

Walking Is Not Writing Performance and Poetics in Walser's *Der Spaziergang*

Among the most striking passages in Robert Walser's *Der Spaziergang* (1917) is one in which the narrator praises the flora and fauna that decorate ladies' hats, as if the latter were themselves gardens:

Die Federn, Bänder, künstlichen Früchte und Blumen auf den netten drolligen Hüten waren für mich fast ebenso anziehend und anheimelnd wie die Natur selber, die mit ihrem natürlichen Grün, mit ihren Naturfarben die künstlichen Farben und phantastischen Modeformen umrahmte und zart einschloß, derart, als sei das Putzgeschäft ein bloßes liebliches Gemälde.

SW 5, 25–26

At first glance, the passage would seem to do little more than note the power of imitation. So true to life are the flowers and fruits that adorn ladies' hats that one might be tempted to pluck or eat them, were it not for the frame that surrounds them and reveals them to be the work of human hands as opposed to nature's bounty. Yet, what stands out in this passage is not so much the verisimilitude of the decorative arts, or even the *trompe l'oeil* effect of imitation, as the recalibration of what counts as the center and the periphery of a representation. Nature frames the window of the milliner's shop; it embellishes or adorns its own imitation; it serves as the ornament to a display of ladies' hats, which are themselves the quintessential ornamental object. For this reason, the narrator compares the milliner's shop to "ein bloßes liebliches Gemälde," but the analogy is not as apt as it may seem, for what is on display is not the natural world but its simulation in a commodity. Unlike a painting, which, according to Leon Battista Alberti among other Renaissance theorists, is supposed to provide a window into nature's soul, what we have here is a window—literally a shop window—into the world of artifice that, *qua* artifice, poses as a natural phenomenon.¹ In other words, we are treated to a representation of

1 In his treatise *On Painting* (1435), Alberti compared painting to "an open window through which I see what I want to paint" (p. 56). Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Elisabeth Decultot point out that the subject of a pictorial representation for Alberti is not so much nature as history. The Renaissance adapted Aristotle's definition of *mimesis* in the *Poetics* as the imitation of men in action to meet the requirements of the visual arts. What painting imitates is

representation, which is not surprising in a work that depicts not a walk but, as I will argue, the pretense of one to fill the pages of the narrator's notebook.

We know from the outset that the narrator is haunted by the blank page and that he supposedly sets out on a walk to lift his spirits, which had been weighed down by his difficulty with writing among other things. As soon as he sets out, his mood changes:

Rasch vergaß ich, daß ich oben in meiner Stube soeben noch düster über ein leeres Blatt Papier hingebrütet hatte. Alle Trauer, aller Schmerz und alle schweren Gedanken waren wie verschwunden, obschon ich einen gewissen Ernst, als Klang, noch immer vor mir und hinter mir lebhaft spürte.

SW 5, 7–8

It would be hard not to hear parallels to Walser's letter to his editor Max Rychner from June 20, 1927, a decade after the publication of *Der Spaziergang*, in which he explains how he devised his peculiar writing method of first drafting texts in pencil before copying them in ink (see BA2, 298–300). Walser tells Rychner he adopted this system to overcome the difficulties he faced writing with a pen, and lest one think that these difficulties were merely physical, he quickly adds, "Eine Ohnmacht, ein Krampf, eine Dumpfheit sind immer etwas körperliches und zugleich seelisches" (BA2, 300). Writing with a pencil as opposed to a pen freed his hand, and the evident pleasure he took in the physical act of writing simultaneously rekindled his inner "Schriftstellerlust" (BA2, 300).² Similarly, in *Der Spaziergang*, it would seem that the act of walking inspires the narrator to write, to move his hand across the page after having moved his body through space in an apparently aimless stroll. The narrator indicates as much when he later declares in dramatic fashion, "Ohne Spazieren wäre ich tot, und mein Beruf, den ich leidenschaftlich liebe, wäre vernichtet" (SW 5, 50).

Statements like this in which the narrator aligns walking with writing have largely shaped the critical reception of Walser's work. Susanne Andres, for instance, argues that the act of writing is the motor of Walser's fiction insofar

not nature as something created (*natura naturata*) but as a creative power or agent in its own right (*natura naturans*). See Lichtenstein and Decultot: "Mimesis," pp. 662–664.

- 2 In *Irony's Antics*, Erica Weitzman offers a novel and provocative thesis to explain Walser's writer's block. She attributes it, in part, to the absence of any imperative or necessity in his work, which is consistent with other interpretations of his prose as unmotivated. Such a necessity usually derives from the subject who fashions the text and stands as an absolute authority opposite it. If the writer is no longer able to assume this position and to establish the law of the work, then his writing is no longer entirely free. Weitzman suggests that this loss of freedom contributed as much to Walser's peculiar style as it did to his difficulties writing. See Weitzman: *Irony's Antics*, pp. 78–79.

as his narratives proceed as the narrator-cum-writer imagines new roles for himself in a seemingly endless stream. She remarks, “Er [Walser] wandert schreibend, findet sich nie, verschwindet und kommt wieder. Es geht nicht mehr um das Geschriebene, sondern um das Schreiben.”³ In a similar vein, Daniela Mohr comments that Walser’s texts are organized like walks with multiple scenes, whose only link would seem to be their arrangement in a sequence. Put in linguistic terms, the syntax of the episodes is paratactic, as is the order of impressions or perceptions in a walk.⁴ Finally, Walter Keutel highlights the inextricable connection between walking and writing at the heart of Walser’s work: “[die] Grenzüberschreitung zwischen Text und Leben, die beliebige Wiederholbarkeit und Abrufbarkeit einer vertexteten Existenz.”⁵

Walser himself did not hesitate to align writing with walking, as is evident in the following passage from *Der Spaziergang* in which the narrator begs the reader’s indulgence for the deliberate, if not sluggish, pace of his narrative:

Indem du dir, lieber, gewogener Leser, die Mühe nimmst, sorgfältig mit dem Schreiber und Erfinder dieser Zeilen *vorwärts* in die helle, freundliche Morgenwelt *hinauszumarschieren*, nicht eilig, sondern vielmehr ganz behaglich, sachlich, glatt, bedächtig und ruhig, *gelangen wir* beide vor die bereits vorgemerkte Bäckerei mit Goldinschrift [...].

SW 5, 15, emphasis added

Here the narrator conflates the movement of the reader’s eye with a movement through space, such that the reader can arrive in die “helle, freundliche Morgenwelt” merely by chancing upon these words. Similarly, the bakery mentioned in the passage first appears not as a physical edifice but as a sign—a point the text makes in noting the gilt lettering that distinguishes this one fixture from its surroundings. Elsewhere the narrator blurs the line between time and space by foreshadowing scenes, which gives his writing an interim goal toward which it can advance in space.

And yet walking is not writing; such, at least, is my thesis. In spite of the similarity between forward movement and straightforward discourse implied in the word “prose,” which derives from the Latin *prosus* meaning straightforward, straight, direct, or contracted, writing has the capacity to circle back

3 Andres: *Robert Walsers arabeskes Schreiben*, pp. 58–59. Andres argues that the attention to writing in Walser’s prose gives his work an ironic structure, which enables it to intimate the infinite within a finite frame. See *ibid.*, pp. 31–36.

4 Daniela Mohr observes that Walser’s work maintains this order by presenting itself as “chronologisches Protokoll der rezipierten Landschaftselemente.” See Mohr: *Das nomadische Subjekt*, p. 16.

5 Keutel: *Röbu, Robertchen, das Walser*, p. 15.

and to present not only what is, but also what was, and, above all, what could be in other circumstances.⁶ The latter is, of course, consistent with Aristotle's definition of literature in the *Poetics* as a mimetic art that, unlike history, conveys not what has happened, but what could happen in keeping with the laws of probability and necessity.⁷ Writing, in contrast to walking, can mimic what it is not—a fact the narrator turns to his advantage when he refers to his “hochdaherstolzierende[r] Stil” (SW 5, 21). He can create the appearance of strutting, even if he stays in one place thanks to the power of his pen, which produces its own flight: the flight of fancy.

The narrator's opening remarks offer an illustration of the difference between writing and walking, thinking and doing, or imagining and acting:

Rasch vergaß ich, daß ich oben in meiner Stube soeben noch düster über ein leeres Blatt Papier hingebrütet hatte. Alle Trauer, aller Schmerz und alle schweren Gedanken waren wie verschwunden, obschon ich einen gewissen Ernst, als Klang, noch immer vor mir und hinter mir lebhaft spürte.

SW 5, 7–8

Were one to delineate the temporal jumps in this passage in a straightforward manner, one would have to say that the narrator recalls in the present an occasion in the past when he forgot the difficulty of writing by taking a walk. The passage as such bears witness to the powerful but hardly original distinction between *Erzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit*. Many first-person texts depend on the split between the time of the work and the events recounted in order to underscore the narrative act. What is, rather, remarkable in this passage from *Der Spaziergang* is that the narrator enacts what he writes and does so by eliding the moment of composition. He is able to fill the pages of his notebook as soon as he forgets that he writes and imagines, instead, that he is wandering in the hills and valleys surrounding a provincial town. In other words, he suppresses the fact that he is seated at his desk and that his only adventure lies in the pages of his still unfolding text.⁸

This is admittedly a speculative claim. It would be hard to prove that the narrator's walk is a fiction or narrative device designed to help him move his

6 For a lengthier discussion of the term's etymology, see “Prose,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

7 See Aristotle: *Poetik*, 1451b.

8 In *Kleiner. Feiner. Leichter*, Jörg Kreienbrock goes so far as to claim that the narrator never succeeds in leaving his study behind in spirit, even if he abandons it in the flesh. He notes that the desultory thoughts that weigh on the speaker in his study are “wie verschwunden,” which would suggest that they continue to weigh on Walser's narrator as he wanders, however much he asserts the opposite. See Kreienbrock: *Kleiner. Feiner. Leichter*, pp. 50–52.

pen across the page and to forget the otherwise blank sheet before him.⁹ Yet, on more than one occasion he suggests that the walk is a pretext for his account, which communicates nothing but the miracle of communication itself, as the first words of the text demonstrate: “Ich teile mit” (SW 5, 7). These words are miraculous to the extent that they instantiate what they say, making the idea of communication simultaneous with its occurrence and thereby enacting the underlying logic of any magic trick: *Abracadabra, voilà*. The narrator appeals to magic when he considers the buildings and fixtures he would include in his account, were he ever to sit down to write it: “Es käme jetzt und träte hervor ein Wirtshaus [...]. Der Garten läge auf einem aussichtsreichen niedlichen Hügel, und dicht daneben läge oder stände ein künstlicher Extra-Aussichtshügel” (SW 5, 31–32, emphasis added). If he were ever to produce a narrative, all the items mentioned here would find their proper place in a world that is indistinguishable from fantasy, as reality is based solely in the word.

Judith Ryan coined the phrase “hypothetical narration” to describe this form of storytelling specifically in reference to Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, but this term applies to other fictional works as well. She points out that in his notebooks, Malte frequently tells stories by imagining how another storyteller would narrate them.¹⁰ For instance, in the middle of his version of the legend of “The Prodigal Son,” Malte refers to how other authors narrated the son’s return: “Die die Geschichte erzählt haben, versuchen es an dieser Stelle, uns an das Haus zu erinnern, wie es war.”¹¹ For Ryan, the deferral to other storytellers enables Malte to narrate experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible to him.¹² Although the narrator in *Der Spaziergang* does not adopt the perspective of other storytellers, he repeatedly shifts from descriptive utterances to hypothetical formulations (i.e., questions concerning what should or should not be contained in the narrative) in order to write a text about walking that he otherwise could not start. The hypothetical gives him an occasion to compose while claiming to do something else and, in this manner, allows him to overcome his writer’s block.

The narrator’s remarks about the milliner’s shop, in particular, demonstrate the power of the hypothetical in this tale. He wonders how plausible it would be to find a boutique for fine hats in a bucolic setting: “Eine bescheidene Frage: Ist vielleicht nachgerade für ein zierliches Putzgeschäft unter grünen Bäumen

9 Walser’s *horror vacui* was arguably so strong that he could only write if he cultivated the illusion that he was not facing a blank sheet at all.

10 See Ryan: “Hypothetisches Erzählen,” pp. 245–284.

11 Rilke: *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 634.

12 See Ryan: “Hypothetisches Erzählen,” p. 277.

hervorragendes Interesse und womöglich etlicher Beifall spärlich vorhanden?“ (SW 5, 25) The statement has all the hallmark features of Walser's writing. It contains several effusive, if also formulaic, expressions of humility that at the same time mask the exorbitance of its demand for acknowledgment from the reader in the form of applause and rapt attention. It is worth noting that what the reader is asked to applaud is the narrator's finesse in presenting a scene that would otherwise be incongruous. In drawing attention to his rhetorical skill, the narrator also frames the account that follows as a rhetorical exercise in the most literal sense, a display of verbal wit. Neither reality (what is) nor logic (what has to be) dictates the account. It is governed instead by a hypothetical proposition, a statement regarding what *could be* if the narrator were ever to write a text entitled *Der Spaziergang*.

Were the narrator ever to write such a work, he would highlight this incongruous scene noting as much in an almost theatrical aside in which he quotes his own line of reasoning:

„Das alles“, so nahm ich mir im stillen und während des Stillstehens vor, „schreibe ich bestimmt demnächst in ein Stück oder in eine Art Phantasie hinein, die ich ‚Der Spaziergang‘ betiteln werde. Namentlich darf mir dieser Damenhutladen keineswegs darin fehlen. Ein hoher malerischer Reiz würde dem Stück sonst sicher abgehen, und diesen Mangel werde ich so gut zu vermeiden als zu umgehen und unmöglich zu machen wissen.“

SW 5, 25

Seldom has a text so boldly presented itself as a conditional work. The only other novel to do so in similar fashion, and possibly as an allusion to Walser, is Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung*, whose narrator likewise declares his intent to write a memoir in the future bearing the same title as the one we read in the present.¹³ Unlike in *Auslöschung*, however, the pattern of self-reference in *Der Spaziergang* does not fit the model of romantic irony, even if it would seem to conform to Schlegel's definition of transcendental poetry: “[S]o sollte wohl

13 Bernhard's narrator makes several statements regarding his intended memoir, but the one that plays on the paradoxical nature of his autobiographical project reads as follows: “Das einzige, das ich schon endgültig im Kopf habe, hatte ich zu Gambetti gesagt, ist der Titel *Auslöschung*, denn mein Bericht ist nur dazu da, das in ihm Beschriebene auszulöschen, alles auszulöschen, das ich unter Wolfsegg verstehe, und alles, das Wolfsegg ist, alles, Gambetti verstehen Sie mich, wirklich und tatsächlich alles. Nach diesem Bericht muß alles, das Wolfsegg ist, ausgelöscht sein” (Bernhard: *Auslöschung*, p. 199). There has been little research done on the connection between Bernhard and Walser to date, although this is a fruitful topic given the subversion of the first-person form characteristic of both writers.

auch jene Poesie [...] in jeder ihrer Darstellungen sich selbst mit darstellen.”¹⁴ Every time the narrator refers to his own writing, every time he draws attention to the compositional choices he has to make, he would seem to fulfill Schlegel’s dictum that the hand that does the writing should be included in the writing or, put otherwise, “das Produzierende” should appear “mit dem Produkt.”¹⁵ Yet there is a crucial difference between the two. For Schlegel, the poet is, on the one hand, given or immanent in the work and, on the other hand, exceeds it as the transcendental subjectivity that fuels the creative outpouring but is never exhausted by it. For Walser, by contrast, the writer is never given in the work, because the work itself is always yet to come. It has the status of a future project, perhaps a fanciful piece entitled “Der Spaziergang,” as the narrator notes in the above-cited passage.¹⁶ For the time being, this piece remains a hypothetical project: that is, a project which the narrator realizes only by denying he is engaged with it and pretending to take a walk instead.

It is thus no accident that the narrator claims to have arrived at the idea of his project while standing still (“während des Stillstehens”) in an ostensible break from his stroll, but which again should be understood as a hypothetical proposition: it is a break he would take were he to chance upon a milliner’s shop. The exact phrasing the narrator uses to describe this shop is worth recalling: “Was sah und entdeckte ich Neues, Unerhörtes und Schönes? Ei, ganz einfach *besagtes* allerliebstes Putzgeschäft und Modesalon” (SW 5, 25, emphasis added). What catches the narrator by surprise and causes him to pause is a shop understood literally as something said, “[B]esagtes.” He finds himself before a fixture of his own making, an edifice he previously fantasized would turn up in his own peregrinations. This is the motor of Walser’s *Der Spaziergang* that drives the text forward, even when it would appear to circle back. It consists in the narrator’s citation of himself insofar as everything he confronts is something

14 Schlegel: *Athenäums-Fragmente*, p. 127.

15 Ibid.

16 Self-reflection is an undeniable aspect of Walser’s prose. My argument does not dispute this but focuses instead on the modality of his fiction, which unfolds *as if* it had yet to come to pass and to this extent constitutes not an actual, but a hypothetical representation. In this context, it is worth noting that the achievement of Walser’s work is always coupled with the narrator’s disappearance from the text. The narrator retreats from the diegetic space in which he had paraded, ultimately becoming a figure no one notices. For a more thorough investigation of romantic irony in the context of Walser’s work, see Gronau: “*Ich schreibe hier dekorativ*,” pp. 45–55; Weitzman: *Irony’s Antics*, pp. 69–74; Andres: *Robert Walsers arabeskes Schreiben*, pp. 55–63; and Martin Walser: “Einübung ins Nichts,” pp. 115–152.

he has uttered, as though conjured out of thin air.¹⁷ Examples include not only the milliner's shop but also the house with the young singer and Frau Aebi, whose name is itself a testament to all literary creation given that it consists of two consonants that could be dubbed alpha-beta. The narrator finds himself in a world of his own making, i.e., a world he generates with the pen, and this gives him occasion to adopt whatever persona he likes before proceeding to the next scene or, more precisely, the next invented scenario. The personae can be anything from a diffident youth to a starving poet to a charming rascal. It matters little what mask the narrator assumes, only that it is marked as such, i.e., as a mask he takes up only to discard it in the next instance.

This pattern gives the text its peculiar rhythm. It is neither slow nor fast but almost metonymic in its steady unveiling of new scenes that are no sooner introduced than abandoned. Each encounter with a new person provides the narrator with an occasion to deliver a dramatic monologue that has little, if any, relation to what comes before or after it.¹⁸ The only connective tissue between episodes is their mere articulation in a sequence, as if they were points in a line. This syncopated rhythm applies not only to the events recounted but also to Walser's diction, as Walter Benjamin observed: "[E]in Wortschwall bricht aus, in dem jeder Satz nur die Aufgabe hat, den vorigen vergessen zu machen."¹⁹ And yet, *Der Spaziergang* is not entirely monological, even if what it conveys is a hypothetical walk that does not occur anywhere except in the narrator's imagination.

For all the concerted lightheartedness of the text, there is something darker lurking in it from the start when the narrator makes a passing reference to the gloom he felt in his room as he stared at the blank sheet before him. This danger finds its most conspicuous expression in the giant Tomzack, who appears after a lengthy digression in which the narrator catalogs the fruits and vegetables growing in cultivated beds. Representing the uncultivated element in the scene, Tomzack is a wild figure with whom the narrator has uncanny familiarity: "[E]in Mensch, ein Ungeheuer, ein Ungetüm [kam] mir entgegen,

17 In Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*, the headmistress of the school Lisa Benjamenta turns allegorical expressions like "die Sorgenwand," "trübselige[] Mauer," and "Strom von Zweifel" into literal spaces through the touch of her magic wand ("Herrin-Stab"). This is, at least, what Jakob initially believes about "inner chambers" until he returns there later and discovers that they are simple rooms, whose only decorative feature seems to be a fish tank. See SW 11, 100–102.

18 Mohr describes this dynamic as follows: "Indem das erzählte Ich seine Selbstinszenierungen auf ein imaginäres Publikum hin ausrichtet, dem es wechselnde Rollen vorspielt, wird die Unmittelbarkeit seines Selbstverhältnisses gebrochen, und seine Identität in den verschiedenen Maskeraden und Posen aufgelöst" (Mohr: *Das nomadische Subjekt*, p. 6).

19 Benjamin: "Robert Walser," p. 326.

der mir die helle lichte Straße fast völlig verdunkelte, ein lang- und hochaufgeschossener unheimlicher Kerl, *den ich leider nur allzu gut kannte*" (SW 5, 28, emphasis added).²⁰ The narrator notes this familiarity a mere paragraph later when emphasizing once again the monumental size of this figure and his own relative slightness: "Ich kam mir neben ihm wie ein Zwerg oder wie ein kleines armes schwaches Kind vor. Mit der größten Leichtigkeit hätte mich der Riese zertreten oder erdrücken können. *Ah, ich wußte, wer er war*" (SW 5, 29, emphasis added).

Tomzack dogs the narrator like his shadow, which he may in fact be, as he had been there in the background since the narrator's youth and had not changed in the intervening years. Tomzack's immutability derives from the fact that he is neither alive nor dead—"[e]r war nicht tot und nicht lebendig, nicht alt und nicht jung" (SW 5, 29)—which is also what makes him so haunting for the narrator. He belongs nowhere. He has neither a house nor a tombstone to his name and is, as a result, ubiquitous; he can be found anywhere. At the same time, he lacks all features, all defining traits and to this extent constitutes a blank slate.²¹ The narrator can never be done with Tomzack. He can never exhaust him in representation, for Tomzack is nothing but a name for the blankness that threatens to engulf the narrator were he to cease to write—were he to walk instead.

It is thus no surprise that Tomzack reappears, albeit in muted form, at the conclusion of *Der Spaziergang* as the narrator reaches the end of the line, the point farthest from home, where he disappears from the work we have before us. Although he announces that he plans to return home, he does not chronicle this journey in the text.²² *Der Spaziergang* literally ends with a gaping hole, an unanswered question. The narrator asks "Wozu dann die Blumen?" (SW 5, 77) regarding the flowers he collected, which would, at first, seem to be intended for the graves of two specific individuals. The first is a girl from the narrator's youth whom he admits to having wronged; the second is a man he encountered lying on the floor of the forest, who was either dead or in the process of dying. Yet, it becomes apparent that neither of the two are the recipients of the

20 Fuchs argues that the various theatrical poses the narrator adopts in the novella are a response to an indeterminate experience of negativity that culminates in the appearance of Tomzack, whom she identifies as the narrator's alter ego. See Fuchs: *Dramaturgie des Narrentums*, p. 55.

21 Mohr also notes the absence of any distinguishing features or traits in Tomzack. See Mohr: *Das nomadische Subjekt*, p. 43.

22 Kreienbrock draws attention to the fact that the end of the novella does not meet up with its beginning, and consequently the work never becomes a self-contained whole. See Kreienbrock: *Kleiner. Feiner. Leichter*, p. 62.

flowers and that something else is at stake with the gesture—something that refers back to Tomzack, about whom the narrator previously said, “Kein Grab mit Blumen gab es für ihn” (SW 5, 29).

The unmarked grave is a leitmotif of the text. It appears first when the narrator recounts to a stranger the depths of despair to which he once fell, “Ich war tot, und jetzt ist es mir, als habe mich jemand gehoben und gefördert” (SW 5, 24). It turns up again as he imagines dying in the forest like the mysterious man referred to in the final paragraph: “Hier tot zu sein und in der kühlen Walderde unauffällig begraben zu liegen, müßte süß sein” (SW 5, 31). Finally, it appears at the railway crossing when the narrator is at his most exuberant, convinced that God has revealed himself to him. He describes how he has fallen into a hole, though in his grace-filled world, the heights and the depths are no different: “An der Oberfläche herab stürzte ich in die fabelhafte Tiefe, die ich im Augenblick als das Gute erkannte” (SW 5, 57). The Christian overtones in these passages are not incidental. In suggesting he survives his own death, the narrator alludes implicitly, and one might say with perverse relish, to Jesus, who proclaims, “[F]or I was dead and now I am alive for evermore” (*The New English Bible*, Rev.1.18).²³ The fantasy of surviving death is crucial to Walser’s narrator as it would enable him to render his absence present, to depict his demise as if it were something that did not affect his writing or thinking. In other words, it would enable him to fill the blankness that otherwise called into question his being as a writer who could write only by pretending to walk or by otherwise performing for the reader. In portraying his own death, the narrator achieves the apex of his literary fantasy: he imagines what would otherwise eliminate him.

Only in the final episode is this fantasy supplanted by another approach to the blank page. In lieu of trying to depict what otherwise escapes his writing, the narrator opts instead to let the blank page have the final word. He drops his pen. This is represented allegorically in the novella since only in an allegory can the narrator bid farewell to the reader who has followed him, as if he were walking, even when he was at home drafting the lines of the text: “Wozu dann die Blumen? ‘Sammelte ich Blumen, um sie auf mein Unglück zu legen?’ fragte ich mich, und der Strauß fiel mir aus der Hand. Ich hatte mich erhoben, um nach Hause zu gehen; denn es war schon spät, und alles war dunkel!” (SW 5,

23 The parallel between the narrator’s statements and Jesus’ reflections on surviving death are more pronounced in the German. His comment “Ich war tot, und jetzt ist es mir, als habe mich jemand gehoben und gefördert,” (SW 5, 24) repeats the beginning of the biblical passage verbatim: “Ich war tot, und siehe, ich bin lebendig von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit” (Offenbarung 1,18).

77). It would be hard not to read the flowers as emblems for the episodes or vignettes collected in this work. Each flower would serve the purpose of obscuring the narrator's unhappiness, if not terror, at the empty page. And yet, to let them drop, to scatter them to the winds is to abandon ownership of the work—in short, to cease to be an author. The narrator who wrote in adopting the pretense that he was walking finally becomes a walker when he abandons the text and disappears into an unmarked grave like the one belonging to Tomzack. Leaving behind the work in which he had adopted numerous poses, he discovers the freedom of being no one.

This desire to be anonymous and unconstrained is the impulse that motivates the following passage, which would be devastating in any other work save in this one, because this passage anticipates a day *to come* when the narrator can go for a walk unobserved: “Erde, Luft und Himmel anschauend, kam mich der [...] Gedanke an, daß ich zwischen Himmel und Erde ein armer Gefangener sei, [...] daß es keinen andern Weg in die andere Welt gebe als den, der durch das Grab *geht*” (SW 5, 76, emphasis added). Like Jakob von Gunten, the narrator retreats through the circle he draws on the page; he engineers his disappearance in passing through the text, which becomes his grave.²⁴ If writing, for him, is a passage, it is to another world in which he is no longer constrained by the burden of being an author—an isolated subject. By way of the hypothetical, he secures his freedom, and in this manner demonstrates that writing what could happen—to invoke Aristotle again—has the power not only to reproduce but also to produce reality. Walser's narrator steps into the world through his own novella. We who read it are witness to his transformation, which is the miracle of Walser's text. The word becomes deed as soon as the narrator drops his pen and vanishes into the darkness where he, like Tomzack, can reside, both as no one in particular and everyone potentially: “[E]s war schon spät, und alles war dunkel” (SW 5, 77). The narrator-writer lays the groundwork for his escape into the world as a walker we could potentially meet anywhere.

24 I explore how this dynamic in *Jakob von Gunten* works in Tobias: “The Double Fiction in Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*,” pp. 293–307.