

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Gad Hollander, *Walserian Waltzes*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Sebald, “Le promeneur solitaire”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

–Carvalho, *Onze*

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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estavam se perdendo; dizia que a publicidade estava substituindo a realidade (...) e que o mercado e a especulação haviam massacrado todos os valores reais. (...) [A]s palavras eram suas, mas também podiam ser minhas, porque para mim, no fundo, era difícil não concordar..." (T, 25-27).

<sup>82</sup> See the essays "O Natal de Robert Walser" (MFE, 36-39), and "Cinema do Presente" (MFE, 104-106).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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