

WILEY



---

The Double Fiction in Robert Walser's "Jakob von Gunten"

Author(s): Rochelle Tobias

Source: *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3, Focus on Literature around 1900 (Summer, 2006), pp. 293-307

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [American Association of Teachers of German](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27675952>

Accessed: 24/02/2015 11:29

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and American Association of Teachers of German are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The German Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ROCHELLE TOBIAS  
*The Johns Hopkins University*

## The Double Fiction in Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*<sup>1</sup>

The Swiss author Robert Walser earned his place in the modernist canon posthumously. Although he was praised during his lifetime by several noted writers—among them Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, and Walter Benjamin—he did not achieve fame until the 1960s, when the texts he wrote in an astonishingly tiny script began to be published, first in facsimile form and then in deciphered versions.<sup>2</sup> The micrograms, as these texts are known, not only generated renewed interest in Walser, but also legitimized his work after the fact. They gave the heroes of his fiction a written or graphic form that seemed more appropriate to them than the printed letter.

The protagonists of Walser's fiction are invariably drifters and ne'er-dowells who never cease to proclaim their insignificance, indeed who seem to relish their marginal status. At the same time, they exert a magnetic force over others, who are drawn to them precisely because in them they see the innocence of their youth and a freedom they long ago surrendered. "Dir gegenüber erlaubt man sich alles" (*GT* 175) exclaims a character in *Die Geschwister Tanner* in a remark that is typical of the response Walser's heroes elicit from strangers. The character continues, "Dein Betragen erlöst anderer Betragen von jeder Art Unfreiheit" (*GT* 175), in a comment that suggests the curious liberating power of Walser's impoverished protagonists. His heroes are free by virtue of their detachment from institutions of any kind. They have no familial, religious, or social obligations but also, and more disturbingly, no fraternal bonds. The protagonists in Walser's stories are incapable of forming attachments or returning the affection directed at them since they have no defining traits save that they mirror the characters they meet. They pass through the world with nothing but a mirror in their hands which conceals them, even when they are open, by turning their face into a mask.

As this brief sketch indicates, indecipherability was always an issue of Walser's work. The micrograms, however, gave it another dimension that resonated with literary critics throughout the 1980s and '90s. The texts drew attention to the materiality of writing. More specifically, they drew attention to Walser's minuscule script, which was interpreted as the basis for his indecipherable or unreadable protagonists.<sup>3</sup> Few critics at the time asked if this was

true for all of Walser's works, most of which were written before he arrived at what he called the "Bleistiftmethode" in a now famous letter to Max Rychner.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not he consistently wrote in tiny letters cannot be verified here.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, though, the assumption that he used the "Bleistiftmethode" throughout his life led to his rehabilitation as a modernist. From that point on, Walser was not merely a fanciful author, obsessed with trivial objects and marginal figures, but a writer who experimented with form, indeed who made form into the substance of his work. Walser gained his place in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century canon through a reversal of terms whereby the indecipherability of his protagonists came to be viewed as nothing but a reflection of the indecipherability of his script.

The paradox of this approach is that it denies what makes it possible in the first place, namely the narratives in which impenetrability is explored as a character trait. Only because Walser's protagonists are indecipherable at a thematic level, can his manuscripts be appreciated in turn for their indecipherability at a graphic level, i.e., at the level of their script. Two factors of varying importance have led to this confusion. The first concerns the breadth of Walser's work, which includes three completed novels, the unfinished draft of a fourth, several short stories, lyric poems, novellas, dramas, and lastly numerous one-page sketches written for the *feuilletons*. Producing an overview of such a vast and heterogeneous *œuvre* is a difficult task at best, especially when the only consistent feature seems to be the author's handwriting. But a second part of the problem—and one of deeper concern to literary critics—is the reduction of the notion of form to the graphic dimensions of a text. In the case of Walser, the materiality of his writing has been mistaken for the form of his work, which is a puzzling development given that material (or matter) has always stood as the opposite of form in aesthetics.

This article seeks to expand the notion of form to include such narrative conventions as the place of the narrator in the story recounted. In particular, it looks at the first-person narrator in Walser's most celebrated work, the diary novel *Jakob von Guten: Ein Tagebuch*, which appeared in 1909 shortly after the publication of *Die Geschwister Tanner* (1907) and *Der Gehülfe* (1908). Part of what makes this text attractive for formal analysis is that it is Walser's most conventional narrative.<sup>6</sup> The events of the novel unfold for the most part in chronological sequence. The clear marking of "before" and "after" distinguishes it from Walser's other work which has little if any temporal development. And yet, as I will show, temporality is the key issue of the text. The eponymous hero of this diary novel occupies more than one here-and-now, which is generally a constraint of the diary. The rules of ordinary language dictate that the first person can refer only to the speaker invoking it at any point in time; in other words, the first person is "an instance of discourse" and nothing else, as Benveniste has demonstrated (217–19). That Jakob would exist in two places at once is thus a logical contradiction and a violation of

grammar. This article will nonetheless claim that he can do so precisely because in fiction a narrator is not constrained by the rules of ordinary language or, more specifically, the form of first-person utterances. *Jakob von Gunten* is a novel which plays with narrative conventions to undermine them in the end—ultimately to subordinate form to content. The first section of the article will consider how Jakob's idealized notion of a servant challenges the idea of selfhood usually associated with the first person; the second will then explore the narratological dimensions of the text as a double fiction or a diary within a diary; the third and final section will discuss the questions this text raises for the conception of first-person fiction in narrative theory.

### The Freedom of a Servant

*Jakob von Gunten* is ostensibly the diary of a student at a school for servants which once enjoyed considerable renown, although its reputation has waned in recent years. Beginning with his first entry, Jakob wonders what will happen to him in a comment which is as much in jest as it is in earnest:

Man lernt hier sehr wenig, es fehlt an Lehrkräften, und wir Knaben vom Institut Benjamenta werden es zu nichts bringen, das heißt, wir werden alle etwas sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes im späteren Leben sein. (7)

In a manner typical of Walser's heroes, Jakob does not promise much save his eventual insignificance, should he reach a ripe old age when his years will outnumber his accomplishments. "Wir ... werden es zu nichts bringen," he notes with peculiar certainty, given that the issue in question is the future. Yet the form of the novel requires such a projection; it requires the horizon of a future to establish the present as the interval in which the protagonist becomes what he was meant to be from the outset. In this manner, the text alludes to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, as does its location in a school or *Bildungsanstalt*.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with this tradition, Jakob promises his development over time. Counter to this tradition, he does not predict his eventual formation as an autonomous subject, but rather his degeneration into a mere subordinate subject to the whims of others. He anticipates "amounting to nothing," which would rank as a failure in any other work save in this one where becoming nothing is an extraordinary achievement, the next closest thing to godliness.

Among the chores assigned to the students is to dust the few decorative objects hanging in the school. These include a sword and sheath and an iron helmet, all items which hark back to an earlier age when there were still kings, lords, and masters. Wim Peeters contends that this hierarchy is fundamental to any social system. Drawing on the work of Pierre Legendre, he argues that every order posits a past when the father established the law, although this

past is invariably mythical (179–81). For Peeters, *Jakob von Gunten* represents nothing less than a crisis in the social system. Neither Jakob's real father nor his symbolic fathers (i.e., his teachers) possess any authority. As a result, Jakob is forced to find another father whom he can install as the governing body over himself and his schoolmates (186–87).

Peeters is not the first critic to note the dialectical nature of the relationship between Jakob and the institute's reclusive director, whom Jakob chooses as his *ersatz* paternal figure (Peeters 188, Philippi 127–28, Magris 347). Although Jakob is the supposed subordinate, he must *compel* Herr Benjamenta to assume the role of lord or master ("Herr"). What this interpretation nonetheless overlooks, as do most which focus exclusively on Jakob's relationship with Herr Benjamenta (Hiebel 308–45), is the quest for freedom that leads Jakob to a school where hierarchy is of paramount importance.

According to Jakob, the Institute Benjamenta is trapped in a bygone era, whereas the city around it is caught in the throes of republicanism, whose central tenet is that all men are created equal. Equality, Jakob implies, is a form of enslavement insofar as it deprives the individual of the ideals necessary for the exercise of freedom.<sup>8</sup> Jakob does not express this sentiment directly, but puts it in the mouth of his brother Johann, whom he encounters on the street in the crowd or what Jakob calls "[das] Menschengewimmel" (65). Johann warns his younger brother:

"Die Masse, das ist der Sklave von heute, und der Einzelne ist der Sklave des großartigen Massengedankens. Es gibt nichts Schönes und Vortreffliches mehr. Du mußt dir das Schöne und Gute und Rechtschaffene träumen. Sage mir, verstehst du zu träumen?" (67)

The condescending tone of Johann's comment notwithstanding, his critique of modernity is not without its merits. Insofar as the masses no longer have any ideals (e.g., "the beautiful," "the good," "the upright"), they are enslaved since they have no occasion to demonstrate that they are free. Freedom inheres in the effort to embody ideals which are by definition hierarchical, that is, of a higher nature than nature. Faced with this paradox of republicanism, Jakob can only dream. He dreams of becoming a servant who is master of his destiny.

A servant is master of his fate because he is free—free to serve anyone who is in need. Jakob thus takes particular pleasure in imagining situations where he can help someone who is, as he puts it, "of no concern to him": "Jemandem, den man nicht kennt und *der einen gar nichts angeht*, einen Dienst erweisen, das ist reizend, das läßt in göttlich nebelhafte Paradiese blicken" (23, emphasis added). To give without being asked affords one a glimpse of the heavens for reasons that become apparent in the remainder of the passage. Jakob admits that no human being is ever *entirely* divorced from him, but he means this only in the most literal sense, as his next statement indicates: "Die da an mir

vorübergehen, die gehen mich irgend etwas an, das steht fest" (23). Insofar as someone walks past Jakob [*an ihm vorübergeht*], they concern him [*sie gehen ihn an*], because they occupy his space. The link between intransitive verb "vorübergehen" and the transitive "angehen" reduces the latter to a mere physical relation. Strangers concern Jakob when they are "in his face," when they are near enough to him that he feels their presence. If offering them a service is uplifting, if it enables him to transcend his station, it is because in such cases he moves from being a victim of chance to a master of the situation. Jakob offers the example of a dog that gets tangled in its leash:

Da bücke ich mich, und dem großen, großen Unglück ist abgeholfen. Nun kommt die Herrin des Hundes heranmarschiert. Sie sieht, was los ist, und dankt mir ... "Danke, mein Herr." Ah, zum Herrn hat sie mich gemacht. Ja, wenn man sich zu benehmen weiß, ist man ein Herr. (23)

The mere repetition of the word "Herr" in this passage indicates that more is at stake in the term than a translation of it as "Sir" or "gentleman" can convey. Jakob has after all just resolved "a great, great misfortune" as he would have it. He has intervened to set matters right like a *deus ex machina* who descends from the heavens to resolve the crises created by men. More importantly, he intercedes on behalf of a person whom he does not know and who does not know him. The latter point is crucial, as it draws attention to an asymmetry in the master-servant relationship. Strangers may concern Jakob, but Jakob does not concern them since they can do nothing for him. He is not in need of their services. He thus becomes the stranger in the scene, the one about whom the lady will later ask, as Jesus's disciples did of him, "Who was he?"<sup>9</sup>

The similarity between the figure Jakob imagines and the Christian messiah is not incidental. Although the novel never makes any explicit reference to Christ, his example pervades almost every page. Christ is the model servant, the one who devotes himself to the salvation of others, who need him for their redemption, although he does not need them in the reverse. Jakob draws on this model of service in the above-cited passage, albeit to pervert it for his own ends. Service does not require a sacrifice on his part. On the contrary, it elevates and enlarges him by allowing him to become a being that no one notices and consequently is not confined to any one place. Nowhere in particular, Jakob is everywhere potentially. This reversal informs every aspect of a servant's life, including his time or temporality.

A servant, as Jakob sees it, has access to eternity insofar as his work is never done or his service is never complete. Accordingly, the two virtues emphasized in the institute's curriculum are patience and obedience, each of which is oriented toward the future:

Der Unterricht, den wir genießen, besteht hauptsächlich darin, uns Geduld und Gehorsam einzuprägen, zwei Eigenschaften, die wenig oder gar keinen Erfolg versprechen. Innere Erfolge, ja. Doch was hat man von solchen? (7)



Although patience and obedience are usually characterized as passive dispositions, such a definition does not do justice to them. Neither virtue consists in the surrender of will or the suspension of desire, as is commonly assumed. On the contrary, the two are arguably the most willful dispositions insofar as they require the subject to attend not only to the present but also the future. For this reason, patience and obedience can never be fully mastered or learned. One never finishes with the initial exercise of either, unless one is, of course, impatient or disobedient. The two stretch out over an eternity. As a result, they never yield any rewards save the reward of the exercise itself. Jakob calls this reward an "inner success" to distinguish it from external rewards such as the accumulation of wealth.

Inner and outer, however, are complicated terms in a work, where rules are said to "hagel[n], blitz[en], schnei[en] und regn[en]" (84) and people waft like scents in the air, in short, where individuals and institutions are represented as forces of nature. The tension in the language of the text is reflected in the instruction at the school as well, which is divided into a theoretical and a practical part, although the former is not described at any length. We are told that the students memorize the maxims contained in the school's one textbook, which is appropriately titled with a question, "Was bezweckt die Knabenschule?" (83). The bulk of the instruction takes place in practical sessions, which include such exercises as gymnastics, dance, and role-playing. According to Jakob, the purpose of these lessons is to give shape to the body. But it is also to give life to the law, so that the law may in turn guide the lives of the students. Jakob indicates as much in his description of the learning process:

Wir erfassen eines ums andere, und haben wir etwas erfaßt, so besitzt es uns quasi. Nicht wir besitzen es, sondern im Gegenteil, was wir scheinbar zu unserem Besitz gemacht haben herrscht dann über uns.... Das Gesetz, das befiehlt, der Zwang, der nötigt, und die vielen unerbittlichen Vorschriften, die uns die Richtung und den Geschmack angeben: das ist das Große, und nicht wir, wir Eleven. (63–64)

To the extent that the students incarnate the law and let it take possession of them, they are placed in another dimension where time stands still even as it continues to pass for everyone around them. For each time the students do as the law commands, they are returned to this one moment in the classroom, as if it had never passed. Conversely, this one moment lives on in them as their inextinguishable youth and abiding innocence. For this reason, none of the characters in the work is said to live, only to live on ("dahinleben"). All the residents of the school "live on" without direction or orientation in a dimension where time never passes and no one grows old or withers.

Freed from the constraints of time, the students become riddles to each other and themselves, as Jakob himself notes in his first diary entry: "Seit ich hier im Institut Benjamenta bin, habe ich es bereits fertiggebracht, mir zum

Rätsel zu werden" (7). What Jakob finds *rätselhaft*, inscrutable, is his new-found contentment which is not unlike the serenity of the model student at the school, Kraus, whose ordinary name belies his exemplarity. Although Kraus is dim-witted, plodding, and physically unattractive, Jakob reveres him all the same since in his commitment to service Kraus has become a riddle, which is as much an epistemological as a theological quandary:

Ja, man wird Kraus nie achten, und gerade das, daß er ohne Achtung zu genießen dahinleben wird, das ist ja das Wundervolle und Planvolle, das An-den-Schöpfer-Mahnende. Gott gibt der Welt einen Kraus, um ihr gleichsam ein tiefes unauflösbares Rätsel aufzugeben. Nun, und das Rätsel wird nie begriffen werden, denn siehe: man gibt sich ja gar nicht einmal Mühe es zu lösen, und gerade deshalb ist dieses Kraus-Rätsel ein so Herrliches und Tiefes: weil niemand begehrt, es zu lösen, weil überhaupt gar kein lebendiger Mensch hinter diesem namenlos unscheinbaren Kraus irgendeine Aufgabe, irgendein Rätsel ... vermuten wird. Kraus ist ein echtes Gott-Werk, ein Nichts, ein Diener. (81)

As Jakob repeatedly underscores, Kraus is a mystery precisely because no one suspects anything mysterious in him. His distinction is that he is inconspicuous or indistinct, which resonates with scholastic definitions of God as the One who is divided from all creation by virtue of his indivisibility. Kraus is a riddle because he has no particularities. So thoroughly has he internalized the lessons of the servant school that he no longer stands out as an individual. Rather, he blends in with nature as a natural phenomenon. For this reason, Jakob can refer to him as "das An-den-Schöpfer-Mahnende." One does not see Kraus when he performs a service. One sees nature in his stead, since Kraus's work is to reestablish the order of things, as God created them. If he is noticed at all, it is at best as a scent in the air, which is a recurring motif in the work. Herr Benjamenta, for instance, notes that when Jakob came to the institute he was "frech und blühend, duftend von unverdorbenen Empfindungen" (156). And Jakob himself imagines that when he dies he will be transformed into a blossom: "Eines Tages wird von meinem Wesen und Beginnen Duft ausgehen, ich werde Blüte sein und ein wenig ... duften" (144). All of these examples lend credence to the claim, "Das gute Betragen ist ein blühender Garten" (83), which is the one maxim from the school's textbook cited in the work.

At a structural level, Kraus's function is not only to illuminate what Jakob wants to be, but also to exemplify what he becomes, if one takes the conclusion of the novel seriously, that is, if one trusts Jakob as narrator. There is, of course, the possibility that his diary is a ruse, a collection of stories invented to gratify the author, who could be either Jakob von Gunten or Robert Walser. Jochen Greven (173) and Dagmar Grenz (141–42) argue along these lines that Jakob is not only Kraus's likeness, but also his antithesis in his penchant for irony and word play. Yet the full extent of Jakob's irony only comes to the



foreground at the novel's end, when he becomes, like Kraus, "a nothing, a servant" (81).

The final pages of the novel are marked by a rapid series of events, which stand in stark contrast to the lugubrious pace of the preceding sections (Grenz 90). After a lonely life in which her love was never requited, Fräulein Benjamenta suddenly dies. Her death precipitates the disbanding of the school which, as the director admits, had been his refuge from the world. All the students are dispatched to posts around the globe with the exception of Jakob who stays behind as the director's chosen companion. Before leaving the institute, the students gather one last time around Lisa Benjamenta. Kraus holds a eulogy that encapsulates the lessons of the school on the rewards of service:

Die Gedanken, die du uns eingepägt, die Lehren, und Kenntnisse, die du in uns befestigt hast, werden uns immer an dich, die Schöpferin des Guten, was in uns ist, erinnern. *Ganz von selber*. Essen wir, so wird uns die Gabel sagen, wie du wünschtest, daß wir sie führen und handhaben sollen.... In uns herrschest, gebietest, lebst, erziehst und fragst und tönst du weiter. (152, emphasis added)

Fräulein Benjamenta is able to live on *in* her students because they live *through* her. She is the author of all that is good in them which is simultaneously all that they can call their own. Their profession requires that they live their lives without any recognition or monetary reward. The only reward that they can claim hence is that they fulfill or embody the law. Put otherwise, the law is its own reward. This is the meaning of the phrase "ganz von selber" which plays on Jakob's name, as does the phrase "ganz von unten" (69) that occurs earlier in the novel, when Jakob muses about his preferred social station (Siegel 19; Utz, "Robert Walser," 203; Middleton 24). At stake in this word play is that the law compensates those who serve it "of its own accord." It grants "[den] Guten," "ganz von unten" eternal life, albeit at the price of any recognition for their accomplishment.

Once the students leave and Lisa Benjamenta is buried, Jakob and Herr Benjamenta can depart as well. The destination of their trip is never specified as anything but a desert far from Europe that recalls something else: the birthplace of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are all mentioned in the text. Before Jakob can embark on this journey, however, he must lay down his pen. He can only venture off into the distance, if he ceases to write for reasons that become apparent in his final diary entry:

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

According to the premises of this passage, Jakob must dispense with writing to start a new life since writing, as he represents it, is a form of confinement. It imprisons one in a world of thought and, by extension, in a self that is solipsistic and cut off from all others. In ceasing to write, Jakob can consequently merge with the world at large. Indeed, his entire diary would seem to anticipate this moment when he retreats as a narrator from our sight to return as someone we do not notice, someone like Kraus who is “a true work of God” (81). God will be with Jakob, once he leaves us behind, since in leaving us he can finally fulfill his mission to serve. He can incarnate the law which requires that he help anyone who is in need—in short, which requires that he be infinite. The Institute Benjamenta is disbanded and yet it remains intact literally *à Dieu*, with God, which represents the world outside the confines of the written text.

### The Double Fiction

If there is something disconcerting in this conclusion, it is that it is all too gratifying for Jakob. He orchestrates his disappearance, so that he may gain access to eternal life or at least a life in which he is no longer constrained by the threat of disappearing or dying, for a servant whom no one notices cannot die. He cannot disappear, when he only ever appears as a force of nature (a scent) or a *deus ex machina* (a miracle). For this reason, Jakob's descriptions of himself as a flower or a stranger, as in the scene with the dog, are not merely whimsical remarks, but part of a concerted strategy to establish the conditions for his own eventual departure. Jakob would have us believe that he retreats from the very pages of the book we hold in our hands to emerge on the other side of writing, that is, in life as someone we fail to acknowledge. The two instruments he uses in this undertaking are his pen and us. We, the readers, are the necessary witnesses to his passing into eternal life.

Seen in this light, Jakob's diary is nothing but an archway or threshold—“eine reizende, kugelrunde Null” (8), to borrow one of his favorite figures of speech. He passes through the circle—the institute—he draws on the page to be born anew in another world. As this brief sketch indicates, the space of the institute and the diary are one and the same, which raises the question whether the institute is not a fantasy *within* the diegetic space. That is to say, in the fiction of the existence of someone named Jakob von Gunten lies another fiction, namely that Jakob attends a servant school that he records in his diary. The text is arguably structured as a series of concentric rings, in which the diary of a student is enclosed within the diary of another person bearing the same name as him.

Andreas Gößling arrives at a similar hypothesis regarding the structure of the novel, albeit for different reasons. In his interpretation, Jakob draws on the

tradition of the *Bildungsroman* to generate and form himself as a work of art (170–79). Jakob, the student, is in his opinion a figure modeled after the hero of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.<sup>10</sup> Insofar as the narrator of the diary is modeled after another figure and as such sketched by another hand, the text has to be conceived as a double fiction with two narrators. A hidden writer named Jakob represents himself as a student who writes a diary in which he also represents himself. To bolster this speculative claim, Gößling points to the number of passages in which Jakob's knowledge exceeds that of an ordinary diarist. For instance, early in the text Jakob writes, "Von Kraus werde ich sehr viel reden müssen" (25), as if he already knows what direction his diary will take. A few pages later he comments, "Ich muß noch einmal ganz zum Anfang zurückkehren" (29), as if it were necessary to inform others that he is retracing his steps. And throughout the text, Jakob wonders how readers will respond to what he writes. For example, he begins one entry with the statement, "Ich muß jetzt etwas berichten, was vielleicht einigen Zweifel erregt" (53). And later he jokes: "Ich schwatze wieder ein wenig, nicht wahr? Geb' es gern zu, daß ich schwatze, denn mit etwas müssen doch Zeilen ausgefüllt werden" (105). All of these remarks lend credence to Gößling's claim that the diary is marked as fictitious within the very space of the text.

Yet for all the strength of these examples what Gößling fails to address is the significance of the double fiction for Jakob's self-formation. His analysis avoids the perhaps naïve, but fundamental question of what Jakob stands to gain in pretending to be a student who writes a diary, even if his diary is implausible as a journal. This question is not merely one of form; it bears on the content of the work. It concerns how the work understands its form and exploits it for its own ends. This moment of self-reflection comes as Jakob enters "die inneren Gemächer," which stand as much for the mystery of the school as they do for the mystery of Jakob's diary.

The "inner chambers" are the rooms where the Benjamentas reside. The only student allowed to see them is Kraus, who never breathes a word about them. One evening, however, Jakob is suddenly and magically transported there when Fräulein Benjamenta appears behind him and puts her hands on his shoulders, as if bestowing a blessing on him. Jakob then finds himself in a cavernous space underground with Fräulein Benjamenta as his guide. Although the two claim to walk from room to room, it would be more appropriate to say that each room blends into the other like shifting stills or camera frames. However cinematic this effect may seem, I do not believe it was inspired by the films of Walser's day. The rooms are too literary in one respect to be viewed as citations of film technology. Each room is the translation of an allegorical figure; each represents a particular phrase or mood as a physical environment. So, for instance, when Jakob bumps his head against a wall, Fräulein Benjamenta says: "Geh und lieblose die Mauer. Es ist die Sorgenwand. Sie wird stets vor deinen Blicken aufgerichtet sein" (100). And when he

is almost blinded by a light, she tells him that this represents joy which one has to learn to take in moderation. I could continue with this list, but I suspect these examples show that the rooms are externalizations of inner states, *habitus* made literal.

What makes the inner chambers significant is that they mirror the work as a whole. As the chambers are projections of inner states, so, too, the Institute Benjamenta is an externalization of Jakob's fantasy. This becomes apparent when Jakob enters the chambers again and this time discovers only sparsely furnished rooms with a fish tank as the one flourish. Jakob had already hinted that the chambers were a fantasy during his first stay there by playing on the two meanings of the noun "Gemach" [room and comfort] as well as its negation, "das Ungemach" [adversity] (Utz, "Jakob von Gunten," 496). He has Fräulein Benjamenta ask him:

Hörst du, wie es zornig einherdonnert und -rollt? Das ist *das Ungemach*. Du hast jetzt in einem *Gemach* Ruhe genossen. Nun wird *das Ungemach* über dich herabregnen und Zweifel und Unruhe werden dich durchnässen. (102, emphasis added)

As soon as Fräulein Benjamenta utters the noun "das Ungemach," Jakob is whisked from the chambers and plunged into a "Strom von Zweifel" (102), as he puts it. That the word would have such incantatory power is not unusual in the context of the scene. Throughout the episode, the phrases that Fräulein Benjamenta utters appear as diverse settings. What is unusual in this case is that "das Ungemach" does not materialize as a new setting. Rather, it destroys the very illusion of place by exposing the chambers as nothing but a vision based in words and nothing else. Peter Utz thus calls the inner chambers "empty places" and compares them to a balloon that is popped in the course of the novel ("Jakob von Gunten" 496).

The puncturing of Jakob's illusion is simultaneously a puncturing of ours. It calls into question whether the Institute Benjamenta ever existed or if it was merely a product of Jakob's fantasy, that is, a fiction created out of words, as the inner chambers were created through the translation of allegorical figures. What is lost with the chambers, however, is not merely the fiction of the school. The figure of the diarist or author is cast in doubt as well. Jakob cannot be a student who writes of his experiences at school, if the school does not exist anywhere outside his text. This is where the episode in the inner chambers becomes significant again. Jakob's passage through the narrow and winding corridors of the chambers ends in a pool of grief—more precisely a "Strom von Zweifel" (102)—in which he almost drowns. Rarely in a work has birth been described in such direct and dramatic terms. And rarely has it been so completely overlooked in the secondary literature. Two entries before this one on the inner chambers, Jakob writes after an encounter with Herr Benjamenta, "Es war mir, als sei ich zu Hause. Nein, es war mir, als sei ich noch nicht

geboren, als schwämme ich in etwas Vor-Gebürtigem" (95). The passage through the inner chambers is a birth, albeit not the birth that Jakob wants, which is why it ends in grief. The birth he wants comes at the end of his diary. Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that the entire fiction of the school is meant to promote the fantasy of a birth without blood or water, a literal self-formation. We indulge Jakob in this fantasy. We serve him by creating or opening a space outside of the fiction of the school into which he can slip once he stops writing. The reader in effect legitimizes Jakob's claim that "Die Schule Benjamenta ist das Vorzimmer zu den Wohnräumen und Prunksälen des ausgedehnten Lebens" (64–65).

### The Limits of Narrative Theory

In narratological terms, Jakob is split between the two orders of the text. On the one hand, he participates in the world that he represents. On the other, he produces this world from afar, from a vantage point not visible to the reader. In Genette's terminology, he is both the homo- and heterodiegetic narrator of the text, although he uses the first-person throughout, which would usually make a heterodiegetic position impossible. Yet in this work, the pronoun "I" refers at one and the same time to Jakob's position inside and outside the diary, which is also inside and outside the institute. Jakob is both a student at a school which he writes about and a writer who fantasizes about being at such a school—in other words, an author who produces what Gößling calls a "feigned" diary (170–75). These two positions cannot be entirely disentangled from one another. There are, however, moments when Jakob suggests that the pronoun "I" must be understood as at least dual in its reference: "Ich führe ein sonderbares Doppelleben, ein geregeltes und ein ungeregeltes, ein kontrolliertes und ein unkontrolliertes, ein einfaches und ein höchst kompliziertes" (140). Jakob's life is a two-fold adventure, a union of opposites, since he is both the narrating and the narrated subject of this diary within a diary.

As Käte Hamburger might put it, he is a fictional character at the level of the internal narrative and a feigned statement-subject at the level of the frame, i.e., the space outside the institute but in the book. In *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Hamburger distinguishes between third-person fiction, which operates according to its own set of linguistic principles, and first-person narration, which follows the rules of ordinary language, albeit as feint or mimicry. The distinction between feint and fiction, however, is at best murky in a work in which the narrated subject (i.e., the student Jakob) writes a diary and the narrating subject (i.e., the hidden author Jakob) keeps silent. Formal criticism is limited in its ability to account for this dynamic, since what generates it is a perversion of the rules governing ordinary language and fictional utterances.



However, as a perversion this dynamic has a thematic component as well which can be expounded in any reading. *Jakob von Gunten* offers this component in its treatment of service, a topic that informs every aspect of the novel, including the characters' names. Although Jakob is a student and by extension a son, he bears the name of the biblical patriarch, whereas his teachers and symbolic parents bear a name related to the patriarch's son, Benjamin (Gößling 219; Peeters 190). Within the school, Jakob is a minor, but outside it he is the father of a nation. At the novel's conclusion, he disappears with the children he sires with his pen, i.e., with the fictional progeny he produces with the aid of the reader as nurse or midwife.<sup>11</sup> He slips into the world beyond the institute as a word made flesh, that is, as the embodiment of the institute's impersonal principles. Klaus-Peter Philippi has complained that Jakob's sole ambition in the novel is to be (131). Yet it is a remarkable achievement for a character to engineer his departure from the page and entrance into life, if only as an anonymous being. With Jakob's disappearance, the semblance of life in the text gives way to a life beyond all semblance, which is also a life beyond all formal constraint. Jakob achieves his freedom by abandoning the fiction he creates. He persists long after the conclusion of the novel by virtue of not appearing, by forsaking all self-representation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of this article were delivered at Princeton University and at the 2004 annual convention of the American Comparative Literature Association. I am grateful to the audience at both events for many useful comments. I would also like to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers of the *German Quarterly* for their sensitive comments.

<sup>2</sup> The executor of Walser's estate, Carl Seelig, published the first reproduction of the micrograms in 1957. Greven immediately identified the handwriting as a miniscule version of Sütterlin as opposed to a secret script, which was Seelig's contention. Greven transcribed the manuscript of the unfinished novel *Der Räuber*, published in 1972. Since 1985, Echte and Morlang have deciphered and published the micrograms in a six-volume edition. The micrograms were written in pencil on pages which Walser made by cutting up large, decorative calendars. The manuscripts include drafts of published works as well as texts which were only made available after the author's death.

<sup>3</sup> See Gees's study which attempts to avoid the pitfall of reading Walser's work in terms of his biography. Gees, nonetheless, limits her discussion to those dimensions of Walser's *oeuvre* that dramatize his peculiar writing process.

<sup>4</sup> In the letter to Max Rychner, Walser explains that he developed the "Bleistiftmethode" to overcome a physical and mental writer's block from which he suffered when using a pen (*Briefe* 300–01).

<sup>5</sup> In the letter to Rychner, dated 20 June 1927, Walser states that he started writing in pencil ten years earlier. However, he also claims that he experienced a crisis writing



in ink during his highly productive Berlin years (1905 to 1913). See *Briefe* 300–01. Regardless of when he developed the “Bleistiftmethode,” the issue remains that his characters have been seen as thematizations of his writing process, not the reverse.

<sup>6</sup> Walser himself suggested that it was his most successful work. See Seelig, *Wanderungen*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Philippi argues that the novel invokes the *Bildungsroman* tradition only to parody it (121–22). Gößling claims that the work is at almost every turn a play on *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and the second half of his study centers on the ways in which Walser’s novel forces us to reinterpret Goethe’s text (169–234). Borchmeyer reads Walser’s novel as perverting the entire *Bildungsroman* tradition in an effort to disprove its validity in a capitalist age (27–28). Grenz concurs with Borchmeyer’s assessment of the social critique that runs through the work. She notes that Jakob does not venture out into the world, as the typical hero of the *Bildungsroman* does, but instead withdraws into a school sealed off from the world around it. As the final section of my essay, however, implies, Jakob does indeed eventually enter the public realm as a new person, if not a fully formed one.

<sup>8</sup> Borchmeyer identifies this critique as central to the text (29–30). As to the rejection of republicanism in particular, see the passage in the novel about the Weibel brothers who supposedly torment Jakob in his youth because of the way his family treated a servant (70).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, *Mark* 4:41.

<sup>10</sup> Gößling sees the student and diary-keeper Jakob as a compendium of allusions to Goethe’s classic novel. Jakob is the vehicle through which a hidden narrator makes evident how he reads and understands another literary work.

<sup>11</sup> Pleister’s article reviews all the literature pertaining to the conclusion of the novel (87–103). He finds that most critics have emphasized either the utopian or politically resigned nature of Jakob’s departure from the page, with Pleister siding with the latter interpretation. In contrast, I have emphasized the novel’s narratological aspects and the participation that *Jakob von Gunten* demands from its readers, which would be the place to start for any political analysis of the text.

## Works Cited

- Benveniste, Emile. “The Nature of Pronouns.” *Problems in General Linguistics*. Trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek. Miami: U of Miami P, 1971. 217–22.
- Borchmeyer, Dieter. *Dienst und Herrschaft: Ein Versuch über Robert Walser*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980.
- Gees, Marion. *Schauspiel auf Papier: Gebärde und Maskierung in der Prosa Robert Walsers*. Berlin: E. Schmidt, 2001.
- Gößling, Andreas. *Abendstern und Zauberstab: Studien und Interpretationen zu Robert Walsers “Der Gehülfe” und “Jakob von Gunten.”* Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1992.
- Grenz, Dagmar. *Die Romane Robert Walsers: Weltbezug und Wirklichkeitsdarstellung*. Munich: Fink, 1974.

- Greven, Jochen. "Figuren des Widerspruchs: Zeit und Kulturkritik im Werk Robert Walsers." *Über Robert Walser*. Ed. Katharine Kerr. Vol. 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978. 164–93.
- Hamburger, Käte. *Die Logik der Dichtung*. 4th ed. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994.
- Hiebel, Hans H. "Robert Walsers Jakob von Gunten: Die Zerstörung der Signifikanz im modernen Roman." *Über Robert Walser*. Ed. Katharine Kerr. Vol. 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978. 308–45.
- Magris, Claudio. "In den unteren Regionen: Robert Walser." *Robert Walser*. Ed. Klaus-Michael Hinz and Thomas Horst. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991. 343–57.
- Middleton, John Christopher. "Der Herr Niemand: Anmerkungen zu Robert Walser mit einer Notiz über Walser und Kafka." Trans. Jochen Greven. *Über Robert Walser*. Ed. Katharine Kerr. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979. 9–40.
- Peeters, Wim. "'Wenn kein Gebot, kein Soll herrschte in der Welt, ich würde sterben': Jakob von Gunten als Glossator." *Gesetz. Ironie. Festschrift für Manfred Schneider*. Ed. Rüdiger Campe and Michael Niehaus. Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004. 179–96.
- Philippi, Klaus-Peter. "Robert Walsers 'Jakob von Gunten.'" *Der deutsche Roman im 20. Jahrhundert*. Ed. Manfred Brauneck. Vol. 1. Bamberg: C.C. Buchners Verlag, 1976. 116–34.
- Pleister, Michael. "Jakob von Gunten: Utopie oder Resignation? Studie zu Robert Walsers Tagebuch-Roman." *Sprachkunst: Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft* 23.1 (1992): 87–103.
- Seelig, Carl. Reproduction of a Microgram. *du: Schweizerische Monatsschrift* 17.10 (October 1957): 46.
- . *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser*. Rev. ed. with an afterword by Elio Fröhlich and photographs by Carl Seelig. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.
- Siegel, Elke. *Aufträge aus dem Bleistiftgebiet: Zur Dichtung Robert Walsers*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001.
- Utz, Peter. "Robert Walsers Jakob von Gunten: Eine "Null"-Stelle der deutschen Literatur." *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 74 (2000): 488–512.
- . "Robert Walser." *Deutsche Dichter des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. Hartmut Steinecke. Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1994. 197–211.
- Walser, Robert. *Die Geschwister Tanner*. Vol. 9 of *Robert Walser: Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben*. 20 vols. Ed. Jochen Greven. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978–85.
- . *Jakob von Gunten: Ein Tagebuch*. Vol. 11 of *Robert Walser: Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben*. Ed. Jochen Greven. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978–85.
- . *Briefe*. Ed. Jörg Schäfer in collaboration with Robert Mächler. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975.
- . *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*. Deciphered and edited by Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang. 6 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985–2000.