

# An Existential Crisis: The Significance of the Opening and Concluding Passages of Robert Walser's *Jacob Von Gunten*

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**Abstract** This study examines the opening and concluding passages of Robert Walser's *Jacob Von Gunten* (1909) as they contain the essence of the novel. The novel follows the life of Jakob, a young man of supposed noble background, as he enrolls in the Institute Benjamenta to become a servant. Jakob's lack of history and the failure of modernist ideals in him lead to a state of identity crisis, wherein he questions the possibility of any authentic sense of existence. By drawing on a conjunction of Existentialist and Marxist theories, it is claimed that subordination and domination that Jakob experiences is in effect, the metaphoric critique of bourgeois and modernism. Also these eventually lead the protagonist to an existential feeling of nothingness and alienation.

**Keywords** Subordination; Crisis; the Existential; Walser; *Jacob Von Gunten*

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“To become imperceptible oneself, to have dismantled love in order to become capable of loving. To have dismantled one’s self in order finally to be alone and meet the true double at the other end of the line. A clandestine passenger on a motionless voyage. To become like everybody else; but this, precisely, is a becoming only for one who knows how to be nobody, to no longer be anybody. To paint oneself gray on gray.”

— Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

In “Walser’s Voice,” a foreword to Robert Walser’s *Selected Stories*, Susan Sontag writes, “The moral core of Walser’s art is the refusal of power; of domination” (VII). Walser, primarily in his short stories, writes on nothing but everything. He deals with issues of power, loss, and a chosen form of subjection and autonomy. His novel, *Jakob von Gunten*, highlights a binary of power relation that centers on the lord/servant and the master/slave trope, where Mr. Benjamenta acts as “the dominant lord and master” and Jakob as “the subordinate servant and slave” (Pister 114). Walser’s treatment of this problem is appropriated to intricate yet ordinary and internalized narrative, turning the novel into what Walser’s translator Christopher Middleton in the novel’s foreword calls, “an analytic fictional soliloquy” (5). However, the significance of the opening<sup>1</sup> and concluding<sup>2</sup> passages of *Jacob Von Gunten* is that they contain the essence of the novel. J.M. Coetzee writes in “The Genius of Robert Walser” that Walser’s prose contains “lucid syntactic layout, [...] casual juxtapositions of the elevated with the banal, and [...] eerily convincing logic of paradox” (15). The novel itself is complex in nature as it contains biographical information, unreliable narration, normalized subordination and irresolute choices.

*Jacob Von Gunten* is written as a combination of traditional Swiss prose and the European avant-garde in a period between Spitteler’s *Imago* (1906) and World War I which today is known as Epische Dekade or Epic Decade (Schellinger 1309). Walser picks up the theme of subordination and autonomy in his satire of modernism to portray aporias erected atop inter-discursivity of power, religion, and ideology that issue the boundaries of the modernist society. A power that is a chosen form of subordination by subjects who are seen to be dominated, and it is thus that Walser provides the readers the possibility of resistance by disobedience.

The importance of modernism as a historical context for existentialism has been realized by critics. Henry Berry in *From Revolution to Fads: The Progress of Modernity* asserts that “Existentialism, then, is the first phenomenon of Western culture to deal with the disintegration of the anxieties that were the driving force

of modernism, anxieties that were generated by the anomalies of modernism” (175). Berry claims that the role of society is the primary vehicle for realizing the ambitions of modernism and that existentialism despairs society that has nothing positive or productive to offer (176). The argument here is that Walser chooses forms of subordination and domination as a critique of bourgeois, modernism, and courses that lead him to an existential nothingness and alienation.

Walser succeeds by transmuting his narratives out of the ordinary throughout the text in a modernist fashion and merging it with existential concerns. He combines what Guy Davenport calls the “kithless epistemology” with what Susan Sontag calls “creatureliness of life” forming an uncanny metaphysical and captivating representation of the real world, turning everyday things and shared experiences of history into existential accounts that make him a practitioner of a dialectical materialism analogous to Walter Benjamin (Fragopoulos par. 1). Davenport in calling Walser “kithless” in his epistemology questions him for being without origin, or without epistemological concerns, which leads to this fact that Walser’s concern is more ontological. Also, being kithless in one’s logical discourse could be a question of what Martin Heidegger calls “Befindlichkeit” [state-of-mind] and the ontological question of “Wie befinden Sie sich?” [How are you feeling?] which shapes the assimilation of individual’s knowledge?

Walser’s *Jacob Von Gunten* takes on a mock-bildungsroman form, but unlike the bildungsroman tradition, Jacob’s subjectivity as the protagonist of the story is overtaken by subordination (Tobias 259). Predominantly, Jakob’s subordination comes with the acceptance of Mr. Benjamenta as his master but the fact is that this binary of power arises from Jakob’s participation in the institute to become “sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes” [very small and subordinate] (Walser 7). This participation implies choice, a choice made by an autonomous mind reduced to its basic instinctual criterion of survival in the modern society that is defined by “Gelder verschwenden” [squandering money] (Walser 7). This reification has been used by Walser to portray the structure of social consciousness wherein individuals are left to be identified with objects or things.

Slavoj Žižek in his discussion of ideological fantasy uses the Marxian expression of “they do not know it, but they are doing it” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 28). As for Jakob, he does know why he is doing, but he is doing it because everybody is doing it. Such behavior might be reflective of a false consciousness that lies in false logic of ideological judgments in the “knowing” or in the “doing” of the individuals. Žižek claims the “concept of ideology implies” an abjured form of naivety, inexperience, “misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own

effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it" (24). Jakob is doing it for money, a fetish commodity that is the materialization of a network of social relations. He is living in a society where social relations are between commodities or things. Žižek calls this unconscious illusion "the ideological fantasy" (30). This unconscious fantasy masks the authentic state of things for Jakob and blinds him to the social reality and thus creates an illusion for him.

David Knights and Hugh Willmott in "Dualism and Domination: An Analysis of Marxian, Weberian and Existentialist Perspectives" discuss the problems of reconciling the separation of the individual from society (sociological dualism). In their discussion of three perspectives of domination and dualism, they believe in a neglected existential perspective of domination. In this model social relations are a reflection of "insecurity" that involves "anxiety" stemming from an ideology that is associated with "the identification of self as subject" which encompasses "the subordination of experience to social identity" (37). In the experience of dualism in "social existence," the individual bases his presumptions on the mere experiences and tend to shape his/her consciousness as a "concrete entity" by escaping the socio-temporal and socio-spatial reflections. This reflection involves a "preoccupation with securing a solid sense of self" which is solidified through the opening passage of the novel. Jakob renders the naivety of his experience as a means to "reconstructs his experience to sustain identity that secures the concrete senses he has of himself." This reconstruction happens through isolation of the individual and it is intensified "through the materially instrumental actions of self-interested individuals" (41).

In this regard, believing that he will become nothing with the anxiety of the gaze of the others in the society, Jakob wears uniforms that "erniedrigt und erhebt" [humiliates and exalts] him but brings a sort of social identity by making him a homogeneous human labor, abstracted and defined by what he wears. Jakob seeks to work as a butler because work is the source of money and social identity while he knows that this work will hardly bring him personal fulfillment and progression. Also, there was neither the force of compulsion nor that of violence in Jakob's decision to attend the institute so the whys of attending there remains a mystery for the reader who glances at Jakob saying, "Aber auch in dieser Beziehung bin ich mir vorläufig noch ein Rätsel. Vielleicht steckt ein ganz, ganz gemeiner Mensch in mir. Vielleicht aber besitze ich aristokratische Adern" [I am a mystery to myself for the time being. Perhaps there is a very very commonplace person inside me. But perhaps I have aristocratic blood in my veins] (Walser 8).

The opening passage starts in medias res, and Jakob's past is revealed by bits

of information later in the novel. We find ourselves in an ethical version of the hermeneutic circle and the meaning making process starts in the beginning and by the end to attain the full meaning we have return to the beginning. The existentialist or Jakob judges in-situation and places the readers in-situation. However, where “the prudent person [phronimos] *discovers*,” “the existentialist *decides* the right thing to do,” and if the individual is “authentic” he or she will decide “in full recognition of judgment’s fallibility” (Flynn 154-155; emphasis in the original). Jakob decides to attend Institute Benjamenta, being not aware of his judgment’s fallibility, because he lacks authentic individual’s decision making ability.

In *The Division of Labor*, Emile Durkheim describes the rise of the individuality as “the disappearance of the segmentary type of society” (261). In Durkheim’s view, we can only “liberate ourselves” as autonomous moral actors, “through understanding” (270). The social intelligence restricts Jakob’s knowledge, and he defines “Taschengeld” [pocket money] as the definition of social stature, and not having it reduces him to a state of “Nichtswürdigkeit” [nothingness] (Walser 7).

In the heart of Walser’s text, there is a controlled society, with policies for unifying it, blocking the creation of new ideas, preserving rules and avoiding criticism. The concept of autonomy stresses an individual’s autonomous abilities and the facility to make a decision. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes:

Authenticity and individuality have to be earned: I shall be my own authenticity only if under the influence of the call of conscience (Ruf des Gewissens) I launch out toward death with a resolute-decision (Entschlossenheit) as toward my own most peculiar possibility. At this moment I reveal myself to myself in authenticity, and I raise others along with myself toward the authentic. (332)

Authentic existence in Walser is full of despair, ungratefulness, transmogrified, autonomous but lacks choice, dispassionate toward the others and is filled with unethical ethics. Heidegger believes when being of “Dasein” [being there] becomes primordial then it must answer basic ontological questions and “light existentially the Being of Dasein in its possibilities of authenticity and totality” (234). Thus, an entity’s “state of Being” must be traced back to the existential backgrounds and constructions. This “ontological analysis of conscience” is before any justification and categorizing of “Experiences of conscience.” However, it is closer to “a theological exegesis of conscience” for creating an “immediate consciousness of God” (269).

In the modern condition, in Heideggerian terms, as the realization of authentic existence, the desire to eternal life with God or “authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole” has been switched to “*Sein zum Tode*” [being-towards-death] (277). It could be stated that in such condition of being, “only a god can save us” as Heidegger declares in his interview with *Der Spiegel*. In the concluding passage of the novel, Jakob says, “Gott wird mit mir sein. Was brauche ich da an ihn zu denken? Gott geht mit den Gedankenlosen” [God will be with me. What should I need to think of Him? God goes with thoughtless people] (Walser 175). The existence of Jakob’s self, in spite of accompanying a divine being, lacks significance and authentic existence because he still desires to thoughtlessly wander about with God, an entity he endeavors to touch but fails as he becomes an anomaly.

In the opening passage we also see that Jakob believes he can achieve nothing with what he calls “*Innere Erfolge*” [Inward successes] (Walser 7). Seeking “outward successes,” rather than “inward successes,” makes Jakob reject his own inner desires and lead to state of subjection, a collective state of self-estrangement, domination, nothingness, and seclusion and alienates from what he truly is. It is thus that in the beginning, the reader faces a state of crisis that the narrator is unaware of and although he knows this fact he turns a blind eye. Yet, in the concluding passage we see Jakob coming into terms with his religious alienation. In all its various forms, religious alienation is what “man creates [as] a force outside himself that he does not recognize as his own, to which he is submitted” (Vandenberghe 48). Karl Marx in his *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* writes:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo. [...] It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. (131-132)

The interesting fact about Jakob is that his religious estrangement is the result of money in face of God. Marx in “On the Jewish Question” believes, “Money debases

all the gods of mankind and turns them into commodities. [...] Money is the universal self-constituted value of all things. [...] Money is the estranged essence of man's work and existence" (67). There is a skeptical view of money and it is considered as the cause of the anomalies of a society and it is taken as God himself. The concluding passage disintegrates this view but not in a positive sense.

Mr. Benjamenta, on the other hand, is taken over by Jakob and sets off to wander with him thoughtlessly in the desert. Jakob as a commodified object turns to Mr. Benjamenta as an autonomized product to overpower him, that is, an object dominating the subject. This incident shatters the hierarchy of society that in the novel stems from the manifesto of Institute Benjamenta, "[...] d. h., wir werden alle etwas sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes im späteren Leben sein" or [that is to say, we [the students] shall all be something very small and subordinate later in life] (Walser 7). One can conclude that Jakob had the freedom and autonomy, regardless of the society, to attend Institute Benjamenta. However, one is responsible for one's values, regardless of society's values and by taking that Jakob is suffering from existential crisis; and individuals suffering from existential crisis cannot "take responsibility of their existence" (Nelson-Jones 113). Individuals are in need of a leader and in the concluding passage of the novel, the non-violent death of Fraulein Benjamenta and the transition of power, leads to the liberation of the subordinates who now do not have a leader to dominate them. Jakob needs a master and when Fraulein dies, his true master, he suffices to a new master which is God himself.

The supposed autonomous and authorizing individual is a "Null" [Zero], as Jakob calls it, a herd animal ready for becoming small and dominated by obeying the principles of the institute. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard considers "dialectical determinations of anxiety" in the face of nothing and asserts that ignorance, for instance, is about nothing and "innocence is ignorance" (41-44). Jakob's ignorance for coming to the institute Benjamenta can be justified by saying that he is nothing thus innocent and ignorant. Kierkegaard believes that this nothingness brings anxiety and continues his argument:

[...] God said to Adam, "Only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat," it follows as a matter of course that Adam really has not understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit? When it is assumed that the prohibition awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge instead of ignorance, and in that case Adam must have had a knowledge of freedom, because the desire was to use it. (44)



The state of being that Jakob faces in the institute awakens Jakob's eye to say farewell to the institute, and leave it "sein, aufrichtig Gutes wollen und tun und nachts schlafen und träumen läßt" [willing good things and doing them, and sleeping and dreaming at night] (Walser 175). It is significant because it shows the transition of Jakob from one state to another in the face of nothingness and redeems the anxiety of death in the face of it. Heidegger characterizes existentially authentic Being-towards-death as anxiety that is "an impassioned freedom towards death – *a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the 'they,' and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious*" (Being and Time 311; emphasis in original).

Walser deconstructs the rigid binaries of repressive and hegemonizing Institute Benjamenta with its repressed and hegemonized butlers as his protagonist identifies his authentic existence within the chains and definitions of the society. In a modernist society, "historicism" mean chains and subordination and "its opposite is presentism" (Tymieniecka 326). However, the modernism brings its own chains and subordinates its subjects. In a presentist state, the author and the character either handle the death "of the past without emotion, or they deplore the loss as an amputation of the narrative and the self" (Hoffmann 295). Hoffmann claims that a presentist believes that everything is present and the obscurity of the past and the inability of the self to make it significant might "lead to the loss of personal and collective history; the flow of time is reduced to the present" (295). Walser's protagonist Jakob submits and later refutes, to an extent, with the purpose of the institute by accepting Institute Benjamenta as propagators of uniformity and subordination. It's through presentism that Jakob deconstructs the binaries and by the end of the novel the institute is taken down by the deconstruction of tradition which comes along, again, by the death of Fraulein Benjamenta but this presentism comes at one price, to exist no more. Concerning this, Heidegger writes:

If Being is to be conceived in terms of time, and if, indeed, its various modes and derivatives are to become intelligible in their respective modifications and derivations by taking time into consideration, then Being itself (and not merely entities, let us say, as entities "in time") is thus made visible in its 'temporal' character. [...] Thus the way in which Being and its modes and characteristics have their meaning determined primordially in terms of time, is what we shall call its "Temporal" determinateness. Thus the fundamental ontological task of Interpreting Being as such includes working out the Temporality of Being. In the exposition of the problematic of Temporality the question of the meaning of Being will first be concretely answered (Being and Time 40).



History in a traditional sense is the exploration of the past from the perspective of the present, but Heidegger's history is "[...] primordially and always the future, that which[...] comes toward us [...] The future is the beginning of all happening" (Basic Questions of Philosophy 35-36). It can be concluded that to be authentic and to exist the individuals need to be historical or toward history, and this signifies that individual identity has a time-based constitution that is narrated in terms of events, originating from the history. Opening the story in medias res gives Jakob a chance to find out his past later in the text as the reader is warned by Jakob, "Aber weg jetzt mit der Feder" [I'll throw away my pen] so he will exist no more (Walser 175). By this warning, the reader understands that Jakob is the author, or simply Walser is reflected, camouflaged in Jakob, giving the novel a meta-fictional touch. However, the significance of the sentence remains in that Jakob (Walser) questions his existence, as the novel loosely follows Walser's own life.

Jakob's knowledge is dependent on others, and he is to silence what he wants by wearing "uniforms," obeying and accepting what others say as true. His lack of autonomy and the need to achieve freedom and authenticity, on one hand; and on the other, being incapable of loving, lacking the feeling of belonging or accepting the truth plunges him into a state of crisis. This state of crisis is associated with the need to maintain a sense of self when his being and entire universe is unjustified, ephemeral, and interconnected.

Taken together, *Jakob Von Gunten* can be considered as Walser's masterpiece. Walser's opening and concluding passages give a microcosmic picture of the course of the novel and Jakob's transformations in his state of crisis. It succinctly reflects Jakob's journey from subordination to a state of conceited autonomy and freedom, one that he fails to attain in the novel's end but the one which he has attained as a writer. Walser ironically questions the nature of existence. Jakob will not be the same person for the stigma carved up in his unconscious resulting in psychosis, caused by the state of crisis in this period when the modernist dreams brought about a mode of existence that led to nothingness without history. He puts on stage an exaggerated and fantastical representation of subjectively disoriented individual as a manifestation of modern establishment and the condition of the individual within it. Walser utilizes the alienating effect of existentialism to disorient the readers and challenge what would be passed as unnoticeable.

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