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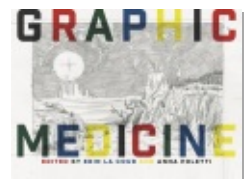
Outsider Writing: The Healing Art of Robert Walser

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OUTSIDER WRITING

The Healing Art of Robert Walser

KIENE BRILLENBURG WURTH

What happens when literary creativity is constrained? I do not have in mind the kind of playful constraints strategically chosen by the Dadaists or the Oulipo poets—analogue algorithms that have expanded the space of art and writing. Rather, I have in mind a mental or physical barrier that is externally imposed. I have in mind a suffering that many writers and academics have encountered at some point in their life: writer's block, or the painful inability to write. There is nothing to write about. Or the body refuses to write. There is a cramp, hernia, or inflammation that hurts and obstructs the flow. The hurt signals a limit to what the mind may have taken to be an infinite space—a space of thinking that writers and academics like to live in and that they feel is real and exciting and important. They disappear into this space, and create many wonderful things in it. But then something comes knocking at their door. It is life, or a body they left behind in their abstractions. This body is far more intelligent. It has archived layers of memories that the mind cannot access or control (Heller). So, the world of thinking and writing as pure construction breaks. It is nothing.

At some point in the 1920s, the body of the Swiss writer Robert Walser came knocking at his door. Writing literature with a pen, he had developed a cramp in his hand. The cramp was physical and mental, and paralyzing in both ways. Battling with a spasm

of my own, I became intrigued by Walser's cramp, especially by the remedy he developed for it. He started penciling texts in a miniaturized version of a medieval German script called *Kurrent*. Transcribed years after his death in 1956, these microscripts were mostly composed in mental institutions where Walser stayed for the last twenty-seven years of his life. Because of this lengthy stay, the scripts have often been approached as outsider art: an "other" art made by creators residing in institutions of care, outside the bounds of the art world (Cardinal, *Outsider Art*). Outsider art, as Cardinal explains, is a form of artistic expression that willingly or unwillingly shuns the "public sphere." Such art is "other" insofar as it is singular: it "can be highly idiosyncratic and secretive, and reflects the individual creator's attempt to construct a coherent, albeit strange, private world" ("Outsider Art" 1459). Outsider art is outside not because it springs from a mental condition, but because it has the power to *decondition our expectations about art*—to ask what is art, what is creativity?

Walser's microscripts can be considered outsider art—outsider writing—on many of Cardinal's grounds: they were self-invented, created in private, partly kept a secret, and they present the kind of "anti-conventionality" that outsider art is typically expected to display ("Outsider Art" 1460). The scripts are



Figure 1. Walser in Herisau, photograph taken by a nurse in 1944. © Keystone / Robert Walser-Stiftung Bern. Reproduced with permission.

unreadable with the bare eye in their original form, and the style can be off-putting at first sight: digressive, chaotic, and seemingly uncommunicative. Indeed, reading the scripts initially made me tired and impatient. Only later did I realize I was being educated to become a different kind of reader, one attuned to nothing—no substance, no coherence—rather than something. I also realized that “outsider writing” is but a partial fit for Walser’s late work. Focused on his tragic biography, critics since the 1970s have tried to unravel his graphic work by approaching it from narrow, medicalizing angles. While there is some ground in these approaches, I argue, it is more productive to consider the microscripts in terms of a spectrum between psychopathology and literary improvisation. There is room for both. This ambivalence marks the complexity and singularity of the scripts, and how they contribute to our understanding of graphic medicine.

In what follows, I first offer an overview of medical approaches to Walser’s work that have typically been focused on major depressive disorder and schizophrenia. Both dimensions, I point out, have been long related to creative accomplishment—which may well explain the persistent link between “madness” and genius in Walser’s posthumous reception. As I show, however, this link has obscured as much as it has revealed about Walser’s penciled work. I therefore propose to turn the tables. Medical approaches have reduced Walser’s late work to scientific records to deductively reach a psychiatric diagnosis; I show how this work teaches us to suspend judgment and expand our perception of literary creativity. It offers, I hope, a more productive perspective for medical professionals—one that tolerates cognitive uncertainty to better assess creative complexity.

I build my interpretive frame around a concept coined by Annie G. Rogers to approach art made by patients with a psychotic disorder: incandescent alphabets. The concept refers to art illuminating hallucinatory experiences, for which a new language needs to be invented. Indeed, the artwork *is* that language. My adaptation of the concept will stretch incandescence beyond its

psychopathological origin. Walser's microscripts, I show, illuminate less an alienating experience of the Other than a writerly attunement to what is present: the "now" we often fail to notice, yet for which Walser develops a distinct style. This style reshapes the literary as an art of the moment, compressed to a minimum. Nothing matters but this moment. That is what I call Walser's healing art: whatever he suffered from, it functioned as a barrier to creative breakthrough, and an opening to a new poetic space.

Two Clusters and Two Approaches

Since 1956, a long line of literary critics, psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts have tried to penetrate Walser's puzzling genius on the assumption that it was a genius related to issues of mental health. Why? Plagued by auditory hallucinations, and suffering from alcoholism, Walser was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1929. Upon his diagnosis, he was institutionalized in Waldau psychiatric clinic. Looking back, in conversations with his future biographer Carl Seelig, Walser suggested he had simply been burnt out (*Totgebrannt*) in 1929 (Seelig 24). Still, his sister Lisa had him moved to a closed asylum in Herisau in 1932 when the Waldau clinic reorganized and could no longer accommodate him.

Walser stayed in Herisau until his death in 1956, which came suddenly with a heart attack during one of his Sunday hikes. By then, he had not written for years. His dead body was found by young boys in the snow. Its picture taken by the magistrate marks a life spent walking (fig. 2).

Walser's institutionalization, his work, the seemingly illegible microscripts discovered after his death, and even this picture in the snow established the idea of the outsider writer in the 1950s and 60s: the writer in the madhouse fighting a lonely battle with his depression, his psychosis, and his catatonia (Vannette 19–21). Though Walser was ignored during his life, this frame would set the terms for his posthumous critical acclaim. Max Brod, for one, called him sick but wise on the back jacket for Carl Seelig's

memoirs, promoting Walser's vulnerability as a special kind of literary knowledge that allowed for deep insights and striking judgments (Vannette 19–21).

It may have been the way to market Walser's inaccessible style, but was framing him as an outsider artist justified? I cannot answer this question here in full, but I will test a few typical instances of symptomatic readings of Walser's writings: readings for latent clues of illness or suffering. On the whole, such readings have



Figure 2. A picture of "the Author" after his fatal heart attack, 1956. © Keystone / Robert Walser-Stiftung Bern. Reproduced with permission.

focused on two clusters of conditions, which have long been connected to creative talent in psychological/psychiatric research, so that they pair well with ideas of genius: affective mood disorders—now called dimensions—and the schizophrenia spectrum. I consider these two clusters below, showing how they have been deployed as interpretive frames for Walser's writings. Since an extensive review of the literature is beyond my aim and scope here, I zoom in on a few exemplary cases. I then turn to the microscripts, to see if this incandescent writing might be reassessed in terms of a heightened spiritual sensitivity.

Affective Mood Continuum: Walser's Walks

"Affective mood continuum" refers to a cluster of conditions or dimensions that includes severe depression, dysthymic and seasonal divergence, as well as bipolar dimension. These conditions share a more or less severe change in mood, for a longer or shorter period. Kay Redfield Jamison and others have laid bare the deep connection between dimensions in this continuum and creativity (Rothenberg; Barrantes-Vidal; Goodwin and Jamison; Johnson et al.). In the last decades, psychiatrists have tried to assess which types of psychosis—affective or schizophrenic dimensions—account for creative accomplishment.¹ In this section, I focus on the former, though a rigid distinction between the two no longer holds in present-day psychiatry: schizophrenic dimensions can also be affective.

Walser's posthumous reception as a writer can be divided into critics pathologizing and depathologizing him, or considering him as a borderline case between (what is considered to be) normalcy and divergence from such normalcy (Vannette). Thus, for one, based on the scarce biographical evidence, Viktoria Lyons and Michael Fitzgerald assert that "there is no doubt that Robert Walser suffered from depression, although the onset of his depression is very hard to determine" (302). Their argument is based on

doctor's reports, family history, and Walser's writings themselves. These writings have long been considered autobiographical, as Walser once declared all of his work to be part of a life-long life-writing project (Greven, *Der Roman*). The question still remains: as life writings, can these writings be reduced to signs or proof of a condition?

In the decades after Walser's death, critics have typically been reading for such signs. A brief look at the critical reception of Walser's now famous novella *Der Spaziergang* (1917) shows us how the framework of a psychopathology has been written *in* his work, or indeed, how this work has been critically *written as* a psychopathology. First translated into English as "The Walk" by Christopher Middleton in 1955,² *Der Spaziergang* is a self-reflexive tale about a writer suffering from writer's block. He rushes out of his study to take a walk, encounters different scenes in town and nature, and decides to write about it. This writer sets out gayly, fully immersed in the present moment as he passes through nature. Towards the end, his mood grows darker. Probably out of "weariness," he becomes entangled in negative thinking. His inner judge takes over: "Self-reproof touched me from behind my back and stood before me in my way. Certain evil memories took hold of me. Accusations of all sorts that I directed toward myself made my heart a burden to me" (*The Walk* 87). Self-reproof blocks him as repressed feelings capture his heart, showing themselves to be a more substantial cause of suffering and discontent than any external one. Shortly after, he also has melancholic but realistic thoughts about the fate of humans in life: they die and end up in the soil of the earth (88).

Some of Walser's most influential readers have seen the weariness and self-reproaching thoughts, the sense of meaninglessness, the melancholy and the darkness in this story as indicators of depression. Bernard Echte, for one, has used these indicators to consider the text as an "allegory of depression." According to Echte, the story consistently shapes depression as a metaphor for a lived

experience heavily felt, a journey into darkness. But whose depression is this? Walser's, as he configures his condition in a crafted, narrative work? Or a paper-based persona (Bebe)? The logical answer is the latter: a self as mediated through narrative that detachedly observes a past change of mood when self-reproach kicked in during a walk. Could this narratological distance be read as an indicator of the affective disconnect typical of depression; of experiencing the self as other and not being able to feel one's feelings? Or is it the ironic style of a modernist who sees the limits of realism (Byrne)? It could be either or both—the ironic style as a depressive's style—but whatever we choose we should be mindful of the gap between writer, implied author, and persona: should this story be about “Walser” then he is never more than a persona *collected or inferred by the reader* (Howe; Howes).

Confusing the three categories (writer, implied author, persona) gets us into the kind of trouble Susan Sontag exemplifies when she frames “The Walk” in the landscape of depression in her foreword to the 1982 edition of *Selected Stories*. The foreword, “Walser's Voice,” was a first introduction to Walser for many American and English-speaking readers. Reproduced in the October issue of *Vogue* (1982), it would acquire legendary status, just as it would give Walser a legendary status of his own: the peripheral, heart-breaking genius with a mental condition. At that time, Elio Fröhlich and Peter Hamm's *Robert Walser: Leben und Werk in Daten und Bildern* (1980) had recently appeared with reprinted reports of Walser's doctors. Sontag presented Walser accordingly as a writer-sufferer. Stories like “The Walk,” she argued, bear the imprint of a creativity generated by a “depressive temperament”:

Walser's life illustrates the restlessness of one kind of depressive temperament: he had the depressive's fascination with stasis, and with the way time distends, is consumed; and spent much of his life obsessively turning time into space: his walks. His work plays with the depressive's appalled vision of endlessness: it is all voice—musing, conversing, rambling, running on. (viii)

Sontag was probably attracted to Walser because his work lent itself well to a reading against interpretation. The rich surface, the twists and turns defying a coherent narrative, the beauty of tactile, poetic observations, and the minimal presence of plots enabled a critical stance of affect instead of penetration. But as an avid surface reader, Sontag misses quite a lot when she judges Walser's texts to be “all voice.” Her reading is oddly paranoid (or: symptomatic) here, determined from the start by a frame of “depression and terror.”³ She makes Walser's voice appear as an extension of a condition, shrinking his digressive, ironic style to an “appalled vision of endlessness” and the temporal dysfunction of patients with depression.⁴

Like Echte, in other words, Sontag diagnoses Walser—to borrow a phrase from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—“in terms of lack” (“Interlude, Pedagogic” 23). Sontag may well have done so because she battled with depression herself. Half or more of what critics say is projection—which is why reading literary criticism can be so interesting and entertaining. Elias Canetti, for that matter, diagnosed Walser as a modernist troubled by existential fears beneath a surface of cheerful, precise observation (289). I resist reading Walser merely as a “subject of privation” here, just as Sedgwick has resisted framing “outsider” artist Judith Scott in terms of such privation (24). I see his personae as walkers on a spiritual path, in so far as the spiritual means an “affective register” of embodied cognition: a sensitivity to the entanglement of self and no-self, human and nonhuman beings, living beings and nonliving elements, and of existence—including what we think of as “self”—as impermanence (Nhat Hanh; Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism” 154). This sensitivity typically emerges in the cheerful surfaces that critics like Canetti (and many others) have tried to uproot for signs of pathology in *The Walk*: “I fell away from the surface, down into the depths, which I recognized to be all that was good. . . . I was no longer myself, I was another, yet it was on this account that I became properly myself” (67–68). This writer feels love, and partaking of a

A LITTLE RAMBLE

I walked through the mountains today. The weather was damp, and the entire region was gray. But the road was soft and in places very clean. At first I had my coat on; soon, however, I pulled it off, folded it together, and laid it upon my arm. The walk on the wonderful road gave me more and ever more pleasure; first it went up and then descended again. The mountains were huge, they seemed to go around. The whole mountainous world appeared to me like an enormous theater. The road snuggled up splendidly to the mountainsides. Then I came down into a deep ravine, a river roared at my feet, a train rushed past me with magnificent white smoke. The road went through the ravine like a smooth white stream, and as I walked on, to me it was as if the narrow valley were bending and winding around itself. Gray clouds lay on the mountains as though that were their resting place. I met a young traveler with a rucksack on his back, who asked if I had seen two other young fellows. No, I said. Had I come here from very far? Yes, I said, and went farther on my way. Not a long time, and I saw and heard the two young wanderers pass by with music. A village was especially beautiful with humble dwellings set thickly under the white cliffs. I encountered a few carts, otherwise nothing, and I had seen some children on the highway. We don't need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much.

Robert Walser
1914

Figure 3. “A Little Ramble” from *Selected Stories* by Robert Walser; translated by Tom Whalen. Copyright © 1966, 1967, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975 by Verlag Helmut Kossodo. Translation copyright © 1960, 1964, 1968, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1982 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and by permission of Carcanet Press, Manchester, UK. All Rights Reserved.

“soul of the world,” being as much self (I) as no-self (“earth”) (67, 68). Zooming in on these passages, *The Walk* emerges as the lived experience of a journey into the cyclical nature of life and death, death and life, the self merely a temporary constellation in an ongoing process of transformation: this self as non-self, being as much dark earth as observing I.

Dominant, pathographic interpretations of Walser’s story, which transform Walser’s “The Walk” into “Walser’s walk,” show what happens when interpretive frames colonize written texts: they are robbed of their indeterminacy. As academic readers we have been trained so hard to distance ourselves from, instead of learning to live through, texts that it is safer to linger among critical frames than to step out onto the surface of experience. And experience, lived experience, is key to Walser’s writings. When his personae walk in nature, they feel connected, and they are right. They wake up, full of wonder, ready to be affected, after having been separated from themselves inside their rooms when writing does not come easily. With Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I would say these passages on walking and rambling offer a reparative stance—to the personae *and* to their readers: a positive, joyful, and receptively affective position that interrupts thinking (144).

Walser’s “Kleine Wanderung” (1914), translated in English as “A Little Ramble,” illustrates the point (fig. 3).⁵ Reading this road story, I imagine the mountains towering above, all around, the smell of smoked wood, grass, the fresh air when walking along a river. I see the precision of Walser’s writing, observing whatever comes along. I see the superfluity of me as a critic as I witness this narrator walking up and down the road, sensing the presence of the mountains, and running into a few people. “Walser” is also just that—a great evoker and weaver of words, a poet attuned to the present moment with a sensitivity and perceptiveness that lies beyond any psychopathology. I will keep this perceptiveness in mind for my discussion of Walser’s microscripts below.

Schizophrenia Spectrum: Incandescent Alphabets

Schizophrenia is a spectrum that has been defined differently in different times and places and psychiatric manuals. Once, it was classified under autism; now the schizophrenia spectrum is known as a set of psychotic disorders that destabilize our experience of and affective relation to ourselves and awareness of the world. For my reading of Walser's microscripts, it is not necessary to consider each of the dimensions on the spectrum here. All that needs to be noted is that delusions and hallucinations, excessive and often directionless thinking, divergences in perception and experience, disturbances in the relation between self and other, and self and self (self-presence) are key to the schizophrenia spectrum.⁶

As a psychotic disorder, schizophrenia has long been seen as a vector for creativity, and recently scholars have reemphasized the *cognitive* nature of the link between the two (Sass, *Madness and Modernism*).⁷ Creativity is a mode of thinking: an open, free, or associative, accelerated kind of thinking that is called "divergent" and subtended by "convergent" or bounded, purposeful thinking. In schizophrenia, patients think aimlessly, excessively—divergently. They can be hyper-reflexive or hyper-abstract, without getting anywhere, as their thoughts and ideas are constantly interrupted by new, other, alternative ones (Sass, "Romanticism"). As we encounter such thought processes almost as a rule in Walser's late work, critics have amply used it to debate the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Some of them (Partl et al.) have concluded beyond any doubt that Walser had schizophrenia, while others—in the 1970s, when psychoanalytic schools and currents in philosophy challenged the binary between mental illness and health—have attempted the opposite (Vannette 20–39). One way or another, a continuity between creativity and schizophrenia is outlined in Walser's reception, whether critics have reduced his works to *symptoms* of a dimension or whether they identify a *schizoid style* in his texts (Hiebel). Processes occurring in creative thinking have a

pathological counterpart in schizophrenia and vice versa (so that, for instance, the schizoid style is at once the modernist's voice of irony).

Another way of putting this is that Walser's *texts* materialize as a spectrum: as fields of ambiguity where creativity (divergence, difference, queerness, otherness) intertwines with or materializes as crafted patterns of pathology. We should not lose sight of the fact that Walser was, indeed, plagued by voices in the mid- and later 1920s before being admitted into Waldau (Gisi; Sauvat), yet neither should we lose sight of the fact that his work was composed with original, even radical poetic devices. His hyper-reflexivity is an aesthetic tool that may parallel schizophrenic thought processes and observational styles (Vannette 38–39; Sass and Parnas), but also a radical poetics of the signifier that gestures towards conceptual art and poststructuralism. Preferably we see both at the same time.

A concept coined by Annie G. Rogers for works made by artists in psychiatric institutions diagnosed with psychotic disorders will, I think, give substance to this double view: *incandescent alphabets*. "Incandescent" is a word that may ring familiar to modern readers of Walser, as it appears twice in Middleton's translation of his story "Kleist in Thun" (1913), which features Walser's rendering of the Romantic poet Heinrich von Kleist:

Below him lies the lake, as if it had been hurled down by the great hand of a god, incandescent with shades of yellow and red, its whole incandescence seems to glow up out of the water's depth. It is like a lake of fire. (*Selected Stories* 22)

Kleist looks at this lake as he senses his detachment from the world, his aloneness and unfeelingness towards that world. The dark sparkling lake, its incandescence, is perhaps a metaphor for the intensity of creative processes: the glowing "shades of yellow and red" that entrance but also grip a mind dedicated to "the entire

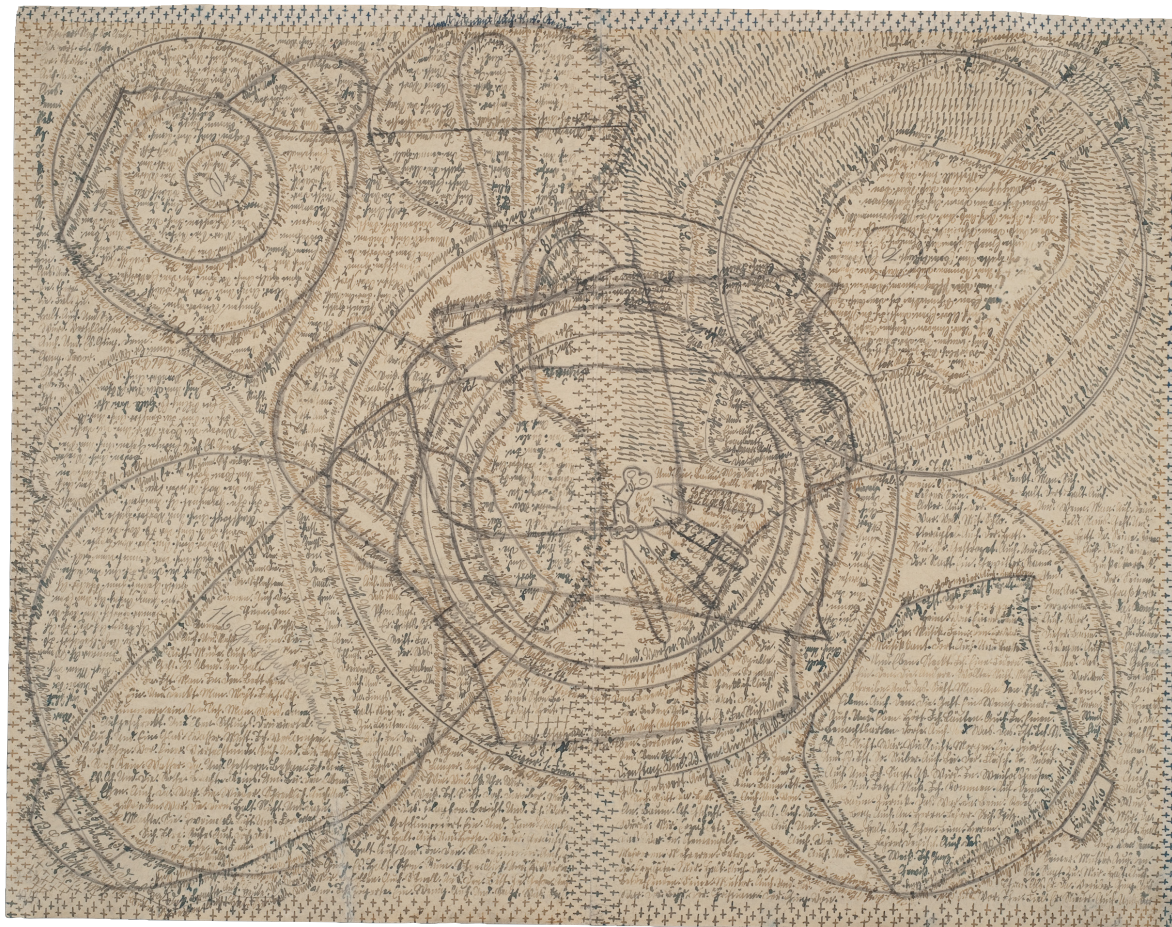


Figure 4. Barbara Suckfüll, untitled. Inv. no. 01955. © Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg. Reproduced with permission.

catastrophe of being a poet,” obsessively deleting what he creates “with a grimace” (23).⁸ Nothing is good enough when one aims for “the intangible, the incomprehensible” in language (22).

Rogers’s application of incandescence likewise bears on the incomprehensible: incandescent alphabets, she explains, reflect the position of one who lives “at the edge of the alphabet,” where language crumbles and needs to be reinvented (122).⁹ Potentially, this can be the position of a psychotic patient *and* a poet, a liminal position imposed *and* chosen. Incandescent alphabets, then, bear on writings illuminating experiences at the limits of language (or the symbolic order): the works Rogers has selected from the Prinzhorn Collection, as well as from experimental poets and artists she links to that collection, foreground an encounter that cannot be otherwise expressed.¹⁰ For Rogers, these encounters are not “limited to madness as an outcome,” but pertain to psychosis “as a structure” specific to creative thinking (105). Psychosis thus becomes a complex mental setup that Rogers—following Sass and Parnas—takes to underly creative accomplishment: it can go either way, or be both. The structure is thus a potentiality, the pattern for a way of thinking, seeing, hearing, or touching. Where psychosis does indeed materialize, a derailed consciousness may cause aspects of the self to be experienced as radically alien: encounters with the Other that epitomize psychotic episodes. Such aspects, Rogers explains, may be “vivid and present, but not part of one’s own experience,” or rather, they are present and intensely felt *because* they are externalized parts of the self that are normally tacit but suddenly come into focus (164). Conversely, where hallucinations are not present, a psychotic structure can be metaphorically assumed for literary experiments taking alphabetic systems apart and inventing new ones.

The incandescent, then, is a glowing from within a certain darkness. The incandescent alphabet is a writing deployed to speak out from this darkness that we, as readers, cannot access. To illustrate how such illegible alphabets work, Rogers suggestively pairs Walser’s microscripts with the verbal-visual art of Barbara Suckfüll,

a woman who was admitted into a psychiatric institution in 1907, and released in 1928. Though the idea of incandescent alphabets suspends the binary between mentally healthy and ill, Rogers links Suckfüll and Walser because they were both hospitalized when suffering from auditory delusions.

Suckfüll was a farmer and a mother who started hearing voices when she was fifty. These voices commanded her to cry and walk, but also to write and draw. This is when she became an institutionalized artist. She made drawings of her table, plates, and spoons, and then filled the open spaces on the sheet with very small writing. Her drawing can be seen as a graphic imprint of her interaction with the Other commanding her to write: “Geben sie mir Papier, so viel sie wollen,” she told her doctor, “ich schreib alles voll, ich brauch mich gar nicht zu besinnen u. anzustrengen, das läuft mit alles nur so in die Feder” [Give me paper as much as you want, I fill everything with writing, I do not at all need to reflect or strain myself] (Hohnholz). Suckfüll is a vessel of the Other, unveiling the complexities of the psychotic structure as a pattern of world-making, but she is also an observer of that pattern: she registers her subjection in a language modernistically merging word and image (fig. 4).

Like Suckfüll, Walser’s work fuses verbal, visual, and graphic regimes, with the miniscule writing overflowing the tabular setup of the page (Brillenburg Wurth 233). The scripts spread in multiple directions, transforming the page into a painterly field: a space carved out of ready-mades (letters, cards, book covers) with a pencil. However, is this pencil constrained by hallucinatory voices or by a private system of inscription to deal with a problem—a painful writer’s block? I agree with Rogers that writing that “scribbles and scripts around and within drawings seems to be one of the signatures of psychotic art” (86), but as I will show below, Walser’s writing is compulsive in another way—it is meditative.

Framing Walser’s microscripts as pathographic texts (and the same holds for Suckfüll’s work) makes readers miss an important point about them: the point of their indeterminacy. Are they

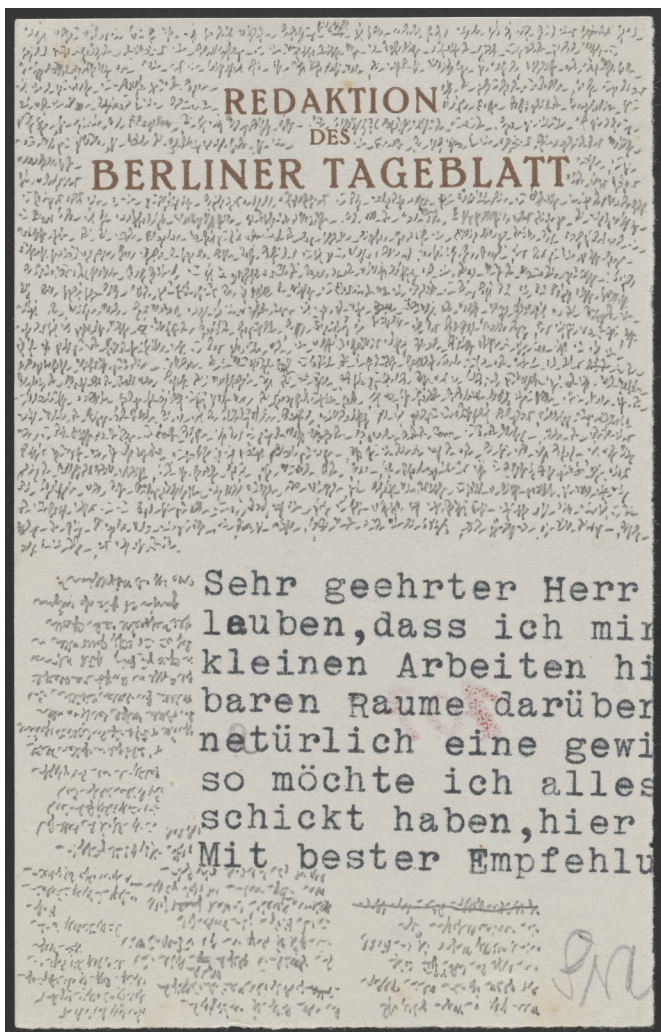


Figure 5. Robert Walser, Microscript 107. © Keystone / Robert Walser-Stiftung Bern. Reproduced with permission.

indeed the extract of a lived psychotic experience, or could they be more than that? Does Walser try to mediate the unsayable, as such an extract would? Or does he hide in a script to solve a cramp? In the next section, I consider the scripts in more detail, using the frame of incandescence, but with a significant twist. Hijacking Rogers’s term, I use it for a writing that mediates momentariness, fleetingness, impermanence: the dimensions of existence we tend to move to the edges of consciousness to immerse ourselves in illusions of continuity, ownership, and substantiveness. To the extent that such dimensions are suppressed, they have become unsayable—other. Walser’s writings make them intimate again. His scripts, I argue accordingly, tend to illuminate less an alienating experience of the Other than an attunement to what is present—the now we fail to notice, yet for which he develops a distinct style.

Reading a Private Writing

In 1957, Seelig published a reproduction of one of Walser’s microscripts in the German literary magazine *du*. Just one. The rest he kept to himself. Writing a dissertation on Walser, then PhD student Jochen Greven suddenly detected a script in it he had learned in school as a boy:¹¹ a plain, literary, but incredibly shrunken German called Sütterlin. Sütterlin is a form of German or Kurrent script, as alien to me as it is to most people raised on Roman letter types. Kurrent is more ornamental, and can be traced to the Middle Ages. As an adaptation of Kurrent, Ludwig Sütterlin designed the Sütterlin script in the 1910s. It was used in schools and for official documents requiring handwriting until 1941.¹²

Walser had a beautiful hand at writing (Bernofsky, “Secrets”). When his hand became locked in a cramp, and writing became impossible, he took up his pencil and compressed Sütterlin into miniature form—a script easy to downsize with its “slanting angles” (Rogers 105). Walser’s first microscripts in Sütterlin date from 1917 and 1924, when he was still penciling in a two- to three-millimeter script. In the following years, it decreased to one

millimeter (Schwebel 6). In a 1927 letter to Max Rychner, editor of the *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, Walser famously writes about his cramp—and the antidote he developed for it:

approximately ten years ago I began to first shyly and reverentially sketch out in pencil everything I produced, which naturally imparted a sluggishness and slowness to the writing process that assumed practically colossal proportions. This pencil system, which is inseparable from a logically consistent, office-like copying system, has caused me real torments, but this torment taught me patience. . . . The writer of these lines experienced a time when he hideously, frightfully hated his pen . . . and to free himself from this pen-malaise he began to pencil-sketch, to scribble, fiddle about. With the aid of my pencil I was better able to play, to write. . . . I suffered a real breakdown in my hand on account of the pen, a sort of cramp from whose clutches I slowly, laboriously freed myself by means of the pencil. A swoon, a cramp, a stupor—these are both physical and mental. (Qtd. in Bernofsky, “Secrets” 11–12)

The pencil was a painful, laborious method but also afforded easy, erasable writing. It became an instrument for sketching and cleared the path for a necessary and time-consuming detour: it liberated Walser from the strain and fixity of pen-writing (as pen-writing was then still used for proofs ready for publication) and the mental barrier of writer’s block.

Transcribed and collected together—though never intended as such—into a multivolume work, the scripts came to be known in the 1980s as Walser’s pieces from the pencil zone: *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* (From the pencil zone). Bernard Echte and Werner Morlang gave the title to Walser’s posthumous publications to emphasize the singularity and materiality of the script: with the pencil, Walser had unlocked a different space for “writing,” a space beyond the page, book, and bounds of literary publishing

(Schwebel 14–15). It crossed limits and subverted distinctions: between the verbal and visual, prose and poetry, between what we now call column, essay, diary, and notebook sketch. Today, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* is no longer just a title. It is a frame, a *parergon* that allows the penciled writings of Walser to emerge as literary texts (Derrida). It directs and structures our reading of the scripts—at the edges, but then also at the core of our perception and positioning. Tellingly, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* suggests something mysterious or otherworldly: writings from the twilight zone. Writings from inside a madhouse. We are all ears. In the end, therefore, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* does more than assemble Walser’s final decade of writing: it creates a meaningful *work* out of the shards of penciled paper found after his death.

Walser himself referred to the pencil pieces as *Skizzen*: sketches, exercises, outlines, or plans, loose forms in which narration becomes unhinged. In these sketches, stories are being intimated but will not be told. Fragments, images, or impressions are assembled in constructions that are still narrative in form but at the same time experiment away from causality (this, and therefore that) and closure. Greven explains that this is because Walser’s texts are spatially rather than temporally construed: though not plotless, the texts offer minimal plots defined more by contiguity than causality. Images or impressions are placed side by side; things happen in exchangeable scenes rather than in a chronologically progressing line (Greven, *Der Roman* 91). I agree with Greven: in the micro-scripts, the idea of apparent timelessness becomes part of the manner of presentation, the arrangement of descriptive moments and observations. What to psychiatrists may seem to be *word salad* is a specific, material style lighting up instances and experiences that cannot be said in any other way—the form and the tone *is the content*. This incandescent writing, I will show, takes us out of our comfort zone as readers of narrative by means of two poetic techniques: compression and parataxis.

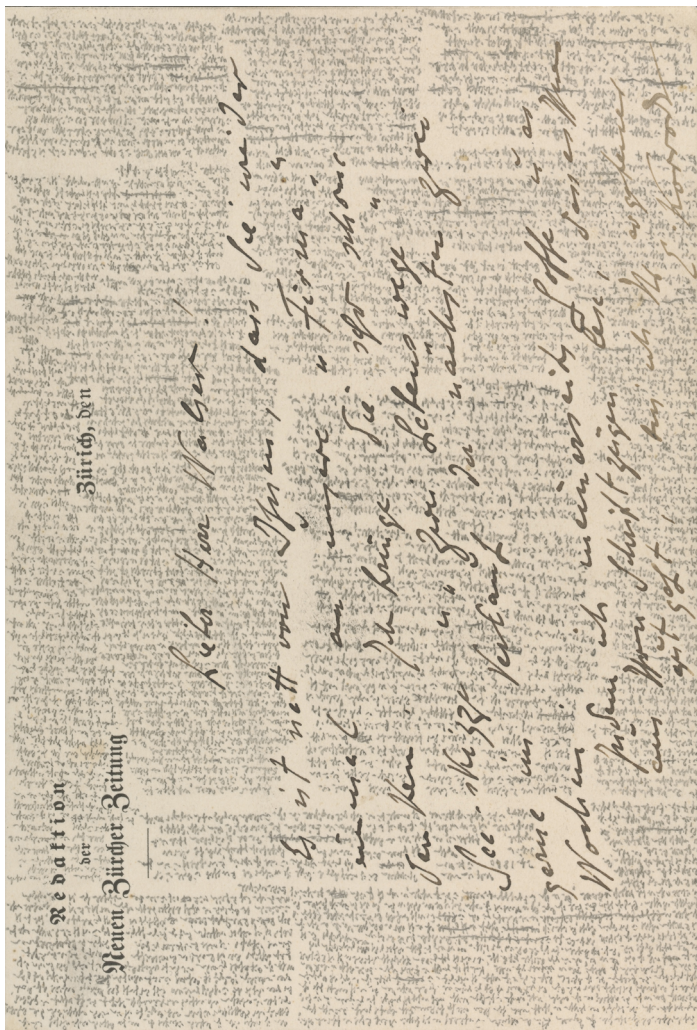


Figure 6. Robert Walser, Microscript 9a/I. © Keystone / Robert Walser-Stiftung Bern. Reproduced with permission.

Incandescent Mastery: Compression and Parataxis in the Microscripts

Compression is a poetic concept that is still strongly associated with the poet Ezra Pound. For him, making poetry meant to compress meaning, as densely as possible. In this sense, compression derives from the German *Dichtung*, meaning at once to make poetry and to condense or compress. In poetic practice, compression became the hallmark of Imagist poetry, where it referred to a “direct treatment of the thing,” using “no word that does not contribute to the observation,” and composing “in the sequence of a musical phrase” (Longenbach 165). In Walser’s microscripts too, compression emerges as an important structuring device. The small writing on scraps of paper helps to reduce storytelling to an impression of stories that *could have been told*. As in Imagist poetry, and continuous with the idea of incandescent alphabets, the sketches foreground what has not been said—that is to say, the “aura of the unsaid is always palpable” (Longenbach 165). This aura defines the tone of many of the sketches. Take Microscript 9a/I (fig. 6), which has been titled with its puzzling opening line by the German editors: “Fahrten eleganter Art” (Jaunts elegant in nature). The piece was written in June or July 1932, on a card received from Eduard Koroni, editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Walser prepared the second part of it in fair copy (*Microscripts* 115). It is about solidity and lightness, and was never published. I compress it even more:

Jaunts elegant in nature now lay in the past for this sorrowful man, who in the course of time might well have amassed quite respectable skills in crossing his arms and gazing pensively at the ground before him. . . . Now I shall turn to his son or progeny. . . . [A] certain precious entity, by which I mean the worrying, was not imparted to him. . . . He was allowed to spend his days in a state of distraction. . . . Only cautiously, apprehensively do I lay my hands on him. May the image I am attempting to

create resemble a wafting breeze, a sweet fragrance! . . . He would never grow old. . . . Not being known was the lot that fell to his soul, which remained not quite grown-up. . . . An illness took hold of him, and he let it bear him away until he departed. (*Microscripts* 31–33)¹³

In the opening sentence, poetic inversion marks the passing of time: there were graceful journeys once, at the beginning, a long time ago. They linger vaguely, until the adjective “sorrowful” qualifies the man without a name—and prepares us for a condensed retrospective. We learn that the sorrowful man led a life of deprivation and distinction. He grew up among “severe, naked, tall, blue . . . joy-deficient cliffs” that taught him how to persevere and “steel himself” (31). The image of the tall cliffs captures the man’s narrow path in life. He suffered and toiled—yet fate was kind and rewarded him for his hard labors. The sorrowful man traveled, conquered, and became successful. He married a beautiful woman. Still, his heavy sense of duty never left him. Could this outline be the bare bones of a *Bildungsroman*: a story of accomplishment, and of labor rewarded? Why bother spelling it out in a few hundred pages? I, for one, am happy that Walser does not.

What matters in this outline is not the specifics of the plot and character development, but the imagery through which these characters appear: the solid father, the radiant son—light and careless. This imagery presents two entangled lives: one directed toward the future (the narrow path among the cliffs), the other spent in the space of the present (the garden) “at pains to consider himself happy” (32). Just as the father is focused on a way straight ahead, so that he has no present, no lightness, so the son enjoys the present, as he has no future. We could say the sketch is about these alternating ways, rather than about a father and a son. As he evokes these two ways, Walser throws us into a world that goes by as a breath. He nails that fleetingness of life in a miniature form that in itself conveys a certain delicacy and evanescence. The idea of evanescence is sustained by the consistent grace and playfulness of the

tone of the sketch: “May the image I am attempting to create resemble a wafting breeze!” (33). This tone tells us as much as the condensed storyline offered to us: be now—life vanishes as we speak. Fittingly, the sketch ends with the boy dissolving into weightlessness.

Psychiatrists unaware of the poetic technique of compression may find Walser’s style chaotic and potentially schizoid: it omits many of the causal connections we expect to find in storytelling, and it is extremely self-reflexive. But when we bring a literary toolbox to open the graphic text, we find an innovative strategy to compress meaning as tightly as possible in a narrative setting that—at the same time—tends towards digression and distraction: Dickinson and Pound meet Baudelaire and Sterne. Seen in this light, Walser’s is a singular style that cannot be reduced to an expression or symptom of mental illness.

In *Microscript* 389/I (fig. 7), written in 1928–29, Walser reframes the telling of stories as a spatial art: a series of observations that are placed alongside each other and that may or may not be connected. The connection is, in any case, not instrumental. Such contiguity illustrates the other technique to be outlined here: parataxis, or placing sentences side by side without establishing a causal relation between them.¹⁴ Let the reader find out, hopping from one fragment to the next. It is an ancient technique that is not hard to find in Walser’s sketches—and it may have misled many a psychiatrist looking for signs of schizophrenia:

New year’s page [*Microscript* 389/I]

Year rhymes with hear, appear. Someone tapped at my door. I shouted “come in” and then hid in the wardrobe, and the one arriving no doubt stood listening, waiting for quite some time. Many a novel has begun in a promising way. Last night in a dream, my hands were transformed into rotten, crumbling towers. A ruin, I mean to say an aging millionairess, once

Import englischer Stoffe
HANS MARTY
 Burgdorf
 Telefon 89

Vertreten durch:

389

[Handwritten notes in German]

[A page of dense handwritten text in German, likely a ledger or account book, with multiple columns and rows of entries.]

Figure 7. Robert Walser, Microscript 389/I. © Keystone / Robert Walser-Stiftung Bern. Reproduced with permission.

bequeathed to me one hundred thousand francs, which in short order I squandered. What a beguiling memory! . . . Leafing through a newspaper as a young boy, I one day caught sight of an illustration depicting the chastisement of a slave. I'm being tapped on the shoulder by the question of whether I am at present writing quietly or loudly; by the same token I ask myself whether the present sketch sounds pointy or dull. (*Microscripts* 105–106)

The page becomes a dreamscape conjured up by a “reliable lout,” as Walser puts it. A narrative voice hangs over it. Sometimes we see a route from one scene to the other: a “ruin,” an “aging millionaire,” will later connect to a “wealthy woman” who was ugly. Parataxis in this piece offers a strange paradox. It gives the impression of a mind digressing, yet the digression gives shape—in tone and form—quite consistently to a subtending idea: the process of writing. In “Writing *Geschwister Tanner*,” Walser observes how he once pushed himself to the limit: “The poet must ramble, must audaciously lose himself, must always risk everything” to get to this stage where it all falls together (*Speaking* 7). Bewitched by “all the thoughts, all the images that had been passing through my mind,” he finally succeeded in connecting them while writing *The Tanners* (7). In this sketch, the whirl of thoughts shows us what happens to a mind in creation. It fans out; it is scanning unconsciously—a mode of perception that is haphazard and undifferentiated, an openness as hard as it is crucial to pass through (Ehrenzweig). Appropriately, the sketch then closes as it opens—with the new year: “When a year stops, another instantly commences, as if one were turning the page. The story keeps on going, and we see the beauty that lies in connectedness” (Walser, *Microscripts* 107). It requires a different idea of time to grasp such a random connectedness: time as a loop, where things keep coming back to their beginning. In the end is my beginning, in the beginning my end: the whole of time compressed in an instant.

As I read the scripts, I see the routes Walser tries in exploring the limits of language and literature as a temporal art. “I was conducting experiments in the field of language,” Walser writes in “My Endeavors” (1928–29) on his later prose, “in the hope it might contain an unknown vitality which would be a joy to awaken” (*Speaking* 101). Free improvisation is Walser’s healing art, and he practices it to mediate a healing insight: being in the present is all there is, and we had better be open to it. This is precisely how Walser’s work massages us into becoming different kinds of readers. It “recharges”—to adopt Rita Felski’s term—perception, and challenges us to suspend judgment, to adopt an aesthetic position in the true sense of the term (*Hooked* and *Limits*). Significantly, this idea of recharging extends Annie Rogers’s approach to incandescent art. Whereas she listens to the address of those who are forced to “bear witness to something [we] are entirely ignorant about” (41), I listen to an address that takes place at the limits of literary communication—and takes me to it. I could have stopped, but nothing has ever stopped me from going on a ramble. Becoming a reader of the pencil zone requires a deep, meditative concentration—a concentration that paradoxically is at once focused and scattered. I must be open to forming new, unsuspected connections in these texts. Reading the pencil zone fragments is a creative act: it invites a reader to enter the same suspension and confusion of any creative process. That process, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard observed long ago, is about the now here happening—the wonder that something occurs in a (willed) openness. And now what? Walser’s sketches pose this question again and again as they write and address the indeterminate: what, in the end, does it mean to be “literature”?

Conclusion: Walser’s Healing Art

In a brilliant afterword for the German collection of Walser’s short works (*Der Spaziergang: Ausgewählte Geschichten und Aufsätze*),

Urs Widmer addresses Walser's compulsive currents of thinking—and how such currents may have translated into his writing. Walser, he proposes, was subject to thinking instead of being a thinking subject. Seeing the microscripts—and Walser's other works—as an extension of a mental excess has long been commonplace in Walser criticism. As interested as I am in this excess, I have wanted to stress the other side of the continuum here. This is a side that I would almost call spiritual, in the sense of embodied awareness: a consistent and profound engagement with the present, with the small and inconspicuous, with a mere breeze. It is an engagement that triggers my involvement as a reader of his work: my wonder and joy. The spiritual in Walser is a dimension that has not been readily acknowledged. Critics are more at home in the world of thinking (as if there is a binary between the two), and have—as I have tried to show—channeled the undecidability of Walser's writings in pathographic frames. However, throughout these writings, there is a sensitivity to spirituality as linked to creativity: the quality of intensity, delight, and freedom one can bring to the things one does. As a reader, my perception is recharged by the trust Walser's personae have in life, in the moment, as well as by the exploration of otherness his writings perform—only to make it intimate again. Loving life, and venturing out into the dimensions of being that interrupt commonsense experience, summarizes what I call the healing art of Robert Walser: it lights up “joy in the present moment” (*The Tanners* 282).

Notes

1. See Sass, “Romanticism, Creativity”; Barrantes-Vidal; and Simonton. Problematically, historiometric research has tended to focus all too much on white males—officially termed “eminent men”—in the research, thus explicitly making the masculine the norm, and all kinds of aspects of imaginative work associated with masculinity: bravery, courage, indifference, and autonomy. I should also note here that neurosis has mainly been the province of psychoanalytic studies into creativity. Recent neurobiological and neuroscientific research claims that no causal relation can be established between neurosis and the generation of creative ideas (i.e., in psychological definitions of creativity: ideas that are considered novel, meaningful, and useful). See Kaufman.
2. *Der Spaziergang* was first published in 1917, but Walser revised it and another version appeared in 1920. Middleton translated the 1917 version, and Susan Bernofsky revised and edited that translation “to arrive at a translation of Walser’s 1920 revision” (Introduction 10–11). The quotations that follow are from that revised version (*The Walk*).
3. For the idea of a paranoid, in contrast to a reparative reading, see Sedgwick.
4. As Vogel et al. have observed, patients suffering from depression “subjectively seem to have lost the ability to influence or change the present, resulting in an impersonal and blocked future. The present is rendered meaningless . . . and the passage of time turned into a dragging, inexorable, and viscous continuance.”
5. Translated by Tom Whalen as “A Little Ramble” in *Selected Stories* (30–31).
6. The syndromes on this spectrum generally include “delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and behavior, abnormal motor behavior [including a reduced responsiveness to the world or catatonia] and negative symptoms such as anhedonia/amotivation [inability to enter into activities] and blunted affect/reduced speech” (Barch).
7. According to Sass and Parnas, schizophrenia proper is typified by a unifying set of symptoms (427–29). The first consists of two complementary symptoms: a disturbance of ipseity or a sense of coinciding with yourself; a solid and unquestioned first-person perspective. This disturbance manifests itself as an alienating self-consciousness or hyper-reflexivity and a diminished self-affection at the same time. Because there is something amiss in the sense of what is real about yourself, you start to experience parts of yourself as if they were other or alien. Thus, you become acutely aware of these parts, as they are seen from a radically different perspective. Hearing voices, as Walser did, may be part of this disturbance. As Sass and Parnas recapitulate the fatal relation between hyper-reflexivity and weakened self-affection, “whereas the notion of hyperreflexivity emphasizes the way in which something normally tacit becomes focal and explicit, the notion of diminished self-affection emphasizes a complementary aspect of this very same process—the fact that what once was tacit is no longer being inhabited as a medium of taken-for-granted selfhood” (430). A third syndrome or “experiential infrastructure” of schizophrenia is a transformation in the field of awareness (439). This transformation often includes a disruption in cognitive focus and perceptual grip (435).
8. Ten years after his stay in Thun, Heinrich von Kleist would end his life, after shooting his terminally ill fiancée Henriette Vogel, on the banks of another lake: Wannsee. I must add that “Kleist in Thun” is one of the most beautiful stories I have ever read.
9. Rogers here purposively echoes Janet Frame’s *At the Edge of the Alphabet* (1962).
10. The Prinzhorn Collection is a museum in Heidelberg dedicated to outsider art, which carries the name of psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, who in the 1920s collected art made in psychiatric institutions, and which now contains works made between 1840 and 1940.
11. Initially, Jochen Greven thought the dots were characters of a miniature stenography (*Stenogramm* in German; hence the initial title *Mikrogramme*—micrographies—for the scripts). See Greven, *Robert Walser*; Schwebel.
12. See for this: <http://www.suetterlinschrift.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm>.
13. The German original in Bernofsky’s selected translations of the microscripts is on pp. 221–23 of *Microscripts*.
14. For more on Walser and parataxis, see Evans.

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