

‘No Story Comes from Nowhere’, or, the Dentist from *Finding Nemo*: Ambivalent Originality in Four Contemporary Works

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Abstract

This paper offers a perspective on a range of contemporary developments and articulations of the phenomenon of intertextuality in fiction and film. Using as backdrop a brief discussion of different intertextual motifs in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and Pixar’s animated short film *Boundin’* (2004), it moves on to discuss the highly intertextual relation between the works of Swiss writer Robert Walser and the contemporary American experimentalist Alison Bundy. The paper thus problematizes and qualifies the line of demarcation supposedly existing between texts or works of art and aims to expand and exemplify the scope of reference, citation and paraphrase inherent in the overall concept of intertextuality.

This paper springs from a baffled encounter with four postmodern works which all revolve around the theme of ambivalent originality. The four works portray origin and the original as regurgitation and as a result or an end point. And they describe the site of origin as both primary and secondary, and as disturbingly identical to what appears to repeat it. This undermining of the stability and integrity of the point of origin is presented as a thoroughly relational event. Origin is seen to lose its originality in the interaction with its surroundings, echoing Graham Allen speaking of the ‘relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life’ (5).

In this paper I discuss four different expressions of this ‘interconnectedness’—expressions which each in their own way portray or testify to patterns of intertextuality. For the nodding, copying, alluding and parroting discussed below are all more or less explicit manifestations of the poststructuralist tenet of the inevitable intertextual dimension of language and text. Several of the key voices of critical thought of the last forty years—all of them representatives of J. Hillis Miller’s so-called ‘uncanny’ or ‘Dionysian’ critics—have addressed this aspect of the deceptively margined and coherent unity of the entity of the Book. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, ‘[a] literary text is not a thing in itself, ‘organically

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unified,' but a relation to other texts which are relations in their turn' (120). Or, in the words of Michel Foucault,

[t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network [. . .] The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands [. . .] Its unity is variable and relative. (23)

Or, finally, in the words of the founding father of deconstructive thought, Jacques Derrida, who in his work addresses precisely 'all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth' (256). For both the book and its margins are continually, inevitably and uncontrollably transgressed.

What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [. . .] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text' [. . .]—a 'text' that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines). (Derrida 257)

This paper seeks to address four cases of precisely these 'dividing and multiplying strokes and lines'—in the form of two novels, an animated short film and a striking tandem relation between two entire bodies of work, which emerge as both obviously and traditionally distinct and yet also strikingly, almost disturbingly, Same. The first three objects of scrutiny in this paper I will deal with more briefly, as thematic prologues—and then spend more time on the fourth and last, tracing in more detail its instances of kinship and parrotry.

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* from 1990 is a fairy-tale about the importance of story-telling. But it also paints a thoroughly postmodern picture of stories, language and text as inherently and inevitably intertextual. On the Moon of stories Kahani, an 'Ocean of the

Streams of Story’—‘the biggest library in the universe’—provides the world’s story-tellers with story-water which strengthens and continues their gift of the gab (72). The main character of the novel, Haroun, has a father who is one of these subscribers of story-water—and who, consequently, loses his storyteller status when he discontinues his subscription and loses his ability to tell stories.

The story-water is gardened and peopled with creatures of differing forms of creativity—the most important ones being the so-called Plentimaw fishes, hunger artists, which swallow the old stories in the story-water and spawn new ones. ‘In their innards miracles occur; a little bit of one story joins on to an idea from another, and hey presto, when they spew the stories out they are not old tales but new ones. Nothing comes from nothing’ (86). With this creative setup, Rushdie very clearly presents both creativity and articulation as regurgitations of something already articulated. However, most significantly, he does so without lamentation. To both romantic and modernist ears, regurgitation smacks of stale and lifeless second-hand words. Of written has-beens. But Rushdie’s novel celebrates the re-presented and the second-hand—and presents the two both as a given, inevitable fact, as well as a highly productive one. Any story worth its salt, as it says, needs story water. Again, nothing comes from nothing. The word itself is dialogue, with a past. In this, Rushdie is neo-classicist and postmodern all at once, presenting a story-teller giving voice to ‘what oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed’ (Pope 139). As Graham Allen puts it, ‘in the Postmodern epoch, theorists often claim, it is not possible any longer to speak of originality or the uniqueness of the artistic object [. . .] since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art’ (5).

Significantly, the villain of Rushdie’s novel—the terrible Khattam-Shud, which in Hindustani means ‘completely finished’ or ‘over and done with’—stands for silence and negation. With their multiple and complicated margins and pasts, stories represent something uncontrollable and always already in deferral, and hence also a thorn in the side of one seeking stasis, identity and fossilization. So Khattam-Shud counters each story with an anti-story, aimed to silence and annul it. ‘On those twilit shores, no bird sang. No wind blew. No voice spoke’ (122). Here, we clearly see Bakhtin’s dialogic and ambivalent world as described by Kristeva—dialogic in its relation between writer and reader

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(or story-teller and listener), ambivalent between word and word (or story and story)—stifled and stabilized, in the most destructive way imaginable (Kristeva 37). ‘A text is a relational event’, Harold Bloom says—but seen in quiet isolation, it is *Khattam-Shud* (Allen 136).

The second case of allusive intertextuality which I am going to discuss is Paul Auster’s recent novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* from 2006. Like Rushdie’s text, Auster’s novel also focuses on the motif of the source, and on problematized originality, in keeping with Allen’s portrait of postmodernity. For if we go by the characterization of postmodernism as a mindset of impossible originality, Paul Auster emerges as a thoroughly postmodern writer. His are books haunted and troubled by deferral, repetition, circularity and inconclusion. Auster supplements the postmodern notion of no beginnings with a range of novels testifying to the absence or impossibility of endings, conclusions. Both Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* describe a source which is strangely double—serving as both originator and result. *Travels in the Scriptorium* opens in seemingly complete oblivion with an unidentified man sitting on a bed in a room. As the novel progresses, the space surrounding this man—both the physical and geographical, as well as the mental space of his conscience, memory and awareness—is gradually articulated into place, mapped and spread out. Other characters come to see him, with stories and questions and tasks. And it turns out that the man is a writer, an author, originator of characters and events—who are now returning to confront and plague their inventor, who seems to be on trial for crimes against characterhood. In other words, the originator is now at the receiving end. What most clearly, yet rather subtly, strikes the cord of intertextuality in this confusing setup, however, is the fact that the characters who come to visit are all characters from other Auster novels. In other words, *Travels in the Scriptorium* as a whole is a portrait of intertextuality, of language as inherently borrowed and assembled from other bits and pieces. The visitors are described as agents, and they can be argued to both embody and maneuver the realm of Bakhtin’s ‘ambivalence’, embodying the intertextual dimension of the word-to-word negotiation. And this makes Auster’s novel a thoroughly ‘ambivalent’ one.

With its particular execution of this sort of excessive and explicit intertextuality, *Travels in the Scriptorium* also sets itself apart from most

of Auster's other novels. Throughout Auster's writing, there are recurring names, objects and motifs which, with varying degrees of elaboration, constitute cases of allusion and motific intertextuality. However, *Travels in the Scriptorium* does something different. With its many visits from what is presented as the margins and outskirts of Auster's production, the novel more directly seems to outline the contours of what one could read as a mother text, a source text, an Austeresque head office—from and to which all the other texts both seem to emanate and return. This phenomenon somehow recalls Gérard Genette's architext and also the hopes for order and stability inherent in this concept, as elaborated in Genette's *The Architext*. Genette uses this concept to outline the contours of an imagined mental construct which in genre theory, for example, contains all the possible traits that any member deemed to belong to a certain genre might possess. In other words, Genette's architext is the imagined sum of all details that are considered to belong to it; imagined, because no such super-text, or absolute mother text, exists in reality. All members of a genre are partial members of it, with some, and not all, of its identifying features.

However, Auster's head office is at the same time presented as strangely oblivious and in the dark, and its central and primary tenant—the supposed creator of everything we see—as emphatically marginal and powerless. In other words, again, origin is supplemented. The subject becomes the object. In this, Auster's novel (as well as many of his other novels) implicitly nods to Harold Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence and his notion of the 'poetic father'—a 'scandalous figure, scandalous because he cannot die or be murdered' (Allen 134). For clearly, authority and the power of what came before is on trial in Auster's novel. And indeed, a potential, brutal and actual murder of the man in the room—the 'poetic father'—is even discussed, as Auster again literalizes and makes explicit a point of intertextuality and intertextual relations. Even Bloom's discussions of reading as rereading and misreading—as that belated event—are subtly thematized in Auster's novel, beyond its ongoing and confusing proliferation of narrative planes. For the novel begins twice, with a little more than a hundred pages apart. And it begins like it ends. Once more supplementing the notion of originality, Auster lets his main character uncover a manuscript on his desk, under a fittingly unfinished report about the enigmatic Mr Land. And both he and we—despite our carefully honed instincts of

anticipation when it comes to Austeresque convolution—shudder, as the first lines of the manuscript repeat, verbatim, the opening words of the novel itself.

The third incident of intertextuality I am going to detail in this paper is a strange one, and it is—all things considered—the odd one out of the three texts discussed. The animated short film *Boundin'*, made by Bud Luckey and Pixar in 2004, is the odd one out, first, of course, because it is piece of visual and musical art, but secondly also because it disturbs some of the definitions of reference and repetition which even ultra-intertextual, and intra-textual, as I have demonstrated, texts such as Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*, leave undisturbed. The film's director Bud Luckey plays with the very distinctions between the primary and the secondary, as well as between the same and the different, in a very interesting way. Indeed, to continue the suggested tagline of Rushdie's novel—that nothing comes from nothing—one could go further and say that Auster's novel argues that nothing comes from nothing, and returns to it, too. And finally, one could conclude with the mind-boggling point about Pixar's *Boundin'* that here, nothing is indistinguishable from nothing, and neither comes nor returns, because it emerges, disturbingly, as the same.

Boundin' is a heavily allusive and intertextual text, which explores a range of familiar registers and territories, from the musical western to folklore and the fable. One might even argue that the film parodies and references the style of Pixar itself, with its special irony, gestures and aesthetics. However, what is interesting about the short film at this point is its indirect citation of two elements from other Pixar films—citations which emerge as paradoxically both indirect and very direct. Three-dimensional computer animation works on the basis of a created figure or object which is rendered in three dimensions and after that programmed to act or move in a certain way. In other words, the core programming somehow remains the same, even when the object behaves differently. So what consequences does it have, then, when one learns that the vintage Ford T in *Boundin'* is directly lifted from the Pixar animated feature film *Cars* (*Boundin'*, director commentary)? And that the human arm which pulls the fluffy main character sheep off screen actually belongs to the dentist in the Pixar film *Finding Nemo*? These are not just references, or passages which resemble passages in other works

of art. They are the *same* as them, and their programmed base is identical—in a way which far exceeds the identity between words and letters reused to describe objects, characters and events in different literary texts. Here, for a brief moment, gestures in two different works of art are somehow completely identical. An arm doing in one work what it does in another would be described in exactly the same way. One could argue that an arm in a Shakespeare tragedy is also a nod to the mention of an arm in the Bible. However, in *Boundin'*, the relation is dramatically more intimate and elaborate. The philosophical implications of this relation are manifold, fundamental and obscure and one of the only clear points that emerges in its wake is that it thoroughly questions and problematizes many of the assumptions involved in analysis of difference and similitude, origin and subsequence as well as reference and repetition.

When asked how her stories begin, contemporary American experimentalist writer Alison Bundy describes the triggering potential and effect of the linguistic fragment. Beyond immediate conventional semantics, words appeal to her. Sentences appeal to her. But they do so more thanks to their phonetic qualities, their visual properties, or their potential for contrast or paradox—than to their conventionally semantic properties. Her body of work, primarily comprising two collections and a short, episodic tale—*A Bad Business* (1985), *Tale of a Good Cook* (1992) and *DunceCap* (1998)—is peopled by chihuahuas, beefsteaks or names of Russian silent movie actors, such as Ivan Mosjoukine, for example. This is an indication of the nature of the narrative ambition in Bundy's stories—and has clear consequences for the semantic cohesion and homogeneity in and of them. Bundy's stories gravitate differently from those of other writers, somehow. Clearly, theirs is a different point; they look elsewhere, differently, and for different purposes. 'There are writers who want to communicate. I am probably not one of them', as Bundy says (Bundy, personal interview). Bundy's stories are stories of sounds, of tensions, of changes, and of articulation. Their conventional transparency is supplemented, and their signifieds distanced. On a general level they are narratives about the fragility of the construct of story. Structures and conventions are displaced and frustrated throughout. Narrative efforts are obstructed, stories forget themselves, and speaking voices are lost in alien logics and incoherence. No wonder

a large portion of Bundy's narrators are nervous characters, characters at a loss. Instead of being wielders of language, they are swamped and overwhelmed by it. And this helps explain the atmosphere of anxiety and tension in Bundy's stories, in the face of the project of articulation and narration. Alison Bundy is very deliberate in her cultivation of this particular atmosphere. Misunderstanding is far more interesting, fertile and generative (of articulation and narrative, for example) than understanding, she says (Bundy, personal interview). And solution is overrated. Or point. Bundy wants her readers intrigued, haunted, even stuck. So, too, with her narrative voices, who are continually kept in the dark, troubled by the secrecies and inscrutabilities of articulation itself. Several Bundy stories baffle their speaking voices with secret letters, signs and silences. Language in Bundy's narrative space is covert. And her stories are tales of signification, articulation and proliferation.

Bundy's literary space clearly thematizes narrative obstruction and textual impossibility. *A Bad Business*, *Tale of a Good Cook* and *DunceCap* tell tales of how difficult tale-telling really is. They are swamped by redirection, misdirection and the indirect. How interesting, therefore, to find in and between the lines of these odd, often dead-ended texts references which are clear, direct and surprisingly non-covert. For Bundy seems to be quoting. Not in the formal and direct sense, with marks and clearly definable containment, but in a thematic and tonal sense. Her space seems to build on, cite and continue that of a literary predecessor from across the Atlantic—one whose own biography in fact (in a way which adds even further to the sense of kinship and similarity in play here) resembles very much one of Bundy's own figments, nervous, tormented, outcast, strange.

In her translator's preface to the Swiss writer Robert Walser's collection *Masquerade and Other Stories*, Susan Bernofsky says that,

many readers turned their backs rather than enter into complicity with an author who had unhooked the safety net of reference. Saying yes to risk, like his Chinese woman who says yes to hunger, Walser often allowed the direction of a text to be dictated by a chance rhyme or association, a word's plurality of meaning, and in so doing tapped into the infinitive rewards of unsuspected truths, of the 'quiddities' that 'never rest [but] ramble'. (Bernofsky xxi)

Like many of Alison Bundy's, Walser's texts constitute elusive textual experiments, often governed by alien logics and unconventional patterns of cohesion. Here, too, the notion of point is severely tested, on several

levels. The stories portray ‘a life of observant idling, city strolling, mountain hikes, and woodland walks, a life lived on the edges of lakes, on the margins of meadows, on the verges of things, a life in slow but constant motion, at a gawker’s pace: sad, removed, amused, ironic, obsessively reflexive’ (Gass ix). Conventional semantic transparency in the tales—‘unhooked from the safety net of reference’—seems obscured by the mirrored mirroring of this reflexion; ‘to gaze on this gaze, to look into this look, examine this examination as nicely as he could’ (Walser 1990: 194). These characterizing features, combined with the strange, frequent anonymity of Walser’s stories, as well as their strange archaic tone, cast a certain shade of allegory over them—a peculiar, implicit italicization. The tales seem to resist conventional assignment of meaning to them, and thus both displace themselves and invoke ambiguity and uncertainty in their wake. The title of Walser’s story ‘Masquerade’ is symptomatic that way, suggesting subversion, carnival, reversal and deception. ‘A child, a boy, a girl, a woman, a youth, a man, and an old man and woman filed past the pagan stone, which was utterly unaffected by this procession’ (1990: 191). Why this proliferating list of aging characters? Why so many of them? Why so anonymous? And how could a stone be affected? ‘No one has the right to act as though he knew me’, one Walser character says (Bernofsky xxiii). So, too, with Walser’s stories in general. Gothicism—another topography very much in play in Bundy’s work—also seems to haunt Walser’s stories, which talk of horror, anger, fright, speechlessness, mystery and doubt. All these details, and the strange combination of immediate clarity in an otherwise obscure and seemingly random and elusive narrative space clearly link Walser’s texts to those of Alison Bundy—in a way which exceeds mere nodding or reference. Bundy seems to be writing Walser, extending his stories and fates of incomprehensible allegory. His tales seem to function as the obscure—and of course itself at least secondary—point of origin of hers. However, this is neither parody nor pastiche. Bundy is no mere epigone. This is kindred, respectful and affectionate homage and co-authory—a continuation of a body of stories whose previous voice is no longer speaking.

For the purpose of emphasizing the further dismantling of the supposed autonomy of the motifs of origin and originality, my reading of the double-voiced tandem monologue of Robert Walser and Alison Bundy will have as its primary focus junctions and passages from

Walser's work, instead of those of their perpetuator. Bundy's stories are also Walser's, and the latter is where I now turn.

In his late forties, in 1920s Switzerland, Robert Walser was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and he spent the remainder of his life—almost thirty years—in various mental institutions. Whether or not Walser was in fact schizophrenic, his stories very much are—haunted by an atmosphere of ambiguity, tension and uncertainty. They are stories of confused narrators' confused encounters with a confusing world. His characters are nervous, tired, at a loss—and unable to construct cohesive stories. Walser's story 'The Green Spider' introduces a storyline very clearly coming into being in the course of its own articulation, thus thematizing the narrative process itself. Story is a construction—which, significantly, seems to lead to madness and disruption, however insincere. Convention is suffocating.

Two in the afternoon it will have been, in a most sumptuously furnished apartment, whose décor may have consisted entirely of damask. There's no question of my knowing what damask really is, it's enough that I once ran across it while reading and flipping through some book or other. Isn't it splendid how I admit this, so frankly and freely, and how without delay I now place a green spider in the residence, for she's just occurred to my seven senses, of which, as always, I'm in perfect control, though now and then, just for the fun of it, I act the madman, wrapping myself, as it were, in the velvet of the most elegant insanity, for sometimes common sense bores me. (Walser 1990: 139)

Or, in the words of Bundy's tale "The Nervous Person", 'yet I do not wish to give the impression that he was in any way unhappy. Far from it, he was a happy man, only with a slightly nervous disposition' (*Business* 13). Not only does the gradual seeping into Walser's story of madness and illogic clearly anticipate several of Alison Bundy's stories. Walser's green spider—the first sign of gothic reversal in the story—is implicitly quoted in the title bug of Bundy's tale "The Baby and the Poison Beetle". In fact, Walser's passage seems to wrap itself in the maddening proliferation of storylines piling up in its wake, slowly drowning its supposed point of narrative origin of an isolated point in time, 'two in the afternoon'. Proliferation and unruly signification are also lurking behind the door of Bundy's strange surrogate text "The Man, the Storm". Here, one character's obsessive imaginings of storms and dangers are gradually overwhelming him, threatening to destroy his role in and relation to his immediate surroundings and his family behind the door he is desperate to

keep closed. In fact, this motif of proliferation and piling-up signification is one of the defining features of Bundy's literary space in its entirety. Walser's "The Boat" further elaborates the theme of narrative wrapping, and suggests that every story is a re-telling, something already wrapped, and thus potentially maddening—implicitly painting both himself and Bundy as successors, as much as originators. 'I think I've written this scene before, but I'll write once again' (1990: 29). Or, in the words of his story "Nothing at all", 'of course, many a woman has gone shopping and in so doing been just a little absentminded. So in no way is this story new' (1990: 112). Clearly, novelty in supposed, immediate message or point is of no particular concern in these texts. The assemblage of text, of elusive points (or, points of reference to other points), on the other hand, seems much more interesting. Bundy's *Tale of a Good Cook* describes a group of baffled dinner guests seeing their hostess first slim down to half size within days, and then split in two a moment later. Overwhelmed by this unsettling breach of logic and convention, the guests later leave the dinner, finding themselves unable to articulate it. They are muted by nonsense. And the story and explanation of this mysterious event is inadequately pieced together by the equally baffled narrator who has only descriptions from mute witnesses at his disposal. Fragmented and elusive points, indeed. In Walser's words, '[g]et hold of some masks, half a dozen noses, foreheads, tufts of hair, and eyebrows, and twenty voices' (1990: 3).

Another narrator seems to lose himself in swamping narratives of hypothetical consideration, and his initial thought flounders.

If I were a painter, and my becoming one isn't out of the question, for no one knows his own destiny, I'd most passionately love to be a painter of autumn. My only fear is that my colors would prove inadequate. Perhaps I still know too little about it. And why worry at all about something that hasn't yet happened? After all, it's only the present moment to which I should and must devote myself. Where have I heard these words? (Walser 1990: 5)

Even the present—to which the narrator returns, from his apparently pointless journey to a future 'that hasn't yet happened'—is supplemented, displaced and heard before. Bundy's "Apostle Love" tells of a speaking voice who sees its living room space—its home—invaded by an obscure, offensive and unattractive stranger. Departures are easily contaminated. Alison Bundy's "Tale of the Times" contains another

excellent example of heavily detoured, textual deflection, as the sister-in-law or brother-in-law of the main character is described as one of the ‘the parents of her deceased husband’s nephew’ (1985: 43). It is clear that it is not the chief aim of these tales to articulate themselves by the shortest and fastest route through language.

The motif of the supplemented present is also explicitly articulated both in the title and in the opening sentence of Walser’s story “Response to a Request”, with its ‘you ask me if I have an idea for you, a sort of sketch that I might write, a spectacle, a dance, a pantomime, or anything else that you could use as an outline to follow’ (1982: 3). In other words, the story opens with an open-ended dialogue, as a request to an unuttered response somehow preceding it. The speaking voice of the story “Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*” [sic] even seems to long for this space beyond his own story. ‘Why don’t I suffer from convulsive seizures?’, he exclaims—in a narrative gesture anticipating the frustration of one Bundy character, ‘disgusted to find I write only of love’ (Bundy 1985: 45; Walser 1982: 149). However, he realizes that he is unable to shoulder the story he longs for. ‘I’m sorry I’m not the hero of a novel. I’m not up to playing such a part, I just read a lot sometimes’ (Walser 1982: 149).

Walser seems particularly interested in this motif of the bruised and battered character, and his story “Nervous”—a clear thematic cousin of Bundy’s ‘The Nervous Person’—elaborates it rather dramatically. As the narrator says about himself, ‘I am a little worn out, raddled, squashed, downtrodden, shot full of holes. Mortars have mortared me to bits. I am a little crumbly, decaying, yes, yes’ (Walser 1982: 51). He is shot through and displaced by absences—and subtly trapped in the project of describing accurately the exact nature of his predicament. In this, ‘Nervous’ also very much anticipates Bundy’s ‘Onset of his Sickness’ and its opening list of negations. Walser’s narrator goes on, ‘I am a bit scalded and scorched, yes, yes. [. . .] I am very tough, I can vouch for that. I am no longer young, but I am not old yet, definitely not. I am aging, fading a little, but that doesn’t matter. I am not very nervous, to be sure, I just have a few grouches. Sometimes I am a bit weird and grouchy, but that doesn’t mean I am altogether lost, I hope’ (Walser 1982: 51). “The Chinese Woman, the Chinaman” also articulates a narrator trying to label and legitimate himself—to establish himself and his ‘good word’, as Bundy’s detective has it (Bundy 1992: 7). ‘Most people are monstrously good. I have taken a lesson from alle these

examples, and have become so myself. I go to bed early and am early to rise. I am, I believe, on my way to becoming useful to society. Don't you think me capable of this? The most respectable convictions reside in me' (Walser 1990: 153). But often, alas, convictions alone do not do the trick. 'The art of living [. . .] has something tightrope-walkerish about it' (Walser 1990: 183). However, many of Walser's narrators emerge as strange aliens in their own stories, knowing little or nothing of what is going in them. 'Is the man in the boat an abductor? Is the woman the happy, enchanted victim? This we don't know; we see only how they both kiss each other' (Walser 1982: 29). Narrators seem unable to look beyond the signs around them—incapable of seeing what they are signs of.

The only character of Alison Bundy's "The Trip" is desperately trying to keep out a world over which he seems to possess no significant control—but which seems to constitute a threat to his narrative autonomy. The windows of his car are hermetically shut, its doors are locked, and the man is convinced he will be able to make the trip 'and keep all his secrets hidden' (1985: 41). However, he seems implicitly aware of the futility of this project. His entire system of logic has been turned upside down, and his statements of almost pure nonsense reveal a character in dire straits. There is bizarre causality in the narrator's concession that 'although the car had not moved in an hour, night was coming.' So, too, with the reverse version of *A Bad Business's* epigraphic Buster Keaton quote of the man being sure that 'the change of light was due to his closing in' on something. And his nonsensical talk of something spectacular emerging in the growing darkness (because, for anything to be spectacular, then by definition, there has to be light) also constitutes an example of a person at his wits' end. It is clear that the man is trying to narrate himself into safety and authority—but he is leaning in vain on Austin's rule of saying so, makes it so, as discussed in Austin's analyses of the category of illocutionary acts (120). 'Now we are getting somewhere,' 'I could tell you the meaning of this in a jiffy. Yes indeed,' the man says. But nothing happens. And he cannot. And despite what he thinks, he is not 'responsible for a group of passengers'—he is not in charge, and he is all alone (1985: 41).

In contrast to these failed authorities, who crowd the realms of both Walser and Bundy, the former's text "The Boy (II)" presents a boy who, indeed, longs for ignorance and grammatical object-hood. 'Among other

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things, the woman called him by name, but did he know what his name was, did he know himself, didn't he find it, in a certain way, more interesting to be perfectly ignorant about this?' (1990: 194). The speaking voice of Walser's "Nervous" also concedes and yields his narrative powers.

I am blithe in spirit, although I am aging a little, crumbling and fading, which is quite natural [. . .] Grouches, grouches, one must have them, and one must have the courage to live with them. That's the nicest way to live. Nobody should be afraid of this little bit of weirdness. Fear is altogether foolish. 'You are very nervous!' 'Yes, come by all means and calmly tell me so!' (1982: 52)

Robert Walser and Alison Bundy very much emerge as literary relatives in their particular focus on and fascination with the pointless and inadequate. Stories and characters change their mind and change course, they forget themselves, and fail to actually tell the story they seem to want to tell. One of Walser's narrators abandons ship over a sudden craving for a drink. 'And now it must be ended, this snake-entwisted tale, for I must confess a sudden longing for a glass of beer and intend to satisfy this with unrelenting inconsiderateness' (1990: 140). Another goes out of his way to make the stories he is telling odd and unusual—"Two Strange Stories", even (1982). Clearly, again, clarity is no primary concern. Reading through the narrative space of Alison Bundy, the reader continually gets the distinct feeling that something is out of joint. One continues to stop and think that one has indeed missed something, in the deceptively straight-forward universe of Bundy's pigs, steaks, chihuahuas and beetles saying 'tikka tikka tikka' (1985: 18). Many of Bundy's tales seem to be speaking from a confused and memory-less narrative perspective, absent-mindedly meandering through a strangely exploded and unconventional textual hierarchy of significance. For example, the governing cohesion in Bundy's "The Wheelbarrow Story" moves through dreams, gardening and worms—to a lake, a girl, and the closing image of the story of a wheelbarrow. Similarly, the narrator of Walser's "The Green Spider" tries to articulate something out of his reach. 'The gigantically tall windows shimmered at night with such splendor that my mouth and its modest tool, my inherited language, are incapable of describing it and stammering it out' (Walser 1990: 140). He finds his narrative focus flickered from object to object, relaying his story along—from an apartment, to a certain décor, to a

spider, to his own narrative efforts, to a peculiar anthropomorphization of the spider, to a mysterious, young noble etc. He seems unable to make up his mind as to what story to tell; or, indeed, refuses to make that decision. So, too, with the narrator of Walser's "Two Strange Stories" mentioned before, who somehow leaves his story both concluded and open, inconcluded, at the same time. Towards the end of it, the story seems to gravitate toward the point of its departure, as though getting ready to start again. This motif of potentially overlapping narratives is also in play in Bundy's "Early Childhood Development", whose child walks around the block to find the penny she herself placed on the ledge above her head. And as she does so, the story seems ready to begin again—written by both Walser and Bundy in the process.

Overlapping or confluence of narratives also constitutes a significant governing principle in Walser's ironic text "The Job Application", which seems to superpose conflicting genres, which—in superposition—seem to annul each other. And again, because of it, the text emerges as neither one nor the other. It emerges as a story beside the point—and its narrator seems trapped in the narrative framework of a job application he does not want to tell. 'Large and difficult tasks I cannot perform, and obligations of a far-ranging sort are too strenuous for my mind. I am not particularly clever, and first and foremost I do not like to strain my intelligence overmuch. I am a dreamer rather than a thinker, a zero rather than a force, dim rather than sharp' (1982: 27-28). Here, a speaker is very much directly trying to betray his 'good word'—a quality otherwise so bombastically craved by the detective narrator of Alison Bundy's *Tale of a Good Cook*. 'Although I am not a traveller,' as it says, 'I have been out and about in the world. I observed children playing with ropes at noon; witnessed the wild dogs running through brambles at dusk; just yesterday, sat watching the trees in an empty park in the heart of the night' (Bundy 1992: 7). This is clearly conscience speaking—but, alas, no trees grow into the sky.

However, while I feel compelled to establish myself and my good word, I must add that I am not, in truth, the author of this tale: I must take care not to misrepresent myself. I believe I am, strictly speaking, a reporter, perhaps a detective—yes, certainly it would be neither inaccurate nor immodest to portray my role here as one of detection [. . .] I have attempted at all times to deal with the events in a straightforward manner, to regard the facts dispassionately, and to add them simply together as a child will add numbers; and, when the facts resist addition, to follow one line of reasoning until it proves false, to turn then and follow another, and yet

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another, so arriving eventually, like a man who has crossed a great uncharted forest, prompted by an obscure but urgent message, who wandered circuitously, using any means he could draw from the habit of muscle and intuition of mind to determine his path, so arriving, I say, at the open field which we know to be the good field of truth. (Bundy 1992: 7-8)

Great uncharted forest, indeed—however, any good field of truth? No such luck. Bundy's *Tale of a Good Cook* constitutes a mystery refusing to be told. It is a failed detective story—based on hear-say accounts from mute witnesses. Bundy and Walser write havoc and pandemonium. Walser's "Two Stories" describes a scene of children scolding parents, students drawing coaches, and 'an aristocratic lady' carrying 'a booted and spurred lackey upon her delicate shoulders. [. . .] All is chaos, shrieks, yodels, running, racing, stench' (1990: 13).

Tension and jarring contrast are also very much in play in Walser's "A Biedermeier Story", with its 'housemaid, of whom and in whose hearing, albeit she was in her way an excellent person perhaps, more young than old, and more nearly beautiful than fundamentally hideous, some were apt to say she was a beast' (1982: 184). Similarly, 'her lover became, with more success than was welcome to his fellows, a criminal, who did with wondrous precision things I shall not mention [. . .] while misdeed upon misdeed accrued to his credit, or, in slightly different language, good prose pieces galore seemed to drop from his pen' (1982: 185). The narrative seems jolted out of tune, and changes its course—like Bundy's criminal on his way to a robbery, distracted by the fragrant roses in *Tale of a Good Cook*, which is indeed also itself both generated and displaced by another deceitful writer, namely the poetry-writing woman. Again, poetry, language and literature emerge as gestures of violent and uncontrollable proliferation, diversion and misdirection.

The four works of always already intersecting textualities which I have discussed in this paper outline a development in and an exploration of what appears to be a most ambivalent originality. Both re- and paraphrasing Derrida, one can say that these works argue that the original really is not that original. Rushdie's novel portrays originality as always already reused and regurgitated—and, significantly, generatively and creatively so. His is no mourned paraphrase. Auster's multi-layered scriptorium in deferral presents a feeble and oblivious point of origin as a site of return—as an end point, rather than a beginning or source. Here,

origin is not the subject of the sentence, but the object of it. Bud Luckey's short film seems to further disturb the entire distinction between origin and subsequence. It presents a narrative space in which the repeated is quietly, unusually and both excessively and disturbingly identical to what it repeats. And Alison Bundy's literary universe—slim in scale, but huge in implication—seems to overtly nod to and explicitly elaborate other points of origin than what would traditionally be seen as its own. Bundy's texts celebrate and paraphrase a separate source, but at the same time contribute to it, continue and change it. In other words, the immediate origin of these tales emerges as oddly secondary—backstaged and supplemented by a point before it, which they add to and rearticulate. And, most significantly, they do all this in full view and without smoke-screens or embarrassment—that is, without shying away, instead articulating the paradoxically clear subtext and agenda that this gesture is not only unavoidable, but always already happening and taking place in any cluster of words and letters. Text is, unavoidably, intertext. Bundy's and Walser's tales thus join both Auster's scriptorium and Luckey's palimpsest visuals in reiterating the key point of Rushdie's tale of the story *Moon Kahani*—that nothing comes from nothing. These odd cousins all suggest that going back to where one came from might not be the best way to put it. One might as well go forward—to where one came from.

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