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The art of killing time: Boredom, work, and not-doing

By drawing on well-known sociological and philosophical accounts of boredom by Theodor W. Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Lars Svendsen, Martin Hägglund etc., this paper examines the depictions of boredom at work in narrative fiction and proposes an alternative way to think about the relationship between boredom induced by the performance of monotonous labour. With reference to select meditative aphorisms in the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, I will primarily focus on the depictions of boredom in an office setting in select texts by the Swiss writer Robert Walser, in whose work we can find a sustained preoccupation with ideas of idleness, work, boredom, and how one can find joy in the daily life and in one's work. In Walser's novels and short stories, his characters seem to be trying to find an answer to the following questions: what does it mean to work? What does it mean to be idle? What does it mean to be lazy? How does one find a vocation? What does it mean to enjoy one's vocation? The texts I examine present office workers who are committed to actively being passive and while away time by wasting time or engaging in various acts of not-doing. This commitment to active passivity is demonstrated by the characters' deliberate acts of slowness, tardiness, in moments in which characters actively waste time, or quit their job to slide into idyllic pleasures of idleness. I argue that the texts I examine serve as reminders that what is more important than getting bored is how one gets bored. An important nuance I wish to present in my readings is that the worker does not stave off boredom, but by committing to active passivity, the worker makes a claim over how he is bored. An implied argument of the paper is that the texts I examine show the potential of boredom to transvalue into idleness, subverting the dynamics of a common (mis)conception that idleness breeds boredom.