

## Exploring the Logic of Madness: The Utopian Unity of Violence and Dialogue in Robert Walser's *Der Räuber*

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**RESUMEN:** Mediante la utilización de las teorías de la deconstrucción y la fenomenología, la autora propone una lectura de la obra de Robert Walser, *Der Räuber*, en la que las estrategias narrativas de la paradoja y la auto-reflexividad textual permiten la subversión del universo literario y socio-político que se presenta en la novela. Los conceptos de lo negativo y lo positivo se invierten para conseguir que el lector, así como los elementos desfavorecidos de la sociedad que se mencionan en la obra, tomen conciencia de su posición, como estadio inicial para su superación, en lo que podría considerarse el potencial democrático del texto. Las representaciones de la violencia presentes en la obra se abordan desde una perspectiva pragmática y performativa que revela las implicaciones éticas derivadas de las estrategias textuales empleadas en la novela. De esa manera, se abre la posibilidad de superar las lecturas monológicas que el narrador o el texto pretenden imponer.

*Palabras clave:* violencia, representación cultural, metadiscursividad, performatividad, ética, inversión, deconstrucción.

**ABSTRACT:** With the aid of Deconstruction and Phenomenology, the narrative strategies of paradox and self-reflexivity employed in Walser's *Der Räuber* are examined so as to evaluate how they may subvert the literary, social and political universes presented in the novel. Violence is analysed for its pragmatic and performative force, in order to highlight the ethical implications of its representation, as well as what could be considered the democratic potential of the text. The inversion of polar opposites (such as the concepts of good and evil) becomes a central strategy in suggesting alternatives to the apparently monological readings emanating from the narrator's manipulation of textuality.

*Keywords:* violence, cultural representation, meta-discourses, performativity, ethics, inversion, deconstruction.

## 1. Literature and Representation: Modes of Semantic Attribution

Es begegnen mir da zu viele Gerechte, die wollen mich alle meistern.  
(*Der Räuber*: 111)

Violence is a phenomenon that every reader is familiar with and which is commonly associated with war, danger, hate and bodily injury. In other words, we can think of different ways to represent violence that are linked to a particular context. In his discussion of Poetics and Hermeneutics, Jonathan Culler (2000: 68) points out the drawbacks of «symptomatic interpretation»: studies that treat literature as a symptom of non-textual phenomena neglect the specificity of textual representations. More useful than a strictly symptomatic interpretation might be an analysis that starts from the presupposition that every text intends to say something valuable, thus advocating interpretations that combine the reconstruction of «the original context of production» with a critical attitude towards «the unexamined assumptions on which a text may rely (political, sexual, philosophical, linguistic)» (Culler, 2000: 68). Even though this hermeneutical approach takes into account the pragmatics of institutionalised representations, it fails to acknowledge the performative power inherent to the literary context.

Within the literary text the discrepancy between performance and semantics calls into question the possibility of projecting (the significance of) semantic - e.g. cultural - practices onto literary texts. Ever since literature's mimetic capacity became contested and poststructuralist trends in several fields of study overthrew the paradigm of analogy, interpretations foregrounding the link between literature and outside reality have been criticized. Deconstructionists and poststructuralists have insisted on the fact that the false assumption of a one-on-one relation between a signifier and a signified leads to verbal oppression. Even the urge for interpretation itself has been viewed as a mechanism of violence and exploitation.

Two considerations that arise from the drawbacks of Hermeneutics help to outline our approach to the concept of violence. First of all, context-oriented analyses reconstruct *ex negativo* - and often on the basis of synchronous interests - external, cultural influences on individual texts. In contrast, we will adopt an affirmative approach to literary representations in general, and to those of violence in particular, stressing the active engagement of literary texts with societal phenomena. To this avail, institutionalised opinions and depictions of violence should be considered as elements belonging to a historical repertory (Iser, 1976: 116) that represents the background against which the text's *particular* communicative capacity is aimed. Secondly, we have to overcome the dual view of the affirmative and negative modifications of accepted modes of representation by introducing an interpretational methodology that diversifies the concept of violence. That is

why violence will not be analysed with respect to textual semantics but according to its pragmatic force.

In «Mimesis und Performanz», Wolfgang Iser (1991: 405) provides important insights into the status of literary representations by insisting on textual performance: «Die Anzeige einer anwesenden Abwesenheit leistet der ästhetische Schein, der zum einen die Illusion einer Gegenwart von dem erzeugt, was nicht ist, und zum anderen als Schein durchschaubar bleiben muß, damit Nicht-Seiendes nicht zum Sein werde». Iser focuses on literature's double-bind, that originates in the simultaneity of presence and absence. The duality inscribed in the text is symbolised by the *breach* («Riß»): «Der Bruch mit der Objektwelt ist als Riß im Kunstwerk gegenwärtig» (Iser, 1991: 405).

The recognition of the *breach* poses ethical considerations that have an impact on the way we think about culture and that are of importance when analysing Walser's novel. If literary contents are measured against existing patterns, established foundations are reinforced and the interaction necessary for societal development stagnates. In a world of increasing modernisation and technology, where «simulacra» - in a vaguely Baudrillardian sense - are starting to play down reality in favour of deforming artificial products, the *breach* operates as a reminder of patterns of identity and cultural formation by confronting the reader with contingency and difference.

Iser (1991: 407) discards the idea that texts display a difference between an original and its imitation. It is not because representations in novels deviate from or adhere to semantic formations known by the reader that they should be read as a critique or a support of existing constellations respectively. The incompatibility of absence and presence stimulates a *movement of play*, «in dessen Entfaltung sich nichts gleich bleibt» (Iser, 1991: 407). The *game* constitutes «a process of transforming positions» (Iser, 1996: 335), where the tropes of change, paradox and negation undermine any straightforward reception and stimulate constant change.<sup>1</sup>

The «game» metaphor has implications for the way in which representations of violence function in *Der Räuber*. First of all, specific depictions of violence in the novel point towards its different staging in alternative cotexts, so that it cannot be viewed as a linguistic and semantic unity. On the contrary, the concept is gradually developed in the course of the narrative and suggested to be incomplete after the reading is completed. What we need to investigate is whether, behind the plurality of «representations of violence», there lies a meaning in the text's

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1. Nieraad (1994: 25-26) points out that experiences of beauty, harmony and proportion could be seen as mechanisms to quiet down people and demonize violence and the unknown. Novels like Walser's, that tempt the reader to overcome their habitual reading habits by inserting a shifting and paradoxical narrative voice, could be called violent and contingent.

pragmatics that has ethical implications (Miller, 1995). In order to accomplish this, we have to consider how individual representations of violence work rhetorically, that is, how images are deconstructed and reconstructed by means of negative signals and tropes, and how they are interrelated with other passages representing - «staging» - violence. Secondly, an ethics of violence should itself be defined pragmatically, according to the effects that it has on the reader and on the act of reading.

What we propose in this article is a methodology that allows for a discussion of violence on the basis of telling acts and focalisation by the narrative voice.<sup>2</sup> The presence of the *narrative voice* and the influence it takes on the rendering of the story will in the following be highlighted because of its suggestion of power relations: «Neben die Gewalt tritt also Autorität als andere Form der Machtausübung» (Nieraad, 1994: 20). Following Iser (2003: 219), the *act of narrating* itself will be discussed as an explicit and self-reflexive strategy that stages inconsistency and paradox in order to let the reader reflect on the function of representations of harmony and violence.<sup>3</sup> Although these insights seem to take us away exactly from the initial aim of this investigation - to analyse Walser's novel affirmatively, i.e., according to its specific meaning and ethical implications - self-reflexive structures, wavering and secrecy (Miller, 2003: 261) do give rise to a new sort of authority.

Culler rendered the «symptom» problematic because of the fragile link it establishes between anthropologically differentiated worlds. Still, in self-reflexive literary works that appear as the consequence rather than the container of the *auctorial* stance, the symptom can be turned into an agent of criticism. Representations of violence can in turn become the object of representation and demand attention for the effects of existing imagery and symptomatic readings. The notion of oscillation, as a movement feeding upon the incongruence and difference of representation, has led to an affirmative approach towards the concept of negation, known as «aesthetic negativity». Though negativity is a philosophical category that reaches far beyond concrete imaginative processes, it will first and foremost be treated as an «open» mental concept that conditions the representation of violence in *Der Räuber*.

The way «openness» is stimulated by literary strategies raises and answers questions with a strong sociological bias. We have to be aware of the interrelation between literature and literary theory, on the one hand, and the way «openness» and «negativity» function in both of them, on the other. To that avail, we will describe through which strategies violence in Walser's novel is represented, as

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2. Monika Fludernik (2003) makes a plea for reorienting narratological studies towards the mimetic illusion of story-telling and story-teller.
  3. Iser's (2003) theory of literary reception defines «omniscient narration», not as a form of authority, but as «Urheberschaft», an anonymous zero point which becomes self-reflexive.

well as the ethical implications derived from it, by resorting to the concept of «simultaneity», as defined by deconstructionist theory. When deconstruction insists on its affirmative implications (Derrida, 1996), it refers to itself as the counterpart of established norms, in order to make them re-evaluate their positions. Derrida's works are often said to leave no cognitive residue, but his style of writing in fact illustrates the principle it wishes to uphold to present constellations. It makes an implicit reference to the deconstructibility of all systems: it uncovers all systems' contingent borders. In Walser's novel, «simultaneity» is defined as a textually induced reading strategy that has communicative effects, since it thrives on a partial overlapping – a dialogising – of semantic and pragmatic functions. It tackles fixed categories and provides a new angle to define violence.

Our reading of Walser's novel acknowledges the importance of describing violence aimed against minorities (women, homosexuals, foreigners, the working classes), but departs from the assumption that such representations are identical to the text's treatment of violence as such, thus widening its applicative value for the reader. *Der Räuber* is approached in the light of its minute renderings of violence and the ethical implications of its textual strategies. We will describe the performative force of violence within the text's social system and the alternative view it offers on (representations of) violence.

## 2. Robert Walser's Ethics of Robbing

Einst ließ er aus nichts als Nachgiebigkeit, aus Menschenfreundlichkeit hunderttausend Mark in den Händen anderer liegen. (*Der Räuber*: 7)

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with a narrative voice that abuses the «Räuber» in a harsh and patronising way. He calls him an untalented good-for-nothing who joins in the laughter when being laughed at, gets on everyone's nerves and has not even got a friend. Hence, the words «generosity» and «friendliness» in the quote seem to be used ironically.<sup>4</sup> In the past, scholars who performed a close reading of the novel's first chapter either overlooked this sentence or interpreted it as an indication that the «Räuber» was a generous man who, at some point in the past, had given away a lot of money. It can, however, be read in a different way that stimulates the reader to revise from the start the aggressive and derogatory tone of the narrator. The verb «liegenlassen» denotes the absence of action by a person who has the

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4. Peter Villwock (1993) points out that, despite the context, these words attribute positive characteristics to the «Räuber». Although «Nachgiebigkeit» is juxtaposed with «Mitmenschlichkeit», by expressing a different point of view difference is stressed.

opportunity to take something away, and implies that the person ignored the possibility of stealing. The reason why the «Räuber» does not perform what is promoted by the narrator as something natural is that he does not identify with society's materialist way of thinking.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the narrator introduces a paradox between similar reproaches does not only have consequences for his credibility throughout the story, but indirectly points towards a textual level with an alternative performative character, as well. As a result, the narrator does not occupy the objective stance he claims to do when opposing the main character and others, thus pretending to be on the outside of this interaction. The discourse of the narrative voice is manipulated to set the moral values within which the behaviour of the main character will be judged. Though the social space laid out at the beginning of the novel cannot be identical to the one familiar to the readers, the *auctorial locus* outside the text's discourse modifies in an indirect way the virtual literary system, whose standards breathe aggression and violence. Within this system-inspired world, the «Räuber» figures as a symbol of otherness that causes uneasiness among the people around him.

The word «Räuber» is related to motives and themes that are developed in the course of the story. Still, even without first getting familiar with the text's thematic networks, the novel's concern with *ethos* and violence can already be derived from the title.<sup>6</sup> In spite of its light-hearted and frantic tone, the story is indeed advanced by a succession of aggressive acts and utterances. Additionally, the title carries the implication that at least two parties who interact in a minimal way are confronted with each other. Even though the title refers to an authoritarian situation in which one of two instances forces his or her will onto the other, an exchange takes place, a stimulus to act or reconsider one's position and safety is transmitted. The reader can relate the title to several symbolic acts of robbing, which, on a more abstract level, reflect the function of the main character: to point at the inescapability of violent behaviour, to provoke dialogue and obliterate institutionalised certainties. In the novel, communication appears as an option that can reduce or increase violent dispositions.

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5. The «lady in brown» reproaches him in the passage the fact that he ignores property: «Während deines ganzen bisherigen Lebens hast du ein Besitztum ignoriert» (*Der Räuber*: 16). If the main character is not interested in collecting material goods, then «Nachgiebigkeit» is inappropriate, since it presents a mere negation, incapable of describing the outsider's incompatible perspective. The «Räuber» simply does not recognise the money paradigm. The negation does not function on the syntagmatic, but on the paradigmatic axis. Since the absence of interest in money by the Other is labelled as generous, financial standards are characterised by a lack of generosity and humanity. Viewed this way, «Nachgiebigkeit» and «Mitmenschlichkeit» are indeed used ironically, but this kind of irony - «paradigmatic irony» - runs counter to the intended direction: not the viewed but the viewer is unmasked.
6. Although the title of the novel was not provided by Robert Walser himself, but added by Jochen Greven when the «Mikrogramme» were first edited, it seems very well-chosen when taking into account the many suggestions it has led scholars to discover. Moreover, the word «Räuber» functions as the centre of a semantic and thematic web that underlies the actions and descriptions of the characters and the narrator.

### 3. Violence Personified or Violence Exemplified? Figurations of the Narrative Voice

O wie sind wir jetzt, da wir dies hier kritzeln, so sonderbar träge. Grad, als wenn Selma auch uns bannte. Doch gewaltsam nehmen wir uns zusammen. (*Der Räuber*: 159)

Throughout the novel, a tension between the observing narrator and its main object of observation can be remarked. The seemingly envious narrating voice often slips into an imitation of the «Räuber»'s behaviour, while at times insisting on the difference between them: «Ich muß immer achtgeben, daß ich mich nicht mit ihm verwechsle» (*Der Räuber*: 87). The story-teller resorts to moral principles regularly, «Man versucht ihn mürbe zu machen, unmutig, nervös, gereizt. Man hat mit einem Wort versucht, ihm Moral einzupflanzen» (*Der Räuber*: 53), when commenting on the «Räuber»'s evil deeds. Still, moral discourse cannot prevent his fascination and frustration with unconventional behaviour - which he himself does not seem able to appropriate for his own convenience - from breaking through. The duality of the narrating self is reflected by its constant shifting between the use of the personal pronoun «ich» - which evokes a sphere of present, oral communication - and «wir» - suggesting a reduplication of historical «I»'s, in other words, established, written authority: «Wir fühlen uns bewogen, das von ihm auszusagen, ob es ihm zur Last gelegt wird oder nicht. Ich würde es nicht tun» (*Der Räuber*: 27). As the novel progresses, however, both the associative violence and group mentality evoked by «wir» are hollowed out by the gradual outlining of contingent voices questioning the story-teller. As the title of Dieter Roser's (1994) study «fingierte Mündlichkeit» indicates, the evocation of oral communication in Walser's work is in fact a staging technique.

The quote at the beginning of the section illustrates how the text urges the reader to overcome the need to identify with any of the anthropomorphic voices. The reader should resist being excluded by those few traces of verisimilitude and free him - or herself from linguistic strains and interpellation techniques. Outspoken anthropomorphic characteristics intend to stage the aggression suffered by the characters, who are trying to find their way within the boundaries of an increasingly anonymous, competitive and socially schizophrenic society.

The threat of slowing down, «O wie sind wir jetzt, da wir dies hier kritzeln, so sonderbar träge» (*Der Räuber*: 159), can be read as a parallel to individual and social stagnation. The «ich» displays an anger that is not only directed towards the main character, but opposes the novel's virtual society and its «wir», as well. The narrative voice's split is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's observation about the tension between institutionalised power (and its suspension of violence) and natural aggression, a subject that evoked fierce debates in the early 1920s. Benjamin's (1965) greatest concern was with the corrupting connection both

positivist and naturalist theories made between means and aims. Instead, he pleaded for a differentiation between lawmaking («rechtsetzende») and law-preserving («rechtserhaltende») violence.<sup>7</sup> In *Der Räuber*, preset aims are countered by the semantic instability of the narrative voice. However, this apparently contingent, human-like voice is doubled by a suggested alternative cohesion: the narrator does keep his promises in that he returns to subjects previously announced. Only by activating his own capacity for remembering can the reader discover how the narrator's process of memorisation functions. As will become apparent, the novel thrives on the connection between past and present. Because the madness of the narrator prevents the construction of an either/or pattern, the reader can only guess at the novel's intentions by connecting several instances of implicit and explicit violence. The story-teller's gaze symbolises the duality inherent to observation, language use and society formations, on the one hand, and reflects ironically upon the prefixed mindscapes and anthropomorphisation techniques of his own display of power, on the other.

The text stimulates an oscillation between performance and semantics in exemplifying the ability to use linguistic violence, but also points towards the working of violence by giving a recognisable example: what Benjamin attacked explicitly, *Der Räuber* puts forward implicitly on the basis of open textual games.

By undermining its own authority as a result of paradox and inconsistent hypotheses, the text's discourse also draws the reader's attention to linguistic violence. In societies that have given up the ritual of bloody sacrifice, feelings of aggression tend to shift towards the field of oral interaction and, *in extremis* result in mental torture and psychological abuse. Seen this way, aggression figures as a «geschichtliche Konstante» between people (Nieraad, 1994: 21). Even though the narrator displays intense hatred and envy and recounts memories in a disorderly fashion, linguistic violence as an attitude takes priority over the content of his utterances. As a result of the novel's self-reflexive nature and its double-layered narrator, *Der Räuber* foregrounds the violence of discourse, the rhetorics of violence, as a quotation.<sup>8</sup> The *play movement* is fuelled by specific forms of violence and shapes the way the novel deals with the phenomenon of violence. In other words, the concept it develops within the novel is countered by

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7. Similarly, Jürgen Nieraad (1994: 18) distinguishes between power as a hidden potential («Macht») and violence as the exercise of that potential («Gewalt»).

8. Self-reflexivity appropriates the concept of representation throughout. Spangenberg's (2001) distinction between external and internal representation is articulated self-reflexively in Walser's novel. Internal representation surfaces in the text when the anthropomorphic qualities of the narrator are functionalised in a performative process that deconstructs analogy. External representation, on the other hand, is rendered problematic because of the blind spots (Luhmann and Fuchs, 1989) within the observer and the object of reference.

manners of dealing with it. This is where the main character comes in, since the narrator could not possibly stir the reader to a playful interaction without the challenges set by the «Räuber».

#### 4. The Unexpected: Violence and Dialogue

Saatfelder keimen grün und Schlachtfelder blühen rot und strotzen vor Purpur, und es fragt sich mancher für mich, wann und wo den Räuber zum Lohn für alle seine wohldurchdachten Untaten und in Überzeugtheit getauchten Liederlichkeiten dieser Schuß zu treffen habe. (*Der Räuber*: 106)

In this section, a close reading of chapter twenty is conducted in the light of the interaction between the concepts of violence and dialogue, in order to unravel the function of the split self in relation to the «Räuber» character.<sup>9</sup> Intentionally, I have chosen to analyse a chapter that neither has an obvious dialogical nature, nor does it display a thematically motivated imitation of the «Räuber»'s behaviour by the narrator. Even a highly monological piece of text like this one contains instances of the ethical implications that the way in which the story is told has for the interaction between the narrator and the main character, and between the reader and the text.

The description of the landscape made in this passage is not connected with the last lines of the previous chapter, in which the narrator recounts how the main character has accepted a priest's offer to mount the pulpit. In the second part of the opening quotation, the narrator changes the subject again and insinuates that many others with him are eagerly waiting for the moment when the «Räuber» will be shot as a punishment for his misbehaviour. After having read the novel through, the anecdote of the invitation to preach and the reference to the punishment turn out to be linked: the «Räuber»'s bold speech in front of the community ultimately provokes Edith to shoot him. What remains a semantic gap, however, is the role that the landscape is suggested to play in the development of the story.

Upon a closer look, the narrator places an agricultural environment next to a surreal one. Aggression and nature are suggested to be interrelated phenomena by labelling them with the word «Felder», while the words «keimen» and «blühen», from the same semantic field, create a link between the two images.

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9. The narrator is doing more than performing a psycho-analytical investigation based on the split between subject and object. If we direct our attention towards the concept of difference instead of similarity, then new interpretational stimuli will arise. Differences become negative signals suggesting meaningful underlying and unspoken processes.

The comparison is easily accepted by the reader, who is despairingly looking for a fluent recounting based on similarities.<sup>10</sup> However, the two images cannot be considered in juxtaposition, but should instead be recognised as a simultaneous pair, a metaphor which displays temporal difference. «Keimen» denotes an early stage in the growing process of plants, whereas the verb «blühen» refers to a later stage. The text, thus, insinuates that the «Saatfelder» contain the seeds to grow violence and war: such a metaphorical reading connects «seeds» with the punishment of the «Räuber». Since «Schlacht» refers to a common human action, the verbs can also be related to the three stages of life<sup>11</sup> and to the evolution of society.<sup>12</sup> The text seems to lean on the verge of the natural and the artificial: traces of violence are and, at the same time, are not detected by the narrator in the middle of a breathtaking landscape. The fact that cultivated fields are equated with «Schlachtfelder», instead of using the image of pure nature, emphasises the theme of subjectivity, as well as its abstract counterpart, opening up the possibility of interpreting this as a metaphor for sublimating discourse.

The announcement of the «Räuber»'s punishment is followed by a seemingly unmotivated reference to the landscape, which is described in a light and playful tone:

Wie leuchten Rapsfelder kühl und schön unter dem Blau, und daß der Wald immer nie anders als grün sein will, ist ja ganz schön, und von ihm zeugt das von Ausdauerlichkeit, aber er könnte uns mal abgewechselt, verändert kommen, meinen Sie nicht auch? Was für eine neue und niedagewesene Farbe würden Sie als Gewand für den Wald vorschlagen? Bitte, unterbreiten Sie mir Ihre Meinung, die ich jederzeit gern anhöre. (*Der Räuber*: 106-107)

These lines counter a mimetic description and reading of the landscape by suggesting deviations from what the reader recognises as logical or real. Moreover, the narrator uncovers his subjective inclination by using a synaesthesia that undermines his authority. The visual «leuchten» comes next to «kühl», a word expressing a sensation, while «schön» refers directly to the fact that the

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10. This reader is regularly addressed by the narrator and pampered with apologies and comments intended to render him/her passive: «Weil ich mich im eben aufgerichteten Abschnitt groß gemacht habe, was einige Leser vielleicht abschrecken könnte, mit Lesen fortzufahren, stille und mildere ich mich hier und mache mich fingerhutsklein» (*Der Räuber*: 113).
  11. The difference between child and adult plays an important role in the novel. It is also striking that the processes of sprouting and flowering are mentioned, whereas that of withering remains absent in a pronounced way. This semantic gap gives indirect expression to society's suppression of, and emotional immunity to, death.
  12. The speech uttered by «Life», complaining that one generation follows another without becoming conscious of the ethics of violence, acquires new meaning in this context: «und es kommt niemand klug aus mir, und sind doch alle längst klug aus mir geworden, aber sie vergessen das immer und fangen von neuem zu raten [an] und erraten es und vergessen es wieder und erraten es nie» (*Der Räuber*: 112).

narrator offers a personal impression. The reader, however, has to overcome the anthropomorphic signals, recognise the exemplary and ethical function of the narrator and identify the representation of the landscape as a discursive space. The narrator urges the readers to rethink established modes of perception and to activate their will to try and see things in a new light.

The description of the landscape, which had already been linked with violence, is here confronted with the possibility of an alternative act of violence. This implies that, unless one remains passive, the exertion of will and power are inescapable, yet might lead to a positive outcome. The violation of institutionalised beauty operates as a textual and reader pragmatic that sets textual and visual semantics into motion. Hence, the landscape metaphor can be defined as a self-reflexive visual phenomenon, since it openly engages with representations. Ultimately, addressing the readers to force new insights onto them could be seen as a violent and destabilising act.<sup>13</sup>

The text «expands» in the following lines the idea of multiversality, the simultaneous relevance of several points of view. Without any apparent reason, the narrator first turns to the «Räuber», who remembers having read about the torturing of rebels in one of the magazines mentioned previously. As a warning to potential lawbreakers, those acting against institutionalised power are sawn to pieces:

Er las den anknüpfenden Aufsatz in einer von den allerersten Zeitschriften, und dem Aufsatz waren Abbildungen aus der betreffenden Epoche beigegeben. Man konnte da das Zersägtwerden, neben einem Eiskaffee, den man sich hübsch zu Gemüte führte, ganz behaglich in die Eindrucksfähigkeit einziehen lassen, als werde da etwas durch ein Tor hindurchbefördert. (*Der Räuber*: 107)

His memories of the article contain violence, not only because of the torture and human suffering that they depict, but mainly because of the violence done to the readers on the textual level: they are reduced to recipients, gates - «ein Tor» - through which cruelty is «shoved in» - «hindurchbefördert» - and rendered unemotional. The novel excludes such a passive reading by avoiding clear-cut judgements and by «quoting» representations of violence that appear by means of ironic collocations and contextually-induced fragmentation. The term «Abbildungen» summarizes the connection between visualisation and aggression: people are rendered immune to violence. As the immunity grows, the readiness to respond to aggression diminishes, resulting in the passive reception of Rathenau's murder. So, when the «Räuber» is laughing his head off upon

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13. Violence should at this point be defined as the result of a fragmentary perception of reality, which cannot be avoided except by passivity and the suppression of the individual will.

hearing that Conrad Rathenau has been shot, he is not reacting to the contents of the message, but contradicting the accepted mode of responding to politically induced violence. Since the exercise of power involves hiding its violent fundamentals to appear as a natural thing, the text appeals to the readers' imagination as a realm of exchange in which common representations are modified in order to expose hidden forms of violence.

The chapter started out with the opposition between the natural colour of the landscape and the traces of violence, turning afterwards to nature again, in order to be confronted with the reminiscence of cruelty: the restaurant where the «Räuber» had read the magazines was located in a street lined with trees. Accordingly, nature would not figure solely as the theme (to depict a tamed naturalness), but would include a rhematic function: to appease the reading public and to create a certain amount of coherence. Still, the actual message springs from the interaction between images of nature and the incongruous lines and negative signals that interrupt the rhematic pattern. The readers are supposed to notice that the narrator's comments on the landscape engage in a dialogue with the memories of the «Räuber», thus stimulating an alternative reading:

Die Straße wies Bäume zu beiden Seiten auf, und in seinem Zimmer lag unfern, d.h. in einem der Häuser dieser Straße, ein kranker Maler. [...] Und bei Gelegenheit eines Spazierganges, am späten Abend, der die Ränder der leise und fein über den runden Abhang verteilten Bäume sanft umsilberte, als wenn er sie zum Lohn für ihre Anspruchslosigkeit und für ihre unsägliche Geduld, es sieht natürlich nur so aus, als wenn die Bäume etwas wie Geduld hätten, mit Diamantenfäden gesäumt hätte, kam ihm still in Erinnerung, wie da einstmals ein Kaiser ermordet worden war [...] (*Der Räuber*: 107)

The description of the trees is meant to be artificial, serving the sublimation of society's authoritarian foundation: the trees are carefully arranged and domesticated to keep their natural violence from growing rank, while being compared with silver and diamonds, luxury goods esteemed for their socially accepted value.

The intertwining of violence and nature, effected to reveal the inevitability of the subjective will and civilisation as a historical continuum, reaches its climax in the episode retelling the murder of an unspecified emperor. The narrator first seems to be on the side of the royal family, yet suddenly laments the harm and pain caused to the delinquents' women - «Verbrechen». The story is momentarily interrupted at this point with a remark about how children in school are provided with frames of thinking that connive with institutionalised power: «Diese Geschichte war dem Räuber noch aus der Schule her im Kopf eingraviert geblieben» (*Der Räuber*: 108). The novel's rewriting of history includes those

minorities - women and children - that are usually neglected, but who suffer from the cruelty of the powerful, integrating, in this manner, accepted representations of aggression within a larger picture of violence that stages characters and circumstances previously omitted.

One of the main ethical concerns outlined in chapter twenty is that violence pervades the history of society. The narrator, who pretends to neglect the past by turning to a consistent present-tense use, in fact engages with the memories of the «Räuber», thus forcing present-minded readers to reconsider their past. History teaches us that every now and then hatred and suppressed irritation suddenly erupt and lead to violent rebellion, murder and torture. At times, when power senses the possibility of being overthrown, it sacrifices an outsider in order to still the inner longing of the people for blood. This primary desire is not only recognised but willingly endured by the «Räuber». In a certain way, the «Räuber» reminds us of Walter Benjamin's (1965: 39) «großen Verbrecher» and the threat he presents to institutionalised power. His presence leads to an eruption of violence within an apparently peaceful society and exposes the contingency of legal boundaries and society's endorsement of violence, whenever unforeseen events occur.

## 5. The Ethics of Dialogue

Wir müssen uns eben gezankt haben, das scheint mir bei der Grobheits- und Feinheits-Geschichte das Wesentliche zu sein. (*Der Räuber*: 98)

*Der Räuber* seems to argue that engaging in a dialogue presupposes the willingness to be responsive to new patterns of behaviour. It points out that aggression is unavoidable if the incomprehensible - personified in the character of the «Räuber» - is measured solely in the light of preconceived moral categories. The readers who eagerly identify with received modes of thinking experience the refutability of fixed categories (such as prescribed ethical reasoning and the attempt to explain the novel's structure as the product of a mad narrator), since to advocate that new experiences should be moulded to fit standards could be labelled as authoritarian, moralising and legalising. Instead, the ethics of dialogue implies the readiness to actively explore the structure and moral make-up of *Der Räuber* - both main character and novel - and gain an insight into the limits of one's general knowledge of the world. If the characters in the novel, or the reader outside the text, stigmatise illogical behaviour (whether similar to that of a child or a mad person), they render themselves incapable of reacting in a humane way to the consequences of such a behaviour.

The narrator depicts the «Räuber» as a child because set modes of differentiation cannot account for his mental make-up.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, if the readers ignore paradox and inconsistency in the text, they violate and betray it by imposing their own values on it. The fact that the «Räuber» confronts others with their suppressed longings is an act of violence as well, but one that supports the development of the individual will. The main character symbolises the democratic potential in the exercise of power, that does not aim at creating borders but that, on the contrary, exposes existing systems' contingency. Equally, he illustrates how a dynamics of power involves the subjection to the will of others but not the necessity to give up one's own: «Eines Mitbürgers Ausgezeichnetheit bildet eher eine Erlaubnis als ein Verbot, daß auch ich etwas leiste» (*Der Räuber*: 43).

The act of putting this message into words, however, involves an aggressive intervention towards the characters and events, that are controlled by the subjective narrative voice, on the one hand; and towards the readers, who are supposed to willingly suspend their conventional way of reading, on the other. *Der Räuber* tries to reduce these power relations to a minimum. The narrator is utterly dependent for the retelling of the events on the character that he is constantly patronising, thus proving that a monological view of the world is impossible. In fact, on a primary textual level, the story-teller appears as an uncommunicative person who feels isolated from the rest of society and is unable to interact with others. Still, he engages in a mental dialogue with the «Räuber», often forgetting the differences between each other, which would suggest the possibility of subverting preconceived ideas.

On an abstract narrative level, every textual element is recognised to introduce a latent doubling. The fact that the novel's structure projects the image of a reader who is expected to respond to the performative value of the text openly states its individual viewpoint. The doubling of the reader position leaves it up to the readers to decide whether or not they want to engage with the novel's ethical concerns. Syntactic juxtaposition induces new ways of combining and interpreting reality, which entail democratic implications in relation to the narrator's activity. In such a way, juxtaposition is linked with performativity, i.e., repeated staging, so as to enable the undermining of any *auctorial* / authoritarian standpoint. By revealing or mirroring its structural scaffolding, the text functions as an illustration of the message that it is trying to send across.

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14. The apparent childishness of the «Räuber» allows him to formulate forbidden ideas without risking any serious punishment.

## 6. The Democratic Potential of Democracy

Immer ist versucht worden, ihm das Gefühl der Unsicherheit, der Spaltung, der Uneinigkeit mit sich selbst einzuflößen. (*Der Räuber*: 62)

Walser's novel presents a main character that has - next to human qualities - elements of abstraction. The ideal ethical stance he stands for remains an unattainable secret which cannot be actualised at any given moment within spatial boundaries. Following the discussion previously introduced about the socio-political implications of Derrida's works, Walser's main character would not be intended to destroy but to render aware. He introduces negativity into reality and urges minorities to think over their position, if they are to precipitate change on the basis of reflecting about existing problems, such as colonisation, or the discrimination of women, homosexuals and the lower classes. The «Räuber» thus offers a promise of democracy.

The otherness of the main character prompts self-reflexivity and a *movement of play* that challenges others to overcome the violence of «autopoiesis». As Geoffrey H. Hartman (1997: 9) points out, it is important to think of one's culture as *a culture*, «For otherwise we risk losing entirely the idea of radical *poiesis*: that man is made by what he makes, that art too, even if "play" rather than "work", has transformative potential». While the ideal of democracy projected in the novel appears to conform to white, heterosexual, middle-class, European male standards, the «Räuber» provides the community with examples that negate this ideal picture.<sup>15</sup> Even though he has no intention of overthrowing existing conditions, he seems to admit that people need to start building towards the future with the materials at their disposal. This idea is mirrored in the use of thematic overlapping, which is translated into reading strategies playing several pieces of information simultaneously. The main character mimics the novel's rationale by providing an insight into the inescapability of individual inhibitions, on the one hand, and by inducing the «readers» to actively strive for new possibilities, on the other. As a symbol of negativity, he allows one to conceive of existing constellations as essentially open to challenge and change. Walser's work thematizes the historical suppression of minorities, while also pointing towards society's blindness to historically «tamed» contingency and the human being's natural need to engage with the unexpected as a form of violence.

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15. The main character can be read as the personification of «affirmative negativity», of an essentially open concept that is, however, necessarily modified by changing contexts. For references to sodomy, see pp. 77-78; for criticism against colonisation and sexism, see pp. 29-31; for engagement with the lower classes, see «die Ausgemerzte», pp. 55-57.

The writing of the novel is comparable to the installation of discourse in that both literature and institutionalized power are unable to derive their power from any previous foundation. The main difference is, however, that literature constantly reflects upon its exemplarity, thus leaving space for alternatives.

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