



Dieter Bachmann

Walser's Wake, 1956 – 1966

This article deals with the relationship between Robert Walser and his colleagues as his readers. Carl Seelig, the man who protected but also jealously guarded Walser's life and work, might have also been guided himself by Walser. By also looking at many others of his interpreters, Dieter Bachmann comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to follow Walser since he and his texts are transitory and keep turning away.

Does this photo really exist: the one of the dead writer, in his dark, high-collared coat, lying supine in the snow? A lonely object lies above him in the picture: his hat; footsteps lead from the upper frame into the middle of the image, his last steps in the slush. Here is Walser, and he seems to be gazing heavenward, the very picture of amicable, terminal absence. Just like the end of one of his own stories: "Please consider this a little fancy." A wanderer arrived at his destination, a destination that was the way itself. Here he is, spread out across the path, at his destination en route, en route at his destination. He had been a child or a youth for 26 years; he had been a writer for 29 years; and he had been mute to the world for 23 years. The pictures of the old, living Walser are less uncanny, the couple of photos of the writer in Herisau. In all of them he stands remarkably erect, his umbrella over his arm or in his hand, his expression at once honest and mischievous, the Walser who kept the wool pulled down firmly over the eyes of his photographer and Boswell, Carl Seelig. Seelig wanted to make of friend Walser his Walser, his own figure, and was forever scribbling furtive notes on their walks and at meals in country inns in Toggenburg: notes that Walser, meanwhile, pretended not to see, while Seelig was busy plucking and sorting him, readying him for the killing box of literary legend. And Walser, of course, now indeed become a figure in one of his own stories, was busy all the while, feeding Seelig little anecdotes and bits of clever stuff to draw his own self-portrait with the other's pen: the other, Seelig, all unwitting. Seelig wanted to keep Walser to himself and would allow no one else to get close to him. Walser was more than his friend, he was his ward, which means he was his property. When a psychiatrist visited Walser in 1954 without Seelig's knowledge, Seelig lodged serious complaints with the management of the institute. Seelig brushed off Hermann Hesse, along with Joseph Breitbach and Theodor Heuss, all of whom tried to visit Walser in the late forties. As Seelig wrote to Hesse, he had been made Walser's guardian because the writer had renounced his desire for involvement in "the affairs of this world". The Walser expert Jochen Greven is cautious in his assessment of this claim: "Seelig was surely not hewing closely to the truth: just as Walser had seen no reason for his being made a ward as early as 1934, in fact had expressly considered himself *compos mentis*." Seen in this light, Seelig's relationship with Walser is reminiscent of the eeriest of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales, with their accounts of obsessive power inexorably exerted.

And it makes sense of the instruction left in Seelig's will: "All manuscripts by Robert Walser are to be burned, at his own wish." As transmitted by Seelig, Walser's utterances are clear and lucid. He knew precisely how and why he had fallen by the wayside: "I stopped writing in Herisau. Why should I continue to write? The Nazis have destroyed my world: The newspapers I used to write for have folded, their editors have been chased away or have died. I'm pretty close to being a fossil." Does that sound like someone who needs a guardian?

If the young man looks full of promise in that wonderful portrait in Biel, the old man would appear to have been freed of such energy by the end of his life, standing there by the side of a mercilessly straight Swiss thoroughfare, his inevitable umbrella and hat in hand, smiling, attentive, utterly poised from the tips of his polished shoes to the top of his impeccable brushcut. The writer seems to have lost the slight air of suffering that had characterized his appearance in his middle years: here is an upright pensioner, gone voluntarily to his retirement.

Mightn't it have been that Walser was actually addressing the public over Seelig's shoulder during all those promenades? Seelig and Walser: partners in crime, you might say, except that here the inspector is the perpetrator and the victim has been cunning enough to survive. Just the kind of relationship that is best represented in a novel, in fact.

Until that Christmas Day in 1956. "It's been almost three decades since Robert Walser, the writer, fell silent. Hence our confusion when we learned of his death." Werner Weber, the connoisseur and expert, expressed surprise from his aerie at the NZZ. "We had been living with his corpus while banishing the man himself from this mortal coil. Now he's died a second time." Walser had been more than simply peripatetic in his residences: he had had more than one life. You couldn't quite pin him down.

Meanwhile, it was 1956, and, surrounded by swarms of would-be Rube Goldbergs, all of them striving to be admitted to the Federal Technical Institute of Precision Studies in indispensable Zurich, far from this sleepy bend in the Rhine, the four of us, Peter, Jan, Florian and I, consoled ourselves with a steady diet of literature. It was the era of the first Walser revival. Unnoticed at first, a twenty-year-old aspiring Kafka specialist in Cologne named Wilhelm Emrich was at work on the first ever Walser dissertation. In Geneva, Darmstadt and Frankfurt, the first volumes of Carl Seelig's edition of the Poems in Prose began to appear. And, in Zurich, "du" magazine printed a report on the deceased writer: or rather, true to form, "du" presented the world with a meticulously prepared and cleverly organized dossier on the man and his career.

It was only ten pages long, and constituted a solemn act of renaissance. And here was I, a schoolboy, reading something announced as an unpublished sketch, the magical, mysterious cadences of *Under a Lime Tree*, for example: "The city was fine and void. How quickly that is said! Is this what they call writing?" There followed a chronicle of Walser's life by Walser himself; samples of his work; notes by his English translator, Christopher Middleton; and the reproduction of a little picture by his brother Karl, who had managed to produce a mixture of Spitzweg and expressionism. There was also a scurrilous anecdote from the actress Tilla Durieux, recounting a hilarious evening spent with Robert and Karl Walser.

The real sensation of the dossier, however, at least in hindsight, was undoubtedly the magazine's publication of a facsimile of one of Walser's microscopic pencil manuscripts, the finest graphite scribbles on neatly lined paper. Surely this was evidence that Walser had continued to write, even after his self-imposed publishing moratorium: at any rate, evidence of a covert, camouflaged activity. Seelig, of course, was certain that what we had before us was a piece of code, of secret script, indecipherable and mysterious, the traces of Walser's flight from the world into the confines of his madness. This (erroneous) theory was to stand another 43 years, until Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang managed with painstaking labor to make out the sense of the jottings on these 526 pieces of paper. It hasn't made Walser any less mysterious. But we are free now to read his work, as continued on these pages, rather than simply its medium.

We had, of course, been reading that work already, or at least its published manifestations. Emil Staiger's celebrated lectures on literature at the University of Zurich in the fifties and sixties had included mention of Walser, and the then-dean of German studies made no bones of either his admiration for the writer, or his discomfort at being expected to make sense of him. "Robert Walser," he wrote, "who sought to evade all alliances, manages also to evade his interpreter."

Not that many had tried yet. Apart from contemporary reviews, Katharina Kerr's Walser bibliography includes only a handful of entries for the early sixties: Hans Bänziger's treatment of Walser in his continuation of Walther Muschg's literary history; Christopher Middleton's *The Picture of Nobody* (1958); George C. Avery's *Focus on Reality* (1959); Karl Joachim Wilhelm Greven's 1960 dissertation, *Existence, the World and Pure Being in the Work of Robert Walser*; and Marthe Robert's foreword to the French edition of *Der Gehülfe* (*The assistant*). Now we were witnessing the rediscovery of a writer who seemed to belong to us, to our generation, and who, we fervently hoped, would have nothing to say to the current class of self-appointed arbiters of taste, since he was so un-sublime, such a vagabond, such a consumer of pork rinds and inhabitant of servant's quarters; the man in the sensible black shoes, with his umbrella, his hat and his prose. A man, we thought, who was not at home anywhere, neither in his garrets in Biel nor in his rooms in Berlin, not in Switzerland and not in this world. A common stroller like the rest of us, and yet different even from our soft, privileged selves because so diffident. We read him. We didn't talk about him much.

There was a new generation of Swiss storytellers rising up then, to take the place of Frisch and Dürrenmatt. Or so they thought, for where are they now, those Turels and Vogels and Humms? Who reads Felix Moeschlin or Albert Steffen, nominated by Werner Weber as Walser's worthiest epigones? Even Friedrich Glauser, the crime-novelist junkie and asylum inmate, has been rediscovered, while Jakob Bosshart, Maria Waser and Arnold Kübler have sunk into oblivion. And Robert Walser has outlived them all, by creeping along marvelously underneath them.

Walser came with dust on his shoes into the salon of Swiss literature, a salon still marked by the provincial arrogance of the Swiss National Exhibition. And, along with C.F. Ramuz, he brought forth the only examples of Swiss writing produced between the golden age of Keller, Meyer and Gotthelf and the rise of those Young Turks, Frisch and Dürrenmatt, that were worthy of consideration among the works of world literature. And now the criticism began to appear. With the posthumous publication in 1961 of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*,

Walser acquired his second great champion after Kafka, who had read and admired and indeed been influenced by his Swiss contemporary. Benjamin classed Walser with Eichendorff and Hebel, and described his prose style thus: "While we are accustomed to the riddle of style arising out of a series of more or less integral and intentional works of art, what we have before us here is an apparently quite aimless (and yet no less enchanting) linguistic savagery. A self-abandonment involving the entire range, from grace to bitterness." Walser's writing was a protest against the classical heritage, in other words, with its veneration of the perfect form, and struck a singular, idiosyncratic blow for modernity. Benjamin also detected a certain madness in Walser's figures before the writer himself entered psychiatric treatment: a madness, however, that is resistant to psychology. "These are figures," Benjamin wrote, "drawn against a background of madness, which is why they remain so heartrendingly, so inhumanly, so unerringly superficial. If one wanted to choose one word to refer to the uncanny delight they afford, it would be: healed. They have all been healed. But of course we are never made privy to the process of their healing." And yet Benjamin claimed also to have heard the secret music accompanying Walser's composition: "A sob is the melody of his patter." While Benjamin was content to limit his study of Walser to a few brilliant aphorisms, it was to be the duty and honor of a certain Jochen Greven in Cologne, a student of Wilhelm Emrich's, to conclusively resuscitate Walser's literary reputation for the seventies, eighties and beyond. Greven's dissertation is only a first attempt at approaching his subject: his true accomplishment was to be his edition of the collected works, which appeared between 1966 and 1975. During his Herculean labor, Greven remained remarkably discreet about the difficulties involved in editing Walser. Now, albeit with his characteristic reserve, he has broken his silence, in *Walserien 1956–2001*, an "autobiography with Walser" evidently intended, with its extremely limited issue, to outdo Walser himself in modesty. Greven's great contribution has been to collect the widely dispersed pieces of Walser's oeuvre, in newspapers and journals, to assess them and to order them. It was Greven who invented the term "microgram" and who was the first to successfully decipher what had been wrongly described as an idiolect. Greven went on to duplicate his own work with Kossodo by editing a series of single-volume collected works with Suhrkamp, and served four years as the president of the Robert Walser Society, which he had co-founded, until 2001. Perhaps someone will grant this man's memoirs a proper publication after all, and give him the honor he deserves.

Walser himself, of course, doesn't need any more honor. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Walser is currently being idolized by an entire new generation of wakeful, tender, observant authors, their eyes flung open as wide as Walser's and hardly even imitating him anymore, so fully and indeed masterfully have they incorporated his style. And yet, if there ever was an author unsusceptible to emulation, it is Walser. Perhaps we should never have written about him in the first place. Just attend to the way he vanishes: "The world was as full of life as ever and as fair as in its fairest hour. Gently I crept away and went out onto the street."

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