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Virtuoso Servitude and (De)Mobilization in Robert Walser, W. G. Sebald, and the Brothers Quay

It's very good that you write through another text, a foil, so that
you write out of it and make your work a palimpsest. You don't
have to declare it or tell where it's from.

—The collected “Maxims” of W. G. Sebald, recorded by
David Lambert and Robert McGill

This article proposes a parallel reading of Robert Walser's novel *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) and W. G. Sebald's “Ambros Adelwarth” from the collection *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992), set off against an excursus on the 1995 adaptation of Walser's text by the Quay Brothers, *Institute Benjamenta*. While the film's metonymical transposition of the literary onto the visual faithfully recreates the original in a different medium, it is impossible to prove that Sebald wrote “Ambros Adelwarth” indeed “through” *Jakob von Gunten*. Yet the intertextual reading casts new light on his work, as it shows how Sebald operates at once within and beyond the modernist tradition, reworking modernist themes from a post-Holocaust perspective. Among the growing literature on intertextuality in Sebald, the correspondences with Walser have so far received comparatively little attention. Existing enquiries focus on the problem of pathography and the broad complex of writing and schizophrenia.¹ They elucidate the ways in which Sebald writes *about* and identifies with the Swiss author, most significantly in the encounter in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, with the poet Ernst Herbeck that is illustrated with unacknowledged photographs of Walser. The present investigation in contrast moves away from the interpersonal to an intertextual conversation. It is interested in a text which seems to have been written “out of” Walser's novel, superimposing as well as integrating its “foil” from a retrospective point of view that is both redemptive and scarred.²

Jakob von Gunten belongs to what may be called slow modernism.³ Its vaguely apocalyptic setting, an anachronistic institute for the formation of servants, is a site of deferral, repetition and slumber in the midst of a bustling early twentieth-century metropolis. Modernity's excess of progressive move-

ment is countered by an ascetic physical discipline of loitering at a school that teaches the virtuosity of servitude as an end in itself, more than as a preparation for a future post. At a time when teleological mobility and speed became increasingly synonymous with military mobilization, the servants' futile ornamental exercises represent a critical gesture in the discursive build-up towards the First World War. This article reads Walser's retreat into virtuoso servitude as a subversive aesthetic formulation of demobilization and desertion. Yet even though the unwillingness to comply with the charged trajectories of modern mobility brings life to a halt, Jakob von Gunten's enlisting in the servants' institute does not entail stasis. It gives rise instead to forms of "still-act," to borrow a phrase from recent performance theory—that is, to "a corporeally based interruption" of modes of historical flow (Lepecki 15). The "de-" of "demobilization" generally stands within parentheses in this article in order to foreground the commitment not to the abolishment of movement, but to a rethinking of its terms.

If *Jakob von Gunten* is overwritten by the palimpsestic works of Sebald and the Quay Brothers, the novel's lines are still visible in its adaptation and in "Ambros Adelwarth." Preferring the patient navigation around the stumbling stones of preexisting territory to the *tabula rasa* of ostensible originality, these examples of literary and filmic afterlife partake in the slowed-down temporality of their source. The kinds of intertextual engagement practiced by Sebald and the Quays themselves become a critical and creative approach to the passing of time. While they both recover and reshape the original text, Sebald in particular takes up some of its threads from the irrevocably changed historical standpoint of the one who writes after two World Wars. Articulating demobilization and desertion in a much more literal fashion than *Jakob von Gunten*, "Ambros Adelwarth" spells out the undercurrent of rigidity, dysfunction and mortification that runs through Walser's text, pointing up the limits of its emancipatory potential.

The following readings are informed by the ongoing discussions of modernity in relation to speed, movement, and military mobilization, most notably in Peter Sloterdijk, Paul Virilio and more recently Hartmut Rosa. While modernist formulations of slowness that arose in answer to acceleration are an intriguing field of enquiry as such, my specific focus is on the postural dynamic of this slowness, as opposed to stasis, in Walser, and on its legacy in the Quay Brothers and Sebald. Instead of participating in the modern culture of the race, Walser's virtuoso servitude (a term inspired by Paolo Virno's concept of "servile virtuosity," which will be discussed below) is indebted to the obstacle course of artful movement. The excellence that is achieved in practices of submission deconstructs the logic of winner and loser, the one who leads and the one who follows, in a way that goes beyond a mere reversal of roles. Pierre Legendre's exploration of the libidinal economy of institutional forms of movement and conduct will help us to understand Jakob's and Ambros's

insistence on remaining virtuoso servants even without being required to do so. The larger aim of the present article, then, is to contribute to the recent focus in German Studies on what one may term psycho-physicality, clustered around theoretical reconsiderations of posture and gesture.⁴

The Virtuosity of Servitude: Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*

Jakob von Gunten has entered the modernist canon alongside other seminal texts on the ambivalent authoritarian structures of institutional life, such as Robert Musil's *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (1906) and Frank Wedekind's *Mine-Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen* (1901). However, the at once exhilarating and deeply unsettling perceptiveness with which it analyzes the reciprocity between principal and pupil maintains a unique position within these examples. Walser's most (in)famous novel is a collection of journal entries of a young man, Jakob, who enrolls of his own accord in an institute for the training of servants. He declares that he descends from a noble family and repeatedly states his superiority over the other pupils; yet at the same time, he claims that he desired nothing more than to become a "reizende, kugelrunde Null" (8) in later life. What is more, he even revels in succumbing to the power of an institution whose exceedingly absurd status he acknowledges from his first impressions onwards as the vestige of a bygone era, devoid of any meaningful curriculum: "Kenntnisse werden uns keine beigebracht. Es fehlt eben, wie ich schon sagte, an Lehrkräften, das heißt die Herren Erzieher schlafen, oder sie sind tot, oder nur scheintot, oder sie sind versteinert, gleichviel, jedenfalls hat man gar nichts von ihnen" (9). The lessons the pupils receive from Lisa Benjamenta, the sister of the principal Herr Benjamenta, teach them "wenig, und wir wiederholen immer" (9). Lisa instills an ethos of unquestioned repetition in the students, both mimicked and mocked in Jakob's parroting: "Was wir Zöglinge tun, tun wir, weil wir müssen, aber warum wir müssen, das weiß keiner von uns recht" (36).

Instruction in the art of decorously wasting time is composed of two elements, one theoretical and one practical; one is "Auswendiglernen" (62), and the other one "eine Art fortwährend wiederholtes Turnen oder Tanzen [...] Der Gruß, das Eintreten in eine Stube, das Benehmen gegenüber Frauen oder ähnliches wird geübt, und zwar sehr langfädig, oft langweilig" (63). Jakob's sense of dedication does not exclude inner distance: from day one, he perceives the school as a swindle, yet his biggest aspiration is to turn into a successful inmate; his lessons remind him of "ein sinnloses und zugleich sehr sinnreiches Märchen" (62); he develops fantasies of hidden signification gaining ground in mysterious, inaccessible inner chambers, where the principal and his sister reside, only to discover that this inner sanctum does not exist, finding in its place two miserable rooms with a goldfish bowl that he is told to clean at

regular intervals. While he dreams of the Benjamenta school's importance as a "Vorzimmer zu den Wohnräumen und Prunksälen des ausgedehnten Lebens" (65), his education eventually leads to an escape from the crumbling institution, together with the principal, to what is called without much further explanation "die Wüste" (164), at which point the journal entries come to a halt.

Jakob excels at the sovereign submissiveness of his at once subordinate and superior performance, and holds up its principles even when he is offered special treatment by Lisa and her brother. Claudia Liebrand has described this as follows: "Sowohl Ohnmacht als auch Versagung verlieren für Jakob also ihren Schrecken, weil sie von ihm selbst induziert sind, weil es sich nurmehr um Effekte einer Simulation, einer Inszenierung, eines Spiels handelt, dessen Regeln er bestimmt" (347–48).⁵ He becomes a virtuoso at conducting his own play—in the sense of game and performance—of absolute servitude. This simultaneous debasement and empowerment of the subject is reflected in the perpetual shifting of Jakob's feelings between smallness and grandeur, impotence and omnipotence, obedience and transgression. After the principal's declaration of love for his pupil towards the end of the novel, it is Jakob who insists on maintaining the hierarchical relationship. He enjoys being thrown out of Herr Benjamenta's office, and indulges in self-assured laughter: "Wenn ich so lache, nun, dann steht nichts mehr über mir. Dann bin ich etwas an Umfassen und Beherrschen nicht zu Überbietendes. Ich bin in solchen Momenten einfach groß" (130). Herr Benjamenta fulfills his assignments in turn by enacting the roles of both "Riese" (17) and "enthronter Herrscher" (157).

Paolo Virno recently introduced the idea of virtuosity as "an extremely modern servitude" (208), as a way to explain the performative quality of those non-material skills and services that shape post-industrial information society. Detaching the concept of virtuosity from its more common context in the performing arts and tracing its history from Aristotle via Marx to Hannah Arendt, he detects both its inherent potential of non-productive service labor and its capacity for representing a type of political agency born out of the excellence of a leader figure. Virno's rethinking of the concept aims to restore this political agency to the "general intellect" (195) of today's virtuosic service providers, and encourage their "exodus" (197) from stifling corporate structures. The double-edged movement of exodus as both liberating and traumatic departure will indeed inflect the present readings of Walser and Sebald. However, while Virno's intriguing notion of servile virtuosity can function as a point of departure for reconsidering *Jakob von Gunten*, the virtuosic servants of Walser's novel follow their own course. What Walser rehearses, in the first instance, is the subversive drive of virtuosity *within*, rather than *after* servitude. Walser's Jakob does not want to abandon servility; he refines and mocks its rules and rituals, which can only be done if those very rules and rituals are firmly in place.

“Was bezweckt die Knabenschule?” (62) we cannot avoid asking ourselves as the protagonist does, who seems to consult a book of the same title on his own, as much for himself as on our behalf. The institute’s “tiefverborgener Sinn,” we read on the next page, is its educational program of “Zwang” and “Entbehrungen” (63):

Uns prägt man ein, daß es von wohltuender Wirkung ist, sich an ein festes, sicheres Weniges anzupassen, das heißt sich an Gesetze und Gebote, die ein strenges Äußeres vorschreibt, zu gewöhnen und zu schmiegen. [...] Hier lernen wir Respekt empfinden und so tun, wie diejenigen tun müssen, die an irgendetwas emporzublicken haben. (64–65)

Once again it becomes clear that the school teaches the ability to obey in place of any substantial content, while Jakob’s ambiguous choice of words reconfirms that his acquiescence to being molded is always also a form of role play which includes, as we have seen, its very own reversals (“so tun, wie” almost necessarily evokes “so tun, als ob,” which is to play act). Moreover, the vocabulary of pliability not only reveals the literalness of responding to authority by physically exercising an increasingly supple and adaptable body, but also points up the libidinous structure that upholds the power of the law (“sich an Gesetze [...] schmiegen” may be rendered as “to comply with laws in a loving way.”) Wim Peeter’s reference in his reading of *Jakob von Gunten* to Pierre Legendre’s “amour de l’institution” (Legendre 25), which the latter finds to be operative within the tradition of occidental dance, corresponds thus to Liebrand’s more psychoanalytically oriented explorations of the masochistic dynamic that underpins the script of Jakob’s behavior.⁶ Acquired forms of conduct like bodily movement are embedded within the occidental discourse of symbolic authority, which Legendre calls “Loi” (12) or “Texte” (51). Desire is expressed not outside but within this regime, he claims. This provides an apposite framework for Walser’s take on physical training. “Uns Zöglinge will man bilden und formen [...] indem man uns zwingt, die Beschaffenheit unserer eigenen Seele und unseres eigenen Körpers genau kennen zu lernen” (63), writes Jakob. This discipline implies the formation of a different, second body—a body in uniform, prepared to respond immediately to every imaginable future requirement, and thus exercised with a care that mirrors the care for the regime that dictates the educational program. “L’amour du corps est l’amour de l’institution” (25), as Legendre has it.⁷ In Walser, the body gains eloquence by entering the symbolic field of domestic servitude, and is thereby able to speak its desires using the choreographic vocabulary of humility, respect, obedience, and adoration that structures Jakob’s relationship with Lisa, and even more so Herr Benjamenta. While the expectation of servile and polite behavior first meets with revulsion in the pupil, after a short time acts like knocking at the door, bowing in front of the principal, and leaving his room without turning around come to be experienced as “schicklich und schön” (18).

Yet while the domesticated body represents a cultivated literacy that the pupil clings onto even when his teacher proposes changing its codes, Jakob still escapes from time to time to the unruly pleasures of malfeasance. He practices a far less refined register of physical interaction—mute, unmediated, and behind the back of institutional rule—with Schacht, one of his fellow students, who resembles “einem kränklichen, eigensinnigen Mädchen” (13). Passages like the following cast light on their encounters: “Wir, ich und er, liegen oft zusammen in meiner Schlafkammer, auf dem Bett, in den Kleidern, ohne die Schuhe auszuziehen, und rauchen Zigaretten, was gegen die Vorschriften ist” (13). A comparable physical register also emerges, more viscerally, with regard to the principal, for instance in Herr Benjamenta’s choleric attack: “Geworfen hat er sich mit seinem mächtigen Körper auf mich wie ein dunkles Stück verrückt gewordenen Jähzornes” (143). We never therefore lose the impression that Jakob’s subordination under the symbolic identity of the servant remains a chosen option within various potential forms of erotic experimentation. As we will see, Ambros Adelwarth’s unwavering dedication to his passed-away superior in contrast spells out the fatally compulsive aspects of love within, and for, a symbolic structure.

The discipline, regulations and mindless exercise that make up life at the Benjamentas’ school may invoke the twentieth century’s worst totalitarian nightmares. I would like to propose a different reading here, one that is responsive to the more imminent historical context of impending military mobilization for World War I. It positions Walser’s novel within modernist counter-practices that react to what has been theorized as the “kinetic” (Sloterdijk) or “dromological”⁸ (Virilio) aspect of modern armament.⁹ Jakob scorns the idea of being armed for life: “Rüstig sein [...] Naß werden von den Regengüssen des Bemühens, hart und stark werden an den Stößen und Reibungen dessen, was die Notwendigkeit fordert. Ich hasse solche klugen Redensarten” (127). What is more, the novel contains a strangely disconnected, visionary passage that prognosticates war by projecting it backwards. The protagonist muses about how it must have felt to be a soldier under Napoleon. The scenario is one of continuous advance towards the Eastern front, marked by growing numbness: “Doch immer würde ich Schritt halten, Beine hin und her werfen und vorwärtsmarschieren [...] Die soldatische Zucht und Geduld würde mich zu einem festen, undurchdringlichen, fast ganz inhaltslosen Körper-Klumpen gemacht haben” (136–38).

Yet just as Walser’s soldiers never arrive in Moscow, the pupils at the school hesitate to leave their educational institution, if they are moving on at all. And if the school intended to mobilize its army of apprentices for their future posts, it does so with conspicuous lack of efficiency. This is not least obvious in Herr Benjamenta’s negligent attitude. He is a director who only manages to find placements for his students once it becomes clear his institution is on the brink of collapse. In contrast to this refusal of progress, the 1917 piece of short

prose “Tobold (II)” draws on Walser’s own experience in 1905 of moving on from a Berlin school of servants to the post of butler at the estate of Dambrau in Silesia. It may be read as an alternative ending to the novel, concluding on an upbeat, ironically mobilized note with the ex-butler ready to face life after having successfully conducted his experiment of servitude. The insistence in *Jakob von Gunten* on repetition, stagnation, and spatial confinement in turn suggests an art of (de)mobilization or “Nichtstun,” whose literal emphasis on virtuosic stand-still is both playful and disquieting: “Der Hof liegt verlassen da wie eine viereckige Ewigkeit, und ich stehe meist aufrecht und übe mich, auf einem Bein zu stehen” (71).

(De)Mobilizing the Servant: The Quay Brothers’ Institute Benjamenta

The Quay Brothers’ dancery adaptation of the novel draws out Walser’s choreographic imagination to great effect. *Institute Benjamenta*, or *This Dream People Call Human Life*, is the first full-length feature with human actors by two artists who had previously worked exclusively on animation films. Their intention for *Institute Benjamenta*, perfectly suited to Walser’s aesthetics, was “to use actors primarily as dancers. [...] ‘We wrote the script from the point of view of the actors being puppets. We treated the actors with as much respect as we treated our puppets’” (Romney 13). Although the characters recite selected passages from the original text, it is most intriguing how the Quays transpose the literary discourse onto the visual field, making it for instance “a formal concern that the zero, the circle, would be inscribed throughout the imagery” (Romney 14). The visual performance of the film leaves little doubt about school life as a ritualistic practice of largely “opaque rituals” (Romney 13)—that is, geared towards maintaining and confirming the curriculum’s status quo. “Ach, all dieses sonderbare Sehnen, dieses Suchen, dieses Hände-Ausstrecken nach einer Bedeutung. Mag es träumen, mag es schlafen” (141–42), Jakob writes towards the end of his stay. The Quay Brothers show how the allure of de-signification transforms yearning hands into hands busying themselves with endless exercises, forever remaining in the limbo-zone of “Warten [...] auf das [...] Nachherige” (127). The dream-like lightness, yet also the “nicht ganz Gesunde” (127) of life in the *as if* and the *not yet* stem not least from the fragility of a goal that has lost validity, floating above an abyss—“man steht wie in der bloßen Luft, nicht wie auf festem Boden” (126)—as the students prepare for a world of personal servitude that has been declared lost from early on: “Es gibt keine Herren mehr, die machen können, was sie wollen, und es gibt längst keine Herrinnen mehr” (70).

I would like to single out a scene of *Institute Benjamenta* whose choreography is particularly suggestive, in order to analyze the film’s dense kinetic

vocabulary. It is set in a classroom, the walls of which are decorated with carefully framed *aide mémoires* of the institute's ethos, reading "Vorschriften denken an alles," "Ordnung ist des Himmels oberstes Gesetz," and most evocatively for our context, "Warten Sie duldsam in aufrechter Haltung." A close-up of the back of Jakob's head and right ear, which he seems to be cleaning in order to hear the instructions better, or, perhaps, wondering whether he has not misheard an order, draws us in. Any content, however, remains unknown to us, as there is no instruction but voice-over by the protagonist, describing the teaching and learning practices at the school. Later he sits with his eyes closed, extending his fingers toward his temples: is he dreaming the scene that we are about to witness? Or making himself dream, thinking it up in order to fill the pages of his journal? The camera has moved to focus on makeshift compasses, constructed from a piece of chalk and a piece of yarn which, intentionally or not, are reminiscent of Freud's cotton reel. This makes us think of the exercises at the institute as a stand-in practice (coping with lack, pretending a presence that is never fulfilled), an inkling that is confirmed not only in the undercurrent of the absent mother that runs through *Jakob von Gunten*, but also in the imaginary actions that the pupils rehearse. Hands use the compasses for drawing the leitmotiv of the perfectly spherical zero on the floor, prescribing an outline for the arrangement of silver spoons (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Reproduced with permission by Koninck/Quay Brothers.

Fingers in close-up collect pieces of yarn from a nail in the wall, whose small loops echo the spherical shape on the floor. Fingers slip into the loops, so that the yarn becomes a device for cleaning forks (Figure 2).

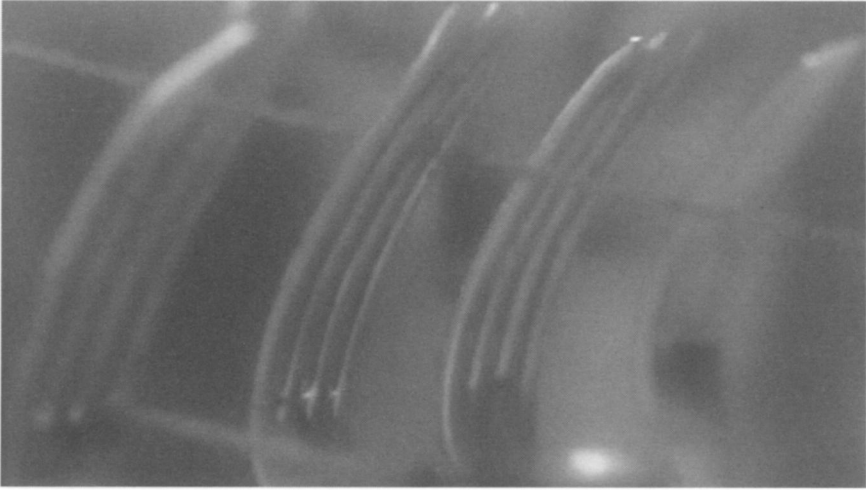


Figure 2. Reproduced with permission by Koninck/Quay Brothers.

There is a hand playing with another piece of chalk, systematically and skillfully passing it from finger to finger, transposing Lisa's activity of writing numbers on the blackboard onto a more ornamental practice. The close-ups, which display an excessive attention to objects and detail, lend a fetishistic quality to the scene, which is very Walserian; so too is the fact that cleaning becomes an act of caressing the silverware, turning servile labor into "eine stattliche Leistung auf erotischem Gebiet" (22), as the author states in another novel, *Der Räuber*. Then we see more and more pupils moving around in the room, carrying out servants' duties in pantomime, ghostly in the absence of the addressees, minute in the precision of the gestures: a slender actor mimes the dropping to the floor of a ring, squats down, his delicate hand being caught in shivering vibration for what seem like endless seconds before picking up the ring again (Figure 3).

After slowly-progressing, *tableau-vivant*-like constellations, the group enters a formation to perform gymnastic exercises under head boy Kraus' guidance that turn into a servants' ballet, rhythmically conducted by the latter's signals. The extra-diegetic waltz numbs all diegetic sound, creating an eerily weightless, otherworldly movement quality, with the camera panning from left to right and back again, a constant, measured pendulum that is closer to the standstill of time than to its passing. Diegetic sound sets in again with Kraus's clapping and a polyphony of monologues, spelling out more servile encounters. They are nearly drowned out by Jakob's compulsively eager voice, which is finally silenced when Kraus passes him a fork that he had artfully turned round and round in his hands, the token in an utterly unhurried relay that follows rules which remain obscure to us.



Figure 3. Reproduced with permission by Koninck/Quay Brothers.

Two fundamental choreographic principles can be identified within the richness of this scene's physical display. First, back-and-forth movement, whether in the rapid acceleration of vibration, or in the slowed-down swaying of bodies from side to side: a physical representation of how Jakob describes the pupils' state of mind, "[w]ir vibrieren" (92), which entails "eine sehr, sehr bewegungsfähige, kleine, biege- und schmiegsame Würde" (93). Secondly, there is the principle of circularity, based on the dialectic of the spherical zero representing at once nullity and virtuosic perfection.¹⁰ Both principles play with repetitive, rather than progressive patterns. They are joined by a third element, staging the sovereign aspect of virtuosic servitude, most prominently in the wonderful scene of "Lisa giving a lesson in how to fold the famous 'mitre' napkin" (Romney 15), without the principal's sister actually doing anything, confined as she is to staring out the window. The students meanwhile enact an arcane exercise whose artistry is aptly accompanied by the extra-diegetic music of composer Leszek Jankowski, replete with the suspense and sensationalist dynamic of a circus tune. Activity is interrupted by a short blackout, after which the dimensions have suddenly changed. Kraus surfaces in a Christ-like pose with a full-size napkin miter on his head (Figure 4).

The other students perform the duties of altar boys, devoutly dusting off the sovereign's path, to then join a triumphant pageant that chases Jakob around the institute's corridors. If this grotesque procession, as well as the synchronous formations of the servants' ballet, come close to march-like configurations, they are either lost in the labyrinth of the institute's mazy architecture, or they soon dissolve into more chaotic individual arrangements. The intricate, reiterative, and highly theatrical moves of *Institute Benjamenta*

(de)mobilize the performers, turning them into self-contained arrangements and fulfilling their function within a fiction of servile encounters, rather than preparing them for efficient concerted action.



Figure 4. Reproduced with permission by Koninck/Quay Brothers.

Beyond Servitude: W. G. Sebald's "Ambros Adelwarth"

Ambros Adelwarth, great-uncle of the narrator of *Die Ausgewanderten*, is the most prominent servant figure in W. G. Sebald's work. Given that Sebald was a dedicated reader of Walser, as documented in his essay "Le promeneur solitaire" of *Logis in einem Landhaus*, an exploration of "Ambros Adelwarth" in relation to *Jakob von Gunten* seems in order. Ambros is presented to us as someone whose life is determined by loss from the beginning. His mother dies before he is two years old and he contributes to the running of the household from an early age. As Aunt Fini, who tells the narrator about Ambros, claims, he is someone who has never had "so etwas wie eine Kindheit" (112). This lack, together with its inverse, a compensatory permanence of child-like features in the adult person, whether in his dedication to authority or to play, links Ambros to Jakob: "Ich war eigentlich nie Kind" (144). It is also reminiscent of another one of Walser's fictional characters, the protagonist of the above-mentioned novel *Der Räuber*, and also recalls the Swiss author himself, as Sebald mentions in his essay.¹¹ Jakob's sovereign insistence on smallness can be approached in this context; it returns, under the guise of direct reference to Ambros's height, at the beginning of Sebald's narrative, when the narrator recalls his only experience of his great-uncle, who was "nicht sonderlich groß gewachsen gewesen, aber er war demohngeachtet eine hochvornehme

Erscheinung, durch die sich alle anderen Anwesenden [...] in ihrem Selbstwert bestätigt und gehoben fühlten, auch wenn sie in Wahrheit durch den Vergleich mit dem Onkel geradezu deklassiert wurden" (98).

Early on, Ambros starts an apprenticeship as *garçon* in a big Swiss hotel, then takes up a post in London in 1905, and spends two years in Japan in the company of an unmarried Japanese official, "[h]alb als Kammerdiener, halb als Gast" (115). That his chosen profession offers a closeting symbolic framework which enables him to guard his public persona while also accommodating a degree of private fulfillment becomes even clearer in his subsequent appointment with Cosmo Solomon, the eccentric and troubled son of a wealthy Jewish businessman. This is again much more than a professional affair, with Ambros taking on the role of caretaker and confidant until Cosmo's untimely death. Through the narrator's alleged discovery of his great-uncle's journal we learn about the extensive journeys of the two men. The narrative closes with entries from this travel diary, giving voice, without mediation by others, to the young Ambros, who is himself long dead by then. It transpires that Cosmo's hypersensitivity to the events of the First World War, from which he is shielded and yet to which he feels utterly exposed, causes incurable and fatal melancholia. Cosmo's final retreat into an embryonic bodily position completes the trajectory of his illness, indicating not a regression to prenatal safety, but the eventually lethal drifting into a state *unmoved* by what he cannot bear:

Als es finster wurde draußen, legte er sich auf den Boden, zog die Beine an den Leib und verbarg das Gesicht in den Händen. In diesem Zustand mußte Ambros ihn nach Hause bringen und eine Woche später in die Nervenklinik Samaria in Ithaka, New York, wo er innerhalb desselben Jahres noch, stumm und unbeweglich, wie er war, verdämmerte. (143)

After Cosmo's death, Ambros perfects his symbolical role in a manner that suggests an abiding psychic strategy: the need for preserving his love within the parameters of its outer—which has become its only—shell.¹² In Aunt Fini's words: "Rückblickend kann man sagen, daß er gar nicht existiert hat als Privatperson, daß er nur mehr aus Korrektheit bestand. Unmöglich hätte ich ihn mir in Hemdsärmeln vorstellen können oder in Strumpfsocken, ohne seine unfehlbar auf Hochglanz gewichsten Stiefeletten" (144).

The servant's correctness culminates in the imitative performance of his friend's condition. If melancholia is the illness of not relinquishing but incorporating a lost love object, Ambros's melancholia stems from a double root. It testifies to his inability to overcome the loss of his partner, and truthfully mimics the latter's suffering. Ambros fully embodies his friend's affliction, down to the paralysis that seized Cosmo at the end. This leads him eventually to Samaria, the same sanatorium in Ithaca, New York, where his friend died before him. At Samaria, he still places "den denkbar größten Wert auf seine Erscheinung," only ever wearing a "dreiteiligen Anzug" with "tadellos

gebundener Schleife" (162). Nonetheless, as his former doctor tells the narrator,

erweckte er [...] stets den Eindruck, als sei er von einem heillosen Leid erfüllt. Ich glaube nicht, [...] daß ich jemals einem schwermütigeren Menschen begegnet bin als Ihrem Großonkel; jedes seiner beiläufigen Worte, jede seiner Gesten, sein ganzer, bis zuletzt aufrechter Habitus kam eigentlich einem immer wieder aufs neue vorgebrachten Absentierungsgesuch gleich. (162)

Ambros's readiness to undergo shock treatments, the doctor suspects, was simply due to his "Sehnsucht [...] nach einer möglichst gründlichen und unwiderrüflichen Auslöschung seines Denk- und Erinnerungsvermögens" (167). Towards the end, Ambros suffers progressive "Erstarrung seiner Gelenke und Glieder" (169), and eventually dies, lying on his bed, "in Lackstiefeln und sozusagen voller Montur" (171). And while the doctor may be right in assuming a will to let go, Ambros's continued, hyper-correct fulfillment of his symbolical role, at least in appearance, suggests the dedication to his personal relationship until death.

The specific mutual texture that arises between Sebald and Walser is one of continuation and renunciation, of taking up the loose ends left by the other, of redemption sometimes, or, in the words of Sigurd Martin, "Ähnlichkeiten" and "Entstellung" (82). There is for instance a heartbreaking scene in Walser's second novel, *Der Gehülfe*, where a little girl has to live through a torturous spell at table, being told off because of her manners by a cruel and abusive maid. Not only does Walser himself undo such childhood trauma in the servants' ballets of his following book, *Jakob von Gunten*, and in other instances where his protagonists impeccably enact servants' duties toward children; Sebald too may have had Walser in mind when for instance Lucy Landau in another part of the *Die Ausgewanderten*, "Paul Bereyter," remembers how her father on the occasion of her eighth birthday, "in schwarzer Weste und mit einer Serviette überm Arm, einen Kellner von seltener Zuvorkommenheit gespielt habe" (42). Yet there is an undeniable gap between Walser, who wrote his three early novels before the First World War, and Sebald, who wrote after two wars, and above all after the Holocaust. Returning to Ambros's travelogue, we may wonder at first whether this does not map out what was, in Walser, not more than a tentatively charted desert, the void of a relationship between two men who were and were not master and slave anymore. While Ambros's journal continues where Jakob's ended, spelling out some hopeful aspects of the servant's and the principal's new life together that remains so nebulous in the earlier text, we are nonetheless left with a promising future, however ambivalent, in Walser, while being compelled to witness double death in Sebald. Jakob dreams about his future adventures with Herr Benjamenta, "der wie ein Araber aussah" (163), in an exoticist fantasy, riding camels, organizing a revolution in India, and excited to turn their backs on "was man europäische Kultur nennt, für immer, oder zumindest für sehr, sehr

lange Zeit" (162). Cosmo's much more haunting exoticist vision in contrast casts shadows on the happier times when Ambros had dressed up in Arabian attire. During the outbreak of his final crisis, the patient keeps on returning to one of the hallucination scenes in Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, where a caravan is conjured up by the hypnotist, crosses the stage, goes down into the auditorium, passing the spectators, and mysteriously vanishes, with Cosmo being under the impression that he himself had gone from the hall together with the eerie processional, and could no longer tell where he was.¹³ The somewhat disconcerting yet thoroughly triumphant exodus of "Ritter" and "Knappe" (163) in Walser, which takes on the guise of a Don Quixote/Sancho Panza fantasy, is complemented by the compulsively self-imposed extinction of two broken men in Sebald.

Exodus

As we have seen in the analysis of *Jakob von Gunten* and *Institute Benjamenta*, Walser and the Brothers Quay show a form of preparatory virtuoso mobility that, perpetually stalling itself, refuses to reach its point of operation. Text and film delineate thus what Sloterdijk in *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik* calls "Vorschule der Demobilisierung" (53), a critical theory of movement that the philosopher claims is needed at the end of the twentieth century. Modernity's complicity with progress as a form of always also military mobilization demands "Demobilisierungswissen" (73) to help build up new kinds of ethical intervention. If progress is "Bewegung zur Bewegung, Bewegung zur Mehrbewegung, Bewegung zur gesteigerten Bewegungsfähigkeit" (36), a distinction between "richtiger Beweglichkeit und falscher Mobilisierung" (53) is of crucial importance. Virilio's statement that "revolution is movement, but movement is not a revolution" (43) points up a similar engagement with the diverse facets of mobility. This is precisely what Walser's and the Quays' kinetic criticism of the kinetics of modernity offers: the exercises enacted in the school represent a counter-practice of (de)mobilization that calls off its "kinetische Komplizenschaft mit der Bewegtheit des Weltprozesses in die schlimmste aller möglichen Richtungen" (53). This practice qualifies as a critical theory in Sloterdijk's sense. Yet in the instances looked at here, it is performed rather than debated, initiated by a writer at the beginning of the century, towards the end of which Sloterdijk asks whether such a theory, finding its way out of the "Tempodrom" (54) to something truly different, would be possible at all. He contends that the one who engaged in this kind of theoretical endeavor would need to be prepared to ask at each turn whether that which he is undertaking does not actually amount to yet another sacrifice at the altar of mobilization, instead of taking on a new course. Suffice it to add that Sloterdijk's own essay displays a fluid understanding of

the border between theory and practice, and that this inclusion of modes of performative thinking can open up promising perspectives for what the author calls political kinetics.¹⁴ More important, however, is the fact that his essay asks questions that have also been asked and answered elsewhere, whether in literature or film. While the status of Walser's novel, the Quay Brothers' film and Sebald's prose as political intervention remains questionable, the political potential of their aesthetic is uncontested. This potential may reside precisely in their ambivalent notion of (de)mobilization.

In "Ambros Adelwarth," demobilization is literally embodied in Cosmo's paralyzing physical response to the horror of a fully mobilized Europe, ending with his final desertion into *rigor mortis*, which is performed a second time over by the friend who is unable to survive the loss of his partner.¹⁵ Jakob's and Herr Benjamenta's exodus in turn has been called by Peter Utz "eine *Desertion* im Wortsinn" (506, my emphasis). It is a form of leave-taking which is a *departure from* rather than a *departure to*, a movement decidedly unlike a march, as we can witness in the Quay Brothers' adaptation, which ends with the simultaneously light-footed and wobbling steps of a couple exiting the house entirely unequipped for a major journey, as if they expected, at any moment, to lose the ground beneath their feet. This spirit of abandonment is possible only at the cost of joining the thoughtless or mindless, placing their trust in a divine agency: "Gott geht mit den Gedankenlosen" (164). The uncharted territory of wilderness is expecting the pair, perhaps a promised land waiting after captivity, more literary than anything else, a desert turned into the oasis of cultural imagination as dreamed up by Jakob.¹⁶ In Sebald, the search for Canaan must endure the depressing visit to Jerusalem, city of hopes reached after a "zwölfstündige[m] Ritt" (202) that concludes one of Cosmo's and Ambros's routes. Radically different from the idea of the desired homeland, "a ruined and broken mass of rocks, the Queen of the desert" (202), it is a place of utter disillusion. Their excursions lead them repeatedly "an den Rand einer der vielen die Stadt durchziehenden Schluchten" (207), resulting in a crisis of spiritual impasse or collapse that will terminate, years later, in Cosmo's haunting hallucination of vanishing into an exotic no-man's land.¹⁷ Without the possibility of return to a promised country, Cosmo leaves European culture for good.¹⁸

The end of Sebald's text, however, goes back to Israel in December 1913, and to two more images of departure and impossible return. Ambros's last journal entry closes with a confession that one afternoon the sudden arrival of snow made him think of his (German) past, a lost terrain at the bottom of the towers of memory whose surge has to be resisted, the image seems to imply, for the sake of his life.¹⁹ Yet shortly before this ending, the pull of gravity is overcome by Ambros's description of a quail's flight, which had been resting for hours in the sleeping Cosmo's lap, suggesting a faint echo of redemption:

Bei Tagesanbruch aber, als Cosmo sich rührte, lief sie geschwind, wie Wachteln das tun, über den ebenen Boden davon, setzte in die Luft, schlug einen Augenblick lang mit ungeheurer Geschwindigkeit mit ihren Flügeln, streckte sie dann *starr* und *bewegungslos* aus und segelte in einem wunderschönen Bogen um ein kleines Gehölz herum und davon. (214, my emphasis)

This scene takes place at the shores of the Dead Sea, bordering on the Judean desert, during a few days' break from Jerusalem's strains in the paradisiacal surroundings of Ain Jidy. It is the most serene of Ambros's memories, set in a space saturated with the fauna of (self)citation. Sebald's butterfly is there, with "goldgesprenkelten Flügeln," and "der braunblau gefiederte, rotschnablige Vogel Bülbül" (213) of Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* and Rilke's "Persischer Heliotrop." Such images as the bulbul's song and the quail's flight may come closest to invocations of felicitous sexual life which is often seen as entirely absent, or in highly neurotic form, in Sebald's works.²⁰ In its evocation of both spiritual and erotic bliss, the quail's hovering alludes to an altogether different fantasy of "Starre" and "Bewegungslosigkeit," one that Sebald describes in his essay on Gottfried Keller in *Logis in einem Landhaus* as follows:

Was hier fantasiert wird, ist die Erstarrung des Körpers im Augenblick des bis auf den höchsten Punkt gesteigerten Glücks, eine Versteinerung, die kein Zeichen ist der Strafe oder der Verbannung, sondern der Ausdruck der Hoffnung, die Sekunde der Seligkeit möge dauern für immer. (119)²¹

If the bird's (im)mobility can be read in a similar manner, it is an expression of hope that contains the impossibility of its realization, prognosticating a different kind of paralysis that the future will bring. Exhilarating and alarming at once, it carries on the spirit of Walserian (de)mobilization.²²

Notes

¹See Vogel-Klein (106–07) and especially Atze (159–62). See Klebes (72–75) for a discussion of Sebald's Walser essay in *Logis in einem Landhaus*. In "Pleasure and Affinity in W. G. Sebald and Robert Walser," I have tried to move beyond the thematic focus of the above-mentioned contributions to understand Sebald's engagement with Walser as a pleasurable practice of melancholic incorporation and an act of solidarity with the deceased. The present article complements this approach.

²The use of the term "intertextuality" seems to be fitting here precisely because the extent to which Sebald consciously engaged with Walser's novel remains uncertain. While I am discussing the Quay Brothers' explicit adaptation of *Jakob von Gunten* as a form of conscious intertextuality, I am aware that the concept distinguishes itself from the study of influence in as much as it "involves a recognition that meaning [...] lies between texts in networks which are ultimately only partially recoverable, only partially readable (or traceable)" (Allen).

³Rosa speaks of the pronounced yet ultimately ineffective "hochkulturelle[n] Diskurshegemonie der *Entschleuniger*" (81) within the otherwise dominant modern emphasis on speed.

⁴See, for instance, Santner's engagement with the creaturely cringe in Benjamin, Rilke and Sebald.

⁵Liebrand's focus on performance thus advances existing accounts of Jakob's aristocratic servitude, as in Borchmeyer and Hinz.

⁶"Jakob plaudert die innere Struktur des okzidentalens Tanzes aus, der durch eine Interferenz zwischen Bewegungslust und der dafür notwendigen Bejahung einer normierten Choreographie charakterisiert ist. Nach Pierre Legendre lässt sich der Körper bei der Technik des Tanzes von Vorschriften führen: Bewegung, Emotion und Geste werden folglich zum Gesetzesobjekt. Der Tanz ist das Ritual, worin man unter institutionalisierten Bedingungen körperliche Lust an der Teilhabe am Gesetzesdiskurs empfinden kann" (Peeters 185). On Jakob's masochism, see also Hiebel 267–69.

⁷Hiebel's insistence on the "Widerspruch von Tyrannei und libidinöser Abhängigkeit" (266) is deconstructed in Legendre's analysis of libidinal structures as intrinsic to the institution.

⁸Paul Virilio's *Speed and Politics* is subtitled "An Essay on Dromology," from Gr. *dromos*: race course.

⁹Walser's pre-World War I vision of (de)mobilization can be read as a counter-text to Ernst Jünger's post-World War I treatises on a totally mobilized society, "Der Arbeiter" and "Totale Mobilmachung." On Jünger, see Sloterdijk 48–52.

¹⁰For a detailed exploration of the function of the "zero" in *Jakob von Gunten*, see Utz.

¹¹In Sebald's reading, the narrator of *Der Räuber* mimics many of Walser's own experiences (see *Logis* 158).

¹²See Renata Salecl's analysis of butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (11).

¹³On the filmic fantasy of the caravan, see also Gnam 29 and Jacobs 61–62.

¹⁴Lepecki for instance bases his investigation of contemporary dance and performance practices on Sloterdijk's argument (12–13).

¹⁵A more detailed discussion of "Starre" in Sebald can be found in Maier 114–15.

¹⁶For a discussion of the cultural imagination attached to the desert in Walser, see Utz 508–11.

¹⁷On the recurring topos of the desert in Sebald, see Korff 180–82.

¹⁸In locating the history of the Jews in the gap between exodus and return, trauma and liberation, Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939), finished in exile and written with forebodings of the Holocaust, would be the logical next step in the array of intertexts proposed in this article.

¹⁹On "Heimatentzug" in Sebald, see also Heidelberger-Leonard 128.

²⁰See Maier 122, and the fourth chapter of Santner.

²¹The scenery of Ain Jidy with the mountains of Moab in the background, whose outline against the horizon looks as if the hand of the colorist had "beim Aquarellieren gezittert" (214), can be read in a similar manner against a further reference to Keller, Sebald's discussion of one of the latter's watercolors. Given by Keller to the actress Johanna Kapp, whom he courted unsuccessfully, it shows an idyllic landscape at the banks of a river in front of a misty mountain range. Kapp, in a state of mental decline, cut out about a quarter of the picture, leaving a curiously shaped silhouette which in one corner resembles a bird spreading its wings preparing to set off. The quail's flight, then, may also act as positive to this mutilated watercolor's negative. I am grateful to Carolin Duttlinger for pointing out the shape of the silhouette. For a more detailed dis-

cussion of the implications of Keller's watercolor, see her article 341-42.

²² I would like to thank Hilary Brown, Anke Kramer and Dora Osborne for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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