Book Review

Carl Seelig


The Swiss writer Robert Walser (1878-1956) has been an overlooked figure among the original voices that mark European literature of the last century. Yet his work was admired by his contemporaries, Kafka and Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil and Herman Hesse. More recently, with the appearance of English translations of the novels and short stories, Walser has acquired a posthumous reputation within the modern tradition of German prose. And although Susan Sontag and J.M. Coetzee, among others, have drawn Walser to the attention of the English-speaking world, it is by way of W.G. Sebald’s remarkable essay Le Promeneur Solitaire that readers are encouraged to discover for themselves the Swiss writer’s oeuvre. With atmospheric mastery, Sebald discloses Walser’s slender grasp upon the material world, as the following passage illustrates:

... from the very beginning, [Walser] was only ever connected with the world in the most fleeting of ways. Nowhere was he able to settle, never did he acquire the least thing by way of possessions. He had neither a house, nor any fixed abode, not a single piece of furniture, and as far as clothes are concerned, at most one good suit and one less so. Even among the tools a writer needs to carry out his craft were almost none he could call his own. He did not, I believe, even own the books he had written. What he read was for the most part borrowed. Even the paper he used for writing was secondhand.1

A chronology of Robert Walser’s life can be summarised as follows. Born in 1878, grew up in Biel; apprenticed as a bank clerk; takes a series of mundane office jobs; in 1895, follows his artist-brother Karl to Stuttgart, where he tries

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and fails to become an actor; returns to Zürich and in 1904 publishes his first book, Fritz Kocher’s Tales; is a butler to Silesian gentry, but when his brother moves to Berlin as a set painter, Walser goes too, and there he writes prolifically and publishes three novels: The Tanners (1907), The Assistant (1908), Jakob von Gunten (1909); two volumes of short stories appear in 1913/1914. At the outbreak of war, he returns to Switzerland, contributing feuilletons (literary sketches) to newspapers in Bern. Increasingly, his work is rejected and by the mid-1920s he ceases to publish, but begins what he calls “Bleistiftgebiet” (Pencil Regions), (handwriting so minute at a millimetre high, it was not deciphered until 1972 when, incredibly, it was found to include a last novel, The Robbers.) In 1929, after a breakdown and several vague suicide attempts, Walser is admitted to Waldau Psychiatric Hospital suffering from hallucinations and anxiety, eventually diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenia. In 1933, he is transferred to the Herisau sanatorium in the eastern canton of Appenzell where, in July 1936, he is visited by Carl Seelig, an influential Swiss writer and editor, who explains: “I felt a need to do something for his work and for him personally. Of all the contemporary writers in Switzerland he seemed to me the most peculiar.” Walser remained at the sanatorium until his death, out walking alone, on Christmas Day 1956.

Carl Seelig’s book Walks with Robert Walser, now published for the first time in English, is a fascinating account of their tramps together in the Appenzell. It contains 46 entries spanning twenty-years of friendship. Seelig is a generous companion and invaluably gives us the only sustained portrait we have of Walser. The writing is observant and succinct. Indeed, the account is so skilfully conveyed, from time to time the reader has to remind themselves that they are not actually there with Walser – striding ahead in his frayed collar, tie askew, and the threadbare suit he wore in all weathers – carrying an umbrella “rolled up like a sausage” for good luck.

Across the seasons, in driving snow and blazing summers, they wander through Walser’s reflections as though the darkening events of 1930s Europe and the great conflagration that followed, hardly existed. Hitler is mentioned in passing, and so is the atomic bomb, yet the ramifications of either seem worlds away from their peregrinations in Switzerland. This is not a criticism of the book, for its purposes are focussed on the willing capture of its subject’s literary experience, now clinically sequestered. Hence, we listen to Walser’s opinions of Hölderlin, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Mann, and even Walt Whitman, as well as about his favourite book, Gottfried Keller’s Green Henry. We eavesdrop on his memories of Berlin critics: “Robert Walser, you began as a clerk and a clerk you’ll always be!” And learn why he abandoned writing: “I simply could not find a motif ... I had written myself dry. Burned out like an oven.”