

Waiting Works: Institutional Autonomy in Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*

by

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Arne Höcker

Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*, published in 1909, retains a motif present in Walser's first two novels of waiting as a means of subjective liberation from a stagnant, monotonous, and spiritually vacuous life defined in the present. Walser's protagonists are optimistic workers prone to distraction. Their affirmative yet detached outlook on life is not a position of resistance, rather they ostensibly do nothing. Walser's figures aren't ever caught up in modernity, they observe but never take part in urban life, they begin careers only to give them up- characteristically they're single, itinerant, and ambivalent. These figures avoid modern institutions in favor of Walserian institution, in *Jakob von Gunten* the 'Institut Benjamenta'. These institutions are structurally unstable, they merely to employ the individual, and in doing so protect him from unemployment. The Institut Benjamenta demands just the formalities of dutifulness. This point gets at another major concept in the thesis, that surrounding subjective autonomy. Prolongation constitutes a temporality of waiting. Jakob, like all of Walser's protagonists, rules out a sense of the future- he crucially rejects the Bildungsroman telos. The performance of servitude as an act of waiting, of delaying the act of dutifulness, frame this endless present as a series of personal decisions. I focus on Rudiger Campe's theory of the 'institutional novel,' and how it pertains to *Jakob von Gunten* and Kafka's *Der Process*, in particular how Walser and Kafka's respective protagonists see themselves as institutional subjects. I drew in Arnold Gehlen's institutional theory as

proposed in his essay "Mensch und Institutionen". Gehlen pointed to the defining characteristic of a 'successful' institutional subject- the successful institutional subject knows where to assert himself, whereas those like K. attempt to assert themselves in spite of their surroundings. In order to historicize these initial observations, I brought in Hegel's theory of the novel, which characterizes the Bildungsroman as the slow institutionalization of the individual, albeit an institutionalization which the individual accepts- these institutions give order to the protagonist's life, they harmonize with the subjective wishes, wants, desires cultivated by the protagonist in their pre-institutional years of wandering.

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## Introduction to Waiting:

The publication of Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* in the Spring of 1909 was by all accounts a financial flop. While Walser's two prior novels, *Geschwister Tanner* in 1907 and *Der Gehülfe* in 1908, had relative success in the Berlin market, Walser's third and final novel to be released in his lifetime, sold too few copies to warrant a second edition (Mächler 108). While advocates like Hermann Hesse recognized the novel's significance in the burgeoning literary modernist movement, its salvo on the German aesthetic tradition fell largely on deaf ears (Walser 1985, 169). The novel, rather than giving voice to the alienation of a rapidly urbanizing world, appears to have alienated its readership, chiefly Walser's publisher, Bruno Cassirer, who withdrew financial support for the writer thereafter (Mächler 110). A sympathetic reviewer might say that *Jakob von Gunten* was ill-fit for its time; it hearkens to a bygone romantic past of Eichendorff and his novel *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* with its do-nothing protagonist, while preceding Franz Kafka's *Der Process* by a half-decade with its institutional setting dredged of any chance of escape.

To its readership in 1909, *Jakob von Gunten* would have come across as a repudiation of the Bildungsroman<sup>1</sup> tradition, clear in its opening lines, where the titular protagonist declares his education to be an endeavor promising "little or no success at all" (Walser 1985, 7). Walser's doubt on the prospects of education came from personal experience. Walser grew up in a household scarce on literary materials, had abandoned his education at the age of 14 prior to completing his Progymnasium exams, and worked in assistantships and clerkships until arriving in Berlin in 1905, where he managed to establish a career under Cassirer's patronage (Mächler 80). The novel's journey of social ruin drew inspiration from a four-week 'servant course'

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<sup>1</sup> Novel of development or education

[“Dienerkurs”] Walser attended in the Schloss Dambrau in 1905, this being the one of the last of Walser’s fruitless occupational pursuits prior to his relocation to Berlin (Seelig 15). The modicum of literary success Walser had achieved by 1909 came in circumvention of a literary career preconditioned by the Germanic educational systems. In a similar manner, *Jakob von Gunten* does not directly abandon the Bildungsroman form, but instead brings to it a worldview which until the early-twentieth century had been denied a literary platform. The Bildungsroman, following a Hegelian dialectical structure, exemplified a bourgeois trust in civic institutions of the state, government, jurisprudence, marriage, etc. The protagonist first seeks a subjectivity in neglect of societal norms, before realizing himself by taking up position within society, furnished with a wife, family, and secure employment. *Jakob von Gunten*, whose plot will be outlined in the following section, does not abandon the search for subjective autonomy, but rather does so in marked departure from the Bildungsroman protagonist’s educational arc.

In the novel, the titular character enrolls in the Institut Benjamenta, a ‘servant school’ [“Dienerschule”] for boys. Once prestigious and well-staffed, by the time Jakob arrives it is a hollow shell of its former self. What remains of the Institut’s staff are the Benjamenta siblings, with Herr Benjamenta serving as the de facto administration and his sister, Fräulein Benjamenta, as the boys’ sole teacher. Jakob’s progression through the school promises little intellectual or emotional development. Rather, the school’s curriculum produces the types of patient and obedient servants desired by the Berlin elite. While Jakob himself comes from a bourgeois family, his matriculation confirms a future as, “a charming, perfectly rounded zero” (Walser 1985, 8). Jakob is nonetheless driven to find the underlying meaning in the school’s teachings, which he locates in the school’s inner chambers. While his dreams furnish the chambers with rich allegorical symbolism, his eventual admittance to the chambers by Fräulein Benjamenta

finds them empty. With this discovery comes a rapid deterioration of conditions within the school. Following Fräulein Benjamenta's death and the departure of the last students, Herr Benjamenta and Jakob remain as the sole inhabitants of the school. In the final scene of the book, the two venture off together into the desert, bidding farewell to the vacated Institut.

Jakob von Gunten, who relinquishes his bourgeois role to descend into the servile underclass, is a figure conspicuously missing from the Bildungsroman. Curiously enough, while Hegel's dialects rely on the metaphor of the Lord-Bondsman relationship as the formative definition of institutional autonomy, the Bildungsroman relies on a romanticized life defined by a class of land-owning, ruling masters. The working class, left out almost entirely from this depiction of life, are denied the substantive promises of bourgeois society, i.e., the Bildungsroman's idealistic promise of subjective autonomy. Siegfried Kracauer, writing in his 1930 sociological study *Die Angestellten*, describes this phenomenon in the incompatibility between the middle class and their bourgeois aspirations. The 'salaried masses' Kracauer documents experience the liberating bourgeois subjectivity vicariously in movie theaters and shopping centers of downtown Berlin, whose glamorous edifices distract the individual from their spiritual "homelessness" (Kracauer 1998, 91). Distraction describes their work as well, which must distract from its lack of progressive movement, "that they sit in offices, receive clients, lead negotiations, visit lecture halls, they forget most likely in the din of their business their actual inner self and fancy themselves to be free from the burden which secretly weighs them down" (Kracauer 1963, 106).<sup>2</sup> If Hegel and Goethe's protagonists entered bourgeois institutions to find self-affirmation, Kracauer's office illustrates the way in which modern

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<sup>2</sup> „da sie in Büros sitzen, Klienten empfangen, Verhandlungen führen, die Hörsäle besuchen, vergessen sie wohl häufig über dem Lärm des Getriebes ihr eigentliches inneres Sein und wähnen sich frei von der Last, die sie heimlich beschwert“



institutions obfuscate this promise. The question of subjective autonomy is for Kracauer an infrastructural one. The office, like the gleaming and glittering buildings of the Berlin metropole in *Die Angestellten*, are institutions of distraction antithetical to the bourgeois institution. In an essay entitled “Die Wartenden,” Kracauer prescribes a posture of waiting to those aware of the emptiness of their respective institutional situations. Waiting defines a “hesitant openness,” a posture of yes-maybe, which avoids the all-to-quick return to the stabilizing yet hollow habitation within institutions of distraction, as well as the self-imposed exile of an eternal sceptic (116). The one who waits postures himself both within and beyond his institutional context, in the former sense through waiting as a practice of living, and in the latter through waiting as a self-conscious practice of criticism. Waiting occurs at the threshold of a true autonomous existence, when the one who waits convinces himself to make the leap from the deceptive world of appearances into a ‘real world’ [“Wirklichkeit”]. Waiting concludes in action, and it is this action, the leap, which provides waiting with its significance.

*Jakob von Gunten*’s ending seems to directly promise the kind of ‘leap’ which Kracauer’s waiting individual eventually takes, in the case of Walser’s protagonist beyond a crumbling institutional setting and into a desert defined by a post-institutional dissolution of hierarchy. It is in this sentiment that Herr Benjamenta speaks to Jakob shortly before their departure, stating, “Now, Jakob, you are no longer my pupil. I don’t want to form and teach any longer, rather I want to live...” (Walser 1985, 160).

In his approach to the question of subjective autonomy within the *Institut Benjamenta*, Walser does not seek to rectify the individual with the telos of the Bildungsroman, but rather to seek out autonomy in ‘waiting’. This entails, however, an institutional relationship absent in Kracauer’s conceptualization, which reappraises waiting not as a practice of future-tense doing,

but solely as a present-tense ‘doing-nothing’. Rather than delayed reward, the one who waits in Walser’s depiction enjoys immanent success within the institutional context. In a short story entitled “Herren und Angestellten,”<sup>3</sup> Walser gives a succinct description of waiting as a privilege enjoyed by the individual in his place of employment.

As the title already suggests, the story recalls the distinction between the lord and bondsman and placed in the modern world of the salaried masses. The employee [“Angestellte”], as Walser writes, submits himself to the orders of the Herr, who in turn enjoys the sovereignty of decision. The employee’s naïve subjectivity, born out of the boss’ request, is described nonetheless as emancipatory. The boss suffers the excesses of his position of command and envies the employee’s inherent happiness and thoughtlessness [“Angestelltenfröhlichkeiten und -unbesonnenheiten”] (Walser 1968, 203)). Walser’s scenario proceeds according to well-known dialectic dynamic positioning total sovereignty against total obedience. However, rather than centering on the concept of work, as in the case with Hegel, Walser’s boss/employee relationship is defined by a distinction between the boss, who ‘let’s wait,’ and the employee, who ‘waits.’ Far from waiting upon the boss’ next order, the employee finds within waiting an activity of self-sustained productivity. While he waits, the employee thinks of his wife, his children, his loved one free from the imperatives of his workplace (204). Walser does not just make clear an understanding of the breaks and lapses of labor present in waiting, but of waiting as a state-of-being born within labor yet ontologically liberated from it.

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<sup>3</sup> “Bosses and Employees” (own translation), written by Walser in 1928.

### The Institutional Novel and the Bildungsroman:

Rüdiger Campe has read *Jakob von Gunten* as an example of what he calls the ‘institutional novel’ [“Institutionenroman”] (Campe 2005, 239). Other significant representatives are for Campe Franz Kafka’s novels *Das Schloß* and *Der Process* and Robert Musil’s *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, all of which appear at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reimagining of the novel under modern conditions. The autobiographical perspective, which distinguishes the novel from other narrative forms, is introduced in an institutional environment. These environments range from the educational, such as the Institut Benjamenta in *Jakob von Gunten* and the military academy in Musil’s *Törleß*, to the administrative, such as the castle in *Das Schloß*, to the jurisprudential, as with the court in *Der Process*. This shift in perspective marks a break from the Bildungsroman, which represented the development or education of the individual who initially resists, and finally accepts, a position within society. The Bildungsroman’s ‘institutionalization’ is represented through employment and marriage as assimilative acts within the bourgeois social strata. The protagonist’s act of crossing the threshold into the institution plays a determining role in both novelistic forms and how they conceptualize individual autonomy. For the Bildungsroman, the protagonist’s entrance into society constitutes a willful act of integration culminating his journey of self-discovery. For the institutional novel, this act serves as the initiating mechanism of the narrative. The crossing of the threshold in the institutional novel occurs prior to the protagonist recognition of it. The agency in this act is shifted from the protagonist to the institution, which incorporates the individual within itself.

As a modern reinterpretation of the Bildungsroman, the institutional novel confronts the dilemma of the position of the narrator posed by Adorno, that, “it is no longer possible to tell a

story, but the form of the novel requires narration” (Adorno 30). Whereas the Bildungsroman made claims to a ‘concrete reality’ through the perspective of its protagonist, Adorno recognizes particularly in Kafka’s novels a question posed around the value of subjective experience in an objective reality built out of rigid social conventions (32). The illusion of the Bildungsroman as “the three-walled stage of bourgeois theater” rested on the narrating protagonist’s capacity to disregard the artificiality of this narrative context (33). His capacity to “raise the curtain” was also the indication of his lack of self-conscience (33). “There is a heavy taboo on reflection: it becomes the cardinal sin against objective purity” (33). The institutional novel, by contrast, constitutes a self-conscious project of the novel, resolving the conflict of maintaining a duty to ‘realism’ within a world of individual alienation and disenchantment by making the narrative ultimately a story of “institutional continuance or decay” (Campe 2005, 239). Both Campe and Adorno make the claim that modernist novels represent individual life as being determined by the structures of life. To understand the consequence this shift has in the institutional novel, it is important to first look at how the Bildungsroman maintains the possibility of subjective autonomy within bourgeois society.

Hegel, writing in his essay on the ‘novelistic,’ distinguishes the Bildungsroman from earlier literary forms by its introduction of an autobiographical perspective into a world of “set, secure order” (Hegel 219). Whereas the romantic protagonist stood opposite an external world of “chance,” the Bildungsroman protagonist confronts the “bourgeois society, the state,” and its various sub-institutions of the “police, courts, the army, the local government” (219). The autobiographical perspective is established in opposition to this extrinsic reality, so that each of the protagonist’s wishes, ideals, and goals find direct contradiction in “the will of a father, an aunt, bourgeois relationships, and so on” (219). In conceptualizing himself as the direct negation

of the institutional relationships surrounding him, the protagonist can only visualize his autonomy in a non-institutional context. “Now it comes to pass, to drive a hole into this order of things, to change the world, to improve or in spite of it at least to cut a heaven from the earth” (219). If the protagonist’s reformist objectives fail to succeed, his only option is to disobey his duty to realism and flee into a world of fantasy, the ‘heaven cut from the earth’. The project of the Bildungsroman is largely built out of the deferral of this decision. The protagonist’s search for autonomy is at once a period of his trying to make sense of his place within, or in severance from, the world. The Bildungsroman’s preoccupation with this phase regards it not as a form of solipsistic escapism but as naivety on the part of the protagonist. These youthful illusions of a non-institutional existence culminate in an institutionalization which lends to them their point. “These fights are however in the modern world nothing more than the apprentice years, the education of the individual to the immanent world, and through this they receive their true meaning” (Hegel 220).

As Franco Moretti writes, the rebelliousness of youth ultimately situates it within the Bildungsroman as “the age which holds ‘the meaning of life’” (Moretti 4). A youthful subjectivity materializes as the product of a vigorous power of imagination, something not yet actualized and future oriented. This subjectivity responds to the bourgeois age, “because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity’s dynamism and instability” (5). If youth is the ‘symbolic form’ of modernity, the Bildungsroman’s treatment of it differs greatly from that of the institutional novel. The youth’s accentuation of modernity’s dynamism and instability represents the future-orientation of the age, the progressive potential of education, yet it also threatens to break from its form, to ‘cut a heaven from the earth’. The Bildungsroman’s process of institutionalization appears to undermine its “youthful essence” (6) and equivocate the protagonist’s desire for

autonomy as a naive search for meaning within the world. For Moretti this is a necessary contradiction, “only thus, it seems, can modernity be *represented*. Only thus, we may add, can it be ‘made human’” (6). The protagonist’s assumption of a position in society is framed as a compromise of youth rebelliousness with a mature understanding of the world.

The Bildungsroman does not present maturity as an inevitability, rather it is a choice facing the protagonist. “Then the end of the so-called years of learning consists therein, that the subject sheds his horns and with his wishes and opinions incorporates himself into the existing relationships and their rationality” (Hegel 220). The decision obscures a further contradiction within the Bildungsroman, that the pre-institutional youth is already a stage of institutionalization, constituting an ‘education’ rather than a series of ‘fights’.

Hegel’s description of the protagonist’s “shedding of his horns” situates the experience of the Bildungsroman, in which the protagonist experiences total autonomy beyond the institutional world, within the culture of initiation rituals of ‘deposition’ common in European universities at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the ritualized deposition, the shedding of one’s horns represented a period of irresponsible behavior prior to matriculation into the university, whereupon these behaviors would be performatively cleansed (Nail 1). In updating the reference, the Bildungsroman resembles less the period prior to higher education than the pop-cultural representation of the American college experience found in films like *American Pie*. Sheltered by an ultimately laissez-faire school administration, the protagonist enjoys an experience of libidinal freedom without being subject to the law and order which others are subject to. The privilege which the Bildungsroman and the undergraduate experience impart upon the protagonist are however reserved to a select few, those financially secure enough to postpone work, family, and the “annoyances” they provide (Hegel 220). While Hegel acknowledges the

institutionalized protagonist has shed his youthful excesses to become a “philistine as good as any other” (220), this subjectivity is associated with the stability of mature life and not with a loss of agency. A sense of subjective autonomy is maintained so long as the protagonist sees the correctives administered by a bourgeois rite of passage in correspondence to his own youthful excesses. Hegel concludes by noting, “We see here the same character of adventurousness, only that this finds its correct meaning, that the fantastical must experience its necessary correction” (220).

In comparison to the Bildungsroman, the institutional novel comprises only a brief episode in the life of the protagonist; it begins with his entrance into the institution and ends either with his death or the collapse of the institution itself. The entrance into the institution either constitutes the novel’s initial scene, as in *Jakob von Gunten*, or as a moment directly prior to the novel’s beginning, as in *Der Process*. Whereas the protagonist of the Bildungsroman constitutes himself first in contradiction to his institutional surroundings, the protagonist of the institutional novel only first finds his voice after entering the institution’s premises. Born in a sense into the institutional context, the protagonist is denied the youthful excesses of his Bildungsroman counterpart. Therefore, the institution is not the culmination of life, but rather becomes life itself. The protagonist enters a contingent relationship with the institution, “whose topography, the limits and points of transgression, is the course of his life” (204). Jakob acknowledges the macabre situation occasioned by institutional life, “As an old man I will have to serve young, arrogant, poorly raised boors, or I will beg, or I will perish” (Walser 1985, 8).

Whereas the institutions of the Bildungsroman gave form to the life of the protagonist, in the institutional novel this dynamic is reversed. In both the Bildungsroman and the institutional novel, the institution does not speak for itself, but rather in appropriation of its institutional

subjects as representatives of its operations (Campe 2004, 204). In the Bildungsroman, however, the protagonist as institutional representative exemplifies the corrective role the institution plays on individual life, defining the institutional role exclusively in its significance for individual life. In the institutional novel, identity is bound in this representative role. The protagonist too does not speak for himself, but rather speaks in response to institutional inquiry, as with Josef K. in *Der Process*, who sets out to draft his autobiography as a response to the accusation leveled at him by the court (202). As Campe notes, K.'s autobiography affirms the court's practice of jurisprudence as "a piece of text in the sparse language of the trial" (198). The mutual dependence between the protagonist and the institution is altered, the protagonist's place within the institution does not culminate his narrative arc, but rather forces him to embody the institution's own chameleon nature as something which, "surrenders its own identity in favor of self-continuation and -permanency" (200). In Campe's description, the institutional subject represents less an individual than an "institutional fact" (200), who speaks to sustain the institution as a discursive practice.

K., serving as a court representative, as well as Jakob, serving as a pupil in the Institut Benjamenta, are according to Campe's theory caught up in the institution's hollowed out operations, surrendering any sense of an innate identity to ensure their continued existence. They are representative of a general shift in perspective, from the human in the Bildungsroman to the institution in the institutional novel. This perspectival shift entails a further shift in institutional temporality. The institutional plot in the Bildungsroman is built around finality. This conclusiveness does not damper the prospects of subjective autonomy, but rather realizes it. The 'character of adventurousness' is given form by the institutional corrective. For the institutional novel, the individual and his autobiography trigger the institution's self-perpetuating dynamic.



This illustrates a different claim on modernity and its symbolic form in ‘youth’. Rather than seeking to conserve youth’s energy, the institutional novel illustrates modernity as the exploitation of life. Adorno sums up the plot of the institutional novel when he makes the appeal, “The reification of all relationships between individuals, which transforms their human qualities into lubricating oil for the smooth running of the machinery, the universal alienation and self-alienation, needs to be called by name” (Adorno 32).

Campe’s claim that the institutional novel gives “fictions of stories, whose relationship of form is not around the life of the protagonist but rather around the continuation or decay of institutions” (Campe 2005, 239) resolves the aporia in the Bildungsroman; that the institutional origin of ‘subjectivity’ in coming-of-age rites is obfuscated by the coincidence of protagonist’s crossing of the threshold into society and his personal decision to cross the threshold. The institutional novel exposes the compulsory relationship between the individual and the institution, which as living entities live vicariously through one another. Duty, rather than choice, becomes the key issue in determining the prospects of subjective autonomy within this context.

Yet duty does not necessarily predetermine the relationship of utter synchronization described by Adorno. Walser’s institutions are notable in their demands for written documents from their subjects, for this institutional practice locates the institution proximate to the literary profession which for Walser exempted him from further employment. The institutional duty is therefore held in tension between the manual practice of ‘copying’ [‘Abschreiben’] and the creative practice of ‘writing’ [‘Schreiben’] (Groves 5). As Jakob cooly notes, “A servant can do nothing more than accept the mask and affectations of his master in order to naively reproduce them, so to speak” (Walser 1985, 56). The naïve reproduction of institutional doctrine as either a practice of alienation or self-realization, will be an ongoing discussion in this piece.

Gehlen, The Function of Institutions:

For Arnold Gehlen, one of the significant theorists of the institution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the institutional relationship is a metaphor for life capable of resolving the question in philosophical anthropology of humankind's nature as both a natural and social being (Gehlen 69). For Gehlen, the Cartesian justification of humankind in a dualism of body and spirit fails to clarify the key difference between man and animal, that man, "destitute in his organic faculties" nonetheless has managed to inhabit the furthest reaches of the world (69). For Gehlen, this faculty for "intelligent action" exclusive to humankind is a direct result of its inherent biological disadvantage. The stability of human life is not to be found in a rugged individualism, but rather in humankind's willingness for social engagement, predicated on mutually deciding upon rules by which all participants will abide. These "socially-sanctioned patterns of behavior" relieve the social individual from the litany of decisions facing the sole individual, by providing a collectivized "guide through the abundance of impressions and stimulants which inundate the cosmopolitan<sup>4</sup> human" (71). The sign-postage provided by institutional relationships is what allows the individual to pursue an enriching "inner life" (71). This passage is perhaps the most radical in Gehlen's theory, for it postulates that the basis of personality is to be found within the regulative function of the institution, importantly, its handling of the question of what the individual should do and what should be let be ["Tun und Lassen"] (71).

Hegel's notion of an 'objective spirit,' encompassing the objectivized patterns of behavior superordinate to the individual, falsely situates institutions as "the subject of all possible statements" (70). That is, it unnecessarily restricts the limits of human life within solidified forms. For Gehlen, institutions nonetheless represent the solidification of agreed upon

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<sup>4</sup> Literally 'world-open' ("weltoffen")

conventions into rules and laws, bound within the “objective order” of institutions of jurisprudence, customs, family, and the state. Whereas in the former case patterns of behavior had provided refuge from an unregulated natural state, in their evolved state institutions begin to operate like natural states themselves, “without pause and doubt as if from themselves, that is, self-evidently, without there being another possibility imaginable” (72). For Gehlen, the institution does not achieve universality in the Hegelian sense, as a cumulative totality of human existence, but in its ability to regulate all aspects of human life.

In the best circumstances, as exemplified in the *Bildungsroman*, the nature of the institution as the pre-condition of life is left undisputed until questions of marriage and occupation are raised. What Adorno critiques as the taboo of reflection in the traditional novel is for Gehlen rather an effect of institutional stability. In the worst circumstances, the paradoxical relationship between the institution and the individual reveals itself as undergirding one’s individuality as well as triggering one’s sense of alienation. Alienation, the feeling that one is compelled by a system without the possibility of participating within it, defines a situation where the institution is unable to serve its role as an orienting point in the life of the individual, where its self-evidence is brought into question. Here, the irony at the heart of the institution is most apparent; while institutions provide the precondition for subjectivity, their self-evident mechanics ensure that they will eventually operate independent from the input of its participants.

Gehlen is unambiguous where he identifies this institutional conflict arising; it comes with the end of a 5000-year “age of kings” brought to its end by the rise of industrial societies, under whose conditions the original institutional ethic become “incompatible” (71). Institutions’ compatibility with a bygone monarchical age appears to be embedded for Gehlen in their decision over what the individual does or let’s be. It is less the industrial age as expressed through

institutions of mass alienated labor than the industrial age as the reinauguration of democratic governance which troubles the stability of the institutional relationship. The democratic promise of limitless subjective autonomy clashes with the institutional regulation of human life, particularly when this regulative authority relies on a naturalized legitimacy.

Walser too voices a conservative criticism of modern institutions. The metropolis which surrounds the Institut Benjamenta is defined as an institution without infrastructure; its logic rests in the dynamic movement of its 'crowds'. It is a logic of industriousness demanding its subjects keep pace. "In the city every messenger boy knows the value of his time, and every newspaper salesman doesn't want to trifle his time away" (Walser 1985, 46). While the principle of self-management is also adopted in the Institut, Jakob, like Gehlen, is wary of the deregulated nature of these modernist institutions rendering institutions of hierarchy obsolete. "The city," Jakob remarks, "educates, it cultivates, and by examples, what's more, not by dry lessons taken from books" ["Die Großstadt erzieht, sie bildet, und zwar durch Beispiele, nicht durch trockene, den Büchern entnommene Lehrsätze"] (46). Yet for Jakob it is precisely rules and laws, however inhumane, which preserve the sanctity of servitude. Under the governance of the city, Jakob envisions the modern populace as "like slaves, dominated by an angry, whip-wielding, indelicate world thought ["Weltgedanken"]" (78).

The result of this institutional disturbance is not the liberation of the individual from an autocratic rule, but rather the individual's abandonment to a mass of instinctual questions. Modernity does not introduce a new worldview so much as revert to a pre-institutional primitivism. For Gehlen, literary modernism captures this abandoned perspective which turns to the "nearby, real and directly representable" in its search for order (Gehlen 73). The resulting literary work is therefore a hermeneutics of its respective immediate surroundings. Gehlen's

interpretation of modernism is dismissive, the term provides only a thin veil of mutual intelligibility to what are otherwise “the strained efforts of communication by deaf-mutes” (73). While these efforts represent “honest reactions” to the world, they compensate for their non-institutional myopia by exaggerating their individualized thoughts and convictions “to a general validity” (74).<sup>5</sup> The modernist pursuit is neither arrogant nor egoist, but rather represents a reversion to ‘subjectivism’ [“Subjektivismus”]. Modernity not only is a return to primitivism but brings with it the dangers confronting the naturally deficient human.<sup>6</sup> For Gehlen, Kafka’s protagonist defines the instability of the modern individual, “the loss of a center of gravity and the tumbling about of focal points” (73).

Like with Hegel’s theory, the individual who rejects institutional affiliation is threatened with an existence incommunicable to others (75). The Bildungsroman’s protagonist sees subjective autonomy as the fulfillment of his wish to form the world in his own image, either by forceful implementation or through fantasy. Whereas the protagonist eventually finds within bourgeois society the fulfillment of these wishes, Kafka’s protagonists never rescue themselves from their solipsistic worldviews. For Gehlen, they lack a comprehensive understanding of subjectivity, which for him covers both the Bildungsroman’s definition as an expansionary, self-interested force, as well as subjectivity housed in the institution around the pragmatic maintenance of life (72). As such, Gehlenian subjectivity gives space for self-sovereignty and autonomy at both poles of an institution which regulates what the individual does and let’s be. Even subject to the most disciplinary of institutions, those born in the age of industrial mass society, Gehlen envisions an expression of subjective autonomy, “singularity” [“Einmaligkeit”],

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<sup>5</sup> “Von den Institutionen im Stich gelassen und auf sich zurückgeworfen, kann man wohl nicht anders reagieren als mit dieser Überhöhung des jetzt noch vorhandenen Inneren zur allgemeinen Gültigkeit“

<sup>6</sup> Gehlen defines humankind in *Der Mensch, Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* as a ‘being of deficiency’ („Mängelwesen“).

coming when the individual adapts to his institutional conditions. “I will say: even when the institutions schematize us in a certain way, when they, through our behavior, also shape and make typical our thoughts and feelings, one draws nevertheless on the energy reserves in order within one’s conditions to represent a singularity” (72).

Whereas Gehlen codifies K. as a figure ultimately undone by his devotion to a non-institutional subjectivity, who “rather than within his own conditions in all possible conditions attempts to assert his personality” (72), in fact K. falls victim to a shift in the institutional relationship, wherein prolongation no longer provides salvation. By placing the blame for institutional failure upon the individual and his “excessive subjectivity” [“Übersteigerung der Subjektivität”] (74), Gehlen appears to contradict his earlier claim and argue that institutions represent singularly conservative entities. In addressing avant-garde art, itself an expression of an irreconcilable subjectivity, Gehlen justifies its success as the result of a gradual institutionalization, noting, “artistic tendencies, which decades ago arose from the destruction of traditions and the boundless freeing of the subjectivity, have become these days world-wide institutions” (76). Gehlen’s definition of institutions is colored by a fundamentally conservative stance, seeing institutions as ultimately restraining non-normative individual behavior. Robert Seyfert, a contemporary theorist of the institution, disputes this depiction of institutions as fixed ‘structures,’ into which non-institutional life slowly stabilizes. At their core, institutions do not represent the architecture they inhabit, but rather a “daedelic” ability for reconfiguring already present elements, human life, etc., into a new “artful fabric or arrangement” (Seyfert 15).<sup>7</sup> This act of reconfiguration contradicts Gehlen’s claim about institutions limiting the excesses of human life, here the institution establishes a social sphere through its tendency for excess. “An

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<sup>7</sup> “Institutionen sind also nicht die Sozialstruktur, sie definieren sich eher über ihren wörtlichen Sinn von *Einrichtungen* als ein kunstvolles Gefüge bzw. Arrangement”

institution invents problems (and their solutions), that weren't there before" (15). Individual friction with the institution is far less a tendency in contradiction to institutional operation than it is a quite logical reaction to an institution in daedelic excess.

The Institut Benjamenta, captured in a state of disrepair and nearing its end, represents such a daedelic institution. Herr Benjamenta speaks to the ever-changing nature of the school as a series of personal mood swings, referencing the school's auspicious beginnings as a period of feeling like a king, before descending into a maelstrom of 'disheartenment and debasement' (Walser 1985, 159). During this period, marked by an absence of teachers and a hollowing out of the school's pedagogical practices. Not only are Jakob and his fellow pupils left with fewer duties, but they are also tasked with self-disciplining themselves to maintaining the image of the school as an institution seeing to the pupil's proper socialization. Within this latter dynamic, the school can be read as seeking its own self-perpetuation through the pupils' repetitive practices. Yet Benjamenta points to a new state of the institution when he declares, "And now I am again, that is I'm beginning to become myself again... as if I were elevated and crowned ruler" (159). The return of Herr Benjamenta's to his kingly dignity entails a restructuring of the Institut; by the point Herr Benjamenta voices these thoughts the rest of the pupils have been released, leaving only school's head and Jakob. In departure from the hierarchized structure of the school, Benjamenta approaches his pupil with the proposal releasing Jakob from his tutelage; "Now, Jakob, you are no longer my pupil. I don't want to educate and form any longer, rather I want to live..." (160). The relationship into which Herr Benjamenta and Jakob enter as they depart into the desert, in departure of education to a practice of life, only confirms what the Institut had long since represented. The ability to restructure the institution as a means for one's own life are not

just reserved to Herr Benjamenta as the operator of the school, for Walser they also lie in the hands of Jakob, who understands how to assert himself within the school's operations.



Kafka, the Question of Subjective Excesses, the Limits of Autonomy in the Institution:

Before exploring how the institutional relationship develops in *Jakob von Gunten*, it is important to first turn our attention to Kafka's *Der Process*. While K. holds an ultimately pessimistic view of the institution and the prospects of subjective autonomy, the perspectives of the writer and his protagonist do not necessarily entirely overlap. Kafka accedes to gaps in the institutional matrix, hinting that some of the inevitabilities of his protagonist's fate are the result of K.'s reading of the court and its function.

K. identifies the institution in the question of restriction, limits, points of transgression. This Campeian perspective is laid out most clearly in K.'s hermeneutic debate with the court's prison chaplain over the foundational text of the court, a parable entitled "Before the Law" ["Vor dem Gesetz"] (Kafka 197). A man seeking entrance to the Law approaches its entryway, an open door guarded by a gatekeeper, who notifies him it is not possible to enter the Law at the moment. Rather than leaving, or attempting to overpower the gatekeeper, the man decides to await a further inquiry beside the doorway. Here the man waits for years and years, ever so often asking for entrance only to be rejected in each instance by the gatekeeper. Ultimately, as the man nears his death, he asks the gatekeeper why he has been the only one to seek entrance to the Law. The gatekeeper, aware of the man's imminent demise, provides an answer, "here no one else may be admitted, because this entrance was only meant for you" (198), before ultimately closing the door. To K., the parable reproduces the fundamental deception of the court, one which makes promises of enlightenment and salvation to the individual and inhibits these pursuits in the same stroke. If the institution is a structure of limits, individual autonomy is to be found in the transgression of these limits. For the chaplain, the law however never promises this privilege of unchecked access. The relationship between the individual and the institution is ultimately one of

accommodation. The gatekeeper's offer of a cushion for the man to sit on represents the generousities of the institution, providing for a comfortable existence, which extend beyond its mandate as the mere scaffolding for social life. While not providing total freedoms, the institution is nonetheless an inclusionary entity which promises each a place within its system of meaning. Only the one who seeks direct access to the law, a privilege never promised, ultimately sees the institution as a restrictive entity. The institution's concern for the individual, represented by the door, is a subjective illusion. Concluding the conversation, the chaplain explains, "The court wants nothing from you. It picks you up when you come and lets you go when you leave" (205).

Living within the court promises three paths, as defined by the court painter Titorelli. The first, the "true release" ["wirkliche Freisprechung"], Titorelli has never experienced himself (140). Therefore, Titorelli presents the latter two, the "apparent release" ["scheinbare Freisprechung"] and the "protraction" ["Verschleppung"] as the legitimate means of engagement with the court. The apparent release resembles the true release in every regard, except that in its case a new trial may be opened at any moment against the defendant (144). K. must first guarantee his innocence to Titorelli, who will then visit with various judges of the court, using this admission of innocence to advocate for K. and accruing the necessary number of not guilty verdicts to ultimately convince K.'s judge to drop the case. This acquittal frees K. from his present trial, but not from the ban of indictability, which as Titorelli notes will continue to lurk over K. and can, "as soon as the higher command comes, enter immediately into force" (145). In contrast to the apparent release, the protraction represents an option requiring, "a far less, but constant effort" (143). To protract one's case, the defendant must command an intimate knowledge of the court's operations and cultivate close relations with its officials to ensure the

trial remains in its initial phase (146-7). As Titorelli notes, “the protraction is advantageous in that the future of the accused is less uncertain, he remains safe from the horrors of a sudden arrest and must not fear needing to take on exertion and excitement at a time when his state of affairs otherwise are at their most unfavorable” (147). The apparent release illustrates the inescapability of institutional affiliation, even in the case of acquittal the court’s power to indict hangs over the head of the individual. Existence outside the institution is only an apparent state, the individual is still exposed to the court’s rule of law, which in addition to operating according to arcane rules now behaves unpredictably.

Being on trial is only one of a series of institutional affiliations, yet as Titorelli emphasizes is the most stable instance. While the individual pursuing a protraction of his case must keep its proceedings in perpetual motion, the requirements of the court are open to adaptation. “When one suddenly has no time or no desire to go, one may excuse oneself, one may even determine court orders with certain judges well in advance” (147-8). The fight for one’s innocence plays out as a formality neither seriously pursued by the defendant nor contested by the judge, who are both bound by another demand of the trial, that “it cannot stand still without there being present at least apparent grounds for it” (147). The trial concedes many freedoms; it does not demand progress but rather the mere appearance of change (147).<sup>8</sup> The only freedom which cannot be conceded is that which counteracts the perpetual motion of the court. If the severing of institutional relationships is such a freedom, the novel’s final scene then portrays its consequences as K.’s executioners drive a knife into his heart (211). While the court’s operations follow a clear sequence conditioned by the path the defendant chooses, the

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<sup>8</sup> “Es muss deshalb im Process nach außen hin etwas geschehn”

decision is never presented as an inevitability, but rather something which, according to the priest, “the process passes gradually into” (197).

K.’s attempt to draft an autobiographical text represents his singular earnest attempt to protract his case. In this document, K. will justify each event of his life in anticipation of any possible claim of guilt made by the court. It is a task whose scope complies with protraction’s endless nature. K. however admonishes himself, “not to halt it halfway, that was not only in transactions, but always and in each case the least sensible” (116). The axiom of prolongation, to live in rhythm with the court, runs up against an axiom which dominates K.’s life as a high-ranking banking employee; to complete each piece of business to the greatest advantage of the represented party (114). That the profitability of the autobiography lies in its endless scope rather than its persuasiveness as a finished legal document escapes the banker. For him, its scope is what threatens to consume all his time and energy. “If he could not find the time in his office for it, which was highly possible, then he would need to complete it at home during the night. If the nights did not suffice, then he would need to take a vacation” (116). K. implicitly conceptualizes this fear as one of being torn between the two institutions which determine his future, one in legal terms of innocence and guilt, the other in terms of professional advancement. Whereas the court makes concessions for other institutional prerogatives so long as the pretense of trial progress is kept, the bank’s time is non-negotiable. As a piece of business entangled within the operations of both institutions, the autobiography is something which under no circumstance should be put on hold, yet whose undertaking presupposes its swift completion. In other words, the task rewrites the perpetual motion of prolongation with the back-breaking intensity of modernity. As the bank refuses to yield time to court matters, K. concludes his only way forward is a sleepless existence, spent in the office by day and at the desk writing by night.

Before setting about to draft the piece, K. is woken from his musings to find he has spent precious time at work; several important clients are waiting, “who one under no circumstance should let wait” (117). “Why they came at such an inconvenient time and why... had the diligent K. used the best business hours for personal matters” (117). The text remains an unfulfilled as well as unvocalized thought regarding the possibility of life in the court.

Yet here it points to a clash of institutional dynamics, an institution which offers privileges, which ultimately protects the individual, and an institution which extracts labor from the individual, an institution of profit, an opposition which will be discussed in the epilogue.

Jakob von Gunten and the Stakes of Entering the Institution:

In the first scene of the novel, Jakob describes his matriculation into the Institut Benjamenta. Jakob's initial suspicions of the school resemble those voiced by K. at his first court hearing. Elements conditioned by the institution take on an air of dubiousness. The school, like the court in its first manifestation,<sup>9</sup> is housed in an inconspicuous tenement at the outskirts of a large city. The institution here seems to contradict its function as an entity of comprehensive scope, and it is perhaps the institution's modest parochial self-presentation which, rather than inspiring awe, causes the protagonist to see himself from the outside looking in. Jakob recoils at the welcoming he receives from Kraus, noting "that something there must not be going right" (Walser 1985, 11).<sup>10</sup> Unlike the compulsory institutional relationship established by Campe, these operations do not yet concern the protagonist, rather in Jakob's case they *concern* him. The court's attempt to bully K. into a confession without ever revealing his crimes indicates a certain hollowness at the center of its operations, leading the protagonist to declare, "there is in actuality no trial, because there is only a trial, when I recognize it as such" (Kafka 43). It is however eventually the court, more specifically the court chaplain, who eventually recognizes K., giving him the appellation "Josef K.". In the moment when the protagonist yields to institutional request and divulges himself, the critical perspective converts into an orientation of seeing oneself within the institution. Here, K. merely consents to his naming with a nod (193), continuing a pattern of silence over his own identity begun in the conceptualization of the autobiography. Walser's protagonist, by contrast, experience no such inhibitions. His institutionalization is occasioned by him blathering on about himself.

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<sup>9</sup> Disregarding K.'s arrest in his home in the novel's first scene.

<sup>10</sup> literally: "with right things," a Walserian pun on the 'ape-like' manner by which Kraus bows to Jakob.

“Plötzlich wurde ich nach meinem Namen gefragt und nach meiner Herkunft. Jetzt hielt ich mich für verloren, denn ich fühlte mit einemmal, daß ich da nicht mehr loskäme. Stotternd gab ich Auskunft, ich wagte sogar zu betonen, daß ich aus einem sehr guten Hause stamme. Ich sagte unter anderem, mein Vater sei Großrat, und ich sei ihm davongelaufen, weil ich gefürchtet hätte, von seiner Vortrefflichkeit erstickt zu werden“ (Walser 1985, 12).

"Suddenly I was asked for my name and where I came from. Now I thought I was lost, for suddenly I felt that I would never escape from the place. I stuttered out the information, I even ventured to emphasize that I came from a very good family. Among other things, I said that my father was an alderman, and that I had run away from him because I was afraid of being suffocated by his excellence"

The ‘suddenness’ of Herr Benjamenta’s questions seem to trigger Jakob’s torrent of words, and it is noteworthy that while the novel’s diary form inherently represents Jakob’s voice, this scene gives one of the longest passages of Jakob’s reported speech. In the Campeian sense, Jakob’s identity has become redrafted within the institution, redirecting the autobiographical instance through an institution which interrogates and extracts information from its subject (Campe 2004, 201). Yet it is perhaps less the sudden exercise of institutional power which overwhelms Jakob with a feeling that he will never leave the school again, but rather the extent of his confessional.

Jakob draws a parallel between his reaction to the school and the reaction which brought him to its front steps in the first place. A ‘suffocating’ fear first applies to an inheritance of ‘excellence’ which Jakob is destined for as the son of the councilman. Jakob’s brief mention of his father is a description with interwoven filial and bureaucratic relationships, in which merely growing up is also burdened with the acceptance of a certain position in society. The institution

of the bourgeois family represents an entity which not only encompasses, but in doing so smothers life. The fear manifests in the ‘stammering disclosure’ Jakob gives when faced with the inescapability of the school and the likelihood of being cheated in its ‘bent’ system. “I thought even of clandestine murder, a strangulation bit by bit” (Walser 1985, 12).<sup>11</sup> It is not unlike the piteous death which greets K. at the end of his attempts to escape a seemingly inextricable trial. Yet the fear which grips Jakob, that perhaps the Institut Benjamenta does not differ from the familial house in any crucial regard, initiates what can only be seen as an unforeseen consequence in the Campeian sense of the institution. The school does not hush Jakob as it does K., rather it overwhelms him with its instantiation of an autobiographical act so robust as to suggest that Jakob will never be able to ‘get away’ because he will be too busy talking, or writing, the novel’s text.

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<sup>11</sup> “Ich dachte sogar an geheime Ermordung, stückweises Erdrosseln“



### The Institutionalization of the Biography:

Here, it would be pertinent to differentiate acts of writing in the context of what Campe refers to as “the institutionalization of the biography” (Campe 2004, 201). Whereas K. conceptualizes written and spoken defenses as having the same purpose and function in the court, Jakob’s diary comes into conflict with another autobiographical text, termed the ‘curriculum vitae’ [“Lebenslauf”], which the school demands from its students as part of their matriculation process. Jason Groves clarifies this relationship, noting that in Walser’s works commissioned acts of writing often become texts commenting on their own failure to materialize (Groves 4). Jakob’s diary in part manifests from the curriculum vitae, vocalizing Jakob’s inability to complete the text, “I’ve admittedly written the curriculum vitae, but I’ve ripped it up again” (Walser 1985, 49), as well as occupying the off-hours ostensibly set aside for the curriculum vitae’s completion, “I write all these lines mostly in the evening by lamplight on the large school table, on which we pupils so often must sit mindlessly or not mindlessly” (33).<sup>12</sup> The school’s occasioning for the curriculum vitae becomes the occasioning for the diary. Not only do these two texts compete for the same tables and quiet hours, but they reflect contradictory conceptualizations of the individual. The curriculum vitae’s German name, “Lebenslauf,” references its function in reflecting life as a line traced through an institution.<sup>13</sup> As a statement of one’s position, or positions, it succeeds in finding correspondence with future employment positions. It performs an institutionalizing task by presenting life as the fulfillment of institutional duties.

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<sup>12</sup> “An all diesen Zeilen schreibe ich meist abends, bei der Lampe, an dem großen Schultisch, an welchem wir Zöglinge so oft stumpfsinnig oder nicht stumpfsinnig sitzen müssen.” (Walser 1985, 33)

<sup>13</sup> “Lebenslauf” meaning literally ‘course’ or ‘movement’ of life.

Jakob's diary, by contrast, sketches an untethered line, circling around a puzzling existence as a "charming, perfectly rounded zero" (Walser 1985, 8) in pursuit of a deeper meaning within the school. The diary's lack of a "progressive schema" (Groves 12) makes it a poor compensatory text in lieu of the curriculum vitae. Far less than enabling a career, the text frames life as, "a career of 'careering', moving swiftly and in an uncontrolled way, a life marked by chronic inability to secure a position, which entails, as a small and unsalaried consolation, plenty of opportunities for literary endeavors" (11). In the diary, this manifests as a life begun and ending at the vanishing points of a 'zero'-existence.<sup>14</sup> This career of careering is far different from the career promised by the curriculum vitae; its occasioning is a breakdown of institutional operation. While the institution furnishes the subject with a place to write, as Groves writes these furnishings are 'unbecoming,' and therefore unsuitable for the writing task at hand. And whereas the curriculum vitae pertains to a wide range of possible employments, the career of careering is exclusively a literary activity begun when the subject un-employs himself from his present task. Groves therefore undermines an equation made by Campe between the novel and the institutional story it conveys. In Groves theory, there are two institutional domains at play: the institution, the Institut Benjamenta and its topography, and the autobiographical text, occasioned by the former. "What the Institute furnishes, it seems, is nothing more than its withdrawal, the adequate 'downtime', in which another movement and another practice can develop and take shape: An interval" (Groves 9). Here, in the institutional interval, the curriculum vitae demonstrates its importance by keeping a 'withdrawn' institution in operation. The diary as a text which neglects institutional duties and rejects institutional furnishing reasserts a human perspective, different than that of the Bildungsroman, in the alienated existence of the writer.

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<sup>14</sup> Jakob both confirms a future as a rounded zero and a present existence as a zero (Walser 1985, 8, 53)

The writer, therefore, is a human figure capable of maintaining the ‘position’ within the institutional interval, he writes at, “a site of abandonment, where the writer abandons his hand to another’s voice, the site where the writer and author correspond with, but no longer to one another” (3). When Jakob does complete his curriculum vitae, what emerges from the “counter-productive” text is a failed institutional representative who “contains so little biographical information that it is undeserving of the title “Lebenslauf”” (9). The text as an institutional encapsulation of Jakob’s life is overshadowed by the diary as an encapsulation of the institution’s failure to discipline the individual.

The life of the writer is marked by his Gehlenian symbiosis with the institution, which ‘furnishes’ the literary activity, with an anti-Gehlenian twist, since it is the lack of a stable position which begins the writer’s career of careering. As Groves summarizes, “The institutions whose furnishings support these writers therein deprive them of their stature” (3). Unlike Gehlen’s conservative institution, which limits the individual to certain postures, and Seyfert’s daedelic institution, which constantly reshuffles social dynamics, Walser’s institutions are hollow entities which fail to employ the individual as its representative. Those who fail to become employed are for Groves “radically autonomous figures” whose careering resides “outside of a strictly institutional sense” (14).

It seems impertinent however to disregard the (non-)position Jakob occupies within the Institut Benjamenta, and to read his ‘zero-existence’ as so tightly bound with an evasion to employment, or even to immediately equate employment with static terms like position and stature. While the Bildungsroman employs the institutional figure as a means of giving his life a conclusion, the Campeian institution does not form the individual’s life, rather it exploits life as a formless energy, a ‘lubricating oil’ for its machinery. In returning to the curriculum vitae, we

encounter not necessarily an unemployable individual, but an individual with the potential for employment.

“Unterzeichneter, Jakob von Gunten, Sohn rechtschaffener Eltern, den und den Tag geboren, da und da aufgewachsen, ist als Eleve in das Institut Benjamenta eingetreten, um sich die paar Kenntnisse anzueignen, die nötig sind, in irgend jemandes Dienste zu treten” (Walser 1985, 50-1).

“Signatory, Jakob von Gunten, son of righteous parents, born on this and this day, there and there raised, has entered as pupil into the Institut Benjamenta in order to acquire the few pieces of knowledge which are necessary to enter into any person’s service.”

The zero-existence written into the curriculum vitae uses this nothing however not in the pejorative sense, as a pupil doomed to a lack of success. His lack of biographical content leaves him as an empty vessel for the ‘knowledge’ required by his future employer. Jakob’s emptiness is indicative of a potential to match every job requirement. This would appear to raise a contradiction in Groves’ argument, that namely Jakob’s emptiness not only makes him employable but defines him as the employable servant par excellence. The career of careering’s exclusion of employment possibilities fails to make space for Jakob, a figure whose potential for employment is never tested. Jakob, unlike other institutional failures like K., who succumbs to the institutional decision, and Musil’s Torleß, who is released by his school back into the care of his mother, passes his institutional requirements, only to turn down his diploma in the novel’s penultimate scene (Walser 1985, 161).

### Dilletantism:

For Groves, employability constitutes a taking place of the individual, it is occasioned by a stable position, be it comfortable furniture or a “content-rich education” (Groves 8), upon which the intellectual project can be built. For Jörg Kreienbrock, Walser and his protagonists do not follow this traditional path of employment, exemplified by the ‘genius’ writer, but rather the “curious career” [“merkwürdige Laufbahn”] of the dilettante (Kreienbrock 152). Both the genius and the dilettante possess a “natural talent” which predetermine their respective careers as breaking with tradition, specifically the German education tradition, *Bildung*, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been given an increased importance in the development of an ‘educated’ artist through writers like Schiller and Goethe. By nature, writes Kreienbrock, the dilettante and genius possess a certain “innocence” [“Schuldlosigkeit”] regarding their careers, which at first entails educational non-conformity (152). The genius’ education in a literary tradition however culminates in a work of “creative originality” (152). Despite not following a typical educational path, the genius nonetheless represents the culmination of Schiller and Goethe’s educational telos.

The Walserian dilettante never achieves this mastery, his non-conformity doesn’t come in his departure for tradition, but rather in an originality, “which obstructs every development” (153).<sup>15</sup> The dilettante’s break from tradition is his refusal to depart from the educational process. The dilettante is not necessarily a failed genius, whose lack of a masterwork dooms him to educational aimlessness, but rather pursues originality in a radically different form than the genius. For the dilettante, capturing originality in a static form betrays it as a *process* breaking with tradition. “The character of the artist,” writes Kreienbrock, “is departing, setting off, a

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<sup>15</sup> „Der ewige Dilletantismus des Genies kommt nicht voran, verharrt im Zustand seiner naturgegebenen Originalität, die jeder Entwicklung hemmend entgegensteht“

question, a thought, a spirit flying forth” (153). Any static representation of this subjectivity would inherently undermine its existence as always exceeding itself. Unlike in Groves’ depiction, where the absence of educational practice produces the literary subjectivity, for Kreienbrock education and subjectivity are inextricably intertwined.

The dilettantish genius masters the educational process as an endless space of experimentation. His education promises no culminating acts of groundbreaking originality, but rather in its perpetuity exposes itself as non-cohesive, “friable” [“brüchig”] and therefore open to endless recombination. “The past is not past but becomes again and again a new possibility” (160). The non-cohesive institution occasions texts like Jakob’s diary, whose exploitation of the school’s intervals does not liberate the individual from the school but realizes his dilettantish identity within the interval. This dynamic suggests a new type of institutional relationship, in which the individual exploits his own educational potential.

It is not the failure of the institution to provide him with a stable position, but his own dilettantish need for “withdrawal from direct, willful disposability” (Kreienbrock 162). Dilettantism, as a representation of an artistic autonomy, represents, “a restraint, an exertion, but no possession” (162). Therefore, it is not an educational gap, an interval, or lack of pedagogical content but a subjective unwillingness to resolve the educational process which constitutes the act of ‘withdrawal’. The dilettantish practice is one of many examples of an ‘unending ending’ [“unaufhörliches Aufhören”] defining Walser’s texts as a writing, “which escapes the direct declaration of a rounded, encapsulated work, which never ends in setting forth, and in setting forth never ends” (9). Dilettantishness, ‘unending endlessness,’ both draw upon the institutional novel’s distinct nature of prolonging and perpetuating itself.

To get at this correlation of the dilettantish pupil with the institution, and to differentiate it from Groves' correlation of the literary pupil in absence of the institution, we may turn to a scene imagined by Jakob involving a writer who visits the Institut.

“... weil wir so reizend frisiert und gescheitelt sind, sehen wir uns alle eigentlich ähnlich, was für einen Schriftsteller zum Beispiel zum Totlachen wäre, wenn er uns besuchte, um uns in unserer Herrlichkeit und Wenigkeit zu studieren. Mag dieser Herr Schriftsteller zu Hause bleiben. Windbeutel sind das, die nur studieren, malen und Beobachtungen anstellen wollen. Man lebe, dann beobachtet sich's ganz von selber“ (Walser 1985, 57)

„... because we are so charmingly coiffed and parted, we all actually look alike, which for a writer for example would be laughable if he visited us to try and study us in our glory and paucity. May this writer remain at home. Windbags are those, who only want to study, paint, and make observations. One lives, and that observes itself.”

The writer, like Groves himself, recognizes within the pupil a subjectivity whose radicality resides in his 'glory' and 'paucity'. Yet the writer who attempts to capture this subjectivity in the pupil's appearance will, as Jakob writes, be better off remaining at home. The pursuit of an observation bereaves the pupil of his context. As a nuclear, 'radically autonomous' figure, the pupil hardly distinguishes himself from his schoolmates, like the dilettante. His originality fails any static representation. Living, that is, life actualized through the institutional process, is the only means by which the pupil can be understood. As Kreienbrock writes, Jakob's zero existence is therefore not remarkable on its own, “To categorize his career as a simple failure, would misjudge the character of Jakob's course, because it comes to changes and transition in his life: the zero of the pupil is not identical with the zero in *later life*” (168). It is a career whose significance rests in the 'changes' and 'transitions' as

markers of a dilettantish potential, realized within the institution and illustrating an autonomous subjectivity in realization. Jakob signals to this ever-changing subjectivity in his curriculum vitae as being born within the school.

„Allerdings ist er stolz, denn es ist ihm unmöglich, die angeborene Natur zu verleugnen, aber er versteht unter Stolz etwas ganz Neues, gewissermaßen der Zeit, in der er lebt, Entsprechendes... Wenn die Ahnen des gehorsam Unterzeichneten das ritterliche Schwert geführt haben, so handelt der Nachkomme traditionell, wenn er glühend heiß begehrt, sich irgendwie nützlich zu erweisen... Er hat einen Trotzkopf, in ihm leben eben noch ein wenig die ungebändigten Geister seiner Vorfahren, doch er bittet, ihn zu ermahnen, wenn er trotzt, und wenn das nichts nützt, zu züchtigen, denn dann glaubt er, nützt es“ (51-2).

“Of course, he is proud, for it is impossible for him to deny his inborn nature, but by pride he means something quite new, something that corresponds, in some degree, to the times in which he is living... If the ancestors of the obedient undersigned bore the knightly sword, their descendant acts in the same tradition by desiring ardently to make himself useful somehow... He possesses a defiant head, the untamed spirits of his forefathers still live in him, but he requests to be admonished when he defies, and when that does bring anything, to be given the strap, then there he believes it will bring something”.

Within his inborn, ‘von-Guntian’ nature, Jakob speaks to a vitalizing pride which his ancestors possessed. While they too subjected themselves to the rule of others, they carried out these duties with the ‘knightly sword,’ evincing duty through evocative acts of violence. This image recalls the youthful excesses of the forebearer to the Bildungsroman protagonist, the knight, for whom service and an “untamed spirit” were not mutually exclusive. Jakob’s distancing from his family history of defiant duty speaks to a context, inaugurated by the



Bildungsroman, and carried to its logical conclusion by the institutional novel, of a comprehensive institutional life. Jakob's dutifulness maintains the 'ardent desire' of his forefathers while evading any means of representation, it is not a duty carried out by the sword but in the potential 'to be useful'. Understood in both the context of a Campeian commitment to institutional operationalization as well as Kreienbrock's dilettantish potential, the question becomes whether this dutifulness constitutes a human quality dispossessed by the Institut Benjamenta, or a youthful energy cultivated by the Bildungsroman.

The Internalization of Dutifulness in the Institut Benjamenta:

The Institut Benjamenta which Jakob walks into is a far cry from its earlier state. Perhaps it was once a provincial institution set outside the Berlin city limits, a refuge sought by the local elite at once to provide their children with an adequate education and to maintain a healthy distance from them, lest they suffocate them under their stifling authority. Such speculation is perhaps not so far-fetched and explains Jakob's indignation when he approaches the front steps to find it overtaken by the city's metropolitan expansion and sequestered in its outlying tenements. In any case, the school's fall from stature is left unexplained, leading to Jakob's own speculation when addressing the school's lack of staffing. "Either the teachers are not present, or are still asleep, or appear to have forgotten their occupation" (58). It is not their absence, but their willful absence, resting in rooms secluded from the rest of the school, which Jakob envisions. The school presently offers only a single course taught by Fräulein Benjamenta, itself an hour long and constantly repeated. It is pitiful surrogate for the school's former course catalogue spanning foreign languages, religion, and arithmetic.

The school's failure to compensate for the academic rigor of its former state has irreversible consequences. As Jakob writes, the teachers' return is ruled out; their "liberal" and "spirited" curriculum demands too much of a student body unaccustomed to "such extravagant requirements" (59).<sup>16</sup> Here Jakob must admit he hasn't been speculating, but rather mixing up the school with his earlier Progymnasium experience. "But I'm likely dreaming about my hometown teachers? There was knowledge aplenty in Progymnasium, here there is something much different. We pupils are taught something much different" (59). Jakob's emphasizes that the school's lacks are not evidence of a pedagogical decay as much as a shift in pedagogical practice

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<sup>16</sup> "Hier im Institut existieren keine solche überspannte Voraussetzungen"

away from ‘knowledge’ [“Kenntnisse”]. The pupil of the Institut Benjamenta is ostensibly to be molded into a disciplined servant. The education of the pupil is not their schooling in hard manual labor, rather through Jakob’s portrayals of his fellow students this is a trait which they all possess prior to matriculation, evidence of their harsh upbringings. With exception of Jakob, who descends from the bourgeois into the ranks of the ‘zeroes,’ the pupils come from the lowest social class. In the case of Jakob’s closest confidant, Kraus, his willingness to self-subjugation is first cultivated aboard coal barges under the dominion of his father.

The refinement of the pupil into a “charming, perfectly round zero” (8) is a process of becoming representative of the Institut Benjamenta. The pupil’s identity, constituted through the school, makes them into unfit Progymnasium students. The teachers invoked in Jakob’s daydream are authoritarian figures whose pedagogical approach of intellectual rigor mixed with “corporeal discipline” is for Groves the counterpole to the limp and hollow curriculum of the Institut (Groves 10). Yet it is not so much that the pupils are unprepared for this level of academic rigor, then that they’ve streamlined educational practice to render the role of the teacher irrelevant. To Jakob, the teachers invoked in his daydream are all better off asleep.

Fräulein Benjamenta’s role as the sole teacher at the school exemplifies this irrelevancy. As Jakob notes, “Our adored Fräulein is now no such sergeant, on the contrary she smiles quite often, yes, she allows herself from time to time to simply laugh at us rule-abiding children of men [“Menschenkinder”], but she expects that we patiently and expressionlessly let her laugh” (Walser 1985, 56-7). Fräulein Benjamenta, unlike her counterparts in Jakob’s Progymnasium, does not embody her class’ pedagogical approach, rather she seems to mock the students’ stern abidance to the rules of the Institut. Fräulein Benjamenta’s role is replaced by the pupil himself, who internalizes the rules of the school to become a self-disciplinary subject. “We grasp one

thing after another, and once we've grasped it, it possesses us in a sense... what we've apparently made into our possession rules over us" (63-4). It is this act of self-discipline which Jakob calls 'Bildung,'<sup>17</sup> carried out through an act of "obeying" ["Gehorchen"] which, "in all seriousness... looks most often exactly the same as ordering" (56). The students' self-subjugation means their every act is at once an order and its fulfillment, ostensibly rendering the educational process a tautology. For Groves, this tautology represents the school as the "pure formality of education" (Groves 10). Indeed, as Jakob makes clear, the Institut inculcates a practice of dutifulness without the figure of the master or teacher. Again, this doesn't necessarily suggest the Institut's decay, its neglect of the pupil's educational growth, as much as denies the Institut's pupils the achievements of a servant who nobly submits to the caprices of his master. Through his upbringing, Jakob is well-versed in a 19<sup>th</sup> century form of aristocratic life defined by this dynamic. While defining the school's rule of law, he interrupts himself briefly to recall an emblematic scene of his homelife involving his family's long-standing servant, Fehlmann.

"Fehlmann ließ sich eines Tages ein grobes Verfehlen zuschulden kommen und sollte entlassen werden. „Fehlmann,“ sagte Mama, „Sie können gehen. Wir brauchen Sie nicht mehr.“ Da stürzte der arme Alte, der einen am Krebs gestorbenen Jungen noch vor kurzer Zeit begraben hatte (lustig ist das nicht), meiner Mutter zu Füßen und bat um Gnade, direkt um Gnade. Der arme Teufel, er hatte Tränen in den alten Augen. Mama verzeiht ihm, ich erzähle den Auftritt anderntags meinen Kameraden, den Brüdern Weibel, und die lachen mich fürchterlich aus und verachten mich. Sie entziehen mir ihre Freundschaft, weil es, wie sie meinen, in unserem Haus zu royalistisch zugeht. Das Zu-Füßen-Fallen finden sie verdächtig, und sie gehen hin und verleumden mich und Mama in der abgeschmacktesten Weise. Wie echte Buben, ja, aber auch

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<sup>17</sup> „Kraus kennt wenig, aber er ist nie, nie gedankenlos, er unterwirft sich immer gewissen selbstgestellten Geboten, und das nenne ich Bildung“ (Walser 1985, 80)

wie echte Republikaner, denen das Waltenlassen persönlicher und herrschaftlicher Gnade oder Ungnade ein Greuel und ein Gegenstand des Abscheus ist. Wie kommt mir das jetzt komisch vor! Und doch, wie bezeichnend ist dieser kleine Vorfall für den Lauf der Zeiten. So wie die Buben Weibel, so urteilt heute eine ganze Welt. Ja, so ist es: man duldet nichts Herren- und Damenhaftes mehr. Es gibt keine Herren mehr, die machen können, was sie wollen, und es gibt längst keine Herrinnen mehr... Bin ich verantwortlich für den Geist des Zeitalters? Ich nehme die Zeit, wie sie ist, und behalte mir nur vor, im stillen meine Beobachtungen zu machen. Der gute Fehlmann: ihm, ihm ist noch auf altväterliche Art verziehen worden. Tränen der Treue und Anhänglichkeit, wie schön ist das." (Walser 1985, 70)

"Fehlmann committed a gross mistake one day and was going to be dismissed. "Fehlmann," said Mamma, you can go. We don't need you anymore." At that the poor old man, who had just buried a son of his who had died from cancer (by no means funny), fell to the feet of my mother and begged for mercy, directly for mercy. The poor devil, he had tears in his old eyes. Mamma forgave him, and I recounted the scene the next day to my comrades, the Weibel brothers, and they laughed terribly at me and scorned me. They withdrew their friendship from me because our house functioned too royalistic. They found the falling-to-the-feet suspicious, and they go about and slander me and Mamma in the most tasteless manner. Like real scoundrels, yes, but also like real little Republicans, for whom the letting rule of personal and despotic grace or disgrace is an atrocity and an object of disgust. How that now appears so funny! And yet, how characteristic is this little incident for the way things change. The whole world today prejudices like the brothers Weibel. Yes, so is it: one doesn't condone anything master- or lady-like anymore. Am I responsible for the spirit of the times? I accept the time as it

is and reserve quiet judgement for myself. The good Fehlmann: he, he is nonetheless forgiven in patriarchal manner. Tears of loyalty and dependence, how beautiful that is.”

Far less than representing a regression, the Institut’s practice of self-discipline appears in accordance with the republican ‘spirit of the age’ which has abolished the rule of a class of masters and ladies [“Herren und Damen”]. The Institut, in rearing a class of nuclear, self-subjugating servants, is adopting the practice of democratic self-governance seen elsewhere at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fehlmann’s duty, disparaged by the Weibel brothers as an obsolete form of ‘royalist’ humiliation, expresses itself in his pathetic response to Frau von Gunten, his falling to his knees and begging for forgiveness amidst tears of ‘loyalty’ and ‘dependence’. In contrast to the Institut’s servant, who speaks for himself as his subjugator and his own subject, Fehlmann expresses himself in reaction to the whims of Frau von Gunten. In the shift from a royalist servitude to its present democratic incarnation, the role of the master is incorporated into the servant just as their powers are severely limited. The servant, as his own subjugator, cannot relieve himself from his duties. Rather his orders must retain the appearance of obedience, he cannot achieve the excesses of despotic rule nor servile deference. The Benjaminian servant is therefore more than a standard servant. Kraus, who for Jakob constitutes the ideal servant, cannot be let to work “like an ordinary menial servant or worker” [“wie einen gewöhnlichen Knecht oder Arbeiter”] (32). Rather, Kraus’ embodiment of dutifulness means he “can represent” (32). Yet what representation entails has implications both for the servant himself, his autonomy, as well as for the role of the Institut as a transitional institution or Campeian institution of self-prolongation. Kraus’ servitude constitutes a practice of ‘pedantism’; unlike Fehlmann, he does not go through processes of crime and forgiveness but constant subjection to work. Yet another

servile role emerges in the context of Fräulein Benjamenta's class around the mimicry of dutifulness, where the servant exploits the absence of a despotic master.

### The Mimicry of Dutifulness:

In the 'practical' part of Fräulein Benjamenta's class, the students engage in a "continuous repeated acrobatics or dance" which perform acts of servitude, "the greeting, the entrance in a parlor, the conduct towards women..." (63). Yet to preclude any assumption of the practical application of these repetitive acts of servitude, these acts conclude in a series of comedic plays held occasionally by the pupils, which always "reference the school and the pupils" (113). In them, the hero, a polish graduate of the Institut Benjamenta played by the pupil Schilinski, attempts to win the approval of his lover's mother. "What have you learned then at this Institut 'Bagnamenta'" the mother indignantly retorts to the lovers' pleadings (113). "Apologies: Benjamenta, not Bagnamenta, is the name of the school. What have I learned? Now, I must indeed admit, I have learned very little. But these days knowing very much doesn't make a big difference. That you must admit" (113), to which the mother interjects, "my handsome looking young man, please do me the favor of leaving and never coming back" ["Sie würden mir einen Gefallen erweisen, wenn Sie sich auf Nimmerwiedersehen entfernen wollen"] (113). This performance of the servant's socialization presents the desires of the educated pupil in conformity with bourgeois society while simultaneously excluding the pupil from social integration.

The play can be read as an initiation of the pupils into their subaltern social class, whose service excludes him from the bourgeois promise of marriage. Speaking to this sense of the institution is Jakob's characterization of the pupil Kraus, a model servant, who "should soon step out into life and a position" (33). Kraus's education therefore follows a progressive arc towards his ultimate graduation, confirming the Institut as a transitional educational institution. As Jakob observes, Kraus "has a cumbersome memory, and however he imprints, albeit with great effort,



everything firmly. That which he knows is then so to speak engraved in his head like metal, and he can't forget it again" (62-3). The little which Kraus manages to learn he will never forget, in abidance with one of the principles of the school, "little but thoroughly" (63).

For Jakob however, who memorizes "very easily" (62), this boast comes with the insinuation that unlike Kraus, what his memorization skill has in speed it lacks in fixedness. For Jakob, however, his memorization nonetheless correlates to the very same principle of "little but thorough". "Learn little! Over and over the same! By and by I begin to comprehend what a large world lies hidden behind these words" (63). Insofar as Jakob's memorization skills deny him a future, they align with the school's pedagogical shift away from accretive 'knowledge' and towards a praxis of repetition spelled out in Fräulein Benjamenta's class. Counter to Groves' conceptualization, Jakob's memorization, as a process of forgetting and re-memorizing, is a career of careering which will always keep him employed with an institutional task. The pupils' memorization, be it of rules, acrobatics, or dance, appears to find its realization not beyond the Institut, but within its perpetual restaging. "Kraus," as Jakob notes, "is the worst actor" (113).

### The Irony of the Institution:

It is repetition as the ironizing of education which Campe sees exemplified in the structure of Fräulein Benjamenta's class. This type of education circles around the rhetorical question posed in the title of the school's textbook; "What does Benjamenta's school for boys aim to achieve?"<sup>18</sup>. As Campe writes, "When the single purpose of the school is the rulebook's instruction ["Unterweisung"] of the purpose of the school, then the Institut Benjamenta destroys and secures itself apparently at once" (Campe 2004, 202). It makes the task of learning not a progressive process, but an act of repetition encircling this question of purpose. The institution in Campe's theory is itself an ironic entity, it exists as the answer to these questions of purpose by postponing its answer. At its ironic peak, the pupils' 'acrobatics or dancelike' performance points to a pedagogical emptiness at the core of the institution, its purposelessness, while at the same time affirming the institution and "the continuation of its operation" (202). "The purpose of the school, the law of its foundation and existence, is the rehearsing of the text of its law" (206). At the individual level, Campe expresses this ironic contradiction as a never-ending cycle of alienation. One's attempts to get to the bottom of things, either to reveal a deeper institutional meaning or rescue personal autonomy merely reinscribe "constant *re-entries* of the first traversal of borders," whose meaning "removes itself further with every *re-entry*" (204).

Erica Weitzman, however, visualizes the ironic relationship as another form of repetition, this time emphasized by play and autonomous potential. If irony defines a modern relationship between the individual and the institution, it is not just the irony at the heart of the institution, but an irony at the heart of the modernist perspective, which sees relationships as the bringing together of non-like things (Weitzman 7). Institutions themselves, while at their core designed to

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<sup>18</sup> „Was bezweckt Benjamenta's Knabenschule“

resolve contradictions and provide social life with a sensible structure, nonetheless contributes to a greater ironization of life by bringing together people and things into increasingly complex and increasingly arbitrary relationships. Whereas Hegel's conceptualization of the Bildungsroman theorizes an ultimate overcoming of this irony when the individual is corrected by his institutional context, Campe emphasizes the necessity of an ironic core of the institution. "To mean the opposite of what is spoken [Das Gegenteil des Gesagten meinen]- and in particular to negate the predicated content- takes from itself already a direction towards carrying on and resumption of the very same procedure" (Campe 2004, 200). The institutional novel represents a shift away from the Bildungsroman's attempt to liberate itself from the ironic towards a welcoming of irony and its ambiguity. For Campe, the institution's play with irony is essential in its role as "the location of truth" (208).

For Weitzman, the "coming out into the open of irony" represents a certain liberating artistic shift towards the "comic" (Weitzman 6). The comic potential of irony, its ability to work as a "knowing performance of the contingency of all relations" applies not only to a self-aware institution, but to an individual, be it Walser or Jakob, who smirks at the farce of trying to make sense of a world revealed in its "artificiality, arbitrariness, and plasticity" (62). If Campe and Weitzman both agree on the impossibility for meaning to be achieved in representation, itself requiring a non-ironic epistemological-ontological core, they have different conceptualizations of how the 'performance' of irony works. For Weitzman, the individual's performance of his ironic position, insofar as it constitutes this 'knowing act,' is an act of playfulness. Playfulness plays out in an individual who sees the institution and feels joy in its nonsense. Walser's refusal to resolve the irony of the institution plays out at the level of Jakob himself, who does not despair over the 'puzzle' of his zero-existence, but rather finds it 'charming'. "Reference is thus rejected

in favor of an aesthetic form which is itself purely contingent and ornamental, a matter of self-entertainment; in turn, however, through this very self-entertainment, the contingency of form becomes not just its own object but also its own form of reference” (84). The distinctions here between institutional operation, in the contingency of form, and subjective intention, through the operationalizing of this contingency of form as a form of reference, overlap.

Yet the self-perpetuating logic of irony, its role as both object and form, does not just ensure the continuation of the institution, as a form of self-entertainment it unlocks the institution’s ‘location of truth’ as a space of possibility, “a sandbox, in which castles are built and knocked down with the same gleeful or distracted ease” (67). Playfulness therefore is an outlook to the institution which regards its laws as beneficial to one’s own artistry. While Weitzman clarifies how playfulness serves Walser the writer, less attention is paid to the playful posture which his protagonists, like Jakob adopt. It is not just Jakob’s blissful naivety to the irony of repetitive education, but more so his revelation of the possibility within repetition, the “large world which is hidden behind these words” (63), which will be investigated in the next section.

### From Mimicry to Waiting:

Jakob notes that the school's textbook dictates all facets of life both inside and outside of class through rules "which think of everything" (55). Yet this representation of the school's rules as a disembodied organ of dutiful thought to which the students subjugate themselves is questionable. The textbook does not represent a dense, all-encompassing entity, made apparent by its inability to presuppose all possible action for the institutional individual. Rather, in actualizing itself through the pupils' embodiment of 'dutifulness,' the textbook becomes a text in constant production. While rarely receiving explicit reference in Jakob's diary, the school's rule of law permeates the implicit expectations of the Benjamenta siblings as well as the assumptions of the Jakob and his fellow servants, who cannot differentiate what is prohibited from what is merely not done. The reinterpretation of institutional practice according to a personal sense of dutifulness becomes dogmatic.

The deviation between institutional doctrine and its execution comes in the Institut's unstructured off-hours. Yet unlike in the theories of Groves and Kreienbrock, for whom institutional intervals represent a break from educational norms, these intervals illustrate the total coordination of the Institut's rules dictating free-time and the pupil's posturing of 'doing nothing'.

"Nichtstun und dennoch Haltung beobachten, das fordert Energie, der Schaffende hat es leicht dagegen. Wir Zöglinge sind Meister in dieser Art Anstand. Sonst fangen die Nichtstuer aus Langeweile etwa an, ein wenig zu flegeln, zu strampeln, hochaufzugähnen oder zu seufzen. Das tun wir Eleven nicht. Wir pressen die Lippen fest und sind unbeweglich. Über unsern Köpfen schweben immer die mürrischen Vorschriften." (71)

“To do nothing and nonetheless maintain one’s bearing, that requires energy, the one who works has it comparatively easy. We pupils are masters in this kind of modesty. Otherwise, the do-nothings start something out of boredom, flailing, thrashing, yawning or sighing. We pupils do not do this. We press our lips firmly together and are motionless. Over our heads the grumpy rules are always floating.”

Only in doing nothing while maintaining an immovable and expressionless posture distinguishes the students of the Institut Benjamenta from the ‘do-nothing,’ who attempts to bide this idle time with bored acts of ‘flailing, thrashing, yawning or sighing’. The do-nothing in effect does not in actuality do nothing, but rather acts without a conclusiveness afforded to the ‘one who works’. His idle acts position him somewhere between inactivity and activity. Left without work, the school’s rules not only command the students to abstain from all activity, but furthermore to make inactivity itself a pursuit to be strived for, as well as an achieved state to be arduously maintained. The servant, in abidance with an order to wait dutifully, is more like the productive individual, ‘the one who works’. Yet whereas the productive individual distinguishes himself through the fulfillment of his deed, the servant’s feat is one of the enduring maintaining of a posture. His performance, Jakob argues, is far more energy-intensive than that of the productive individual. His ability to do nothing in the time ostensibly left to his own devices expresses a sort of physical superiority. Without the guidance of an order, the student nonetheless finds a way to perform servile labor in the absence of work. This posture of doing nothing is emblematic of a servant who, absent orders, does not anticipate future ones.

As such the servant exemplifies a type of institutional character unmentioned in Campe’s depiction, one whose terms of employment do not afford him an itinerant waiting, the bored acts of ‘flailing, thrashing, yawning or sighing’ which overcome a figure like K. Whereas K. is

impatient for the court's decision, "certainly, I must depart. I am a clerk at the bank, people are waiting for me" (Kafka 204), the terms of waiting, that is, what is being waited upon, are dictated for Jakob by school policy. The policy to do nothing also applies to the ten minute-period prior to the begin of Fräulein Benjamenta's class, where the pupils arrive and are to wait upon the teacher. "It holds as law, to hearken after her, whether she is coming soon, who at this and this moment will certainly walk in" (Walser 1985, 89).

Waiting, as a formalized practice of dutifulness, appears to exemplify the Campeian irony at the heart of the institution. The pupil will wait in eternal postponement of his ultimate order, his dutifulness will keep in motion institutional operations which deny him his subjective realization. The one who waits represents a resigned institutional subject. Kraus, Jakob notes, "is incapable of any rashness" (124). His sense of "awaiting" ["Abwarten"] which "is written almost majestically on his peaceful brow," is a trait potentially dooming him to institutional purgatory. "Kraus acts as if he expects to remain in the Institut for a decade. He learns his lessons dryly and sullenly..." (124). The figure who waits is ultimately an impatient waiter, the task of waiting being the delaying of his employment. In these off-hours, when the school does not issue any orders, figures like Kraus have the "sullen" task of finding work. Contrary to this description of a waiting in absence of an order is a sense of waiting practiced by Jakob which seeps into moments when the Institut demands the students be active.

Waiting:

“Beinahe jeden frühen Morgen setzt es zwischen mir und Kraus ein geflüstertes Redegefecht ab. Kraus glaubt immer, mich zur Arbeit antreiben zu sollen. Vielleicht irrt er sich auch gar nicht, wenn er annimmt, daß ich nicht gern früh aufstehe. Ja doch, ich stehe schon ganz gern vom Bett auf, aber wiederum finde ich es geradezu köstlich, ein wenig länger liegen zu bleiben, als ich soll. Etwas nicht tun sollen, das ist manchmal so reizend, daß man nicht anders kann, als es doch tun. Deshalb liebe ich ja so von Grund aus jede Art Zwang, weil er einem erlaubt, sich auf Gesetzwidrigkeiten zu freuen. Wenn kein Gebot, kein Soll herrschte in der Welt, ich würde sterben, verhungern, verkrüppeln vor Langerweile. Mich soll man nur antrieben, zwingen, bevormunden. Ist mir durchaus lieb. Zuletzt entscheide doch ich, ich allein. Ich reize das stirnrunzelnde Gesetz immer ein wenig zum Zorn, nachher bin ich bemüht, es zu besänftigen... Wer im Unrecht ist, der ist frech genug, den, der im Recht ist, stets zur Geduld aufzufordern. Das Rechthaben ist hitzig, das Unrechthaben trägt stets eine stolze, frivole Gelassenheit zur Schau. Derjenige, der es leidenschaftlich gut meint (Kraus), unterliegt stets dem (also mir), dem das Gute und Förderliche nicht gar so ausgesprochen am Herzen liegt... Kraus zürnt bei jeder Gelegenheit. Das ist so schön, so humorvoll, so edel. Und wir beide passen so gut zueinander. Dem Empörten muß doch immer der Sünder gegenüberstehen, sonst fehlte ja etwas“

(28)

“Almost every early morning there begins a whispered verbal battle between Kraus and me. Kraus always believes that he must spur me on to work. Perhaps he's not entirely wrong in supposing that I do not like to get up early. I certainly do like getting up early, but I also find it quite delicious to lie in bed a little longer than I should. To be supposed not to do something is so alluring sometimes that one cannot help doing it. Therefore, I love so deeply every kind of



compulsion because it allows me to take joy in what is illicit. If there were no commandments, no duties in the world, I would die, starve, be crippled by boredom. I only have to be spurred on, compelled, regimented. It suits me entirely. Ultimately it is I who decides, only I. I provoke the frowning law to anger a little, afterwards I make the effort to pacify it... A person in the wrong is bold enough always to challenge the patience of a person in the right. Being right is fervid, being wrong always makes a show of proud, frivolous composure. The one who is so passionately well-meaning (Kraus) is always defeated by the one (me) who is not so outspokenly intent on what is good and required... Kraus is angered on each occasion. That is so beautiful, so humorous, so noble. And we both fit so well together. The indignant must always face the sinner, otherwise something is missing.”

In taking longer to get out of bed in the morning, Jakob does not directly resist the Institut's rules. Rather, Jakob expands the parameters of obedience under the school's rule of law. He recognizes the law's force of compulsion as something which offers orientation to one's actions, either in acting in the right (Kraus), or in the wrong (Jakob). Jakob rules out the possibility that he is acting in resistance to institutional doctrine, rather his 'not doing as he should' intends to invoke disciplinary action. Jakob, echoing Gehlen, affirms the role of the institution as sheltering the individual through its regulative capacity, 'If there were no commandments, no duties in the world, I would die...'. Yet if for Gehlen the withdrawal of the institution exposed the individual to an overstimulation of instinctual questions, in Jakob's conceptualization it deprives him of stimulation, the 'joy in what is illicit'. Jakob individualizes the institutional relationship, rather than the school providing him with a social world, it shelters him with amusements. This amusement, induced by the illicit acts and fulfilled in the eventual pacification of those acting on behalf of the law, is framed as a personal decision.

The decision to get up or stay in bed defines a type of waiting practiced by Jakob in distinction to the 'awaiting' practiced by Kraus. This type of waiting exploits the irony of servitude defined by the Institut's concept of waiting. Jakob's lazy waiting and the waiting in absence of an order bear no apparent differences, merely that the former is subject to Jakob's joy in awaiting discipline while the latter is merely subject to a sense of dutifulness. The coordination of personal desire with the operations of the institution will be looked at in the following section.

Waiting, Sadism and Masochism:

While joy in awaiting discipline has the trappings of a masochistic fantasy, Jakob's plan is carried out in a sadistic fashion; it is Jakob's own 'quite delicious' idea to remain in bed longer, and raise the ire of Kraus, which Jakob demonstrably claims as the necessary institutional relationship between 'the indignant and the sinner' (Deleuze 18, 64). Like the sadist described by Deleuze in the works of De Sade, the joy of the illicit is performed through this cycle of laziness and discipline with a kind of mathematical precision. It is the fact this verbal battle will always produce the same results, angering Kraus on each occasion, which strikes Jakob as 'so beautiful, so humorous, so noble'. These undertakings of subjective fantasy, through the process of endless repetition, take on a sort of impersonal, empirical identity (19). It is in this sense that the sadist, like Jakob, "is in need of institutions" (20), whose closed system allows these experiments to be instituted with demonstrable precision. The sadist, by realizing his violent fantasies of domination and torture, reconstitutes the institution as a solipsistic space where personal fantasy and impersonal truth and reason are one and the same, their relationship only further reinforced in repetition.

Jakob's idea realizes the servile fulfillment of duty as the fulfillment of subjective desires. He is as much reliant on the institution as a space of experimentation as on the contractual nature of the institution, between the indignant and the sinner. It is not an idea with demonstrable conclusions, but like Deleuze's masochist constitutes "a state of waiting... in its pure form" (63). Jakob joy in the illicit is as much associated with the pleasure of remaining in bed longer as it is with the act of pacification, the eventual moment when the sinner faces the indignant. The licit and the illicit predicate each other, just as they deprive each other of their source of pleasure. Jakob's act of waiting conditions a mechanics of disavowing the direct

realization of his idea. For Jakob, like the masochist, stimulation lies in waiting as an operation, yet for Jakob there is no educational undertaking; the act of pacification only serves as precedent for a further illicit act.

Like for Deleuze's masochist, Jakob's idea proceeds through a 'dialectical reversal,' wherein Kraus's disciplining of Jakob is effectively of Jakob's own formation. "It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer," (21) writes Deleuze, and for Jakob, it is his intention to avoid a fate devoid of 'commandments' and 'duties' which speaks through the enraged Kraus. With the masochist, his contractual relationship with a disciplining female constitutes their relationship within the law (66). Like with the sadist, the masochist's intention takes on a level of objectivity, mirrored respectively in a contractual law and an instated reason. For Jakob, the achievement of his joy in the illicit occurs through a contractual master-servant relationship, albeit within one where the role of the master is partitioned. While the servant occupies a limited sense of internalized self-mastery, Jakob defines himself as subordinate to Kraus, who voices the law and where it is to be followed, as well as himself as the master of his own decision to submit to orders. In so doing, Jakob has externalized the giving of orders, freeing his dutiful subjectivity from its self-disciplining force. The ultimate distinction between Jakob and the figures of the sadist and the masochist is that, in the case of Jakob, what is realized is not a perversion on exhibition, but a Gehlenian realization of autonomy within the institution, per the rules governing servile duty. The sadistic need of repetition, as well as the masochistic outsourcing of one's own subjugation, which cohere within Jakob's practice of waiting, are themselves adopted from the Institut Benjamenta's own operations.

Jakob's lively spirit finds embodiment within this figuration of one who waits. Jakob's subjective autonomy is the expression of lacking the self-enterprising nature of a servant like

Kraus. His personal decision to lie in bed or get up exploits this lack; it is requisite of another to spur him on.<sup>19</sup> Jakob's division of order-giving affords him the chance to 'wait' on the school's enforcement of the law.

Importantly, waiting does not only take place in the absence of institutional orders when the students are only subject to the apparent performance of dutifulness. Jakob waits throughout the novel on the enforcement of the law, notably later when confronted by Herr Benjamenta about not having completed his curriculum vitae. "Do I actually desire to be castigated by Herr Benjamenta?" Jakob asks himself, only to clarify shortly thereafter, "Now good, I will write the curriculum vitae soon" (Walser 1985, 44). Waiting balances the kinds of creative practices exploiting a hollowed or withdrawn institutional structure with affirmations of institutional doctrine. Together, these practices can be read as an affirmation of the institution on the terms set by the individual. Jakob remains dutiful yet avoids the constant rigors of servitude.

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<sup>19</sup> Ilya Kliger's study of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* describes a similar process; Raskolnikov's crime, as a personal decision, renders his identity 'enigmatic'. "Confronted with the task of making the crime his own, Raskolnikov is unable to do so. He has become a mystery to himself" (Kliger 232). For both Raskolnikov and Jakob, this 'becoming a mystery to oneself' is a form of social decline, for Jakob into the role of the institutionalized pupil, for Raskolnikov into the identity shared by a generation of Russians emancipated from serfdom in 1861 suddenly exposed to a wider range of socio-economic possibilities (229). For Dostoevsky, the correlation of his protagonist with a burgeoning Russian selfhood was bound with a political project of 'self-historicity'; the Russian people would participate in the active development of their identity in departure of "the same universal-historical path traveled by the countries of Western Europe" (234). Raskolnikov's crime bursts the prefabrication of emplotment devices, yet this exceptional act does not confer an exceptional identity on Raskolnikov. For Raskolnikov, exceptionalism consists in emerging from the enigmatic status of the proletarianized Russian. Jakob's enigmatic status as a pupil who waits makes him exceptional in relation to those like Kraus. Jakob's decision to wait is not a transgressive act, rather it adds a space of waiting to the temporal shape of the school. This space of waiting, wherein the individual does not wait upon a culminative act but decides to let the interval without work persist, aligns with Weitzman's notion of the comic, 'knowing' act in recapitulation of institutional operations. Walser's waiting shares with Dostoevsky's description of Raskolnikov a mistrust of existing institutions, yet locating possible spaces within existing institutions, and within the enigmatic identity, for self-realization.

## Epilogue:

### Negative Exceptionalism and Hesitation:

As Anne Fuchs writes, the figure of Jakob does not so much as reject the teleological self-realization of the Bildungsroman, so much as make the practice of defying expectation and typification his own path towards a “negative exceptionalism” (Fuchs 146). For Fuchs, Jakob’s ambiguous power of decision, both in pursuit of the illicit and the licit represent attempts to achieve “a highly elusive notion of selfhood that resists fixation” (149). The Institut Benjamenta serves as the site for this practice of self-realization ungrounded in tradition and genealogy. The school’s theatrical performance of dutifulness unites with Jakob’s acts of self-differentiation. “Jakob’s loquacious diary entries open up a gap between the mask of his demonstrative servility on the one hand and an autonomous self on the other that engages in ludic performances and acts of make-believe that showcase the self’s essentially negative freedom” (152). Waiting, while unmentioned in Fuchs’s argument, defines the temporality of this practice of differentiation, which “rejects both the future oriented notion of growth and the backward-oriented notion of inheritance and lineage” (146).

To break with tradition, Jakob must break from the Oedipal, Freudian and Hegelian relationships of family and hierarchy underlying the servant-master dynamic in the school. For Fuchs, Jakob’s exceptionalism necessitates a self-birth carried out within the school’s inner chambers. This self-birth is oriented around the pursuit of exceptionalism, in repudiation of “all heteronormative emotional attachments in favour of an asocial cold self” (151). Jakob’s self-conscience is not ironized but nihilistic, he conceptualizes himself not in the ironic appropriation of institutional relationships and operations, but in their complete elimination. Fuchs reads the conclusion of *Jakob von Gunten* as Jakob’s rejection of the school in favor of self-realization.

Herr Benjamenta's offer of friendship to Jakob threatens to "jeopardize his self-birth" (153).

Differentiation is a fundamentally progressive practice in Fuchs's conceptualization which can only take the ironic recapitulation of institutional operations so far. "Jakob has exhausted the performance of negative exceptionalism in the institutional setting of the school for servants, the only way forward leads out of Europe" (153).

The act of differentiation as a 'leap' from the institutional context opens a temporality which Joseph Vogl defines as "hesitation" ["Zaudern"]. The contradiction between Jakob and the school which Fuchs highlights is represented by Vogl as a dynamic between the individual and the modern institution, whose system-functional logic "establishes a manner of execution, which over the heads of the individuals combines action with the consequence of action, selects options, orients chains of reaction and so doing installs in general a social machine" (Vogl 57). The individual bears the role of merely executing commands within the system-functional activity of modern institutions. Vogl terms this new individual, distinguished from the "active, uninhibited, >free-trading< or interest-driven," the "*homo cunctans*" or 'hesitating' individual (58). The *homo cunctans* is tasked with adopting a machinic posture, "wearing down, tiring, neurasthenia and exhaustion are seen in association with a stagnation in the machine" (58). The *homo cunctans* exposure to these grinding machines leads to his development of a posture, a "relationship to the world" ["Weltverhalten"] which resists the obligation to insert oneself into the machine, be it the assembly line or the crowd (57-8). The *homo cunctans* manifests in "a patient, who by sound mind stays put before a jacket or a glass of water... a renowned author, who at the final line of his work capitulates and never brings it to print... a notary, to whom despite persistent attempts it becomes an impossibility to raise his hand before a completed text and ratify it with his signature" (58).

Their resistance to institutional involvement rests on their inability to act within the institution. Acting [“handeln”] represents the central operation of the institution, and while not exclusively representing progressive activity, as in the case of the performance of duty in the Institut Benjamenta and the court in *Der Process*, nonetheless rests on its affirmation of the institution as the ‘space of reality’. The hesitator, haunted by ‘doubts and ruminations,’ refuse to accept the contingency of institutional reality against an endlessness of what may be and what might have been. While Fuchs argues the “realization of this dream remains imaginary,” (Fuchs 154), for Vogl hesitation coalesces into a mechanics of perpetual motion. “In difference to related varieties like indecision, lethargy, bafflement, weakness of will or mere inactivity [“Nichtstun”] it lies beyond stabile or labile states of balance, it has far more a meta-stable character and lets counteracting impulses initiate, unleash and at the same time inhibit again and again”<sup>20</sup> (Vogl 23). The temporality of hesitation proposed by Vogl is a present of tireless confrontation.

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<sup>20</sup> “Im Unterschied zu verwandten Spielarten wie Unentschlossenheit, Trägheit, Ratlosigkeit, Willensschwäche oder bloßem Nichtstun liegt es fernab stabiler oder labiler Gleichgewichtszustände, es hat vielmehr einen meta-stabilen Charakter und lässt gegenstrebige Impulse immer von Neuem einander initiieren, entfesseln und hemmen zugleich”



24/7:

While institutions inculcate differentiation and hesitation, these practices ultimately come into conflict with institutional limits; negative and hesitating subjectivities are defined in practice, and thus exhaust, in the case of Fuchs, or undermine, in the case of Vogl, their institutional settings. Jonathan Crary's 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* describes another practice, 24/7 labor, which departs from an institutional housing. 24/7 labor comes as the culmination of the twin developments of capitalism and industrialization, which as Crary notes had always set as their goals the reconstitution of labor as a practice without limits nor pause, disavowing the "rhythmic and periodic textures of human life" (Crary 9) in favor of "the impervious rhythms, efficiency, and dynamism of mechanization" (57). The cult of distraction surrounding menial labor described by Kracauer gives way to what Crary terms "the final capitalist mirage of post-history," defined by, "the sweeping abandonment of the pretense that time is coupled with any long-term undertaking, even to fantasies of "progress" or development" (9).

In subjecting oneself to 24/7 labor, the individual implicitly rejects previously afforded institutional protections, chiefly sleep. Sleep, as an unavoidable state of vulnerability within human life, exposes the ultimate dependency of individuals on institutions for protection (21). While institutions of profit, control, etc., continue to exist, they have abandoned their mandate to protect human life. For institutionally austere practices like 24/7 labor, sleep represents the wasteful privileges which institutions of profit formerly afforded to the individual. Yet amongst institutionally resistive practices like differentiation and hesitation, sleep expresses a certain recidivism to the privileged state of subjectivity within the institution. Per Crary, "Sleep is an irrational and intolerable affirmation that there might be limits to the compatibility of living

beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernization” (13). Modernization, here defined around the pursuit of a self-sufficient subjectivity, comes up against the Gehlenian point of a ‘crucial dependence’ of the individual on others (25).

### Final Thoughts on Waiting:

My interest with waiting attempts to focus questions of autonomy and self-realization on the institutional housings which realize these projects. The tendency of modernization described by Crary is to redefine autonomy and self-sufficiency as achieved within a nuclear individual. These projects are achieved in a sort of post-history, whether it is in the kind of singular capitalist realism portrayed in a 24/7 world, or the exotic space devoid of “the entire European system of signification” (Fuchs 154) into which Jakob appears to enter. Jakob’s self-conscience can be read as ultimately self-referential, for Fuchs avoiding the instantiation of tradition and genealogy, for Groves ambulating away from “institutional props” (Groves 14). Through waiting, however, Jakob appears to test the flexibility of the performance of institutional subjectivity. He will always ultimately fulfill his duties, but the space prior to fulfillment is empty, brimming with creative potential. Waiting proposes a different temporality devoid of progress, isolating the present as a space only ostensibly connected to the traditions and infrastructure which establish it. Waiting is the temporality occupied by those who choose to sustain the school as a Campeian institution of self-perpetuation, just as it is a practice in which the figure tests the limits of being an institutional representative. Waiting according to this manner represents an approach to understanding Walser’s language as a purely ironic gesture towards literary conventions. Per Walter Benjamin’s essay on Walser, “the complete insignificance of content has to be compensated by their “cultivated,” “refined” attention to form” (Benjamin 257). ‘How’ Walser produces these radically autonomous figures must also address the question of the form of the novel, the structural elements which the Institut Benjamenta embodies.

This attention to form is that of the attentive one who waits, aware of balancing the contradictions of subjective autonomy and institutional duty. This attentiveness, as a task of waiting, is what for Jakob defines the Benjamenta pupil. “Are we products of a higher culture, or are we the children of nature... The one thing I know for sure: we wait! That is our worth. Yes, we wait, and we hearken at the same time out into life, out into this space which one calls the world, out into the sea with its storms” (Walser 1985, 93). Waiting is a practice which acknowledges a hopeless future while placing its attention on the present. Another reading of *Jakob von Gunten*’s ending is that, rather than exorcising the institution from this space of present waiting, Jakob manages to draw it out longer and longer as an interval increasingly detached from its institutional housing. Looking out into the desert, Jakob does not necessarily bid the school, and Europe, goodbye, but puts off their return. “It looked as though we would see vanish that which one calls European culture for forever, or at least for a very, very long time” (162).

This project has been largely carried out during the pandemic, when the day-to-day and the prospects of a return to normalcy appeared at their most irreconcilable. Additionally, as a project which has spanned largely the timeline of the pandemic (to be determined), it is a testament to the accord found in waiting between these two temporalities.

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