Sovereign Insignificance: Review of *Speaking to the Rose: Writings, 1912-1932* by Robert Walser

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For the feuilletonist everything is an occasion for a prose piece: a walk in the Berlin Tiergarten, a new hair or dress style, ladies' shoes, an old fountain, a Parisian newspaper, an hour of the day. Historical figures might also attract him—Bismarck or Jesus or "Ramses II" or "The Cave Man"—or ones from myth like "Hercules" ("The boy gave early proofs of remarkable strength. Probably he preferred sport and that sort of thing. We know nothing of his schooling") or "Odysseus" ("He spent years in the vicinity of a lady who had the wicked habit of transforming men with apparently good reputations and solid ways of life into what is best not closely described"), or the lives and works of other artists—"Brentano I," "Brentano III," "Something about Goethe," "A Note on Van Gogh's *L'Arlésienne*" ("In the picture, many questions find their finest, most subtle, most delicate significance—which is that they cannot be answered"). However, it is the rare feuilletonists, no matter how fine a quick-sketch artist, who can bestow permanence to reality's ephemera, which is one reason we tend to ignore miniaturists in prose—to our great loss, in the case of a genius like Robert Walser. In *Speaking to the Rose: Writings, 1912 - 1932*, from which the above titles come, Christopher Middleton has selected and translated fifty such sketches, stories, rambles, essays, improvisations—*writings*, yes, that's the right word—by Walser.[1]

Born in Biel, Switzerland in 1878, Walser left school at age fourteen to apprentice as a bank clerk. Walser's primary cities of residence during his active writing career (1898 - 1933) were Zurich, Berlin, Biel, and Bern, though he also worked for a time in Basel, Stuttgart, Thun, Wädenswil, and as an assistant butler in Castle Dambrau in Upper Silesia. The pattern of his life was one of short-term jobs, mostly of a clerical nature, and short-term stays in furnished rooms—between 1896 and 1905, he changed residences seventeen times. Before the end of the century, his poems and short prose began to appear in literary journals and in the feuilleton sections of newspapers, and in 1904 his first book, *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (Fritz Kocher's Essays), was published. More than a dozen others followed, including the novels *Geschwister Tanner* (The Tanner Siblings, 1907), *Der Gehülfe* (The Assistant, 1908), and one of the twentieth century's master-novels *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), whose eponymous narrator is a pupil of the Benjamenta Institute, a school for butlers (Walser himself attended one in Berlin) where "the educators and teachers are asleep, or they are dead, or seemingly dead, or they are fossilized, no matter, in any case we get nothing from them."

1 A shorter version of this article appeared in *Bookforum* (Feb/Mar 2006) under the title "Written on a Whim."

Admired by and an influence upon Kafka, but generally ignored when first published, *Jakob von Gunten*, though subtitled "A Diary," is more a journal or dream journal of a life in a dream school where the only class is "How should a boy behave?" and whose staff consists only of the principal, Herr Benjamenta ("a giant"), and his sister, the mysterious, sad, beautiful Lisa Benjamenta. Even Jakob, in keeping with the world both outside and within him, has "contrived to become a mystery to myself." The novel is bathed in unreality and shimmers with contradictions. Jakob is a dreamy, benevolent rascal, a sort of King Midas who turns everything he touches into riddles. It is his willingness to embrace the ordinary and the contradictory that allows him to thrive in the stultifying, rule-ridden atmosphere of the Institute. "Everything that's forbidden lives a hundred times over," he writes; "thus, if something is supposed to be dead, its life is all the livelier. As in small things, so in big ones. Nicely put, in everyday words, but in everyday things the true truths are found." For the German novelist Martin Walser (no relation) *Jakob von Gunten* is "the most radical book I know."

In 1917 Walser suffered, "due to the pen, a real breakdown in my hand, a sort of cramp," as he said in a 1927 letter. "With the help of the pencil I was better able to play, to write; this seemed to revive my writerly enthusiasm." Fourteen of the pieces Christopher Middleton has chosen for inclusion in *Speaking to the Rose: Writings, 1912 - 1932* are from the *Mikrogramme*, 526 slips of paper that contain drafts Walser wrote in pencil during the '20s and early '30s, many of which he revised and saw published in the leading newspapers and journals of his day. Jochen Greven, editor of the twenty volume *Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben* (1985), discovered that Walser's tiny handwriting, once considered an indecipherable code and a sign of the author's madness, was in the old German Sutterlin script and indeed decipherable. Transcribed by Werner Morlang and Bernhard Echte, these scraps of paper with their minute script constitute the six volumes of *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* (From the Pencil Region, 1985- 2000) which supplement Greven's edition.

In 1929, at age fifty, after severe episodes of anxiety and depression, Walser entered Waldau, a psychiatric clinic in Bern. There he managed to maintain what he described as his "little prose piece business" until 1933, when a new director decided that Waldau should house only acute patients. He was then transferred to a clinic outside Herisau, in eastern Switzerland, where he remained until his death on Christmas Day, 1956, of a heart attack while taking a walk on the snowy hills near the clinic. It shouldn't surprise us that Walser, contrary to previous opinion, very well might have kept writing after his transfer to Herisau. In the introduction to her impeccable translation of *Der Räuber* (*The Robber*) Susan Bernofsky, citing Catherine Sauvat's biography of Walser, tells us that a former attendant at the asylum recalled observing Walser scribbling on scraps of paper after meals. Bernofsky's assumption that Walser himself destroyed this work, as he had destroyed earlier manuscripts, including three novels (another was lost by a publisher), sounds reasonable, as would our imagining him writing the world inside his head instead of on paper.

Because Walser wrote like someone upon whom nothing is lost and synchronized his syntax to thought, one might almost say he's Jamesian. W. G. Sebald, in his forty-page homage "*Le promeneur solitaire*" (The Solitary Walker), from *Logis in einem Landhaus* (Lodgings in a Country House, 1998), wrote that Walser "registers with a seismographic precision the slightest tremors at the edge of his consciousness." This is a consciousness able, as we see in the microscript text "*The idea was a delicate one*," to sense that "branches,

the stalks, are remarkable, swaying, hushing, also in their speaking suppleness, and indeed how singular are the roots, in their dark existence, which, like the holiness of light, is the stuff of fairytales" and that flowers "have incomparable grace and are friends without equal, fresh and gentle, carefree and humble, and they raise no objection to being smelled, or else they behave as if this were not forbidden; they are pious without knowing anything of piety, good without knowing anything of goodness, and they love nothing. Is that perhaps why one loves them so much?"

In *Speaking to the Rose* we also encounter such peculiar evocations of consciousness as a room that "if endowed with the faculty of speech, would ask to be designated as a 'drawing room'" ("Letter of a European"); a dancer, "beautiful Preziosa," who "came to resemble an angel in paradise, apparently shedding all gravity, materiality, necessitudes, and hankerings" ("*The stage-space might have measured*"); and as a Flaubert-aficionado flapper who tells us, "In so-called realistic books reality begins/To look unreal. . . . /What's more we can create reality/Insofar as it does consist of ourselves" ("Cabaret Scene").

How easy it is to underappreciate and misread Walser. For the record, however, in addition to Sebald, Walser's European admirers include Kafka, Brod, Morgenstern, Benjamin, Musil, Hesse, Tucholsky, Hessel, Canetti, Dürrenmatt, Frisch, Nizon, Koeppen, Aichinger, Bernhard, Muschg, Martin Walser, Gert Hofmann, Uwe Johnson, Elfriede Jelinek, Roberto Calasso, Fleur Jaeggy, and Claudio Magris. Nonetheless, Walser's idiosyncratic rambles through the fields of language have earned him little favor from the general public. But before dismissing his flights as frivolous, consider Sebald's comment that Walser "was anything but politically naive," and then read, say, from *Selected Stories* "Masters and Workers" ("Those who are begged beg the beggars, who don't understand this") or "Essay on Freedom" ("I hope I may be believed if I permit myself to say that freedom is difficult and produces difficulties, with which phrase perhaps there sprang from my mouth an insight the expression of which could be accomplished by none but a connoisseur and gourmet of freedom who notes and cherishes all the unfreedoms internal to freedom") or from *Masquerade and Other Stories* a lesson in Swiss history "The Battle of Sempach" ("Naturally the noble steeds trampled their own masters in frenzied flight; and many noblemen, attempting to dismount quickly, got caught in their stirrups with their stupid, fashionable shoes, so that they kissed the meadows with the backs of their bloody heads, while their horrified eyes, before they went out, saw the sky burning above them like a furious flame"), or from *Speaking to the Rose* the microscript text "*It can so happen that*" ("Can a war be of any use? . . . It is my opinion, my feeling, my conviction that one must have the courage to ask oneself this question, for I think nothing so harmful as catchwords whose meanings can turn, imperceptibly slowly but absolutely, in the hush of their clockwork progression, into their opposites").

Unlike many members of the author's guild of the almost-forgotten, Walser knew all along that, as he wrote in "Poets," "Every true poet likes dust, for it is in the dust, and in the most enchanting oblivion, that, as we all know, precisely the greatest poets like to lie . . ." (*Selected Stories*). For a 1926 anthology on "underappreciated poets" edited by Eduard Korrodi, the literary editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Walser wrote:

> I have nothing to complain about being underappreciated. I know people who long for me. Certain individuals court me. Women of a not-to-be-misunderstood social status are pleased when I am, to even the least

degree, nice to them. Early each morning, my *Daseinslust* or pleasure-in-being refreshes itself with the finest Dutch cocoa. In my cupboards lie if not the best then at least the most agreeable wines. In my opinion, poets by and large are appreciated rather too easily and hastily. Thus one soon tires of them. Maidens invite me to tea in the sunny outdoors, introduce me to their mothers, write me flattering letters which decorate the drawers of my ornamental tables with their delicatenesses. Everybody is very concerned about me. To appear discerning I act indifferent and ungrateful. To the degree that I'm content with my reception I wish my colleagues the same. My publishers tell me they find me enchanting. Incessantly they hope for the best, and I don't keep them from embellishing their exquisite opinion of me. On the other hand I don't offer them any support in this either. My poetic products travel happily and circle ceaselessly throughout the press. Once in a while a little golden bird flies trustingly from some pale and unknown hand into mine. Every day I'm busy with some problem or other. Generally speaking, I find nothing so healthy as a hearty portion of underappreciation, which surely has its disadvantages, but by happily working through them exquisite things will come. (tr. TW and Annette Wiesner, as are the subsequent previously untranslated passages)

Some readers no doubt found, and still find, the velocity at which Walser's irony travels too fast to follow; others look down and see no bottom in sight. When is the mask of irony on, when off? And if one mask is lifted, how many more are left before we reach the author's true self? In "The Gifted Person," a woman whispers endearments to a rose. Is Walser kidding, one wonders, or cuddling with Romanticism? Among the Romantic authors about whom Walser penned prose pieces were Baudelaire, Brentano, Büchner, Dostoyevsky, Eichendorff, Gotthelf, Hölderlin, Jean Paul, Kleist, Lenz, Poe, Rousseau, Stendhal, and Tieck. (Walser was no slouch as a reader.) In a postcard to Hermann Hesse, whose kindnesses (a typical Walser coinage) included writing six articles on Walser's work, Walser wrote from Biel on 3 Dec. 1917:

Dear Mr. Hermann Hesse,

I have just come back from a foot and snow hike from the Jura and am still filled with beautiful impressions and warm from marching. Last week I read your short, very beautiful noble exposition in the *NZZ* about [my] *Poetenleben* (Lives of Poets). That you have an uncommonly fine way of reporting about books, many will already have told you. By the way, I also am convinced of the incredibly high value of Eichendorff's *Taugenichts*. What a German and what a graceful book. But because a stupid good fellow is the protagonist of this masterpiece and because everything is pure and quite natural, no sub- or side streams, nothing frightening, Strindbergian, nothing bent or sick, roguish, treacherous or gruesome occurs in it, the reader feels, so to speak, embarrassed. I thank you very much and greet you from my European war and diplomat's room, that is Deputy chamber, sincerely, your friend Robert Walser

On the other hand (if it is the other hand), to the Swiss writer Carl Seelig, who would

later become his legal guardian and write *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser* (Walks with Robert Walser, 1957), based on conversations he had with Walser during his last two decades, Walser is less accepting of Romanticism. To Seelig's first letter to him, he responds on 28 February 1922:

> Dear Sir,
> Why don't you have the *Reader's Circle Hottingen* send you the booklet with my contribution "*Rob. Walser's Biography*." They will do that, and you will find in the essay what you need for your purpose. The Romantics and delicate authors I've put aside a bit. Now I look for my essence elsewhere, and therefore am not that interested anymore. Best greetings,
> Robert Walser.

For Musil, who, in a joint review of Walser's seventh book and Kafka's first, labeled Kafka "a special case of the Walser type," Walser's fiction contained "Shades of puppetry, Romantic irony; but in this fun there is something else . . . all of a sudden the gravity of real conditions begins to drizzle along the thread of verbal association" (tr. Mark Harmon, *Robert Walser Rediscovered*). Kafka would have understood his being compared to Walser; as early as 1907 he was enthusiastically reading him and as late as 1917 is enough of a student to compare Walser and Dickens in the blurring effect of their abstract metaphors ("*Walsers Zusammenhang mit ihm in der verschwimmenden Anwendung von abstrakten Metaphern*." 8 Oct. 1917 journal entry).

Still, readers may wonder of prose pieces like "The One and Only" ("She to whom poems are addressed, who is significant, who writes no poems but is a poem significant to a poet—I know her") if Walser's relationship to Romanticism is one of irony or of gush. Is he ingenuous or ingenious? To settle on one answer is certainly not the point. "Quiddities never rest," he wrote in "Sampler Plate" (*Masquerade and Other Stories*), "they ramble."

Walser's excursions, sometimes plotless, into the reality of his time . . .

Impatient Reader: Plotless? That means he must have been one of those "difficult, experimental writers" we sometimes hear something about but know it's best we dismiss; they have nothing to tell us and this they accomplish in impenetrable prose.

Reviewer: I assure you Walser escapes the experimental camp as easily as any other.

And maybe his squibs aren't plotless after all. Here's the "plot" of "The Gifted Person": Evening in a city. How do we know this? Because "vesperal fluid," i.e. "whispering traffic," "spilled" into Bahnhofstrasse and because "Athletes decorated with laurel wreaths" are "returning from the hubbub of a distant festival." But lest we find the "laurel wreaths that shimmered gold and silver in the torchlight" too, well, *outré*, we're informed that "their wives and children . . . awaited their homecoming with impatience." Perhaps a domestic tale is in the offing.

With his establishing shot in place, in the second paragraph Walser slips us into "an alley, conceivably almost romantic with its utter hush and sequesteredness," where "a woman, who felt at this instant beautiful, good, noble, magnanimous, and distinguished," looks up at "an incalculable young man" standing at a "fourth or fifth floor" window. The young man, "with a theatrical gesture" tosses to the "timorous shadowy figure waiting [below] a rose, which he might have picked, unsolicited, with a lilylike tenderness, in a park."

Now our poor, plot-beguiled reader can't get any traction, there's something odd about the track beneath his feet (something odd, too, about feet, on which more in a

moment).

Impatient Reader: Is that part of the plot or a digression?

Reviewer: Bear with me.

Impatient Reader: But look at that "theatrical gesture" the young man uses to throw down the rose. And, hey, Walser's got it all wrong. The young man is supposed to be in the alley looking up at the woman, not vice-versa, and she's the one who's supposed to toss down the flower, not him, she's the one who should have picked it "with a lilylike tenderness." Walser's out of touch with reality.

Reviewer (quoting Jakob von Gunten): "Bare reality: what a crook it sometimes is. It steals things, and afterwards it has no idea what to do with them. It just seems to spread sorrow for fun. Of course, I like sorrow very much as well, it's very valuable, very. It shapes one."

The woman looking longingly at the gifted young man, it turns out, is the wife of a diamond merchant—that is, of a class different from our so-to-speak hero. It's she who has had to suffer "his frolicsome spates of indifference," not he her patrician disdain, and who is left "to her whispers, speaking to the rose she has received from his white hands, which [snowily] glowed in the dark of night, words of endearment." (The translation omits *schneeig*, "snowily.") In the split image—woman's hands with rose below / young man's hands glowing in the dark above—I detect something art deco-ish, enameled, and out of whack.

In the third paragraph (of seven in the translation which re-paragraphs the original; the whole of "The Gifted Person" is no more than five hundred words), the young man, because he is gifted, "deserved the reverences of a woman so sensitive and not at all unbeautiful, but divinely graceful and knowledgeable" and whose reach "of her cultivation resembled an unsurveyable sea." Alas, the gifted one, "gaily and frivolously wrangled with himself" instead of taking up the "treasures" of her cultivation which "lay at his feet."

Impatient Reader: I'm afraid . . .

Reviewer: Careful, or you'll suffer the fate of a character in Walser's final novel *The Robber*: one day "a gentleman of refined appearance . . . nonchalantly yawned" in the Robber's face, only to have the Robber's cigarette butt "tossed . . . into this gaping yawnhole. You can imagine the astonishment caused by this ashtray maneuver. One might entitle this deed 'The Robber's Revenge.' Happily, it was performed with finesse."

In the fourth paragraph the plot thickens, the tale turns, when down the alley "a girl came leaping with an exclamation on her tongue." Where, she wonders, can she "find the fellow who chatted me up for a while today and enchanted me, while so doing, with his lovelocks?" Life without him, she says, is unendurable. Our heroine (fifth paragraph) "seemed to nose out" that it's her young man whom this intruder into her story, this leaping young girl, is "referring to in words that harmonized with the splash of fountains and the fragrance of flowers that issued from the local gardens . . ." The diamond merchant's wife (big confrontational climax) laughs "at the tearful simpleton" and says, "I am a heroine." Who would doubt it?

In the penultimate paragraph (falling action, one sentence) a fourth person enters, "a passer-by" who tells us he has "never been loved."

Passer-by, girl, diamond merchant's wife, the gifted person: How does Walser resolve the conflicts, pure in their artificiality, generated by this constellation? By stepping outside

the frame, adding a fifth element that implies infinitely more.

The gifted person called down to the group: "Being touched by the sympathy shown me, as I live at the foot of the mountain, in the strange industrial city, where for a while the Italianist Gobineau sojourned once, my thoughts are upon the ravishing Jewess with whom, while a cloudburst was pouring down, I rode across the Potsdamer Platz in an omnibus."

For Walser, as Sebald noted, "the detour is a question of survival." The gifted person's speech, with its memory of an omnibus ride in Berlin with someone "ravishing," both shifts and extends the story's direction. The Walser avatar can't stop *here* (Biel, "the strange industrial city," where Count Arthur de Gobineau [1816-1882] attended school for several years, as Jochen Greven's note to the German original informs us; Middleton's misidentification of the city as Zurich in his note is due to both Biel and Zurich having a Bahnhofstrasse), he must also go *there* (Berlin). "Perpetual motion compels morality," says Jakob von Gunten. "Everything reminds one of its opposite," says the narrator of "Snowdrops" (*Selected Stories*). At the end of "Titus," the narrator's "most exalted is so beautiful and I worship her with such a holy respect that I attach myself to another and therewith must seize the opportunity to recover from the strain of sleepless nights, to relate to the successor how dear the past one was, to tell her, 'I love you just as much'" (*Selected Stories*). Walser intuited what neurologists later discovered—that movement not stasis is the essence of self.

The plot of "The Gifted Person," of course, derives from what Walser called *Bahnhofhallenbüchlein*, the penny dreadfuls of his time, the kind of little book or booklet you might find, as the above German compound word suggests, for sale in the kiosks of train station halls. On the plots of such books Walser performed astonishing improvisations, designed simultaneously to inspirit language, ironize kitsch, and mock the arbiters of literature who judge books only by the principles that can be extracted from them. In the collection's purest example of a Walser arabesque (a Walseresque?) derived from one of these love stories, "A Propos the Kissing of a Hand," Walser remarks of the parlor romance he's taking pleasure in, "Now and then a little slippered foot would capriciously curl, perhaps to insinuate something." To understand how separate Walser is from the *proper* literary currents of his or any time, try to imagine a writer of Walser's talent plumping his prose-piece nest with the plot shavings of today's airport fare and finding therein the means for "truing language to matter," as Christopher Middleton wrote in his 1958 essay "A Picture of Nobody: Some Remarks on Robert Walser" (*Bolshevism in Art and Other Expository Writings*, 1978), still the single best essay on Walser's prose I know.

We're fortunate that it was Christopher Middleton, a poet and essayist possessing his own quirky brilliance, who in 1954, while teaching at the University of Zurich, became the first person in any language to translate Robert Walser. In his 1973 essay "Notes on Rhythm," Middleton states: "The rhythm of a poem is a structure of variable tempos which realize its sounds as the radicles of meaning" (*Bolshevism in Art*). Only a translator alert to Walser's "variable tempos" can effectively mime his thought, especially at the syntactic level, where Walser performed his most daring turns about "the dream called human life" (*Jakob von Gunten*). Take, for example, this passage from the 1930 prose piece "I Was Reading Two Stories":

> While for my pleasure I was reading how a woman of refinement, a model of cultivation, in demi-colleté, I mean with polite deliberation exposing to view her pretty bust, suddenly thought of something that had slipped

her mind for a moment, a wagon halted outside the house and two horses attached to it stood there as motionless as two brass, or bronze, or marble statues.

Such syntactically charged prose is in large part what appealed to me when, in 1972, I first read Walser in *Great German Short Stories*, a Dell paperback edited by Stephen Spender and published in 1960, which contained Middleton's translation of "*Dorfgeschichte*," "A Village Tale". Here's my literal translation of a sentence from the story: "A writer wrote in a lamplit room at his rapidly growing work, while the maid, plagued by visions, got up from bed so as to run into the water, which was carried out with almost laughable promptness." (*Ein Schriftsteller schrieb in einer lampenbeleuchteten Stube an seinem zusehends wachsenden Werk, als die von Visionen geplagte Magd aus ihrem Bett aufstand, um ins Wasser zu laufen, was mit beinahe belachenswerter Promptheit ausgeführt wurde.*) And here's Middleton's version: "A writer was working in a lamplit room at his rapidly waxing work when, vexed by visions, the girl rose up from her bed intending to rush into the pond, which she did with almost laughable alacrity." Middleton translates to perfection both the text and the spirit. In *Speaking to the Rose* "a foreigner," whom a girl had "allowed into her soul," is said to have "upped and awayed." "He'd gone, like a scurrying squirrel, a ship swimming into the distance, or a flying affiliate of the bird-world" ("I Was Reading Two Stories").

Attracted to its alpine flowers, novice translators (myself among them) crash and burn against the Walserberg. For example, the relatively simple syntax of "*Was nicht anwesend ist, ist es manchmal gerade dadurch sehr*" ("What is not present, for that reason sometimes very much is." "*Das Hotel*") one translator contorted into "What is not present, sometimes, through that, is very." Fortunately, the two principal translators of Walser's prose, Middleton and Bernofsky, adeptly scale its peaks, although all translators inevitably leave their marks on the mountain. In the last sentence of "From the Life of a Writer," for example, Middleton translates *Aufgewecktheit* as "being wide awake" when what is meant is cleverness or quick-wittedness. In "*Die Hochzeitsreise*" ("The Honeymoon," *Selected Stories*), Walser spins a honeymoon tale off the three elements of the word *Hochzeitsreise*—*Hoch* (high) *zeits* (time) *reise* (journey). Of course it's impossible to translate this aspect of the story, but Middleton's translation is still a miracle and marvel.

In his essay on translating Walser, "Translating as a Species of Mime," Middleton notes that Walser's "spirit, this manifold configuration in all its mobility, which the translator tries to mime, is of course not identical with the spirit he performs, or hopes to voice. Precisely that discrepancy is the area of risk which provokes the translator as mime to grapple with the manifold, now insightfully, now blindly. A translation can only achieve so much, no more, of a manifold spirit which persistently disseminates itself" (Middleton, *Jackdaw Jiving*, 1998). For a close, perceptive analysis of the challenges found in translating Walser, see Bernofsky's "Unrelenting Tact: Elements of Style in Walser's Late Prose" (*Robert Walser and the Visual Arts*, edited by Tamara S. Evans).

Because *Speaking to the Rose* contains no stories with the immediately perceivable stature of "Kleist in Thun," Helbling's Story," "The Little Berliner," or "The Walk" from Middleton's earlier *Selected Stories* or "The Battle of Sempach," "Tobold (II)," and "A Flaubert Prose Piece" from Bernofsky's *Masquerade and Other Stories*, one might mistakenly consider the pieces collected here as lesser Walser. But such an opinion would fail to take account of Walser's comment in "*Eine Art Erzählung*" (A Kind of Story) that "the sketches I produce

now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel . . . I am constantly writing [that] might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself" (epigraph to *Selected Stories*). Walser's central themes of self-effacement, the primacy of the imagination, the liberating aim of creative play are richly displayed in the new volume. Here, too, you'll find the Walser deadpan ("This storybook silence is putting me to sleep"), pratfall ("Because the book was madly funny, it was pronounced a product of madness, and while reading it the not unrespected daughter of a bourgeois family fell lifeless to the floor, having actually died laughing at what was in it"), his fondness for aposiopesis, a kind of skip of the needle ("There are more misunderstandings in life than there are stones on the ground—I snipped the thread, which he picked up and spun further . . ."), shrug ("The person who hatched [this story] now glances at the dial and thinks it is time to get up from his desk and go for a little walk"), and swoon into Being ("Yet for the love-deprived who are full of love, who are constantly close to the center of Being and removed from it, something is constantly missing. . . . Enough, enough, I'm lost, and that means more than you think").

Then there come moments when suddenly Walser seems to have removed his writerly clothes, his mannerist mask, and speaks to us openly, directly. "We don't need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much" ("A Little Ramble," *Selected Stories*). In a microscript text included in *Speaking to the Rose*, after one of his typical dialectical aphorisms ("repose is glad to renew itself in restlessness"), Walser appends:

> Besides, I was myself the one who spoke to me. I sat and stood at the same time, hushed and spoke and formed two persons from my own alone. It was, wasn't it, as if with the greatest levity and astonishing velocity thinkable one stood up from where one sat to stand speaking to the person one was a moment before and now no longer was, and yet remained that person still, because one is seeing oneself in imagination, which enriches life, which I employ as often as I want or can or may, which throws me off balance and always restores it, which is the continuous emotion for the sake of which I always and never go too far, which as today for instance, multiplies me or at least doubles me now and then, which is strange and is pleasurable and keeps me active and therefore rejuvenated and foolish, so that one can experience being pleasured alive, so that it won't be all that too self-evident, and not too lonesome, either. ("*She addressed me in the formal style*")

Like other Modernist masters (Proust, Kafka, Beckett), Walser didn't so much write about ideas as he found the formal means to embody them. In "Lightness," his first lecture from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), Calvino warns us against mistaking lightness for frivolity, solemnity for weight: "In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy." Or, as Walser's microscript text "*I would like to be standing*" concludes:

> Moreover I make with pleasure the confession—which perhaps characterizes me—that while writing I might have been silent about rather much, quite unintentionally, too, for as a writer I preferred to speak not of what could be irksome, or difficult to express, but of lightness, whereas into what has occupied me here I did open out, with all the heaviness in me, though fugitively, of course, as seems to be my wont.

For Sebald, Walser's "ideal was the overcoming of gravity." Walser's lightness is lighter than

light, buoyant up to and beyond belief, terrifyingly light.

> Mysteriously and secretly there prowl at the walker's heels all kinds of beautiful subtle walker's thoughts, such as make him stand in his ardent and regardless tracks and listen, so that he will again and again be confused and startled by curious impressions and bewitchings of spirit power, and he has the feeling that he must sink all of a sudden into the earth, or that before his dazzled, bewildered thinker's and poet's eyes an abyss has opened. ("The Walk," *Selected Stories*)

At times Walser seems closer to someone like the French poet Francis Ponge than to his "weightier" peers such as Musil, Broch, or Mann. Both Ponge and Walser, through an almost phenomenological parsing and shedding of received notions, reveal the uniqueness of insignificant things. In his insignificance Walser was among the sovereign.

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Speaking to the Rose:Writings, 1912 - 1932 by Robert Walser.
Selected and Translated by Christopher Middleton
Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press. 128 pages. Cloth $40. Paper $15.

Other books by Robert Walser in English translation discussed in this article:

Jakob von Gunten. Translated by Christopher Middleton. New York: New York Review Books, 1999. 176 pages. $12.95

Selected Stories. Translated by Christopher Middleton and others. Introduction by Susan Sontag. New York: New York Review Books, 2002. 196 pages. $12.95

Masquerade and Other Stories. Translated by Susan Bernofsky. Introduction by William H. Gass. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. 202 pages. $12.95

The Robber. Translated by Susan Bernofsky. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 141 pages. $15.