Linguæ &
Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

Anna Fattori

Investigating Taboos in Robert Walser's Late Microscripts

https://doi.org/10.14276/l.v26i2.4743

2 / 2024

ISSN 1724-8698

Urbino University Press
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

Anna Fattori

Tor Vergata University of Rome
fattori@lettere.uniroma2.it

Investigating Taboos in Robert Walser's Late Microscripts

ABSTRACT

For many years, the Swiss-German writer Robert Walser (1878-1956) has been considered a naive author who lived in isolation, writing pleasant, harmless and worthless texts, uninterested in the cultural, historical and social context. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that he was deeply concerned not only with the issues of his time, but also with the delicate aspects of human existence, such as hierarchical social structures, normative modes of gendered behaviour, masochism, violence, death and suicide.
This short article explores some of these tabooed subjects and sheds light on the intertwining of form and content in some of Walser's late microscripts. In particular, it will focus on the short prose piece *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* (1928), which features a disturbing phallophagic scene, and *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits* (1926), a commented list of cruelties throughout the centuries.

KEYWORDS: Swiss-German Literature; cannibalism; sex; gender fluidity; violence.

The Swiss-German author Robert Walser was known for many decades as a 'writers' writer' as he was misunderstood or ignored by a large part of critics and appreciated by colleagues. Among his admirers were Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Hesse, Christian Morgenstern and Robert Musil[1]. Contemporary authors such as W. G. Sebald, Martin Walser, Nobel laureates

[1] See Kafka 1978, Benjamin 1978, Hesse 1978, Morgenstern 1978, Musil 1978.

Elfriede Jelinek and J. M. Coetzee have commented very positively on his work[2].

The publication of the *Robert Walser Handbuch* (Gisi 2015) marked his official recognition as one of the three most significant Swiss-German writers of the 20th century, together with Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt; at present he is a model, a constant reference for several German-speaking colleagues. In their introduction to *Robert Walser. A Companion* (Frederick and Heffernan 2018), another milestone in the Walser-*Forschung,* the editors state that "Walser has been an open secret among writers in England and the United States for quite some time" (ibid., 3) and that he is now recognised "as one of the great German-language writers of the modernist period" (ibid., 8). With reference to the treatment of space and time, his writings have been compared to the abstract compositions of the avant-garde art of the Bernese painter Paul Klee, who was his contemporary[3].

Born in Biel in 1878, Robert Walser left school at 15 and led a wandering life in several places working as a clerk in a bank, as a butler in a castle, as an assistant to an inventor near Zurich, all the while producing essays, stories, poems, short dramas as well as other creative writing. In 1929 he had a nervous breakdown mainly due to professional problems, as he was nearly forgotten in the second half of the 1920s and could hardly find publishers for his texts. He ended up in the psychiatric clinic of Waldau, near Bern. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, but his mental state improved in the clinic. There, he went on writing texts until 1933, when he moved to another asylum, Herisau, and stopped writing. He died in 1956[4].

Starting from the 1920s, or possibly even earlier, he began writing his texts with a pencil on recycled paper in a very tiny handwriting, producing the so-called "Microscripts" (*Mikrogramme*)[5].

From the very beginning, his writings displayed a peculiarly transgressive tendency, though most critics and reviewers failed to recognise the subversive

[2] See Walser 1978, Sebald 1998, Coetzee 2000 and 2007. The Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek composed a play (*Er nicht als er*) based on Robert Walser; see Jelinek 1998.

[3] See Evans 1983.

[4] For Walser's biography see Echte 2008 and Bernofsky 2021.

[5] On the microscripts see v. Schwerin 2001 and Kammer 2015.

subtext which lay beyond the apparently naïve quality of his style. This is why for many years he was perceived as 'ein Idylliker', that is, an idyllic poet[6]. Even a giant such as Thomas Mann, after reading Walser's book *Die Rose* (*The Rose*), which is not harmless at all, defined him as "ein sehr, sehr feines, vornehmes, artiges und unartiges Kind" ("a really very delicate, refined, well behaved and at the same time naughty child") (Walser 1978, II: 118), a characterisation which seemed to offend or even hurt him, as he told his friend and executor[7] Carl Seelig.

If we consider his first book, *Fritz Kocher's Aufsätze* (*Fritz Kocher's Essays,* 1904), a fiction based on a collection of school essays written by a pupil before his death, the impression of naivety arising from the attempt to imitate a schoolboy's style contrasts with the critical approach to the topic of many of his essays. Fritz Kocher's humour and irony aim at subverting stereotypes and hierarchies. These strategies disorient and unsettle the reader, producing the ambiguity which permeates every page of Walser's writings. In the essay "Armut" ("Poverty"), he writes that the teacher "behandelt sie [arme Knaben] rauher als uns, und er hat recht. Ein Lehrer weiß, was er tut" ("treats [poor pupils] harsher than he treats us, and he is right. A teacher always knows, what he is doing")[8] (Walser 1978, I: 16). The genre of the school essay was rather popular at the beginning of the 20th century, and Walser takes it on in a peculiar way to display his critique of teaching methods and hierarchical authority. This was also the topic of *Professor Unrat* (1905), the novel by Heinrich Mann, which was very successfully released in 1930 as a film starring Marlene Dietrich. Still, in H. Mann's novel, the criticism of the school system is expressed in a quite different and indeed more direct way than in *Fritz Kocher's Essays*.

This brief introduction shows that a transgressive attitude can be found throughout Walser's work, from his early prose to his late microscripts. Here, in the late period, the playful treatment of taboo topics is much more evident, as I have stated elsewhere[9]. I will focus on two taboos: sex and cruelty.

---

[6] See Bänziger 1978; Brod 1978; Johst 1978; Korrodi 1978a and 1978b; Loerke 1978; Pinthus 1978.

[7] See Seelig 1977, 13.

[8] If not differently specified, translations from German are mine.

[9] See Fattori 2020.

In the short prose *Vor Wut über ihre Wut war sie grün* (*With Anger about her Anger She Was Green*, 1928), a phallophagic scene is described. A man and a woman are having an argument, and a moment later, when the man is asleep, the woman cuts off his genitals, from which "seine Lebenslust, sein beleidigendes Prangen und Lachen herrührte. [---] [sie] entfernte […] von seinem Wesen, was ihrer Meinung nach keinesfalls dazu paßte" ("arose his lust for life, his offensive boastfulness and laughter […] [she] removed from his being what in her opinion did not belong there", transl. Evers 2018, 229) (Walser 1985-2000, V: 125). This "thing" ("Dinglein" in German) resembles "mehr einem Würstchen als dem Lauf einer Kanone" ("rather a small sausage than the barrel of a cannon", transl. ibid.) (ibid.). The woman fries in a pan what she has removed from the man and she eats it: "Muß das eine Lust gewesen sein hineinzubeißen. Sie aß es vor seinen Augen glatt auf" ("What a pleasure it must have been to take a bite. She ate it up right before his eyes") (ibid.). The man, now awake, says nothing; he just observes her eating and enjoying the cannibalistic meal. At the end of the short prose, nothing has changed compared to the beginning of the scene. The castration has not changed him: "Ganz derselbe war er. Solange er das Ding hatte, besaß er's, und jetzt, wo es ihm nicht mehr gehörte, war's nicht mehr sein" ("He was just the same. As long as he had the thing, he possessed it, and now, when it no longer belonged to him, it was no longer his", transl. ibid., 239) (ibid.).

The episode may be seen as a veiled, even unsettling sex scene, or as a grotesque representation of the traditionally taboo female sexual desire; words such as 'lust', 'satisfied', 'to play' seem to suggest this interpretation. However, it seems improbable that the man would not express any pain, shock or anger after such a violent and traumatic event; in fact, he continues to look at her "bruesk" ("rudely") (ibid.) as he did before the emasculation.

Evidence for an alternative interpretation can be found in the dazzling use of language. Diminutives such as "Blümlein" ("small flower") (ibid., 124), "Glöcklein" ("small bell") (ibid., 125), "Dingelchen" ("small thing") (ibid.), all used for the cut part of the body, the nearly mechanical confidence of the woman in carrying out the action, the childish phrasing, the gastronomical jargon and, last but not least, the fact that the man does not suffer at all (he shows no trace of pain or suffering), all these elements suggest that this short

prose is very similar to a *Märchen*, a fairy tale, of course a negative one, an evil fairy tale. In fairy tales, characters do not suffer, they are just role carriers, they have no feelings and do not feel pain[10]. The last lines give further clues to the interpretation of this amazing, baffling text that deals with, or at least alludes to, taboos such as masochism, cannibalism, onanism and the sexual impulse of women. In the final section, we read that no one has changed after castration, neither she nor he: "[E]s [kann] Dinge geben […], denen man zu viel Wert beimißt, da es auf eine Eigentümlichkeit mehr oder weniger nicht so viel ankommt, wie die meisten Menschen meinen" ("[T]here are things to which people attribute too much importance; in fact, if you have a characteristic more or one less, is a fact which is not so important, though many people think it is") (ibid., 125).

Of course, this anticlimactic conclusion is very different from the happy endings of fairy tales; although there is no reconciliation in Walser's prose, the final statement is worth a comment in terms of gender.

The part of the man's body which the woman cuts off is called 'small thing', 'small flower', 'object', 'small sausage', etc. It is characterised as an unrelated part, an object or an ornament, something which is not essential, which is implicit in the diminutive Walser uses. The short story about castration can be considered as a bizarre, peculiar representation of Walser's artistic and existential vision, expressed in his statement that "[d]as Schreiben […] °ist männlich und weiblich zugleich" ("Writing […] is masculine and feminine at the same time") (Walser 1978, XII: 182). His exploration of fluid identity in both writing and human subjectivity, as well as his attempts to deconstruct hierarchies and break down prejudices and heteronormativity, presents interesting parallels with questions of gender fluidity and identity construction that would later become central to postmodern critical discourse.

This unusual text about sex and cannibalism, together with some idyllic, rather evanescent *Prosastücke* – e.g., "Seltsame Stadt", "Phantasieren", "Träumen" – belongs to Walser's utopian writings; in *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* he outlines the ideal of a relationship between man and woman which swerves from traditional models inasmuch as gender-related features play

[10] On this aspect of the genre of the *Märchen* see Lüthi 1985.

no role in the relationship and also in the building of hierarchies. In some other texts from the late microscripts, e.g., in the theatrical scene *Die Chinesin. Der Chinese,* he stages an astonishing battle of the sexes by playing with stereotypes and prejudices, thus radically questioning the traditional images of man and woman in a verbally aggressive manner [11].

The second text by Walser I am going to consider, "Grausame Bräuche, Sitten. Gewohnheiten usw" ("Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits etc.", 1926), consists of a commented list of historically documented cruelties from Antiquity to the Modern Age. Cutting off the nose, blinding, cannibalism, breaking on the wheel, whipping, widow burning, etc. are some of the acts of violence which are provided with historical coordinates and discussed in an objective and often quite humorous style: "Die Guillotinen der großen Revolution verfuhren, früheren Strafarten gegenübergehalten, wesentlich humaner" ("Compared to earlier forms of punishment, it is immediately evident that the guillotines of the Great Revolution proceeded substantially more humanely", transl. Evers 2021, 243) (Walser 1985-2000, IV: 179.) About drowning: "jeder Einsichtsvolle [muβ] zugeben, daβ solche Tötungsart gelinde genannt zu werden verdient" ("every judicious person has to admit that such killing method deserves to be called a gentle one", transl. ibid. 245) (ibid., 179) About blinding: "Blenden oder Augenstechen scheint geraume Zeit eine recht sehr beliebte Methode gewesen zu sein" ("Blinding or eye-gouging seems to have been for long time a rather popular method") (ibid., 180). Because of its apparently childish tone, this late text could be one of the essays in the above-mentioned early collection *Fritz Kocher's Essays*, were the topic not so delicate.

There is no empathy here, no identification with the tortured; everything is described in an ironic, objective tone which puzzles the reader: "Grausame Bräuche, Sitten, Gewohnheiten usw. haben ja, unsentimental betrachtet, etwas Naives, Drolliges, vielleicht auch etwas Puppenhaftes, als wenn körperlicher Schmerz im Grund gar nicht so schlimm wäre" ("If looked at without sentiment, cruel rites, customs, habits etc. have something naive, something droll about them, possibly something dollish, as if bodily pain were basically not so bad", transl. ibid. 244) (ibid., 178). The instruments of violence are

[11] For an in-depth comment on this scene see Heffernan 2007, 128-39.

described in a very precise, realistic language; some descriptions recall cartoons, which are very often full of violence. The text is very peculiar: the objective, referential language puzzles the reader and the unusual, grotesque drollery provokes irritation and even indignation. How is it possible for these cruelties to be described as "pompously comical" ("pompöskomisch", ibid., 178)? The text says exactly the contrary of what is really meant. The deliberate drollery and the detached style are to be understood on the level of narration as a tool of guiding the reader; they are a formal strategy aimed at making the reader perceive on a deeper level the tragic nature of the situations, that is, "the darker regions below the surface of [the] charming style" (Evers 2018, 229). The form deliberately contrasts with the tragic, taboo topic of the text[12]. When the narrator claims that the cruelties he is depicting are hilarious, he is inviting the reader to disagree with this statement, to take a different position and to reflect on the tremendousness of the cruelties he is describing that have actually been practised in human history. The seemingly merciless, heartless drollery is a deliberately targeted stylistic device.

The text *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits* makes it clear that Robert Walser is not, or not merely, to be considered as the poet of the idyll; in fact, he was a very critical observer of complex periods in European history (for example, the war between the Slavic and Germanic tribes, the Inquisition, the Peasants' War), during which social taboos were pervasive, though the "spectral beauty of [his] meandering sentences" (ibid., 231), which often have a deliberately scholarly, naive and ironic tone, may be misleading.

[12] For more details about this strategy, that is, about the deliberate contrast between form and content, see Fattori 2020.

References

Bänziger, Hans. 1978. "Abseitige Idyllik" (1956). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 162-67. Bd. 1, 162-67. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, Walter. 1978. "Robert Walser" (1929). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 126-29. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Bernofsky, Susan. 2021. *Clairvoyant of the Small: The Life of Robert Walser.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Brod, Max. 1978. "Kafka liest Walser" (1948). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 85-86. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Coetzee, J. M. 2000. "The Genius of Robert Walser". *The New York Review of Books* 47 (17): 13-16.

___. 2007. "Robert Walser". In *Inner Workings: Literary Essays, 2000–2005,* 15-19. London: Harville Secker.

Echte, Bernhard. 2008. *Robert Walser: Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Evans, Tamara. 1983. "'A Paul Klee in Prose': Design, Space and Time in the Work of Robert Walser". *The German Quarterly* 57 (1): 27-41.

Evers, Kai. 2018. "Robert Walser and Violence: Strange Excursions into the Microscripts". In *Robert Walser: A Companion.* Ed. by Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan, 211-28. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Fattori, Anna. 2020. "Das enfant terrible Robert Walser: Inhaltliche und formale Tabubrüche in den späten Mikrogramm-Texten". In *Tabuzonen und Tabubrüche in der Schweizer Literatur,* hrsg. v. Dorota Sośnicka, 41-54. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Frederick, Samuel, and Valerie Heffernan, eds. 2018. *Robert Walser: A Companion.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gisi, Lucas Marco, hrsg. 2015. *Robert Walser-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung.* Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.

Heffernan, Valerie. 2007. *Provocation from the Periphery: Robert Walser Re-examined.* Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Hesse, Hermann. 1978. "Robert Walser" (1909). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1*,* 52-57. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Jelinek, Elfriede. 1998. *Er nicht als er (zu, mit Robert Walser): Ein Stück.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Johst, Hans. 1978. "Poetenleben" (1918). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1*,* 111-12. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Kafka, Franz. 1978. "Brief an Direktor Eisner" (1909). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 76-77. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Kammer, Stephan. 2015. "Das Phänomen der Mikrographie". In *Robert Walser-Handbuch.* Ed. by Lucas Marco Gisi, 274-82. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.

Kerr, Katarina, ed. 1978. *Über Robert Walser.* 3 Bde. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Lüthi, Max. 1985. *Das europäische Volksmärchen.* Tübingen: Francke.

Korrodi, Karl. 1978a. "Der Spaziergang" (1917). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 113–14. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

___. 1978b. "Walser über Walser: Die Rose" (1925). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 117-20. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Loerke, Oskar. 1978. "Poetenleben" (1918). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 125. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Morgenstern, Christian. 1978. "Brief an Bruno Cassirer" (1906). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 89-91. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Musil, Robert. 1978. "Die 'Geschichten' von Robert Walser" (1914). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 39-41. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Pinthus, Kurt. 1978. "Kleine Dichtungen" (1915). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 1, 103-04. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Schwerin, Kerstin Gräfin von. 2001. *Minima Aesthetica: Die Kunst des Verschwindens: Robert Walsers mikrographische Entwürfe „Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet".* Frankfurt a. M.: Lang.

Sebald, W. G. 1998. "Zur Erinnerung an Robert Walser". In *Logis in einem Landhaus: Über Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser und andere,* 127-68. München: Hanser.

Seelig, Carl. 1977. *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Walser, Martin. 1978. "Alleinstehender Dichter" (1963). In Kerr ed. 1978, Bd. 2, 14-20. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Walser, Robert. 1978. *Das Gesamtwerk in 12 Bänden*. Ed. by Jochen Greven. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

___. 1985-2000. *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*. 6 Bde. Ed. by Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

___. 2018: *Briefe*. Ed. by Peter Stocker and Bernhard Echte, with Thomas Binder and Peter Utz. 3 Bde. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.