

ARTICLE

Walking with Robert Walser

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SUMMARY

Swiss writer Robert Walser (1878–1956) is surprisingly little known in the United States, although he was read and admired by his European contemporaries. The author of poetry, short stories, and novels, he suffered from mental illness for much of his life. His 1917 short story *The Walk* was the first of his writings to be translated and is the work through which he is best known to English-speaking readers. In it, writing and walking converge to become a means of resisting the monster of severe depression.

KEYWORDS: Switzerland, short stories, walking, mental illness, narrator, eccentric style, Modernism, city, countryside, nature

Jean-Claude Carron introduced me to Robert Walser several years ago via a collection of the Swiss author's writings, *Selected Stories*, introduced by Susan Sontag.¹ "Stories" seemed a questionable way to describe these forty-two pieces presenting an intriguing line-up of titles: "Trousers," "Balloon Journey," "Stork and Hedgehog," "Nervous," "The Monkey," "The Pimp," "So! I've Got You," and so on. Their length varies from just one page, "A Little Ramble," to fifty pages with "The Walk." (Only later would it dawn on me that those two chapters explored the same subject: walking.) Playful but often dark, disconcerting digressions threw stumbling blocks in my own path of reading the book. A first-person voice narrates many of the "stories." Soon the word "essays" replaced "stories" in my mind.

I had never read – I'm not sure that I had even heard of – Walser before Jean-Claude's introduction. In this ignorance I was not alone. Writers like Sontag and others emphasize how relatively little Walser is known today even among devoted admirers of Modernist writers. In case some readers among Jean-Claude's friends do not know Walser and his writing, I offer this brief introduction. Robert Walser was born in 1878 in Bienne, Switzerland, a town on the linguistic frontier between German and French-speaking Switzerland. His family was German-speaking, but he grew up speaking both languages. The young Robert showed no potential that would have led his family or his teachers to direct his education toward the university. In 1892, at the age of fourteen, he began training as a bank clerk. Two years later, his mother, who had long suffered from mental illness, died. Robert left the bank and moved with his older brother Karl, an artist, to Stuttgart, where Karl pursued a career in painting. Robert first tried to become an actor, and when that effort yielded little success, he turned to writing, first publishing poetry and then turning to prose.

In 1905 at the age of 27, Walser moved to Berlin, again following his brother Karl, who enjoyed a successful career as a stage-set designer. Robert lived there until 1913. The Berlin years

were a productive period for his writing, although not a financially rewarding time. He depended on Karl, who adapted comfortably to his rise in fame and fortune. Unlike his brother, Robert became increasingly a misfit, never comfortable in Berlin's high society. Soon his quirky behavior marked him as an eccentric. He tried training at a school that prepared young men for jobs in restaurants and hotels, and he worked one winter as a butler in a nobleman's castle – writing all the while. His novels and short pieces were often well received by critics, but they rarely brought him enough money to live independently. He moved from rented room to room and became increasingly isolated, even as he experienced a period of productivity in his writing.

In 1910 Walser suffered a mental health crisis that led to severe writer's block. For two years his productivity languished before his health improved somewhat and he was once again able to write and publish. In 1913 he left Berlin for good and returned to Switzerland. He lived in Bienne for a time with his sister, Lisa, on the grounds of the psychiatric hospital where she taught. Mental illness haunted Walser's family. His brother Ernst died as a patient in a mental health hospital in 1916, and another brother, Hermann, died by suicide three years later. During World War I, Robert served several weeks of military service each year. In the following years he continued to produce while becoming increasingly isolated from society, moving from one temporary lodging to another his few possessions. In 1921 he moved to Bern, where he wrote two novels and other works.

In 1929, after another mental health crisis, Walser entered the Waldau asylum in Bern. His writing decreased and then stopped. In 1933, with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, he was moved to the Herisau asylum in Appenzell, Switzerland. At this point he had almost slipped out of sight from the literary scene and would have receded into oblivion if not for the intervention of Carl Seelig. Seelig, a Swiss writer and editor, biographer of Alfred Einstein, began visiting Walser in Herisau in 1936, walking with him. He eventually, in 1944, became Walser's legal guardian and literary executor, gathering and saving Walser's published and unpublished writings, including Walser's by then signature handwriting, the tiny "microscripts." On Christmas Day, 1956, Robert Walser died alone while on one of his long walks near the asylum.

For much of his life, long walks, often at night, were a major part of Walser's routine, and characters walking occur frequently in his writing. The brief one-page piece "A Little Ramble" (1914) opens simply with, "I walked through the mountains today" (*Selected Stories* 30). The narrator praises the beauty of the mountains and the pleasure he felt as he followed "the wonderful road" along the mountainside and down into a deep ravine, where a river roared. He exchanges a few words with a young traveler and later sees and hears his two companions, who "pass by with music" (*Selected Stories* 30). The language is simple and straightforward, a landscape tableau with just a few human figures.

The Walk (1917) is not only much longer, but much more complex in showcasing its eccentric literary playfulness and its melancholy. It may not be coincidental that during the three years between those two walks Europe experienced World War I, and in that context, Walser experienced the ravages of mental illness within his family. He was thirty-nine when it appeared.

First published as a single work alone in 1917, *The Walk* was the first of Walser's works to be translated in any language; Christopher Middleton published his English translation in 1954. It has remained Walser's best-known work among English-speaking audiences. It begins:

I have to report that one fine morning, I do not know any more for sure what time it was, as the desire to take a walk came over me, I put my hat on my head, left my writing room, or room of phantoms, and ran down the stairs to hurry out into the street [...]. As far as I can remember as I write this down, I found myself, as I walked into the open, bright, and cheerful street, in a romantically adventurous state of mind, which pleased me profoundly. (54)

The first time I read these lines, I thought briefly of Virginia Woolf, Walser's contemporary, who sends Clarissa Dalloway out alone on a walk into the bustle of London on a warm June day. Like Clarissa, Walser's first-person narrator quickly encounters other pedestrians, at first without engaging with them: a woman on the stairs, perhaps "a Spaniard, a Peruvian or a Creole" (55); and then Professor Meili, who in brushing by him, inspires a detailed portrait of an eminent scholar, a figure who appears "in spite of all its severity and adamance, sympathetic" (55). He glimpses a bookseller, a priest, a bicycling chemist, a rag collector, young children playing, a dog drinking in a fountain, a regimental doctor, and an "unassuming pedestrian" who "should not be unconsidered, or unrecorded; for he asks me politely to mention him" (55). Walser sends his narrator along a path quite unlike Clarissa Dalloway's. He pulls the reader along with him, pointing out the various other people whom he encounters and passes, but he then makes that unassuming pedestrian startle us by addressing him directly, not as a walker but as the writer of the pages we are reading. The illusion of simply strolling along city streets with a garrulous guide abruptly dissolves, and we confront walker and writer as they converge.

Walser then has his narrator recount longer episodes of stops along his walk as he leaves the street and enters first a book shop, then a bank. In each place he initiates a dialogue with an employee that quickly becomes a comic parody of the mundane exchanges of everyday commerce. The dialogue with the book clerk takes a surprising negative turn as he rejects the clerk's recommendation and abruptly leaves the shop. In the bank, long sentences in highly mannered, stilted prose undermine any illusion of realism in the narrator's conversation with the bank official, and where we might expect another negative turn, the outcome is a happy one. Perhaps this segment is Walser's sly commentary on his own very brief career as a bank employee. As he walks along, the narrator increasingly presumes upon the reader's willingness to accept his mercurial swings of mood. Within one sentence he can slip from an even-tempered, mellow appreciation of a pleasant morning into an explosive tirade. He calmly approaches a bakery with a sign in gold lettering and suddenly erupts:

Since, dear kind reader, you give yourself the trouble to march attentively along with the writer and inventor of these lines, out forthwith into the bright and friendly morning world, not hurrying, but rather quite at ease, with level head, smoothly, discreetly, and calmly, now we both arrive in front of the above-mentioned bakery with the gold inscription, where we feel inclined to stop, horrified, to stand mournfully aghast at the gross ostentation and the sad disfigurement of sweet rusticity which is intimately connected with it. (62)

After a long rant against gold letters on bakers' shops as foolish ostentations compared to the rustic simplicity of bread, he drops his pompous tone. "Now, [...] I shall on account of this haughty bearing, this domineering attitude, take myself to task" (62). Sudden reversals, retractions, hesitations, and apologies betray a manic instability in the speaker.

Following these dramatic encounters in crowded commercial city streets, Walser, without warning his reader, changes the scene to a country road. “Left of the country road here, a foundry full of workmen and industry causes a notable disturbance. In recognition of this I am honestly ashamed to be merely out for a walk while so many others drudge and labor” (62). A bicyclist, “a friend of mine from 135/III Battalion of the militia” (62), reinforces his shame by observing that Walser is enjoying a stroll during working hours. Only briefly deterred, Walser moves on. Now the road provides a structure for his observations. He records a series of tranquil encounters that enchant him: a dog lying in the road, children playing, a conversation with an aging, beautiful woman who receives him kindly, all inspire exclamations of: “Here I breathed again more quiet and free – and became again a better, warmer, and happier man [...]. I was dead, and now it is as if someone had raised me up and set me on my way” (66). This experience inspires his will to write. “All this [...] I shall certainly soon write down in a piece or sort of fantasy, which I shall entitle ‘The Walk’” (67). But just as he is enjoying these newfound pleasant thoughts,

there came a man in my direction, an enormity, a monster, who almost completely darkened my shining road, a tall, lanky beanpole of a fellow, sinister, whom I knew, alas, only too well, a very curious customer; namely the giant TOMZACK. In any other place and on any other road but this dear yielding country road I would have expected him. His woeful, gruesome air, his tragic atrocious appearance, infused me with terror and took every good, bright and beautiful prospect, all joy and gaiety away from me. Tomzack! It is true, dear reader, is it not, the name alone has the sound of terrible and mournful things? (69–70)

As Walser describes the monster in horrifying detail, it gradually becomes clear that Tomzack is the specter of the mental illness that haunts him, his alter-ego who loomed up repeatedly in his life. “Beside him, I felt like a dwarf, or a poor weak little child. With the greatest of ease the giant could have trodden me underfoot and crushed me. Oh, I knew who he was” (70). As he would do repeatedly, Walser the walker and the writer resists and moves on. “I eluded him, and murmured to myself: ‘Goodbye, keep well nevertheless, friend Tomzack!’ Without looking back at the phantom, the pitiful colossus and superman, [...] I walked on” (70).

It is not surprising that Robert Walser’s ambling narratives inspired commentary from W. E. Sebald, whose *The Rings of Saturn* follows its author’s walking journey along the coast of East Anglia, a journey followed by his hospitalization for depression. Sebald called his essay on Walser “Le promeneur solitaire: A Remembrance of Robert Walser.” The title, of course, recalls Walser’s fellow countryman, Rousseau, and another literary account of walking. Although he never met Walser (he was born five years before Walser died), Sebald insists on a deep kinship that binds him to his predecessor. While commenting on the photos of Walser that he includes in his essay, Sebald stops at a few showing Walser on walks during his last years, and writes, “there is something in the way that the poet, long since retired from the service of the pen, that reminds me instinctively of my grandfather [...]. I think I see my grandfather before me” (126–27). Sebald draws out the similarities between Walser and his grandfather: both men left the top button of their waistcoats undone, both men died in 1956. Details in Walser’s novel *The Robber* show an uncanny similarity with one of Sebald’s stories, written before he had read *The Robber*. There is something compelling in Sebald’s impulse to find in Walser his forefather. Like Walser, Sebald walked and wrote to push back against the Tomzack of his depression. The places he records seeing on his walk evoke memories of war and destruction. He wrote notes on those places where he walked and the thoughts those places provoked in him.

At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages. (*The Rings of Saturn* 3)

It was only after he succumbed to the depression and was hospitalized that he began to read his notes and write *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald was well-equipped to read and appreciate Walser.

Walser's *The Walk* records the struggle that afflicted and tormented him throughout his life, a struggle between despair and hope where walking and writing fight against defeat. Walking away from Tomzack, he comes to a pine forest where he finds peace and happiness:

How glad I was at this sweet forest softness and repose [...]. Here and there in all this tranquility and quietude a bird let its blithe voice be heard out of his charmed and holy hiding place. There I stood and listened, and suddenly there came upon me an inexpressible feeling for the world, and together with it a feeling of gratitude which broke powerfully out of my soul. (71)

In moments of hope, his language expands into rapturous plenitude. But such moments do not endure. Throughout *The Walk* it is in scenes of nature, when he is alone, that Walser's narrator expresses peace and happiness. When he leaves the forest, a series of encounters, even ostensibly pleasant ones, betray his anxiety. He sees a young schoolgirl singing in a window and describes the powerful affect her song has on him, as well as his attempts to encourage her. His speech stuns her, and he records no reply. "Serious and astonished, the girl listened to the words I spoke, though I uttered them certainly more for my own delight than in any hope that the little thing might appreciate and understand them, for she lacked the necessary maturity" (74). Spoken words do little to effect meaningful communication with others in *The Walk*. In fact, the walker's long speeches seem calculated to protect him against such communication.

A visit to a friend, Frau Aeri, for lunch becomes a scene of terror when his hostess keeps forcing food on him until he is suffocating. He confronts his domineering tailor with mock-epic prose, only to leave the scene in "painful and ignominious defeat" (83). He narrates his suffering in such stylistically overblown language that his speeches become comic. Undaunted, he approaches an interview with a tax official. In his appeal to pay fewer taxes we see a self-portrait of Walser as his friends described him:

I get along as best I can; I dispense with all luxuries; this a single glance at my person should tell you. The food I eat can be described as sufficient and frugal [...]. On Sundays I may not allow myself to be seen on the streets, for I have no Sunday clothes. In my steady and thrifty way of life, I am like a field mouse. A sparrow has better prospects of prosperity [...]. (85)

When the tax official remarks: "But you're always to be seen out for a walk?" the narrator breaks into a stirring praise of walking that fills three pages. In spite of its length, the language in this section does not seem inflated and comic. These pages serve as Walser's defense of the walking

that sustained him even in the last decades of his life when he no longer wrote. They propel him happily out of the tax office and back into nature:

As I was mercifully released, I hurried happily away, and was soon in the open air again. Raptures of freedom seized me and carried me away [...]. Now all the world around seemed to me suddenly to have become a thousand times more beautiful. The walk seemed more beautiful, rich, and long. (88–89)

For a while, the closing pages of *The Walk* suggest that those rapturous feelings will prevail. “One delight followed the other, and in the soft confiding air contentment floated to and fro and trembled as with joy restrained” (90). But even as he describes a country barbershop, a schoolhouse, and a castle, hints of disturbing feelings creep into his prose. He praises the beauty of majestic trees and decries the greed of the men who cut them down for money “which is the vilest and most contemptible thing on earth” (92). A Moorish garden pavilion inspires in him dreams of a night time scene when a beautiful, exotic noblewoman arrives with a sweet yellow light to dispel the darkness. She sings in a delightful voice [...], when the dream is rudely interrupted by the noise of a passing automobile. Other scenes of buildings, “everyday things and street events” follow quickly: a piano factory, a circus, gypsy girls in red boots, a dog in the road, until finally the day comes to an end. “It was now evening, and I came to a quiet pretty path or side road which ran under trees, toward the lake, and here the walk ended” (102).

The end of the walk brings *The Walk* to its end. The final long paragraph records a mood change from which there is no recovery:

Perhaps because of a certain general weariness, I thought of a beautiful girl, and of how alone I was in the wide world, and that this could not be quite right. Self-reproof touched me from behind my back and stood before me in my way, and I had to struggle hard. Certain evil memories took control of me. Self-accusations made my heart deeply and suddenly a burden to me [...]. Old long-past failures occurred to me, disloyalty, hatred, scorn, falsity, cunning, anger, and many violent unbeautiful actions. I was seized with astonishment at my countless frailties, at all unfriendliness and lovelessness that I had caused people to feel [...]. As I looked at earth and air and sky, the melancholy unquestioning thought came to me that I was a poor prisoner between heaven and earth, that all men were miserably imprisoned in this way. (103–04)

In this mood he recalls two memories, one of a poor, weak old man he had seen lying in the forest, and the other of a girl, in every way the opposite of the old man, “beautiful and fresh with youth.” He remembers that he had asked her a question some time ago, he remembers how “in her doubt and disbelief her lovely eyes had looked away, and how she had said no when I asked her if she believed in my sincere love, affection, surrender, and tenderness.” This thought makes him look at the flowers he had picked up and was holding in his hand. “Why then the flowers? ‘Did I pick flowers to lay them upon my sorrow?’ I asked myself, and the flowers fell out of my hand. I had risen up, to go home; for it was late now and everything was dark” (104). *The Walk* ends with those words: everything was dark.

It is hard to move on from that ending, to step back and consider *The Walk* as a whole, to

place it among the other pieces in *Selected Stories* and the many other works that Walser wrote. We might wish that he had ended on one of the earlier notes of elation. But if Walser experienced failure in achieving close communion with others, as he suggests in *The Walk* and elsewhere in his writing, he allows us, his readers, to feel compassion for him and others who experience deep depression. And Walser himself emerged from episodes of depression like the one he portrays here and went on to write and to walk. In the years after 1917 and *The Walk*'s appearance, he knew the most productive period of his career.

I thank Jean-Claude for introducing me to Robert Walser, and I wish him the happiest years ahead in his retirement.

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Notes

¹ See Works Cited. A later translation, incorporating Walser's subsequent revisions of the 1917 version, is *The Walk*, translated by Christopher Middleton with Susan Bernofsky, Introduction by Susan Bernofsky (also in bibliography). Bernofsky explains that she "tweaked" Middleton's translation with his blessing (3).