

ROBERT WALSER (1878–1956) was born in Biel/Bienne in Switzerland. In 1905 he moved to Berlin, where he attended a school for servants and began to publish the short prose works that brought him briefly to the attention of writers such as Robert Musil, Hermann Hesse and Franz Kafka. The following years saw the publication of three novels – *The Tanners* (1906), *The Assistant* (1908) and *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) – but by 1913 Walser had returned to Switzerland, and only one more substantial piece of fiction, the novella *The Walk* (1917), was published in his lifetime. Of two further novels only the titles remain: *Theodor* and *Tobold*. They were never published and are considered lost. Walser's final novel, *The Robber*, was written in minuscule pencil script and went undeciphered and unpublished until long after his death. After a severe mental breakdown in 1929, Walser was admitted first to the Waldau Mental Asylum in Bern, and later to the sanitarium in Herisau, where he lived from 1933 until his death on Christmas Day 1956. From Walser's twenty-three years at Herisau, not a single written word has emerged.

Jakob von Gunten

ROBERT WALSER

Translated and with an afterword by Christopher Middleton

with a foreword by J. M. Coetzee



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Foreword

On Christmas Day, 1956 police in the town of Herisau in eastern Switzerland received a call: children had stumbled upon the body of a man frozen to death in a snowy field. Arriving at the scene, the police first took photographs, then removed the body.

The deceased was soon identified: he was Robert Walser, aged seventy-eight, missing from a local mental hospital. In his earlier years Walser had won somewhat of a reputation, in Switzerland and in Germany too, as a writer. Certain of his books were still in print; someone had even published a book about him, a biography. During a quarter of a century spent in mental institutions, however, his own writing had dried up. Long country walks – like the one on which he had perished – had become his main recreation.

The police photographs showed an old man in overcoat and boots lying sprawled in the snow, his eyes wide open, his jaw slack. These photographs have been widely (and shamelessly) reproduced in the critical literature on Walser that has burgeoned since the 1960s. Walser's so-called madness, his lonely death, and the posthumously discovered cache of secret writings became the pillars

on which a legend of Walser as a scandalously neglected genius was erected. Even the sudden growth of interest in Walser became part of the scandal. 'I ask myself,' wrote Elias Canetti in 1973, 'whether, among those who build their leisurely, secure, dead regular academic life on that of a writer who had lived in misery and despair, there is a single one who is ashamed of himself.'

Robert Walser was born in 1878 in the canton of Bern, the seventh of eight children. His father, trained as a bookbinder, ran a store selling stationery. At the age of fourteen Robert was taken out of school and apprenticed to a bank, where he performed his clerical functions in exemplary fashion until without warning, possessed by a dream of becoming an actor, he decamped and ran off to Stuttgart. There he did an audition, which proved a humiliating failure: he was rejected as too wooden, too expressionless. Abandoning his stage ambitions, he determined to become – 'God willing' – a poet. He drifted from job to job, writing poems, prose sketches, and little verse plays ('dramolets') for the periodical press, not without success. Soon he was taken up by Insel Verlag, publisher of Rilke and Hofmannsthal, who put out his first book. In 1905, with the aim of advancing his literary career, he followed his elder brother, a successful book illustrator and stage designer, to Berlin. As a prudent measure he also enrolled in a training school for servants and worked briefly as a butler in a country house, where he wore livery and answered to the name 'Monsieur Robert'. Before long, however, he found he

could support himself on the proceeds of his writing. His work began to appear in prestigious literary magazines; he was welcomed in serious artistic circles. But the role of metropolitan intellectual was not one to which he found it easy to conform. After a few drinks he tended to become rude and aggressively provincial. Gradually he retreated from society to a solitary, frugal life in bedsitters. In these surroundings he wrote four novels, of which three have survived: *Geschwister Tanner* (The Tanner Children, 1906), *Der Gehülfe* (The Factotum, 1908), and *Jakob von Gunten* (1909). All draw for their material on his own experiences; but in the case of *Jakob von Gunten* – the best known of the three, and deservedly so – that experience is wondrously transmuted.

‘One learns very little here,’ observes young Jakob von Gunten after his first day at the Benjamenta Institute, where he has enrolled himself as a student. There is only one textbook, *What is the Aim of Benjamenta’s Boys’ School?*; and only one lesson, ‘How Should a Boy Behave?’ The teachers lie around like dead men. All the actual teaching is done by Fräulein Lisa Benjamenta, sister of the principal. Herr Benjamenta himself sits in his office counting his money, like an ogre in a fairy tale. In fact, the school seems a bit of a swindle.

Nevertheless, having run away from what he calls ‘a very very small metropolis’ to the big city – not named but clearly Berlin – Jakob has no intention of retreating. He gets on with his fellow students; he does not mind wearing the Benjamenta uniform; and besides, going

downtown to ride the elevators gives him a thrill, makes him feel thoroughly a child of the modern age.

Jakob von Gunten purports to be a diary that Jakob keeps during his stay at the Institute. It consists mainly of his reflections on the kind of education he receives there – an education in humility – and on the strange brother and sister who offer it. The humility taught by the Benjamentas is not of the religious variety. Most of their graduates aspire to be serving men or butlers, not saints. But Jakob is a special case, a pupil for whom lessons in humility have an added inner resonance. ‘How fortunate I am,’ he writes, ‘not to be able to see in myself anything worth respecting and watching! To be small and to stay small.’

The Benjamentas are a mysterious and, on first acquaintance, forbidding pair. Jakob takes it as his task to penetrate their mystery. He treats them not with respect but with the cheeky self-assurance of a child who is used to having his mischief-making excused as cute. He mixes effrontery with patently insincere self-abasement, giggling at his own insincerity, confident that candour will disarm all criticism, and not really caring if it does not. The word he would like to apply to himself, the word he would like the world to apply to him, is *impish*. An imp is a mischievous sprite; but an imp is also a lesser devil.

Soon Jakob begins to gain ascendancy over the Benjamentas. Fräulein Benjamenta hints that she has become fond of him. He pretends not to understand. In fact, she discloses, what she feels for him is perhaps more than fondness, is perhaps love. Jakob replies with a long,

evasive speech full of respectful sentiments. Thwarted, Fräulein Benjamenta pines away and dies.

As for Herr Benjamenta, once hostile to Jakob, he is soon manoeuvred to the point of pleading with the boy to be his friend, to leave the school behind and come wandering the world with him. Primly Jakob declines: 'But how shall I eat, Principal? ... It's your duty to find me a decent job. All I want is a job.' Yet on the last page of his diary he announces he is changing his mind: he will throw away his pen and go off into the wilderness with Herr Benjamenta. To which one can only respond: With such a companion, God save Herr Benjamenta!

As a literary character, Jakob von Gunten is not without precedent. In the pleasure he takes in picking away at his own motives he reminds one of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* and, behind him, of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the *Confessions*. But – as Walser's first French translator, Marthe Robert, pointed out – there is in Jakob too something of the hero of the traditional German folk tale, of the lad who confronts the giant in his castle and emerges victorious. Franz Kafka admired Walser's work (Max Brod records with what delight Kafka would read aloud Walser's humorous sketches). Barnabas and Jeremias, Surveyor K.'s demonically obstructive 'assistants' in *The Castle*, have Jakob as their prototype.

In Kafka one also catches echoes of Walser's prose, with its lucid syntactic layout, its casual juxtapositions of the elevated with the banal, and its eerily convincing logic of paradox. Here is Jakob in reflective mood:

We wear uniforms. Now, the wearing of uniforms simultaneously humiliates and exalts us. We look like unfree people, and that is possibly a disgrace, but we also look nice in our uniforms, and that sets us apart from the deep disgrace of those people who walk around in their very own clothes but in torn and dirty ones. To me, for instance, wearing a uniform is very pleasant because I never did know, before, what clothes to put on. But in this, too, I am a mystery to myself for the time being.

What is the mystery in or about himself that Jakob finds so intriguing? In an essay on Walser that is all the more striking for being based on a very incomplete acquaintance with his writings, Walter Benjamin suggests that Walser's people are like characters from a fairy tale that has come to an end, characters who must from now on live in the real world. They are marked by 'a consistently heartrending, inhuman superficiality', as if, having been rescued from madness (or from a spell), they must tread carefully for fear of being swallowed back into it.

Jakob is such an odd being, and the air he breathes in the Benjamenta Institute is so rare, so near to the allegorical, that it is hard to think of him as representative of any element of society. Yet Jakob's cynicism about civilization and about values in general, his contempt for the life of the mind, his simplistic beliefs about how the world really works (it is run by big business to

exploit the little man), his elevation of obedience to the highest of virtues, his readiness to bide his time, awaiting the call of destiny, his claim to be of noble, martial descent (whereas the etymology he himself hints at for the name von Gunten – *von unten*, ‘from below’ – suggests otherwise), as well as his pleasure in the all-male ambience of the boarding school and his delight in malicious pranks – all of these features, taken together, point toward the type of petit-bourgeois male who, in a time of greater social confusion, would find Hitler’s Brownshirts attractive.

Walser was never an overtly political writer. Nevertheless, his emotional involvement with the class from which he came, the class of shopkeepers and clerks and schoolteachers, ran deep. Berlin offered him a clear chance to escape his social origins, to defect, as his brother had done, to the *declassé* cosmopolitan intelligentsia. He tried that route and failed, or gave up on it, choosing instead to return to the embrace of provincial Switzerland. Yet he never lost sight of – indeed, was not allowed to lose sight of – the illiberal, conformist tendencies of his class, its intolerance of people like himself, dreamers and vagabonds.

In 1913 Walser left Berlin and returned to Switzerland ‘a ridiculed and unsuccessful author’ (his own self-disparaging words). He took a room in a temperance hotel in the industrial town of Biel, near his sister, and for the next seven years earned a precarious living contributing sketches to the literary supplements. Otherwise he went

on long country hikes and served out his obligations in the National Guard. In the collections of his poetry and short prose that continued to appear, he turned more and more to the Swiss social and natural landscape. Besides the three novels mentioned above, he wrote two more. The manuscript of the first, *Theodor*, was lost by his publishers; the second, *Tobold*, was destroyed by Walser himself.

After the World War, the taste among the public for the kind of writing Walser had relied on for an income, writing easily dismissed as whimsical and belletristic, waned. He was too cut off from wider German society to keep abreast of new currents of thought; as for Switzerland, the reading public there was too small to support a corps of writers. Though he prided himself on his frugality, he had to close down what he called his 'little prose-piece workshop'. His precarious mental balance began to waver. He felt more and more oppressed by the censorious gaze of his neighbours, by their demand for respectability. He quit Biel in favour of Bern, where he took up a position in the national archives; but within months he was dismissed for insubordination. He moved from lodgings to lodgings. He drank heavily; he suffered from insomnia, heard imaginary voices, had nightmares and anxiety attacks. He attempted suicide, failing because, as he disarmingly admitted, 'I couldn't even make a proper noose.'

It was clear that he could no longer live alone. He came from a family that was, in the terminology of the

times, tainted: his mother had been a chronic depressive; one brother had committed suicide; another had died in a mental hospital. Pressure was put on a sister to take him in, but she was unwilling. So he allowed himself to be committed to the sanatorium in Waldau. 'Markedly depressed and severely inhibited,' ran the initial medical report. 'Responded evasively to questions about being sick of life.'

In later evaluations Walser's doctors would disagree about what, if anything, was wrong with him, and would even urge him to try living outside again. However, the bedrock of institutional routine would appear to have become indispensable to him, and he chose to stay. In 1933 his family had him transferred to the asylum in Herisau, where he was entitled to welfare support. There he occupied his time in chores like gluing paper bags and sorting beans. He remained in full possession of his faculties; he continued to read newspapers and popular magazines; but, after 1932, he did not write. 'I'm not here to write, I'm here to be mad,' he told a visitor. Besides, he said, the heyday of *littérateurs* was over.

(Years after Walser's death, one of the Herisau staff claimed that during his tenure he saw Walser at work writing. But even if this is true, no manuscript material dating from after 1932 has survived.)

Being a writer, someone who uses his hands to turn thoughts into marks on paper, was difficult for Walser at the most elementary of levels. In his earlier years he wrote a clear, well-formed script on which he prided

himself. The manuscripts that survive from those days – fair copies – are models of fine handwriting. Handwriting was, however, one of the sites where disturbance in Walser's psyche first manifested itself. At some time in his thirties (he is vague about the date) he began to suffer from psychosomatic cramps of the right hand. He attributed these to unconscious animosity toward the pen as a tool; he was able to overcome them only by abandoning the pen in favour of the pencil.

Writing with a pencil was important enough for Walser to dub it his 'pencil system' or 'pencil method'. The pencil method meant more than just use of a pencil. When he moved to pencil-writing Walser also radically changed his script. At his death he left behind some five hundred sheets of paper covered from edge to edge in rows of delicate, minute, pencilled calligraphic signs, a script so difficult to read that his executor at first took the papers to belong to a diary in secret code. But Walser kept no diary, nor is the script a code. The late manuscripts are in fact written in standard German script, but with so many idiosyncratic abbreviations that, even for editors familiar with it, unambiguous decipherment is not always possible. It is only in 'pencil-method' drafts that Walser's numerous late works, including his last novel *The Robber* (twenty-four sheets of microscript, some one hundred and fifty pages in print), have come down to us.

More interesting than the decipherment of the script itself is the question of what the pencil method made

possible to Walser as a writer that the pen could no longer provide (he was still prepared to use a pen when merely transcribing, or for writing letters). The answer seems to be that, like an artist with a stick of charcoal between his fingers, Walser needed to get a steady, rhythmic hand movement going before he could slip into a frame of mind in which reverie, composition, and the flow of the writing tool became much the same thing. In a piece entitled 'Pencil Sketch' dating from 1926/7 he mentions the 'unique bliss' that the pencil method allowed him. 'It calms me down and cheers me up,' he said elsewhere. Walser's texts proceed neither by logic nor by narrative but by moods, fancies, and associations: by temperament he is less a thinker following an argument or even a storyteller following a narrative line than a belletrist. The pencil and the self-invented stenographic script allowed the purposeful, uninterrupted, introverted, dream-driven hand movement that had become indispensable to his creative mood.

Although a project to bring together Walser's writings was initiated before his death, it was only after the first volumes of a more scholarly Collected Works began to appear in 1966, and after he had been noticed by readers in England and France, that Walser gained widespread attention in Germany.

Today Walser is judged on the basis of his novels, even though these form only a fifth of his output, and even though the novel proper was not his forte (the four long fictions he left behind really belong to the less ambitious

tradition of the novella). He is more at home in shorter forms. Pieces like 'Helbling's Story' (1914) or 'Kleist in Thun' (1913), in which watercolour shades of sentiment are inspected with the lightest of irony and the prose responds to passing currents of feeling as sensitively as a butterfly's wing, show him at his best. His own uneventful yet, in its way, harrowing life was his only true subject. All of his prose pieces, he suggested in retrospect, might be read as chapters in 'a long, plotless, realistic story', a 'cut up or disjointed book of the self [*Ich-Buch*]'.

Was Walser a great writer? If one finally hesitates to call him great, remarked Canetti, that is only because nothing could be more alien to him than greatness. In a late poem Walser wrote:

I would wish it on no one to be me.
Only I am capable of bearing myself.
To know so much, to have seen so much, and
To say nothing, just about nothing.

J. M. Coetzee
2000