

Reto Sorg

Walking as a Philosophy of Life

### *Living Poetry*

*The Walk* is one of Robert Walser's most well-known works. First published in 1917 by a small Swiss publisher, it is now read around the world; full of dynamic beauty and verve, pensive and humorous in equal measure, and infused with the wit and spirit of a writer on the margins, it is a prime example of modern literature's power to fascinate. Even where the story's irony and subjectivity border on the eccentric, even bizarre, the text never comes across like mere navel-gazing—instead it presents a self-aware individual's unique perspective on the world.

In a cunningly doubled narrative—the writer at his desk summarizing his walk, and the walker afoot thinking about what he'll write—the main character rambles through a number of smaller and larger episodes of small-town everyday life linked together through the motif of the walk. His stroll, which takes up the whole day, unfolds as a whole roundelay of varied and entertaining encounters, conversations, experiences, and impressions, some of them extremely comic, casting life itself as a combination of social interaction, tempting eye candy, and solitary make-believe. The setting of the story is not named but is unmistakably Biel, the small Swiss city where Walser was born in 1878, spent the first twenty years of his life, and lived in again from 1913 to 1920, after his return from Berlin.

Indeed, this is Walser's greatness: his art exists with all its playfulness and its depth right in the midst of life. It touches on everything, afraid of nothing: dreams, animals, civil servants, working women, pity, flowers, professors, the sky, tourism, religion, fear, love, music, humor, death, all forming a whole. The richness of experience and observation, bound together casually yet forcefully by the walk, is never presented for its own sake: it is meant to inspire, to open readers' eyes to everyday life, both their own and other people's.

### *Wanderlust*

It is au courant these days to reject stasis and remain constantly in motion; the mandates of our current era are eager facility and endless flexibility. Mobility is practically a sacred duty, while staying still—God forbid!—is always a step backwards. The pleasure we take in contemplative walks is itself part of the global ideology of progress: they let us satisfy our opposing need for slow movement and rest. Speedy progress and contemplative strolls are two ideas based in the same paradigm: introspective, determined walking on foot, in the

service of relaxation, contemplation, and inspiration, is socially acceptable as a reaction against the dynamic forces of the Industrial Revolution and the technological and social changes they gave rise to.

This theme evolved in the 18th Century and is still current today, and the following, by no means exhaustive list of examples should suffice to show how widespread it is: Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Walk" [*Der Spaziergang*], a monument to confident bourgeois existence; Henry David Thoreau's "Walking," romanticizing a wilderness threatened by civilization; Walter Benjamin cultivating the flaneur's drift through the city; Vilém Flusser defining human existence as nomadic; Lucius Burckhardt exploring the dialectical bond between natural beauty and ideas of exploitation; Peter Handke criss-crossing the European metropolis; Erling Kagge's understanding of walking as a micro-anarchic protest action; Bob Dylan's "Let Me Die in My Footsteps," a hymn to determining one's own path through life.

What those who proclaim these varieties of "wanderlust" (to use Rebecca Solnit's term) have in common is that they are all examples of the modern individual, portraying the world not as something abstract and universal but as subjective, constantly changing personal experience. The walk is the easily available prototype par excellence of this wandering form of attention, directed equally at the everyday and the exceptional: you walk in some ritualized fashion, usually in territory familiar to you, sometimes consciously according to plan and sometimes aimlessly and absentmindedly, and eventually you return to your starting point, having become, so to speak, a different person.

### *A Shifting Time Frame*

Seen in this way, walking—as Walser's story puts it at one point—is "not only healthy and lovely, it is also of service and useful" (tr. Christopher Middleton; *Selected Stories*, NYRB Classics edition, p. 86). Walser recognized early on the scope and significance of linking perception to the individual. As his career went on, his work was more and more based on seeing the world from an individual perspective. Every "I" exists in a "now"—at a particular time and in a particular place. Walser's *Jetztzeitstil* [present-moment style] doesn't try to present this here and now in any unmediated way, depicting the stream of perception and consciousness as authentically as possible in the vein of the Naturalist writers or James Joyce. Rather, Walser's work embodies the process of becoming conscious: the marvelous coming together of life experience, lived encounters, memory, reflection, and description in language.

In *The Walk*, Walser found an exemplary form for this process. Informed by the horrors of the First World War—the text was written at its murderous peak, when ten thousand soldiers a day were losing their lives on the Western Front in France—Walser’s story highlights the subjective view as a critical antithesis to a collective experience constantly shaped by nationalism and political power. What makes the text groundbreaking is that it doesn’t naively share with the reader a walker’s perceptions but instead tells the story of how a canny and self-aware writer uses walking to grasp and express the interrelationships among personal, philosophical, political, and existential aspects of experience.

The walk, described in the past tense, and the remembering and writing down of the walk, described in the present, are temporally distinguished but increasingly blur together as the story progresses. Experience, memory, reflection, and representation thus form a kind of autonomous shifting time frame with its own reality. Walser’s text never purports to depict reality as such; from the start, it emphasizes its own contingency and subjectivity and reminds us of its dependence on the circumstances of its own origins.

More than almost any of his other works, *The Walk* embodies Walser’s conception of literature. It decisively poeticizes the world, not as an act of eccentric, ivory-tower romanticism but as a way of approaching everyday life; it has political content, in that it privileges not the major highways and main clauses of the world but the byways and detours, the minutiae and sideshows. In the life of the individual, what matters are not things in themselves or official statements about them but personal ideas and perspectives. And these unfold step by step.

*Translated from German by Damion Searls*