RECONSTRUCTING GOETHE'S PERCEPTION OF SUFFERING PAIN, OLD AGE, AND LIFE CRISIS IN MARTIN WALSER'S *A MAN IN LOVE*

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Abstract:. This article analyzes Martin Walser's *A Man in Love* (2008), focusing on its exploration of pain, old age, relationship antagonisms, and end-life crisis. Through a close reading of the novel, this article critically evaluates whether the text can be categorized as a work centered on an end-of-life crisis. Walser depicts the suffering of the ageing Goethe and his last significant experience of love. He is not interested in a meticulous description of the historical figure of Goethe. Instead, he describes suffering and despair in all its facets. The question that arises is: How does one deal with physical decline, pain, and rejection in this phase of life? The ageing Goethe tries to shape his life again, even in his perhaps most difficult moment. Pessimistic and doubtful, he turns to his pen. Ultimately, he discovers a sense of purpose and a positive trajectory for his destiny, channelling his reflections into artistic creativity. This analysis aims to shed light on Walser's thematic exploration and contribute to the broader understanding of literature's portrayal of the human condition.

Keywords: Martin Walser; old age; end-life crisis; pain; Goethe; literary tradition

With the generation of the so-called baby boomers reaching retirement, old age and finally the end of their lives, Europe and the West in general are facing societal changes of historic proportions. Still in the midst of the slowly disappearing ruins of World War II, despite widespread poverty and misery, observers in the 40s and early 50s could not fail to notice that playing children seemed to be omnipresent. Nowadays, Western societies saturated by affluence are struggling to finance their pension systems. Care homes are searching desperately for personnel

while only migration can counterbalance the otherwise shrinking population of countries like Germany or Austria.

The generation that was the main driving force of the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s is now facing its own decline. The defining literary giants of the second half of the last century for decades have been reflecting on their present and the activism of their peers. Are these writers still able to shape the discourse of the present? To remain relevant with their observations and contributions despite their own lateness?

Reflections about old age and decline are of course nothing new in literature. The difference now is rather that past generations took on the issue of facing a 'good death' in a dignified manner as an individual, philosophical challenge, whereas now, the aged have steadily become the majority. How does this diagnosis change the outlook of writers of our time compared to those of the past?

In German literature, a rich tradition exists exploring the themes of ageing and the creative journey (Taberner 2013: 10). While this tradition has endured over time, contemporary German-language fiction appears to be predominantly male-dominated and "issue-driven rather than reflexive" (12). Among the authors who "inspect" this subject of ageing is Martin Walser, whose poignant works often shed light on the complexities of growing old. In his work *A Man in Love* (2008) Walser takes on this momentous task by interweaving his own perspectives with those of the ageing Goethe and his famous *Marienbad Elegy*. "Nothing makes as poor as unfulfilled love"[1] (2008: 67), Walser declares in *A Man in Love,* which reveals the love and suffering of Goethe's late life. The book took Walser only eight weeks to write, including a visit to the historical sights of Marienbad and Karlsbad to help him depict the great writer and his alleged "last" love Ulrike von Levetzow. The story is set in the year 1823, the 73-year-old Goethe is resting at the health resort of Marienbad. There, he meets the eldest of the three daughters of the widow Amalie von Levetzow, the nineteen-year-old Ulrike. The poet falls for the almost fifty-five-year-younger girl and enjoys appearing in public with her. When the ladies leave for Karlsbad, he - after a short detour to Eger - follows Ulrike. They celebrate his 74th birthday together. On the way back to Weimar, Goethe writes the *Marienbad Elegy* which is printed in Walser's work in its full length of twenty-three stanzas. At the end of the book, the suffering Goethe writes fictional letters that were never meant to be sent to the young addressee. The poet courts

[1] Translations in the text are by the author. Walser, Martin. Ein liebender Mann. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2008

Ulrike von Levetzow and gets "silently" rejected. Walser's novel ends with the words: "When he woke up, he held his organ in his hand and it was stiff"(285).

Stuart Taberner, in his book *Aging and Old-Age Style in Günter Grass, Ruth Klüger, Christa Wolf, and Martin Walser* (2013), offers a close reading of texts by the writers named concentrating above all on style. His emphasis lies on analysing the aesthetic strategies employed by the selected authors "their literary (re)-negotiations of their old age and on their life stories" (2013: 194). According to Taberner "old-age style appears to be associated with an articulation of a new freedom […] and may substantiate the artist's freedom to rewrite who he or she is" (2013: 24). He also identifies "a *rewriting* of the outcomes of earlier work as a key component of each author's old-age style and their resolution of biographical contradictions, […] old-age style [is] highly intertextual" (2013: 195).

In 2015 Taberner published an extensive article analysing three novels of Walser (including *A Man in Love*) as "examples of late style" that "allows us not only to reconceptualize all of Walser's literary fiction of the last two decades […], but also to understand his untimely aesthetic as paradoxically entirely synchronous with the superannuated era in which both he as author and we as readers now live" (2015: 99). He is also of the opinion that all three novels he analyses "express both rage against the indignity of corporal aging - this is an intensification of the concern with physical potency that has always preoccupied the predominantly male characters that populate Walser's oeuvre - and a rage against elderly bodies relegated to margins of society obsessed with youth, performance, and appearance" (2015: 100). It is also interesting that Taberner sees the articulation of late-style in the novels *The Moment of Love*, *Final Flowering*, and *A Man in Love* as a rewriting of Walser's earliest fiction from 1950s and 1960s (2015: 103).

Similarly to Taberner, Evi Zemanek believes that in retrospect, the earlier novel *The Moment of Love* (2004*)* is to be read as a precursor to the Goethe novel (571). In her article, Zemanek examines the narrative and lyrical configuration of the meaningful 'Augen-Blicke' (glances) and shows that Walser seems to have constructed his portrayal of the Goethe character primarily by studying Goethe's original texts, rather than relying on biographical sources (567-68).

Aneta Jurzysta also suggests that the themes of transience, ageing, diminishing strength, and existential problems that come with the final years of life have been recurring motifs in Walser's writings for many years, particularly in his recent works. After analyzing the themes of love and ageing in a few of Walser's works, she concludes that the constant

return to the theme of old love may adequately highlight the problems at hand, but delving into the eroticism of old age becomes more and more embarrassing with each new work (145).

Anna Szyndler analyses the love motif in Goethe's *Marienbad Elegy* and Walser's *A Man in Love*. She contends that Walser disputes Goethe's poetic representation of the relationship with Ulrike, leading him to critically examine particular motifs in the elegy by questioning their essence and presenting his own interpretation. In her opinion, through this critique of the elevated romantic portrayal in the elegy, Walser aims to uncover the truth about Goethe's love for Ulrike. The outcome, according to Szyndler, is a new perspective on the "Dichterfürsten" (prince among poets), a portrayal that has sparked disagreement among certain literary critics (318).

In *A Man in Love*, Walser reveals a different facet of Goethe. In his account, Goethe himself bears his past and his struggles, illustrating how even the most earnest individuals can go astray. In the context of this analysis, the core issue is less Goethe's relation to young Ulrike, but rather the psychological state of the writer. The question that arises is: Is it really love that makes him experience inappropriate, even ridiculous ambitions? Or is it not rather unrealistic expectations and the process of suppression when it comes to ageing and the end-of-life crisis that distort Goethe's self-perception to the point that he gets stuck in a dream of renewed youth? Furthermore, what role does the process of writing play in confronting old age and inevitable death? In *The Moment of Love*, the protagonist Gottlieb Zürn ponders of Beate, the younger woman he is in love with, as she may see him: "The worst torture for me is to see how you see me" (2004: 144). In A *Man in Love* the worst torture is "to have to tell how you suffer" (2008: 67). Walser's Goethe is a prime example of sublimation. Previously, it was his characters who endured suffering, but now it is Goethe's turn to directly experience the depths of pain and anguish: "Suffering is dirty. It dirties. [...] You escape into writing [...] You have never, never, suffered. Until now, it has always been others who suffered." (Walser 68).

Walser's biographer, Jörg Magenau, believes that Walser depicts the "Dichterfürsten" (prince among poets) Goethe not as the great genius, but as a typical Walser figure, thus making it appear credible. According to him, "rarely has love been portrayed in its entire passion and ridiculousness so poignantly" as in this book. In the TV show *Literatur im Foyer* of March the 8th, Walser stated: „He [Goethe] is the most serious clown possible. Unrequited love turns any person into a clown".

Walser's Goethe reflects on his physical appearance and still finds himself attractive: "Considering that you are such an old fogey, you still look pretty good. At your age, when it comes to appearance, there can only be insults. And not only when it comes to appearances" (Walser 2008: 69). Taberner holds the opinion that like other of Walser's "old male characters", Goethe "worries about his sexual prowess and appearance when naked" as well as being "conscious of his redundancy" (Taberner 2015: 100). In the above-mentioned edition of *Literatur im Foyer*, Walser stated that if Goethe had thought of himself as being ugly, he would not have had any interest in telling posterity about his love, suffering, and misery. To him, old age was not a wound, at least not a deadly one. According to him, the true pain of the final stage of life is not being loved anymore: "You do not die of being old. Write it down. The terrible thing is not being allowed to love anymore. Though you may still love, you must get used to not being loved anymore, never again" (Walser 2008: 69). Walser's Goethe refuses to accept the harsh reality that he may never experience the enchantment of love again. In a regretful tone, he says: "No one is in love with me at the moment, I am not in love with anyone, only death awaits in the corner" (69). This might be read as an allusion to Franz Kafka's *The Little Fable*. To the mouse, the walls of the world seem to become ever narrower, in the corner there is the trap the mouse is heading for. This might be a figurative motive, the inevitable fear of death and failure.

After the bitter realisation that he might never again be loved, Walser's Goethe ponders about the refusal of love and how humanity would have been spared the misery of love if the first commandment had been slightly different:

> Thou shalt not love. This is the first commandment. Moses was probably too exhausted when he had climbed the 2,244-meter-high mountain of legislation, too exhausted to fully grasp the first commandment enacted by the Lord. A tragic omission that cannot be rectified. If Moses had brought this commandment from Mount Sinai, mankind would have lacked nothing but tragedy. Love has always been the origin of tragedy. It would have been so easy to do without love! It was never necessary for reproduction. Why then love? So that we realize that we do not live in paradise. That no human life is possible without suffering. None. The Lord was wise enough. I am a jealous God, he said about it. (70)

Blaschke argues that Walser lets his hero reflect on his work, as a "revisionist Goethe" about the "therapeutic relation between work and

life". Walser's Goethe does not even attempt to find solace and protection from the failures of old age in idealized memories of his youth. Instead, he writes and reflects on his life because his experience and his harmonistically inspired values do not show him any other way out. The conclusion of his reflections is not backward- directed. While this might be a tempting alternative for any other old man shaken by ag and physical decline, it is not so for an intellectual of Goethe's stature. He draws the material for his very personal conclusion from his life, yet the pitiless determination of his mind does not allow him to cross the border to glossed over memories. However, Walser's protagonist is not Werther and does not die of unrequited love. He is Goethe and therefore must shoulder his destiny. Werther was not able to deal with his loss, nor did he find solace through writing. Walser's Goethe must conceal his pain from those around him, a feat that Werther was unable to achieve.

> I cannot kill myself. I still overestimate the value of the world, that is: the environment. I do not begrudge them the mockery they would unleash in their pages if they could report: Now he finally killed himself. Headline: The Sorrows of Old Werther. (192)

According to the Austrian psychiatrist Erwin Ringel, suicide is not an act that simply offers a violent way out of a life considered unbearable (1953: 136-138). The suicide victim, also wants to punish his surroundings and make them feel guilty. Werther's suicide can also be seen from this perspective. What makes the situation of the ageing Goethe in *A Man in Love* special is that he denies himself the final satisfaction of filling his surroundings with feelings of guilt. Ending his life would even please his enemies and critics. Wounded pride is an important motive of suicide victims, but it is exactly this pride that prevents Goethe from taking this final step. In other words, not even suicide remains as a last resort to relieve his pain. Walser has found a unique constellation to create a literary monument to the confusion and the hopelessness of the end-of-life crisis.

Imprisoned in a labyrinth of gloomy thoughts, Goethe tries to break out of his dilemma in the way he knows best: by resuming his writing. He who had preached throughout the years that writing was the ultimate remedy to liberate the soul from all forms of pain, is now confronted with the hopelessness. What could be more obvious to him than to fall back on his own panacea? This is exactly what Walser's Goethe does, though lacking conviction, as the following passage shows:

> What have not I set into the world about the reasons for writing. Entire schools seek their salvation in my confessions, which state that one can deal with everything that could kill one by writing about it. From Werther onwards. And now, dear Ulrike! I have written the elegy. For the first time, having written does not help. Only writing helps. But what would I be without the elegy! It articulates my longing. It is proud. Proud of itself. I want to learn this pride from it. I want to be like the elegy. So composed. It is your elegy. Our elegy. (Walser 2008: 198).

Zemanek believes that Walser searches for his inspiration for the Goethe character in Goethe's poems, especially in the "Elegy". He interprets the biographical aspects of this elegy as the foundation for his novel and concludes that Walser's novel is a "narrative interpretation" of this "Elegy". The novel illustrates how the poet might have felt if he had not "sublimated" his suffering into verses (Zemanek 588-59). Tilman Krause writes that Walser turns Goethe's moods into a comedy. The novel uncovers the "'high art of sublimation by Goethe: […] 'self-therapy through writing: 'theatre of renunciation'".

According to Taberner, Walsers's portrayal of Goethe, the act of "self-definition" found in "Entsagung" (renunciation) is not a graceful act of "self-effacement", but rather an "intimation of rage". Taberner suggests that in Walser's adaptation of "Entsagung" within his "late-style aesthetic", his protagonist becomes the carrier of his own autobiographical drive (2015: 107).

In *Literatur im Foyer,* Walser presented his own interpretation of the life of the ageing Goethe. Goethe had only pretended to renounce to deceive the critics; he had only played this role and culture provided the backdrop. He had used the second half of his life to demonstrate that he could cope with everything and that there was nothing one could not overcome by writing. Walser goes on that all of this had only been a theatre of renunciation because he had not been able to get over his pain for a single moment. Yet this pain was not bitter at all, on the contrary, according to Walser this pain made him rich. Andreas Merkel asserts that Walser writes in an overbearing, passionate tone about love as an existential necessity, while also suggesting that he instrumentalized Goethe, depicting him as someone who, during a time when art was meant to uplift, boldly explored the risks of his passion in a programmatic manner.

Love has captivated Goethe completely. Walser transformed his main character into a teenager deeply infatuated. Once more, Walser

aimed to emphasize that love knows no age boundaries and a shattered heart is not solely the plight of youth although old age often yearns for the strength and the carefree attitude of youth. To an old man, the future no longer appears as an open field full of possibilities, but rather like a short *cul de sac*, in the darkness of which death looms. The remaining lifetime seems to tick away, yet even here, love offers to break out of this prison. What do the notions of future and past mean at this age? The future lurks gloomily with illness, pain and death, the latter perhaps even appearing as a redeemer of the hurting chains of the waning body. Through idealized memories, the past can ease the pain for a while, but this is only a delusion. Timelessness, removed from the past and the future, can bring liberation, and this is exactly the power of love in the case of the ageing Goethe: "When you are with me, the future and the past have no value" (97). Having no value implies that it does not offer any kind of gain and that it deserves to be annihilated. Yet, if the future and the past – like in the case of Walser's Goethe – have a negative connotation and are only linked to further suffering, having no value means that the spell is broken, that they can no longer bind the old man in their pitiless absoluteness. Suddenly, having no value receives a positive connotation. Yet, can this blissful oblivion to one's surroundings, this detachment from physical suffering and the one-way street of infirmity and death go on for much longer? Does not the weakness of the body inevitably throw the old man from cloud nine back to earth?

In this novel, Walser has interwoven this fall from the heights of love quite literally. He descends suddenly and brutally from these higher spheres and crash-lands back to reality, in failure. The great mind falls victim to his decaying body. Not even the literary genius can slow down this deep fall. As Goethe is taking a walk with Ulrike in semi-darkness in Marienbad, he suddenly falls. "You will never fall. Now he had fallen. And he had fallen because he had not paid attention to the path in the semi-darkness with Ulrike" (106). His fall is the epitome of failure. He had not thought about the consequences, so they had caught up to him. In A *Man in Love*, the fall is not simply a figure of speech; it happens in the brutal, literal sense.

Taberner, too, believes that the *fall* clearly represents a symptom of ageing (2015: 100), as does Zemanek. In her opinion, the scenes at the beginning and the end of the book, linked to Goethe's visual impairment, serve as an indication of his old age, and frame the encounter between Goethe and Ulrike (581). For Szyndler, in Walser's work, it is the physical decline that exposes Goethe's hope of being loved and attractive to young women despite his age as illusory (324). To

Alexandra Pontzen, Goethe's *fall* turns the Marienbad experience into an "embarrassing gaffe". She sees the fall and the head injury as an allusion to Werther's gunshot wound. The fall also serves as a warning of the age gap between Goethe and Ulrike.

It is hardly possible to sum up the symbolic power of this moment any better. Yet, I do not approve of the interpretation of Goethe's being in love in Marienbad as an "embarrassing gaffe". Doubtlessly the aging Goethe had forgotten himself, had preferred to ignore his frailty and in his youthful desire for conquest, he seemed to have thought of himself as being back on his voyage to Italy. In view of the norms of society at the time, it is, of course an embarrassing gaffe. Still, Walser's description of the inner struggle of the poet against his bodily decline and the torment of desperation gives Goethe's rebellion against the inevitable, though not a heroic, yet at least a sympathetic trait.

The fall is inevitable, but is it not worth risking it rather than succumbing to despair? It is easy to condemn the Goethe of Marienbad outright. In his poem, *Relativität des Marienbader Schmerzes* [The Relativity of the Marienbad Pain], (1971) Andreas Okopenko sees Goethe's experience as little more than the last hormonal surge of an old dodderer (1971: 72-73). What are his emotional pain and the inevitable refusal in comparison to the real suffering of the victims of napalm bombings in Vietnam? Embarrassing gaffes? – Yes and no. If Walser's Goethe of *A Man in Love* would remain there, if he would indeed do nothing more than relish in his vanity and self-pity, this judgement would indeed be justified.

Yet in his novel, Walser goes a decisive step further. He contextualizes an imaginary Goethe within his main topic, the end-of-life crisis. Goethe fights against windmills, aware that his time is dwindling, yet refusing to surrender. Instead, he fights using his most potent weapon: the written word. Goethe falls, Goethe doubts, he does not even believe himself that the often-implored power of the pen protects against the humiliation of old age, but he makes the best of it. Thereby he shows the way of how it is possible, though not to vanquish the end-of-life crisis, but at least not to get torn into the whirl of despair, self-pity, and hopelessness.

Walser frequently subjects his protagonists to profound despair. However, it is crucial to recognize the subtle beauty in *A Man in Love:* Walser does not allow Goethe to deteriorate irreparably. Thus, his Goethe may not be a classic hero, but his approach to tackling the end-of-life crisis can still be seen as an exemplary model, making him a "hero of our time".

Now, Goethe must confront old age, regardless of how challenging this may prove for him. “A silly branch, a wet path, semi-darkness, that could happen to anyone. Now she lied. She knew perfectly well that it could only happen to him, and only to him because he was seventy-four” (Walser 2008: 107). His age makes him ridiculous because at his age, life does not give any second chances. Due to his fall, he realizes that he cannot escape old age. Dancing with her briefly granted him the illusion of shared youth: “There they were the same age, that's when everything was decided” (102). However, his fall once again proves to him that there can be no common ground between them. It brings him back to the harsh reality that she will always remain one step ahead, forever unattainable: “When he saw her, she had already seen him. When his gaze reached her, her gaze was already on him” (9). For Zemanek, “Blicke” (gazes) are an important medium of communication, and in this “duel of gazes”, Ulrike emerges victorious (569), and asks why Walser describes Goethe as a “collector and archivist of moments” (572).

Old age restrains the great writer, regardless of his efforts to keep pace with the young Ulrike. She effortlessly surpasses him, completely unaware of her swiftness. Should Goethe not have been already aware then that their short relationship could only end in a fall? Probably yes, but what did he stand to lose except perhaps his pride? Furthermore, this short moment of happiness alongside Ulrike does not offer him only a reincarnation of his passion, but also an escape from the isolation of old age. In the end, it did not to turn out fine at all, but at least he felt alive and young for the first time in many years. Perhaps enduring the fall was worth it after all. For a few days, he had overcome the state of lack of love:

> All the evils of the world have arisen from lack of love. [...] The abruptness of his expression stems from the fact that something was always missing, throughout his life, his entire life. Love. Now it was there. So, it does exist after all. It is not just a mere wordplay. It is the utmost certainty. It is the most present thing of all. The most fulfilling. The greatest security. (156)

Ulrike does not leave him directly for someone else, someone younger, but she disappears from Goethe’s life without a word. Goethe pays a high price for his *Moment of Love*, but to live is to endure suffering, nonetheless.

Shortly after the kiss Ulrike finally leaves Goethe's life. Of course, he cannot know what would become of her, but his lips would never again experience the fountain of youth found in a kiss. Love pangs

through him, and like so many years before his "Werther" he sees himself immediately threatened in his physical existence by his torment of the soul: "The soul is an organ. He knew that now. You can die from the soul" (228). Werther had died of it, indeed. "The soul is also an organ. It hurts. Nothing but pain" (236). Reminiscent of La Mettries *L`homme machine* where he describes the soul as an organ. This is where Walser's source of inspiration once again finds its way, after he had explored this topic in many layers, yet it remained far from exhausted in the book *The Moment of Love*. Walser's Goethe says to himself: "'Just give in" (278), which is reminiscent of Kafka's story *Give It Up*, in which the protagonist asks a guardian for the way out. Walser's Goethe sees no other way out than to *give in* to this feeling: "Just give in, let this feeling grow, that you feel ashamed. Demand anything from this feeling. Let it grow" (278).

Without any doubt, the *Marienbad Elegy* counts among the most beautiful poems ever written in German when it comes to describing the suffering and pain of unrequited love. Still, even after 200 years of scientific analysis, there remain doubts about how far the poet was able to – as he had postulated - cope with his pain through writing and simultaneously vanquish it emotionally. Szyndler believes that in the "Elegy", the age of the lovers is not addressed, and the factor of environment is omitted. Walser builds on this "deficiency" (323). As fervent as the *Marienbad Elegy* may be, in the end, we must separate Goethe's words from his real life: In reality, the poet has never overcome the pain and the refusal. Consequently, several literary scholars have given it the less-than-flattering title "theatre of renunciation". It seems impossible to determine the extent to which Goethe truly managed to alleviate his pain through writing. For the context of my analysis, this is also irrelevant, since it is not a psychogram of the historical Goethe, but rather the poet as a projection figure for Walser's literary-philosophical message. Walser chose Goethe as a figure who also could fall prey to the whole depth of the pain that life and love can offer. At the same time, he had the personal format to be able to free himself from the vortex of negative emotions. Would Goethe in Walser's narrative succeed in accomplishing that in the end?

> The great renunciant, the noblest cultural facade of Germany, Europe, the whole world, a classic example of renunciation for generations to come, all the unhappy people should look up to you like a constellation: this is how one deals with great pain, you see, so that it is no longer pain, no longer hurts, but rather a smile, a cultural grimace that beautifies your face. The pain becomes an occasional poem, not too light, but much lighter

> than the elegy; the elegy remains in the safe, that it had hurt is part of the deal. Now that it is over, completely over, you can admit that it had hurt; now that it is completely over, it may even hurt a lot more. What matters is only that it is over, over, over, over. Above all: You must ensure that it is achieved! She must see that you are not a squirming worm. She should feel better when she sees, the old man made it (266).

Walser's Goethe has not only to struggle with a broken heart and no prospects for the future as the end comes ever closer. Goethe realizes that his 'positive routine of life' had not been a sign of force, but that it had also contained a flight from his own weaknesses – a first and essential step towards the painful recognition of his faults. Taberner has a slightly different opinion on this; he argues that Walser's characters are "indifferent to social convention" (2013: 145), thus according to him, these protagonists in their old age, no longer feel the necessity to apologize for their "excessive subjectivity and their deviation from, or defiance of, social and political norms" (145), thus they "declare themselves to be answerable only to their own conscience" (149).

Just a short time afterwards, the inner monologues sum up this realization quite dramatically, all that remains of the love story is a memory, one he must destroy and conceal: "Now destroy the memory. Hide, hide from oneself, that simply was not possible" (Walser 2008: 279). Those memories, as painful as they might be, but are worth it.

The decisive step is taken; his aim is no longer to flee the pain but to use the pain and the memories as a source of life and artistic inspiration. The question remains whether he would be able to do this or whether he would remain at the façade of the "theatre of renunciation". Due to its importance, this question is the focus of numerous reviews of this novel. Most critics tend to give a negative answer, perhaps because of decades-long analyses of the "theatre of renunciation" of the historical Goethe. Szyndler believes that Walser considers "Goethe's love image to be self-staging and has therefore undertaken its deconstruction, entirely in keeping with postmodern aesthetics", resulting in a new portrait of the "Dichterfürst" (326-27).

The "old Werther" tries to portray himself as loveless, adhering to the first commandment of his modified Decalogue which he now comprehends, "exhausted, yes, but not in the least hard of hearing, more attentive than ever before, he heard and understood the commandment: Thou shalt not love" (Walser 2008: 284). Adhering to this commandment would significantly simplify his life. Without love, humankind might have produced less poetry and art, but it would have

also been spared a lot of suffering. A broken heart always leaves traces, as evidenced in the case of Goethe, they are probably the most beautiful of all— the verses filled with pain and anguish of the *Marienbad Elegy*. These verses stand as the sole tangible proof, providing a documented account of Goethe's shattered heart:

> To me is all, I to myself am lost,
> Who the immortals' fav'rite erst was thought;
> They, tempting, sent Pandoras to my cost,
> So rich in wealth, with danger far more fraught;
> They urged me to those lips, with rapture crown'd,
> Deserted me, and hurl'd me to the ground[2] (qtd. Walser204)

According to Jurzysta, Goethe is forced to give up his great love. Consequently, Goethe gradually reconciles with his age, accepts his societal role, and recognizes the impossibility of the feeling that erupted so suddenly (144). As Walser himself had stated in *Literatur im Foyer*, despite failing to win Ulrike's affection, Goethe learns to love himself.

Walser's Goethe is insecure and sceptical about his own strategies for writing as a way of coping with problems, yet he takes a chance. Although Goethe's erection, affirming his masculinity, is not yet a symbol of victory, it demonstrates his ability to find self-realization not only in art but also physically. Although he has not entirely overcome his end-of-life crisis, he possesses sufficient energy to enter new relationships and tread new paths, even though death may already be lurking around the corner. Considering the circumstances, this can be interpreted as a triumph.

The fact that Walser has made references to Goethe and his writings over the years is not a new revelation. Taberner suggests that in A *Man in Love*, Walser "updates his own previous portrayal of the artist as a cruel egomaniac" in *In Goethes Hand,* showing a "more indulgent appreciation of Goethe's self-obsession" (2013: 106). According to him, it highlights Goethe's "own late-period revisions" of the themes of his early works *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1769), *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1821/1829), including his attempt to rewrite the ending of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to create a more optimistic outcome, diverging from Werther's tragic suicide.

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2 Translated by Edgar Alfred Bowring https://enacademic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/10765729

Magenau thinks that the long monologues and the erection in *A Man in Love* are references to Thomas Mann's Goethe novel *Lotte in Weimar,* creating a subtextual connection from Goethe to Mann to Walser. He also draws a comparison between Walser's earlier Goethe work *In Goethes Hand* (1982), where Eckermann and his relationship of dependency were in the foreground. Here, in *A Man in Love*, this dependency is transferred onto Goethe himself, not as a relationship of dominance, but as a desperate search for love. Despite the suffering, this kind of dependency also has a positive side, as it serves as a makeover for the aged poet.

Walser describes in *A Man in Love* suffering and despair in all their facets. Goethe no longer flees from his pain by pressing his soul into merciless routines, instead confronts himself, creates a magnificent work of art, and regains a glimmer of hope and strength. Walser's Goethe emerges from the eternal cycle of pain, self-pity, and art as a product of decline and failure in real life.

The novel contains some fictional letters from Goethe to Ulrike, which sparked a sharp polemic among many literary scholars who disagreed with Walser's "Goethe Letters" arguing that Goethe would have never written anything alike. Taberner even refers to them "as neurotic and undignified letters" (2015:100). However, Walser insists in *Literatur im Foyer* that he intended to write a novel rather than a biography of Goethe and that he wrote the letters without assuming a presumptuous tone. He argues that imitating a Goethe style would be ridiculous. According to Walser, these were his own letters and he had written them because he had become a witness of Goethe's suffering, and it was only his suffering that had guided his hand in composing them.

In my opinion, the meaning of the letters within the novel consists of two elements. First, they testify to Goethe's suffering and reflect the emotional struggles within him. Secondly, they are also structured in the form of the most famous letter novel in German literature, *The Sorrows of the Young*. Walser thus highlights the "suffering of old Werther" in his novel but diverges from its tragic ending, instead depicting the protagonist's victory over hopelessness. The fact that the letters accompanying this process are also steeped in bitterness, which is less like the real Goethe, may disturb purists who hoped for a resurrection of Weimar's "Dichterfürst", but this does not matter in the context of Walser's artistic project.

In *A Man in Love,* it is the ageing Goethe who tries to shape his own life even in the perhaps most difficult moment of his life. Pessimistically and doubtfully, he reaches for his quill, lacking confidence in his ability,

proclaimed so loudly by the public, to use the power of the word against the evils of fate. Ultimately, however, it turns out that it is precisely this, cast through reflection in artistic creativity, that can give his life meaning and his fate a turn for the better. Writing does not eradicate pain, but at least temporarily relieves it and opens a new perspective with new tasks. While the youthful strength of his body may have left him forever, his mind remains sharp, and the experience, suffering and perspective of old age inspire him. As a result, his new creation not only reaches the level of his previous works capable, but rises to new heights of inwardness.

Walser does not offer definitive answers to crises of meaning, he does not write a how-to guide book with recipes on coping with old age and the end life crisis. The commandment *Thou shalt not love!* (Walser 2008: 70) does not sound like a serious attempt to address the shortcomings of old age because it could also lead to self-denial. The advice behind it is rather: “Thou shalt not talk yourself into believing that through an affair, you will become a young man once more!” It is less the true emotions that lead Goethe to the embarrassment of his fall and his failure, but rather his self-promotion as “a man in love” living through a second spring. After his mishap, Goethe experiences the stages of denial, and resentment, and ultimately confronts the reality of what occurred. He also attempts to cope with his humiliation and his crisis of meaning through writing. Walser does not present writing as the ultimate solution, as a panacea. Instead, he aims to engage with the potential, the power, and the energy of the events in a constructive manner. It is evident that Walser identifies with this ageing Goethe in this context.

Taberner suggests that approaching Walser's recent work with a more empathetic perspective, viewing it as both “late style” and “life writing”, not only validates its significance but also helps to understand its difficult aesthetic styles. The work becomes more “readable” when we are willing to explore non-linear interpretations (2015:110-11). According to Jurzysta in the late works of Walser, the eros of old age become the obsession of the protagonists and the writer himself (145). Furthermore, she believes that Walser's insistence on the themes of “ageing” and “the desire to remain sexually active” serves as proof that the writer himself struggles to come to terms with advancing age, thus attempts to express his disappointments, frustrations, and remaining hopes through literature (145). Zemanek is the opinion that Walser portrays his Goethe in a much more self-critical manner, especially regarding his own incorrigibility in matters of love and his futile resistance against ageing. This resemblance is evident in the male

characters from Walser's other novels about ageing, with whom the author himself is frequently identified (587).

Drawing new strength from the crisis and understanding age as a source of inspiration, or as Walser puts it "turning weakness into victory" (Walser 1988: 289) might be the author's true message. It is here that I see the relevance of Walser's work in today's societal context. While the works of writers like Philip Roth frequently feature ageing men who, in their attempts to hold onto their youth, end up behaving foolishly (e.g. *Sabbath's Theatre*), Walser confronts decline and death less desperately. The world no longer bends to our hopes and ideals, but even in our waning days, there is a lingering dignity that endures.

It our era of radical individualism and emotional introspection, it is typical that finding meaning nowadays is less about intellectual or artistic achievements; otherwise, Goethe's example of two hundred years would have sufficed anyway. On the contrary, it is personal self-fulfilment in the emotional realm that takes centre stage and – to quote Houellebecq, *L'Extension du domaine de la lute*. Success and fulfilment are no longer solely determined by wealth or intellectual prestige. The capacity to attract and be loved, as well as the journey of becoming and remaining *A Man in Love*, has gained equal significance.

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REKONSTRUKCIJA GETEOVE PERCEPCIJE PATNJE- BOL, STAROST I KRIZE U POZNIM GODINAMA U DJELU POSLEDNJA GETEOVA LJUBAV MARTINA VALZERA

Ovaj članak se bavi analizom djela *Poslednja Geteova ljubav* (2008) Martina Valzera, fokusirajući se na istraživanje boli, starosti, antagonizama u odnosima i krize u poznim godinama. Kroz pažljivo čitanje romana, kritički se procjenjuje da li isti može da se kategorizuje kao djelo usmjereno na krizu u poznim godinama. Valzer prikazuje patnju ostarjelog Getea i njegovo posljednje značajno iskustvo ljubavi. On nije zainteresovan za detaljno portretiranje istorijske ličnosti Getea. Umjesto toga, Valzer opisuje patnju i očaj u svim njihovim aspektima. Postavlja se pitanje: Kako se nositi sa fizičkim propadanjem, boli i odbijanjem u ovoj fazi života? Ostarjeli Gete pokušava da ponovo oblikuje svoj život, čak i u svom možda najtežem trenutku. Pesimističan i sumnjičav, okreće se pisanju. Najzad, on otkriva svrhu i pozitivnu putanju svoje sudbine, usmjeravajući svoja razmišljanja ka umjetničkoj kreativnosti. Ova analiza teži da rasvijetli Valzerovo tematsko istraživanje, kao i da doprinese širem razumijevanju prikaza ljudskog stanja u književnosti.

Ključne riječi: Martin Valzer, starost, kriza poznih godina, patnja, Gete, književna tradicija