

# Walking With Walser

# Introduction

The book you hold in your hands is quite a peculiar case: a rewrite of a re-translation of an almost-hundred-year-old Swiss–German novel.

I stumbled over Robert Walser's *The Walk* (*Der Spaziergang*) in the spring of 2013 while wandering the digital world, researching the tradition of *flânerie* as a possible model for my writing. The book was named as an iconic example of how, since the nineteenth century, artist-poets known as *flâneurs* have strolled city streets in order to observe and record the social changes brought by industrialization.

Always open to discovering a new-to-me author, I ordered a slim, paperback copy of *The Walk*. A day later it arrived my mailbox, and when I started reading it, I felt I had found a friend.

An episodic story about a writer who goes for a walk in his neighbourhood, *The Walk* calls itself fiction but features a cranky, lonely, witty, humble, hopeful narrator—a man very much like Walser himself. Or at least, that's how it seemed to me when I began to research the author's life story and explore his other writings.

I was shocked to find a literary soul mate in Walser—a man who had written a century earlier about a place I had never visited. Despite our differences, the landscape of our inner lives seemed remarkably similar. We both write and we both walk; we are anxious, but find solace in nature; we try to be kind; we despise cars; we seek and find meaning in the mundane.

Though we shared a certain way of seeing the world, Walser's way of describing this world was utterly new to me. I was thrilled by his all-encompassing vocabulary, his playful neologisms, and his labyrinthine sentences, all of which seemed to stimulate new pathways in my brain. Through my close study of his style, he—and his translators—became my teachers.

Born in 1878, Walser was self-educated but became a successful novelist and writer of short prose pieces early in life, earning the admiration of Franz Kafka, among other literary giants.

After a few years of success in Berlin, Walser's writing career was handicapped by World War I. Between 1914 and 1918, he served in the Swiss army for weeks at a time, alternating military service with weeks spent living alone in an attic room of a residential hotel in his hometown of Biel, Switzerland. It was during this period that Walser wrote and published *The Walk*.

Between the wars, he continued to publish modestly, but by the age of 50, Walser could no longer support himself as a writer and claimed to be hearing voices. He retired to a mental hospital in 1929 and spent the rest of his long life in institutions, having been diagnosed with

schizophrenia. He was largely forgotten by the literary world and died in 1956 while taking a walk in the snow.

A year before his death, Walser's work was translated for the first time into English by Christopher Middleton, an American poet and professor. Over the next two decades, Middleton translated several of Walser's novels, as well as many poems and short prose pieces, helping to secure the author's reputation as a master of modernism.

Thanks to the recent work of Susan Bernofsky, an American translator who has masterfully rendered several of Walser's novels and prose pieces in English over the past several years, there has been a twenty-first-century revival of interest in Walser, albeit a limited one.

Walser's status in popular culture seems to be that of the writer's writer. In Canada, his books are hard to come by at both libraries and bookstores, and, with only a few exceptions, whenever I mentioned his name to my reader friends, I received a blasé shrug in response. No one seemed to have heard of this "master of modernism," which only served to intensify my blossoming relationship with him.

I began to carry *The Walk* everywhere I went. The pile of unread books at my bedside grew while I studied Walser's novella as if it were a sacred text. I took it on daily walks around my neighbourhood, deconstructing his comedy and satirical voice while sitting in cafés, provoking many a curious look at my bursts of laughter.

My walks came to life through this close reading

of Walser. I felt a profound connection with random passersby; plants and trees now had perceptible souls; baby strollers became symbolic, traffic symptomatic, and Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's conspicuous image—which dominated the newspaper boxes that summer—farcically funny.

These walks were so healing and so enjoyable that I began to view Walser's way of seeing things as a remedy for the cultural illness that afflicted my city. Beset by unprecedented population growth, with a deepening divide between rich and poor, an aging transit system, and a shameful political scandal that reeked of gangs, drugs, guns, and public urination, the Toronto I saw from the window of the Queen streetcar seemed to be suffering.

In the cafés and parks along my home street, I began rewriting Walser's book for a contemporary audience. I recounted my own experience, but I did so by poaching Walser's loping plot and eccentric point of view. I went so far as to walk off with some of his sentences, transporting them through time and space because I found in them faultless expressions of my own experience.

This weird way of writing was in fact an extension of work I'd been doing with Peter Levitt, a poet, translator, and Zen Buddhist teacher. Levitt instructs writers on the craft of translating poetry from languages they may or may not know, on the premise that all writing is a form of translation. Creation, he reveals, is an act of dipping

beneath the level of language and devoting oneself to the act of translating lived experience into words.

Having tasted the discipline and devotion required for translation, I was in awe of Bernofsky's 2012 re-translation of *The Walk*, which was a peculiar case of its own, as she notes in her introduction:

“When the estimable Christopher Middleton translated Robert Walser's iconic novella *The Walk* in 1955, he didn't know that Walser himself had subjected this story to a thorough revision, publishing the new version several years after the original edition, on which Middleton's translation was based.”

Bernofsky updated Middleton's version to better reflect Walser's revisions, some of which, it turns out, were anticipated in Middleton's translation. In Bernofsky's introduction, she describes how the revisions altered the tone of the story. This offered a rare look behind the curtain and made the point that translations are never fixed or finished; they're an ongoing conversation.

I think of my story as a radical form of translation, a sort of conversation with Walser. I altered his tale only enough to bring it into this time and this place and, less significantly, to tell it in the voice of a female narrator. In some places, Walser's sentences—as translated by Bernofsky—remain wholly intact. These sentences are noted in the text.

At times, I feared the ruin that comes to singers who lip-synch, or the public flogging meted out to journalists who cut-and-paste a little too nonchalantly, but I was

encouraged to discover that Walser had himself engaged in creative acts of borrowing. He transformed other writers' works of art by weaving personal aspects of his own life into them, and openly admitted he had borrowed the plot of a pulp fiction novel to write one of his own books, although he never revealed which.

Borrowing Walser's words felt like an anarchistic act, but it also seemed a natural extension of my work as a journalist. To write this book, I returned to a habit I had developed as an arts reporter at Canada's largest daily newspaper, the Toronto Star—walking Queen Street in search of a timely story. With an assignment from Walser loosely in mind, I moved through my neighbourhood, inviting sights and sounds into my consciousness. Now, though, instead of stacking my observations into journalism's inverted triangle, I arranged them according to my mentor's picaresque plot. My goal was no longer the telling of truth, but rather, the showing of "truth."

This process, and the story that emerged, was personally transformative. By looking at my time and place from Walser's point of view, I came to see my neighbourhood, my city, and my era with new clarity and deeper compassion.

I hope my take on Walser's classic text will offer a similar experience to contemporary readers. We certainly need something to soothe our modern maladies, and what better than a funny little story?

If you have not yet experienced Walser, I urge you to read his novella before, after, or instead of my

adaptation. If you are already familiar with *The Walk*, I hope my homage prompts you to reread it or explore his other works.

While superficial and substantial aspects of certain people in my book are based on actual inhabitants of my neighbourhood, the characters in no way represent the real people who obliquely inspired them. Still, I would like to thank the friends, acquaintances, and unknown-to-me people of Queen Street who unwittingly played parts in my imaginary drama.

I would also like to thank my teachers Swami Jyotihananda, Sarah Selecky, and Peter Levitt. Their embodied wisdom helped me find the exact right words.

And finally, I would like to bow with gratitude before Robert Walser, Christopher Middleton, and Susan Bernofsky, in whose footsteps I humbly follow.

—DAPHNE GORDON

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*Walking With Walser*

ONE MORNING, as a desire to take a walk came over me, I put my hat on my head, left my writing room, or room of Facebook, and ran down the stairs to hurry out into the street.<sup>1</sup>

On the sidewalk, I encountered a woman who looked Persian, Iranian, or Middle Eastern.<sup>2</sup> She was towing an overburdened grocery tote and presented to the eye a certain pallid, faded majesty.

I was momentarily disturbed by everything she suggested, but my mood soon lifted. I strolled past a fragrant honeysuckle vine, then crossed the quiet street to caress a row of yellow roses, after which, in cordial acceptance of time's breakneck pace, I continued along down toward the hum of Queen Street.

I do love to say its name. The status and might of royalty is implied off the top, and then a layer of femininity comes in, all of which is influenced by the sound of that initial word itself, how it breaks open the air in front of your face. You can't help but smile when you say it. I challenge the reader to try!

It is perhaps arrogant to be convinced that one's own neighbourhood is the best, most interesting, and

delightful in the country. Yet my street's cultural, historical, recreational, and economic merits are well-documented, and I make no secret of the fact that I sing the Queen's sweet praises at least in part because she is my Queen.<sup>3</sup>

She is the earth upon which I walk. She provides the food that fuels my every activity. On even the darkest night, she lights my way home. Therefore, I bow down to her. Not to do so would be a matter of being dead inside.

The morning world spread out before my eyes as beautiful to me as if I were seeing it for the first time. Everything I witnessed made upon me a delightful impression of friendliness, trendiness, and youth. I quickly forgot that up in my room, I had only just a minute before been brooding sleepily online. Ambition, self-righteousness, and disgust had now vanished, although I vividly sensed my avatar acting in the network as I walked along the street, tense with eager expectation of whatever friend or ex-friend I might encounter here in open public space.

Travelling east, I presented, as far as I know, an attractive yet modest countenance. My minimal breasts I like to conceal from the eyes of my admirers, both male and female. Showing them, in my opinion, gives away one of my scarcest resources — sexual power — for *gratis* mass consumption.<sup>4</sup>

Conceding the delimiting effect of my androgynous image, I nonetheless guarantee the delivery of words potent enough to act simultaneously as balm to the soul

and cocktail to the brain. In return for the virtuosic literary performance I have promised, I ask only for whatever small bit of undivided attention you might have at your disposal.

I had not yet gone two or three blocks along the thoroughfare when the famed newspaper columnist Joe Fiorito<sup>5</sup> hiked past me. Incontrovertibly sensitive in person, and serious, humble, and rigorous in his devotion to reportage, Mr. Fiorito walked his way, wearing his jacket, carrying his bag with visible strain. That he would haul a large camera or heavy books did not surprise me. In his writing, he frequently draws himself as a character who knows and appreciates the value of hard work. Duties done well have the power to transform the soul, and he manages to make this point in words as well as in the way he carries his bag.

Most people do not notice the everyday demigods who populate this street. But I credit myself with perfect recall for faces, names, works of art, *mots justes*, and philanthropic efforts.

I caught a glimpse of a mid-century modern furniture store, then a flower shop bursting out into the street. Next, I had a yoga teacher to observe. With a kind face and flowing white clothing, she raced past on a bicycle, offering little more than a nod to me—me, formerly a devoted student of hers, now almost completely forgotten.

It should be noted that all this while, myriad baby boys and girls, lavishly accessorized, were racing past on the sidewalk in vehicles powered by nameless,

faceless mothers who seemed to hold coffee and smartphones in high regard. It's a wonder, I thought, that these infants don't end up in the gutter!

"Let the mothers 'multi-task' now," I chuckled to myself, "since age will one day soon make it impossible to concentrate on even one thing at a time!"<sup>6</sup>

The fertility in evidence all around prompted musings on Mother Nature's tenacity—of which an ongoing urban avian symphony was further proof. Even here, in the most commercial of zoning designations, the birds were atwitter. I moved forward in meditation on their song until three women in astonishingly high, pastel-coloured booties<sup>7</sup> made themselves conspicuous.

Moreover, two bushy beards caught my eye. The story about the beards is this: in the bright, gentle air I suddenly spied two chestnut facial sculptures; above the whiskers were perched twin pairs of thick-framed, black glasses, and under the glasses stood two preppy gentlemen, who, by means of subtle nods of the heads, bid each other good morning, an occasion that seemed to have been brought about by their inadvertently identical brown-beard-with-chunky-glasses look. Did they notice that their cocoa-coloured chukka boots were also mutually reflexive? I concluded, no.

As now an independent bookshop came to my notice, I felt the desire to honour it with a fleeting visit. I did not hesitate to step in, felicitously, feeling only the slightest prick of shame re: my reputation in the shop as a maker of reading lists for later consummation at the library, as opposed to an actual buyer of newly released, preferably

hardcover books. In a polite tone, I inquired, with the finest diction, after the latest and best in the field of fiction.

“May I,” I asked with reserve, “take a moment to acquaint myself with the most sterling and best-selling reading matter you now have available? I would pledge my eternal gratitude were you to lay before me that book series which, as nobody can know so precisely as you, has found the top of the pile in the collective awareness of the reading public?”

The clerk glanced up from his electronic device and inquired, “How can I help you?” in a singsong voice designed to indicate enthusiasm.

“I am excited to learn which of all of the works of the pen put on show here is the extremely famous, most-read, best-selling series of the year, the sight of which will probably compel me to produce my credit card.”

My longing to see the preferred publications of all the cultivated world swelled as he swivelled his stool 180 degrees, placed his device in a charger, stood, pulled up his crisp culottes, and finally, turned back to me with a blank look.

“Might I, as urgently as possible, though I’m sorry to interrupt your important activities, ask you to show me the book that, in triplicate, rests at the top of the lists? So that this desire which has seized me might acknowledge itself gratified and cease to trouble me?”

“Of course,” said the sales associate. Like an arrow, he vanished out of eyeshot, to return the next instant bearing the most bought and read volumes of the current

moment to me, his potential client. This tender fruit of the spirit he conveyed carelessly, however. His eyes appeared utterly bored, though his moustache twisted and twitched this way and that, creating an illusion of alertness. With that smile on his lips which one finds only on the faces of those who are motivated at the very core by arbitrary sales goals, he laid before me in the most winning way that which he had brought.<sup>8</sup>

I considered the volumes and asked: “Can you swear that these are the must-reads of the season?”

“Um, yeah. I mean, like, if you’re into... I mean... This is a very specific type of erotic...”

“But, are these books definitely good?”

“Don’t ask me that.” He punctuated his words with a hands-clasped begging gesture. “Please?”

“Thank you most kindly,” I said coldly and left the books where they were to withdraw without further ceremony, i.e. as swiftly as I could. Spending good money on bad books seemed a silly thing to do.

I was blushing at my own odd behaviour, but through the shop’s window, out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the sales associate wasn’t offended by my bad manners in the least; my sudden departure had liberated his thumbs to smoothly return to texting position.

I walked at ease on my way, feeling superior to all passersby for having left my house *sans* electronic gadgets. I walked in the real universe; they roamed the network. We slipped past each other and consciousnesses barely converged.

My next stop was the bank. “To enter a monetary