

OPPRESSIVE LIGHT

SELECTED POEMS BY
ROBERT WALSER

Translated and Edited by
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For Nicole, Fiona, and Giacomo.

For James Reidel.

And for Thomas “T-Man” Daniel Leavines.

—DP

INTRODUCTION

To paraphrase Musil's famous aphorism regarding Reason, the path of Robert Walser's poetry "is the path of a cloud" in the rarified air of a solitary life, adrift in an evil century, moving with the lightness of an accomplished soul. One enters his language to be enveloped in gentle agonies, dark praise, rays of bright pleasure and the tumult of recognitions regarding selfhood and the fog of self, an *ich ohne ich*. This lyric cloud forms at the beginning of his writing life, with the earliest poem "Im Bureau," wherein the poet, as a "miserable clerk," is "made humble," his language floating across the moon, a "wound of night."

As a young man, Walser left his birthplace of Biel/Bienne, Switzerland, for Stuttgart, Germany, where, having failed his first audition as an actor, he resolved to become a poet, earning his living as a clerk moving from job to job before returning to Switzerland, on foot, to continue in clerical positions. After fulfilling his military obligations, he entered the employ of a failed inventor, and then trained as a servant, working as a butler in a castle in Upper Silesia. In 1905, he moved to Berlin to join his brother, a painter of theater sets, and here, living frugally in rooming houses, he wrote his first three masterful novels, as well as short stories, sketches, 'dramolets' and feuilletons popular in magazines and newspapers of the day. He was accepted in literary circles and admired by Franz Kafka, Robert Musil and also Walter Benjamin, who wrote that in Walser's

sentences, “the idea that stumbles around . . . is a thief, a vagabond and a genius.” In these years, prose flowed fluently from his pen, in a script that was nearly calligraphic in its execution. The flâneur, the servant, the poet and salaried clerk moved as characters through his dreamscapes, anonymous and evanescent. His sentences seemed to cascade and vanish like veils of falling water upon rock. The late W. G. Sebald thought that Walser shared Gogol’s secret of “utter superfluity . . . the awful provisionality of their respective existences, the prismatic mood swings, the sense of panic, the wonderfully capricious humor steeped at the same time in blackest heartache, the endless scraps of paper and, of course, the invention of a whole populace of lost souls, a ceaseless masquerade for the purpose of autobiographical mystification.”

Walser’s life swerves here, through a return to Switzerland, military service, the loss of his father, a brother’s suicide, periods of prodigious writing and self-disparagement, poverty and isolation, and finally the closing of his “little prose-piece workshop.” A crippling cramp in his writing hand forced him then to invent what he called “the pencil method,”—writing in pencil on paper scraps, in a miniscule and, for years, indecipherable hand of “tiny, antlike markings” that his friend, Carl Seelig, assumed was a secret code.

The sequence is unclear to me, but it seems that after periods of drinking and depression, his sister urged him to enter a mental sanatorium in Waldau, and although doctors couldn’t agree on a diagnosis, finally settling on schizophrenia, he would live incarcerated in mental hospitals in Waldau and later Herisau for a quarter of a century, until his death. He spent his days at menial tasks such as sorting beans and making paper bags; he read magazines and took long walks, especially at night. He declined a room of his own, choosing to sleep in the asylum barracks. Although he showed no outward signs of mental illness, he refused to live in the world again, and when asked by a visitor about his writing, he famously answered: “I’m not here to write, I’m here to be mad.”

The later poems are dated from 1924 to 1933, spanning the years

of his confinement. The last of them had to have been written “from the pencil area,” a provisional *brouillon* of light drafts that freed his hand and didn’t at all resemble his past experience of sitting “for hours bent over a single word that has to take the long slow route from brain to paper.” The penciled script allowed him, according to J. M. Coetzee, “the purposeful, uninterrupted, yet dreamy hand movement that had become indispensable to his creative mood.” In the asylum, he never felt himself to be in a hurry. The asylum walls and also his long walks on the grounds and beyond afforded him solitude, and in the barracks and wards, he found companionship of the sort he could bear. “I would wish it on no one to be me,” he wrote, “Only I am capable of bearing myself. To know so much, to have seen so much, and/ To say nothing, just about nothing.”

The late poems include “To Georg Trakl,” the Austrian poet who would have been Walser’s contemporary, and with whom he shared affinities, lyric and experiential, having to do with literary gifts and mental fragility, who shared a sense of apartness on earth, and who was also hospitalized (in Krakow) for a mental breakdown in the aftermath of attending to ninety wounded soldiers in Galicia whose lives he could not save. Trakl’s friend, Ludwig von Ficker, attempted to intercede on his behalf and also preserved his work, just as Walser’s friend Carl Seelig would later do. They shared a radiant awareness of nature, the brevity of conscious life, and the instability of selfhood. Of reading Trakl’s work, Walser wrote to the poet: “I found myself in the chasm of reading,/ in the pursuit of your being’s beauty,” and later, “I dedicate this speech, playfully, dreamlike/ to your genius.” And in conclusion, “When I read your poems/ I feel as if/ I’m being driven away by a magnificent chaise.”

Throughout the poems, early and late, we find the vocation announced, to which Walser would devote his life: the spiritual and later corporeal work of vanishing from the world. This is everywhere available in the lyrics: “They abandoned me, so I learned to forget myself/ which allowed me to bathe in my inspired soul.” And later in the same poem: “Because they didn’t want to know me, I became

self-aware.” In another he is “enchanted/ by the idea that I’ve been forgotten.” Of the place in which he has vanished, he writes “I only know that it’s quiet here,/ stripped of all needs and doings,/ here it feels good, here I can rest,/ for no time measures my time.” With untold suffering behind him perhaps, in the interstices of his recorded life, he seems to write his way toward a liminal state of non-attachment and hovering, weightless acceptance: “The world is inside an hour,/ unaware, not needing anything,/ and, oh, I don’t always know/ where it rests and sleeps, my world.” His world is other-where, and he without it, and we emerge from reading his lyric art as a cloud would disperse in raw light, with unexpected clarity, having followed the poet’s footsteps to where he was found on Christmas Day in 1956, lying in the snow, his eyes open, his heart still, with snow on his shoulders and his soul loosed.

—Carolyn Forché

In “October” he advises us to *be
glad, be gentle and kind/ and patient.*

October, 2011

“I would wish it on no one to be me.
Only I am capable of bearing myself.
To know so much, to have seen so much, and
To say nothing, just about nothing.”

—RW

**OPPRESSIVE
LIGHT**

From
EARLY LYRICS
(1897-1912)

From
POEMS
(1909)

IM BUREAU

Der Mond blickt zu uns hinein,
er sieht mich als armen Kommiss
schmachten unter dem strengen Blick
meines Prinzipals.

Ich kratze verlegen am Hals.
Dauernden Lebenssonnenschein
kannte ich noch nie.
Mangel ist mein Geschick;
kratzen zu müssen am Hals
unter dem Blick des Prinzipals.

Der Mond ist die Wunde der Nacht,
Blutstropfen sind alle Sterne.
Ob ich dem blühenden Glück auch ferne,
ich bin dafür bescheiden gemacht.
Der Mond ist die Wunde der Nacht.

IN THE OFFICE

The moon peers in on us.
He sees me as a miserable clerk
languishing under the strict gaze
of my boss.
Embarrassed, I scratch my neck.
I've never known
life's lasting sunshine.
My flaw is my skill;
having to scratch my neck
under the boss's gaze.

The moon is the wound of night.
Every star is a blood drop.
Though far from the flower of luck,
I'm made humble for it.
The moon is the wound of night.

ABEND (I)

Schwarzgelb im Schnee vor mir leuchtet
ein Weg und geht unter Bäumen her.
Es ist Abend, und schwer
ist die Luft von Farben durchfeuchtet.

Die Bäume, unter denen ich gehe,
haben Äste wie Kinderhände;
sie flehen ohne Ende
unsäglich lieb, wenn ich stille stehe.

Ferne Gärten und Hecken
brennen in dunklem Wirrwarr,
und der glühende Himmel sieht angststarr,
wie die Kinderhände sich strecken.

EVENING (I)

In the snow before me a path glimmers
black-yellow and goes on beneath the trees.
It's evening, and the air is heavy
And damp with colors.

The trees beneath which I walk
have branches like children's hands;
they plead without end,
ineffably kind, when I stand still.

Distant gardens and hedges
burn in a dark mess,
and the glowing sky, rigid with fear,
sees how the children's hands are reaching.