

Staging Report: “The Walk with Robert Walser” in Bern

Robert Walser: no Stranger for this class

After having staged the Staging Lessons "The Walk with Robert Walser" in 2009 with an eleventh grade from Seeland-Gymnasium at the "original locations" in Biel, according to the specifications of my colleague Beat Bichsel, I was curious to see how a geographical variation, the "Walk with Robert Walser in Bern", would work. From Walser's biography it becomes clear that Berne, where he lived from 1921 to 1933, had been the second most important place in his literary productive time after Biel. In addition, since April 2009 Berne is the home town of the Robert Walser Center, which, together with the Swiss Literary Archives SLA of the Swiss National Library, is responsible for Walser's literary remains.

The class with which I wanted to stage the Lessons consisted of 14 ladies and seven gentlemen, all adults of different ages who would like to take up the Matura at the Berner Maturitätsschule für Erwachsene BME. They had already met Robert Walser for the first time in the 3rd semester (of 7): In the context of the introduction to text interpretation, we used the short prose «Das Zimmerstück» (first published in «Schweizerland» in August 1915) to practise both the content and the formal analysis as well as the contextualization of the text. In the accompanying dossier the students also received an impression of Robert Walser as a person and got keywords for his biography. Because the class expressed great interest in Walser's text, I decided to start the "Walk Staging Lessons" after the summer holidays. This now within the framework of a one-semester introduction into the three main literary genres of lyric, dramatic and epic poetry.

The first time I staged that Lessons in Biel I had around 20 lessons over eight weeks at my disposal, but here in Bern there were significantly less, i.e. about 12 lessons, two of which were out of school for the planned literature walk to «Walser places» in the city. However, the adult students know that they have to double the amount of preparation and follow-up activity time at home to complete a school program, which also allows for a reduced workload.

6 August:

Twice Epical Primal Situation in prelude and play

We start the new semester one week earlier after the shortened summer holidays on a rather cool rainy day. After having written down the term "Epical Primal Situation" in big letters in the middle of the blackboard, I often glance through the large windows at the green space in front of the gymnasium, because I know that the middle part of our afternoon four-session Lessons will take place outside. To the class, however, I explain that we're still expecting the visit of Robert Walser and that I would recognize him by his hat and umbrella. Yet for the time being, I would distribute the reading for the semester and present the semester program to the class, here (in the box) the first third reserved for the Staging Lessons:

Programme			
Date	Place/Time	Contents	Means
Monday 6th August	Neufeld (1.06) 13.30 – 17h	Programme/ Means Introduction to narrative literature „..... where you can hear the narrator!”	The Walk with Robert Walser in Berne Start of our own walk
Saturday 18th August	Neufeld (1.04) 9.50-10.35 10.50- 11.35	The Walk with Robert Walser in Berne Survey and Walser’s „Tonality” „..... where you can hear the narrator!”	Walser: „The Walk“, our own walk text Dossier
Saturday 8th September	Neufeld (1.04) 9.50-10.35 10.50- 11.35	The Walk with Robert Walser in Berne Revising our own texts	Walser: „The Walk“, our own walk text Dossier
Saturday 15th September	Neufeld (1.04) 9.50-10.35 10.50- 11.35	On Walser’s Traces through Biel and Bern – Search for evidence (Topics essay: Reflection on the Staging Lessons)	Walk with Robert Walser in Berne (in town in the afternoon*) Dossier
AUTUMN	HALF- TERM		
Saturday 20th October	Neufeld (1.04) 9.50-10.35 10.50- 11.35	Introduction to the drama (I) „For drama, set the stage!” Preparing our own playing	Theater Brecht’s „Street Scene” 2 groups; Dossier (Hand in essay) 14.30h Walser Center

In this program, the dramaturgy of our production as well as the evaluation of the performance is defined: the "prelude", the creation of the (general) epic original situation, is followed by the opening play scene and our own walk, immediately joined by the first walk over the paper. Two further meetings are planned for deepening in Walser's text with the intention of optimizing our own walk drafts. The essay written at home serves the retrospective reflection and will become part of the portfolio, the basis for the evaluation of the performance. Finally we will go for the Walser Literary Walk in Bern.

Throughout the semester, we will feed a regular accompanying dossier, which will always include all the new contributions from the past lessons such as the semester planning, the handouts with the exercises, as well as additional material such as the mentioned final "walk" texts. I regularly send updates to this dossier by mail to all members of the class.

Prelude: Genesis of a general Epical Primal Situation

"Epical Primal Situation": Still our term on the blackboard remains unexplained. In all three literary genres, we would like to (re-)produce the respective literary primal situation. I therefore show the following quatrain, which summarizes this genetic approach in a Wilhelm-Busch manner as follows:

*Die Lyrik will gesungen sein,
Fürs Drama richt' die Bühne ein,
Und Epik uns nur dort betört,
Wo den Erzähler man auch hört.*

English translation:

*The verse wants to be sung,
For drama, set the stage!
And epic poetry decoys us only there,
Where you can hear the narrator.*

We are reversing the order in our course and starting at the rear, for without doubt Walser's "The Walk" is a piece of epic narration. The narrator, however, I comment, plays the first part in making epic literature come to life again. Here, Rafael, who is a newcomer to the class, asks for the definition of epic literature. I briefly explain it as one of the three basic genres, besides lyrics and drama, and refer to our ongoing accompanying dossier, which defines it as "a genre of literature derived from the Greek expression "επική ποίησις" for narrative poetics . This genre is "an ever recurring commemorating speech about past times, spaces, events, actions, persons and their thoughts, which is told by a narrating instance (in its essence: a first-person narrator) to an audience (in the minimum: to oneself, in an extreme case: only with an inner voice). Speaking from the memory serves narrators as well as listeners to reassure them of their own identity in history and to produce their own, individual life (sense)."

If, however, we want to liven up literature, it is necessary to pick up a core in the definition of the genre and to use it as a guide to its implementation. This nucleus is the narrator epic literature. Despite the masculine form, the narrator is not a man, but an instance or a role. With this narrator, the respective original situation can be reconstructed at any time and in many places, especially in a classroom, so that the texts can be revived or literature works in a literary way, and not as a dead letter like in a score.



The narrator's chair

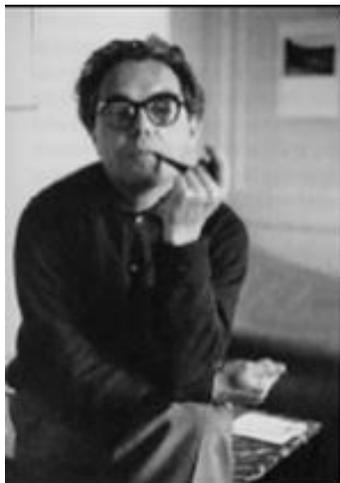
We therefore do the following exercise: First, I set up a narrator's chair. Any chair can serve this purpose if we tag it as a "narrator's chair" (see picture). Now we need a living individual to activate the

narrator for an audience, because the instance "narrator" does not have its own vocal organ. Next, everybody in the class gets a narrative assignment: "Tell us briefly how you got into this course, how you ended up in the BME? Was there a key situation in your life, perhaps a discovery that you have made about yourself, a special experience, a meeting with another person, or perhaps a picture impression that led you into this school and this course?" After five minutes, in which all of them have remembered and prepared their answers, we excitedly listen to the real stories of Franziska, Daniela and Amon, which they tell us as narrators sitting on the narrator's chair, partly as a sober report, partly as an anecdote. Quite entertaining, this round, but is the genesis of epic literature explained that way?

At the end of the sequence of short stories I transform myself from the teacher into a narrator and, taking a seat on the narrator's chair, tell the class an anecdote on how I got into this school (or into the teacher's profession.) The reason was the fact that I had read all the books of Karl May, an adventure story writer from the 19th century. The starting point of the anecdote was a school friend called Kurt. This friend enjoyed the reputation to have read all the books of Karl May already in the second grade of primary school. Little Stephan did not know who Karl May was at that time and his works weren't a particular incentive, but that this friend should have done such a reading performance was enough for him to equal him. Or, perhaps, to overthrow him. This is how Stephan has been involved in the reading of books - and since then has remained in it.

That was how it was. Or not exactly? Florian rightly doubts that little Stephan had read *all* Karl-May books. The analysis of the epic primal situation reveals: Even our little stories raise the question what is truth, a question that many writers – including Walser – have a central concern for. For the statement of the last narrator read: "I have read all the books of Karl May as a fourth grader." Really all? May's "Collected Works" from the Karl-May editors are nowadays at about volume 92! Obviously, the teacher's statement on the chair was not true, was a lie – or, expressed more mildly, was fiction. There is obviously a dichotomy: How can we win the truth about us and our lives? I approach the truth paradox with this question, at first presenting on a slide a picture of Max Frisch at the time when he had formulated this paradox.

Are we what is put down in our passport or what we list as facts in a CV: names, places, dates, qualifications, jobs, number of partners, children etc.? Or rather: is our identity moulded by characteristic experiences, by central encounters with people, by essential words, by narrations, by music, images, ideas, memories, dreams, desires, feelings that we recall?



Max Frisch (1911-1991) 1959 in his Rome domicile with Ingeborg Bachmann (From: Hans Höller: *Ingeborg Bachmann, Reinbek: Rowohlt 1999, S. 118*)

Again, the class now sees what Frisch wrote in 1960 in a text entitled "Our Greed for Stories": "You can not tell the truth. That's it. The truth is not a story, it has no beginning and no end, it is simply there or not there, it is a crack through the world of our madness, an experience but no story. All the stories are invented, are plays of imagination, designs of experience, images, true only as images. Everyone, not just the poet, invents his stories – only that he holds them, in contrast to the poet, for his life – otherwise we do not see our experience patterns, our personal experience." (Frisch, Max: *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, IV, S. 263)

In his novel „Mein Name sei Gantenbein“ (from 1964) the formula is even more radical: „Everybody sooner or later invents a story which he considers to be his life.“ (Frisch, Max: *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, Frankfurt M.: Suhrkamp 1976, Bd. V, S. 49")

In an interview about the method of biographical writing he used in his most famous novel "Stiller" of 1954, Frisch said looking back over 30 years: It is not about biographical data but about 77 stories:

"If you tell me your biography honestly, honestly, honestly: where you were born, what you have done, where you lived, how you live now, and I listen to that, in the sense of almost a confession, but without connecting it to guilt. That is one thing. But of that I do not want to know anything, instead I invite you to a villa in Tuscany, and you won't be let out, you'll get everything to eat there and so on, before you have written 77 fictitious stories that can be short, can be long and you will come with these 77 stories, and I think they are good or I don't think they are good, but they will be very different, be funny, be cheerless, and I now just claim a playing thesis: after these 77 stories, I know a lot more about you than what you have told me in your biography, and when I show you the stories, you know a lot more (...)"

(In: Albarella, Paola: Roman des Übergangs. Max Frischs «Stiller» und die Romankunst um die Jahrhundertmitte. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann 2003, S. 167/68)

In order to test this assertion, our test persons would have to sit on the narrator's chair again, with the request not to tell us half the truth, but the whole truth. But all of them were right if they refused to tell us a complete novel, which had to be their life novel.

Not least for time reasons; because now I've checked again a few times through the window, if I see Walser coming already. The narrative of one's life novel, I conclude, is the source of all epic literature. And Walser, too, with his walk story, did nothing else but to tell a piece about his life, meaning about his almost lifelong occupation with himself, with his reality and with the other people.

The game: Genesis of the primal "walk" situation

Again, Rafael asks why Walser was able to come, he had thought he died a long time ago. We just have ways to make him come back to life – so my reply. In fact, it is now time for the Walser act, the primal scene of the "walk" or the next, work-related and dramatized reproduction of an epic original situation. While the rain clouds are gathering further outside, I apologize to the class for leaving the classroom, I had to meet Mr. Walser. There is a hat, an umbrella, an inkwell, a pen, and a few blank sheets of paper in the preparatory room, and with these props Robert Walser steps into the classroom, on whose stage the desk now represents Walser's table in his "writing room, or room of phantoms."

Our Walser is now sitting in front of the pile of white paper, but only for a short while. He seems dispirited and nervous. I open the booklet with the "Walk" text and read the first sentence: "One morning, as the desire to take a walk came over me, I put my hat on my head, left my writing room, or room of phantoms, and ran down the stairs to hurry out into the street." (*Walser 1978, p. 7 or in the English version, Robert Walser: The Walk, translated by Christopher Middleton and Susan Bernofsky, New York: New Directions Books 2012 p. 13*).

Walser immediately carried out this plan, he put his hat on his head, caught the umbrella, and hurried out. Walser comes back after a short break of a minute. He writes "5 hours later" on the blackboard, quickly puts aside his umbrella and his hat, and sits behind the desk in a settled atmosphere and full of passion. Again he opens the book and starts to read, but this time he dives his pen into the ink and writes the first section fluently. Then, after speaking loudly, he contemplates which adjective he should put before the noun "state of mind", until he decides "romantically adventurous."

I decide to keep the playing short because I suspect the class has pulled the lesson from it quickly. But the important thing is that my engagement as the poet and writer Robert Walser ends with the self-explanatory sentence: «'All this,' so I proposed resolutely, 'I shall soon sketch and write down in a piece or sort of fantasy, which I shall entitle "The Walk."» (cf. *Walser 1978, p. 26/27 or in the English version Walser 2012, p. 32/33*). Immediately I transform myself into the teacher. Now is the right time to introduce our leading question (Sogfrage). This is Walser's approach. We could name it "to walser" (German: *Walsern*). Which two movements does this Walser method comprise, I ask the class. The answer comes quickly: first to walk, then to write down the walk. That's easy, isn't it, I add (again with a worried look out, where the rain just still holds back) and pass the order: Now go out on your walk and see that you are back here at 16:15h in our writing room, or room of phantoms," then we have another three-quarters of an hour to put the first draft of our walk on the paper. And do not forget your raincoats and umbrellas!

Without further questions, but with quite mixed feelings about what may be result from that exercise, everyone is on their way. I myself still close the classroom, angle my Walser umbrella and get my camera in the preparatory room, because I had practiced to work with 'station' photos already in the staging of the Lessons in Biel. One of my first pictures showed Marianne hurrying away (picture). It really started to rain, while we all went outside. But no one let the rain stop him. On the contrary, I was glad to see that without grumbling everyone tackled the task of writing a walk text from their memory in a first draft. I also wrote my first version by hand.

Footnote: This skepticism is evident in many of the retrospective comments. Here are three examples: "The attempt to walser, i.e. to take a walk, and come back and to bring it to paper, turned out to be more difficult than expected. I find the reasons for this because I'm no expert in walking." (*Melanie*);

"When, on the first day after our summer holidays, our teacher asked us to take a walk on Walser's footsteps, I was anything but enthusiastic. Quite honestly, I can think of better ways to spend time on a wet, rainy and relatively cool day. So I was not particularly motivated going my way to the woods just behind the school house with two of my classmates." (*Michael*);

"Everyone enjoys walking, but Walser was not content to keep that pleasure for himself, he had to write about it. And that's where I found the most problems to make my text come alive. I wrote because our teacher wanted it that way. Not because I felt the urge to tell something." (*Jessika*).

18 August:

Discover the whole of Walser's text, its "tonality" and its spaces

"To walser, how does that work?" Our leading question of the last time is written on the blackboard again after a two weeks' break. That we have understood Walser's double method of going a real walk and then repeating this walk on paper is evident from the walk text drafts that the students have brought back with them. Today I explained that we would now work to optimize them, but also to investigate further how Walser himself wrote his own text. The aim of today's two lessons is first to get to know the whole of the text as well as other and new aspects of Walser's poetics: on the one hand the voice of the narrator in Walser's "Walk" text and on the other hand the outside spaces described, the interiors and the present time. The first lesson thus belonged to the overview of the whole of the story as well as the discovery of the narrator's voice.

In the introduction to the epical primal situation, we had seen the last time that the narrator's voice should be made hearable in any prose piece ("...And epic poetry decoys us only there, Where you can hear the narrator").

There are no sound documents of Walser himself. We know that he did shy away from reading his texts in front of an audience, but he liked to listen to other readers when they read his literature.

Such a reader is certainly Fritz Lichtenhahn, a Swiss actor and Walser specialist. We will listen to his congenial reading on the CD after the students have received an overview sheet entitled "Stations in Walser's <Walk>: Overview of the Whole of the Text", which divides the text of the narrative into 20 <chapters> and thus makes it manageable. In my staging in Biel three years ago I had the class still find the chapter headings; this time I gave them the headings for the sake of time. This time, the aim of the exercise in the first lesson was to note one's own observations on Walser's style, especially on the "tonality" or the lyrical quality of his poetry while listening to the reading. Of course with the intention to discover the musical aspects of one's own "walk" texts and to optimize its quality.

There is a keen attention during the reading. Lichtenhahn pairs his stage-diction with the singsong of a language melody, which has its roots in Swiss-German. In addition, he separates rhythmically individual passages like the different movements of a piece of music. In this way, he emphasizes the musicality or "tonality" of Walser's text in a fascinating way. In the first lesson we reach the chapter on the giant Tomzack (1978, pp. 29-32), a passage of "deepest melancholic thoughtfulness," as Bernhard

Echte writes in his accompanying text. We briefly talk in a class discussion about the question what influence the disturbing appearance of this threatening fairy-tale or dream figure has on the inner life of the Walser's first-person figure, whereby Sergej already presents the thesis that the relationship of an author to the world, which he describes in his works, is characterized by his inner world. And here the experience of a depression is reflected.

At the end I give two CD copies to circulate in the class. How they were used to create a familiarity with the text was reflected in Daniela's final essay, where she wrote: "We also received two CDs from our teacher, a kind of audiobook about Robert Walser's "Walk". I have had them for about four weeks now and have not given them to anyone of my classmates. (...) It is a wonderful audio book. An audiobook is still gaining in value when the narrating voice is pleasant for the listening ear. And the narrator of the audio book of the "Walk" has a very pleasant voice. I hear them again and again. Also my son, he is nine years old, hears the "Walk" in the evening in bed with his radio. He loves this piece, turns quite calm, and then marvelously falls asleep. "

The discovery that the inner world of the ego figure in Walser's story can indeed assume the fabulous form of an encounter with a giant (Tomzack) has drawn our attention to further stylistic features of the text. In the second lesson, we again analyze the beginning of the narrative with regard to the three levels of the external world or outside spaces, the inner life or inner world, and the question of how historical time (i.e., Walser's "time") is reflected in the work. I recommend to distinguish the three layers in color in the following order (see box):

To Mark 3 Levels in the Text (outside reality, inside reality, historical actuality)

Outside Spaces (orange)

Please mark references to the «outside spaces», i.e. the places where the first-person narrator passes by on his walk through the town of Biel and its surroundings, with a orange colour!

Inner Life (green)

The narration «The Walk» offers a multiple register of sounds for the inner life. Please mark references to the «inner life», the feelings and the mood of the first-person narrator with a green colour!

Present Time (yellow)

Yellow is the colour for all references to the "present time", i.e. texts which point to the social, economic and cultural background before which the events in the text take place.

Already the first page offers material for all three levels. Before we go on in individual work, we realize that the "writing room or room of phantoms", the stairwell, the open street, the broad, man-made square, of course describe the outer reality and can still be seen in Biel (Unterer Quai and Zentralplatz) .

The inner world, on the other hand, is placed in the first sentence with the narrator's desire for a walk and the romantically adventurous "state of mind", which is brought into contrast with "sorrow, pain," the "grave thoughts", and the "certain seriousness."

The fact that the woman in the staircase from the second sentence already refers to Walser's writing

in 1917 is only an indirect hint, for example, about the word "Creole", which is hardly used any more today. A foreigner from the far south was still an exotic rarity, while Biel, a hundred years later, with almost 30 per cent of foreign residents, reflects Swiss average normality. On the other hand, the fourth and fifth encounters of the walker, the "regimental or staff doctor "as well as the rich "bric-a-brac vendor and rag collector " (Walser 2012, p. 15), refer to Switzerland during the First World with its officer corps and the war winners.

As the second lesson for today comes to an end, I conclude with a reminder of the homework: on the one hand, today's analyzes are to be completed; on the other hand, all are to have a first revision or a second draft of their own walk text in the light of today's findings about what it means to "walser". These revised texts should be brought along as print-outs next time.

8 September:

Presentation of examples with a personal "tonality" and copy amendments

Because of an exchange of lessons, three weeks have elapsed since we saw each other. After all, the students have been mailed the first addition to our ongoing dossier, which also contained the instructions from the last time.

First, I give the class a few clues on the portfolio. It should not only contain "fictitious" material, that is, the different versions of their own walk text, but also "find" in connection with Walser. So, for example, a brochure of the Robert Walser Center in Berne at Marktgasse 45 (www.robertwalser.ch) or the (also retroactive) photos of the stations of our walk etc. I show the class first my own gray portfolio with the initial draft of my walk text (still without built-in photos) as well as a brochure of this kind, and that I expected further material this afternoon because I had – together with a colleague – organized the yearly teacher tour of our department with the topic: The walk with Robert Walser in Biel (See picture in box).

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BME-Lehrpersonen-Ausflug vom Samstag, 8. September 2012

Spaziergang mit Robert Walser durch Biel

Wann?	Wo?	Was?
14.13 ab	Bern Bahnhof	Fahrt nach Biel
14.45	Robert Walser-Platz, Biel	Besammlung
15.15	Seeland-Gymnasium	Besuch von Spaziergänger Walser
15.30	Draussen	Eigener Spaziergang
16.00	Seeland-Gymnasium	Eigener Spaziergang auf Papier
17.00	Vorstadt und Altstadt Biel	Literarischer Spaziergang zu Walsers biographischen Stationen
18.30	Pavillon	Abschluss des Spaziergangs mit Walser
19.00	Rest. Arcade	Abendessen
Später		Rückkehr individuell

Das Programm ist wetterunabhängig. Bei Regengefahr bitte Schirme und gutes Schuhwerk dabeihaben.

Ich melde mich an für den BME-Lehrpersonen-Ausflug vom 8. September 2012:

"To Walser, how does that work?" Our leading question, which is also quoted in the dossier, may again be the guide on our blackboard. This time, we organize in groups of three to four people and present our walk texts in these groups. The goal in the first lesson is to find examples of Walser's "tonality" in our own texts and to present best examples on large A3 paper sheets. I join Martina and Valentina and give them the first draft of my walk text for critical reading. It turns out that practically all of us find passages, sentences or expressions in the texts which can be assigned to the Walser style, because Walser's way to write seems to have something contagious. We do not care at first on which level (phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax) our Walser bloomers are to be settled; our first ambition is to find the phenomena themselves.

Because we had all been surprised by the rain on our walk, there was an abundance of this topic in the sentences, which were finally to be read on the suspended A3 posters. Here are some examples:

"Water could be heard everywhere. It streamed, dripped and splashed." (Jessika)

"Water drops drip off my umbrella and thus create a fascinating melody." (Michael)

"With the raincoat, I exchange the water shower for a sound shower." (Rafael)

"But enough rain, that my clothes would not dryly follow me back to this place." (Melanie)

In addition, there were further examples of interfaces in the transition from description to thought:

"Through my brain convulsions, the proverb whispered:" (Valentina)

"... a gleam of hope crept into my dark thoughts." (Martina)

"On the right, there are now allotment gardens. A lot more gardens. Longing outcry of the citydwellers for nature." (Franziska)

"Pushing empty thoughts before me and at the same time soaking up the mood of this afternoon, I strolled towards the junk store." (Michelle)

At home I copy all the examples from the posters and put them in the ongoing dossier, so that the students can continue to work with them. The same is true of our next exercise on text supplementation, which was initiated by a student's intervention. Actually, I did not want to control "walk" texts in their design stage. Sergej nevertheless showed me his first text draft with the question whether it sufficed (quantitatively). Before we were able to investigate the montage principle of Walser's "The Walk," I wanted to encourage the students to include supplementary additions in their texts with aspects that are all contained in Walser's text, but which are still missing in our own. In the next lesson, the following 10 <posts> were attached to our classroom window (box) and suggested that at least two of these ten suggestions should be added to complement our walk texts.

<i>Post 1</i> The first-person narrator reflects on himself during his walk.	<i>Post 6</i> What the first-person narrator thinks about walking, but didn't dare to say yet.
<i>Post 2</i> A character of the story pipes up and addresses himself to the walker.	<i>Post 7</i> The first-person narrator announces what possibly won't come.
<i>Post 3</i> What the first-person narrator forgets to tell us on his walk of thoughts.	<i>Post 8</i> The first-person narrator gives thoughts to walking and writing.
<i>Post 4</i> The first-person narrator is lost musing.	<i>Post 9</i> The first-person narrator thinks about today's Bern.
<i>Post 5</i> The first-person narrator encounters an imaginary figure.	<i>Post 10</i> The first-person narrator addresses the reader.

Which additions my students chose cannot be taken from my overview; I can only report that I have expanded my own text by a section on the aspects on posts 4 and 8. Here is the section where my narrator sinks into dreams:

"(...) The poster of a bed and mattress store, which promotes Bico of Switzerland, is nearly as queer. A blue night view of the Monte Brè and Lake Lugano fill a whole window, and a signboard with pink writing on light green, attached to the flower box grid, invites you to visit the mattress store with <OPEN>. Yes, if you could simply lie down and test your sleep?

I would be quite tired already. To forget everything and to dawn into the other land on the test mattress? This one is more populated by desires and fears than the rain space I would escape. I would dream of a house – and it is always the same, an enchanted one. The rooms are large and I feel lost in them, not snuggly. And now there are always disasters to be expected, if people should appear in my dream house. When I'd wake up, often also startled, I always know immediately what I dreamed of quite a bit earlier – something like a bad taste remains on my tongue.

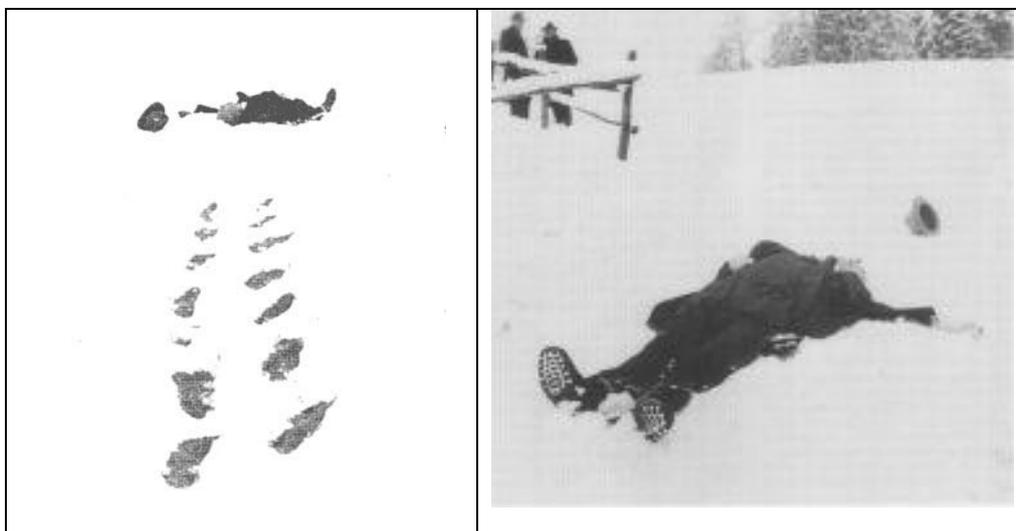
Let's rather return from the dreamy to the rainy season. (...) »

15 September:

Searching for tracks in Biel and Bern - and new things about walser

As always with live teaching, the designed lessons change during the staging. This for two reasons: On the one hand, I had planned the search for Walser's footprints in Biel and Bern, i.e. to go on the literature walk this afternoon in Bern's inner city. In the meantime, however, I was able to offer a guided tour to the class after a visit to the Robert Walser Center, which met with great interest. However, we found a suitable date only after the autumn holidays, on October 20th. On the other hand, during my research in preparation for the walk to Walser places in Bern I found a very interesting letter document from Walser, which could contribute to our inquiring question: to walser, how does that work?

This leading question was once again on the blackboard as we began our search today. The class had already received the short biography of Walser from the Website of the Robert Walser Center in the dossier of the third semester; but I distributed it again today, together with the brochure of the Walser Center, which offers a map of Walser's many addresses in Bern. With this material it was possible for us to track Walser's "life nomadisme" locally and in its time. We put the 25 living places in a list next to the 16 addresses Walser claimed in his Bernese period between 1921 and 1933 (see pdf materials). I reminded the class of the police photos of Walser's death on December 25, 1956, which we had already looked at in the dossier of the third semester:



Walser died at the age of 78 on a snow walk. What was this person whose walker in the "walk" uttered the radical sentence: "Without walking I would be dead"? (Walser, 2012, p. 60) We cannot discuss this issue today, but it is one of the topics for the announced final essay that the class has to write during the holidays and which will then be part of the portfolio.

In preparation for our literary walk in Bern, at the end of the first lesson, I showed the class the historical and the modern city map of Biel, where Walser's "walk" can be traced, and which stations we had visited on our literature walk with our teachers' colleagues a week ago.

In the second lesson, we return to Walser's poetics. Is it perhaps more complex than we thought so far? We want to pursue this complexity with two exercises. Our question: "To walser, how does that work? is still on the blackboard. We repeat the double response, which emerges from Walser's "Walk" text itself. Melanie answers for the class: Walser's procedure is:

1. To go out for a walk and collect impressions,
2. To return home and repeat the same walk on the paper. And this procedure, I comment, is so concise and plausible that we can also do it. We can immediately "walser". Or not?

What we had practiced with our <montage> a week ago, to add (also later) parts to our texts is something Walser does as well. A more precise reading of his prose piece shows that Walser's narrator distinguishes the text walk from the actual walk. There are many passages where the narrator comes to the organization of the text walk. The order for the first exercise is therefore: *Find three such passages and record the reference!*

After ten minutes, we are allowed to enter the harvest. A first passage is already to be found on the second page, when the first-person narrator says: "I catch a glimpse of a bookseller along with a book shop; likewise soon, as I guess and observe, a bakery with gold lettering comes in for a mention." (Walser, 2012, p. 15). The above-mentioned adventures with the bookseller and the bakery, however, come only after one respectively eight pages, and the visit in the bank is interspersed.

The announcement of lunch at Frau Aebi (ibid., P. 15/16) is quite striking. The walker is not yet with her, but the narrator merely asks "But when shall I come at last to the well-earned banquet with my Frau Aebi?" (ibid., p. 35).

This will only be 10 pages later, after he has announced the railroad crossing, which he will see only 20 pages later, putting there the organizing remark: "After many a bravely endured adventures, and after more or less victoriously overwhelming many an obstacle, I come at last to the long-since forecast railway crossing." (ibid., p. 65)

These three paragraphs, and many other remarks – someone also mentions the self-irony of the narrator, who reprimands the author – show that the narrated walk is clearly distinguished from the actual one. Yes, even more: Walser highlights the subsequent structuring of the written walk – he wants us to notice the assembling character of the text at any time.

Cf. for example, the passage: "The writer is nonetheless very humbly asked to be a bit careful to avoid jokes as well as other superfluosnesses. It is hoped that he understands this, once and for all." (ibid., p. 16)

The second lesson of our last lesson concerns "To be precise about the origination of an essay", as Walser himself formulated it. To "walser" also includes the look at the actual, the technical side of his writing process, the class reads on our present handout. As is well known, Robert Walser wrote his texts with the pen. He was a real calligrapher, as the many preserved manuscripts and letters show. However, he has also left quite a few works in his pencil writing – today known as the so-called micrograms. The connection between his pencil work and the "fair copy" with the pen is reflected by Walser in an informative comment in a letter to the journalist, author and editor of the magazine "Neue Schweizer

Rundschau", Max Rychner (1897-1965) of 20 June 1927:

«I mentioned the term brouillon with which I have told you a whole story of creation and life, for you are to know, sir, that about ten years ago I began to sketch everything that I produce, shyly and devoutly, with my pencil, as a result of which the process of writing naturally experienced a sluggishness going almost into the colossal. I owe the pencil system, which is entangled with a subsequent office-like copying system, true torment, but this torment taught me patience, so that I have become an artist in patience ... You might perhaps find ridiculous to be so precise about the origination of an essay. For me, however, the pencillery has a significance. For, for the author of these lines there was a time when he horribly, terribly hated the feather.... And in order to rid himself of this nibbing weariness, he began to play around with his pencil, drawing, fiddling. For me the pencil helped to get better playing, versing; it seemed to me that the writer's passion revived anew. I can assure you that I have experienced a real collapse of my hand with the feather (this started in Berlin already), a kind of spasm from whose clamps I slowly and painfully freed myself on the pencil path. An impotence, a spasm, a dullness are always something bodily and at the same time of the soul. So there was for me a time of disruption, which reflected, as it were, in the handwriting, in its dissolution, and when I was copying from the pencil area, I learned to write again – like a boy.»

Bernhard Echte (ed.): Robert Walser. Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2008, p. 384-85

After everybody had studied this passage of the letter, five minutes remained for their own notes on the consequences of this information from Walser for our own inscription exercises, that is, for our following the Walser method. The most creative answer I would get in the portfolio of Imma: She wrote her own walk-text first with pencil as a microgram! Walser's micrograms – also a later discovery when visiting the Robert Walser Center – had a great and lasting fascination for many students. How this element could be used for future stagings of the Lessons will hopefully be the subject of further discussion.

By handing out the topics for the homework essays (see box), which was to be written during the autumn holidays and which would be part of the portfolio after the correction, I dismissed the class this Saturday.

Topics Home Essay

1. Essayist writing: My way to Walser

Describe in an essay how and how far you have found access to Walser, what you think of the method of actual and literary walking, what experiences you have made with your own walk. Put your attempts to make literature alive in this way also in relation to your general relationship to literature. Would this method also apply to other authors and other works?

Take the topic (My way to Walser) as a heading and put a title expressing your results.

2. Argumental Writing: To walser, how does that work?

Reflect in our essay our ways through the staging Lessons, starting from the above question. Ask yourself what you knew about Walser and his "Walk" text before, and what you have now gained from the knowledge about him and the experiences with his literature. Try to make your argument intelligible to someone who knows neither Walser nor Walser's work, but also does not know what a staging Lessons is.

Take the topic (To walser, how does that work?) as a heading and put a title expressing your results.

3. Interpreting Writing: "Without walking, I would be dead."

« (.....)

For all these I hope convincing reasons, most honored sir, I would request you kindly to overlook all the increases in taxation which you have communicated to me, and in God's name to set your rate of taxation in my case at as low a level as possible."

The superintendent or inspector of taxes said: "But you're always to be seen out for a walk!"

"Walk," was my answer, "I definitely must, to invigorate myself and to maintain contact with the living world, without perceiving which I could neither write the half of one more single word, nor produce a poem in verse or prose. Without walking, I would be dead, and would have long since been forced to abandon my profession, which I love passionately. Also, without walking and gathering reports, I would not be able to render the tiniest report, nor to produce an essay, let alone a story. Without walking, I would be able to collect neither observations nor studies. Such a clever, enlightened man as you will understand this at once.

"On a far-wandering walk a thousand usable thoughts occur to me, while shut in at home, I would lamentably wither and dry up. Walking is for me not only healthy, it is also of service – not only lovely, but also useful. A walk advances me professionally, but also provides me at the same time with amusement; it comforts, delights, and refreshes me, is a pleasure for me, but also has the peculiarity that it spurs me on and allures me to further creation, since it offers me as material numerous more or less significant objectivities upon which I can later work industriously at home.

Every walk is filled with phenomena valuable to see and feel. A pleasant walk most often veritably teems with imageries, living poems, attractive objects, natural beauties, be they ever so small. The lore of nature and the lore of the country are revealed, charming and graceful, to the sense and eyes of the observant walker, who must of course walk not with downcast but with open, unclouded eyes, if he desires the lovely significance and the broad, noble idea of the walk to dawn on him.

Interpret the whole text with regard to its poetics (its making), starting from the quoted passage from Robert Walser's "The Walk", also with regard to the author and to his time. Also show what the text, the author and this kind of writing has brought you (own walk text!).

Take the topic (Without walking, I would be dead) as a heading and put a title expressing your results.



The close of the Staging Lessons was crowned by a visit to the Robert Walser Center in Bern: a workshop in front of the wall with translations of Walser's texts in all world languages.

Picture: Theres Kuhn

October 20:

Visit to the Robert Walser Center

In the beginning I had planned a literary walk to selected Walser sites in the city of Berne – the counterpart to the city walk in the 2009 staging of the Lessons in Biel. The final result was a visit, a visit and a highly interesting seminar in the Robert Walser Center Bern, directed by Reto Sorg. About a third of the class was able to clear the way this Saturday afternoon, and many others expressed their regret that they could not be there. The introduction to the topics by the director of

the Center, the topic of the reputation and the importance of Walser today, the inspection of the treasures of the Center, especially the many first editions and the translations, the pictures (including the original of Karl Walsers robber portrait of his brother Robert of 1894) and the micrograms of the ‘Robber’ novel were an excellent addition to our efforts to understand the phenomenon of Robert Walser. We were able to assure ourselves in the discussion with Reto Sorg that our approach to the teaching subject <Robert Walser> by the exemplary "walk" text is also covered by the latest research, so that we are on the right didactic course with our "walser" method. Walser’s second stay in Biel and his years in Bern, the epoch of the <Stückli> prose before Walser fell silent, were in retrospect his most productive time. And walking (not the urban strolling!), a way of moving in the (rural) 19th century, is made into a literary mode of production exclusively by Walser – and it is a topic *and* the object of reflection in his text "The Walk".

A new aspect for everybody was the discovery, how attractive Walser is as a radical modern artist for today's art creators; the small but fine exhibition of works by the Swiss photographer Robert Frank, born in 1924, entitled "Distant Closeness, a Tribute to Robert Walser" which the students were able to look at, is one element of evidence for that.

To which extent my students could profit from our visit to the Walser Center, became clear to me only when I collected their portfolios. I gained the impression that quite a few students had exchanged their impressions and that the website of the Center was used intensively by many.

November 17:

The harvest

Already while reviewing the first essays, I was astonished and positively surprised. Many of the texts reflected the serious efforts of the students to deepen the topic and also offered self-critical reflections and honest location determinations, very often as actual conversions to literature. Here are three excerpts from three students which may speak for themselves:

"This is how Walser can translate the lively, easy step of the walker through his own walking experience. When reading, one finds oneself in motion. One goes and lives with and this happens mainly by the continuous scene change. The text develops synchronously with the narrator. Narration time and narrated time achieve an almost complete coverage. Through this step-by-step story, one is constantly stepping forward, looking at what still comes.

All in all, the profound discussion with Walser and our occupation with his work "The Walk", have prompted me to pay more and more attention to my choice of words, and to replace frequently used terms with extraordinary and creative ones. Above all was I impressed by the fact that Walser certainly weighed his words and so, in my opinion, sounds exalted and fresh at the same time.

What has always stopped me, however, is the comparison between the author and the first-person narrator. This difference between what is being told and what Walser could have actually experienced is almost unrecognizable. One could interpret his books, including "The Walk", as a kind of self-presentation, as the content of his life and the reproduction of his life-knowledge. But the question remains: Should one?" (Chantal)

"Suddenly, I was really enjoying reading Robert Walser's "The Walk". It is fascinating to see how he turns a normal, not spectacular, small everyday occurrence into one or even several pages with exciting, colorful, captivating and simply impressive literature. When I learned that Robert Walser had moved many times, he had definitely won my sympathy. Perhaps it was an inner disturbance that drove him to a permanent move, or perhaps it was only the fact that he certainly was not one of the rich, and that itinerancy was still not customary at that time. These moves gave him the opportunity to travel, to see and discover new things. Robert Walser was perhaps a similar discoverer spirit as I am: I have found my way to him, running or walking. " (Elianne)

"Even though I do not like to admit it to myself, but Walser has dyed on me. I even notice it at this moment, when I write this sentence. I notice it in the form of a voice in my head that attempts to try out new combinations of words, to describe things with unusual adjectives, and even question some topics almost philosophically. I believe that Walser has moved me and has opened my eyes to other literature. Because I've learned to look behind a story. To evaluate not only the action, but also the art of playing with the words and sometimes even misusing them. And yet to speak a universal language, which is important for many. I have cut off a great deal from Walser and take it with me on my literary way. Let's see how it molds me and how long it keeps me. " (Rafael)



The harvest in one picture: All Walser portfolios on my living room table

Picture: Stephan Schmidlin

Now, of course, I was curious about the walk texts of the students. I had seen only a few drafts prematurely, mostly during our text optimization exercises. Before I collected the portfolios from the class, I opened my own Walser folder and presented them eleven finds for a short time – it never hurts to go ahead with your own good example!

In addition to two new walk texts of my own (one each from Bern and Biel) and two from colleagues, fruits from the teachers’ excursion in Biel, together with my reflections (first essay topic), brochures and books, it also contained the table of contents as a plan for a book. Some of the students’ portfolios were at least as extensive as mine, they contained essays, brochures (many of the Walser path and the museum room in Herisau), scientific articles, bibliographies, own photos, etc. – and, of course, up to five versions of the always reworked walk texts.

Here again, from the great abundance, there are three examples with passages, which show the Walser method (“to walser”), but also that they developed personal style:

“The mission: a walk. I leave the schoolroom over the stone steps of the BME school house with a few other classmates. During the descent of the steps, I was accompanied by a cheerful and amused chatter, as the consequence of the previous visit of the resurrected Robert Walser. The task is as simple as it is complex: following the reading to be observing, absorbing experiences, interweaving them and, as Walser so beautifully did, to put them on paper.

Leaving the school building, I notice the cloud-gray-shrouded sky, no bit of clear sky blue. Contours become milder, the wet veils filter out void and make it disappear. But what is important? Which are the impressions that will stay, which are consciously or unconsciously blanked? And which are those able to be individually transformed after the recording, in order to be reproduced on patient paper?

It’s not quite raining straight. But nevertheless with partly quite big drops, which are clapping directly in my face. An umbrella? I have none. I could put a hood, but what for? I like the rain. (...) “

(Michelle)

«(...)

«Passing the Coop store in the direction of the initially already mentioned junk store, I can already see from a distance something indefinable gray on the worn, dirty sofa that still seems to be for sale.

It was only when I approached that I recognized an old dog who was looking around uncertainly when I whistled. He feels discovered, so he hurriedly jumps from the sofa directly behind the legs of a lady, where he thinks to be safe. The lady is the mistress, middle fifty, the long gray hair tied together with a colorful cloth – something between old hippie and some Bern City mix. I assure the woman that it is not my intention to frighten her dog. Since I myself had a dog, nothing could be further from me than to frighten him. The woman replies with a deep, old, smoky voice; which is sympathetic as well as irritating, the dog peeking out slowly between her legs. She explains that the dog is already old and that she had saved him in Spain a few years ago to offer him a more beautiful life in Berne, Switzerland, far from any killing station. And now he sits or lies outside on the couch, silently observing passers-by, hoping not to be discovered himself, becoming one with the couch, quite passively. There I remember the iguanas that adjust their color to the surroundings, to camouflage themselves perfectly, and immediately I think of lizards in iridescent, rainbow-colored coats in the rainforest clinging to trees. I try to imagine the old gray dog in the rainbow country, but when I want

*to refresh my memory and look at him again, I hear the rain pounding on the blind and the reality has me again. A short conversation, no, only small talk with the woman, and I walk on.
(...)”*

(Melanie)

«(...)

Moved by great curiosity and compassion, I walk to this fairy creature. With my heart collected I say to her: "What a sad, inexplicable, and serious event makes weep such a pretty, tender, young, helpless, simple being?" And sit down beside her.

"Nothing," replies the little one. "It's all right," she confirms.

"I do not think so. But if you'd prefer to be alone, I'll disappear like an unwanted dove," I reply. Shortly she looks at me with her water-filled, slightly reddened, beautiful green eyes and grins very fine. Then I ask: "Now I am somewhat confused, what is there to grin suddenly? Do I have something on my head? Do I have a pear-shaped head that you are now grinning like that? "

"No," she says. "I had to laugh. Just ask myself how a dove occurred to you? These are not undesirable?"

"I thought of a small Italian village. There the doves are hated and get eaten because of their increased occurrence and because of their disturbing influence on the village. But now back to your sad look. What unhappy and sad thing did you have to experience?" I asked again.

Uncertain and yet enthusiastic about my openness, she confessed: "My heart and soul have been robbed, torn, broken, and kicked by feet. I have lost the most important and so far only man in my life. For many years I shared with him, we have experienced good and bad times together. Of course, we had ups and downs in our relationship, but never had I had a feeling that he would not love me anymore. What has just happened?" And she begins to cry.

One tear after another runs down her delicate and pretty face. This sight awakens in me this unfulfilled wish which I mentioned at the beginning of the walk. Unfulfilled or broken love is basically the same.

My thoughts are at once interrupted by her hate-filled body language. She gets up and says: "How can you be with a person for so many years and suddenly he falls in love with another woman? It was only because of this stupid, seemingly better, prettier, slimmer and naturally younger woman that this long-lasting relationship had to end. I still cannot believe it. We got to know each other at 16, we met several times, fell in love instantly like a lightning bolt, which hits quickly, violently and recklessly. Ten years of relationship and now it's over. Without him I cannot live. I cannot, no, I cannot do it with my best will," she says with a loud, desperate, sobbing voice. She cries so loud that she makes my compassion so strong that I also start to cry. I say with an insecure and almost low voice: "Come, little one, you're still young and pretty, it cannot be that such a wonderful young lady like you must suffer so hard. Just because of a man who has not deserved you." Unfortunately, I cannot get anything wiser out of my mouth as my unfulfilled desire brings me into the same feeling as this human being. Thoughtfully, I sit next to her and think, what can I say? Should I say anything at all? I look at her again and suddenly I feel like embracing her. I take her into my arms. At this moment we are silent. After this intense, sensitive, warm and soothing hug, she looks at me and says, "Thank you! Thank

you for being there and just listening. This embrace was now the most precious, the best, the strongest and the most encouraging thing you could give me. I carry this feeling to the end of my days. I would now like to pass on this love and warmth to the wide world. All suffering people who are there should be allowed to experience a warm and honest feeling like this embrace once in a lifetime. That's why I'll take care of it now." She gets up and says good-bye to me. (...)"

(Valentina)

In the new year, before the end of the semester, I conducted a quarter-hour evaluation session with every single student on their portfolio and on the staging Lessons – and I was delighted to be able to make a great compliment for their excellent learning skills. All of them shared the impression that we had penetrated a good deal further into the secret of literature. And this with a modern author who initially doesn't fascinate us, but irritates or even disturbs us.