

# The Search for Meaning and the Illusion of Escaping: Martin Walser's *Runaway Horse* – a Novella about the Midlife Crisis

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*This article is an analysis of Martin Walser's novella Runaway Horse (1977) about the midlife crisis. It describes the search for meaning of a man in his mid-fifties, his imprisonment in futility and the illusion of a possible flight from this abyss. With this novella, Walser embarked on the broad field of philosophy, the ambiguity of postmodern existence and the questioning of traditional lifestyles. In addition, Walser is one of the first writers to artistically address the challenges and crises of age—especially in times of demographic change and the “aging of society,” a highly controversial topic. The question that runs through Walser's novella is: how to live and how to love? Walser does not offer simple answers to all these questions, but he exacerbates the problems that we perceive only vaguely in our everyday life, at the highest level in literature and philosophy. That is why Walser's characters appear so credible and why Runaway Horse represents a palpable example of the expressive power of literature.*

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Many of the greatest minds in literary history have written their masterpieces driven by various reasons such as inner conflicts, the race against time and illness, existentialist crisis and so on. Friedrich Nietzsche's work was created in the course of such a struggle, as was the “In search of lost time” by Marcel Proust and other works of genius minds.

Although Martin Walser's oeuvre did not emerge from such a dramatic state of creation, his writings are also the result of what he called “a response to a lack” (Walser, “Sprache, sonst nichts”)—the attempt to come to terms with his inner problems and conflicts through the

process of writing. The novella *Runaway Horse* marks an important turning point in Walser's writings, who till then fought a hard battle with the literary critics. Walser's bestseller depicts the search of meaning of the protagonists in their mid-fifties and the struggle that accompanies this stage of life. In psychology this kind of phenomenon is defined as the "midlife crisis."

This paper discusses the novella *Runaway Horse* (1977) by Martin Walser in the light of the midlife crisis. The first part introduces a brief history of the phenomenon midlife crisis, followed by the origins of the story that present the link to it. Furthermore, the paper attempts to analyze the different interpretative approaches and motifs that appear in the novella and question their significance for "decoding" it. In one hand we have the literary motive that represent the possible parallels to Goethe's *Wahlverwandschaften* (1809) and on the other hand the potential influence of the philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, mentioned several times in the story.

## The phenomenon of the mid-life crisis

The popular term midlife-crises was first coined by the psychologist Elliot Jaques in 1965. In his essay "Death and the midlife-crisis" he analyzed the lives of creative geniuses and identified changes of style and decline in productivity "around the age of 35" (Jaques 502). Thus, he came to the conclusion that "the paradox is of that entering the prime of life, the stage of fulfilment, but at the same time the prime and fulfilment are dated" (506). The "crucial feature" of the mid-life phase, so Jaques, "is the reality and inevitability of one's eventual personal death" (506).

The psychologist Ursula Lehr defined the physical and psychological changes in this phase of life as follows, comparing the respective changes in midlife crisis with those of puberty:

Psychoanalytical literature as well as literature about developmental psychology often describe youth as a stage of life especially rich in conflict. After this phase of "storm and stress," there is said to be a stage of stabilization, of settling down. Only with the climacteric, in the fifth respectively the sixth decade of life, it would in turn be replaced by a new phase of crisis. Here we speak of a "midlife crisis" (Lehr 145).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sowohl in der psychoanalytischen Literatur als auch in der entwicklungspsychologischen Fachliteratur wird immer wieder das Jugendalter als besonders konfliktfrei-

Both phases have in common wide-ranging hormonal changes: the beginning and the end of the reproductive age. Apart from the changes in the hormone balance, there are also far-reaching changes in the social environment that should not be forgotten (145–146). Thus, the midlife crisis is a painful moment of self-awareness when the individual realizes for the first time that its bodily fitness starts to decline and that the energetic years are already behind him.

Only today's expectations concerning the quality of life, professional success and social recognition make the concept of the midlife crisis even conceivable. These high claims are the basis of disappointment and the feeling of personal failure if, in the end, the high hopes and dreams about the future cannot be fulfilled. The physical fitness slowly decreases and the limits of one's own aspirations become visible. Especially men of that age became increasingly aware that the future was no longer an endless field of possibilities. At this point, there is a new phase of self-awareness in many people, often accompanied by self-doubts or even deep crises of meaning.

In the German language, the notion of the midlife crisis emerged in the late seventies. In 1977, Hermann Schreiber, a columnist for the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published a voluminous book entitled *Midlife-Crisis: die Krise in der Mitte des Lebens*, which triggered a real boom, so that the newly discovered "crisis of masculinity" was on everyone's lips (Kiesel 125). Since the term of the midlife crisis was coined it turned into a broadly recognized concept that found a place in everyday vocabulary as well as in pop culture and literature.

The German author Martin Walser has probably deliberately jumped on the latest trend with his novel *Runaway Horse* (1977). There are important issues linked in the *Runaway Horse*: "self-confidence" or identity crisis, relationship and "sexuality crisis," and "balance crisis" that can be subsumed under the term "midlife crisis." The protagonists of this novel experience these "symptoms." When being asked if he consciously choose to deal literary with the current flow, the author—not surprisingly—denied it. Walser once countered such speculations rather shrewdly:

When those two books, *Jenseits der Liebe* and *Runaway Horse* were discussed, there was always the talk about the midlife crisis. I cannot help it. I was simply

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cher Lebensabschnitt geschildert, dem dann – nach diesen "Sturm- und Drang-Jahren" – eine Phase der Stabilisierung, des Zu-Ruhe-Kommens folge, die erst wieder im Klimakterium, im 5./6. Lebensjahrzehnt, durch eine neue Krisenzeit abgelöst werde. Man spricht hier von einer "Krise der Lebensmitte."

at an age when you write such books and those people who brought up this talk about the midlife crisis most probably were at that age too. They might call it midlife crisis whereas I call it *Jenseits der Liebe* and *Runaway Horse* (qtd. in Kiesel 125-126).<sup>2</sup>

The speculations did not end here. It was also suspected that Walser had also taken up another current topic of late “postmodernity”: “the ‘postmodern’ state of mind, which manifests itself among other things in a tendency towards non-commitment and change of roles, towards hedonism and the aestheticization of life” (Kiesel 126). These characteristics were embodied in the figure of Klaus Buch and *Runaway Horse* appeared as a book of reflection on the “postmodern way of life.” This interpretation might seem a little superficial. Hedonism and the urge for an increased aestheticization of life are by no means phenomena that only apply to postmodernism.

The ups and downs of cultural trends and fashion regularly involve the questioning of social ideals and the goals of life set by the outside world. The prime example of this is the so-called “literary decadence” of the late nineteenth century. If postmodernity was limited to the characteristics cited above, one would soon encounter great difficulties with regard to the demarcation from other epochs of cultural history. In *Runaway Horse*, Walser addresses these phenomena, but he also goes beyond that. Postmodernity is moving towards differentiation and is a response aimed at greater plurality on the tendencies towards uniformization of the preceding modern age. In this sense, there is little to suggest that Klaus Buch can be seen as a representative of “postmodernity.” By contrast, the life crises of the other protagonists involved are typically “postmodern.” Although they are materially secured and can fulfill practically any wish, they are nevertheless threatened by an inner emptiness, feel crushed in the “machine” of society, and have thoughts of escape.

Furthermore, there is also the philosophical aspect embodied in Walser’s writing, which might be helpful in interpreting the novel. In 1972, while doing research for a study about irony, Walser started reading Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s work *Either/Or*, published in

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<sup>2</sup> Als die zwei Bücher “Jenseits der Liebe” und “Ein fliehendes Pferd” besprochen wurden, da wurde immer von dieser *midlife crisis* geredet. Da kann ich ja nichts dafür. Ich bin halt auch in dem Alter, in dem solche Bücher entstehen, und die Leute, die dieses Gerede von *midlife crisis* heraufgebracht haben, sind wahrscheinlich auch in dem Alter. Sie nennen das halt mal *midlife crisis*, ich nenne es halt “Jenseits der Liebe” und “Ein fliehendes Pferd.”

1843, became the main point of reference of existential analysis and even influenced writers and philosophers like Camus, Sartre, Koeppen, Dürrenmatt, and others. There is no wonder that the enthralling philosophical writing could have had an impact on Walser.

In *Either/Or*, the philosopher presents two different ways of life: the aesthetical and the ethical. At the aesthetical level, the individual takes pleasure in happiness, youth and sensuality which attempt to form a synthesis with the feelings like unhappiness, melancholy, and desperation. At the ethical level, the individual openly acknowledges its desperation. In addition, the ethicist “possesses calmness and assurance because its duties are within itself and not outside” (Kierkegaard 213). Kierkegaard describes these two concepts as following:

[T]he aesthetical in a man is that by which he is immediately who he is; the ethical is that whereby he becomes what he becomes (150).

And:

By this I do not intend to say that the man who lives aesthetically does not develop, but he develops by necessity not by freedom, no metamorphosis taken place in him, no infinite movement whereby he reaches the point from whence he becomes what he becomes (189).

As well as:

For he who lives aesthetically sees only possibilities everywhere, they constitute for him the content of the future, whereas he who lives ethically sees tasks everywhere (211).

Furthermore, he stresses that, “every aesthetical life view is despair” (189), and in contrary to it, “the ethicist simply carries through the despair” (192). The principal difference between an ethical and an aesthetical individual, so Kierkegaard, is that “the ethical is transparent to himself and does not live *ins Blaue hinein* as does the aesthetical individual” (216). By acting consciously, and only by choosing itself as an absolute choice, the individual achieves its freedom (188).

As far as Walser’s works are concerned, Kierkegaard’s philosophy offers an interesting insight for *Runaway Horse*. Martin Walser’s main character in *Runaway Horse* cannot stand being confronted with the successful, energetic life of a former friend from school whom he happens to meet on a holiday. He seems to have realized everything of which he himself can only dream. In the end, however, all this turns out to be a mere facade. His former friend struggles with a much worse

midlife crisis than he himself does. The two concepts of Kierkegaard can be applied in analyzing the two antipodal characters, Klaus Buch as an aesthetic individual and Helmut Halm the ethic individual, however, none of them succeeds to choose themselves as an absolute choice and achieve freedom in the Kierkegaardian sense.

### **The origins: A horse that wants to escape the midsummer nightmare**

The novella *Runaway Horse* was written in the summer of 1977, while the then fifty-year-old Martin Walser wrote a much more extensive, but far less significant novel called *Seelenarbeit*. The author himself called it “a summer work that hisses away quickly (eine rasch wegzischende Sommerarbeit)” (Höbel).

But the “hissing away work” became his first real bestseller. Through this novel he succeeded in winning not only the readers but also the critics, thus it became a bridge between him and the “others,” the critics who assigned him the place in the literary business that he was entitled to. Even his long standing “disputing friend” Marcel Reich-Ranicki did not hesitate to praise the book in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and to describe it as “a highlight of the German prose (ein Glanzstück deutscher Prosa)” (Reich-Ranicki, *Martin Walser* 91). He praised Walser as a “master of observations and psychology (Meister der Beobachtungen und der Psychologie),” as a “virtuoso of language (Virtuosen der Sprache)” and was enthusiastic about “his most mature, most beautiful and best book (sein reifstes, schönstens und bestes Buch)” (79). He had “overcome the gossip and regained eloquence (die Geschwätzigkeit überwunden und die Beredsamkeit wiedergewonnen),” his prose “had a seductive or even overwhelming power (eine verführerische oder auch bezwingende Kraft)” (Magenau 353). Strange that these words were uttered by the same man who two years earlier (in 1976) had written a review for F.A.Z. about the book *Jenseits der Liebe* saying that “there were no more sparks in these ashes (in dieser Asche keinen Funken mehr gebe)” (Reich-Ranicki, “Jenseits der Literatur”).

Many critics did not praise the book for its stylistic values, but believed that they had to praise Walser for the fact that, in contrast to his earlier books, he had largely abstained from political statements, “Martin Walser apparently no longer has the ambition to change the world with poetry. He only wants to show a part of this world. You

shouldn't ask more from literature,"<sup>3</sup> uttered Reich-Ranicki (Reich-Ranicki, *Martin Walser* 91). Walser could not remain indifferent to this statement and defended himself in the Swiss *Weltwoche* against such "poisoned praise":

Should the book be just apolitical, simply because there is no boss, no bad entrepreneur here? It is grotesque. When I look at the novella, it does not seem to me to be a private finding of how these two men, Halm and Buch, produce appearances in different ways, live competitive attitudes that in a way eat up a person (Magenau 354–355).<sup>4</sup>

The real engine for this narrative was him "being insulted at this time (Beleidigtsein in dieser Zeit)" (qtd. in Kiesel 116) and *Runaway Horse* allowed him to let out all the anger. In a conversation with the American Germanist Anton Kaes, published in 1984 in the magazine *German Quarterly* under the title "Portrait Martin Walser," Walser reveals what had "irritated" him and prompted him to write such a book:

It was a reaction to a real or imaginary attack from the outside. Can one live the way one lives? To what extent can one feel refuted by others? How weak is one actually? I used to ask such questions for a few years, so to speak in silence. Then, one summer, in 1977, it was too stupid for me and then I responded quickly, wrote a statement, a statement against the attack, a defense against the attack against the counterattack, and so on. It turned out that the attacker was just as weak as the attacked person: that is why it just ended up being so good (Kaes 435).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Walser hat offenbar nicht mehr den Ehrgeiz, mit der Dichtung die Welt zu verändern. Er will nur ein Stück dieser Welt zeigen. Mehr sollte man von Literatur nicht verlangen.

<sup>4</sup> Sollte das Buch nur unpolitisch sein, einfach, weil es hier keinen Chef, keinen bösen Unternehmer gibt? Das ist grotesk. Wenn ich die Novelle anschau, dann scheint mir das kein privater Befund zu sein, wie diese beiden Männer, Halm und Buch, auf verschiedene Weise Schein produzieren, Konkurrenzhaltung leben, die gewissermaßen die Person auffressen.

<sup>5</sup> Es war die Reaktion auf einen wirklichen oder eingebildeten Angriff von außen. Darf man so leben, wie man nun einmal lebt? Wie sehr muß man sich durch andere widerlegt fühlen? Wie schwach ist man eigentlich? Solche Fragen pflegte ich ein paar Jahre lang, ertrug sie sozusagen schweigend. Dann, eines Sommers, 1977, war es mir zu dumm, da reagierte ich und schrieb schnell eine Position hin, den Angriff auf diese Position, die Verteidigung des Angriffs gegen den Gegenangriff der Position usw. Es stellte sich dann heraus, daß der Angreifer genauso schwach war wie der Angegriffene: deshalb ging es gerade noch so gut aus.

Whereas his previous book *Jenseits der Liebe* had turned out to be a low point—Walser got caught up in everyday conflicts and the perspective on the “big picture” of human life was barely visible—the opposite happened in the case of *Runaway Horse*, marking a turning point in Walser’s writing. With this narrative, the author had found the subject of midlife crisis that he portrayed so masterfully in the years that followed. The complicated relationships between the protagonists, the gaping between being and appearance, the desperate search of the parties involved to get their lives under control again, and also to find orientation and support in each other, all this makes *Runaway Horse* a masterpiece that allowed Walser’s extraordinary writing abilities shine in its full pathos. The novella was also a novelty in terms of reception: if the author had fought hard battles with the critics until then, which at times bordered on personal insults, the literary public now unanimously praised him. This represented a completely new situation for the hitherto politicizing and polarizing Walser.

### Storylines in the turmoil of the midlife crisis

What is it all about? We could say: it is about the self-realization of an intellectual in the Germany society, about his attempt to evade its pressure and influence, it is about the loneliness and alienation of the individual in the midst of our everyday life, about his failure and collapse (Reich-Ranicki, *Entgegnungen* 184).<sup>6</sup>

This summary by the literary pundit Marcel Reich-Ranicki offers a good starting point to the plot of the novella. As we will see, Walser this time refrains from direct political comments. Instead, he describes the whole thrust of existential emptiness that life keeps at the ready for us, once the traditional challenges like marriage, children, and finding a job have been overcome. Strangely, it is exactly the success in those areas of life, the creation of a stable, middle-class existence, which triggers a crisis of meaning.

The protagonist Helmut Halm still has about half of his life ahead. However, after having fulfilled the traditional expectations of society, he is haunted by a feeling of emptiness. What new aims can there still

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<sup>6</sup> Worum geht es? Man könnte sagen: um die Selbstverwirklichung des Intellektuellen in der bundesdeutschen Gesellschaft, um seinen Versuch, sich ihrem Druck und Einfluß zu entziehen, um die Vereinsamung und Entfremdung des Individuums inmitten unseres Alltags, um sein Versagen und Scheitern.

be in life? Unconsciously, he yearns for a new beginning in order to escape from the monotony of everyday life. At the same time, this very monotony offers him a sense of safety he does not wish to sacrifice entirely. His life still is quite comfortable after all. The confrontation with a nightmare having come true, a—seemingly—always energetic and active friend from his schooldays, shatter his image of himself as well as his expectations of his future.

Sabine and Helmut Halm, a German couple, like in the past eleven years, spends their holidays in a resort at lake Bodensee. Helmut is thrilled by the unspoiled countryside and passionately likes bird watching. Despite all the beauties of nature, “the most splendid thing about this vacation relationship was its annually increasing but totally detached familiarity” (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 6).

Familiarity instead of passion, love instead of infatuation, routine instead of butterflies in the stomach. What essentially might be regarded as signs of a healthy relationship suddenly feels like a restraining monotony, because the personification of a completely different lifestyle shows up. Klaus Buch, a friend from old school and college days, enters the quiet holidays of the couple, because this year he too spends his holidays there together with his wife Helene. In almost all respects, he is the exact opposite of Helmut. He presents himself as a decisive and successful winner who has achieved pretty much everything in life and now fully enjoys himself. Thereby, he shakes the quiet idyll of the Halms and stirs memories of their long-lost youth. His mere presence reminds Helmut of what he could have achieved in life, but did not due to his lack of energy and ambition. Klaus is a loud and extroverted character and he shows Helmut every single second how boring and devoid of meaning Helmut’s life has become. He awakens him from his lethargy, but this does not make him yearn for a new beginning in life as he is gripped by a feeling of deep desperation. Escaping from this existence devoid of meaning would have been possible, it may indeed still be possible, but he would have to sacrifice everything which has made his life so far this cozy and quiet. Is Klaus a role model for Helmut? Yes and no.

At first glance, the two men seem quite different. Helmut is married, he has two children and he is an established graduate secondary school teacher. Klaus Buch, on the other hand, works as a journalist, is divorced and lives together with the by far younger Helene. While the Buchs rush from one sporting activity to the next, the Halms prefer having a quiet day, reading or watching people from a street side café. These differences become even more obvious by the manner Walser

describes the clothing, the physique and the complexion of the skin of the two couples. The Buchs “appear erotically monopolizing and intimidating at the same time” (Bohn 152). Thereby they raise the fear within Helmut not to be able to fulfill the expectations of society concerning youthfulness, sportiness, strength, and sexual potency, the fear not to be able to keep up with Buch’s lifestyle. On the other hand, he does not even want to, at least most of the time, although at some moments he feels a kind of conflicting admiration for Klaus. His wife Sabine regards the other couple as a refreshing change, an attitude that only increases the unspoken fears of Helmut. An erotic tension is palpable, yet at the same time it reminds Helmut that his wife might take things into her own hands and start an affair with the so much more energetic and youthful Klaus. Distrust, jealousy, and a kind of frustration take hold of him. Klaus Buch fills the, until then, quiet everyday routine of the Halms with activities like a dinner of the two couples, a sailing tour, and hiking. What he sees as Buch’s hyperactivity unnerves Helmut, yet he does not dare to opt out in order to not lose face in front of the others and, above all, his wife. He gets pushed into a role he does not fit in, but he is afraid of appearing to be “an old bore” if he openly addresses the issue or even takes the consequences.

Finally, the novella reaches its climax in two scenes. The first one shows Klaus Buch breaking in a runaway horse. Courageous and forgetting about the risks involved, he simply jumps on the back of the animal and succeeds in forcing his will upon it. There too, the author conjures an interesting picture. Klaus corresponds to the image he wants to project. At the same time, he forces the horse into the constraints of its daily routine, of which the animal wanted to break out. Klaus shows courage bordering to recklessness, but in the end, it is he who prevents the horse from breaking out of the boredom of its existence. Trying to escape from the prison of everyday life, that is exactly what the lifestyle of the Buchs had stood for until then. By contrast, this is exactly Helmut’s greatest fear: the flight from his orderly routine that Klaus does not stop suggesting to him. Now, ironically, it is Klaus who reigns in the animal yearning for freedom. At that moment, Helmut is not yet conscious how symptomatic this scene is for the pitiful existence of his friend: “he was seen to grab the mane, and the next moment he was sitting astride it. The horse galloped off again. But Klaus kept his seat. A small, compact figure. As if part of the horse” (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 61). For the last time in the novella, Klaus is the shining hero. He reflects about his own situation and identifies with the horse: “You know, if there’s something I can identify with, it’s a runaway horse.

That farmer made the mistake of approaching the horse from the front and talking to it. You must never stand in the path of a runaway horse. It must have the feeling that its path remains unobstructed. Besides: You can't reason with a runaway horse" (62–63).

Klaus dreams about escaping, but he is unable to try it all by his own. An inner resistance, the part of him that breaks the horse, also prevents him to break out of his oppressive existence. Yet, at this point in the novella, no one grasps this parallel. The Buch's tissue of lies has not yet been uncovered. Even Helmut is impressed by what his friend has done. According to Volker Bohn, there is a connection to the letter Helmut has started writing after having met the Buchs for the first time during their holiday. He had written it in order to avert the nightmare of an affair and it contains the following words: "Yes, I am running away. I know. Whoever tries to stop me will..." (21). The letter never gets finished, however, because Helmut had written it in a way that "acquired a tone that made it impossible for him to send it" (21).

The runaway horse is the central symbol of the novella, one which even owes its name to it. It is the main symbol and leitmotiv of the whole story (see Kiesel 120). In the context of this thesis, it symbolizes the dream of men around fifty to regain their former energy and to take a chance to gain a new kind of freedom. Yet the horse also stands for the futility of this venture. Where should it escape to? Would it even be able to survive on its own after years and years of captivity? A short illusion of freedom, youthfulness, and the satisfaction of inner longing, but one that could never ever last for long.

A point worth noticing is that through the plot structure, Walser tempts the reader to misinterpret the symbol at first. In the arts, since antiquity, tamers of horses have represented heroes who, through their strength of will and their force overcome nature. In the moment of capturing the runaway horse, Klaus seems to be such a supreme hero, shaping his life according to his dreams. Only after his lies get uncovered, we realize that he is in fact a deeply insecure person, dreaming of starting anew, but always hesitating at the very last moment. The incarnation of the midlife crisis in its worst form is therefore not Helmut, but Klaus Buch himself. The extroverted man has chosen the quiet and timid Helmut to be his companion when they finally try to get away of it all. Klaus is capable of driving the horse back to its staples, but he is unable to ride it and head for new direction. What Klaus and the horse have in common is not so much their boundless yearning for freedom, but their incapability to shape their lives according to their wishes and ideals.

The second scene in which the plot culminates is the sailing tour in a stormy afternoon on lake Bodensee. The two men go sailing without their wives. For the first time, Klaus talks openly to Helmut about his hopes and his plans. He suggests to him to start a new life on the Bahamas, breaking off all bridges behind them: "If for once two men were to join forces, they would carry off a tremendous victory. If each of them remained alone, each would have to wangle his own miserable way through life" (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 80). This plan shows how much the two men still have in common. They are both "immature and wretched intellectuals to whom the only solution to any kind of trouble always seems to be flight (unreife und bemitleidenswerte Intellektuelle, für die als Lösung ihrer Schwierigkeiten immer nur die Flucht in Betracht kommt)" (Reich-Ranicki, *Entgegnungen* 187). In his exuberance, Klaus becomes more and more foolhardy and behaves like a "rodeo rider" (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 84) in the gathering storm. Trying ever more risky maneuvers, he puts himself and Helmut in danger. The situation escalates dramatically as water streams aboard. Helmut knocks the tiller out of Klaus's hands, they lose control of the boat and Klaus goes overboard. Helmut is able to save himself, but Klaus remains missing. Helmut is too overwhelmed by the situation to grasp the whole extent of what has happened. Slowly but steadily he realizes that his unloved friend has died.

After Klaus has disappeared, Helmut in a way takes over Klaus's role. In order to get to grips with what has happened, Helmut convinces Sabine to buy new jogging suits and bicycles, because he feels the need "to get moving again" (93). Just as the Halms want to go biking, Helene comes to visit them. Drinking Calvados and smoking, she tells them openly about her life with Klaus. Helene had been a student of music, but when she met Klaus, she had to choose between him and her studies. She admits Helmut and Sabine into her confidence and tells them, that she was never allowed to live her life as she had wanted to. Helene had given up everything for Klaus and ended up in complete isolation with him. Finally, the truth about Klaus comes to light: "‘He didn't have much of a life,’ Hella said, ‘it was just one long grind. Every day ten, twelve hours at the typewriter. [...] Everything he did was a terrible effort. That's why he tried to give everyone the impression that he didn't work at all [...] and then always the feeling that whatever he was doing was a fraud'" (98).

In his professional life, Klaus was unable to start anew and to live a life that would have satisfied him deep inside. As a result, he dreamt

of getting away from it all. He needed Helene as a confirmation that he was still up to the expectations of society, especially sexually, that he was not a failure, but still “he wasn’t the lowest form of dirt but a supersupersuperman” (100). Right in the middle of her confidences, Klaus turns up suddenly and leaves the Halms together with Helene, without saying another word to Helmut or Sabine.

This abrupt ending leaves many questions unanswered. We do not know what will become of Helmut and Klaus and we are left with no clue about what influence these events are going to have on Helmut and Sabine. Helmut wants to leave the holiday resort as quickly as possible and tries to convince Sabine by using a formula for the last time he had coined especially for her: “‘Oh Sabina. My one and only. Sabina,’ he said. ‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘on the train, Sabina, on the train’” (107). It means that he is going to “stop” in the train, because in the train he starts to narrate the story. In other words, he gives up the *endless repetitions* in favor of one *single* look back, the final account (see Bohn 165). The novella ends with Helmut sitting in the train and writing down the story of Helmut and Sabine:

‘Now I’ll start,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but it’s just possible that I’ll be telling you all about this fellow Helmut, this woman Sabina.’ ‘Go ahead,’ she said, ‘I don’t believe I’ll believe all you say.’ ‘That would be the solution,’ he said. ‘So, here goes,’ he said. ‘It was like this: Suddenly Sabina pushed her way out of the tide of tourists surging along the promenade and headed for a little table that was still unoccupied’” (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 108–109).

The last sentence of the novella is a word-by-word repetition of the first one. By that, Helmut in a way seems to become the author of the story he starts telling, the author had written, and the reader has just finished reading (see Bohn 166).

### **Goethe’s *Wahlverwandschaften*: a motive or interpretive aberration?**

Literary studies—or more precisely literary scholars—sometimes run the risk of overinterpreting literary texts through comparative literature reviews. The literature offers such an abundance of motifs and parallels that almost every storyline can be linked to an earlier work. However, the cognitive value of such parallels is questioned at the latest when it is no longer plausible to understand how the author was influenced

by such earlier works. Unfortunately, *Runaway Horse* could not escape such (over)interpretations.

In 1983, Waltraud Wiethölter used the name “Otto” in Walser’s novella to relate it to Goethe’s *Wahlverwandschaften* (1809). She believes that both works have structural as well as material similarities. Wiethölter compares the arrangement of the characters and events that appear in Goethe’s *Wahlverwandschaften* in the “parable speeches” of the fourth chapter in the manner of chemical divorce and union processes with Walser’s chess game metaphor (qtd. in Kiesel 143). The point to which she focuses the most is Otto: in Goethe’s *Wahlverwandschaften*, Otto is the child of the couple Eduard and Charlotte, but bears the features of the captain that Charlotte had thought of during the conception, and the eyes of Otilie, whom Eduard was in love with. Towards the end of the novel, in a moment of confusion, Otilie drops the child into a lake where it drowns. Wiethölter claims that the name Otto in Walser’s novella is more or less a conscious reminiscence of Goethe’s novel. On the other hand, she understands the use of the name “Otto” as a reference to describe *Runaway Horse* as a “novella of a novel (Novelle eines Romans)” (144), more precisely, as “contemporary amendment (zeitgemäße Novellierung)” (144–145) of *Wahlverwandschaften*, which accordingly takes on parodic features.

Wiethölter’s thesis sounds interesting, especially since the mutual attraction of the four people underlines this. Walser’s Helmut is drawn to Helene and Sabine to Klaus, which also reflects the lifestyle of the Halm couple. However, the parallels do not end here: Helmut’s quest for peace, loneliness and closeness to nature resembles in one form or another Edward and Charlotte’s seclusion in their castle. Last but not least, the restlessness and irritation of the Halms could also represent a literary reference to Goethe’s main protagonists and the appearance of the other pairs, the Buchs and the Hauptmanns or Otilies. The motive of *Wahlverwandschaften* is obvious, but the parallel to the dog’s name seems very daring. Walser, too, did not leave the assumption of *Wahlverwandschaften* piracy on its toes and flatly contested Wiethölter’s theses—from the imitation of *Wahlverwandschaften* to the allegation of their amendment and parody.

Her theory, although interesting, does not seem well grounded. She deserves the credit for referring to *Wahlverwandschaften* as a motive, but this does not mean that Walser actually parodied Goethe. The fateful link between Helmut and Klaus has something deeply human that does not necessarily require literary interpretation.

The constellation between these two fundamentally different characters, which are inspired by the desire to change their future, finds enough examples in everyday life. The only proof of Wiethölter's theory is and remains dog's name Otto in Walser's novel.

### **Philosophical motifs: Kierkegaard as a way out of a meaningless existence**

Two philosophers are mentioned several times in *Runaway Horse*: Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, but it is a question what significance they have for the novella.

Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is mentioned three times in connection with Helmut Halm and the fact that he had already read the book when he was fifteen (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 13). This repeated mention would only make it plausible to suspect any literary-philosophical influences. Walser himself said on the subject that instead of Nietzsche, any other youth reading of the protagonist could have been mentioned (qtd. in Kiesel 127–128). The narrative structure of the novella is also striking since it begins with the same sentence with which it ends: "Suddenly Sabina pushed her way out of the tide of tourist surging along the promenade and headed for a little table that was still unoccupied" (Walser, *Runaway Horse* 109). This could be an allusion to Nietzsche's "idea of eternal return," but it is easy to run into the risk of a literary "over-contextualization" that was already mentioned above. The novella *Runaway Horse* moves in a circle, its beginning and its end are identical. During the course of the novella, the wishes and dreams of Helmut Halm become more obvious, but they have by no means come any closer towards their realization. Therefore, the beginning and the end do not seem to me to be just an original element of style, but they reflect the hopelessness of the situation the protagonists face. The end of the novella remains open. It may well be that Helmut finally decides to free himself from his "incognito," but it may be as well that the "eternal hourglass of life" will continue to get turned over again and again. At the beginning of the novella, there are a few lines that should not be overlooked:

From time to time one comes across novellas in which certain persons expound opposing philosophies. A preferred ending is for one of these persons to convince the other. Thus, instead of the philosophy having to speak for itself, the reader is favored with the historical result that the other person has been

convinced. I regard it as a blessing that in this respect these papers afford no enlightenment. (Martin Walser, *Runaway Horse* epigraph page).<sup>7</sup>

This quotation from Kierkegaard's "Preface" to *Either/Or* at the beginning of Walser's book is certainly no coincidence because Kierkegaard is Walser's second big "love" after Kafka. Now, the question arises whether the confrontation between the antipodes Helmut and Klaus is just a juxtaposition of two forms of the midlife crisis, or whether further references to cultural history can be read out of them. Such interpretations always bear the risk to over contextualize a literary work. Following the concept of *l'art pour l'art*, it should be permitted to just let a work stand as it is. Still, there are some indications for a deeper link between the constellation of the main characters in *Runaway Horse* and the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard who furthermore is cited repeatedly in the course of the novella.

Kierkegaard's existential analysis turns out to be useful in understanding Walser's novella if we recall the two concepts of aesthetical and ethical life:

To him who lives aesthetically applies the old saying, 'to be/or not to be', and the more he is allowed to live aesthetically, the more requirements his life makes, and if merely the least of these is not fulfilled, he is dead. He who lives ethically has always a way of escape when everything goes against him; when the storm broods over him so darkly that his neighbor cannot see him, he nevertheless has not perished, there is always a point he holds fast, and that is... his self (Kierkegaard 212).

We can interpret the two male protagonists as representatives of Kierkegaard's ways of life. Klaus Buch who finally becomes conscious of his desperation is in the role of the esthetic, whereas Helmut Halm is a melancholic and, in the end, repentant ethicist. Helmut is unsatisfied with his current existence. He is well aware that life should be more than doing a frustrating job and—during the holidays—always visits the same holiday resort and finds distraction in hobbies, which by themselves are mere distractions from his deep inertia. For many years, Helmut saw this even as an ideal to strive for, but now he slowly

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<sup>7</sup> Man trifft zuweilen auf Novellen, in denen bestimmte Personen entgegengesetzte Lebensanschauungen vortragen. Das endet dann gerne damit, daß der eine den andern überzeugt. Anstatt daß also die Anschauung für sich sprechen muß, wird der Leser mit dem historischen Ergebnis bereichert, daß der andre überzeugt worden ist. Ich sehe es für ein Glück an, daß in solcher Hinsicht diese Papiere eine Aufklärung nicht gewähren.

doubts whether life should not be more than this completely static leisureliness. Klaus, on the other hand, tries to escape from this feeling through hyperactivity—however, without success. It is not only due to Helmut's fear of failure that he refuses to imitate his former friend's lifestyle. He is far too mature a personality to be deluded by ever new adventures. Still, he does not reach Kierkegaard's level of ethical life, because he still has not drawn the necessary conclusions from his inner void in order to make the dramatic changes in his life necessary to reach this next and higher level. Helmut still sees some positive aspects in this emptiness. Although he is far closer to becoming an ethicist than Klaus, he is still caught in a kind of limbo which does not offer any stability or a way out. It is therefore almost unavoidable that not only his life, but the novella itself move in a circle (see the identical initial and last sentences mentioned above).

However, the question remains whether it is legitimate to label Walser's protagonists this explicitly with Kierkegaard's typologies of life. There still remain some inconsistencies. According to Kierkegaard, the individual develops ethically, he becomes that which he becomes; for even he allows the aesthetical within him to possess validity (which for him has not at all the same meaning as for the man who lives aesthetically) it is nevertheless dethroned (190). If we interpret, for example, Halm as an ethicist with regard to this philosophical concept, Halm's derisive turning away from society with all its superficial values still does not mean that he has found a new set of coordinates for a new beginning necessary in order to become a true ethicist (see Kiesel 131). This question remains unanswered. The only thing that perhaps speaks for the meaning of Kierkegaard are the above mentioned four lines at the beginning of the book. The two protagonists portray opposing ways of life and views, but none of them succeeds in convincing the other or granting enlightenment neither to each other nor to the reader.

### **Conclusion: On the way to new shores of life**

Walser offers neither simple answers nor a *deus ex machina* for the crisis of meaning Helmut is facing. Instead, he describes two disoriented men who try two radically different strategies in order to find a way out of their midlife crisis. Imprisoned in a society striving for machine-like perfection, Helmut—like Klaus—has the impression that life is drifting past him. The contrary mechanisms by which they try to escape, reflect their different characters. The extroverted Klaus attempts

to provoke waves of emotion by ever-new activities and dangers. On his sailing tour with Helmut, he runs completely unnecessary risks, because only in the face of danger and confronted with nature's untamed wildness, he once again feels "alive." While sitting for hours on end in front of his typewriter, Helene later confesses, he was totally unable to feel what it meant to be living. Instead, he was only functioning as a respected—though deeply unhappy—member of society. Realizing his dream of starting anew on the Bahamas certainly would at first provide him with a rush of emotions.

Kierkegaard's aesthetics cannot run away from the existential narrowness of their lives, because wherever they might go, it will always accompany them on their travels. Helmut on the other hand is one step ahead on his way to become an ethicist. He has understood that it does not suffice to exhaust the mind through relentless bodily activity in order to fight the existential void of the midlife crisis. He therefore searches for a new meaning in life by reading and by enjoying the silence. Anyway, he, too has not yet reached his inner aim, he has not even clearly recognized it, which renders his search still more difficult. The accident of his unloved friend shakes him deeply, but it does not shatter the vicious circle of consciously living a life lacking a deeper meaning. Walser does not even attempt to offer us any way out of this dilemma. Yet this is precisely the beauty of the novella. It is impossible to overcome a crisis with a ready-made panacea; each and every one of us has to find his or her own individual way. Be it as it might, Walser has not just given us a wonderful example of the expressive power of literature.

Klaus Buch's hyperactivity turns out to be nothing more than a great delusion. While Helmut still struggles with himself in order to reach the freedom of a true ethicist, at the end of the novella he at least undertakes some interesting steps leading in this direction and pointing towards a solution. On the one hand, he himself suggests becoming more active, though this happens right after Buch's disappearance and might therefore be just a distraction to ease the pain of guilt. On the other hand, however, he moves in a direction that is one of the central themes of this paper: he starts coping with the events of those fateful five days by writing. Here, we find obvious parallels to *Montauk* by Max Frisch and *My life as a Man* by Philip Roth. The act of writing always holds a prominent place in these novels, but the hope of finding a new meaning is of different importance to the respective authors. Max, the protagonist of *Montauk*, sees writing as the ideal solution, while to Philip Roth's Tarnopol, it offers rather *Useful fiction* than a

path to deliverance. Walser leaves open what a role writing will play in coping with the terrible events of the few days just past. Yet the fact that Helmut leaves behind his former lethargy and takes a new path already underlines that his whole existence is about to change. Instead of fleeing aimlessly like the runaway horse into a new life without any perspective for the future, the difficult confrontation with his own limitations and with alternative ways of living provide him with an input to reflect and to become creative.

*Runaway Horse* may still offer to the reader a useful impulse for coping with problems and inner conflicts in life. The author leads us through a decisive section of the road ahead. By illustrating the monotony of the conventional lifestyles of the present, he prepares the reader to search for an individual way out of it.

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## Iskanje smisla in iluzija pobega: *Pobegli konj* Martina Walserja – novela o krizi srednjih let

Ključne besede: nemška književnost / Walser, Martin: *Bežeči konj* / kriza srednjih let / iskanje smisla

Članek analizira novelo *Runaway Horse* [Pobegli konj] (1977) Martina Walserja o krizi srednjih let. Opisuje iskanje smisla človeka v srednjih petdesetih letih, njegovo brezplodno eksistencialno ujetost in iluzijo o morebitnem begu iz tega brezna. Walser se je z novelo podal na široko polje filozofije, znotraj katerega raziskuje dvoumnost postmoderne eksistence in dvom v tradicionalni način življenja. Poleg tega je eden prvih pisateljev, ki se je na umetniški način lotil zelo kontroverzne teme – starostne krize in s tem povezanih izzivov, zlasti v času demografskih sprememb in »staranja družbe«. Vprašanje, ki se v noveli vztrajno zastavlja, je, kako živeti in kako ljubiti. Walser ne ponuja enostavnih odgovorov na vsa ta vprašanja, temveč izostruje težave, ki jih v vsakdanjem življenju le bežno zaznavamo, na najvišji literarni in filozofski ravni. Zato se zdijo njegovi liki tako verodostojni in zato je *Pobegli konj* tako očiten primer izrazne moči literature.

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