



## Robert Walser's Topicality and the Descriptive Turn

Gormsen Schmidt, Johanne

*Published in:*  
On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture

*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Document license:*  
[CC BY](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Gormsen Schmidt, J. (2019). Robert Walser's Topicality and the Descriptive Turn. *On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, (7). <https://www.on-culture.org/journal/issue-7/>

## ROBERT WALSER'S TOPICALITY AND THE DESCRIPTIVE TURN

JOHANNE GORMSEN SCHMIDT

Johanne Gormsen Schmidt received her Master of Arts in Comparative Literature at the University of Copenhagen and is currently a Ph.D. student in literature in the Department for the Study of Culture of the University of Southern Denmark. Her research project is part of The Niels Bohr Professorship Program *Uses of Literature: The Social Dimensions of Literature* led by Rita Felski at the University of Southern Denmark.

### KEYWORDS

Bruno Latour, critique, description, Eve Sedgwick, literary works as actors, matters of fact and matters of concern, Rita Felski, Robert Walser, Susan Sontag

### PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 7, July 31, 2019

### HOW TO CITE

Johanne Gormsen Schmidt. "Robert Walser's Topicality and the Descriptive Turn." *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 7 (2019). <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2019/14766/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2019/14766/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-147661>



# Robert Walser's Topicality and the Descriptive Turn<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The article examines the relation between the sudden rise of public interest in the Swiss writer Robert Walser at the turn of the millennium and the simultaneous emergence of Latourian-inspired methodological discussions in the field of literary studies. In light of the striking commonalities between Walser's literary practice and Bruno Latour's research strategy, the article claims that Latour's project should not just be conceived as a possible source of inspiration to the humanities but as a configuration deeply enmeshed in aesthetic devices from the very outset. Furthermore, the great fascination of Walser among contemporary writers and readers stems from the fact that his writings offer new ways of reading that are exempted from the duty of suspicious interpretation and structure-building efforts, highly relevant to the current deadlock regarding critique in literary studies, but also — owing to Latour's undoing of the divide between art and science — in academia as such. How we are encouraged to meet a text does not leave unaffected how we tend to meet the world, the attentive and descriptive low-key attitude practiced by Walser potentially boosting Latour's call for an extensive transformation of matters of fact into matters of concern.

## 1 Introduction

In his influential essay "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Bruno Latour famously asserts the untimeliness of critique. According to the essay, the mistrustful and skeptical attitude proudly cultivated and celebrated in academia has today become mainstream, a mindless automatic reaction, and is held hostage by right wing populist forces, e.g. to question the fact of global warming. The essay appeared in 2004. 40 years earlier, Susan Sontag wrote the essay "Against Interpretation" (1964).

As a response to the emergent ideology critique in literary studies at the time, which later became prevalent and almost synonymous with academic practice in the humanities, Sontag's indignation curiously anticipates Latour — and in tandem with the current Latourian-inspired trends in literary studies, "Against Interpretation" has also gained renewed interest in the field. From Sontag's broad perspective, including the dealings with art in ancient Greece and the aesthetic experience of cave paintings, it is obvious that critical reading has already run out of steam in 1964: "[T]oday is such a time, when the project of interpretations is largely reactionary, stifling."<sup>2</sup> The spirit of Latour's later essay sounds strikingly similar to that statement, just foregrounding the concept of 'critique' instead of Sontag's related concept of 'interpretation.' Although Latour's essay is concerned with the broad field of social sciences and science and technology studies (STS), and Sontag's essay addresses the quite different and more confined context of

literary studies, their curious overlap indicates that Latour's thinking is in fact indebted to a particular approach within the field of aesthetics.

Another text by Sontag has achieved downright cult status: her short preface "Walser's Voice," introducing the Swiss writer Robert Walser's first major translation into English, *Selected Stories*, published in 1982, has been reissued on many occasions, including in the fashion magazine *Vogue*. The preface acclaims "the musicality and free fall of his writing," which is "less impeded by plot," as well as the inability to identify any substantial traits in the characters.<sup>3</sup> "I'm ordinary — that is, nobody — declares the characteristic Walser persona,"<sup>4</sup> Sontag contends. She notes how Walser's writing, instead of submitting to the construction of an intriguing storyline or of deep psychological portrayals, moves forward with an admirable "effortlessness,"<sup>5</sup> in itself and for itself. Although she does not point it out directly, on closer inspection, Sontag's strong fascination with Walser proves to be closely linked up with her aversion to interpretation: Since Walser's writing, according to Sontag, is not dictated by content, neither of the plot nor of the characters' minds, it hides no deeper meaning to be unearthed by interpretation. This content-shunning aesthetics thus serves as a nonchalant way of eschewing any interpretive advances.

The way in which Sontag's admiration for Walser and her loathing for critique-driven readings conflate is key to understanding the interrelated trends currently throbbing in literary studies and in contemporary literature. Latour's attack on critique began to flutter the doves in literary studies just after the turn of the millennium, most notably by Rita Felski. At the same time the public interest in Walser also suddenly exploded. New publications and translations popped up everywhere. This article is motivated by the endeavor to apprehend this curious coincidence, poring over the interrelatedness of prominent aesthetic and academic practices and orientations after the turn of the millennium — and its implications for the future role of critique in literary studies.

Since the questioning of the dogma of critique spreading in literary studies is widely inspired by Latour, it seems timely to take a closer look at Latour's thinking, with special attention to the fact that it is itself bound up with art. Different attempts to translate Latour's thinking into terms that are useful to literary studies keep occurring. But the relation between Latour and literary studies is not one-way, as Latour's very effort to foreground complex concerns rather than cold facts heavily relies on aesthetics, fiction,

and style, consequently attributing a decisive role to literature and art in his project. An examination of Walser's writings and recent impact, continuously compared to Latour and present Latourian-inspired reading strategies, will help to clarify and elaborate on this claim. The aim is decidedly not to subsume Walser's literary devices into Latour's worldview, but rather to push against such moves, maybe even invert them, as a comparison of the two instigates a discussion of Latour's own research practice.

This article suggests that Latour's close affiliation with art might inspire literary and cultural studies to assume a more collaborative attitude, in which the efforts of a literary work itself are perceived as potentially kindred-spirit and helpful to the literary scholar devising new methodologies in response to the deadlock of critique, and in which the dividing lines between art and academia as well as the various fields within academia are loosened, fostering more cross-disciplinary work.

Before involving Walser in the discussion (section 5-9), I start out by outlining recent tendencies within literary studies that, in search for reading alternatives to critique, point to the decisive role of the work itself in the way we tend to conceive of it (section 1-4). When it comes to Walser, it is in fact left quite open how to relate to his writings, since they do not set the scene for traditional interpretation. A detective-minded response to Walser's general "Verunklärung von Handlung, Figuren und Motivationen"<sup>6</sup> identified by Mareike Schildmann quickly falls short, as the obfuscation does not invite riddle-solving, but simply indicates the relative irrelevance of action, character, and motive. Rather than devoting this article to the extensive discussion of the Walser reception in academia, I continually draw on this reception when relating Walser to Latour's thinking, concentrating on Walser's topicality and relevance to the ongoing heated methodological discussions in literary studies.

## **2\_Aesthetic Attention: Description as Commitment**

Recently various branches within literary studies have sought to break loose from the grip of the hermeneutics of suspicion, largely inspired by Latour. The traditional heroic task of the sharp-eyed critic to persistently wrest some kind of subversive potential from the text has become questionable, and the expediency of ideology critique and critical theory no longer seems obvious. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus phrase the current impasse in literary studies: "we want to ask what it might mean to stay close to our objects of study, without citing as our reason for doing so a belief that those

objects encapsulate freedom. We pose this question, in part, out of a sense of political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics.”<sup>7</sup> The posing of such questions has brought about a new obsession with method in literary studies, seeking to introduce new ways of reading that do not reduce the text to the mere symptom of a predefined context or framework, but take the text itself and how it actually works as the ultimate point of reference.

Felski wants to settle accounts with the hermeneutics of *suspicion*, not hermeneutics as such. In fact, she seeks to extend hermeneutics so that it does not only concern the text, but the whole network surrounding the text. Referring to Latour, this network is assumed to be vibrant with meaning-generating activities: “Hermeneutics is not a privilege of humans, but, so to speak, a property of the world itself.”<sup>8</sup> Another branch of Latourian-inspired literary researchers contrariwise turn their back on hermeneutics, the American trio Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, and Heather Love leaping to the eye with the articles “Surface Reading” (Best and Marcus 2009), “Close but not Deep. Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” (Love 2010), and “Building a Better Description” (Best, Marcus, and Love 2016) — the most recent one by all of them together. The trio turns the hierarchies in traditional reading practice upside down, so that surface is presented as the better alternative to depth, thinness to richness, and description to interpretation. In their 2016 article, they provocatively invite us to indulge in the disliked description, allowing us to linger over some apparently insignificant details without comparing them to any whole or forcing them into any overall interpretive framework. The article concludes with a final rhetorical question: “The worst that might happen? To see a world in a styrofoam peanut”<sup>9</sup> — elegantly summing up their message: that it might not be that bad after all if our alert attention to even the smallest and most banal thingummy can trace the richness of a whole world and tell of a surprising complexity. The act of description in this regard then also establishes some kind of connection and commitment.

Hermeneutics or not, the Latourian-inspired literary scholars all agree on the vital importance of this commitment — or what Felski prefers to call “attachment,” a key concept figuring in the title of her upcoming book, and which as “an affective state means that we cannot ‘not care’ about certain phenomena.”<sup>10</sup> Commitment is also pivotal to Latourian disciple Yves Citton, linking Latour’s undoing of the divide between matters of fact and matters of concern to aesthetic attention *per se*. Quoting Gustave

Flaubert's observation: "For a thing to become interesting, it suffices to look at it for a long time,"<sup>11</sup> Citton argues that aesthetic experience is basically a way of looking, a non-prejudiced kind of attention tolerating "delayed categorization."<sup>12</sup> Accordingly it does not have to be directed towards a particular text, as Citton sees it, it can also be a productive way of relating to the surrounding world in a non-judgmental and open-minded manner. In that way, insights gained from aesthetics can directly contribute to Latour's project.

"[S]omething starts to matter to us when we pay attention to it,"<sup>13</sup> Citton notes, stressing the *way* we read, a certain *attitude*, and goes on: "Literature is less in the eye of the beholder than in his gaze, i.e., in the aesthetic attention he devotes to the text,"<sup>14</sup> implying that it is all about how the text is *met*. But should we really assume that the text itself does not affect how we read it? Shouldn't the text be conceived as an actor too? In this regard it is striking that instead of coming up with concrete examples of the new ways of reading suggested by Love, Best, and Marcus, they point to descriptive and surface-oriented devices *within* literary texts. For example, in "Close But Not Deep" Love picks out a single passage of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in which she finds a thin description of one of the characters' behavior.<sup>15</sup> Love might after all be more interested in description as an aesthetic style than as a reading practice. In their 2016 article the trio also eventually turns to literature for descriptive examples.<sup>16</sup> This conflation of reading and writing strategies is to me evidence of the strong connection between the specific way a literary text is composed and the way we are inclined to read it; the character of our attention.

This connection can be illuminated by Namwali Serpell's introduction of the term affordance in literary studies.<sup>17</sup> The term originates in ecopsychology, where it designates the action possibilities provided by the environment for an individual. A chair, for instance, encourages a human being to sit on it. But it could be used otherwise; a child could turn it into a small den, for instance. In the same way, Serpell argues, texts also afford different opportunities, which the individual readers can spot and make use of, according to what is found suitable. As a reader, you cannot do anything with a text, but on the other hand the text does not completely determine the reader's response either.

### **3\_ The Aesthetics of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

Felski is quite aware of this condition, and in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) she points to Serpell's use of affordance as an inspiring effort to grasp the text itself as an actor exerting its influence.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the term also squares well with Felski's wish to move from theory to method — cf. her article "From Literary Theory to Critical Method" (2008)<sup>19</sup> — that is, to leave general positions and ideas in favor of attending to people's concrete dealings with the text; *how* we read.

When Felski in *The Limits of Critique* points to modernism as one of the actors propagating suspicious interpretations, the reciprocity of text and reading is also at stake: "From the late nineteenth century onward, [...] a *literary suspicion* presses increasingly to the fore [...]. In the experimental ferment known as modernism, writers are drawn to formal devices that systematically block readers from taking words at face value."<sup>20</sup> Thus Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx — pointed out by Paul Ricoeur as the founding fathers of the hermeneutics of suspicion — did not personally ensure the propagation of the suspicious attitude, where everything is conceived as signs that need to be decoded. In the year 1900 Nietzsche dies and Freud's immensely influential *Traumdeutung* is released. But at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a modernist movement in literature also makes itself felt, vigorously foregrounding the distance between sign and meaning.

Felski argues that the literature from that period must be seen as a co-conspirator in the development of the method that is to gain a footing: "Rather than being innocent victims of suspicion, literary works are active instigators and perpetrators of it. That we have learned to read between the lines has everything to do with the devices deployed in modern works of art [...]. Literary works thus train their readers in a hermeneutic of suspicion."<sup>21</sup>

Do other literary works then train their readers in other less suspicious and less interpretive approaches? Felski does not ask this question. She does not follow this line of thought any further than to the modernism from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But what about the literary trends flourishing 100 years later, in the present age? If modernist literature should be seen as an actor in the bigger network propagating the hermeneutics of suspicion, as Felski suggests, could contemporary aesthetic practices and orientations then also actively encourage and partake in the emergent network of new ways of thinking text and reading in the field of literary studies? One might assume that specific

examples of Citton's open-ended aesthetic attention are also to be found in — or afforded by — literary works themselves and not just particular readings of them.

#### **4\_ The Style of Matters of Concern**

In his Spinoza lectures given in 2005, Latour directly addresses the link between art and the way we tend to perceive — not just art, but the world. According to Latour, the tradition of aesthetics plays an important part in the modern propagation of the “bifurcation of nature” within the scientific world, problematically separating meaning and matter, culture and nature. The Spinoza lectures were published in 2008 under the title *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, and *style* is exactly key to his enquiry. “No doubt, matters of fact are the result of a specific style. [...] To put it much too bluntly: the idea of a bridge between representation and the represented is an invention of visual art,”<sup>22</sup> he provocatively asserts, making it clear that the history of science and the history of art must be understood together.

This awareness of co-agency does not only apply when looking back, it is, in Latour's view, also highly useful when devising a new vocabulary allowing matters of fact to appear as matters of concern. He thus envisions “an immense building site where [...] every intellectual skill from artists, scientists, politicians, statesmen, organizers of all kinds, merchants and patrons, are trying to reinvent an Art of Describing, or rather an Art of *Redescribing* matters of fact.”<sup>23</sup> Whereas the idea of matters of fact has been fostered by former artistic activities, now the time has come to let new creative endeavors come to the fore, which by means of an attentive, descriptive approach can help us relate to the phenomena, it is claimed. Sontag's solution in “Against Interpretation” is, again, conspicuously similar, suggesting “a really accurate, sharp, loving description”<sup>24</sup> as an alternative to interpretation. Though Sontag's call for description is of course directed towards art and literature, her aim is nevertheless still more generally to bring us in touch with the richness of the world of sensations: “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.”<sup>25</sup> To both Sontag and Latour, art offers a valuable opportunity in this regard.

In his article “Actor-Network Aesthetics: The Conceptual Rhymes of Bruno Latour and Contemporary Art” (2016), Francis Halsall interestingly compares Latour's thinking to the orientations of the current art world, arguing that Latour basically works like an artist and that his works should be judged as artworks rather than as empirically

verifiable scientific statements. Latour would hardly support a complete unification of art and science — that emerges quite clearly from the Spinoza lectures, just like *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2012) appreciates the diverse specific modes of being and doing rather than attempting to equalize them. But Halsall still hits the nail on the head when calling attention to Latour's dealings and exchanges with the contemporary artistic scene. My interest in this issue concerns Latour's specific highlighting of description as an art form and a sheet anchor, as I wonder about the possible implications of this move for literary texts actively deploying descriptive devices. This question puts Walser's writings to the front.

## **5\_ The Discovery of Walser**

As a writer from the last century, Walser does not seem to be the obvious choice to bring into the discussion. But as Felski points out, texts cannot be reduced to the literary period defined by the time of their production: "Refusing to stay cooped up in their containers, texts barge energetically across space and time."<sup>26</sup> And, in fact, Walser is very much a writer of our time and a source of inspiration for contemporary artistic and literary practices. Even though he stopped writing in the 1930s, Walser remained relatively unknown for many years. But around 2000 the interest in Walser drastically accelerated all at once.

Accordingly, Walser's collected works are currently being published in no less than two brand new critical editions, *Kritischer Robert Walser-Ausgabe* by Schwabe and *Kommentierter Berner Ausgabe* by Suhrkamp. Furthermore, the posthumous publication of his latest writings, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*, written 1924-1933, were finished in 2000 and republished in 2003. The broad academic volume *Robert Walser-Handbuch. Leben — Werk — Wirkung* (2015) and Echte Bernhard's extensive biography *Robert Walser. Sein Leben und Werk in Bildern und Texten* (2008) equally testify to the sudden tremendous attention given to Walser. Never before has Walser been the subject of so much activity in academia.

The translations of Walser into English have appeared in three subsequent waves:<sup>27</sup>

## TRANSLATIONS OF WALSER INTO ENGLISH

### First Wave

*The Walk and Other Stories*. Robert Calder 1957.

*Jakob von Gunten*. University of Texas Press 1969.

### Second Wave

*Selected Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982.

*Selected Stories*. Carcanet New Press 1982.

*Selected Stories*. Vintage Books 1983 (reprint of the 1982 edition)

*Jakob von Gunten*. Vintage Books 1983 (reprint of the 1969 edition).

*Robert Walser Rediscovered: Stories, Fairy-tale Plays, and Critical Responses*, ed. Mark Harman. Published for Dartmouth College by University Press of New England 1985.

*Masquerade and Other Stories*. Robert Johns Hopkins University Press 1990.

*The Walk*. Serpent's Tail 1992. (reprint of Selected Stories with a new title at its 10 years anniversary)

### Third Wave

*Jakob von Gunten*. NYRB Classics 1999 (reprint of the 1969 edition).

*The Robber*. Bison Books 2000.

*The Nimble and the Lazy: Prose Pieces*. Obscure Publications 2000.

*Selected Stories*. NYRB Classics 2002 (reprint at the 20 years anniversary of the 1982 edition).

*Nine Stories*. Obscure Publications 2003.

*Speaking To the Rose: Writings, 1912-1932*. Bison Books 2005.

*The Assistant*. New Directions 2007.

*The Tanners*. New Directions 2009.

*Answer to an Inquiry*. Ugly Duckling Presse 2010.

*Thirty Poems*. New Directions 2012.

*Microscripts*. New Directions 2010.

*Microscripts*. New Directions 2012 (reprint of the 2010 edition).

*Oppressive Light: Selected Poems by Robert Walser*. Black Lawrence Press 2012.

*Berlin Stories*. NYRB Classics 2012.

*Selected Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2012 (reprint at the 30 years anniversary of the 1982 edition)

*The Walk*. New Directions 2012.

*The Walk and Other Stories*. Serpent's Tale 2013 (reprint of the 1957 edition).

*A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories*. NYRB Classics 2013.

*A Little Ramble: In the Spirit of Robert Walser*. Coauthor Peter Fischli. New Directions 2012.

*Olympia*. Bomb 2014 (online publication in the Bomb magazine).

*Looking at Pictures*. New Directions 2015.

*Fairy Tales: Dramolettes*. New Directions 2015

*Thomas Schütte: Watercolors for Robert Walser and Donald Young*. Cahiers d'art 2015.

*Girlfriends, Ghosts, and Other Stories*. NYRB Classics 2016.

*The Battle of Sempach*. Tempo Haus 2017.

*Comedies*. Seagull Books 2018.

Glancing over the publications of each wave of translations, the numbers in themselves make evident the exponentially growing interest in Walser, with two publications in the first wave, seven publications in the second wave, and no less than 26 very diverse publications in the third and ongoing wave. Shortly after Walser's death, a few of his works were translated by Christopher Middleton, most notably *The Walk and Other Stories* from 1957. At this point Walser's writings received negligible attention in public. The second wave was induced in 1982 by the above-mentioned *Selected Stories*, basically an extended version of Middleton's translations in *The Walk*. But as it was published by the prestigious American publishing house Farrar, Straus and Giroux and issued with a preface by Sontag, it quickly achieved the status of a classic and became a great success.

Whereas this second wave was primarily based on republications of the first wave and therefore still made up a fairly limited selection of Walser's writings, the third wave is a much more extensive business. In addition to reprints, myriads of new translations have been launched, with the translator and fiery soul Susan Bernofsky as a key figure, and a wealth of previously non-translated works and fragments have found their way to the market, often initiated by small presses. Recently, a number of academic studies of Walser have also, for the first time, appeared in English,<sup>28</sup> just like Carl Seelig's biographic book on his walks with Walser was translated into English in 2017.

Surveying the Danish reception of Walser — a smaller language close to Germany — it appears that the translations into Danish follow the exact same pattern: one publication in 1966, one in 1981, and then suddenly six publications bursting out after the turn of the millennium alongside a translation of Seelig's walks with Walser in 2011.

#### TRANSLATIONS OF WALSER INTO DANISH

##### First Wave

*Spadsereturen*. Hasselbalchs Kultur-Bibliotek 1966 (translation of *Der Spaziergang*)

##### Second Wave

*Digterliv*, Brøndums Forlag 1981 (translation of *Poetenleben*)

##### Third Wave

*Jakob von Gunten*. Centrum 1999 (translation of *Jakob von Gunten*)

*En verden for sig. Udvalgte mikrogrammer*. Basilisk 2004 (translation of selected texts from *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*)

*Fritz Kochers skolestile*. Arena 2005 (translation of *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*)

*Røverren*. Basilisk 2006 (translation of *Der Räuber*)

*Helblings historie. Små digtninge*. Virkelig 2015 (translation of *Helblings Geschichte* from *Kleine Dichtungen*)

*En verden for sig. Udvalgte mikrogrammer*. Basilisk 2015 (republication of the 2004 edition)

Indubitably, the international awareness of Walser has risen tremendously. The growing public attention includes an increasing number of celebrated contemporary writers looking into Walser and declaring their love for him, among others the noble prizewinners Elfriede Jelinek in 1998 and J.M. Coetzee in 2000. The legendary American poet John Ashbery discovered Walser later in life, suddenly experimenting with the short prose piece form himself at the turn of the millennium after 50 years of poem writing. Recently, contemporary artists such as Peter Fischli (2012), Euan Macdonald (2012), Marcen van Eeden (2012), and Thomas Schütte (2015) have also turned to Walser's writings.

## **6\_Society Doesn't Exist**

Despite Walser's evident topicality, he does not practice the kind of dystopian ecopoetry dominant among contemporary writers and easily compatible with Latour's thinking. Contemporary writing is marked by a problematization of the division of culture and nature and the awareness of a crisis that is not just existential or political, but planetary. In Walser's writing, on the contrary, there is no crisis. As Walter Benjamin in his 1929 essay on Walser states about Walser's characters: "they have all been healed,"<sup>29</sup> all frolicking in the aftermaths of a preceding happy ending. Why, then, does Walser still draw so much attention?

To begin with, in Walser, there are no suspicious attitudes to be found, because there are no principle structures to be suspicious of, no underlying regime that needs to be excavated and questioned. Grand institutions are either ignored or met with lighthearted flutter. Walser had a problem with society as a whole. His retraction to a mental asylum for the last 28 years of his life indicates a preference for a smaller social group with clear routines over the confusing and demanding life in the larger society. His most famous novel, *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), is also motivated by the sincere, though impossible, wish to stay a schoolboy and eschew growing up to become a citizen.

In comparison, Latour is highly skeptical of the very notion of society. Defiantly taking over the vocabulary of a former right-wing politician, he declares: "we need to start with the idea that, as Margaret Thatcher so forcefully put it, 'society doesn't exist.'" <sup>30</sup> Rather than the traditional Durkheimian sociology of 'the social,' using society as the final explanation of everything, Latour endorses a sociology of 'association' or 'translation' in order to understand society and how it is constantly in the process of being built.

Though Walser's reasons to disregard society — as an ill-adjusted nervous wreck with an at times almost desperately cheerful attitude — seem to be far from Latour's attack on the methodologies of social science, it is striking that they still both end up setting aside any tendency to general explanatory overviews of society as a whole in favor of an excited descriptive dive into the details of the world with a microscope in their hands. In Walser's case this means parting from the Bildungsroman prevalent at his time and its plot-based effort to turn the protagonist into a public-spirited character, smoothly fitting into the given social framework. As Marianne Schuller notes, examin-

ing Walser's poetics, he liked to present his writing as "Abhandlung" or "Ab-Handlung," that is, de-action, entailing a descriptive and observing attitude, confirmed by verbs such as ">Beobachten<," ">Sehen<," ">Schauen<" and ">Betrachtung<."<sup>31</sup>

## 7 Lists and Parataxis

Walser was in his element when writing in the short prose form and thus able to escape the claims of the novel to signify an objective social unity. His writing forms an endless row of short prose pieces, strikingly reminiscent of the way Love describes the format of the sociologist Erving Goffman's work: "He tended to produce sketches rather than masterworks, and even his methodological masterpiece, *Frame Analysis*, published in 1974, is structured as a series of fugue-like treatments of a potentially infinite series of frames."<sup>32</sup> Love acclaims Goffman's insistence on just watching and making "thin descriptions" rather than explaining everything he observed with reference to an overall societal frame. Accordingly, the allergy to abstractions and generalizations shared by Walser and Goffman seems to lead to a writing style that is also formally interrelated.

Even though Latour has produced several works of a book's length, his style is also marked by his aversion to the belief in overriding explanatory structures, most noticeably in his preference for drawing up lists. This tendency is so strong that it even has its own name: Latour Litany.<sup>33</sup> As an example, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) starts out with two pages of enumeration of the phenomena appearing in the daily. A random extract goes like this: "On page twelve, the Pope, French bishops, Monsanto, the Fallopian tubes, and Texas Fundamentalists gather in a strange cohort around a single contraceptive."<sup>34</sup> By no means pretending to be exhaustive, Latour's lists typically consist of heterogeneous elements, which turn out to be interrelated actors in an intricate network.

Walser also tends to produce these kinds of lists or accumulations of words and whims, as for instance this jocular list from the prose piece *Der Spaziergang* (1917): "Höchst liebevoll und aufmerksam muß der, der spaziert, jedes kleinste lebendige Ding, sei es ein Kind, ein Hund, eine Mücke, ein Schmetterling, ein Spatz, ein Wurm, eine Blume, ein Mann, ein Haus, ein Baum, eine Hecke, eine Schnecke, eine Maus, eine Wolke, ein Berg, ein Blatt oder auch nur ein armes weggeworfenes Fetzen Schreibpapier, auf das vielleicht ein liebes gutes Schulkind seine ersten ungefügten Buchstaben geschrieben hat, studieren und betrachten."<sup>35</sup> This listing of course has the effect of

impeding the reading, since the appearance of the two clarifying verbs at the end is spun out. Therefore, instead of being dictated by the final meaning, the rhythm of the list takes over the unfolding of the sentence, the quick staccato of the primarily monosyllabic words generating one new word after another.

In Eve Sedgwick's influential essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), she presents the first imperative of paranoia (that is, critique) as "no bad surprises,"<sup>36</sup> referring to paranoia as a feeling of threat and anxiety in terms of what the text might contrive and thus a need to control it. But it seems very difficult to control the above Walser quote and get rid of its surprises. According to Sontag, what can be interpreted and therefore controlled, is content: "By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art."<sup>37</sup> In the quote, however, the content is efficiently emptied before the critic can get to it, encouraging the reader to assume a different attitude, willing to follow and be moved by the unpredictable course of the sentence. Even the category "smallest and liveliest things," supposed to be encapsulated by the list, is disregarded in favor of the rhythm, as you may ask yourself whether e.g. a house [Haus] or a mountain [Berg] is really small and lively. As words in a flow, yes, but in reality? But maybe it is all about the willingness to carefully observe any one of these phenomena *as if* they were living creatures; just as important to pay attention to — in keeping with the function of aesthetic attention according to Citton as an efficient convertor of facts into concerns.

In an interview, Graham Harman claims about the lists, referring to Latour: "They can be found in any author who wants to reawaken our awareness of the particularity of individual things."<sup>38</sup> To him the purpose of the list form is to draw our attention to the peculiarities of individual phenomena. Precisely this intention also seems to motivate Walser's serial principle, whether it finds expression in an endless row of small prose pieces, actual lists — or coordinated sentences.

In one of his short prose pieces, Walser points directly to the serial principle of his writing, making the narrator ponder on a bouquet of flowers:

Ich pflege Blumen immer so zusammenzustellen, daß im Zustand des Vereinigseins keine Form, keine Farbe neben der anderen zu kurz kommt, eine jede Gelegenheit hat, sich zu zeigen. Indem ich keiner einzigen erlaube, zu stark hervorzutreten, gönne ich einer jeden ihren bescheidenen Platz. Jede Erscheinung sage ich mir, ist verpflichtet, sich so aufzuführen, daß sie sich ihres Lebens freut, aber in solchem Sinn, daß die Nebenerscheinung dasselbe zu tun sich in der Lage befindet.<sup>39</sup>

This passage epitomizes Walser's writing device, obstinately resisting the subordination of anything and insisting that all individual pieces come into their own. Accordingly, the single sentence serves as an important structuring principle of his writing, carefully coordinated with the impression of the "bouquet" as a whole.

This principle finds its extreme version in Walser's last work, his so-called microscripts. These were created by means of what he called 'die Bleistiftmethode,' consisting in writing down with a pencil microscopic letters of 1-2mm jammed up against each other. Besides the obsession with smallness revealed by this writing style, Christian Benne convincingly relates it to a surrealist technique of automatic writing, impeding any second thoughts the writer might have: "Weil die Mikroschrift schon im Moment der Notation vom Auge nicht mehr erfassbar ist, folgt der Autor in jedem Moment des Schreibprozesses notgedrungenerweise selbst einer Linie, die immer nur nach vorne führt."<sup>40</sup> As a technique demanding the greatest exertion in the moment of writing and excluding the writer's ability to get an overview of his text or make corrections, since the letters were almost invisible (the microscripts remained unreadable until they were finally decoded in 1968 by Jochen Greven and the publication of the immense material began — completed in 2000), 'die Bleistiftmethode' leads to a writing where each sentence stands alone, just like each flower in the bouquet. Not only is the novel torn to short prose pieces, the coherent narrative of the short story is also broken down to single sentences, each shining separately.

When Best, Sharon, and Marcus characterize description as "a noninstrumental accumulation of particulars with no immediately clear purpose"<sup>41</sup> — which is an unacceptable device to the interpreter, but not to this trio — description definitely seems to match up with the quality of Walser's writing. Such broad view of description also embraces the "desire of the reparative impulse" decidedly outlined by Sedgwick as "additive and accretive."<sup>42</sup>

## **8\_Small Stuff and Stupid Ants**

*What* does Walser's heaps of sentences describe then? In short: one continuous and excited speech about the small stuff and trivial matters of everyday life, e.g.: "O, ich schälte einst einen Apfel, und entzückend war's, wie mir das Werk gelang"<sup>43</sup> and "Wie ich mich erinnere, schlug ich einmal einem Maler vor, eine Leberwurst mit allen er-

denklichen Wirklichkeitsnuancen abzubilden.”<sup>44</sup> It is urgent for the first-person narrator to bring the importance of all these trifles to light, since to him they stand as the very reason to write in the first place: “Ich schaute die einfachsten Gegenständlichkeiten, z.B. Blätter, wie verliebt an, nein, nicht so, aber mit sehr wohltuender Aufmerksamkeit. [...] Vielleicht bist du der Kleinigkeiten überdrüssig. [...] Ohne eine Fülle der Beachtung des Kleinen, ja sogar Kleinchen, ist gerade der großformatige Lebensroman unmöglich.”<sup>45</sup>

This big novel of life is a quiet, but radical denunciation of grandiose words and exemplary storylines directed at a higher end. As the schoolboy Jakob von Gunten wonders: “Man irrt sich stets, wenn man große Worte in den Mund nimmt.”<sup>46</sup> In Walser’s universe it is all about *not* to express oneself in a bombastic language, *not* to make a lot of fuss and stand out from the crowd: “Es empfiehlt sich sehr im Leben, beständig ein wenig unterhalb des Niveaus der Sensation zu bleiben.”<sup>47</sup> In this way, Walser’s characters reject to be heroes, showpieces, the result of a successful development and self-fulfillment.

Latour and the Latourian-inspired literary scholars treated in this article reject a comparable kind of hero worship, namely the heroic status of the scholar whose penetrating and ethically superior eye allegedly sees what no other is able to see. Whereas Walser replaces the traditional hero of the novel with humble and unpretentious figures strolling around enjoying this or that banality, Latour replaces the traditional social science scholar with an equally humble, strolling and down-to-earth character: an ant. Felski sums up the shift made by Latour concisely, depicting the worn-out scholar as an eagle compared to the ant engaged in Latour’s actor network-theory (ANT): “We are no longer afforded a panoramic vision of the social order: to do actor-network theory is not to soar like an eagle, gazing down critically or dispassionately at the distant multitudes below, but to trudge along like an ANT, marveling at the intricate ecologies and diverse microorganisms that lie hidden among thick blades of grass. It is to slow down at each step, to forgo theoretical shortcuts and to attend to the words of our fellow actors.”<sup>48</sup>

ANT basically implies descending to the perspective of an ant, or, in Latour’s words “a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler.”<sup>49</sup> In that position, the view of society as a whole fades out of sight, together with your own role as the savior of the people. In return you get to actually talk with people, listen to their stories,

follow, observe, and describe actors. According to Latour the way of the ant is the only way to actually understand the multiple activities constantly shaping and re-shaping the networks of the social.

Walser is similarly devoted to the wealth of details in a life as banal and insignificant as that of an ant, as for instance when he turns a fly into the protagonist of the split novel he keeps referring to.<sup>50</sup> Or when, in another text, the ordinary quartet of a heap of ash, a needle, a pencil, and a match make up the literary material. Christian Benne notes about this literary device, comparing Walser to the surrealist tradition: “Wie literarische Readymades *avant la lettre* fügen sie Alltagsartefakte zu künstlerischen Installationen zusammen.”<sup>51</sup> In his discussion of the contemporary art scene, Halsall also touches upon readymades and installation art. It is possible to regard such arrangements, Halsall interestingly argues, on one hand as the ultimate *contraction* of any aesthetic orientations, as anti-aesthetics, but on the other hand also as a boundless *expansion* of the scope of aesthetics, providing us with “a means of rethinking our encounters with all objects in the world in aesthetic terms.”<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Halsall poses this idea in a passing remark, Walser’s uncompromising practice points to its centrality, potentially turning all our experiences of the world into matters of concern. In the same spirit as a lot of conceptual art, such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s recent *The Weather* (2005), which turns the most useless and trashy remnants of the information society — old weather reports — into poetry, Walser is motivated by a great care for the stuff he comes across. By insisting on describing things on their own premises, regardless of what kind of meaning they might have been assigned by society, even the appearance of a prostitute proves to be “eine fabelhafte Nachtgestalt;”<sup>53</sup> a captivating meeting intoxicated with colors rather than triggering an automatic condemnation of the prostitute as a social fact.

Anne Fuchs views Walser’s so-called “micro-poetics of marginality”<sup>54</sup> as an opposition to “the logic of capitalism that discovers an economic value in high visibility, prestige and attention” and promotes “surfaces and modes of externality.”<sup>55</sup> Walser indeed did not engage in the discussions of commodity aesthetics at his time, as Julia Maas notes.<sup>56</sup> But instead of placing Walser’s writing on the other side, in privacy and internality, as Fuchs tends to, his occupation with small stuff instead works as an *undoing* of the modern dichotomy of external and internal — or, in Latour’s way of putting

it, of fact and concern. In Walser's writing, the most exhausted trivial objects turn into something enchanting, something of great concern.

In Walser's universe, on a thematic level, nothing is too small or too trivial to be poeticized, just as on the formal level, the sentences are not subordinated to one another. The same goes for the ontology of Latour's ANT. The idea that a true reality hides behind the ideological veil and needs to be made visible by critique is replaced with a flat ontology in which all actors are equally real and equally important. Nothing is too small to be effective; to make a difference, and therefore everything is a potential object of interest to the ANT researcher. To both Walser and Latour, it is a matter of approach, an alternative way of perceiving the world.

Citton's notion of aesthetic experience clarifies the link: "The facts that matter in an aesthetic experience only surface once the matters of immediate concern (along with their preexisting categorizations) have been temporarily put to rest, so that we can let unsuspected categories emerge from a freewheeling attention that discovers new facts and new concerns within the matter under scrutiny."<sup>57</sup> Walser's writing directly manifests such "freewheeling attention," consistently disregarding any "preexisting categorizations" that might stick to the phenomena at hand, allowing them to emerge and brighten up on their own.

In order to adopt such an open-minded attitude, it is necessary to leave behind all that has been learned so far. To Latour, the stupidity of the ant therefore is paradoxically a mark of honor: "one must refuse again to be intelligent. One must remain as myopic as an ant in order to carefully misconstrue what 'social' usually means."<sup>58</sup> It is better to be stupid than buying into grand intellectual explanations of what the true world looks like. Walser's writings also imply a willful reduction to a state of stupidity. All along the line, his characters stubbornly insist on their right to remain unintelligent and unaffected. Jakob von Gunten for instance explicitly prefers to speak "Dummheiten"<sup>59</sup> and has a sharp eye for the merits of mediocrity: "Daß ich der Gescheiteste unter ihnen [seinen Schulkameraden] bin, das ist vielleicht gar nicht einmal so sehr erfreulich [...], ich will hell zu sehen versuchen, aber ich mag nicht hochmüteln, mich nie und nimmer über meine Umgebung erhaben fühlen."<sup>60</sup> In fact, the characters seem convinced that to keep low, bow the neck, and know nothing is the formula for seeing clear [hell] and doing well; that the simple-minded attitude simply offers a richer gamut of experiences. "Es kann einer noch so töricht und unwissend sein: wenn er sich ein wenig zu schicken,

zu schmiegen und zu bewegen weiß, ist er noch nicht verloren, sondern findet seinen Weg durch das Leben vielleicht besser als der Kluge und Mit-Wissen-Vollgepackte.”<sup>61</sup>

In Walser, enlightenment does not foster action. Rather, a sort of counterintuitive agency and adroitness seem to lurk in simplicity. But it is a simplicity that has been thoroughly considered, a conscious choice made on the basis of an enlightened state — as when Latour encourages us to refuse *again* to be intelligent. Therefore when Mareike Schildmann notes, that “Walsers Werk ist [...] von [...] einer Affinität zur Unwissenheit, Ignoranz und Naivität gekennzeichnet,”<sup>62</sup> his writing is of course not to be confused with pure stupidity; it is highly complex precisely qua its exploration of stupidity. Rather than ignorance, a more precise choice of word might be indifference — as it is a matter of assuming an indifferent attitude to (intellectual) abstractions vis-à-vis a caring attitude to particulars.

### **9\_Agency as Being Void or Being Bound?**

Like Walser’s characters, Latour also finds himself at the end of the project of enlightenment, the title of one of his early books, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), defiantly setting the stage. The two most outstanding thinkers having engaged in Walser’s writings — Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben — are also preoccupied with the condition of being *after* something. To Benjamin, Walser’s universe is *after* the fairy tale, whereas to Agamben, it is *after* the grand theological story of redemption.

This state of being after some kind of crisis, cf. Benjamin’s diagnostic observation that the characters have all been healed, seems highly relevant to Sedgwick’s wish to move from the dogma of paranoia to the inclusion of reparative processes in literary studies. Drawing on psychoanalysis and affect theory, Sedgwick also operates with the idea of having gone *through* something: “the reparative motive of seeking pleasure, after all, arrives, by Klein’s account, only with the achievement of a depressive position.”<sup>63</sup> Compared to paranoia, the reparative approach is, in Sedgwick’s account, another, and in some ways more beneficial, way to cope with the same challenges. Often paranoia does not seem to lead anywhere, though its self-corroborating logic makes it difficult to renounce it: “a negative affect theory gains in strength, paradoxically, by virtue of the continuing failures of its strategies to afford protection through successful avoidance of the experience of negative affect.”<sup>64</sup> The reparative process, in contrast,

is about seeking “pleasure” and is directly “ameliorate.”<sup>65</sup> The cheerfulness of Walser’s characters seems to have successfully resorted to reparative devices.

To both Benjamin and Agamben the crux of this success is the replacement of the fixed progress implied by the narrative form with the display and free play of single phenomena. As when Jakob von Gunten, despite being one of Walser’s characters who resembles the hero of a novel the most, amusedly states: “Ich entwickle mich nicht.”<sup>66</sup> Concurrently, potential links to any upper purpose or meaning are carefully hampered. Fritz in *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (1904) thus insists on taking his own words at face value when describing how the schoolboys sometimes laugh behind the teacher’s back, assuring that it is the physical back itself — the literal meaning — that makes them laugh. In that way, the reader is invited to stay on the surface of language, similar to what Best and Marcus espouse. At the same time, the emptying of the figurative dimension is grist to Agamben’s philosophical mill.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Agamben’s political orientation is far from Latour, their visions still do have some striking similarities. The concept of ‘profanation’ is pivotal in Agamben’s thinking. ‘Profanation’ is a process in which the phenomena detach from any general structure in order to exist and unfold on their own premises, encouraging playful interaction. According to Agamben, Walser creates a completely profanized universe in which the characters and all the elements no longer have any higher order to refer to. They are not assigned meaning from above. Like Latour incessantly seeks to promote an attention to the phenomena as they are, Agamben’s project of profanation is also basically an attempt to bring the phenomena back to themselves. And here Walser is his great example.

But there are also crucial differences between Agamben and Latour. Their common affinity to Walser both clarifies and stunts up their distinct positions — and indicates the astounding scope of Walser’s writings. Agamben refers to Walser for the first time in *The Coming Community* (1990), expressing a vision of the social as a gathering of singularities freed from any preexisting content, for example described in this way: “such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class.”<sup>67</sup> Agamben’s choice of words mimes one of Walser’s most pronounced stylistic characteristics: articles, pronouns, and adverbs appearing in pairs, as when Jakob von Gunten coins the beginning of his career in this way: “Jakob von Gunten, Sohn rechtschaffener Eltern, den und den Tag geboren,

da und da aufgewachsen.”<sup>68</sup> Throughout Walser’s writings, similar-sounding sentences like “In hellbeleuchteten Stübchen lasen irgendwelche Personen in den und den Schriften”<sup>69</sup> gush forth, the reduplication of all these particles deftly emptying the statement of content, clearing it from any pre-given definitions.

On the one hand, such devices might seem similar to Latourian-inspired Citton’s request to put to rest our ‘preexisting categorizations’ in order to make room for other hitherto unacknowledged ‘concerns.’ On the other hand however, much unlike the Latourian mindset, Agamben finds in Walser the embryonic state of potentiality, preferring to keep everything at a stage where it has not yet assumed a distinct form. To Agamben real agency is a state in which everything in principle can be used for anything and the complex history of a thing therefore has become completely irrelevant.

Latour opens his early manifesto-like text “Irreductions” with a very different principle: “Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else.”<sup>70</sup> Even though Latour does want to get in touch with the single phenomena, it is always on the assumption that they can never be regarded as self-sufficient islands, that they are always constructed, in a relation. To Latour it makes no sense to disapprove of bonds and ties, since they are fundamental; the only way to achieve agency is to enter into relations and arrangements and be affected, not to aim at an illusory detached state.

Walser’s efficient, almost childlike ignorance of general frameworks makes him relevant to both Agamben and Latour. But where does Walser stand in their disagreement? No doubt that Walser has a strong Agambenian predilection of the blank. But his sensitive registrations often also have an eye for the ways things turn out to be interconnected. In a reflection on things as a motif in Walsers writing, Julia Maas differentiates between two different approaches: “die Dinge an sich” on the one hand and “die interaction zwischen Ihnen und den Figuren”<sup>71</sup> on the other, the latter being in the majority. Though she lists a short prose piece like “Rede an einen Knopf”<sup>72</sup> in the first category, it nevertheless presents a high degree of interaction. In the piece an old threadbare button one day comes off the narrator’s shirt, suddenly making him aware of its importance. He sees how his presentable cloth is in fact held together by small unimpressive dots, the buttons, connecting it all. The modest industriousness of the button — its property of being the very connecting point — becomes both dear and exemplary to the narrator who feels a strong urge to take care of it.

## 10\_Walser as Kayaker

The button can also be seen as an occasion of identification for the narrator as a *writer* whose greatest task too is to be a connecting point. That dimension in Walser seems to pass by Agamben. But what kind of connections do Walser's writings then seek to make? Latour makes a distinction between the aesthetics of matters of fact and the aesthetics of matters of concern, illustrated by the figure of bridge building compared to that of kayaking: "For the bridge builders, events are always lacking something, namely the law of their development which is always supposed to be *somewhere else*,"<sup>73</sup> and that is what the bridge is built for, to jump from the fact (one river bank) to its meaning (the other river bank). The bridge builder *needs* the bridge. But if you go by kayak down the river, Latour notes, the bridge becomes irrelevant, and the banks will look different to you. In a kayak the task is to go with the flow, to navigate, to continually attune to the ever-changing surroundings, to find the right rhythm in sync with whatever you come across.

Picking up the long Walser quote from earlier in this article, Walser's stroller seems to be a true kayaking expert — keenly aware, open, tilting: "Höchst liebevoll und aufmerksam muß der, der spaziert, jedes kleinste lebendige Ding, sei es ein Kind, ein Hund, eine Mücke, [...] studieren und betrachten."<sup>74</sup> This stroller is constantly alert and on the move, openly attending to any phenomena on the way. And what is the principle of 'die Bleistiftmethode' after all if not a kayaking, the only way being forwards, down the river, from moment to moment, one sentence to the next? Connection in Walser's writings is not like a bridge transferring facts to their true meanings (und thus really wiping out the facts) but rather like striking a note, which then starts to resonate with a number of unpredictable phenomena, or, as Latour would have it, to "co-respond."<sup>75</sup> It is a way of getting in touch with the world, moving along with it, relating to it — in short: an aesthetics of matters of concern.

Roland Barthes' request in his influential essay "From Work To Text" to put the signs in motion, make them swing with you, seems peculiarly close to this art of kayaking suggested by Latour. Whereas the story goes that ANT took off in the field of STS, subsequently diffusing into sociology and now finally disseminating the humanities and literary studies in particular, the process seems to be more complicated than that, since Latour appears heavily influenced by literature and art, his practical advices having an unmistakable similarity to e.g. French literary studies.

When comparing Latour to Walser's dealings with connections, the question presses to the fore about whether Latour wants to follow the actors at hand in order to trace the complex historical processes by which they have been made, or, since networks are constantly changing, rather stimulate and partake in new connections and transformations? The idea of kayaking seems to favor the latter — much in the spirit of Walser.

## **11\_Conclusion**

To interpret is to build bridges. Or, in Sontag's words: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world [...]. The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough."<sup>76</sup> Walser's delighted descriptions of one banality after another cannot be interpreted, cannot be torn to pieces. They already are pieces. And these pieces build up their own world. Walser's insistence to lovingly attend to small phenomena that are left unnoticed in the big picture correlates with the reparative impulse described by Sedgwick as a weak theory of positive affects contrary to the grand theory of negative affects termed paranoia, which has gained dominance in literary studies.

This is not to conclude that Walser's writings are just cute and easygoing. At times, the appreciative mood in Walser seems almost compulsive or refractory, as if the narrator was really of the opposite opinion. For instance when Fritz Kocher outspokenly praises the school system, greatly exaggerating the role of a well-behaved schoolboy, the compliant attitude proves to potentially hold a strong aggression. It is decisive, however, that such instances mainly attack structure-building efforts, be it the authority exercised at a school (on the level of content) or interpretative efforts seeking to explain the text to death, reduce it to a single controllable meaning (on the level of reception). Not just the narrators' chats on this and that, but also the very form of Walser's writings aggressively challenge the project of interpretation, as the unmanageability of the massive mass of small texts leads to its meltdown. While the single sentences are crystal clear and comprehensible, the tremendous compilation of these sentences fools any reader seeking to make sense of it all. Instead, the texts give the reader a lesson in how to tune in or 'co-respond'. Such a 'co-responding' implies a close interaction between 'the way we read' — a currently highly debated subject in literary studies — and the way a text is written.

"[D]escription can take us out of ourselves, as when we try to see a mite or to see like a mite"; "description connects us to others — to those described,"<sup>77</sup> Best, Sharon,

and Marcus claim, though not clarifying whether these claims apply to a specific way of reading or specific textual traits. The phrase ‘to see a mite or seeing like a mite’ actually conflates the act of looking at (e.g. reading) something and the object being looked at (e.g. the text). In much the same way, the ANT researcher who wants to study the multiplicity of small actors, travelling the length and breath of messy anthills, must *become* an ant. And in Walser, not least, the eager attention to the banalities of everyday life is attributed to characters aiming at being banal nobodies themselves. These examples all point in the same direction: the inseparability of the object of study and the approach — or, in the narrower context of literary studies, of text and reading.

The explosion of interest in Walser since the turn of the millennium is proof that Latour’s project is no isolated actor, but bound up with a currently expanding network in both academia and art seeking to break the logjam of critique and find new ways of experiencing and relating, ready to perceive texts and the world as messy anthills. Countless contemporary artists, writers, and readers turn to Walser because his writings *are* messy anthills, inciting them — and teaching them how — to adopt a different attitude that does not dissect and control, but is rather attuned and attentive, willing to get dirt on the knees and constantly meet and respond to even the tiniest things at hand.

Writing in the 1960’s, the 2000’s and at the present moment, Sontag, Sedgwick, and the current Latourian-inspired literary scholars with Felski at the head, all seek to bring the power of art into academia, to take seriously art’s capacity to — in often unpredictable ways — thrill, move, engage, and change people; or, with Sontag, to reacclaim what art *does* rather than explaining to death what art *means*.<sup>78</sup> Felski’s attempt to translate ANT into literary studies is really about acknowledging literary works as actors. Instead of just being subjected to our readings, literature itself might *afford* and *inspire* the current academic debates on methodology. Literary studies might in fact learn something from the sudden popularity of Walser’s open-minded attentiveness that does not care much about established truths. That is really what Latour calls for when envisioning a common building site where actors like art historians, literary scholars, and writers can fruitfully exchange tools and products with STS scholars and sociologists, paving the way for spotting new matters of concern.

Walser reminds us that an essential dimension of art, after all, *is* concern. Mareike Schildmann notes how his writings “konterkarieren den Anspruch eines bürgerlichen Kunstverständnisses, das die Literatur in den Dienst der Wahrheit gestellt hat.”<sup>79</sup> Thus

in Walser, literature does not buy into the modern culture of knowledge and its separation of matter from meaning. Walser shows that literature's task is not to point out the correctness of something, but to point out the importance of something, that is, to turn matters of fact into matters of concern. It thus seems that, in order to make that turn, we need art. Latour's thinking cannot do without art, as he is very well aware. Therefore, to question the expediency of comparing e.g. philosophy and art would be to question Latour's whole project. In his view, such comparisons are exactly what we need.

And, in fact, the blurring of such lines seems to a great extent to define the present moment. The descriptive and caring impulse common to Latour and Walser is one example. But it is striking that just as the interest in Walser exploded, a strong engagement with factual matters appeared all over in contemporary literature, a tendency that has not yet tailed off. Whereas the field of science, in Latour's hands, leans towards artistic practices, the field of aesthetics now also seems to lean towards facts, manifesting an outspoken distaste of fiction in dealing with (auto)biographical material and real phenomena. This situation of closeness between the disciplines offers a unique opportunity for collaboration; allowing literature some agency; inviting it to partake in rethinking the *raison d'être* of literary studies as a serious engagement with any concern pressing to the fore, opposed to the skeptical attitude towards all phenomena nourished by the act of distinguishing facts from fiction, matter from meaning, in the name of critique.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This article was written with financial support from the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF127).
- <sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 7 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Sontag 1966').
- <sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, "Walser's Voice," foreword in Robert Walser, *The Walk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), vvi–ix, here: vii–viii (hereafter abbreviated as 'Sontag 1982').
- <sup>4</sup> Sontag 1982, viii.
- <sup>5</sup> Sontag 1982, viii.
- <sup>6</sup> Mareike Schildmann, "4.23 Wissen, Night-Wissen, Dummheit," in *Robert Walser-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. Lucas Marco Gisi (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2015), 340–344, here: 340 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Schildmann').
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading," in *Representations* 108.1 (2009), 1–21, here: 14–15.

- <sup>8</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 175 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Felski 2015’). Felski cites from: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 245 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Latour 2005’).
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, and Heather Love, “Building a Better Description,” in *Representations* 135.1 (2016), 1–21, here: 15 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Best, Marcus & Love’).
- <sup>10</sup> Rita Felski, “Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory,” in *Comparative Literature Studies* 53.4 (2016), 747–765, here: 760.
- <sup>11</sup> Yves Citton, “Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene,” in *New Literary History* 47 (2016), 309–329, here: 317 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Citton’).
- <sup>12</sup> Citton, 317.
- <sup>13</sup> Citton, 317.
- <sup>14</sup> Citton, 317.
- <sup>15</sup> Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” in *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010), 371–391, here: 384–386.
- <sup>16</sup> Best, Marcus & Love, 11–12.
- <sup>17</sup> Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA/London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- <sup>18</sup> Felski 2015, 164–165.
- <sup>19</sup> Rita Felski, “From Literary Theory to Critical Method,” in *Profession* (2008), 108–116.
- <sup>20</sup> Felski 2015, 41–42.
- <sup>21</sup> Felski 2015, 42–43.
- <sup>22</sup> Bruno Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2008), 35, 41 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Latour 2008’).
- <sup>23</sup> Latour 2008, 46.
- <sup>24</sup> Sontag 1966, 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Sontag 1966, 14.
- <sup>26</sup> Felski 2015, 182.
- <sup>27</sup> For a detailed overview, see Susan Bernofsky and Lucas Marco Gisi, “5.9.2 USA, England,” in *Robert Walser-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. Lucas Marco Gisi (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2015), 396–400.
- <sup>28</sup> Among others Samuel Frederick and Valerie Hefernan, *Robert Walser: A Companion* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018) and Jan Plug, *They Have All Been Healed* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).
- <sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Robert Walser,” in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 372. Original German text: “sie sind alle geheilt.”
- <sup>30</sup> Bruno Latour, “What if we Talked Politics a Little?” in *Contemporary Political Theory* 2 (2003), 143–164, here: 143.
- <sup>31</sup> Marianne Schuller, “4.2 Poetik,” in *Robert Walser-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. Lucas Marco Gisi (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2015), 236–245, here: 242–243.
- <sup>32</sup> Heather Love, “Close Reading and Thin Description,” in *Public Culture* 25.3 (2013), 401–434, here: 420.

- 33 See Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What it's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 34 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 2.
- 35 Robert Walser, *Der Spaziergang* (Frauenfeld/Leipzig: Huber & Co, 1917), 55–56.
- 36 Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 132–152, here: 130 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Sedgwick’).
- 37 Sontag 1966, 8.
- 38 Diarmuid Hester, “Missives From The Fortress Of Uncertainty,” in *Mute*, June 8, 2011, accessed January 23, 2019, <<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/missives-fortress-uncertainty>>.
- 39 Robert Walser, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*. Vol. 5 (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 159 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Walser 2003c’).
- 40 Christian Benne, “‘Schrieb je ein Schriftsteller so aufs Geratewohl?’: der surrealistische Walser,” *Surrealismus in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*, ed. Friederike Reents (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter), 47–70, here: 61 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Benne’).
- 41 Best, Sharon & Marcus, 14.
- 42 Sedgwick, 149.
- 43 Robert Walser, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 69 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Walser 2003a’).
- 44 Robert Walser, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 153 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Walser 2003b’).
- 45 Walser 2003b, 69.
- 46 Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten: Ein Tagebuch* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1909), 176 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Walser 1909’).
- 47 Walser 2003a, 75.
- 48 Felski 2015, 157–158.
- 49 Latour 2005, 171.
- 50 Walser 2003c, 170.
- 51 Benne, 56.
- 52 Francis Halsall, “Actor-Network Aesthetics: The Conceptual Rhymes of Bruno Latour and Contemporary Art,” in *New Literary History* 47.2 & 3 (2016), 439–461, here: 452.
- 53 Robert Walser, *Das Gesamtwerk*, Vol. 3 (Geneve/Hamburg: Helmut Kossodo, 1967), 58.
- 54 Anne Fuchs, “Why Smallness Matters: Smallness, Attention and Distraction in Franz Kafka’s and Robert Walser’s Short Prose,” in *Kafka und die kleine Poesie der Moderne*, ed. Manfred Engel and Ritchie Robertson (Wuerzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010), 167–181, here: 174 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Fuchs’).
- 55 Fuchs, 171.
- 56 Julia Maas, “4.18 Dinge,” in *Robert Walser-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung*, ed. Lucas Marco Gisi (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2015), 324–327, here: 324 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Maas’).
- 57 Citton, 317.
- 58 Latour 2005, 171.
- 59 Walser 1909, 11.

- 60 Walser 1909, 24.
- 61 Walser 1909, 33.
- 62 Schildmann, 340.
- 63 Sedgwick, 138.
- 64 Sedgwick, 134.
- 65 Sedgwick, 144.
- 66 Walser 1909, 181.
- 67 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6.
- 68 Walser 1909, 58–49.
- 69 Walser 2003c, 50.
- 70 Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 158 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Latour 1988’).
- 71 Maas, 325.
- 72 Robert Walser, *Das Gesamtwerk*. Vol. 3 (Geneve/Hamburg: Helmut Kossodo, 1967), 108–110.
- 73 Latour 2008, 21.
- 74 See note 26.
- 75 Latour 2008, 22.
- 76 Sontag 1966, 7.
- 77 Best, Sharon & Marcus, 14.
- 78 Sontag 1966, 5.
- 79 Schildmann, 341.