Quantum Histories, Contingency, and Stardom: Narrativizing the Self in *Music, in a Foreign Language* and *My Life is like a Fairy Tale*

Alexandru DIACONESCU
"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract: Andrew Crumey's *Music, in a Foreign Language* (1994) and Robert Irwin's *My Life is like a Fairy Tale* (2019) foreground protagonists who undertake writing as a – fictional or fictionalised – means of representing the self against the pressures of collective histories represented by totalitarian regimes in the background. As contextualised, their practice emphasises the temporal dimension of both subjectivity and reality. While diametrically opposed, their approaches encompass a space that occasions the problematisation of such notions as history, temporality, and consciousness, at the intersection of chance and determinism, as well as the questioning of the interactions between their representations across a number of disciplines. The following study draws on theories from history, chaos theory, and quantum mechanics as discourses interwoven in the textual fabric of the two novels in order to examine the means by which fiction affords the exploration of the interplay of theoretical constructs while repositioning itself in the process.

Keywords: history, temporality, determinism, chaos theory, quantum mechanics

Published twenty-five years apart and inscribed in the Scottish and English literary traditions, respectively, Andrew Crumey's *Music, in a Foreign Language* (1994) and Robert Irwin's *My Life is like a Fairy Tale* (2019) confront the reader with complementary perspectives on a shared topic: narrative attempts at representing subjectivity against the background of totalitarianism. While neither work directly confronts the latter in terms of its political implications, it allows, nonetheless, for the staging of ideology as a privileged, empowered narrative operating as an immutable set of constraints deeply ingrained in

the fabric of their storyworlds, which, instead of completely erasing alternative discourses, becomes complicit with them in engendering historical contingency. As the protagonists are engaged in specific historical contexts, temporality is foregrounded as a framing factor circumscribing the possibilities for self-representation they afford, while the various undertakings towards the latter reflect back on the former, bringing it under scrutiny.

On the surface, the characters in the two novels and the worlds they inhabit could not be any farther apart or more unrelated – nor could their approaches to history, whether personal or collective. Crumey's ontology is predicated entirely on the subjunctive: England has been occupied by Germany during World War II, then it shortly became a communist dictatorship; the narrator is a former lecturer in physics now in exile in Italy, teaching English to earn a living. He is somewhat knowledgeable in literature and music history and can play piano, albeit not outstandingly well. Irwin's story is set in Germany, before and during the Second World War, suffused with historical detail; his focal character is a fictional Dutch minor actress who has come to Berlin in the 1920s in order to fulfil her dream of becoming a movie star, but never quite made it, and whose most conspicuous literary accomplishment is a failed attempt at reading *Ivanhoe* in school. The epistemological methods underlying their understanding – and representation – of both reality and themselves are, thus, diametrically opposed: while the former's is informed by his academic background, consequently – at least apparently – reliant on rational empiricism and prone to constant questioning, the latter's is based on a simple, uninquisitive mechanism of immediate emotional response and quick dismissal of anything that she perceives as boring or otherwise unattractive:

> She never bothered with the political and military news. That would only depress her and what would be the point of that?

> The horoscope was usually more cheerful and certainly more useful, as the horoscope told her what was going to happen, whereas the news only told you what had happened. (Irwin 2019: 30)

A certain sense of symmetry emerges in the approaches proposed by the two novels: the former engages the factual in a counterfactual background, while the latter plunges the counterfactual into the factual. This act of mirroring acquires, however, a further level as the two protagonists are portrayed as being in the process of writing – the former using it as a fictional exploration of the interplay of chance and determinism operating between personal and collective histories, rooted in the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, the latter intent on writing her autobiography, yet projecting it as she would have liked it to be, or what she thinks it *ought* to be, markedly different from the reality of her predicament. For all their overt – and intentional – reliance on textual (re)construction, within the compass of their respective narrative frames of reference, both entail a sense of realism – the former, with respect to the counterfactual nature of the alternate history he inhabits, the latter, in agreement with her own rendition of the factual. The fact that neither project should manage to reach completion only highlights Barthesian notions of intertextuality at work in their endeavours to render the self in writing and calls into question the possibilities and limitations of representing reality or making sense thereof, as the gaps – in meaning, as well as experience – are only deferred and multiplied in the process and the writerly subject remains confined within the folds of contingency and uncertainty.

Both contingency and uncertainty prove to be pivotal in the very disciplines that inform the approaches deployed in the two novels: physics and history – both concerned with producing accurate, *factual* renderings of reality, both related with temporality, and both faced with the conundrum of taking

individual consciousness into account, thus forced to become self-reflexive and verge on philosophical questions. In his introduction to *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997b), a collection of essays exploring plausible alternative outcomes of a series of major historic events – including a German invasion of Britain in WWII – that he describes as "separate voyages into 'imaginary time'" (Ferguson 1997a: 89), historian Niall Ferguson develops an ample metahistorical apparatus in order to prove both the legitimacy and the necessity of counterfactual approaches to historical data. In the process, he traces the recurrence of an overarching determinism underlying ideas of history as far back in time as Classical culture and beyond, being ultimately rooted in divine agency (cf. ibid.: 20 ff.), running parallel to a cyclical view, which he discards as no more than a reflection of "the profession's inherent limitations" (ibid.: 90) – in terms that are of the same order as those underlying the reasoning employed by Crumey's physicist to the same effect, as he grounds it in "an image of the world as a certain limited repertoire of patterns with which to make sense of events" (Crumey 2004: 1287). Yet, at the same time, Ferguson shows that "determinist theories really do play a role in history" (Ferguson 1997a: 88), in that they act as triggers – or, for reasons that will shortly become apparent, *attractors* – for events, enabled precisely by human consciousness, as the latter is genetically and intrinsically conditioned to survive and, to these ends, "seeks, prior to acting in the present, to make sense of the past and on that basis to anticipate the future" (ibid.). Moreover, he highlights the *belief* in such theories as the driving force behind both historical conflict and the long trail of victims history has left behind – in other words, operating in the guise of ideologies – and proposes the counterfactual as an antidote (ibid.: 88–89).

Ferguson's paradigm echoes not only the theory of history voiced by Charles King – the closest approximation to an alter ego, albeit merely potential, that the narrator embeds in his novel

in *Music, in a Foreign Language* –, but also the approach to personal history adopted by the latter. King's representation acknowledges the same degree of determinism as Ferguson's. In the metaphor of the river that he employs, following the chain of causality upstream from the "thick line which represents the river at its fullest" (Crumey 2004: 80) into multiply branching tributaries ends up in a "feathery pattern of mountain streams which is how the whole thing began" (ibid.), while "[t]he course of the river […] is dictated by the shape of the landscape, and the force of gravity" (ibid.), which also dictates the course of each individual stream that ends up fuelling it, as the metaphorical counterpart of the survival instinct. Yet this is as far as determinism is operational in his model, for, as his historian friend Robert Waters suggests, "[t]he river doesn't simply follow the landscape – it changes it" (ibid.: 81). Moreover, further complexity emerges, preventing even the consideration of a singular, unifying, and stable ground:

> But my picture is more complicated even than that. Not only does this "river of history" change the landscape which it flows through, but the landscape itself is constantly changing anyway, because of other factors. You could think of each person as having his own personal "landscape" determined by the way everyone else behaves; and he in turn affects other people's behaviour. It's a dynamical thing. (Ibid.)

In the outer frame, following up on an idea that he cannot account for, which occurred to him accidentally ten years earlier, the narrator undertakes the project of writing the fictional account of a young couple, Duncan and Giovanna, who meet on a train, replicating a chance encounter in his own life, which, in turn, replicates his meeting his future wife in similar circumstances a while earlier. Originally, it is supposed to be "*a novel about fate, and the strange contortions of history*; and it would be about two

people who meet on a train, and *the turn of events (wholly arbitrary, like all fiction) which has caused them to come together in this way*" (Crumey 2004: 12, *emphasis mine*), yet it quickly becomes obvious that even this design is underlain by a deeper realisation – that "by taking any particular course of action, one denies and loses for ever all the other paths along which one could have ventured" (ibid.). Seen through this lens, writing becomes a means of exploring one's own virtual histories targeted at mitigating the effects of all-encompassing determinism.

Crumey's narrator is assigned a detached observer's position – intellectually and physically so – as he muses on historical transformations of his home country from the vantage point of his exile in Italy and his writing in retrospect, looking back at both Britain's past and his own, which affords him an overarching perspective that should allow for patterns to be derived. In Irwin's novel, Sonja, however, is granted no such advantage – partly because her gaze is not informed by discourses that might permit it and partly because she is placed in the midst of unfolding events and emerges as an object of study, rather than a subject conducting it. This difference in perspective is further reinforced by the first-person narrative of the former, as opposed to the third-person account of the latter. In the terms of King's representation above, she is one of the minute streams not "trying to find a river to flow into" (ibid.: 80), but "simply responding to the force of gravity" (ibid.), yet inextricably bound within the flow of a history that she cannot identify with and which is no more legitimate than her own:

> For Joseph [Goebbels], film was war by other means and the victory commemorated in this film was more important than the reality of imminent defeat. […] 'From the ashes and rubble, like a phoenix, a new people will arise… a new nation!' That might have been what they did in 1807, but the Folk in 1944 were hungry, sleepless, and resigned to the worst of what was to

> come. 'The people rise up: the storm breaks!' No, they did not and it did not. At most there was a thin drizzle. Sonja did not care about the Folk. Germany had denied her the stardom that should have been her destiny. Germany did not deserve to survive her. The nation that was soon to be destroyed was like a vast stage set that would echo on a magnified scale her personal defeat. Even if she were to survive the coming debacle, her life, at least all that mattered in her life, would be over. (Irwin 2019: 268)

Such a realisation of the shifting nature of her own personal landscape under the misleading forces of a deterministic wider ground can only occur to an otherwise unsuspecting Sonja as predicated on the virtual history of her projected autobiography. While she is not endowed with the means to acquire a deeper insight that Crumey's academics are equipped with, her employment of the distorting mirror of fiction parallels the method adopted by the physicist, in confirmation of Elana Gomel's observation that "[h]uman beings are […] *narrative* animals" (Gomel 2014: 4), whose "'operational spaces' are as much a product of the stories [they] tell [themselves] about the world [they] live in as they are of [their] sensory capacities" (ibid.). It also hints at Ferguson's acceptance of determinism on the levels of both genetics and consciousness, although the mechanism becomes more nuanced, as the only way in which Sonja's autobiography can be seen as the product of a will to survive is metaphorical – her decisions lean more towards fictionalised self-fashioning than towards self-preservation. While allowing for a certain amount of light to be shed on her predicament, it does not, however, provide her with a solution. In similar fashion, King's understanding of the complexity of the system of forces at work in historical development does not grant him an escape route. He remains ineluctably caught in contingency and the play of possibilities, a condition that, despite

his privileged vantage point, the narrator acknowledges, in turn, with respect to both himself and his own act of writing, foregrounding chance as the driving force of reality and, consequently, history:

> what we regard as reality is only a point in an infinite space of possibilities. And everything we see has come about by an accumulation of accidents; the random preference for one possibility over another. […] There is no inevitability about any of it; we might as well argue about why the sun shines today when yesterday it was cloudy. (Crumey 2004: 39)

It is the same line of reasoning – including the meteorological allusion – that Ferguson's argument in favour of counterfactuals relies on, as he draws on a range of theories in physics and mathematics – including quantum uncertainty, relativity, and chaos theory – to dismantle determinist visions of history. Noting that, as the world is bound to observe the second law of thermodynamics positing increasing entropy – disorder –, what counts as historical evidence is subject to chance and events are stochastic in nature, while "human consciousness […] only adds to the impression of chaos" (Ferguson 1997a: 89), he evinces intrinsic failure in attempting to derive universal laws at work in history (ibid.). Instead, he proposes "'chaostory' – a chaotic approach to history" (ibid.) based on the theory by the same name, as a scientific method of reconciling the seemingly opposite notions of causation and chance.

While such issues find echoes in the historically-oriented debates between King and Waters, as well as in the narrator's own reflections on the issue, the latter's case opens onto a collateral dimension, as his writerly undertaking is explicitly fictional in nature – as is, to a certain extent, Sonja's. Chaos theory provides the bridge between the (counter)factual and the fictional. Following a line of approach that is similar to Ferguson's, Jo

Alyson Parker (2007) proposes what she refers to as "narrative chaotics" (2007: 21), based on a representation of narrative that draws on chaos theory. She argues that, to the extent that the process of reading is to be taken into account, the literary work is not a static structure rendering a fixed meaning (ibid.) – a conclusion that is further reinforced, although on different grounds, by phenomenology and Derridean deconstruction –, which prompts her to substitute Paul Ricœur's notion of *structuration* for the more rigid, and less accurate, idea of "structure", thus provisioning for the determinism related to the materiality of the text. This allows for describing narrative as a dynamical system, falling within the compass of chaos theory and consequently described by attractors – i.e. patterns that the evolution of the system evolves towards (ibid.: 12) –, testifying to deterministic behaviour. Within the variety of narrative forms, she identifies a series that she "characterize[s] as chaotic" (ibid.: 25) and should therefore be modelled as nonlinear dynamical systems – described by *strange* attractors, which do not exhibit a stable, identifiable pattern (ibid.: 13) –, "undermin[ing] classical notions of stability, repeatability, predictability, causality, absolute time, and observer objectivity" (ibid.: 25). In her framework, what distinguishes chaotic narratives among other forms is their inherent subversion of conventional order, repetition, temporality, and reading (ibid.: 25–26).

Constantly under revision and never achieving completion, the evolution of the two narratives in question subscribes to the chaotic, meeting all four criteria outlined above. Crumey's narrator spends ten years playing out the story in his mind, considering appropriate beginnings and changing it every time until he is forced to concede, in retrospect, that the characters and events started to "take on a life of their own" (Crumey 2004: 11), amounting to "foreign lives springing up in [his] head" (ibid.). When he does decide to write it, he only does so on trains while

commuting, always with a fresh stack of paper lest he might lose the lot, and always subject to interruptions, distractions and influences from other books he reads at home, acknowledging to "a certain amount of repetition or self-contradiction" (ibid.: 109) in his work. The result is a story of multiple subtly different beginnings, and potential outcomes that never seem to settle. Sonja's autobiography is an equally fleeting presence. While at several points alluding to having written some of it, no part is ever actually rendered. She is constantly engaged in planning and considering ways in which it *should* be written, but she admits to being "so vague that she had difficulty in remembering what she had actually written as opposed to merely thinking about writing" (Irwin 2019: 158). Consequently, she, too, ends up with potential versions of events instead of fixed representations. The trajectories that both stories delineate are at best likely to answer to the description of those lying on strange attractors, as they "never reach a fixed point; the system is always in the process of becoming" (Parker 2007: 26).

The identity of attractors is codified in initial conditions (cf. Ibid.: 12). Yet, given the chaotic nature of the narratives, as Parker herself warns, "we often have difficulty discerning the initial conditions that gave rise to the current situation" (ibid.: 25). Trying to work out the initial conditions in the cases at hand can prove exceptionally daunting. Going backwards in time in a nonlinear, branching and versioned temporal organisation is hardly likely to evince a convergent pattern – a higher probability would be that it should turn out as divergent as moving in the opposite direction, all the more so as both narrators are engaged in the task themselves – unsuccessfully so as they are faced with the hurdles set up by their own memories. While Sonja simply contents herself with – repeatedly – acknowledging her hopelessness with chronology, to such an extent that "[g]etting things in the right order was all but impossible" (Irwin 2019: 84–

85), the physicist takes a complementary route – granted the clarity and coherence of remembrance, it is impossible to safely assert its veracity as the very act of remembering potentially affects its result:

> The image constantly amended with each successive act of recollection, until what is left bears little relation to what was originally seen. Whatever it really is (and I have often wondered), memory is not merely some kind of neurological video recorder. (Crumey 2004: 9)

Establishing the exact moment – empirically, the initial condition – when the idea of his future novel occurred to him proves to be an issue "it is impossible to conclude […] with any degree of certainty" (ibid.), since, as vivid as the memory of the event seems to be, he finds himself forced to concede that it might be "a pure invention, or at least a confabulation; an accretion of successive imperfect rememberings" (ibid.). This mode of operation of the narrator's memory – as well as Sonja's, albeit inadvertently – amounts to the famous measurement problem in quantum mechanics. Besides lying at the root of interpretations such as the many-worlds theory, which informs the physicist-narrator's writing strategy, it ushers in an underlying understanding of reality which is better suited to the ontologies of the two novels. The paradigm shift occasioned by quantum mechanics lies in disrupting the tradition of classical mechanics – according to which, even in Einstein's relativistic framework, knowledge of a particular state of the universe allows for using the laws of physics "to predict everything about the universe arbitrarily far into the future or to figure out what it was like arbitrarily far into the past" (Greene 2005: 79) –, revealing probability "deeply woven into the fabric of quantum reality" (ibid.: 11) and uncertainty, "built into the wave structure of quantum mechanics" (ibid.: 98), supplanting complete determination. While relying on different

epistemological assumptions, both quantum mechanics and chaos theory produce representations of reality that emphasise chance over determinism. And this holds not only with respect to the future, but also with respect to the past, as shown by Richard Feynman's theory of *sum over histories*, according to which "a probability wave embodies all possible pasts that could have preceded a given observation" (ibid.: 180), even though the act of observation itself evinces one single strand over all possible others. As Brian Greene concludes, "although the quantum evolution from the past until now is unaffected by anything we do now, the story we tell of the past can bear the imprint of today's actions" ibid.: 191). What such an understanding foregrounds is the quantum measurement problem itself – the apparent collapse of the wave function upon observation – and the many-world interpretation mentioned above – according to which, measurement results in multiple universes, each with its own strand of history, while the totality is globally maintained in the non-collapsing wave function.

While the role of consciousness in the quantum framework has not been successfully rejected, it remains central to the two chaotic narratives under consideration and any attempt at disentangling the quagmire of histories it is embedded in will have to take it into account. It is, after all what both figures are intent on accomplishing. Solving the problem in a purely deterministic, Newtonian manner is relatively simple. In *Music, in a Foreign Language*, it can all be traced down to that moment in the bathroom when the narrator got the idea of the novel. In *My Life is like a Fairy Tale*, Sonja states that "[i]t was because of her impatience, sitting around during shoots in the studios, waiting for the leading man to turn up, then for the lighting to be adjusted, and then for the actual shooting to begin" (Irwin 2019: 46), that is, precisely on account of one of the factors that hinder her ability to master her writing. There is an obvious amount of residual

indeterminacy in both cases, woven into the very nature of their individual consciousness and thus reflecting Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, formulated with regard to quantum reality and circling back to the mind-body problem, which is the philosophical response to the measurement problem, addressing "the relation between mind and body, or more specifically, between consciousness and physical processes" (Chalmers & McQueen 2022: 12). Whereas both characters seem to abide by a classically-informed vision of their physical histories, whereby increasing entropy governs their temporal dimension – to the physicist, life is represented as "a gradual pruning of that great tree of possibilities, until one is left with a single trunk, leading to a single branch, and a single twig on the end of which one's life reaches its ultimate conclusion" (Crumey 2004: 13), an idea that permeates Sonja's own understanding of it as a matter of "diminishing options" (Irwin 2019: 134) – and plunges the very idea of time into the field of probabilities, their consciousness, especially as engaged in self-representation, testifies to more intriguing behaviour, which answers the symmetry embedded in the theoretical, *statistical* notion of entropy, rather than its operation in macroscopic reality.

Trying to pinpoint the mechanism that initiated his idea of a novel, the physicist is bound to evince chance instead of determinism, or closure, lying at the root of it, as it is only made possible by the accidental prevention of a different memory habitually springing into his mind under similar circumstances:

> Often, while urinating, I am reminded of an unfortunate incident which took place when I was very young. In my haste to zip up my trousers after using the toilet, I managed to catch a very sensitive piece of skin between the two rows of teeth. Trying to pull the fastener back down so as to release myself only made the pain worse, and I cried out for help. My father came, and struggled with the zipper – making me yelp like a dog – but still

> to no avail. With his usual Biblical authority he said that this was the reason why button flies (such as he always wore) were far superior. None of which was of any help to me. Eventually, however, through the judicious use of some margarine, I was saved. Afterwards, my father laughed and said that if the operation had gone wrong I would have come out Jewish. (Crumey 2004: 9–10)

Not only does the accident in question – as well as his father's waxing philosophical about it – *almost* make him "come out Jewish" thus outlining an idea of identity that is rooted in narrative, but it also *almost* intertextually inscribes this identity in narrative, as it *almost* replicates a similar accident in Tristram Shandy's own history, leading to a less fortunate outcome, yet triggering a similar paternal reaction. While this is precisely the memory that does *not* occur to him, the task that he sets for himself in writing his novel parallels Tristram's in more ways than one. Not only is he engaged in an endeavour that is doomed to failure, but it is equally circumscribed in a sense of temporality that favours chance over determinism. Moreover, it reveals the same realisation of the same amount of chance and branching at work in any historical undertaking as in the progression of events themselves – as Tristram himself complains, "when a man sits down to write a history […] he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet with in his way" (Sterne 1983: 32). Upon representation, time, it follows, is as much a matter of branching and entropy increase in one direction as it is in the other – a conclusion that the physicist himself reaches first with respect to his writing – "[t]he tree of possibilities branches so quickly, that it soon becomes impossible to follow with any degree of completeness, all the many middles and ends which can spring from a single beginning" (Crumey 2004: 213) –, then in his own life, as the rehearsal of the act of beginning reconciles him with the same possibility in his future.

The "pruning of the great tree of possibilities", then, translates as further branching. Yet the whole intertextual reference is relegated to the domain of alternatives. The accident has not turned him into a replica of Tristram and the memory of it has not been produced at the crucial moment. Nevertheless, it does not grant his identity an escape from textuality as the language in which he describes the process – "no such urinary *madeleine* appeared to disrupt the flow of thoughts" (ibid.: 10) – anchors his representation of the underlying mechanisms of his mind in Proust's notion of involuntary memory – and further afield in the compass of chance. For all her systematic avoidance of novels, Sonja is no more impervious to intertextuality in her self-representation. Her recollection of her first encounter with Wieland on a tram in Amsterdam and of her impulse to follow this intriguing apparition, which, it is implied, she *did* write, is rendered through the lens of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "the world was not as [she] had supposed. There were holes in it through which one could tumble and find oneself in another reality" (Irwin 2019: 21). Elsewhere, she repeatedly voices her wish to strike a Faustian deal with the Devil, whereby she would trade her unwanted memory, which she calls her shadow, for a major part in a successful film. Finally, her perception of her aged reflection in the mirror is expressed in a manner that is reminiscent of Dorian Gray: "The mirror, which used to be her friend, had turned against her and these days it gloated at her future […] If only she could have left her ugly reflection trapped in the mirror and returned to her younger self." (ibid.: 238–239).

As with Crumey's physicist, the reality of who Sonja is is thus not simply a product of a series of events to be considered in purely deterministic evolution as a causal chain the reader – observer – could follow in reverse. The gaps the two narrators' stories rush to fill in constitute as many points of discontinuity – quantum jumps that reflect forking histories, the only driving

force accounting for them being chance – as illustrated by figures like Mays, whom the physicist constructs into his novel in order to embody the "labyrinthine nature of Possibility" (Crumey 2004: 240), and Reinhardt, who styles himself as "a professional plotter" (Irwin 2019: 322) and precipitates Sonja to her death in the Suicide Club – another intertextual act of deferral of meaning towards Robert Louis Stevenson's "Story of The Young Man with The Cream Tarts" – where the only certainty she can afford is that of her own death dealt by the shuffling of a deck of cards. Death – the ultimate point of absolute discontinuity – emerges, at the same time, as the ultimate trigger of narrative. It is, after all, only after his wife's death that the physicist can actually bring himself to start putting down his novel, which constantly begins with replaying the accident that brought about Robert's suicide that is supposed to be the driving force behind the whole plot as Duncan strives – and fails – to shed light on his father's demise, echoing similar uncertainties in the narrator's own experience resurfacing upon his father's passing. Death is found to be one of the strange attractors at work in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the first novel Jo Alyson Parker employs to illustrate her theory of chaotic narrative. And, while Tristram's autobiographical project is prevented from reaching its conclusion by its very design, the narratives of both Sonja and Robert are not, as the former dies in mid-sentence and the latter does so in order to make it possible for the story to begin – and keep beginning towards no resolution. Robert's suicide letter, which the writer-narrator cannot bring his own character to find, except in the field of the hypothetical, finds its mirroring in Sonja's autobiography. Both missing from their respective plots, they reveal a subjectivity that writes from beyond death as absolute absence. While Robert starts his confession with the statement of his being already dead, Sonja rejects the idea of resorting to a ghostwriter despite not really knowing what a ghostwriter is on account of the fact that "employing such a

literary wraith would make her feel that she was already dead, or soon would be. The ghostwriter would be like her double helping to usher her into the Other Realm" (Irwin 2019: 273–274). Both functions will be fulfilled by Reinhardt, who convinces her that the Suicide Club would be "the only chance that [her] life will have any meaning" (ibid.: 322) by providing an ending to her story, assists her in the process, and, eighteen months later, starts to write *Her Life was like a Fairy Tale* after having secured access to her diaries, the reading of which "will be as if, from the grave, [she] had written [him] a long, sad letter" (ibid.: 349).

As a strange attractor, death is responsible not only for the structuration of narrative, but also for the multiplication of versions under the pressure of chance and entropy, enacting temporal symmetry not in terms of flow, but in terms of branching. "The tales I have written are no more than shadows" (Crumey 2004: 226), writes the narrator in *Music, in a Foreign Language*, before going on to elicit failure as implicit in the nature of the shadows as "attempts to understand the vocabulary of events which my observations have revealed; events which I cannot understand, and which may perhaps have no meaning, and yet which seem to come together into some kind of pattern, or hierarchy of patterns" (ibid.). The same insufficiency is alluded to in the lack of capitalisation in the spelling of the verb "to be" in Sonja's title, which carries on – or is a reflection of – Reinhardt's. The only reality – either within or without the characters' consciousness – thus made potentially available would best be described by Arkady Plotnitsky's concept of "reality without realism" (Plotnitsky 2019: 250), which he defines in his examination of the inextricable relationship between consciousness and quantum theory:

> By *reality* I refer to that which is assumed to exist, without making any claim concerning the *nature* of this existence, which thus may be placed beyond representation or even conception. I

> understand existence as a capacity to have effects on the world with which we interact and that, because it exists, has such effects upon itself. (Ibid.: 252)

In this light, all narratives constructed in the terms of the novels under scrutiny emerge as shadows of an object that can be neither represented nor conceived – yet that does not invalidate them as narratives. One of the central themes in *Music, in a Foreign Langue* is – musical – variation. What the narrator shares with both King and Waters, apart from variations on totalitarian ideologies – fascist and communist alike – in the background, as well as in the discourses that inform their worldviews and their decisions, just as Sonja's are based on Nazism and celebrity culture, is their passion for music. To be more precise, it is precisely his own musical inclination that mediates his characters and their interactions, while variations radiate from music to his writerly attempts on every level. Even the phrase that gives the book its title and empowers Mays to play out the labyrinthine variations of possibilities is a line on a scrap of paper torn randomly from a sheet containing Robert's variation on a poem by C.P. Cavafy. Fashioned after the paradigm of the many-worlds interpretation, the narrator puts forth the model of a gigantic universal Library hosting any possible book created by every possible combination of symbols, allegedly borrowed from imaginary writer Alfredo Galli, in order to conceive of the universe of the mind – or of the representations it could possibly produce. Like Schrödinger's wave function, it encompasses all possible narrative variations, factual and counterfactual alike. Sonja's own predicament of considering, contemplating both the events in her life (along with the wider historical context) and the possibilities of rendering them in her autobiography also amounts to a series of variations. Her own ontology can thus be described as a superposition of variations that never collapses – the universal wave function that fuels the multiverse with each of her

'observations' –; then, one ontological level up, the whole narrative of her doing so is infinitely multiplied in the image of Reinhardt *beginning* to write her story, displaced into the third person (just like the narrative that contains it) – another superposition of variations that cannot be brought about to collapse – in a reverse image of the measurement problem. While Galli's library is, by virtue of its construction, finite, when pitched against the reality without realism of death, it cannot find closure, since, as Michel Foucault observes in "Language to Infinity" (1998), "[h]eaded toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power – that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits" (1998: 90). When the symbols on paper turn to language, like the original Greek version of Cavafy's poem, in which King struggles to see an actual language instead of mathematical notation, the variations are pushed to replicate themselves infinitely under the strange attractor of meaning – or of its shadows.

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