

## ESSAY

# Robert Walser: Modern Method, Not Madness

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Though Walter Benjamin's claim that "we can read much by Robert Walser, but nothing about him" no longer seems as applicable today as it might have in 1929, there nevertheless remains something eerily enigmatic about this modernist figure. What we may read by him or about him seems to inspire parallels with other literary "giants" whose complex writings seem inextricably bound to their even more complex lives. But what do such comparative formulations reveal about Walser or his writing?

The enduring shadow cast by his absent, depressive mother has been compared to that of Kafka's fraught relationship with his father. His years of confinement, first at Waldau in Bern, followed by more than a quarter of a century in Herisau, evoke Pound's years at St. Elizabeths (though Walser himself might have been more inclined to reflect on Hölderlin). The tragic circumstances of his death—found face-down in the snowy fields of the asylum on Christmas Day 1956—not to mention that his body was gruesomely photographed in this manner, though not a suicide, still evokes the macabre fixation around Woolf's decisive plunge or, worse, Pasolini's crushed body splattered across Italian newspapers.

Swiss by birth, his writing style—or styles, so difficult to pin down a singular mode—have been compared broadly to his German-writing contemporaries, Hesse and Mann; his admirers, Kafka, Musil, and Benjamin; his predecessors, Cervantes, Fielding and Rousseau; his fellow modernists, Joyce and Proust; as well as postmodernists like Pynchon, Barth, and Bernhard. Though he is rarely compared to a woman—let alone an American woman—I can't help but draw analogies between Walser and Emily Dickinson: the self-imposed isolation from the world, the ruminations of madness, the much-debated lifelong virginity, and yet, the impressive if not inconceivable body of work discovered after their deaths, writing capable of such despair as much as wit, such desire tempered by quiet reflection.

But, in the end, what is most difficult about Walser is that he is, in fact, so *unlike* any other writer. His privileging of servants and laborers in his novels, his mixture of class critique bordering on affectionate portraiture, may remind readers

of Dickens but the comparison inevitably proves lacking. His snippets and vignettes, his take on the darkest of inner motives and moods even as they are cast in the lightest of language play may seem reminiscent of Beckett at first glance but only so far. His (debated) turning away from writing might seem akin to Oppen's hiatus in the face of political turmoil, but Walser seems to have avoided reflecting on the turmoil of the world wars. What is to be gained from such comparative analyses in which  $x$  clearly does not equal  $y$ ?

**"I myself am sometimes  
well-known, sometimes  
a stranger"**

RW,  
*Microscripts*

Perhaps the most accurate statement to be made about Walser's writing, then, is that it is uniquely his.

Just recently, New Directions has published a selection of what may be the most quintessentially Walser of all Walser texts, in *Microscripts*. Originally dismissed by his otherwise loyal friend and executor, Carl Seelig, as the "indecipherable" scribbblings of a schizophrenic writing in code, the microscripts emerge as Walser's most enigmatic and haunting literary legacy. Translated by Susan Bernofsky, whose introduction explains: "The 'microscripts' have now been painstakingly analyzed by scholar Werner Morlang and Bernhard Echte, who spent more than a decade laboring over the transcriptions of the 526 diminutive pages, and so we know they were the original drafts Walser would copy over in a fair hand before sending them off for publication" (10).

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Following Bernofsky's informative introduction, the image of the first microscript in the collection announces itself as a tear-off calendar page from 1926 reading, "Mai 16 Sonntag," the red "16" indicating a referent devoid of any particular reference. What appears as a minimalist gesture is immediately upended as one turns the page to glimpse Walser's "pencil method," or *Bleistiftgebeit*, crammed between the margins, cramped and illegible. This juxtaposition, in many ways, enacts the entire reading experience of *Microscripts*—those referents which one might reflexively think of as self-explanatory do not yield such simplistic interpretations. There is no simple interpretation, no clear-cut meaning. Even more, the reverse side of this first microscript of the collection (No. 337) underscores the superb quality of the New Directions reproduction, as the bleed-through from the red "16" is just barely perceptible beneath Walser's microscopic script. The collection of microscripts (again reminiscent of Dickinson's fascicles)—written on the backs of envelopes, tear-off calendars, magazine pages, business cards and postcards, postal wrappers, business correspondence, and large sheets of artist paper—bear witness to the tactile nature of Walser's work. Each crease of the paper, each tear in the margins, the postal marks bleeding through from one side to the other, all emerge as part of the textual experience.

Microscript 350, for instance, written on a portion of an honorarium notice from Rudolf Mosse Verlag, demonstrates Walser's playfulness in appropriating the printed matter. As the "About the Microscripts" endnotes explain, Walser "turned the final 'G' of 'Verlag' (publisher) into a 'C' and added an 'H' to make the end of the word spell out 'ach' (a lament)" (116). Entitled "Crisis," it quickly slips into a meditation on critics: "Could this sentence, which perhaps seems not the most jubilantly exultant where its framer's framework is concerned, merit criticism?" (45).

For all of the critic's rehearsing of Walser's falsely-diagnosed schizophrenia, his voluntary or reluctant years of institutionalized exile, the physical or psychological symptoms behind his turn to the pencil, it is genuinely refreshing to confront the playfulness which opens one microscript: "Is it

perhaps my immaturity, my innocence or, to put it in a more ordinary way, my foolishness that has prompted me to ask myself whether I would like to enter into relations with you" (53). Page after page, the playfulness leaps between toying with desire—"All his longing, how he longed for it again!" (39)—and teasing of language: "This reality. This treasure trove of in-fact-having-occurred-nesses. This car drove off, and he and she were sitting in the back. How do you like my 'trove' and 'drove'? Make a note of these words! They're not my invention....Don't you think my 'trove' is *ben trovato*? Please do be so good as to think so" (62). The language play is so intricate, so seemingly effortless, it is almost possible to forget that this is a work of translation.

At other times, they read as veiled (or not-so-veiled) autobiography. Passages such as "[a]n illness took hold of him, and he let it bear him away until he departed" (33) or "I am living here in a sort of hospital room and am using a newspaper to give support to the page on which I write this sketch" (24) seem to be Walser speaking as himself. Even more notable are the prevalence of reflections on the writing process itself: "I could write you a thirteen-hundred page, that is to say, a very fat book about this if I wanted, but at least for the time being I don't want to. Maybe later. Look forward to what might be coming, my friend, and until then, farewell. To conclude, however, let me quickly add one last thing" (61).

As vital to an understanding of *The Waste Land* as Harcourt's edition of Pound's revisions and Vivian Eliot's marginal comments, or as crucial to the study of *Finnegans Wake* as Joyce's notebooks, so the *Microscripts* will prove invaluable to any reading of Robert Walser. Nearly seventy years later, New Directions has answered Benjamin's lament, offering readers this opportunity to read a work that is as much by Walser as it is about his method.

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