

THE DEHUMANIZING SOCIAL COLLECTIVE

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IN

MARTIN WALSER'S SHORT STORIES

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (1998)  
(German)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The dehumanizing social collective in Martin Walser.

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SUPERVISOR: Professor Hans Schulte

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 90

## ABSTRACT

The following thesis pertains to five short stories written by the German author, Martin Walser. I have translated these works into English. The first four short stories, “Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus”, “Ich suchte eine Frau”, “Der Umzug”, and “Die letzte Matinee”, are part of a collection originally entitled Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus which was published in 1955. Although I had previously translated “Der Umzug” for a graduate course, I have made considerable changes and improvements in this newly revised translation and therefore have decided to include it too with these other stories. The last story, “Bolzer, ein Familienleben”, was part of a second collection put into print nine years later under the title Lügendgeschichten.

Finally, I have critically analysed these five short stories in an essay, by explaining Walser’s main concern of the depersonalized social collective and by examining Walser’s style and how he emphatically expresses through language the grotesqueness of the anitsocial attitude of the collective.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank Professor Gerhart Teuscher, who initially sparked my interest in the literary works of Martin Walser.

To my supervisor, Professor Hans Schulte, I would like to express my gratitude for all the help and guidance he has given me throughout this thesis.

Finally, to my family and friends, I sincerely extend a very special thank you for your patience, encouragement, and love. You were my support team.

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## AN AIRPLANE ABOVE THE HOUSE

I do not remember her first name anymore. The family name was Bergman, I think. I had been to celebrate their daughter's birthday. We found everything ready in the garden. The birthday girl ran back and forth, pushed each and everyone on a chair as if then she did not need to fear any action from them. Then, already somewhat exhausted, she finally took her place at the head of the table. Still her mother sat by her side.

Although everything took place under the tall, old trees, it was hot. Wherever the sun found a way through all the garden foliage and trees, it burned white-hot spots. The broadly stretched and comfortable villa did in fact protect the garden from the street, but the insects made more noise than the streetcar. And yet they were not as bad as the airplanes under which our city has been suffering for some years, under whose howling our dishes in the cupboard rattle day and night, under whose racing shadows our homes moan. In this green garden hollow we heard none of this; we enjoyed the humming chorus coming from the clouds of insects that danced up and down.

The lady of the house was still sitting by her daughter. After she had finished her cup from which she wanted to drink with the birthday group, she stood up and said goodbye. Up until this moment a word or two had been whispered every now and then over the rims of the cups; now even the faintest

whispering died. Everyone's eyes followed her as she walked towards the house, went up the steps on the terrace, turned around, waved to all once again just as at a departure, but especially tenderly to her daughter, the seventeen year old. Yes, she seemed sad, and everyone saw how she suddenly suspended her hand in the air like a faded leaf and also how she then hastily turned away and disappeared into the house: deep inside a room. We looked at each other. The girls' eyes grew large, their breath shorter; still they lifted their shoulders helplessly, then a big raucous noise broke out around the table. It was the girls who started it up, beginning with the birthday girl. They laughed, shook with a kind of cheerfulness that I did not understand and which might have been taken as an attack.

Wide opened mouths wherever one looked, wide rows of teeth, faces distorted by laughter, and flying through the air mainly unclothed arms whose hands flapped freely. The girls were in the majority. We sat, flooded by their movements and clothing, as truly isolated young men. We were stiff and frozen in all the female turbulence. At times we tried to throw one another a look or even a word through their hands, upper bodies, and hair sweeping down over us, but it was not successful. The girls turned into a stream, we swam along, lost pieces of wood, without purpose condemned to failure and abandonment, and silently too. What they were shouting over our heads we did not understand. At first, we still tried to listen, even intervene, but in vain. Moreover we did not know each other. Each one of us had been brought by one of these girls, had

quickly had a formal introduction; then everyone found a seat so far away from the next man that it was impossible to enter into conversation and to get a bit acquainted. While the lady of the house still ruled the table we might have thought we were well received for the duration of the birthday party and somewhat important guests. That had changed abruptly and this cannot really be said in any other way. If the girl friends had suddenly seized us, shackled us, dragged us to the house wall, and executed us with daggers or cleavers, I would not have been particularly surprised. My only comfort was the fact that they were all talking and yelling without anyone listening to anyone else. They certainly could not have come to any understanding in anything nor could they agree on any outstanding questions that might still be in dispute. But perhaps our execution was not a disputed question for them any longer. Perhaps we had been invited just for this reason. I tried to ask Pia, my cousin, who had brought me here, but she shook me off without giving me even a fleeting glance. Perhaps they maintained the practice amongst themselves to sacrifice a handful of young men for each of their birthdays. My companions as well, I ascertained, had meanwhile lost any trace of cheerfulness on their faces.

Along their hairline, pearls of sweat appeared on the skin and sparkled, it appeared as though they had been decorated for a frighteningly festive occasion. Should we yell for the lady of the house? Oh, this delicate birthday child! And I had believed she had been exhausted right from the start from the festivity! Now her flexible body swung at the head of the table through the air like a throng of a

whip in a trainer's hand, and piercing screams escaped her mouth, previously hardly visible, which passed like rockets over the long row of girlfriends and us, the scattered few. They laughed even more piercingly and we winced. Looking for help, I turned my head towards the house and was startled-- doors and windows were all closed now, the iron awnings had been dropped; it was a villa, so it appeared, whose owner had either passed away or gone on a world trip.

Only in the attic from a dormer did a man wave. An old man, he must have been practically a hundred years old. I waved backed. He spotted me and it was not 15 minutes later when he came around the corner of the house, walked directly to me and what did he do, he extricated me and then my fellow sufferers from the female thicket! One after another he fetched them ashore with great calm and control; he sat us side by side on the steps leading to the terrace. Thankfully we looked up to him, and if he had said at this time with the appropriate hand gesture, "Sit, now sit!", we would have cuddled by his feet like dogs saved from death.

But he surprised us in quite another way, saying that we really ought to have had pity on the girls! He said, just as the angler watches a fish that, on its deadly hook, thrashes about more and more but cannot escape any longer, so had we just sat around the table and watched the girls' fear and let them feel that this friendly, green garden cave would become their destiny before the end of this afternoon.

We ought to have pity, especially for Birga--(yes, that was what she was called, now I remember the name of the birthday child again). He said that he was Birga's great uncle and observed her growing up with concern. Unfortunately,

her parents did not have the necessary time which would be needed to protect Birga from the dangers that threaten a girl today. He alone had the time but no longer any strength. He was on the verge of crying when he said this.

And now this tender creature drifts into years, so he said, and what do the years mean for such a vulnerable girl like Birga? Predator's jaws they are, nothing else, and every month is a tooth, each one larger than the last! And he asked us to provide Birga with our protection. "I know", he exclaimed, "that you are the wolves hanging around by the garden doors to jump on her as she steps out onto the street! I know how foolish it is to ask for your help! And yet I do it. She can only be saved if even the most foolish and senseless attempt has been made. It is terrible to have to watch from the attic window and see how she falls into your hands, you young scoundrels!" We listened and breathed more rapidly. He yelled, "There, look at the parents! They have closed the doors and windows, let the iron awning down so that they do not have to see and listen. They have abandoned Birga to you and they no longer believe in a rescue. I ran down because someone waved; I stormed outside through the laundry room because I believe in the impossible: leave Birga alone!"

I noticed how my companions slowly got up from the steps and bared their teeth. The sun which broke through the foliage in the garden here and there patterned us black and white, black and white, black and white. We looked towards the girls who had all of a sudden stopped screaming and who squeezed around the table and stared in our direction now with colourless faces and red

rimmed eyes.

“Aha!”, one of us said.

The great uncle spread out his arms, stepped in front of us, and shouted that he sometimes dreams of Birga being eaten by fishes. “How unpleasant!”, one of us said and pushed the great uncle away. There upon Birga dashed from the table, screaming at her great uncle who looked at her shaking like a beaten animal. “Why did you not stay upstairs? We would have done it. You abandoned us to them. We would have done it. You abandoned us to them!” But we were still standing, breathing deeply and loudly as we looked at the girls; nobody lifted even a foot and the girls also did not stir anymore. Now everyone noticed just how hot this afternoon was. The tree tops hung lower and all the foliage was limp and aglow, making the heat humid, but not preventing it. It was so still that we could hear the branches groan. Probably we remained standing forever there or we would have slowly gone home later-- God knows what we did-- in any case everything would have stayed undecided if a bolt of thunder had not crashed in suddenly from over the house and quite closely over the chimneys and trees, a roaring blast hitting hard like a giant of steel. An airplane, which shot closely over us, detached us from the steps tearing us along in its furious shadow, so that we swept the great uncle away and rushed to the table; no sound even now from the girls’ gaping mouths, only their eyes wider than ever before, and before the engine’s racket, before the airplane’s shadow had disappeared, we controlled the garden, the house, and the girls. But we had gained such control



over everything that we did not even take revenge. Yet still, from the dormer the great uncle wept above us into the future.

## I WAS LOOKING FOR A WOMAN

Hesitating with each step as if I had to grope for a bit of support like a young and still unpractised tight rope walker, with my hands limp at my side and with baited breath, thus I entered the room and allowed myself to drift in the current of the other visitors towards the row of seats; this is how one enters a church of another religion. Each visitor in the room was an initiate in my opinion, and I felt myself observed, even under suspicion by everyone because I was novice in this club or was it a sect, a political party or even worse! Now I almost regretted already venturing inside.

But how else could I try to find again the lady who had walked in front of me outside on the sidewalk. My eyes got ensnared on her nape in exactly the spot where her hair rose from the small hollow between the tendons to a style that I cannot describe, because I had not been able to remove my eyes from her hairline. This nape in front of me had turned to the left all of a sudden.

I had actually first noticed it when an usher at the hall door through which she had disappeared asked me to leave my coat. I had obeyed without saying a word, so that I could get behind my lady again as quickly as possible. By this time I think her face would have interested me. But as I had entered the hall I did not see her anymore. I hoped to find her again when all the guests had taken their seats.

That took a long time.

It was as if nobody wanted to sit down first. All shuffled amongst themselves, shook hands wherever they were offered and many seemed to be on friendly terms or at least so well acquainted that they could risk patting each other on the shoulders. Naturally I did not have the least desire to sit down first; so I shuffled with no less enthusiasm, though much more anxiousness than the others through the rows of seats and the side aisles, since I still hoped after all to find the lady for whose sake I had ventured inside. If I saw a woman somewhere, I quickly manoeuvred myself behind her back, testing her nape, her hairline, and was always disappointed, since they were always different necks and quite unfamiliar hairlines. There I saw round column necks which had lost that tender hollow long ago, or perhaps they never had one! Even worse were the scrawny spindle necks whose tendons formed razor sharp ridges over which hard hairs were rustling audibly. The neck and the nape that had drawn me here were nowhere. And now the bell rang. The shuffling all around became more hurried, the handshaking died down, the little groups dissolved, and everyone looked for a group of seats in which to sit down carefully with repetitive bowing to the left and right.

Once again I looked over everyone, exerted my eyes until they burned, then I let myself fall on the first best seat, planning to look around a bit during the event--of whose course I had no knowledge yet. But above all I wanted to use the break--if there were one-- to resume my search. Caught in the movement

flooding all the rows of seats, I too turned my head to the front half of the hall and saw that there was a stage and a curtain which now moved, parted, and released a gentleman.

He stepped up to a lectern on the stage's edge-- there the proceedings no longer interested me, I swayed away, concentrating my eyes again on the rows of seats.

I heard talking. Probably it was the gentleman who had just approached the lectern. I was looking for the woman. The gentleman talked on. But I let my eyes slowly glide over the hall like search lights, while hardly moving my head in order not to reveal to those around me how little the speaker disturbed me.

Whenever I thought someone had noticed that I was not listening, I became completely frozen for a few seconds, out of fear I would be publicly reprimanded. Then I made up my mind not to search anymore, to wait for the break, but all of a sudden I was afraid that perhaps there was not a break at all and therefore I had no choice but to search--and I searched. I do not know how long the speaker spoke, I do not know how many speakers followed.

Sometimes applause broke out. I was very grateful for that. For me it was an opportunity after all to look more quickly around and to search more intensively. I clapped along, more than all the others, and looked passionately all around pretending to look for an acquaintance to whom I wanted to give a nod, to communicate to him in a way how lucky we could call ourselves to listen to such speeches. Although the applause often lasted a long time and I even jumped up

sometimes to look boldly around the hall as if to challenge all to even greater applause, I did not succeed in discovering that lady. But I was now irrefutably tied to this neck, and whoever has experienced anything similar knows that by the end of the meeting I could not dismiss myself with cheap comfort: perhaps I best leave it to chance to bring me near this lady again. And if chance will not have it, I thought then...no, no, I cannot make it so easy for myself! I asked an usher when the next meeting would take place. He told me that if I were interested in a closer connection I should give my address to him and he would make sure that I would be invited to all the functions.

I gave him my address and a tip which far exceeded my means so that my circumstances could transcend. I was so happy! I was clearly dealing with a real club whose functions were almost always attended by its members only. Probably she was a member. Then I would succeed in finding her again. I rejoiced when I received my first invitation a few days later and--who can describe my joy--a form which I only had to fill out to become a member of this club. Reading through the statutes was impossible for me because the thought of being a member of a club to which she belonged excited me too much. Then when I left the second meeting without having seen her, I was a bit downcast indeed, but I told myself immediately that I actually had no reason to be. How could I have hoped that fate would sit me exactly on that chair from which I could discover her nape! I had to pursue my search systematically. That was made even more possible since the club guaranteed an extensive programme for years to

come. First of all I ascertained the number of women from the list of members. To all the female members I had to have myself introduced. That seemed to become a lengthy work requiring great dexterity, since murmuring shyly my name to the respective ladies would not suffice; it also was not enough to stare at her face for as long as it was decent and possible. Scarcely had I seen her face I had to manoeuvre myself behind her to test her back, her hairline, and the little nape. Up until then I had been a man of few words. But this task, to stare at so many women's napes in public, to compare this sight carefully and thoroughly with the image that I preserved in my memory; this task which I had to unravel every night under the observance of manners and decency turned me from a man of few words to a smooth word-finder.

But although I had been busy in this way with my own plans in all those numerous meetings, it certainly could not be avoided that those speeches which were constantly made, entered my ears on the side, so to speak, and were deposited in my subconscious and spread out. Without ever fully understanding the aims of the club, I had after only a few years a whole mound of details in my head; they were shreds from the many speeches, probably always the loudest parts, but I could, whenever I was asked, answer with such scraps which I could fetch word for word from my subconscious just like a good and interested member. And by no means can it be avoided that I appear a somewhat intelligent human being who establishes connections quite involuntarily between such unintentionally collected fragments. I can make the claim about myself that I

never established such connections deliberately, for I was too busy searching for that lady.

Now this search, however, in time certainly became an activity that unfolded all by itself. Without having to urge myself, I had myself introduced every evening to the female members--resources seemed inexhaustible-- and without really knowing what I was doing, I manoeuvred myself at once towards the backs of the respective ladies. I gradually did not feel the disappointment of once again not finding the desired hairline in the course of time. All that was still important for me was to be able to cross out this lady as well on my list of female members, after I tested her. Perhaps this and that member noticed that I was so insistent on being introduced to all the ladies, perhaps they smiled at my obsession to stare at the ladies closely from behind, but they let me be, that was enough for me, that filled me with genuine gratitude for this club. And if I should be approached sometime to give a talk or a paper, I will obey this wish, although I am really not interested.

To leave the organization just because the number of ladies to be examined had diminished considerably in the course of time, that I could not bring myself to do. I slowed down my work speed, using only every fifth and later every tenth meeting for my investigations. Surviving the meetings without pursuing my own plans filled me with great astonishment. Later I even decided not to examine all the ladies and to phase out my enquiries completely. Perhaps the desired lady had left, perhaps she had changed her hairdo or even her hair

colour, perhaps this neck had become fat, oh well, the speeches of countless club evenings had covered up everything, levelling it with the drifting sand of their imperceptible words. And today I have come so far that an effort is needed whenever I want to remember how I once used the club nights for my own personal purposes. Whenever I think about it I am ashamed and a guilty conscious reddens my temples.

I am comforted by the thought that my transgressions belong to a well protected past. Sometimes, it is true, I still catch myself; fiddling around with a shoulder of a lady to whom I was introduced while my lips formulate a somewhat tactful excuse to justify socially the attraction which pulls me to the back of my conversation partner. But I always pull myself back just in time, murmuring an apology, playing the role of a distracted person for a moment but I then collect myself quickly to bright attentiveness and face my opponent completely and broadly. These attacks do not disturb me further. Gradually they fade away and even when they appear they are easy to overcome, they are in a way aimless, and only a subsequent intellectual work reveals them to me as remnants from my earlier years. But what comforts me the most about my earlier years is the benefit I believe to have provided the club, owing to my experiences. For at one occasion a vote was to be taken as to whether to allow non-members to be admitted to the meetings, or not. Many pleaded for rigorous security at the entrance to prevent strangers from enjoying a meeting. I spoke out against this view. I gave at this time the only speech of my career with the club. Our doors



must stay open, so I said, no matter who mistakenly enters in here and with whatever motive! Our organization must be strong enough, I said, to take in such strangers! I also talked about “our club’s mighty womb” and there was much approval. My speech had the effect that our doors remained open and will remain open. I believe I can be proud of that; because how else should we ever come by new members!

## THE MOVE

We had been married for a long time and a child came out of it--a daughter by the way--when Gerda, my wife, said that she grew to resent my father because he had not allowed me to learn anything except how to repair bicycles. Now I am a happy human being and I use my lips mainly to whistle to myself. But when I heard her speak like that, my lips would form a totally unwanted bend all by themselves, which let out a whistling noise I had never heard before. I remembered how in the movies, which I saw on Saturdays, striking grenades were accompanied by such whistling sounds. But since I can only endure these matters as a spectator, sitting on well-upholstered seats, which must be at least in the tenth row or even further back, I turned away and tried to forget what I had to hear from my wife's mouth.

But I did not forget, could not forget, because the very next day Gerda said, "I am so embarrassed in front of other people." Her eyes looked at me as if through well-trimmed, hardly used buttonholes.

But now I must lay out on the table with all due care how things developed, if I want to understand. And this is what I want, because in the meantime the burden of guilt was put on my shoulder, which I cannot bear.

I got to know my wife in the movie theatre. Yes, that is how it happened. On Saturdays. 14th row. On the movie screen flew a broad-shouldered man

with a pith-helmet, flying along in a tiny aircraft deeply over the primeval forest, and in the end succeeding in rescuing the white woman from the dark savage's sinewy arms who was about to drag her into his reed hut. When the man with the aircraft and the broad shoulders clasped the woman against himself, while the savage rattled in his blood seeping through the bullet wound and vainly turned the little white part of his eyes towards the hygienic European couple, lost in each other--there I took a breath of relief and sighed, and by chance looked to my right where a girl was sitting who at this moment sighed in the same manner and glanced to her left to where I was sitting.

On Saturdays I always wore my best suit. My slim neck would stick out of it and my shining tie stood out in front comfortably and attractively on my chest. So we got mixed up with each other. Got married even. "Can we manage on 65DM a week?", I had asked her overly cautious, because I saw how tiny her hands were. She had openly forbidden such questions and was insulted when I ventured these kinds of considerations. I worked overtime in the shop and in the evening began to work on inventions which mankind should not have to wait for any longer. To be exact, it was Gerda's wish that I should stoop over the paper covered ironing board every evening to design new things. For her sake I covered the beautiful paper with all sorts of lines, but soon retreated to metal, wire, and other similarly familiar materials. There I would bend, flex, and thread the abstruse objects together until Gerda, who observed me closely, smiled contentedly and swore that she would write all this to her parents in order to prove

to them once and for all that their daughter had entered into the embrace of a man who was certainly worthy of her. I paid all too little attention to such phrases at that time. Only today do they echo significantly inside me.

Unfortunately my inventions were not sufficiently appreciated by the discerning environment. I had constructed a bike bell coupled to the backpedal brake. It was rejected because overly clever specialists pretended to know that it would be too late to ring when the brake had already been applied. The ringing should render the braking unnecessary, so these gentlemen opined, since that would be its only justification in the ever increasing traffic. Fine then. I did not want to fight. Hoped for posterity, allowed my lips to whistle as much as they wanted and managed, urged on by Gerda, to get four of my inventions under patent rights in the course of time. Their protection seemed almost a little unnecessary in view of the calibre of my inventions.

Gerda now wanted to fasten a sign on our house door which should have the foreign word "Ingenieur" under my name. This I did not allow. When my inventions are successful, I said, then all right.

So we continued to live off the income of my work at the workshop and were also content: I more, Gerda less. But then Gerda's uncle passed on, who as a bachelor had numbered his days in the most aristocratic quarter of our city. Whether he had accomplished anything more in his life has not come to my attention. And Gerda, who had visited him occasionally, now inherited his place. That was an upswing. Assuring them of my sincerest pity, I left the

inhabitants of our really dingy street behind. Gerda did not find the time to say goodbye to our previous neighbours.

Not once did our meagre furniture bump into anything as we moved into the deceased uncle's halls. Then, when we had evenly distributed our pieces in the six chambers and took our first tour, these insidious chambers had gobbled up all of our furniture. We still found a chair here and there, but only when we went up close to it and groped for it. But we were certainly very proud of this big dwelling which did not cost us anything because our great uncle had acquired it as his property. Now we had our breakfast every morning on the spacious balcony and waved across, up, and down to the other balconies which were glued to the large silent houses. We were cheerful and wanted to keep good neighbours. But all around sat human beings who did not move. As much as I tried I never saw a hand move, a single head lift or even a single mouth open. In the morning our new neighbours pushed themselves out of their rooms onto their balconies. But so slow were their movements, if there were any--so slow, that they were hardly noticeable. So what, I thought, it is the same as with the moon. These people were many hundreds of years older than the agile, always handshaking, and galavanting people who had lived on our old street. These ones here must probably be afraid of falling together into a small pile of whitish flour if they deprived themselves in an all too sudden impulse of whatever little strength they had. At breakfast they sat upright and serious. From every mouth a colourless tube ran into a bowl. I suspected that the expensive food was pumped inside

them by such tubing. After breakfast they were sucked inside their houses together with their chairs by the push of some button. A few minutes later large cars rolled silently out of the gardens; inside, sitting behind the stiff chauffeurs, leaning way back, and again motionless, sat the silvery men who in the meanwhile had vertical hats placed on their heads. Later the wives of these gentlemen rolled away with smaller cars, just as quietly. Only then did a small noise reach the street. The rattling of thin dishes and buzzing motors from practical appliances.

Whenever I pushed my bike outside just at the moment one of those mighty cars passed by, I felt a breath of infinite coldness, causing me dreadful goose-bumps, even on the high summer days, and suddenly freezing all the whistling of my lips. But only for a second, then I recovered and whistled so that the motionless street rattled anxiously.

Throughout this whole time I did not reflect much about this street. We had an apartment, did not have to pay any rent, though our home was so large that I often had to run and grope quite a bit until I found Gerda, thinly in front of one of the enormous walls. Why do I concern myself about how freezing cold the street often appeared. I had not driven the birds away from the front gardens. That was done by those who had destroyed the trees and the bushes and put up a cast iron structure in their place. Elaborate indeed but without spirit. Here and there dwarf plants were planted. A distorted picture of nature, a sad remembrance of a wooded area and real tree growth. Had the occupants, who restrained every expression, feared the natural tree size? Were they afraid that

the strong clouds escaping from the blooms in the spring time corroded their sensitive mucous membranes or even brought turmoil to their carefully maintained interior?

At first I took it for a caprice but now I believe it to be a sickness which has not yet a name. When I still took it for a caprice, I reckoned that these people here had become funny under their special circumstances. I thought, perhaps they do not know that it is really possible to move without breaking an arm and the neck with it. So I often stepped out onto the balcony in the morning and did some gymnastics. No physical fury or any foolhardy acrobatics, oh no, even I dislike that. More like a stretch in the fresh air, a small play of the joints and now and then a childlike muscle manoeuvre. I thought these old people around are in fact not looking; they should not look, but if their eyes are still at all eyes, then my shy movement must certainly sprinkle a trace of life in their pupils and this perhaps would be a way to make their pupils move once again, before they break. Perhaps the paralysis of their eyes would relax, which would extend to necks, and their heads would begin to turn and even their shoulders, and all around on all balconies a dance would begin which later could become a real handshake. So that was my hope. But for nothing. I moved, and I must have also been noticed. For the old people turned away from me as if steered by one single large motor. Circling calmly and almost unnoticeably, they all were turned in such a way that later their backs were turned towards our balcony. And when I tried whistling, allowing my lips to play as never before, replacing and even

surpassing all the driven out birds, the strange neighbours were then sucked back by their houses, flowing as a snail that slowly withdraws inside its hardened shelter whenever its sensitive horn wants to. How was I to understand these neighbours? In the streets, I knew, that had been different. There we all met in front of the house in the evenings; we looked into someone's apartment and whenever someone spat in the flower pot on the window ledge only the women might find fault and agree amongst themselves to punish the men. But here? On all the balconies the same indistinguishable faces of sleeping gypsum and calcium of the dead.

Gerda certainly noticed how much everyone left us alone. She was home the entire day and learned some things I could only imagine. She became different than she was. Earlier at breakfast on the balcony she had laughed so that it whirled far and wide. She clapped her hands whenever I told her something, and quick had been her movements whenever she was busy at the table. But now she no longer laughed. Now and then she still raised her eyebrows, but only very slowly and carefully, as if she were secretly doing something forbidden. The resounding clap of her hands had dwindled to a hardly noticeable movement of her small finger, which she softly tapped on the tablecloth. And she set the table inside the room only, pushed it slowly onto the balcony like a seriously sick patient and followed it carefully. She did not allow me to whistle and looked disapprovingly at me whenever I let out a wholehearted laugh. Every day she gave to me new instructions on how I should push my



bicycle outside the door and on how I should open and close the door. So this is how it continued until the statements arrived which I placed--and not without reason, at the beginning of this report. Those statements which openly implied that my job was not good enough. She spoke without moving her lips. Her eyes had lost all of their sparkle. But her talk was loaded with such weighty disapproval and reproach that it finally collapsed my ears and rendered me stone deaf. I began to brood and, with that, to whistle sad melodies. I began to understand that Gerda had been seized by that sickness for which I still had not heard a name. The longer I observed her the more I exactly realized that I could never heal her anymore. Without having noticed it, that paralysis had penetrated the walls and had infected her with the tenacious slowness that was her nature. I tried to make Gerda mobile again, to have her lips laugh, but the disease had already eaten too deeply inside her. Gerda would no longer listen to my reasoning. She took all my words as an insult, as bad behaviour. And over and over again I had to hear how I could only behave like a bicycle repairman.

“Oh,” I said then and turned around and whistled soundlessly inside me.

Then I tried one last time: I tried to allow this disease to infect me too.

Whatever strangeness I noticed increased by day-- and it became daily more so--I imitated it, moving myself so slowly that all of my limbs fell asleep quite often for days and they itched like crazy. For every errand I took three times as long as I had needed if I had walked normally. I timed my ways with a stopwatch and went back again and did the distance once more whenever I saw that I had moved

improperly fast. Breakfast often stretched out until lunchtime and I did not get to work until early afternoon. It goes without saying that I lost my job at the shop and my boss cannot be faulted.

“Good, that your father did not have to see this,” he said. “I am married,” I said meaningfully by chance and left. Now I sat at home for days on end and stretched out along on our big walls like the shadow of a snail. I became slower but not quieter. Everything that I suppressed piled up higher inside me each day, and more urgently to the point of suffocation. Gerda observed me and moved her left ear in approval. For her that was an almost unrestrained expression of her feelings. For this reason a pale pink colour rushed into her pallid cheeks.

So it went on until one morning I could not bear it any longer. It was a warm spring day. We were sitting rigidly on the balcony as if we were snowmen from last winter. Gerda was serving tea when she poured some of the steaming drink on her hand. A fallow boil shot up on her hand but Gerda simply raised her left eyebrow barely a millimetre high. But the pain, which plagued her without a doubt, pulled her eyes twitchingly upwards, so that I saw only the white part of her eyes. Not a pretty sight but I had to laugh. For the first time in a long while I broke out. And as if for the first time this truly harmless laughter had given my whole body the signal to rebel, a spasm now shook my nerves, my muscles bounced, my arms flayed and from my mouth escaped an unending laughter, piercing shrilly and sharply in renewed torrents through the dead-still streets. Gerda became paralysed. In families, the neighbours were sucked back into their

apartments, I jumped up, yelled "Shame on you", hopped down the stairs, ran outside, and stopped when I saw people who had careworn faces but were going about their daily business with all sorts of movement.

In a nut shell I am working again in the shop. In the evenings I went a few more times through those motionless streets. On the balconies the old people sat like columns. One face like the other. I could not recognize Gerda anymore.

In the next few days I want to pick up my daughter. I think Gerda will hardly miss her. The child is much too restless and would simply annoy Gerda and the whole street. Perhaps she will not notice me at all secretly slipping inside the apartment and taking the child with me. I was under the impression that the general paralysis had progressed even more tremendously since I no longer live on the street. If it was the case that I was a disturbance for that kind of peace, we will not have to wait for the final petrification.

And I want to protect my daughter from it.

If she, however, should also make an excessive demand on me in her mature years, I will try to prove to her that there is no reason to strive for anything else in this world than to be a bicycle repairman. Everything else, I will say, is sinful and an unhealthy climbing of façades. And if she simply cannot comprehend that it is all right to have a father who has acquired some skill in repairing even the most broken bicycles, then I can still bring her back to the balcony and set her next to the crust of her mother. Then I will not say, "Shame on you" any longer, but will leave the balcony and the house and the garden and

the street just as quickly as when I could not refrain from this exclamation.

## THE LAST MATINÉE

Through fat black bulging clouds which were hauled up in the last scene thrust out glaring white and frayed around the edges, the word: Fin. It had been a French film. I felt my way on my wife's arm into the open air, lowered my head forwardly because the radiant Sunday morning blinded me and I also did not want it to be seen that I still had teary water in my eyes. I bent down, adjusted my shoelace, and, panting strenuously, I pretended that I did not notice my wife tugging me impatiently.

Since her early youth, Inga was affiliated with the matinée-goer. Her eyes, the eyes of every matinée veteran, withstood the change from the theatre to the sunlight without blinking; a routine which I did not have the ability to acquire in all the 4 years I had to accompany Inga to the countless matinées.

The true matinée-goer steps quickly and carelessly into the daylight with his head raised, formulating judgements with his forehead at an upward tilted angle. Since he also knows something about film, he does not run the risk of weeping. My complete lack of talent as a matinée-goer had caused many disagreements throughout the years between Inga and myself. To have a man who still grimaced and blinked like an infant as he left the theatre, who hastily wiped the perpetually renewed tears from his face and who practically did not contribute a single word to the discussion which was already surging up in the

exit door already--having such a man was embarrassing enough for Inga in front of the other *matinée*-friends. On the last joint Sunday *matinée*-outing, Inga had again entangled herself at once in a discussion with a painter. The painter, he too a passionate *matinée*-goer, wore a blue coloured lamb fur on this day which like a large blouse dangled around his slender body, covering him down to his thighs. His legs stuck to narrow yellow cloth hoses. His face was lined with red sideburns which seemed to hang there in such an unfortunate contrast with the youthful features of the painter that one could believe the painter was an unhappy and therefore especially valuable human being.

Since I always would meet him and his kind with wordless reverence, I positioned myself just as always quietly and submissively behind my wife's left shoulder. My face played the role of listener. How long would it last again today? Until 6 in the evening or 7 o'clock? There had been Sundays when it was nearly midnight by the time we got home. That depended entirely on the film which had to be dealt with. All around dozens of smaller and larger discussion groups too formed today. Two girls and a young gentleman had also joined Inga and the painter. So thick and smooth was the hair of the two girls, combed so far over their foreheads, that it was impossible to see their eyes anymore. Whenever the girls wanted to see with whom they spoke, they would instinctively bent their knees to make themselves smaller as if they could better see from under their pitch black blind. The young chap, still a beardless gentleman whom they had placed between themselves, covered his eyes with his

flat hand as he formulated his sentences and removed it only as he finished talking, and then took notice of the reactions of his surrounding listeners. At the same time he moved his hand away from his eyes to his chin and he propped it up for a long time in the strained fork of his thumb and index finger until his discussion partner had given him an answer. As he started his next sentence his hands floated upwards once again in order to screen the eyes in now full self-concentration. Although I had already taken this young gentleman for an inexhaustible vessel of arguments, the discussion today blew out after a few hours. Why, I cannot say, because I had not listened. I only felt Inga seizing my arm with annoyance and steering through all the circles into the street. She paved the way home-- as always--with accusations concerning my way of coping with the discussions.

As we climbed up the sandstone steps to our ground floor apartment, I asked her to suspend her fault-finding only until we had got inside our apartment. She became silent. The house door was merely ajar. All the better. Only a step across the tiny landing to our apartment's door. Already freeing the key from the rattling ring, it seemed to me-- but that had to be a deception as I heard a sound coming from-- a deception most certainly--from our apartment? Certainly not. Surely it was the children of the skilled workers' families in the upper levels. How would anyone enter our apartment in a Sunday's bright daylight? A quick look at Inga who was brooding sullenly and therefore had heard nothing. There is certainly nothing to hear at all but we will see that right now, I guided the

correct key with pointed thumb and index finger to the door lock, assisted with my left hand when I heard something and how clearly! It was men's silly laughter and women's squeals. It was not the toy building block throwers: those childish poulterers from upstairs. Inga? Now even she stood differently: quite stiff from having to listen, carefully moving as if she herself were made of paper thin glass. My breathing had stopped immediately; from the centre of my body boiling hot needles went through my limbs and then it stopped, I did not feel myself anymore. To prevent myself from suffocating I pushed the door open. Corridors do not exist in our place. The first door opens directly to the living room and in there three, four, five, six, even more men were lying or sitting; I did not count them, and how many women? They guarded the pots which they placed on the electric cookers that they had undoubtedly brought with them-- or were they actually spirit burners? For there were not enough electric outlets for so many burners in our home! Inga squeezed herself under my armpits. Every pore she touched was stiff and painful. We still stood in the doorway, opened shoulder-wide, nobody took any notice of us. If a pair of eyes met us on occasion in the normal movement of the head, then the eyes would stop. For a breath's length. Then they would calmly move on. To resume their course. However, we drove our eyes right out of their sockets; we simply could not take our eyes off the apartment robbers. Although we kept looking and following all their movement with nose, mouth, and eyes just as a dog follows a piece of meat in an up-and-down playing in its owner's hand, they did not say a word to us and



continued doing their occupations and jests as if they had always been thoroughly accustomed to being stared at. I had never seen such uninhibited living creatures as this crowd which had all too openly taken up quarters in our home while we had once again supported the good film with our presence. Helplessly and almost enraged I detailed once again the plot of the film I was forced to watch: a sculptor, sick, brilliant, hungry. He can work on nothing more and therefore proceeds pushing people who stroll along the Seine at night into the Seine. Once pushed into the water a man who accompanied a girl. The girl understands the sculptor. The sculptor sees himself understood. Whereupon he wakes up and truly despairs and freely goes to the Seine as proof. In the end that girl walks alone. Again by the Seine.

And in the meantime our apartment had been occupied. If we had not gone to the matinée, I concluded, we would still be the undisputed owners of our apartment. The occupants of the upper levels still had their own apartments after all. Inga first despised these occupants but then they belonged to the dull evening audience, to the consumers of nightly kitsch productions--but no hair splitting could do away with it-- they were still the master of their living quarters. I indulged myself in the noises which presently broke through from above; strong female arms pushed pots and tiles into large basins there. Iron and metal clattered together, rumbled under the water over them. In a second phase glass and porcelain plates followed and banged against one another with shriller noise until they too were submerged in water which broke the gurgling noise down into the

dark.

How much had the course of this single morning detached us from these noises. I still hear them as if they were personal childhood memories set in songs. And like these they seemed to me irretrievably lost. I stretched out a hand a little upwards, it spun weakly down again. Inga and I were still standing in the hardly opened doorway, pressed up against one another like people freezing under a too small blanket. Hair, clothes, boots, the strange pot on tiny burners, and lively and bright yakking back and forth, and glass bells barking! Could we have looked at this forever like a theatre? Upon close inspection there were red skins. They had stuck bluish black hair greasy and smoothly around their faces, leaving them in exact oval shapes. True children's book Indians. Become all too real.

Inga pulled me backwards outside the front door and then fell crying loudly on my shoulder. In the first, second, and third storey levels the windows opened. In the neighbourhood as well. From all the windows the renters stretched out their necks watching and taking exaggerated notice of us, as if they had to write a school report later on our movements. Perhaps they all had witnessed how our apartment had been occupied by the free and easy-going strangers.

Then, as I finally withdrew with Inga, a rattling applause arose all around us. They only did this to suck up to the strangers. That would not help them out much, I thought. Apparently the strangers had a tribe of children who needed

still more living space. But where should we go? To the housing office? But it was Sunday. The housing department head was most likely romping at this moment with his many children in a forest lane, out of reach of any telephone.

I stumbled forwards. Aimlessly. Inga continued to cry. I dragged her behind me. In a large square one toddled towards us, a *matinée*-buff, I saw that right away. He was happy, Inga too. She dried her face with a smile. Then we met again another and still another and yet another, growing into a crowd; and always more inflow, inflow until we were again in same old clumps from this morning's dozens of circles. Many hugged each other. It was said, we had simply separated too early this morning. Yes and the apartment, is that not strange, to find one's apartment occupied by strangers. Yes, yes, that happens. Reality makes escapades, so back to this morning's topic...

So they talked. By way of a few subordinate clauses, the invasion of strangers was weaved into the conversation: green-skinned musclemen with the one, a kind of hussars with monkey faces with the others, but also houseflies, bigger than grown chickens were seated earnestly around the table, sinking their proboscis in a bowl from which they slurped the sugary soup, smacking loudly. The beardless young gentleman who with two laboriously peering girls explained that a group of blue-bearded governesses had broken into his place and had ruffled down to the undescrivable undergarments. He explained this without holding his hand over his eyes, however, with an arrogant rattling voice. Inga felt herself so well integrated that she risked in a similar manner to describe our own experience.

When we had still been alone I had tried to calm her down; she had fallen into a crying fit and started yelling at me that she believed that I was not a fit intellectual partner for her but now she had to endure that I was not even able to secure her a home. I was happy to see her now come alive in the fresh wind of dialogue. That took away the worry of having to deal with her for a moment. What had to be done I could better accomplish myself. No way did I want to spend the rest of my life floating in the clump of discussing circles through the streets. I pushed myself ahead. I waved to the next policeman whom I saw, approached him but he avoided me, looking around himself searching for help and then ran away in a panic once I began to speak to him.

Later on I tried it once again with another policeman. He seemed to have heard of our procession, perhaps he had even received instructions on how he should handle us, since he did not allow me to come close to him at all but instead pointed to a new march and nearly despairing he yelled incisively in a new direction, "Everything has been looked after. Everything has been looked after."

I steered the procession in the specified direction. The others did not care. Again and again we bumped into policemen who showed us the way. They all avoided coming near us. They treated us like a herd of wild animals: the kind one is not sure if they are dangerous or not.

Then passers-by also lined our street.

Whoever had already started out on their Sunday stroll, to visit a friend, or to go to the football field, hesitated when he saw us and abandoned his course to

see what it was all about with this crowd of people talking amongst themselves and persuading one after another with their explanation. The people put their heads together, asking questions, and some of them already seemed to be able to provide certain answers about us. They immediately formed the central point for the curious and were plagued with questions from many sides. Unfortunately the type of responses discussing our situation, I could not hear. Probably each informant invented a series of reasons for our strange deployment. In today's world it is almost normal for people to congregate and walk the streets to protest for or against something. Most likely we were taken for a political party, or, what is yet easier to suspect, a sect. It must have been striking to everyone that all the matinée-goers shared one single style of clothing and hairstyle. Yes, even the stature and the manner of movement betrayed a remarkable similarity: the head tilting or straightening, the hands projecting while in speech and response becoming either dramatically frozen or shaking contemptuously. This was already very evident in the clothing and hairstyle so that even an impartial passer-by could come to the conclusion that there was a kind of dress code here. Even if not two of them were not dressed exactly the same, the difference with the usual clothing was certainly the same with all. One wore red coloured burlaps as a wide overhanging blouse while the other had made pants out of it; self-made, that is how these costumes looked, just as, for example, the haircuts of the male matinée-goers consistently revealed each one had sat down at home and taken a hand mirror in his left hand and with the remaining free right had begun cutting

right up to the tiny piece which was no longer layered. In this regard I had always got struck in half-measure. I had never dared to make up myself and dress up like the other *matinée*-goers. That had to do with the fact that as a cash book clerk I had to emphasize a healthy appearance during the week.

Gradually there was now the impression that we had done something wrong, and were taken away. More and more policemen emerged in front of us, waved to us by working their hands practised in pointing around in the air, but their movements were so exaggerated that they took us for a real herd of coloured animals which did not understand a policeman's simple cues. It could not be overlooked that an order had been given on how to proceed with us and where we should be led. In the central bureau for public order, excited men probably bent over a brightly lit city plan trying to find a way for us. We were herded towards the east end and from there onward, it was unmistakable, to the train station yard along the tracks and even further right up to the freight depot.

In the meantime our crowd was surrounded completely by police officers who softly but irrefutably began to push through, firstly up onto a giant loading platform, then inside through a darkly gapping entrance to a dome high freight hall. It stank of fish and on the floor viscous large puddles glistened and wobbled. I was one of the first ones pushed into the hall. All around me there were further discussions. I did not feel well with the darkness and foul air. I worked my way back, which means I stood still and allowed the others to pass. Then Inga came. She had discussions with the two straight-haired girls. I took

her hand, wanted to take her outside but she broke free without having looked at me, since she had voiced an objection, which caused her forehead to wrinkle in annoyance. But then there were already police officers who closed the door. I called out once more: "Inga!", reached one last time for her, again in vain, so I ducked and slipped through quickly under the police officers' arms. I got outside. The double doors were pushed shut and rolled against each other making a metal shutting clink. From inside, buzzing and bubbling could still be heard. Not a single cry arose. And not even once was any light required.

But as soon as I was outside I was seized by the policemen's hand. An interrogation began. My appearance alone proved that I could not belong to that miserably locked up crowd. They looked at me, believed me, and let me go.

I spent the next few days in great uncertainty. After that I started to look around. At first I sneaked passed our apartment, then also passed the apartments of the other matinée-goers. Before I could undertake anything I had to know who these intruders were and what rights they had been given.

In the beginning I observed this seizure to be an act by some kind of occupying power, executed in secret agreement by our own officers. For a while then I had believed they were with the special careless circus performers, the childlike artist souls, who after their show would leave the city again and the apartments too.

Now after many investigations which I had to carry out myself carefully and without any help; limiting investigations almost always to a cautious spying.

Only now I know that we really should not blame the intruders.

Whenever I think about them, I see the brightening face of an ornithologist in front of me who discovers a polar seagull in a swarm of dalmatian storks. He knows the rules of the migration laws of his birds so well and is so eagerly dedicated to their destiny that he too expects the exceptions with affection. He still calls a friend from the meteorology institute and discovers that a cold air mass has broken into the Franz Joseph Land all the way to Novaya Zemlya, which is very unusual for this time of year and it responds to a change in the air pressure which confuses the orientation of the birds. And given this condition and including that possibility, it has already become quite an understandable phenomena that the refugee from the circumpolar region is between the dalmatian storks. If we knew enough about the human beings who lived outside our apartment, would we heartily shake limbs with the red skins, the green-skinned muscle men, the hussars with the monkey faces, the blue-bearded governesses, yes, and even with their coexisting creatures: giant house flies and upright dogs, then would we shake limbs wholeheartily with them as with friends who have announced themselves by a letter and phone call. But we do not know anything and so we must be startled as with enemies, or should we make fun of them by saying that they are from the circus, from the opera scene or even from an escapade of reality (as if reality is really that which we believe it to be)!

Perhaps they have come from very distant landscape, perhaps from the industrial part of our town! That they appear strange to us only means we have



never ever looked at them before. For that they had become intruders. But why were these refugees, refugees of wantonness or need, why were they instructed just to occupy the *matinée-goers'* apartments? This question was for me more important than all other questions, and applying all my attention I found an answer: on the weekdays the officers themselves were there to council and aid all those in need. But if they wanted to have an undisturbed Sunday, lodgings had to be prepared for every likelihood and therefore the accommodations had been prepared in the apartments of those people who on Sunday--everyone knew this--were not at home anyway, ie. The *matinée-goers!* Monday one would see further. In today's world the administration cannot but live from hand to mouth.

And yet the housing administrators may have to face Monday with some feeling of trepidation. How should it continue? Which improvisations were necessary to make up for the Sunday improvisations?

Monday came. Still nothing stirred. Even I was surprised not to learn anything in the paper nor by word of mouth about this certainly quite public event. Had the emergency-quarter in the freight hall been turned into a jail? Were those detained held forcefully back because there was not any more living space for them? Or was it something else, something much more terrible? I restrained at first from making any inquiries in the office. I waited. Waited day in and day out. Was it possible? Should not a cry suddenly break out and make that hall the centre of public rebellion? There was certainly violence involved. Now weeks and months had passed by and none of the *matinée-goers* had

returned. I began to make inquiries, sneaked around the grounds of the freight train station, bribing officers and eavesdropping on the cracks in the boards of the freight hall. In this manner I carried on restlessly for ten, fourteen days, then I had experienced so much that I called off all my endeavours forever. The matinée-goers had not said a single word about their new surrounding, they had neither griped nor complained. Even the officers had wondered. Then they had assigned the detained to small groups of loading jobs so that individual discussion groups would not be scattered. The success was encouraging. Since then the matinée-buffs work at the freight train station and are happy about their debating team. They only voiced a single wish: they want to see films on Sunday morning. Good films! The housing administrators, who were beside themselves with joy with how things developed, have made sure that the promoter of the early matinées can run his programme in the freight hall.

I, however, have given up all hope of ever seeing my wife again. I am comforted only by the thought she would have been downright unhappy with me and her mind would have starved miserably compared to that bliss which is hers so enduringly in the circle of matinée-buffs. I do not begrudge her to stay with those who now live in the dusky hall, ignoring the fish stench, ruling here absolutely, wearing sandals in the puddles of muddy liquid, and talking about the sculptor who sick, brilliant, and hungry pushed people into the Seine until the girl woke him up, so that in desperation he went into the Seine, leaving behind the girl, so alone that there was no other way but to go for walks again at night, alone,

along the Seine! That is a film! That is their topic: which they love like their special hairdo and their very personal attire. They are and remain matinée-goers even in the freight hall: birds born into this world without wings, apostles who have not found Christ. I cannot change that.

## BOLZER, A FAMILY LIFE

Woman, O woman, yells Maximilian Bolzer. Just as easily he could sob.

During the week Bolzer is a foreman in the foundry of the stove plant.

That makes his skin gradually grey.

Today he'll do it, the fat gentleman next to me whispers, as he pushes his toothpick so far down his mouth that it cannot shake anymore.

When it is necessary I will call the two police officers. They must confirm that I was here first today. The fat guy also wants to steal a place at the fence for his wife as well, this I can feel already. He lets her slip under his arm; she slowly emerges now.

Look, Lottie, look, today he'll do it, says the fat guy who also pinned a shaving-brush to his hat, to crown it all. The police officers could really make sure that everyone comes into one's own at the fence.

Last Sunday he was better, I find, says the shaving-brush's wife lifting a part of her upper lip in such a way up to the gums that a gold tooth must shine and an unfeeling sighing sound results. I thoroughly despise that. Arriving late, stealing the best spot at the fence and then passing judgements right away.

Acting as if they were an expert on the Bolzer family. Already I feel the ancient lady's sharp bones from my left. Her clothes always hang wet down her body as if she were just back from a shipwreck. She actually feels rather damp

whenever she presses up against us. She too came today after me. And the policemen act as if they were not there.

Oh, woman, yells Maximilian Bolzer already for the third time. Come on now, hurry up, call a few young chaps out who had come so close to the fence with their motorcycles that the front tires push up against the fence boards like snouts.

It was in May that a guy with a motorcycle came for the first time. Back then I said right away to the shipwrecked lady who always secured her place to my left: That is not the end of it, others will follow. And that is how it happened. And what none of us had dared to, I mean none of those, who stand upright by the fence and observe what happens with the Bolzers on Sunday evening, they took liberties and they sat on their saddles and smoked. So they have girls sit on the pillions. As soon as it turns serious with the Bolzers inside, they lay their heads like forever and really licentiously on the leather shoulders of their guys.

Since the time of these indecisive adventures, their girls on their backs, watch while sitting and smoking, since people like the shaving-brush and his Lottie have come to the fence, people who presume to pass judgements on the events in Bolzer's living-kitchen--since then Sunday evenings have lost respectability, so to speak. Neither I nor the shipwrecked lady to my left nor the one-armed pensioner have ever said a word. In the earlier days the pensioner stood to the right of me. Now the shaving-brush always shoves him away into

the second row. That is not too difficult, since after all the one-armed man can cling to the fence with his one hand only which the shaving-brush has quickly detached. We had never thought of advising one another what may be the role on the playing field. We would have never been forgetful enough to burst into cheering calls and address the Bolzers directly.

Fortunately, Bolzer is immune to every comment and every shout. His seriousness is so enormous that all players must be forbidden to visit the events of these summer evenings. The sign alone which he fastened to the garden fence proves how serious Bolzer is, for it reads: No pictures taken.

Woman, oh woman, cries Bolzer. His hands have flown high. They freeze in a position that is well known as the stranglehold. Bolzer sees what his hands want to do and does not take another move. He only looks at his hands. The shaving-brush who expects one Sunday after another that Bolzer will not remember at this moment, howls in disappointment, whereas I smile almost like a director. Probably each one of us pretends to understand the Bolzers most. I for one am now looking at Mrs. Bolzer. After all, not only Mr. Bolzer should be looked at. Those of us at the fence know almost nothing about what happened the week before or what was inflicted upon Mr. Bolzer through the whims of his immoderately beautiful wife, but I believe if he were to simply lay his hands on her we would break down the fence in the last second and storm in to rip Mr. Bolzer's hands from that slender neck. If we were not ready to do that, I said to myself, then we would have no right to stand any longer at the fence and watch

how Bolzer comes to his senses, how he turns and takes hold of the leather strap. I say it is a leather strap which Bolzer takes from the wall and whips through the air, almost a bit theatrically. It does not have a handle, therefore it is not a true whip. But Bolzer makes it into one. And Mrs. Bolzer flees. She does not simply take the blows. She yells at her husband. She ducks. Jumps to the side. Shows teeth. Runs under and through the raised arms of her husband. Bolzer, large and heavy, turns around. This always takes a while until he has driven her out of the actual kitchen space and pushed her into that wood-panelled niche which leads me to image Bolzer's kitchen as a live-in-kitchen. Once he has her there she hopped on the bench despite her tight skirt, with him following, and when she has arrived there in the farthest corner, crouches down defencelessly and Bolzer can now finally begin hitting her without any disturbance. I have noticed he always spares her face. You see, he still can't do it again, says the wife of the shaving-brush.

Wimp, says the shaving-brush.

From the motorcycles now rumbles a mixed chorus. The shipwrecked lady and I quickly look over. But they do not notice our contempt. Therefore we look at once at the Bolzers again. Is it really a leather, asks the old lady. Ask yourself. Not me. For she knows as I do what is proper. The pensioner does not understand quite as well. He does not bellow but he certainly allows the stump of his right hand to make funny extravagant movements. He does not want to spur Bolzer on or even to direct the vulgar chorus, I know that too, but he

lets himself be carried away. So I have to look at him. Immediately he brings his stump under control. As soon as I look away his stump fidgets again as if it were dreaming a dream, all by itself. It speaks for the pensioner that he is clearly embarrassed about his stump's behaviour even though he is not gaining control over it.

What really are the police officers there for if they do not take action against this roaring chorus. You do not even hear the smacking of the beating anymore.

Only now, Mrs. Bolzer no longer defends herself, Mr. Bolzer can work undisturbed a continuous succession of blows, finally on the same place, we can breath normally again--only now would we have a chance to judge if it were truly made of leather with which he strikes. With that noise we can hear nothing at all. The blows fall silently, so to speak. Silently screams Mrs. Bolzer with her mouth opened. And the guys should certainly not think they could cheer Bolzer on. He obviously knows exactly what he is doing. I counted along every Sunday. He always dispenses his hits in full tens to his wife. From this I conclude that he has a sense of justice. For what he punishes his wife simply does not concern us. We are at the Bolzer's fence, not at the cinema. We only see how she always accepts the punishment in the end. She does not defend herself anymore. Bolzer must then quickly whip her faster just to achieve the number of blows he has calculated for this evening. It is clear that he cannot hit her when she does not defend herself. On the other hand he has his programme.



So the punishment concludes with quick movements. Bolzer no longer finds his aim. That does not even matter to him anymore. Booing from the motorcycles. The girls drum their white fists on the leather backs of their drivers. Inside Mrs. Bolzer stands up. She laughs. She laughs and takes the leather strap out of his hand. She tries it out. Silk, I think. It is certainly silk. She flings the silk belt around Bolzer's head, playfully so to speak. And then more firmly. Now she has sized him already, looking precisely where she hits. And she hits him always in the face which he offers her as no dog could. Those on the motorcycles now howl. Mrs. Bolzer seems to forget from one Sunday to the next how to hit. She only learns this again on Bolzer's face. But she learns it quickly. Bolzer beats like an ancient woodcutting machine, it is large and heavy up and down, when he beats her. She beats him with short, jerking, virtually lightning movements. You could demand of her to whip off the right side of his nose. She would hit nothing she does not want to hit. And her beating does not follow Bolzer's behaviour. She hits him as long as she enjoys it. Bolzer does not enjoy the beating. Therefore it makes us feel rather sad to watch him. Probably he is a pedant. I feel it to be a true climax whenever Mrs. Bolzer starts beating. She becomes absurdly beautiful whenever she goes to work on the enormous areas of her husband's face. Perhaps she wants a man for that, with a tiny dignified face worthy of her accuracy. Suddenly she throws the silk belt over the peg, grabs out of the air or from her neck a white handkerchief and dabs the blood from Bolzer's lips. There are spectators who believe that she has smashed Bolzer's lips. I am

of the opinion that Bolzer bites his own lips bloody when hitting and being hit.

Bites them with his own lonely but large tooth which we seldom see.

Once the blood is dabbed the Bolzers take a seat in the niche. Bolzer bows slightly. Allows his wife to go first. He sits down only when she is sitting. They sit upright facing one another. They look at each other. They do not speak. At first Mrs. Bolzer smiles. Then Mr. Bolzer smiles. Just with that he exposes his tooth once again.

The shaving-brush says, Lottie, this is the last time I'll come along. She says, who then insisted on it. A disheartened grumble could be heard from the motorcycles.

Then the motorcycles fire up and the leather guys shoot off into the night with their girls like rucksacks on their backs. The two police men may dip their stiff white-gloved hands into the path of the head lights for moments. It has become so dark that the politer people must often murmur apologies until they have reached the street. The degree of emotion and amusement which the people allow themselves on their way home is similar to the mood that spreads among people who go home after the summer solstice or after burning the winter witch.

I like to stay a bit longer at the fence, that I admit. And next to me is the shipwrecked, ever damp lady. After the shaving-brush's departure the one-armed pensioner is allowed back once again at the fence. We three are the most patient. We say nothing. We watch. The Bolzers are sitting. And we watch. We three find the simple presence of the Bolzers interesting enough. Just as worth seeing

as the chastisement that they give to one another. We can, but in order not to claim too much, I can get just as much out of the Bolzers just sitting there as from the beating. I admit that it cannot be explained. But they can be looked at closely. The table top between the two is so empty that one would wish a beer bottle stands on it and if possible a glass as well. But the bottle and glass are missing. That is the problem. And if you see the Bolzers sitting there long enough, you understand that the bottle and glass have to be lacking. On the other hand it really gets to us watching the Bolzers sit there like that. Could not a child run inside, or at least a cat. But the Bolzers have obviously taken severe measures, to sit across from each other undisturbed. It is not expected that they talk to each other. That can be observed from the fence, words will not change anything. Since we have to think about things, we now think: they are pregnant with something.

As long as the Bolzers beat each other, they are certainly active. But now, when they sit like this, you might almost fall in love with both Bolzers. They mean something there at their dinner table. I cannot resist it. Whoever wants to laugh and cry, should occasionally look at it. Thank God that the Bolzers cannot bear to sit there all the time. What otherwise would become of me, what would become of the town, which has secretly long lived off the Bolzers' performance. Bolzer knows that tomorrow is Monday. So he does light up a cigarette at least. I use this moment to turn on my heels and leave. After all it should not look as if I am insatiable.

## THE DEHUMANIZING SOCIAL COLLECTIVE

During a conference at Frankfurt am Main in May 1972, Martin Walser gave a lecture entitled “Wie und wovon handelt Literatur”, in which he addressed the role and function of literature for the past 200 years; however, more importantly, he emphasised the task of an author to communicate the ‘Mangel’ that the writer feels and to convey this sense of lacking clearly and precisely in written form. Near the conclusion of his speech, Walser proceeded to point out, “Der Schreiber macht mit jedem Satz, den er aus sich entfernt, etwas wortfest und anschaulich, was vorher schwankend, unsicher, flüchtig, unentschieden war.”<sup>1</sup> In Walser’s opinion, a writer should produce an acute written replica of the situation or circumstance being examined, which before it had been put in writing was vague, ambiguous, and not fully understood by the reader. Walser’s dedication to clarity and a precise description in his own literary works is especially apparent in his 1955 short stories “Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus”, “Ich suchte eine Frau”, “Der Umzug”, “Die letzte Matinee”, and his 1964 story “Bolzer, ein Familienleben”. In all of these short stories Martin Walser is concerned with the condition of humanity in which his characters live.

Anthony Edward Waine, author of Martin Walser: The Development as

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<sup>1</sup> Günther Busch, ed., Martin Walser: Wie und Wovon handelt Literatur: Aufsätze und Reden (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973) 135.

Dramatist 1950-1970, accentuates in one chapter how Walser focuses on this concern. Waine writes, “Many of the stories in the collection Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus constitute fictional paradigms for, and antidotes to, the sociological-philosophical reflections on the condition of modern man.”<sup>2</sup>

Although these stories may seem surreal, the situations that are addressed are truly realistic.

The author directs his attention at the conditioning and transformation of individuals when they join a social organization or group. In these short stories many characters, similar to herding animals, want to form social packs and are willing to shed consequently their individualism and humanity for the sake of the collective. There is a high price to pay when affiliating and joining the group, and this is Walser’s concern. Not only is all personal autonomy eliminated for the collective, a hatred for those not part of the clan festers inside. In the first short story Walser begins by presenting a festive scenario in which there are several different kinds of groups, but there is a catastrophic lack of interaction between them. This main thread is continued in the other short stories where the misfit narrator, however, plays the paramount role as catalyst, unmasking the horrid traits and mannerisms of the collective. Finally, Walser’s grotesque humour ultimately serves to illustrate how the so-called ‘insider’--the social group-- is actually the ‘outsider’ because their lack of humanity pushes them out

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Edward Waine, Martin Walser: The Development as Dramatist 1950-1970, (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1978) 61.

of humanity.

Walser is capable of this examination by probing into various traits and characteristics; he scrutinizes them as under a magnifying glass in order to reveal the fundamental evil. His style therefore aids his grotesque humour which is seen in this high magnification. What at first glance appears normal or socially acceptable is quickly exaggerated and distorted. Walser's diction frequently helps to intensify the bizarre nature of his characters and to unmask their grotesqueness. Quite often caricatures are employed to illustrate humorously these traits which at the same time are quite serious because these characteristics are root of the depersonalizing process. Many times figurative language is used to present a truer picture through sound associations or metaphors. No less important is the structure and syntax of individual sentences and consequently the relationship within the sequence of sentences. The way in which Walser composes a sentence and the connection between sentences too helps to execute his meaning. In all of these ways Martin Walser scrutinizes more vividly the grotesque traits which thrive in the collective environment.

"Flugzeug über dem Haus" is the premiere short story in which Walser explains his fundamental concern for the existence of groups in society. Every individual must play a role in the groups, firstly by shedding their individualism and secondly by performing to the social expectation. It should be noted that the narrator most of the time avoids using 'I' when speaking but is consistently accustomed to using the first person plural subject pronoun 'wir' when talking.

The 'we' naturally refers to the boys' group. He rarely offers his own opinion. Walser has subtly emphasized the narrator's assimilation into the collective with this linguistic aspect. This linguistic subtlety of the subject pronoun 'we' clearly illustrates the lack of individuality.

The story line evolves around a seventeen year old girl's birthday party. At first everything seems to be proceed harmoniously; however, everything abruptly changes and the calm atmosphere turns into a horrifying awakening. The narrator, together with the other young boys, is thrown into a wild female fury. Here Walser introduces the first two groups that are formed in society. On one side there are the girls who have formed their own clan, whereas on the other side the boys have their own assembly. The two entities are different from each other and therefore are separate from the other group. It is also obvious that there is very little mingling amongst the two groups and the root of this is the lack of understanding between them. In fact each group seems to be either terrified or intimidated by the other.

As an outsider to the female group the narrator offers a surrealistic description of the girls' behaviour and the boys' concern. Once Birga's mother leaves the party the mood changes drastically and the social problem presents itself. To lay the foundation for the criticism, a great deal of time is sent detailing the scary events where the boys are all petrified of the girls' turbulence. The narrator describes the scene, "In all der weiblichen Turbulenz wirkten wir

starr und eingefroren.”<sup>3</sup> The boys do not know what they should do. Walser maximizes the intensity of their trauma by picturing the boys as lost pieces of wood in a violent current and focusing on the natural sounds that are associated with this image. The deadly force of the water is imitated by the audible sounds coming from certain words. The onomatopoeia of rushing water is made real when Walser writes, “die Mädchen waren ein Storm geworden, wir schwammen, verlorene Holzstücke, durch nichts mehr gerechtfertigt, zum Scheitern und Stranden verurteilt, und dazu noch schweigend, dahin.”<sup>4</sup> This horrific episode is dramatized through the audible imagery offered by Walser. It is made clear that the boys do not understand the girls and they are not sure how to handle the girls. This is seen through their fear of the girls’ group.

The surrealism is continued here by creating a powerful picture of the boys’ angst. The narrator’s mind really runs wild when he believes that the girls will execute them with daggers and cleavers. In his mind he thinks, “Wenn die Freundinnen uns plötzlich ergriffen, gefesselt, an die Hauswand geschleppt und mit Dolchen oder Hackbeilen hingerichtet hätten, ich wäre nicht sonderlich verwundert gewesen.”<sup>5</sup> This mental image adds to the despair that the boys have. The root of their fear is their lack of understanding of the opposite sex.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Walser, Gesammelte Geschichten (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Walser 8.

<sup>5</sup> Walser 9.



Walser introduces a third group: the grown ups, who pretend to be knowledgeable about everything. Ironically, the author uses Birga's great uncle, who is described by the narrator as, "ein alter, schier hundert jähriger Mann"<sup>6</sup>, to illustrate how this group believes that they are 'know-it-alls'. This attitude is portrayed as ostentatious. The episode where the young boys are rescued by the great uncle is comical not because the narrator describes the boys' gratefulness metaphorically as the gratitude of a canine but on account of the great uncle's response to the boys' actions. After the narrator says, "...wir hätten uns wie vom Tode errettete Hunde zu seinen Füßen gekuschelt,"<sup>7</sup> he examines the hand of the great uncle and the particular movements and gestures it would have used to handle appropriately these snuggling 'dogs'. These kind of hand movements are specifically for controlling dogs. The narrator continues to explain what verbal command would accompany these gestures when he says, "...und wenn er in diesem Augenblick mit der dazugehörigen Handbewegung gesagt hätte: >>Platz, schön Platz!<<"<sup>8</sup>. This episode helps to feed the great uncle's egotism. Now the great uncle can start his fiasco of superior wisdom by lecturing to the boys how much he knows about the workings of the universe. The great uncle reveals the true threat: the boys. He metaphorically compares the boys to

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<sup>6</sup> Walser 10.

<sup>7</sup> Walser 10.

<sup>8</sup> Walser 10.

wolves which are on a hunt waiting to jump on the girls. The great uncle showers the poorly uninformed with his wisdom. By identifying the boys as “Wölfe”<sup>9</sup> and narrowing in on their distinctive feature: their teeth, the great uncle elucidates his superior understanding of the young boys’ new animalistic temperament and the young girls’ yielding disposition.

The grown ups’ know-it-all attitude is made especially satirical by the depiction of the great uncle. It becomes apparent how the caregivers’ lack of interest and guidance of their children now forges misunderstandings between the boys and the girls. Since they did nothing to prepare their children, their know-it-all attitude is attacked satirically in this short story. In fact, the mother and the father have even given up all hope and sequentially have abandoned their children. It is quite clear that this story encompasses a serious social dilemma and that the adult antagonists: the mother, father, and great uncle, are completely aware of the eventual sexual awakening of the boys, but instead of equipping their children with the necessary knowledge, all hope seems to be lost. The mother willingly leaves the garden and goes into the house. The mother’s fortitude is reduced to a bleak picture of her hand hanging in the air “wie ein welches Blatt,...”<sup>10</sup>. Finally both the mother and the father cannot handle even watching, so “Türen und Fenster haben sie zugeschlossen, eisern Läden heruntergelassen,

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<sup>9</sup> Walser 11.

<sup>10</sup> Walser 8.

um es nicht sehen, nicht hören zu müssen!”<sup>11</sup>. Even without making an attempt of helping they turn their backs on the children. The neglect of the care-givers results in the antisocial attitude between the groups. Giving up their children is, therefore, socially destructive.

This sexual awakening and potentially destructive nature is a major concern in the story because neither group knows how to treat the other. From the boys’ wolfish behaviour springs their new sexual role and it will affect everything and everyone around them. Similar to wolves, the boys dominate the upper portion of the hierarchical animal kingdom. The boys are described as, “...wir [waren] Herr über den Garten, das Haus und die Mädchen.”<sup>12</sup>. The narrator and the boys in the last scene fully realize their new role but they do not know how to properly treat the girls and therefore the boys will suppress the females. The girls are not strong enough to break this fate.

In this light “Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus” ends with a very bleak picture with very little hope. The two groups interact separately because they have not been shown how to deal with each other correctly. The tragedy is having one group dominate over the other. The grown ups pretend to know everything, but do little to raise their children to understand and respect the other sex. When the great uncle, “...weinte aus dem Fenster der Masarde...über uns

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<sup>11</sup> Walser 11.

<sup>12</sup> Walser 13.

hinweg, in die Zukunft hinein,”<sup>13</sup> the story concludes, indicating a horrifying future for the two isolated groups with the boys becoming the oppressors.

In the short story “Ich suchte eine Frau”, Walser once again examines the theme of forming groups, but here he stresses how the collective suppresses the inner urges and feelings of those in its grasp. The members in this club must behave in a socially acceptable way and any deviation of this is simply not permissible. The narrator acts as a catalyst who shares with the reader how he must ultimately cover up his reason for entering and finally joining the group. The narrator has fallen in love with a beautiful woman’s nape but he is not allowed to express this feeling in the open. Therefore he resorts to hiding his feelings. However, he cannot simply forget her nape and put it out of his mind, so he manipulates the situation in order to find the nape.

It is important to analyse how the narrator mimics the social graces at the meetings. In an essay discussing two of Martin Walser’s earlier novels, Frank Pilipp is interested in exploring how Walser views role playing. Pilipp writes, “...Walser sketches a broad social panorama of the ...need for conformity and role playing.”<sup>14</sup> Part of playing this socially acceptable role involves acting and reacting in the correct fashion according to protocol. An excellent example of trying to carry on like the group occurs when the bell rings at the meeting and the

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<sup>13</sup> Walser 13.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Pilipp, The Novels of Martin Walser: A Critical Introduction (Dexter: Thomson-Shore, 1991) 7.

narrator responds accordingly by toddling like the others to find a seat. During the speeches he applauds at the appropriate moments. Sometimes the narrator goes to comic extremes to accommodate the expectations of the social environment. In fact he, "...[sprang] sogar manchmal auf und kühn im Saale herumblickte, als wolle ich alle zu noch größerem Beifall auffordern,..."<sup>15</sup>. This scene is ridiculous, especially because the narrator gets all wrapped up in creating his illusion which he is forced to play.

Walser goes to great lengths to describe the narrator's self-interest. The narrator's goal is to find his love by relocating the woman who has led him inside the building and nothing else is important to him although he must manoeuvre himself carefully at the same time. A crucial part in succeeding in rediscovering this woman demands keeping his inner thoughts under wraps. Walser spends a great of time describing the narrator's façade, which is socially pleasing to the members of the club, but, more importantly, permits the narrator to pursue his agenda. The narrator goes to absurd measures to find the nape again. For example the narrator slyly surveys the room like a search light, trying to spot the woman. At the same time he is careful not to expose his lack of interest or his secret motive. The narrator thinks to himself, "Ich aber ließ meine Augen langsam wie Suchscheinwerfer über den Saal gleiten, bewegte dabei den Kopf so gut wie gar nicht, um denen, die um mich her saßen, nicht zu

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<sup>15</sup> Walser 17.

verraten, wie wenig der Redner mich störte.”<sup>16</sup>. The narrator must be crafty and cunning but the club has forced him to act in this fashion by not allowing himself to express openly his feelings.

Trying to find love in a maze of social etiquette is not always easy. In one episode the narrator shares with the reader his annoyance with not finding the beautiful woman and his horror with the necks of the other female members. The distress of the narrator is emphatically reinforced through the employment of linguistically harsh sounding words in Walser’s writing. His disappointment is described as, “Noch schlimmer waren die dünnen Spindelhälse, deren Sehnen messerscharfe Grate bildeten, über die hin geräuschvoll harte Haare raschelten.”<sup>17</sup> Through this stylistic employment the reader can experience the emotional heart break of the narrator and have sympathy for his plight.

Nevertheless the narrator’s desire to find the nape pushes him to continue tracking her down. This task is an obsession for him. It is interesting to note that the German word, ‘Suche’ found in the sentence fragment, “... meine Suche fortzusetzen”<sup>18</sup> can have various meanings. It can mean ‘search’ but it can also imply ‘hunt’. His presence at the meetings is to hunt for her. It should also be noted that he is obsessed with her nape and consequently the napes of the other

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<sup>16</sup> Walser 16.

<sup>17</sup> Walser 15.

<sup>18</sup> Walser 16.

women. Perhaps Walser is implying a sexual metaphor here. In the animal kingdom is it customary for the male dominate sex to grab the nape of the female animal with his mouth while humping her.

Finding this woman's nape again is very important for the narrator, so it is necessary for him to have a good systematic process for locating his desire. At the same time this task is not easy but requires a great deal of effort. It is noteworthy to examine how the actual sentence form mimics the narrator's own procedure in achieving his goal. The narrator's work is described as:

Das schien eine langwierige und große Gewandtheit erfordernde Arbeit zu werden, genügte es doch nicht, daß ich der jeweiligen Dame verschämt meinen Namen entgegenmurmelte; es genügte auch nicht, daß ich ihr so lange als schicklich und möglich ins Gesicht starrte; ich mußte mich, kaum daß ich ihr ins Gesicht gesehen hatte, in ihren Rücken spielen, um sie auf Haaransatz und Nackengrübchen hin prüfen zu können.<sup>19</sup>

However, at the same time, the narrator is conscious not to upset the group. Nevertheless, there are occasions when the narrator forgets himself and slips up. He must recover quickly from his 'faux pas' before he is discovered. The episode where the narrator believes someone has caught him staring at a woman's nape shows how he is able to excuse himself and pacify the onlookers. He excuses himself by saying:

...ich reiße mich immer noch rechtzeitig zurück, murmle eine Entschuldigung, spiele für einen Augenblick den Zerstreuten, sammle mich dann aber rasch zu heller Aufmerksamkeit und

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<sup>19</sup> Walser 18.

sehe meinem Gegenüber voll und breit ins Gesicht.<sup>20</sup>

By playing the role of an absent-minded person, the narrator is capable of recovering from being caught at the wrong behaviour which is not accepted by the group.

Although it appears as though the narrator is able to play two roles simultaneously, this story illustrates how the continual presence of the collective and their attitudes infect the narrator bit by bit, gradually changing him and making him forget his yearning for love. The narrator at the end is not the same person who initially walked through the doors of the club. The opening sentence depicts an insecure narrator groping for support. The narrator describes his mental state as:

Bei jedem Schritt zögernd, als müsse ich wie ein junger, noch ungeübter Seiltänzer ein bißchen Halt ertasten, die Hände schlaff an den Seiten und nur verhalten atmend, so trat ich in den Saal und ließ mich vom Strom der anderen Besucher auf die Stuhlreihen zutreiben; so betritt einer die Kirche einer fremden Religion.<sup>21</sup>

Right from the opening sentence there seems to be a sense of sympathy for this fellow. It is true that the narrator has entered the club for personal reasons but he must shun these innocent reasons. Before long the club assimilates the narrator. Increasingly tidbits of information are deposited inside his head. The narrator is being satirically poignant when he calls the information, "Fetzen aus

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<sup>20</sup> Walser 21.

<sup>21</sup> Walser 14.



vielen Reden”<sup>22</sup> which come from “die lautesten Stellen”<sup>23</sup>. Despite the narrator’s lack of interest in the club’s speeches he is helpless in absorbing the information. He cannot block the shreds out of his head. In the end he can even retrieve these details effortlessly. The narrator explains how he can be a good member by regurgitating the scraps fetched from inside his head when he says, “...ich konnte, wenn ich gefragt wurde, mit solchen Brocken, die ich wörtlich aus meinem Unterbewußten heraufzuholen vermochte, wie ein gutes, interessiertes Mitglied antworten.”<sup>24</sup> Here the satirical attack of the collective reaches its peak. The narrator too has forfeited his own goals to become an anonymous clone of the collective, since he does not think for himself but simply repeats parts of the speeches he heard.

Near the end of the story the narrator has almost forgotten about his love of the nape. He explains that he curbs his search by adjusting his work speed. He states that he, “benützte nur noch jede fünfte und später nur noch jede zehnte Versammlung zu meinen Recherchen.”<sup>25</sup> The most blatant and satirical attack of the social club comes across when the narrator has just about changed completely. He describes how it is difficult for him to even remember why he started attending the meetings in the first place, saying, “Und heute bin ich

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<sup>22</sup> Walser 19.

<sup>23</sup> Walser 19.

<sup>24</sup> Walser 19.

<sup>25</sup> Walser 20.

soweit gekommen, daß es einer Anstrengung bedarf, wenn ich mich daran erinnern will, daß ich früher einmal die Vereinsabende zu recht persönlichen Zwecken benützte.”<sup>26</sup>

Although it may seem as though the narrator has been transformed by the club, this is clearly not the case. The narrator never fully forgets about his love for the lady’s nape. Even though he calls his love a past transgression which he has managed to suppress, the narrator’s primary feeling still surfaces occasionally. This episode is clearly dramatized by inserting this so-called past transgression immediately after the narrator asserts that it belongs to the past.

Right away the narrator slips back to his previous routine when he states:

Manchmal ertappe ich mich zwar noch dabei, wie ich mich einer Dame, der ich gerade vorgestellt wurde, um die Schulter herumspiele, während meine Lippen irgendeine zarte Ausflucht formulieren, um den Sog, der mich in den Rücken meiner Gesprächspartnerin zerrt, gesellschaftlich zu rechtfertigen;<sup>27</sup>

This episode serves to prove that there is still hope. The narrator has not been completely stripped of his feelings by the club.

At the end of “Ich suchte eine Frau” the narrator has still managed to keep a small part of himself alive. The final scene stresses this point. When the other members discuss closing the doors of the club to the outside world, this idea is quickly refuted by the narrator. The narrator is still capable of

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<sup>26</sup> Walser 20.

<sup>27</sup> Walser 21.

manipulating the situation. He pumps up the members' ego by talking about the, "mächtigen Schoß unseres Vereins"<sup>28</sup>. He is successful in allowing an open-door policy and he ends the story with, "Ich glaube, darauf darf ich stolz sein, denn wie anders sollten wir je zu neuen Mitgliedern kommen!"<sup>29</sup> which ultimately illustrates that he will continue searching for his love. There is a 'Happy Ending' in this short story because it is obvious that the narrator has kept a small portion of himself: his love, alive.

In the next two short stories from Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus, "Der Umzug" and "Die letzte Matinee", Walser explores how both narrators have been made social outcasts by their friends, colleagues, and families. Despite every attempt to fit in socially and to belong to the inside group, they fail and are forced to become outsiders. The moment their wives join the social collective, they even end up rejecting their husbands, believing them to be misfits and catastrophically forfeit their love for them. In the end these two narrators stand truly alone. In a relatively recent article commemorating Martin Walser's 70th Birthday, the Deutschland magazine published an essay by Jochen Hieber in which he addressed Walser's literary perspective as a writer who tries to relate to people and their surroundings. Walser is concerned with the failures of the individual and Hieber quotes Walser writing, "...only someone who lacks

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<sup>28</sup> Walser 21.

<sup>29</sup> Walser 21.

something has something to say.”<sup>30</sup> In these last two short stories from the 1955 collection, Walser concentrates on the shortcomings of the narrators. These narrators often suffer because they have not lost their humanity, unlike those who are assimilated by the social group.

In “Der Umzug” the narrator is made a complete outcast. Gerda is the main character who ostracises her husband, but Gerda represents the clan. In this way the criticism is directed at the whole group and not at any one individual. Right from the beginning Gerda desires to become just like the aristocratic neighbours living near her uncle. Even before inheriting the apartment Gerda often visited her uncle. This proves her willingness to surround herself with this environment. She does not like living in the impoverished streets because she believes she desires a better life. In fact, when the narrator and she move into her dead uncle’s apartment, she “fand keine Zeit mehr, sich von unseren bisherigen Nachbarn zu verabschieden.”<sup>31</sup> Whereas the narrator feels genuine “Mitleid”<sup>32</sup> for the old neighbours, Gerda cannot be bothered to say even good-bye. Walser stylistically illustrates this contrast by having Gerda’s response follow immediately after the narrator’s pity. The lack of human compassion is apparent.

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<sup>30</sup> Jochen Hieber, “Martin Walser.” Deutschland No. 3 (Bonn: Societäts-Verlag, 1997)

<sup>31</sup> Walser 25.

<sup>32</sup> Walser 25.

The narrator, who still keeps his humanity and optimism, believes that the move into Gerda's dead uncle's massive apartment will improve their lives. This desire simply shows the naivety of the narrator. This expression of hope or expectation is short lived. The protagonist's 'Erwartungshöhe' is ironically shortened stylistically by Walser in a sentence in which his high expectation is shortened merely to a four word sentence: "Das war ein Aufschwung."<sup>33</sup> It is obvious that they will not be happy, and therefore this idea is conveyed in the extremely brief sentence.

Another brief sentence occurs again later in this story when the protagonist is hopeful for a good relationship with his new neighbours. He believes his own physical movements will bring the cold, plastered faces alive and therefore result in a wholehearted handshake in the street. Once again two brief sentences mimic the short life expectancy of his wish. His hope and success are described as, "So meine Hoffnung. Aber umsonst."<sup>34</sup> These two tiny sentences subtly reveal the message that this wish will never be attained.

In their new home the narrator is quickly made an outcast. The new neighbours: the aristocratic insiders, do not make him feel at home, but instead creep slowly away from him. A lot of attention is given to the life style of the aristocratic insiders and the small details illustrate their bizarre life style.

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<sup>33</sup> Walser 25.

<sup>34</sup> Walser 28.

Perhaps the most funny parody is the episode where the neighbours are eating. Their grotesque eating habits are satirically attacked. The neighbours sit so stiff that they cannot bend themselves at all to eat. All of their food must be pumped inside them. The narrator describes this scene as, "Ich vermutete, daß ihnen mit solchem Röhrenwerk die kostbare Nahrung ins Innere gepumpt wurde."<sup>35</sup> The attack is continued by examining how they retreat back into their homes. The neighbours are sucked inside their apartments. The simplest of activities are avoided by this group. This leitmotiv of being 'sucked' is introduced several times throughout this short story. Later the neighbours are compared to a snail which sucks its head back inside its shell. The narrator describes the scene, "...die seltsamen Nachbarn [ließen] sich von ihren Häusern einsaugen, so fließend, wie eine Schnecke sich bedächtig in ihren verhärteten Schutz zurücknimmt, wenn ihre empfindlichen Fühler es wollen."<sup>36</sup>

The narrator also depicts the neighbours faces with a horrifying description. Their faces are made of "Schlafgips" and "Totenkalk"<sup>37</sup>. The narrator exposes the strange physical features of these neighbours with contradictory terms, since the neighbours have been assigned inanimate characteristics such as gypsum and limestone. However, these unusual traits

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<sup>35</sup> Walser 26.

<sup>36</sup> Walser 28.

<sup>37</sup> Walser 28.

dynamically stress their weirdness. They share similar cold features with the building. In this light they have become a part of their surroundings. Ultimately their environment is described as a “Zerrbild des Natürlichen”<sup>38</sup>. This distorted picture of nature is them. They have destroyed all life including the bushes, trees, and birds and replaced them all with an elaborate cast iron structure. The narrator’s poignancy reaches its height when he describes this world as “...ganz ohne Atem”<sup>39</sup>.

A major statute of this collective is to ignore or degrade those who do not measure up to its stature. Once again much focus is placed on Gerda because she is the one who has willingly forfeited happiness with her husband to join this grotesque group. Gerda is especially cruel to her husband. Her callousness starts right from the beginning of the story by degrading her husband and making him feel bad about himself and his job. Right from the start her lack of tolerance of her husband and her embarrassment of him are conveyed in her actions and utterances. There is only one occasion when Gerda’s speech is placed in parentheses. Walser does this deliberately to emphasize clearly her malicious ways. In her only quoted comment she explains how humiliated she feels about her husband’s job. She says, “Ich geniere mich so vor den Leuten.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Walser 27.

<sup>39</sup> Walser 27.

<sup>40</sup> Walser 22.

She does not get away with this callousness, but instead her cruelty is satirically pointed out time and time again. It is obvious that Gerda does not think that her husband is her equal, so in one episode the narrator plays the role of a humble husband who desperately attempts to please his persistently demanding wife. In this episode the narrator bends some abstruse objects and Gerda seems to be satisfied with his progress and smiles contentedly. Gerda is happy because she believes that she now has a good chance to become part of the snobby elite group. She tells her husband that she will write to her parents and inform them that her husband is now worthy of their daughter.

Gerda's personality is unmasked in a caricature which clearly shows the author's abhorrence of this trait which is rampant amongst this aristocratic clan. Like the ostentatious insiders she nit-picks the actions of her husband. An unusual visual picture of her examining her husband is painted through rarely used button holes. Her inspection of her husband is so intense it appears as though "...ihre Augen sahen mich nur noch wie durch gut eingefasste, wenig benutzte Knopflöcher an."<sup>41</sup>

Later in "Der Umzug" the relationship between the narrator and the insiders worsens when Gerda can no longer tolerate her husband at all. Gerda and the new neighbours make the narrator feel totally unwelcome. When Gerda ridicules her husband for not manoeuvring his bicycle the right way Walser is

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<sup>41</sup> Walser 22.



actually attacking satirically her ridiculing. The narrator reports how she always orders him around, saying, “Jeden Tag gab sie mir neue Anweisungen, wie ich das Fahrrad vors Tor zu schieben habe, wie ich mit der Hand das Tor zu öffnen und wie ich es zu schließen habe.”<sup>42</sup> Besides complaining about his inability to guide his bike she more frequently voices her embarrassment for his job. The narrator observes his wife’s facial features which grossly exhibit her lack of compassion towards her husband. He zooms in on her mouth and eyes, and explains how, “Sie sprach, ohne die Lippen zu bewegen. Ihre Augen hatten allen Glanz verloren.”<sup>43</sup> It appears as though Gerda has lost her life. Her eyes, as a result of affiliating with the lifeless neighbours, no longer sparkle but are lifeless.

Despite Gerda’s and the new neighbours’ lack of interest to assimilate the narrator into their world, the narrator desperately tries to comprehend what has happened to cause this metamorphosis in them. He still has his humanity and he cares especially for his wife. This is why he tries to understand the change in his wife and the cold behaviour of the neighbours. Here the subconsciousness of the narrator is explored in order to show how he interprets what is occurring around him. The narrator’s prognosis is a disease, “für die ich [the narrator]

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<sup>42</sup> Walser 29.

<sup>43</sup> Walser 29.

keinen Namen gehört hatte.”<sup>44</sup> He surrealistically describes how the disease must have penetrated through their apartment wall, just as it did with the neighbours’ walls. Then the disease must have infected Gerda with its tenacious slowness. Although on the one hand this horrifying image appears comical because the narrator stretches the confines of reality to explain the transformation, it is really quite serious because a disease has infected the mental and physical state of this collective.

Near the end of this short story the narrator tries one last time to be accepted by the clan. He tries to let the ‘disease’ infect him so that his agile movements may be slowed down. However, the narrator is not to become like the others and this is obvious when the narrator can only stretch out like a shadow of a snail on the apartment wall. Whereas the new neighbours are portrayed as snails, the narrator can only become a shadow of one. Therefore the narrator cannot transform into a full fledged snail. He is left alone, isolated by the others.

“Der Umzug”, however, does end with a ‘Happy Ending’, at least for the narrator. Not only is the narrator not assimilated by the others, he has no shame for his job at the workshop. Nobody, not even his daughter, can convince him to think badly about his work. The narrator seems to be much happier now and

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<sup>44</sup> Walser 29.

this is elucidated through the repetition of his outburst “Pfui Teufel”<sup>45</sup>. The last time the narrator used this expression of exasperation he was at his wit’s end, but now it is a sign of strength and resistance against those who do not accept him. The narrator is now an emotionally stronger individual who protests the grotesque nature of the lifeless collective around him. Unlike her husband, Gerda is forever lost amongst the compassionless neighbours. The moment she compromised her life with her husband for the neighbours, she lost her humanity.

The last short story from the 1955 collection, “Die letzte Matinee”, deals too with the tragedy of alienation. Once again the narrator struggles to be accepted by those around him. But once again he is made an outcast. It is transparent that Martin Walser favours the narrator in this story by exposing the cruelty of the collective. In “Die letzte Matinee” the routine of the avid *matinée*-buffs is clearly attacked because they dedicate all of their time watching *matinées*, congregating with other devotees to discuss and analyse the film, dressing in the communally acceptable fashions, wearing their hair in the appropriate style, etc. Through the use of unusually long, complex sentences with numerous co-ordinate and subordinate clauses, together with many relative clauses, the ridiculousness of this group is revealed. The opening sentence immediately recreates the grotesque world of these people. The narrator describes how, “Aus fetten schwarzen Wolkenwülsten, die über der letzten Szene

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<sup>45</sup> Walser 32.

aufgezogen waren, schob sich grellweiß, an den Rändern zerfranst, das Wort: Fin; es war ein französischer Film gewesen."<sup>46</sup> This sentence begins with a detailed description of the clouds; they are black, fat and bulging, followed by the observation of a word laminating through these clouds. This sentence, like the *matinée*-buffs' pretentiousness, seems to bulge. This opening scene illustrates the grotesque world of the avid *matinée*-goer.

In the second paragraph the narrator examines typical *matinée*-goers' traits, by focusing primarily on his wife who has always belonged to this group. The narrator discusses Inga's background, saying:

Inga gehört seit ihrer frühen Jugend zu den Matineebesuchern, ihre Augen, die Augen jedes Matineehasen, bestehen den Wechsel vom Kinoraum ins Sonnenlicht ohne Zwinkern; eine Routine, die ich mir in all den unzähligen Matineen, zu denen ich Inga in den vier Jahren unserer Ehe begleiten mußte, nicht anzueignen vermochte.<sup>47</sup>

Here an aspect of this clan's personality is represented through the close examination of Inga's eyes. Inga can easily adjust her eyes to the sudden change in lighting. The narrator goes so far as to describe this trait as a 'routine' which all avid *matinée*-goers can easily perform. However, in the text, the sentence does not end here. Instead, Walser has appropriately inserted a semicolon and concludes the sentence by explaining that the protagonist is incapable of adjusting his own eyes like the others. Through the use of the semicolon the

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<sup>46</sup> Walser 87.

<sup>47</sup> Walser 87.

narrator has not only been separated from the previous part of the sentence but also from the other *matinée*-buffs. Although it appears at first that the narrator is shown to be ridiculous on account of his disability, this is truly not the meaning Walser is trying to get across. Here the wife and the group are the image of satire. She is the one who is blind since she does not see the narrator's love for her. She is also the one who is oblivious to the world around her just like the other *matinée*-goers.

Already within the first two paragraphs Walser has set the ground work for his criticism. The narrator who seemingly appears to be an idiot while the *matinée*-goers try to be perfect is paradoxical. Throughout the whole story Walser concentrates in exposing the inhumanity of this clan and the humanity of the narrator.

Focusing only on the narrator, Walser creates a colossal sentence in which all the faults and flaws of the narrator are uncovered; however, the *matinée*-goers are satirically attacked. Walser writes:

Einen Mann zu haben, der immer noch das Gesicht zu Grimassen verzog und wie ein Säugling zwinkerte, wenn er aus dem Kino trat, der hastig die sich immer wieder erneuernden Tränen aus dem Gesicht wischte und so gut wie kein Wort zur Diskussion beitrug, die noch unter der Kino-Tür aufbrandete, einen solchen Mann zu haben, war für Inga den anderen *Matineefreunden* gegenüber peinlich genug.<sup>48</sup>

Beginning with a 'zu + Infinitiv' construction followed by three relative clauses

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<sup>48</sup> Walser 87-8.

that detail the problematic behaviour of the narrator, Walser initiates a strong argument listing all the failings and concludes with a second 'zu + Infinitiv' sentence which is basically a repetition of the first. However, the second 'zu+ Infinitiv' introduces the final judgement of Inga and the other *matinée*-buffs. This sentence mimics the thinking process and the critical nature of these individuals and how they have arranged the faults in order that are embarrassing for them. They have little tolerance. By emphasizing the narrator's faults, Walser is really exposing the *matinée*-goers lack of tolerance.

Now it is important to investigate how Walser's diction and his choice of vocabulary frequently intensify the physical traits of this group. In "Die letzte Matinee", much attention is focused on describing the *matinée*-goers' appearance. Walser's obsession of precise detail can be easily seen here. For example, words such as "Uniform"<sup>49</sup> and "Kostüme"<sup>50</sup> are employed to depict the type of clothing the *matinée*-goers wear. These words are unusual but this is Walser's objective. These words show their pretentiousness. A little later on the narrator comments on how all the *matinée*-buffs belong together because their apparel and hairdos all look the same. He explains, "In Kleidung und Haartracht war diese schon so deutlich, daß selbst der unvoreingenommene Passant auf den Gedanken kommen konnte, es handle sich hier um eine Art

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<sup>49</sup> Walser 96.

<sup>50</sup> Walser 96.

Uniform.”<sup>51</sup> Any impartial passer-by would easily perceive them as a group. This comical caricature is heightened to its absurdity when particular pieces of their clothing are focused on. The bombardment of detail serves to express emphatically their ludicrous behaviour of these *matinée-goers*. Although some *matinée-goers* make their “Sackleinen”<sup>52</sup> into an overhanging blouse, others turn it into a pair of pants. No matter how differently they wear the burlaps it is easily recognizable that they are all made out of the same mould. There is obviously no individualism in this group.

The satirical parody is strengthened by the observation of the men’s hair styling routine. Like machines, the men prepare their hair. Each hand has a specific function. Walser writes,

...auch...die Frisuren der männlichen Matineebesucher durchweg verrieten, daß sich jeder zu Hause hingesezt, in die Linke einen Handspiegel genommen hatte und mit der freibleibenden Rechten begonnen hatte, die Haare bis auf einen winzigen in sich nicht mehr gestuften Rest abzuschneiden.<sup>53</sup>

Each detail is painstakingly given in order to reveal the egotism of the men. Even the tiniest strand of hair must feather with the rest of the hair or must be cut off. Every strand of hair has its place. Their obsession concerning their hair is quite comical.

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<sup>51</sup> Walser 96.

<sup>52</sup> Walser 96.

<sup>53</sup> Walser 96.

The women certainly do not escape the criticism. He dedicates some of his longest and most complex sentences to illustrate the grotesque physical features of these female buffs. These sentences are like graphs bombarded with satirical commentary. By constructing such colossal sentences which do not allow the reader the chance to breathe, the criticism builds up. For example, Walser painstakingly makes vivid the characteristics of the girls' hair who are accompanying the painter. The description of their hair's texture, its appearance, how it is combed, and the problem of combing it too far over the forehead satirically depicts their mannerism. Their hair is described as:

So dicht und glatt waren die Haare der beiden Mädchen und so weit über die Stirne herabgekämmt, daß man von den Augen nichts mehr sah; wollten die Mädchen sehen, mit wem sie sprachen, so gingen sie unwillkürlich ein bißchen in die Knie, machten sich kleiner, als könnten sie so besser durchsehen unter der pechschwarzen Haarblende.<sup>54</sup>

After the semicolon Walser commences a lengthy exaggeration as to the instinctive reaction of the girls. Whenever they want to see their interlocutor they must perform their ritual of bending the knees. However, the sentence does not end here but concludes with an 'Irrealer Vergleichssatz' (unreal comparative sentence). It can be concluded that these girls are not capable of really seeing their discussion partner since they are too self-absorbed and their hair allows them to maintain and protect this self-interest. Immediately following this long sentence, another colossal sentence starts to probe into the painter's behaviour.

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<sup>54</sup> Walser 88-9.



The painter is not spared a satirical description of his mannerisms--especially his hand gestures--are explicitly detailed.

Der junge, noch bartlose Herr, den sie zwischen sich gestellt hatten, bedeckte, wenn er seine Sätze formulierte, die Augen mit der flachen Hand und nahm sie erst weg, wenn er zu Ende gesprochen hatte und nun die Reaktionen der Umstehenden beobachtete; dazu führte er die Hand von den Augen zum Kinn und stürzte dieses so lange in die gespannte Gabel von Daumen und Zeigefinger, bis seine Diskussionspartner ihm geantwortet hatten; setzte er zum nächsten Satz an, schwebte die Hand wieder nach oben, um die Augen des sich nun ganz auf sich selbst Konzentrierenden aufs neue zu bedecken.<sup>55</sup>

The painter, like his colleagues, simply does not remove his hand from his eyes before he is done talking or a few minutes after his speech, but only when he completes his explanation. Once done, he wishes to inspect the expression and reaction of his interlocutors. While observing their reaction, the painter is busy manoeuvring his hand, resting it between his thumb and index finger. This parody is humorous on account of the painter's hand gestures. The hand movements are also quite mechanical. Through the use of several subordinate clauses, relative clauses and the 'um + zu' construction, Walser forces all attention towards this individual's robotic hand gestures.

Several pages into this short story there is a brief interruption in the *matinée-goer* story line when the narrator and his wife return home to find their apartment invaded by strangers. Here another social group is introduced which is not as refined as the *matinée-goers*. Emphasis is placed on the ridiculous

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<sup>55</sup> Walser 89.

slurping noise made by these invaders while eating soup. This is accomplished by imitating the audible sounds that would be heard in the scene with the appropriate words. The green musclemen “hatten die Rüssel in eine Schüssel gesenkt, aus der sie laut schmatzend Zuckersuppe schlürften.”<sup>56</sup>

Even the various noises during the cleaning-up phase of the women are carefully reproduced in the words. For example, the “Eisen und Blech klapperten”<sup>57</sup>. A clashing metallic noise is generated while a “schrill”<sup>58</sup> can be heard from the glass and porcelain as they are placed into the water. And finally, once everything is submerged under the water, the only noise remaining is the gurgling. Walser writes, “...das Geräusch [brach] glucksend ins Dunkle.”<sup>59</sup> These elaborate sounds recreate this bizarre female washing fury which is like a Kafkaesque nightmare to the *matinée*-goers. Unable to tolerate such rustic behaviour the narrator and, especially, Inga leave their home and join the group of *matinée*-goers on the street.

The narrator reflects on this episode with the strangers and tries to understand what has happened in his home. The narrator’s mind slips into a unusual analogy where he sees a lit up face of an ornithologist. At first this image seems quite strange and out of place but upon closer examination it can be

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<sup>56</sup> Walser 94.

<sup>57</sup> Walser 92.

<sup>58</sup> Walser 92.

<sup>59</sup> Walser 92.

seen that it serves a higher purpose. The narrator is similar to the polar seagull which is out of place amongst the swarm of dalmatian storks. He does not belong among the *matinée-goers*.

Now, this short story reveals how the so-called insiders are actually the outsiders. The *matinée-goers*' world is physically destroyed when they do not have a place to watch their films. But more importantly the *matinée-goers* are truly not even aware of what is happening around them. They are oblivious to their environment. They are relocated in the most unusual and unimaginable place: a train freight hall. The freight hall, "...stank nach Fisch, und auf dem Boden glänzten und schwabbelten dickflüssige Lachen."<sup>60</sup> Despite the fishy odour, the *matinée-clan* go about their business unaware of its stench. They even prefer being in the dark, since, "nicht einmal Licht wurde verlangt."<sup>61</sup> This comical and horrific scene reveals their ignorance.

In the conclusion of "Die letzte Matinee", the narrator offers his own opinion as to the *matinée-goers*' outcome. The second last sentence reads, "Matineebesucher sind sie und bleiben sie, auch in der Güterhalle: Vögel, die ohne Flügel zur Welt gekommen sind, Apostel, die keinen Christus gefunden haben."<sup>62</sup> No matter where they are they will stay the same way. They will not

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<sup>60</sup> Walser 97.

<sup>61</sup> Walser 98.

<sup>62</sup> Walser 102.

change. They will keep their pretentiousness underneath their cold hard shells, rejecting those who do not measure up to their standards.

Nine years later Martin Walser compiled some more short stories and entitled this collection, Lügendgeschichten. One of these stories is “Bolzer, ein Familienleben” in which the premise of the story revolves around a group of voyeurs gawking at a married couple who weekly engage in sadomasochistic activities. In an unusual story line Walser shows how these neighbours have willingly formed the spying club. In this short story the narrator is part of this social group of neighbours. Walser uses the narrator as a vehicle to reveal the harmful “diseases” of the antisocial group. This social group depersonalizes its members stripping them of any human qualities. In addition, not only is there little dialogue between the characters, there is a blatant lack of compassion for others. All of these ills are presented through the narrator who acts as the catalyst reporting all this information to the reader.

Firstly, it is important to examine how the narrator relates to those around him. Although he certainly does not voice his opinions openly, he definitely nurtures them inside his mind. For example, the fat neighbour who wears a shaving-brush pinned to his hat is made into a caricature. The fact that this individual still wears a shaving-brush on his hat is described as “zum Überfluß”<sup>63</sup> by the narrator. Furthermore, his rustic mannerisms are depicted in his speech

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<sup>63</sup> Walser 197.

patterns. It becomes quite evident that the shaving-brush man lacks a refined vocabulary. A few times he uses the colloquialism “Heute packt er’s”<sup>64</sup>. He even resorts to calling Mr. Bolzer names, for example he calls him a “Schlappschwanz”<sup>65</sup>: a typical colloquial term for ‘weakling’. In the end this silly, fat man is depersonalized and reduced to an object. Therefore throughout the entire story this peculiar individual is addressed as “der Gamsbart”<sup>66</sup> or the shaving-brush. In this light it appears as though the only thing he can offer to the group is his ‘Gamsbart’.

The ‘Gamsbart’ is not the only depersonalized character in this antisocial group. Even the ancient lady is always thought of as the “schiffbrüchige Dame”<sup>67</sup> because her clothes hang wet off her and she feels damp to everyone. The other senior citizen is portrayed as the “einarmige Rentner”<sup>68</sup> on account that he lets the stump of his right hand do all the talking for him. Even the young chaps are depersonalized. In fact they and their actions are often seen as being wild and untamed, like animals. At the beginning their motorcycle tires are described as “Tierschnauzen”<sup>69</sup> and later in the story they start to howl when

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<sup>64</sup> Walser 197.

<sup>65</sup> Walser 200.

<sup>66</sup> Walser 197.

<sup>67</sup> Walser 200.

<sup>68</sup> Walser 198.

<sup>69</sup> Walser 198.

Mrs. Bolzer hits her husband in the face. The narrator explains their behaviour, saying, “Die auf den Motorrädern johlen jetzt.”<sup>70</sup> Even the two Bolzers are depersonalized. They are only viewed as sadomasochists who beat each other up regularly. Mr. Bolzer is consequently depicted as “eine uralte Holzhackmaschine”<sup>71</sup> which strikes with great up and down movements, whereas his wife’s swiftness is lightning-like.

A major contributing factor for this depersonalization of the members in this neighbourhood is the obvious lack of communication and compassion between them. As a matter of fact this social group breeds antisocial behaviour. This is very clear at the end of the short story when the spectacle at the Bolzers has come to an end and most of the neighbours have left. Only the narrator, the ‘schiffbrüchige Dame’, and the ‘einarmiger Rentner’ stay behind to watch. The narrator clearly states that the three of them do not talk to one another, “Wir sprechen nichts. Wir schauen zu.”<sup>72</sup> Even after the dramatic performance of the Bolzers they have nothing to say to one another. Earlier when the ‘schiffbrüchige Dame’ asks about the composition of the whip being used, the narrator’s only response is, “Fragt sich selber. Nicht mich.”<sup>73</sup> Communication is not sought after. And when someone voices their opinion, it is met with

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<sup>70</sup> Walser 202.

<sup>71</sup> Walser 202.

<sup>72</sup> Walser 204.

<sup>73</sup> Walser 200.

contempt. When the ‘Gamsbart’ blurts out his viewpoint, the narrator thinks to himself, “Das verachte ich gründlich. Zuletzt kommen...und dann gleich Urteile von sich geben.”<sup>74</sup>

Finally this short story shows how the loss of compassion equates to a loss of humanity. Besides depersonalizing everyone and despising any communication there seems to be little kindness towards anyone else. Everyone simply enjoys the spectacle at the Bolzers and does not concern themselves with the seriousness of the situation. At one point the narrator mentions that they as a group should be prepared to barge inside the Bolzer’s home and rip Mr. Bolzer’s hand from his wife’s neck. But this group only plays the role of “Schauspieler”<sup>75</sup> watching on the “Sportplatz”<sup>76</sup>. They cannot be bothered to intervene. In fact, any noise that interrupts them from actually hearing the beating is detested. The narrator questions the presence of the police officers when he sees them not stopping the raucousness caused by the motorcycle chaps. He rhetorically asks, “Wozu sind eigentlich die Polizisten da, wenn sie nicht einschreiten gegen dieses Chorgebrüll. Man hört ja nicht einmal mehr das Klatschen der Schläge.”<sup>77</sup> In the end, all the neighbours leave the scene without doing a thing. It is very evident that this social force is destructive and

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<sup>74</sup> Walser 197.

<sup>75</sup> Walser 199.

<sup>76</sup> Walser 199.

<sup>77</sup> Walser 201.

disgusting.

In closing, Martin Walser didactically exposes the evil that is present in the social organism which forces a compromise of personal autonomy and lastly a tragic loss of compassion and humanity. As the catalyst, the narrator allows the reader to view this grotesque world of the social collective. On one hand many individuals seem attracted to the social group, believing that it will enrich their lives. Through many stylistic ways Walser reveals successfully this dehumanizing disease of the collective. However, at the same time the author refrains from giving answers or solutions to this problem. He leaves this task to the reader. In an 1974 essay, Wer ist ein Schriftsteller?, Walser analyses the function of various types of literature. Here he makes a contrast between religious antidotes and his works. The former offers disclosure through its conclusions. Walser writes, "Die Religion stellt ja unsere Lage nicht dar, sondern beantwortet sie."<sup>78</sup> Martin Walser's main objective, however, is to explore this world, reveal the social problems, and to leave his poignant message with the reader.

In 1970 Bettina Knapp had the opportunity to interview Walser and although the majority of the discussion focussed on his plays rather than his short stories, Walser revealed an interesting personal quality about himself to her. He openly objected to being compared with elite writers such as Brecht, Weiss, and

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<sup>78</sup> Günter Busch, ed., Martin Walser: Wer ist ein Schriftsteller? (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979) 39.



Grass, stating that his writing is not of the same calibre because writing is not easy but difficult for him. Despite this modest revelation Martin Walser has certainly contributed many literary masterpieces that clearly present the social dilemmas of the antisocial and anti-individual collective.

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