pai resolvia avaliar o estado das obras da estrada que pretendia abrir no meio da selva entre as terras do Chiquinho e a Santa Cecília, e que teria concluído não fosse o literal mar de lama que a engoliu depois da derrubada das árvores e da passagem resfolegante dos tratores, niveladoras e caminhões da civilização.” (NN, 54); “O desmatamento deixava a selva em polvorosa. Animais e pássaros gritavam por toda parte, e havia enxames de abelhas pretas, que cobriam os braços dos homens” (NN, 62).

198 “Recomendou ao mecânico que abrisse a porta antes de o avião tocar o solo e disse que, assim que batêssemos no chão, nós dois devíamos nos atirar, porque o avião podia explodir” (NN, 63).

199 “Em julho de 1967, o hotel tinha se transformado em cenário de uma fotonovela exótica da revista Sétimo Céu. Era um prédio moderno, de dois andares, que lembrava Brasília à beira do Araguaia. Dizem que foi abandonado pouco depois e que pegou fogo. Deve estar caindo aos pedaços, se é que ainda existe” (NN, 58).

200 “Buell Quain também havia acompanhado o pai em viagens de negócios. Quando tinha catorze anos, foram a uma convenção do Rotary Club na Europa. Visitaram a Holanda, a Alemanha e os países escandinavos. E daí em diante nunca mais parou de viajar. Mas se para Quain, que saía do Meio-Oeste para a civilização, o exótico foi logo associado a uma espécie de paraíso, à diferença e à possibilidade de escapar ao seu próprio meio e aos limites que lhe haviam sido impostos por nascimento, para mim as viagens com o meu pai proporcionaram antes de mais nada uma visão e uma consciência do exótico como parte do inferno. (...) O Xingu, em todo caso, ficou guardado na minha memória como a imagem do inferno” (NN, 57; 64).

(“sensação sinistra de reconhecimento”),²⁰¹ of fire-and-cinders metaphors,²⁰² of deserted villages in the scorching heat of 40 degrees Celsius.²⁰³ The immediate victims of these increasingly urgent instances of desertification and desolation are the indigenous tribes, cornered in a desert of their own whose depiction draws back to *Aberração*’s “most deserted of regions”: “Why are the Indians there? Because they were pushed and pursued and fled into the most inhospitable and inaccessible place, the most terrible place imaginable for their survival, and yet the only, and last, place they could survive” (NN, 64–65). The disaster announced in *Nove Noites*, however, does not end in these pockets of helpless, marginalized populations; it slowly starts to spread like wildfire or a curse, and as the surrounding areas become increasingly barren and the land worthless, the more this subtle suggestion of superstition, of prophecy and doom, seeps into the narrative: “The previous site had been abandoned because it had become infertile. I don’t know how much superstition was involved in the decision. They said the ground was bad” (NN, 80–81). It is thus not that unexpected that the novel – like Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* – should end not in an *actual* desert, but heavily immersed in oneiric or phantasmatic images of the desert. And neither should it come as a surprise that *Mongólia*, Carvalho’s follow-up novel published only one year after *Nove Noites* (and both novels are deeply, if not intrinsically, connected), should be a novel ostensibly *about* the desert.

The desert surfaces in both authors’ works as a linguistic representation which is neither random nor naïve, neither truly idyllic nor exotic, but the culmination of the trajectory which this research sought to uncover and analyze. In the desert the landscape achieves its conceptual climax as a function of the authors’ language and narrative agenda.

201 “Carolina é um lugar morto, como disse Quain ao desembarcar ali pela primeira vez, mas que tem a sua graça, ainda mais hoje, por ser resultado de uma tranqüila decadência e abandono, como se tudo tivesse parado e sido preservado no tempo. A estrada que vem de Araguaína desemboca em frente à cidade, do outro lado do Tocantins, no que a rigor não passa de um povoado, não mais que umas poucas ruas, mas ao qual deram o nome extraordinário e inverossímil de Filadélfia. Quando o rio, caudaloso mesmo na estiagem, se abriu à nossa frente, conforme descíamos para pegar a balsa, e eu pude ver o pequeno porto na margem oposta e o estaleiro Pipes, fui imediatamente tomado por uma sensação sinistra de reconhecimento, como se eu já tivesse avistado aquela paisagem antes.” (NN, 67–68)

202 “Não achei nada entre os papéis que se esfacelavam como pó entre os dedos, processos de homicídios, crimes passionais e por dinheiro, brigas familiares e suicídios, esmagados em pastas empoeiradas no alto de estantes esquecidas em cômodos sem janelas, verdadeiras fornalhas nos fundos de casas antigas e térreas no meio do sertão.” (NN, 69)

203 “Perambulei pela cidade deserta. Fazia um calor de quarenta graus. (...) Volta e meia uma figura solitária passava lá embaixo, escondida sob uma sombrinha. Eu estava só.” (NN, 69)