READING ROBERT WALSER

Criticism, creativity, correspondence

Simon Wortham

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

UCLPRESS

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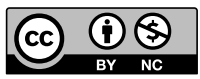

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For Alfie, with love and admiration

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Preface

This is a book about Robert Walser, the German-speaking Swiss author whose writing, once almost forgotten, has been the subject of increasing critical debate and literary scholarship in recent years. But it is also a book not merely about him, since it is more particularly about the letters he wrote to Frieda Mermet between 1913 and 1942, after Walser had left Berlin having failed to achieve commercial success as a writer and before (but also during) the time he spent in Swiss asylums. Mermet was a laundry manager at the Bellelay psychiatric hospital in the Jura foothills above Walser's hometown of Biel, where the writer's sister worked as teacher of the children of its employees. Then again, it is less a book about those letters as the surviving 'side' of the correspondence – Mermet's having been lost, as is so often the case in such 'literary' exchanges (Felice's letters to Kafka being another example examined in this book) – than it is a study devoted to the question of missing correspondence itself. In that sense, it is as much a book about Frieda Mermet as the subject of this question, the figure of lost letters if you like, as it is about either Walser or his epistolary legacy. While the first chapter seeks to familiarise the reader with Walser's life and writing, covering the major aspects one might expect of a critical biography in order to contextualise these letters, both in terms of their main themes and the conditions of their writing, the second chapter turns to this question of missing correspondence, comparing the case of Mermet to that of Felice Bauer in order to suggest that Kafka's various attempts to 'absent' Felice from the correspondence, long before her letters were even registered as lost, is in sharp contrast to the nature of the exchange enjoyed by Walser and Mermet. Beyond that, however, it endeavours to rethink the grounds of many of our assumptions about lost letters by woman, notably in circumstances such as these, and to question the implications of such ideas of loss, absence or lack from the perspective of a deconstructive gender politics. Here, the writings of Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous suggestively connect questions of gender to those of *address*. To respond to these issues, the

third chapter argues, critical analysis or interpretation may take us so far; but writing-performances (and indeed creative practices in other media), which inventively restage questions of address, are perhaps even more powerful. Elfriede Jelinek's play 'on/with' Walser, *Her Not All Her*, is taken as a prime example. All of this leads to the final part of the book, an imaginative rendering or restaging of Walser's letters as they might have been read by Mermet herself. This 'creative' element, then, does not seek to fabricate the missing 'half' of the correspondence; instead, it tries to constitute a fictional 'voice' that might do justice to the problematic of lost correspondence or, rather, that of a female subject of address explored throughout the preceding sections of the book. The results look very different to Jelinek's creative practice, no doubt, but they are driven by similar concerns to those I outline here as well as in the following chapters.

Walser's fictional texts were frequently, and sometimes fundamentally, indebted to the idea of letter-writing, which as a genre or form traversed Walser's stories through different periods of his writing. As an obvious example, at least from the perspective of the present study, his 'Letter from Biel' is based on a missive to Frieda Mermet written in December 1918. It begins with gratitude for the gift of some apples; by way of exchange, the promise of a new book by Walser is made. The letter gently plays with the addressee's name, a little flirtatiously (and perhaps cruelly) confusing it with another 'F.', before speaking of attractive local girls and country walks around Biel. The writer seems to glory in his hometown, its history, landscape and environs. This twisting-and-turning text concludes by celebrating women as sensible governors: 'In the Middle Ages, Bertha reigned over Burgundy, and from what we know from books, she diligently saw to the dissemination of culture and education […] Every humble woman can be a kind of queen in her domain.'[1] The mixture of gift-exchange, playful teasing, seeming ingenuousness and wit, reportage and reflection is (as we will see) characteristic of the letters to Mermet, and establishes a connection between the way Walser writes correspondence and the way he drafts fiction. But there are numerous other examples of Walser making use of the epistolary form, many of them occurring in the years that followed Walser's departure from Berlin. Whether because of the circumstances of the First World War or as a reaction to his flight from a literary metropolis, letters seem of recurring interest to Walser as a writer of short fiction. 'The Job Application' sees a character called Wenzel (perhaps an allusion to the would-be thespian alter ego found in Walser's story of the same name, which also comprised a series of letters[2]) writing to an 'Esteemed Gentleman' with a fawning

enquiry about work. Here, flattery and self-deprecation are so over-egged – the addresser signs off as someone 'drowning in obedience' – as to not only risk but indeed toy with the possibility of offence.[3] Meanwhile, such texts as 'Letter from a Poet to a Gentleman' and 'Letter from a Father to his Son' can be found in *Kleine Dichtungen*. In turning down the request for a meeting from a gentleman to a poet, the former stages a one-sided dialogue between culture (or 'civility') and poetry (or, rather, the happily impoverished poet), mixing polite refusal with parodic self-criticism in a heady blend of Walserian irony – going so far as to claim, amid all the reasons for declining the invitation, that in any case the letter must have been misaddressed.[4] 'The Letter', included in *Poetenleben* (which also features 'Letter from a Painter to a Poet'), is a story of unrequited love. Once again we encounter an association between letters and rejection, as the narrator reads with dismay the affronted reply of a woman who claims his suit is totally unfounded, prompting in turn sorrowful reflections on the deep misadventure of human communication.[5]

But Walser also experimented with epistolary fiction at other times during his career. 'Letter to a Commissioner of Novellas', from the later 1920s (when he was badly struggling as a professional writer), provides an opportunity to indulge in mock solemnity and officious eloquence in response to a literary commission that is obviously found to be presumptuous and condescending (it seems to have asked for something 'gripping'). Couching his remarks as a form of address allows Walser to intensify the ironic purpose. And yet along the way his text contains some serious reflections on the art of short fiction.[6] From the mid-1920s we also have '"Underappreciated Poets Among Us?" – Answer to a Survey', which reflects ironically on the supposedly luxurious, gentlemanly life of the struggling writer and the fashionable benefits assumed to accompany cultish underappreciation.[7] From the same period, 'Don Juan's Letter' imagines the faded glory of a one-time seducer and libertine, the letter itself veering between wistful recollection, half-hearted confession and leftover self-assurance in its attempt to win over an unnamed addressee and would-be lover.[8] Here, the epistolary form establishes a platform for Walser to perform the vagaries of self-identity and personal decline as first and foremost a matter or question of *address*.

Address is a recurring theme that is reflected in a whole host of titles by Walser: 'An Address to a Button', 'Good Morning, Giantess', 'Good Evening, Maiden', to name a few. As in the example of 'Wenzel', moreover, Walser would not only cast his fictions in epistolary form but also frequently use letters within his stories and novels. Early on in *The Tanners* we have a long, reproachful note sent to Simon from his brother

Klaus; later, Simon writes to his other brother Kaspar (the letter is itself a thinly veiled account of his fraught relationship with Karl Walser). These are just two of a number of missives from or to siblings that feature in the novel.[9] Correspondence also has an important role to play in *The Assistant*. It is not long after his arrival in the Tobler household that Joseph writes to Frau Weiss, a former love interest of his, even though she 'would hardly be expecting so swift and affectionate a letter and would certainly not be prepared for it'.[10] Later on, Frau Tobler angrily writes on behalf of her husband (the letter is signed in his name) to the mother of a former employee, a housemaid, who has written Frau Tobler a letter concerning rumours linking her romantically to Joseph's now-dismissed predecessor. The housemaid's letter, couched as a friendly warning, is treated instead as an insult and is indeed suspected by Frau Tobler to constitute a thinly veiled threat against her (118–20). Later still, Herr Tobler himself writes a begging letter to his mother, asking her to save him from financial disgrace and the ignominy it would bring to the whole family, perhaps even causing to him to contemplate suicide – although Tobler assures his mother he is not in any way blackmailing or threatening her (225–6). She replies via her lawyer, who makes it clear that any further bailouts are completely out of the question. These letters, like those Tobler writes to his creditors repudiating on legal grounds their demands for the repayment of loans, suggest that correspondence is often unwanted – an unpleasantness that must be met by more of the same. It invariably constitutes a demand, an exercise in duress, attempting a degree of manipulation not dissimilar to those adverts for Tobler's inventions that are themselves, of course, another form of address. Not long before he leaves Tobler's employment, Joseph sends a box of cigars to his father (two of them having already been smoked), with a letter that laments his failings as a son. However, the letter equivocates between apologising for and bitterly acknowledging their distant relationship, the gift of a part-empty box of cigars symbolising exactly the doubleness of the letter's meaning. Correspondence is not just used as a literary technique by Walser; instead, such letters epitomise the very substance of the novel, particularly in terms of the connection between bourgeois-familial relationships and the dynamics or 'economics' of capitalist-consumerist address. Not unlike the sibling correspondence found in *The Tanners*, the letters in *The Assistant* are to be read not only as ledgers of human profit or loss, but they themselves frequently seek advantage with great entrepreneurial gusto (albeit the replies, where they occur, invariably up the ante, raising the stakes of the game).

To put things another way, correspondence always has a double meaning or, rather, invites double reading throughout Walser's texts. Letters do not simply belong or apply to themselves; they are instead traded, as it were, in fluctuating market conditions where their value is not self-determined so much as it is constituted by the 'other', by a subject of address remaining irreducible to either the addresser or addressee of the exchange. This complexity pervades nearly every sentence, giving impetus to Walser's ironic purposes but also shedding light on the originary doubleness or divisibility of every letter, its constitutive non-self-identity from the very beginning, and thus its intricately varied openness to the 'other'. If this book is not simply about Robert Walser or his letters or their historical 'moment', nor only about reclaiming the 'minorised' perspective of Frieda Mermet in any simple sense, it is surely about that.

Notes

1 Robert Walser, 'Letter from Biel', in *Little Snow Landscape*, translated by Tom Whalen (New York: New York Review Books, 2021), 103–5.
2 Robert Walser, 'Wenzel', in *Little Snow Landscape*, 10–17.
3 Robert Walser, 'The Job Application', in *Selected Stories*, translated by Christopher Middleton and others, with a foreword by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 26–7.
4 The English translation of 'Letter from a Poet to a Gentleman' can be found in *A Schoolboy's Diary*, translated by Damion Searls, with an introduction by Ben Lerner (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 51–3.
5 The English translation of 'The Letter', can be found in *A Schoolboy's Diary*, 97–8.
6 The English translation (by Walter Arndt) of 'Letter to a Commissioner of Novellas' can be found in *Robert Walser Rediscovered: stories, fairy-tale plays, and critical responses*, edited by Mark Harman (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), 46–8.
7 The English translation (by Annette Wiesner) of this text can be found in *Girlfriends, Ghosts, and Other Stories*, translated by Tom Whalen, Nicole Köngeter and Annette Wiesner (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), 113.
8 The English translation can be found in *Little Snow Landscape*, 124–5.
9 Robert Walser, *The Tanners*, translated by Susan Bernofsky (New York: New Directions, 2009). Further page references to this novel will be given in the main body of my chapters.
10 Robert Walser, *The Assistant* (London: Penguin, 2007), 20. Further page references will be given in the main body of my preface.

Introduction
Robert Walser: life, writing, criticism and creativity

To establish various contexts in which his letters to Frieda Mermet may be read, my opening chapter aims to provide an overview of the life and works of Robert Walser, as well as a brief survey of some of the critical writings that are germane to reading them. It is intended as much for a reader who is little acquainted with this writer as for someone who has already engaged with his work, whether academically or otherwise. The chapter is part of a threefold apparatus I want to construct around the last part of the book, which is a creative rendition of the correspondence in question, presented from the point of view of its addressee, Frieda Mermet, whose 'side' of the exchange is now lost. While the next section engages critical questions about epistolary writing and reading, particularly around the problem of missing correspondence, the subsequent one looks at how the writing-performance of a play devoted to Walser by Elfriede Jelinek provides justification for creative as well as critical engagement with him. Both these sections foreground gender as indispensable to the question of address. Jelinek's play, *er nicht als er* (which translates as 'he not as he') deliberately sounds out parts of Walser's own name in its very title, but in English the play's title is nevertheless translated as *Her Not All Her* ('-er- not -al-er', as Jelinek writes in her epilogue), thus fracturing address between the masculine and feminine in the most complex of ways.[1] Why (re)write a correspondence from the perspective of a female addressee, whose own letters no longer survive? What are the critical stakes of such an endeavour, and what creative conditions do they entail or require? By the time the reader comes to 'Bellelay', the final part of this book (named after the asylum where Frieda Mermet ran the laundry), I hope this threefold reading apparatus will provide food for thought – just as Mermet fed Walser throughout the years of their correspondence.

Life and works

Robert Walser was born on 15 April 1878 in the Swiss town of Biel, located in the foothills of the Jura mountains about 40 kilometres north of the capital Bern. Biel is also called Bienne to reflect its position on the language border of German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland, a border whose history is political as much as linguistic, the francophone population growing rapidly as a result of the events of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Biel quadrupled in size during this period, favourable tax laws attracting a wealthy bourgeoisie including a considerable number of watchmakers from the French-speaking Jura. By the mid-1880s, indeed, around two-thirds of Swiss makers of watches lived in Biel. Walser's most famous story 'The Walk', written in 1917, sees its protagonist loop around a fictionalised version of Biel's Zentralplatz, visiting on his travels a bookseller, a bank, the post office, the tailor, and the Commission for Revenues. He passes a piano factory and a baker's shop framed by a gaudy commercial frontage.[2] There are electric trams, farmyard animals and workers, brewery carts, shops and advertising hoardings, a goods station and a travelling circus. The billboards advertise an astounding array of products, ranging from the basic commodities of meat, groceries, clothing, shoes and millinery to clocks, luxury goods and properties currently for sale. Almost 40 years after Walser's birth, the story is a giddying mix of history with modernity, as if a certain embodiment of the Swiss character is made to confront its own experience of finance, consumerism, class, contemporary culture and communication, technology and tax law (at the Commission for Revenues, our hero debates his own tax rate with the superintendent, an occurrence that was actually rather common among the Swiss *nouveau riche*, although it is obviously parodied by the down-at-heel writer narrating the tale).

The seventh of eight children, Walser was born in a backroom of what had been nicknamed the Revolutionary Salon – the building having belonged to Alexander Schöni, the renowned Swiss republican who once helped smuggle political refugees across the German border. Living in quarters attached to his father's shop, a general store selling affordable merchandise of various kinds but also specialising in toys, the Walser siblings rarely wanted for playthings, whether they be dolls, wooden blocks or magic lanterns (the latter recalling, for the modern reader, Anna Freud's *laterna magica* or the phantasmagorica of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, evoking ghostly horrors as much as childhood dreams). The family was part of an expanding middle class that gravitated to the newer

districts at the fashionable centre of the town (in contrast to the more established wealth occupying higher ground in the Jura foothills above the lake). Walser's parents, Adolf and Elisa, epitomised Biel's growing middle class, although unhappily his father's commercial success proved to be short-lived. Adolf's dubious business acumen and lazy financial habits proved a huge disappointment to Walser's mother, an ambitious daughter of the Swiss farmlands, until eventually the family had to move to a poorer district on the outskirts of town. Adolf was forced to try his hand at the import business to make ends meet. Economic necessity meant that, by the age of 14, Walser had begun an apprenticeship as a bank clerk, despite his promise as a talented and dutiful student. (The complexities of a certain dutifulness – the complicated relationship of service, for example, to forms of disengagement or insolence that inhabit as much as resist it – are a constant theme of Walser's writing, as we will see.) He had been a playful child – a scallywag known for getting into scrapes with his brother Karl. Together they would make mischief, play tricks and cause pandemonium. In *The Tanners*, Simon (Walser's protagonist and fictional counterpart) writes a letter to his artist brother Kaspar (a thinly disguised Karl) in which the fraught nature of the sibling's 'friendship' is perfectly captured:

> What odd fish we are, the two of us. The way we drift about this earth … What a crazy form of friendship the two of us have forged … And why shouldn't brothers overdo things a little? We fit together quite well – and we did even back in the days of still hating one another when we nearly beat each other to a pulp … Once at the dinner table, just to provide a single example of this lamentable and childish state of affairs, you threw a plate of sauerkraut at me. (59–60)

Perhaps tellingly, none of the Walser children had offspring of their own in later life. Three of Robert's older brothers were to meet a tragic end. Adolf, the first-born, was to succumb to a short illness aged 15 (his sudden demise was part of the reason their mother suffered a psychological collapse, dying when Robert was just 16 years old). In 1898, meanwhile, a suicidal Ernst entered the Waldau asylum where Robert was committed more than three decades later. A diagnosis of dementia praecox saw Ernst detained until his death in 1916. Hermann, a professor of geography at the University of Bern, committed suicide in 1919. He did not see his 50th birthday. Of the other siblings, Karl – who would become a famous illustrator and theatrical set designer, famously

working with Max Reinhardt in Berlin – was to die from heart disease in his mid-60s. The brotherly intimacy enjoyed in their youth had long since waned, one cause of lasting tension being the illustrations Karl would provide in the hope of bolstering Robert's book sales. By the time Karl died, Robert had been permanently institutionalised for more than a decade. Of his five brothers, only Oscar (born six years earlier than Robert) enjoyed a comparatively uneventful life, becoming a reasonably well-off petit bourgeois through a steady career in banking. Robert's sister Lisa, with whom he had been close, died the year after Karl in 1944 – Robert refusing her request of a final deathbed meeting. (His only other sister, Fanny, the youngest of the siblings, had emigrated to Latvia in the mid-1920s, where her husband was employed as an estate manager.) Lisa had worked for many years as a schoolmistress, teaching the children of employees at the Bellelay psychiatric hospital a few miles outside Biel at the foot of the Jura slopes. It was in Bellelay that Walser met Frieda Mermet, the laundry manager at the asylum. Frieda, a single mother once married to a French coachman, was a close companion of his sister. A long correspondence grew up between the writer and the laundress, lasting from 1913 to 1942. That correspondence is the main subject of this book. In it, we find many of the themes that connect Walser's life to his writing; as well as evidence for that fact that, like so many writers, Walser's letters are not just ancillary to his corpus, but in important ways belong to it. Certainly there are a number of letters to Mermet that form the basis of stories he wrote. Beyond that, the correspondence with Mermet arguably plays an important role in Walser's attitude to his family relationships. Not only does her friendship with Lisa helps mediate their sometimes difficult and occasionally fraught sibling bond, but the letters themselves are full of reflections about the familial relations established by motherhood, childhood, and so on (Mermet's son Louis features heavily in the correspondence, in ways that are sometime troubling). All in all, it is as if Mermet – herself the subject of a broken marriage – is both inside and outside the family nexus, a faux spouse of sorts whose position in that sense somewhat reflects Walser's own existence on the borders of family life.

Walser's first novel *The Tanners* (1907) contains a barely veiled autobiographical account of the fraught interpersonal dynamics of the Walser siblings. For instance, three chapters of the book recount the months during 1902 that Robert spent visiting his sister Lisa at the school in Täuffelen, on the shores of Lake Biel, where she was a teacher. While the pair quickly settle into a comfortable routine, family tensions are never far away. The protagonist Simon, Walser's fictional counterpart,

daydreams about his sister on a boating lake with a man who has stolen her away. This fantasy proves to be recurrent in Walser's writing. One of the essays in *Fritz Kocher's Essays*, 'From the Imagination', includes a vision of a boating courtship involving a countess and a boy from bygone times; while in a later story, 'The Rowboat', the narrator looks out on a couple rowing upon a lake while wondering if the man is a kidnapper.[3] The thought of romantic captivation obviously suggests the darker idea of abduction; as in Täuffelen, a cosily romanticised sort of domesticity stokes prospects of violence that the writer treats with unnerving relish. In many places in Walser's writing, in fact, we witness a sometimes uncomfortable blend of homeliness with eroticism, which often seems indifferent to its own peculiarity: whether to deliberately ironise or indeed scandalise domestic complacency and indifference; or to (unwittingly?) expose the deep connections between family and sexual bonds as a double locus of desire and disgust. Fraught as they may be, it is just these relations and questions that pervade the Walser–Mermet correspondence, the latter providing important insights into Walser's attitudes to sex, gender and kinship, but perhaps more importantly establishing a vehicle for their sometimes-shifting development. In Chapter 2, indeed, attention to the question of the materiality of the letter evaluates the claim that correspondence is not just a prop or tool but a material part of the bodily relations of Walser and Mermet. This is communicated via food as much as sex, forming part of what Elke Siegel calls a 'culinary-epistolary poetics'[4] through which, I argue, Walser expresses not only the sociability Siegel finds in this 'poetics' but also his sense of freedom, which is itself tied up with the idea of *corresponding* in a variety of senses.

In *The Tanners*, Simon's countryside sojourn with his sister Hedwig (as she is called in the story) is interrupted by the arrival of their brother Klaus – a transparent characterisation of Hermann Walser. His exhausting inability to be carefree is signalled early in the novel. Klaus knows thousands of duties, both large and small. Indeed, he feels called upon to engage with an impossible array of duties built up from a deep concern that some duty might go unnoticed and therefore unobserved. Klaus even reproaches himself for neglecting the duty to be a little happy – a duty carrying some moral weight, it is suggested. The position is therefore untenable: the unhappy duty-doer is not only a failure but, worse than that, dutifulness inevitably violates its own vocation (40–2). This is a lesson Simon himself learns. The execution of dry duty, for example his work as a legal clerk, therefore becomes the opportunity for daydreaming, while the undemanding nature of dutiful employment encourages an impertinence that employers frown upon but nevertheless

invite. Reprimands only inspire delight. Later on, having taken a job as a domestic servant, Simon receives a telling-off from his mistress. The pleasure of humiliation is recalled by allusion to a well-known fetish:

> The floor was to be swept clean with a broom, the carpets given a brushing, table and chairs dusted, windows breathed on and polished … After this work was completed, the girl indicated to him that he might now clean a pair of shoes … They were beautiful shoes, delicate shoes with fur trim and made of a leather as soft as silk. Simon had always adored shoes, not just any shoes, not stout sturdy ones, just delicate shoes like these – and now he was holding just such a shoe in his hand, and it was his duty to clean it although he didn't actually see anything that required cleaning … He was caught red-handed by the woman herself, who now came into the kitchen and looked him over sternly … Simon was delighted to have been reprimanded. (211–12)

On another occasion, Simon's employer clumsily breaks a prize piece of porcelain. She is furious at having been caught in the act, enraged that the mistress and not the servant is to blame. Simon falls to his knees to clear up the mess but does so with deliberate slowness, letting his cheek brush against the mistress's skirts. His recurring inclination is not merely to reimagine service as impudence, but to convert it into a masochistic contract with strong sexual overtones. In a later episode, Simon befriends a male nurse, who asks to kiss him. Simon's reaction is one of casual compliance: '"I'll go along with it … I see no reason to be uncivil to this Heinrich, who is otherwise so nice, over such a small thing!" And he yielded up his mouth and let himself be kissed' (278). Nevertheless, dutifulness takes a wholly different turn, as Simon rejects the inevitable sexual advance with coldness and cruel indifference. The connections that lead from the mock-solemnity of duty to coy service to fluid eroticism and masochistic submission, ending in cold indifference and withdrawal, are themselves part of the very fabric of the Walser–Mermet correspondence, often establishing its rhythm and indeed traversing its various crises and reconciliations.

If *The Tanners* teems with sibling antagonism, Walser's fictional 'double' is himself not beyond self-criticism. The author has Hedwig say of him:

> You speak a bit awkwardly, and your mouth, a little ungainly, first pops open and then remains that way until you start to speak, as if you were expecting the words to come flying up from somewhere or

> other and land there. In the eyes of most, you'll cut an uninteresting figure: Girls will find you dreary, women irrelevant, and men utterly untrustworthy and ineffectual. (198)

The retrogressive ties of childhood, from which such tensions obviously arise, are a frequent theme in Walser's writings. Drawing upon his own experiences training as a butler while in Berlin, *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) depicts a dysfunctional school atmosphere fraught with an ambiguous sense of violence and indeed sexual threat.[5] *Fritz Kocher's Essays* (1904) poses as a series of schoolboy assignments on given topics, whose author – before having died – practised the discipline of writing with a sly and sometimes disturbing cheekiness. The connections between youth, duty and service are evident across all of Walser's major works. *The Assistant* (1908), the second of his Berlin novels, reflects Walser's experiences working at the Villa of the Evening Star in Wädenswil as an assistant to the engineer and inventor Carl Dubler-Grässle. The main character in the novel, Joseph Marti, offers assistance to his master Carl Tobler, an inventor of such novelties as the advertising clock, an elaborate timekeeping device carrying adverts, which is to be put up at train stations. Tobler – unlike the real-life Dubler – is unable to secure backers for his prototype to go into production, much less generate sales of the invention (although Dubler himself was to go bankrupt soon after Walser left his service). Walser's novel captures the fragile nature of commercialising modern inventions, indeed the comical precarity of capital investment itself. Meanwhile, the personal and professional strife of the assistant's employer gets played out through the fraught dynamics of the Tobler household. Marti himself lurches from childlike subservience to insolent revolt, the novel itself blending family and financial drama within a bourgeois hall of mirrors. In the letters to Mermet, questions of professional survival or failure, and indeed of family as well as personal fortunes, are interlaced with a pervasive (if not always explicit) sense of modern capital meting out financial and material impacts like so many rolls of a loaded dice. If the spectre of capital as much as war heaps terror on Europe during the period of their correspondence, however, Walser's comic instincts are never far from his discomfited descriptions of them.

The three novels *The Tanners*, *The Assistant* and *Jakob von Gunten* were written while Walser was in Berlin. Unfortunately their reception and sales were not sufficient for him to become commercially successful. Long before that time, having worked in the Biel branch of the Berner Kantonalbank as a somewhat premature school-leaver, Walser had taken a number of clerical jobs. For a time, he held a position as a *commis*

(senior clerk) at the banking and shipping firm of Speyr & Co. in Basel, although the job lasted less than six months. At 17 years old, he moved to Stuttgart in the footsteps of Karl, who had been apprenticed by a well-regarded designer for the stage. The brothers resumed the high jinks for which they had been known as children, now fuelled as much by drinking as by the opportunity for ridiculing the local bourgeoisie. Robert was a *commis* in the advertising department of a publishing house, but quickly changed to a clerical post at another publishers. By 1896, Karl having been offered a fellowship to study in Strasbourg, Robert was on the move once more – this time to Zürich, where he began work as a bookkeeper for a cargo insurance firm. From this comparatively well-paid post he wrote a letter to the poet and journalist Robert Seidel, editor-in-chief of the socialist newspaper *Arbeiterstimme* ('The Worker's Voice'), asking whether he might be considered for a position in a more meaningful environment. The correspondence led to a meeting but not a job, although Walser subsequently felt emboldened to send a poem, in the style of Seidel, in the hope it might be considered for publication. It was a rather leaden imitation, far from the poetry he was later to publish. Unsurprisingly Walser was unsuccessful, but some poems did appear in print the following year when *Der Bund* included half-a-dozen verses by him in a weekend literary supplement of May 1898. The author was identified only by his initials, although a description of 'R.W.' was added: these 'firstlings', mainly landscape poems, were the handiwork of a young Zürich-based commercial employee. They were considered praiseworthy for their unaffectedly delicate style, lacking in monotonous sentimentality. Walser himself was compared to a sleepwalker who is all the more footsure for their lack of (self-)consciousness. His nature poems, many of them collected in the 1909 edition *Gedichte*, are recognisably modern for their expressionist and psychological qualities. If read carefully, they provide an important resource to challenge more naïve considerations of Walser's 'literary' relationship to nature and landscape, beyond naturalist or romanticist paradigms. Since walking in nature features often in the letters to Mermet, the complex nature of this relationship is worth recalling, and has generated some of the critical literature we will attend to shortly.

While his first letter to Seidel showed Walser's address as Zeltweg 64, Hottingen – a rather upmarket berth for a young *commis* – subsequent missives came from Zurlindenstrasse, closer to the outskirts of Zürich. Whether or not this marked the beginning of Walser's itinerant tendencies, he would often switch between residences at the centre and the edge of town. This was certainly true during his time in Bern in the

1920s, as the letters to Mermet show. Such movements might have been due to financial pressures, sometimes brought on by quitting a job to devote himself exclusively to writing, or they may have been caused by troubles with landlords and landladies, but nevertheless the pull of the mountainous Swiss countryside made ready access to the surrounding meadows and foothills an enticing prospect. By the autumn of 1897, however, Walser had moved back into central quarters to prepare for a visit from Karl. But he moved again before Christmas and indeed had seven further addresses before leaving town in January 1899 to dwell for a while in Thun, later ending up in Munich.

At this time, Walser was cultivating literary sponsors. While Seidel had proved something of a dead end, others were quick to see his potential. The renowned Swiss literary critic Josef Viktor Widman was editor at *Der Bund*, while Franz Blei, a well-connected playwright and essayist, had taken this awkwardly dreamy boy-poet somewhat under his wing, introducing him to the writings of Büchner, Lenz and Novalis and encouraging him to send more poems for publication, for example to *Wiener Rundschau* in Vienna. Well known for articles on literature, theatre, culture and philosophy, this *Kulturzeitschrift* would publish work by authors as varied as Dostoevsky, Mallarmé, Rilke, Strindberg, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Turgenev. Blei also sent a notebook of Walser's poems to some young writers based in Munich who planned a new journal. One of them, Otto Julius Bierbaum, responded with tremendous enthusiasm. A year later, Bierbaum found the means to launch *Die Insel*, which would go on to become a major force in German literature, publishing early modernist texts by Rilke and Yeats as well as works by Gide, Poe, Nietzsche and Wilde. Walser's poem 'Brightness', later to be included in *Gedichte*, featured in the inaugural issue. By 1900 Walser had written some 50 new poems grouped under the title *Saite und Sehnsucht* (String and Desire), many of them nature poems in a similar vein to his previous verses, some more heavily steeped in melancholic introspection, most of which remained unpublished (the notebook itself ended up with his sister Fanny and was only discovered after her death). In early May 1899 Robert wrote to Widman that he was heading for Munich, but for some reason he went via Zürich to Solothurn, perhaps to remain relatively near to his family in Biel at that time. He took a job as a bank clerk while beginning work on some dramatic sketches. Of these, his fairy-tale plays *Cinderella* and *Snow White* stand out,[6] the latter earning special praise from Walter Benjamin, who, in a famous essay from 1929, takes it to account for the fact that Walser became a favourite author of Franz Kafka.[7] In *Cinderella*, the prince falls in

love with the servant girl just as she is (there is no ball), even though this deprives her of her dreams, servitude and compliance becoming the source of both pleasure and regret. *Snow White* involves the self-conscious, self-reflexive retelling of the tale from a number of possible angles, the heroine's death being not so much reenacted as reconsidered over and over, the drama itself dwelling on the perilously inventive possibilities of both denial and make-believe. (In all of Walser's dramatic pieces, there is a very modern sense of characters trying to figure out what is involved in being part of the construct for which they have been created.) Both plays were to appear in *Die Insel* in 1901, *Cinderella* being the first work by Walser to receive a review.

Arriving in Munich in 1900, Walser was drawn to the city not only by *Die Insel* but also because of its literary and cultural reputation as the home of artists and writers such as Kandinsky, Klee, Mann and Rilke. The Munich Secession, founded in the early 1890s, had become enormously influential and a number of new journals were thriving. Walser's relations with the high-living editors of *Die Insel* were, however, mixed. Alfred Walter Heymel was more impressed by him than Rudolf Alexander Schröder, and later reflections on his time in Munich give an equivocal picture of how well Walser fitted in; he left in October 1901 for Zürich, where work on *Fritz Kocher's Essays* was begun. *Die Insel*, which had recently launched a publishing house, initially declined to take it. The publisher Bruno Cassirer, for whom Karl had already designed some book covers, was not persuaded either. In the end, *Der Bund* serialised batches of the short stories that were to feature in the book. Times were proving increasingly hard, and Walser was compelled to seek day-work from the Copyist's Office for the Unemployed in between other short-term jobs. *The Tanners* includes a description of this bureau:

> [W]here people came who, owing to their particular life circumstances, found themselves in such a position that securing employment in a regular place of business was out of the question. Individuals of this sort worked for meagre day-wages here, copying out addresses with hasty fingers beneath the strict supervision of a supervisor or secretary – business addresses for the most part, in lots of one thousand, for which large firms contracted with the office. (288)

Letters of recommendation, annual reports and academic treaties are neatly copied by those 'lost souls and hard-luck cases' who 'at some point in their lives had succumbed to some form of dissolution and lost the

ground under their unsteady feet' (288–9). These degenerates now live hand-to-mouth, reports Walser, lacking any hope of advancement. (Living hand-to-mouth raises the question of the 'mouth' as a locus of eating or starvation but also desire; a sense of hungry mouths becoming eroticised openings is tangible throughout the correspondence with Mermet, for example.) With a cold winter lying ahead of them, the 'lost souls' of the bureau are constantly fearful there will be no work – or food – tomorrow.

In March 1903 financial straits led Walser to take a low-paid job in an elastics factory in nearby Winterthur. Reprieve from this indignity came only through the requirement of military service, which due to various periods of employment and travel outside Switzerland he had so far managed to avoid. It was later that year he took the post with Dubler. While in Wädenswil, Robert kept up his professional literary correspondence and sought new publications based on existing work, but by early 1904 he was back in Zürich as a clerk in the Cantonal Bank. *Fritz Kocher's Essays* finally appeared that November, Walser having played Alfred Heymel, majority shareholder at Insel, off against its managing director to secure the book's release. It received mixed reviews, with some critics deriding the trope of the mature child as a misjudged literary conceit, indeed misunderstanding it altogether as an ironic technique on Walser's part. The book earnt Walser no more than the equivalent of a few months' salary. Yet in early 1905 he turned down a permanent position at the bank. Perhaps Walser was buoyed by the thought of the further book releases promised him by the publishers of *Fritz Kocher's Essays*, based around his poems and plays, but these did not materialise. He went back to Biel to stay with his father for a while and then spent time in Berlin with Karl (now working regularly for Max Reinhardt), this being one of a series of short stays in the city that had begun in 1897 when the ambitious young writer's visit had resulted in a sojourn of less than three weeks. Berlin, however, was very much in Walser's future.

However, a prelude to the seven or more solid years he spent in Berlin (from December 1905 until February 1913, the earlier part spent in an apartment shared with Karl), was a brief sojourn in Dambrau in Upper Silesia, where Walser spent several weeks in the employment of Count Konrad von Hochberg, baron of Fürstenstein, working as a footman and butler. It was not until years later that he wrote a story based on his experiences in the castle of the wealthy count ('Tobold'). While in Berlin during the autumn of 1905 he spent a month on a training course in preparation for the job. It is not completely certain where he studied but, attesting to the popularity of such a career, records show there were five different butler schools in the city at that time. For Walser,

however, the idea of serving in well-to-do households was probably less an earnest career choice than it was a piece of japery designed to outrage the bourgeois sensibilities of his family and indeed some of their friends, including, no doubt, Karl's fashionable circle of acquaintance. The job also offered the prospect of fresh literary material: Walser's schooling provided the inspiration for *Jakob von Gunten*.

The story of Walser's time in Berlin is perhaps best told through some of his own writings. For instance, there is a well-known story based on the balloon ride he took in 1908 with the art dealer and gallerist Paul Cassirer, from Bitterfeld out towards the Baltic coast.[8] Walser had been employed by Cassirer for a brief spell as his secretary at the Berlin Secession, mostly handling Cassirer's correspondence. The job was over pretty quickly, although Walser still found himself invited to Cassirer's parties. He wrote 'The Little Berliner' about Cassirer's daughter. It begins 'Papa boxed my ears today, in a most fond and fatherly manner, of course'.[9] Meanwhile, 'Frau Bähni' shows Cassirer as a bullying romancer and observer of nice social manners.[10] He was to shoot himself in 1926 rather than sign his wife's divorce papers. Cassirer's cousin Bruno was the publisher of Walser's novels. In Berlin, his short pieces, often described as *feuilletons*, also appeared in *Die Schaubühne* (which published stories like 'Wenzel', 'Kleist in Thun' and 'Lenz'), *Die Neue Rundschau* (where 'The Little Berliner' was placed) and *Die Zukunft* ('The Battle of Sempach'), as well as appearing in *Die Freistatt* and *Simplicissimus* in Munich. As interest in Walser's novelistic career dwindled, however, so did the enthusiasm of editors. By 1909, the literary sponsorship of *Die Schaubühne* was noticeably waning, and nothing appeared in the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, which had previously published him a couple of times a year. 'Frau Wilke' and 'Frau Scheer' are poignant descriptions of the lodgings Walser took towards the end of his time in Berlin, giving a powerful sense of his declining fortunes. But in Berlin he also wrote a host of memorable stories about the city, about the metropolitan streets and parks, about riding the tram, about the theatres and cafés and markets, about the Aschinger restaurant, and about the Berliners themselves.

In 1913 Walser quit Berlin, heading home to Switzerland. In the spring, he paid a visit to his sister Lisa at the Bellelay asylum. Climbing through the fir trees up to the hospital grounds, he would no doubt have recalled his time in Täuffelen. It was during this visit to Bellelay that Walser struck up the friendship with Frieda Mermet, whose relationship with Lisa – herself the owner of a good library of books in her rooms above the schoolhouse – provided the occasion to steward a collection of Walser's publications, many of which he would send for safekeeping

through the years. This is an important facet of both the Walser–Mermet relationship itself and the letters they exchanged. Mermet's role as a guardian or keeper not only of her 'side' of the correspondence but also of many texts, newspaper clippings and other cuttings from magazines or journals, establishes her in yet another light. From Walser's letters we can see that such dutifulness was surely appreciated, if rather taken for granted. But at times it became a source of tension and even conflict – not least when, in the summer of 1926, Walser demanded the return of some of the material, and was quick to chide Frieda for negligence in her duties (whether through mistakenness brought on by poor mental health, or frustration at the lack of literary success, which often caused him to devise schemes involving republication in new collections). The two women in Bellelay were not only Walser's librarians; they were also doubtless allies in dealing with Walser's many difficulties as time passed. During his visits to Bellelay, however, the three of them would enjoy long walks and talks together and, in the evenings, would dine convivially at the director's table along with other senior employees at the hospital.

Having left Bellelay, Walser became a tenant at the Hotel Blaues Kreuz in Biel, a temperance establishment where he secured affordable accommodation on the attic floor next to the chambermaids' quarters. Outside of military service and various other trips, Walser was to stay in the Blaues Kreuz for a period of more than seven years until he left his hometown for Bern in early 1921. It was after his first visit to Bellelay that Walser began writing to Mermet, and nearly all of the letters to her during this time come from the Blaues Kreuz (unless they are sent from one or other military posting). As such they contain important insights into his experience as a resident (the prevailing assumption is, of course, that Walser was itinerant all his life, whereas the Blaues Kreuz provided some semblance of stability for a number of reasons), but also provide a glimpse of his exploits as a soldier.

Despite the strictures of army duty throughout the war, Walser's time in Biel was not unproductive. He sold stories to the journal *Deutsche Monatschefte*, an offshoot of *Die Rheinlande*, with which he would maintain a relationship during this period. A volume of essays initially rejected by Paul Cassirer was published in 1913 by Kurt Wolff and reviewed as a 'masterpiece' by Max Brod in *Die Neue Rundschau*. That same year four pieces by Walser were included in Brod's *Arcadia*, from the same publisher, alongside Kafka's 'The Judgement'. The next year, short pieces appeared in *Die Zukunft* and the left-wing journal *März*, which Hermann Hesse helped to found. Franz Blei had taken part in establishing a new journal, *Die Weissen Blätter*, an intellectual magazine that came

to be known for its pacificist tendencies (in 1915, it published Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'), and Walser convinced the editor to take a series of *feuilleton*-like sketches, a trick he was able to repeat with some of the other journals in which his work appeared at this time. Meanwhile, another volume, *Geschichten,* was released albeit in very limited print run. Karl once more provided the illustrations, and Robert Musil reviewed the book as evidence of Walser's literary superiority over an author like Kafka, who admittedly was barely established by that point. *Geschichten* included 'Kleist in Thun', 'Wenzel' and 'The Battle of Sempach' among over two dozen pieces including his first published prose work, 'Greifen Lake'. *Kleine Dichtungen*, another collection of short stories from this period, was awarded a prize by the Women's League to Honour Writers of the Rhineland – the only distinction of this kind to occur during Walser's lifetime – although the prize money, a not-inconsiderable sum for a writer subsisting as he did, remained locked up in a German account throughout the hostilities until post-war hyperinflation rendered it nearly worthless. Given the absence of a new novel, however, an effective publication strategy became a struggle. A sense of this ongoing difficulty is captured throughout the letters to Mermet at this time. While *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* took Walser's work because the new editor Eduard Korrodi was a long-time Walser enthusiast, German magazines had begun to favour pro-war writings and writers. Walser's lack of German publications would have a knock-on effect in terms of his literary stock value in the marketplace of European writing. Paper shortages brought on by the war gave editors another excuse to reject submissions they felt unsure about. However, Walser's reputation was still such that the Swiss publishing house Huber invited him to contribute to a series of small-format, cheaply priced novellas they planned, offering a reasonable advance. The upshot of this invitation was 'The Walk'. Within weeks of finishing it, Walser responded to an invitation from another Swiss publishing house, Rascher (now the publishers of *Die Weissen Blätter*), by submitting a manuscript, *Prosastücke*, containing mostly new material – 18 short stories in all. It would appear in time for Christmas 1916. *Kleine Prosa*, meanwhile, was commissioned by a publisher in Bern not long afterwards, coming out the following spring.

Confident of his standing with Rascher, Walser sought to negotiate a further contract for an omnibus collection, which, although unsuccessful, resulted in the idea for another book, *Poetenleben*, made up of 25 short pieces. In the meantime, publication of 'The Walk' was to result in strong sales as well as good reviews, with two reprints and well over 10,000 copies sold within a year or so. *Poetenleben* achieved a similar level of

sales, although this high point proved to be short-lived. *Seeland*, his next collection, was signed by Rascher, while Bruno Cassirer published *Komödie*, a selection of four early plays that included *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. These books did not, however, lift Walser out of financial difficulties (*Seeland* eventually appeared in late 1920, and was virtually ignored, despite including 'The Walk'). Indeed, further proposals for similar collections were beginning to fall on deaf ears. Kurt Wolff advised Walser to abandon such pocket-change writing in favour of another novel. In March 1919 he submitted *Tobold* – a manuscript well over a hundred pages long and therefore the most substantial piece of writing since *Jakob von Gunten* – to Rascher. It was rejected on economic grounds. Negotiations with Huber stalled, and Walser seemed to lose confidence in the project. The novel itself is now entirely lost.

Walser's difficulties led to a written request to Mermet asking whether she would approve of him taking a job at Bellelay as a warder. The response was not encouraging, and he must have guessed the idea would have also been discussed with Lisa. It seems likely the two women considered the permanent prospect of his company simply too difficult to contemplate. As a consequence, Walser took up a suggestion made by Fanny, taking a job in the State Archives in Bern. His first letter to Mermet after arriving in the city, dispatched in February of that year, reports spending whole days in the cellar archives of the Rathaus, leafing through old writings, files, letters, reports, ordinances and decrees, making indexes and handling documents, then coming home quite late in the evening. The appointment to this post, which lasted only a few months, serves as material for his last novel *The Robber*, which remained undiscovered and unpublished during his lifetime.[11] We are told that the protagonist, '[d]uring the first year of his sojourn in our city, which he came to love like none other before … worked intermittently as a clerk in an administrative bureau, that is, in the State Archives, where his principal task was drawing up indexes' (31). The long hours of desk work are unpalatable and he enjoys a mixed relationship with his supervisor, seizing upon opportunities to run errands whenever possible. *The Robber* was one of the 526 microscripts that still survive from Walser's Bern years. They were brought to light by Carl Seelig after Walser's death, although Lisa had sent a shoeboxful to Seelig as early as 1937 (having collected them along with other personal effects from the landlady in Bern whose complaint about Walser's strange behaviour and violent threats triggered his committal to the Waldau asylum in 1929). Some provide the draft material for fair copies subsequently published during this period. Many did not receive this treatment, however, casting doubt on whether Walser

seriously considered them suitable for public consumption (most were untitled, while some were perhaps provisional writing exercises rather than serious drafts). Walser had swapped the pen, which he had begun to associate with the experience of writer's cramp, for the pencil. The latter seemed to feel somewhat liberatory. The earliest pencil draft still in existence dates from 1924 – although Walser himself claimed that he had begun using pencils while still in Berlin – the lettering being barely two millimetres high, and sometimes less. These texts were written in *Sütterlinschrift*, the last widely used form of *Kurrent*, a type of German-language handwriting passed down from medieval times. Due to the relative simplicity of many of its characters, *Sütterlin* is amenable to extreme miniaturisation, although its adoption by Walser presented enormous difficulties of reading and translation, with recognisable letters being replaced by simplified marks that sometimes seemed inscrutable. Heavy vertical strokes made with a bluntish pencil added to the difficulty. The change from pen to a 'pencil-system', 'the pencil territory' or 'pencillation', as Walser variously put it, nevertheless seemed to accentuate organisation, convention and constraint, while nevertheless encouraging a certain degree of writerly 'play' and fluidity to match the brisk pace and breezy freedom characterising some of his earlier writing. (Noted by schoolmasters and employers alike for his fine penmanship, the manuscripts of Walser's novels are barely corrected, Werner Morlang describing them as having 'an almost calligraphic quality'[12] that flowed effortlessly from page to page.) *The Robber*, a seemingly meandering story about a roguish eccentric who courts a waitress while also becoming both the subject and object of homoerotic desires and transgender fantasies, was condensed into 24 sheets of art print paper. The script was so minuscule that Seelig initially deemed it indecipherable. He speculated that it formed a secret code linked to Walser's mental illness, hence discouraging publication. The paper on which *The Robber* was written was not the only type Walser used for the microscripts. A miscellany of prose pieces, poems and dramatic texts as well as other less definable writings, these enigmatic texts were also composed on pages from a calendar, on advertisements from magazines and books, on envelopes, postcards and stationery, on telegrams, galley proofs, cheap book covers and even tax forms. All these scraps of paper were cut to size, Walser making neat little rectangles on which his writing could take refuge from the diminution it itself experienced, perhaps using inconspicuousness as a creative form of protest against the author's declining visibility. Sometimes he wrote on rejection letters.

Why Walser wrote *The Robber* amid a host of shorter miscroscript pieces is a matter of conjecture. In 'Am I Demanding?' from the same year (1925), the narrator notes the amount of time he spends personally corresponding with publishers while other authors publish books.[13] Once more, the story reports, he has changed address – this is the main topic of the piece. His situation is becoming serious, we are told, and a decision has been made to write a novel of the 'psychological' kind. Walser's frustration at the continual pressure he felt to write another novel may, however, cast an ironic light on this apparently earnest declaration that what is required is a new book achieving recognisability in genre terms. Certainly *The Robber* itself defies generic identification. Many of its themes resonate with the collection *The Rose*, also appearing in 1925, commissioned by Rowohlt with the help of Proust translator Franz Hessel, who, as editor of a literary journal published by them, had taken some of Walser's pieces in the past. *The Rose* was to be the last book whose publication Walser oversaw personally, and it was the first by him to appear for several years. The collection included *feuilleton*-like pieces, many of them new, some of them walking stories, some Walserian recountings of the penny dreadfuls available at train-station and street-corner kiosks for which he had acquired a certain taste. The volume told lewd tales that mixed up boys and girls, depicting a writer transmuting amid confusing desires. A review by Herman Hesse seemed to damn the book with faint praise. Sales were extremely disappointing, despite the fact that the publisher had taken out full-page advertisements in a number of places. A shortage of funds prompted him to write to Mermet requesting that she preorder a copy of *The Rose* directly from him at an inflated price and asking others at Bellelay to do the same. Walser's last attempt to place a book was in 1927. Even with Max Brod's assistance the project came to nothing,

From this period onwards, then, all of Walser's publications were to appear in newspapers and magazines. *Berliner Tageblatt* offered a sizeable readership and solid remuneration. Although it paid less well, *Prager Presse* kept faith with Walser when others began to melt away. At the helm was Otto Pick, a close acquaintance of Kafka and Brod who had responded positively to Walser's work as long ago as in a review of *Jakob von Gunten*. Walser also enjoyed some success with *Prager Tagblatt*, with poems as well as *feuilletons* appearing for a German-speaking Czech audience. Outlets like *Individualität* and *Simplicissimus* also took some of his work through the latter half of the 1920s. Use of literary agencies made possible republication of certain texts in different German-speaking cities, resulting in additional income at the cost of little additional labour. However, former advocates like Eduard Korrodi at *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

had become disillusioned with Walser's writing, seeing it as both too piecemeal and overly elaborate, and matters were made worse by the writer's tendency towards voluble rage in the face of rejection. In spring 1927 a letter from *Berliner Tageblatt* suggested to Walser that he stop writing for half a year (although in fact the newspaper published him again within five months). Years later, Walser confided to Seelig that he was indeed suffering writerly burn-out at the time. A celebration of Walser's 50th birthday in *Prager Presse*, arranged by Otto Pick, did little to rekindle his fortunes. Old-time associate Franz Blei was drafted to write a tribute that backfired – whether deliberately or not it is hard to say, given their relationship had deteriorated. Blei presented Walser as a writer of early promise whose signature could, for the most part, be recognised in juvenilia and youthful romanticism.

During Walser's time in Bern, a grant from the Swiss Schiller Foundation, a loan from the Swiss Writers' Association (from which he later resigned due to another falling-out) and a windfall inheritance from a dead uncle in 1922 had just about kept him on his feet financially for a period. Before *The Robber* and *The Rose*, Walser had worked on the manuscript for a longer piece of writing, *Theodor, a Small Novel*, which was set in Berlin and revolved around his own experiences working for Paul Cassirer. Publishers like Rascher and Huber, however, were too hard-hit economically to be viable targets for Walser to aim at, and discussions with other editors failed, Walser refusing to make financial concessions through a mixture of pride and necessity. Rowohlt seemed to sit on it for years, and in the end only an extract was published in a journal. A sense of isolation in Bern was compounded by the dwindling of strong family connections. (Interestingly, the letters to Mermet from this period become much more 'literary' in subject matter and tone, as her role as confidant continues to shift against the background of a changing nexus of familial, social and professional relations.) There had been no reconciliation with Karl and relations with Lisa seemed increasingly strained. His siblings could be critical both of Walser's eccentric lifestyle and the financial difficulties and demands it brought about. Walser became more itinerant, moving rooms with greater regularity. In his first five years in the city, he changed address more than a dozen times, moving between the outskirts and the centre, suggesting on more than one occasion the upside of new literary material being generated in the process. Nonetheless, Walser later told Seelig he had sometimes changed rooms because they were haunted, a prelude no doubt to the hallucinations that seemingly became more common as the decade wore on.

Lisa took her brother to Waldau on 24 January 1929, Walser having first been examined by the psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler, who had been Ernst's doctor during his time in the Bern asylum. Robert's landlady, Martha Häberlin, had sent word to Bellelay informing Lisa that he had behaved menacingly with a knife. Walser had apparently asked both Martha and her sister to marry him, and then invited them to stab him to death. Morgenthaler learnt that he had become increasingly depressed and fearful, suffering delusions. He expressed a wish to reside with his sister, but neither the doctor nor Lisa thought it advisable. Instead, she followed Morgenthaler's advice and took Robert straight to the grandly built sanitorium on the outskirts of town. His first letters from the hospital, sent to his sister Lisa, make a point of mentioning Mermet, and the correspondence is maintained in Waldau, although it begins to dwindle. While Walser continued to write creatively in Waldau, in 1933 he was transferred to Herisau. The director at Waldau had retired and the incoming Jakob Klaesi sought to reduce the asylum's population, which by the early 1930s had risen to nearly 1,000 inmates. It was recommended that Walser be transferred to one of Waldau's outlying agricultural colonies. He refused, expressing a wish to live independently once more. However, the doctors were not convinced. His remaining brothers felt he was now quite capable of standing on his own two feet, but Lisa was obviously concerned that, in such circumstances, Robert's care might fall to her. Klaesi's advice was that Robert be dispatched to another asylum that fell within the official canton of citizenship for the Walser siblings, which was traced back through the paternal line. This meant that the canton would be legally obliged to assume responsibility for Walser if he were ever to become a ward of state. He himself opposed the idea of the transfer and, in the end, it was forcibly undertaken. Herisau, in the east of the country, was under the directorship of Otto Hinrichsen, a literary amateur with whom Walser had fallen out a long time ago. Hinrichsen offered him a private room in which to write but Walser declined this condescension. He stopped writing and his correspondence dwindled. As time went on, he lost control of his financial affairs and was finally declared legally incompetent. Throughout Walser's stint in the asylum, it was costly and onerous for Mermet to visit (having to break her trip with an overnight stay in Zürich), making it possible only a couple of times a year. As a non-family member, she later experienced difficulties in obtaining the permission to see him. The letters continued until as late as 1942, but they became increasingly less frequent and substantial. After more than two decades in Herisau, Walser died in the snow during a Christmas Day walk in 1956.

Early critical reception and translation

In Germany, the publication of Walser's complete works between 1966 and 1975, reissued in paperback by Suhrkamp in 1978 to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of his birth, went a long way to rescuing his writings from the obscurity into which they fell after his death. Republication of the complete works in the mid-1980s, together with the appearance of early volumes of the microscripts, led to a rediscovery in recent decades. Indeed, Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan argue that, alongside Walser, the legacy of figures such as Robert Musil, Karl Kraus and Frank Wedekind suffered from the early canonisation of a quartet of authors who were seen to represent the pinnacle of modern German literature – Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht – who stood for supreme literary achievement in the novel, lyric poetry, short prose and drama respectively.[14] The construction of such a pantheon effectively relegated others to the sidelines: Hermann Hesse was thought to lack the heavyweight qualities of some of his contemporaries; while Ernst Jünger was tainted by his connection to National Socialism. By the time that volumes of Walser's prose were appearing in English translation, however, the faults once attributed to him as an author were being appreciated as literary qualities, and criticism was converted into praise.

In 1955, Carl Seelig – by that time, Walser's legal guardian and financial guarantor – told Walser about the proposed translation of 'Der Spaziergang' into English by the young British poet Christopher Middleton. Seelig had begun corresponding with Walser in 1935, having been impressed by *Jakob von Gunten*. He proposed editing an anthology of Walser's writing, about which the author was initially unenthusiastic except to deliberate over a possible fee. The exchange led to regular meetings between the two men, however, starting in the summer of 1936. Between 1936 and 1955, indeed, they took over 40 walks together in the Swiss countryside around and beyond Herisau, many of which are remembered in Seelig's *Walks with Walser*. (Seelig also struck up an acquaintanceship with Mermet, beginning at Lisa's funeral in the early 1940s, partly from his interest in the correspondence.) In 1937 a Walser collection organised by Seelig did appear, bringing together previously published and unpublished works, and it was enthusiastically reviewed by such notables as Alfred Polgar and Stefan Zweig. (A year earlier Seelig had arranged for a reprint of *The Assistant*, albeit with a small publishing house.) The English translation of 'The Walk' was to be published in 1957 by Calder as part of a collection of Walser's writings. Middleton was himself to enjoy a career as an academic and translator of not only Walser

but also such writers as Goethe, Hölderlin and Nietzsche; his own literary reputation, meanwhile, was established by the award of the Geoffrey Faber Prize in the early 1960s. Calder, latterly Calder and Boyars, was established after the Second World War, becoming known for English editions of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and later for publishing proponents of the 'nouveau roman' including Marguerite Duras, Claude Simon and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Perhaps best known as Samuel Beckett's publisher, Calder also worked with controversial figures like Henry Miller and William S. Burroughs. Middleton went on to translate *Jakob von Gunten* and *The Assistant*, both appearing in 1969. *Selected Stories*, a collection of short pieces published in 1982 that were translated by him, included a foreword by the renowned writer and critic Susan Sontag. She celebrated Walser's artistry by comparing him to the likes of Samuel Beckett and Paul Klee. While the revival of Walser's literary standing has indeed relied upon a critical canon of famous names – Musil, Hesse, Kafka, Brod, Benjamin, Sontag, Coetzee, Sebald – the reassessment of his importance is actually due to rigorous and patient scholarship on the part of a number of academics and translators over the past few decades. Susan Bernofsky, a tireless translator of Walser whose biography was three decades in the making, describes the sight of Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang in the Robert Walser-Archiv in Zurich in 1987: '[S]eated at a pair of desks shoved back-to-back … hunched over thread counters – small magnifying lenses mounted on frames – peering at the tiniest manuscripts I'd ever seen. Using identical typewriters, they turned out draft after draft of their transcriptions.'[15] Those transcriptions, running to six volumes, were not completed until 2000. Echte was later to publish the landmark volume *Robert Walser: Sein Leben in Bildern and Texten* (2008). Meanwhile, the Bernese edition published by Suhrkamp superseded the Sämtliche Werke edited by Jochen Greven, who laboured on the collected works for many years. Greven it was who, while researching the earliest German-language doctoral dissertation on Walser, responded to the appearance of the first microscript facsimile in *Du* (October 1957) by writing to Carl Seelig, aiming to convince him that it was legible and transcribable. Seelig did not reply, but instead made provision in his will for the destruction of the microscripts after his death. Since Seelig had previously dismissed the microscripts as indecipherable remnants of Walser's long-term mental illness, this was no doubt to protect whatever literary reputation remained by this time. However, Bernofsky suggests that Seelig's sponsorship of Walser came at the price of a disproportionate degree of control over his legacy.[16] Having taken control of the publication of a five-volume edition of Walser's works, he

next embarked on a biography that would undoubtedly have sought to cement a particular image of the author. (The letters owned by Mermet were of particular interest in this regard.) But in 1962 Seelig died tragically under the machinery of a moving tram. Some of his research guided Robert Mächler's *The Life of Robert Walser* published four years after Seelig's death. The microscripts were of course not destroyed but reverted instead to Fanny Walser as Walser's last surviving family heir. Greven was engaged by Seelig's lawyer to catalogue them, beginning with *The Robber* and the 'Felix Scenes', which first appeared in 1972.

The modern canon of Walser criticism referred to above probably begins with Walter Benjamin. In his essay from 1929, referred to earlier, Benjamin writes of Walser's special ability to elevate the 'minor genre', as Polgar had called it. Walser's texts are likened by Benjamin to 'unpretentious calyxes' that withstand the 'insolent, rock-like façade of so-called great literature' (257); but it is his resistance to the knowing cultivation of form often accompanying such slender entertainments that makes Walser distinctive. Benjamin calls this subtle and elusive quality 'a neglect of style' (258) by means of which overtly contrived techniques of language are eventually overrun, the Walserian text being claimed instead by a sort of 'linguistic wilderness' (257). Max Brod, Kafka's literary executor and an acquaintance of Walser, himself wrote in 1911 that Walser's writing in fact had three layers: beneath the apparent naïveté one finds artfulness and the chance of irony; underneath that, however, a genuine artlessness persists that is powerfully Swiss-German.[17] Benjamin points to the fact that Walser claimed never to correct a single line in his writing in order to highlight the paradox that Walser – taking his own chances, as it were – intentionally rejected the intentionality that his texts ultimately confound. It is as if self-styled neglect is unstyled by its own devices. Benjamin associates this conundrum with Swiss 'reticence' (*Sprachscham*). Robert Musil, who once labelled Kafka's prose 'a special case of the Walser type', considered Walser a misread author. (Kafka himself was an enthusiastic reader of Walser, as Benjamin knew.) He reasoned that, because audiences were accustomed to recognising the emotional resonance of familiar literary themes, they attributed shallowness to human reactions that ran free of them.[18] For Benjamin, indeed, Walser's texts are all but emptied out by the 'heartrending, inhuman superficiality' (259) that accompanies them. Sontag sought to account for Walser's rejection of success, which Benjamin viewed as Schillerian, seeing it as not just a deliberate identification with ordinariness but the source of a freeing detachment.[19] Elias Canetti similarly observed a missing element in Walser's writing – namely,

those discarded motivations that leave only a cold enthusiasm behind.[20] Seemingly unsuccessful writers, then, undergo separation from a world where greatness comes through romanticised forms of recognition and empathy. Walser himself once confided to Seelig a feeling that his own literary downfall was due to the fanatical admiration shown to Hermann Hesse, the public enthusiasm for whom was due (so Walser said) to a little lofty romanticism here and there.[21]

Critical and creative engagements

In offering fresh perspectives on Walser's writings, some critics have chosen to explore the philosophical themes and formal problems arising from his work. In 'Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*: a "zero" point of German literature', Peter Utz notes Jakob's self-identification as a 'zero'.[22] Whereas this is often associated with the radical diminution of the protagonist as an 'I', Utz reminds us that zero as a 'number without content' is both 'the zero point and the central point of the number system'; as such, zero constitutes the unreckonable value that is nevertheless constitutive of the possibility of reckoning as such, a vanishing point that determines every perspective it eludes (145–6). For Utz, zero is therefore the enigma that makes the entire novel possible. He argues that the double function of the zero found at the intersection of modernism and science allows Walser's text not only to parody the novel of development or *Entwicklungsroman*, but actually to reinscribe itself within the paradoxical conditions of existence of this same novelistic tradition. The ending of *Jakob von Gunten* projects a dreamlike flight to a 'desert', which for Utz recalls the 'zero-point' of Arabic mathematics as evoking an empty space of profound openness or potentiality, inspiring European exoticist fantasies as much as the modern predicament confronted by the West.

Walser's fascination with certain types of diminution (Sebald famously called him the 'clairvoyant of the small') has prompted different readings from a variety of historical angles. Some critics have approached the topic by focussing on the theme of clerical employment, or work and service more broadly, in the Walserian text. For instance, Paul Buchholz writes at length on the subject of giving notice,[23] concluding that Walser's various quitters 'share with the workers' movement … the idea that refusing work provides a form of empowerment for the powerless'; however, such an inkling fosters only a 'distant affinity' (137) bereft of explicit leftist or Marxist principles. As 'resigners', if one could put it that way, Walser's characters become refusers of subjectification

rather than fully fledged political agents. Nevertheless, for Buchholz the indebtedness of capital to labour is narrated by Walser in a way that drives ironic storytelling towards the possibility of more systematic economic or materialist critique. Abigail Schoneboom, meanwhile, explores the writer-clerk tradition in modern European literature more widely.[24] She draws on Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, which provides a survey of the way in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century clerks wrote, read and exchanged ideas in an office setting.[25] Rose notes the disdain shown by authors such as Woolf and Forster towards half-educated clerks working in insurance, civil service and banking, while arguing that the Leonard Bast-type is largely absent from memoirs by Edwardian clerks. Schoneboom's own exploration ranges from Melville's characterisation of the enigmatic and unknowable Bartleby to Flaubert's depiction in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* of the inventive dreams of the clerk, as well as Dostoevsky's portrayals of the romantic inner life of penurious and embittered civil servants in *The Double* and *Notes from Underground* and, of course, Kafka's tales of bureaucratic dehumanisation. In this context, Walser himself is depicted as a writer who exploits clerkdom for financial reasons but also to fuel a combination of personal escapism and social critique.

Other critics concentrate on the broader idea of Walser's writing as a form of social commentary. This aspect of his work is not to be distinguished from Walser's interest in nature and landscape. For example, in his essay 'Robert Walser's Sceneries: "Kleist in Thun" and "The Walk"', Bernard F. Malkmus writes that Walser 'casts an ironic light on the habituated bourgeoise forms of landscape appreciation during his lifetime. Examples include spa culture, mountain and seaside tourism and – with a different sociopolitical index – the *Wandervogel* movement.'[26] 'The Alpine idyll had by this time already become a marketable asset', he concludes (174). Malkmus argues that Walser 'takes issue with the narcissistic projection of individual desires onto nature and landscapes' (172), a displacement of the human onto the non-human that recalls the legacy of the Kantian sublime; and he further suggests that Walser seeks antidotes to the classically German trope of heroic youth that often involves recourse to a certain idea of nature.

Questions of power and politics have become important for Walser scholars in a variety of ways. In 'Robert Walser's Jewish Berlin', Daniel Medin notes J. M. Coetzee's piece in *New York Review of Books* that linked some of Jakob von Gunten's culturally resentful lower-middle-class attitudes to those of Hitler's Brownshirts.[27] Medin does not especially credit such views, citing evidence of obvious sympathy with the Jews

that Walser met and worked with, alongside a consistent refusal of stereotypes; but nevertheless he acknowledges a certain class-based *ressentiment* found in some of Walser's writings from the Bern years. In 'Parodies of Power: Robert Walser's dramatic scenes', meanwhile, Valerie Heffernan argues that Walser's dramatic texts were mainly written to be read rather than performed, allowing a metatheatrical self-consciousness to pervade often recognisable stories from fairy-tale worlds or religious and political history.[28] By this means, she suggests, Walser was able to parody 'the power structures and hierarchies that pervade social and cultural norms', through knowing mimicry of established literary forms which served to 'undermine their authoritative pre-texts even as they seem to replicate their conventions' (225). Anne Fuchs's 'Robert Walser's *The Robber*: an exercise in camp', meanwhile, deems the novel an important example of 'minor literature' in the sense given this term by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.[29] Fuchs writes that Walser's text 'rejects the transcendental signification of major literature through a marginal or eccentric idiom that subverts conventional notions of coherence, power, and of the sovereign subject' (252). Such 'deterritorialisation' of literature occurs through a '"camp" mode of narration' characterised by frivolity and exuberance that itself disrupts the measured and sober demands of recounting required of a reliable narrator. In addition, it erodes 'the heteronormative expectations that conventionally underpin romance' (253). Fuchs cites Susan Sontag's idea that camp entails a highly stylised and playful experience of the world, privileging irony over tragedy and aesthetics over morality. In the camp world of Walser's *The Robber*, seeming romance becomes 'role-play without heterosexual desire' (259). Thus the novel lacks conventional narrative climax. The very notion of characters as sexual actors becomes part of a camp performance characterised by stylised elaborations and deferrals of all kinds. Fuchs suggests that Walser's camp narratology contests the Oedipality of desire and eschews the sadism of a thrusting heteronormativity in favour of a camp erotics of masochism defined by formal suspense (thus effectively queering the masochist 'contract' described by Deleuze).

Taking a different approach, Barbara Natalie Nagel comments on the peculiar fact that so little Walser criticism dwells on the prevalence of images of domestic violence and, more specifically, child abuse in his texts.[30] She notes:

> [W]e have men who batter their wives and sons, a woman who castrates her partner and fries his penis, a sympathetic 'Murderess' who hacks her husband to death because he is lazy. There is

> mention of a father who sexually abused his daughter with no signs of remorse and another father who shoots his son out of mere envy. A woman asks her stepdaughter for a kiss – the same daughter she just tried to have killed. We read about children who neglect their impoverished parents or lock them in the basement. Then there is the sister who, in the place of the mother, slaps her younger brother, or the two brothers who embrace each other in strangulation. Quantitatively speaking, however, the majority of the descriptions relate the violent abuse that children suffer at the hands of their parents and how these children integrate this experience into their world. (110)

Nagel enumerates key elements of the abuse that feature in Walser's writing: first of all, the surprising empathy that Walser's children show toward their abusive parents, which must also be read as a strange form of identification with the aggressor; and, second, the trope of the 'mature child' in Walser as a conspicuously problematic category fraught with anxiety as much as irony. Perhaps drawing on previous readings within the canon of Walser criticism, she further explores Walserian techniques for conveying the abusive situation that his texts describe. Excessive empathy, she concludes, can quickly be interrupted by a sense of apathy that disrupts compassionate feelings, setting aside the rather self-serving effects of empathetic identification. Almost always it is a change of tone that, for Nagel, complicates Walser's relationship to domestic abuse, in particular a 'sudden switch from high to low style' (121), from the loftily grand to the lowly or diminutive, bringing with it stylistic incongruities (for example inappropriate and often uncomfortably comic combinations of aggression and tenderness), which read like 'Tourette-like moments', albeit ones that are less moments of madness than of sanity 'insofar as they attest to a disharmony that would otherwise go unremarked', as she puts it (121). Nagel's essay is of particular importance for thinking about some of the more troubling aspects of Walser's correspondence with Mermet, especially the letters that mention her son Louis in ways that are both obviously (masochistically) erotic and playfully childlike.

The formal properties of Walser's late writing, in particular the microscripts, understandably engage some of the criticism. If Walser himself implied that he wrote *The Robber* having decided to write a story of the 'psychological' kind, Bernhard Echte views this nod towards the contemporary value of psychological fiction as largely ironic.[31] For Echte, it speaks of Walser's frustration at the continual pressure he felt to write another novel:

> The compositional structure of the text and its curiously associative and discontinuous mode of narration isn't the result of a pathological flight of ideas or an uncontrolled literary mania, as a number of reviewers surmised upon the novel's first appearance in 1972, but rather is based on a well thought-out method … [this] can be further clarified by examining the texts Walser wrote in the year or so preceding the composition of the *Räuber* novel. Here one can trace the gradual development of the narrative techniques that account for much of the novel's originality. (106)

Echte notes not only the recurrence of certain leitmotifs in the microscripts that structure *The Robber* itself, but also highlights the concerted use of techniques of 'delay and concealment' that provide a partial solution to Walser's evident difficulty in sustaining long-form writing, themselves becoming a theme of the text itself. Beginning with the novel's opening lines, 'Edith loves him. More on this later', repeated deferrals, interruptions, hints and riddles, some entirely misleading and deliberately futile, entangle the reader in a sort of faux labyrinth – as exasperating as it is entertaining – which both constitutes and confounds novelistic form itself. The near-plotless narrative is articulated from the standpoint of a 'subversive mischievousness with which the phenomenon of literary self-importance is parodied', writes Echte; the 'ironically hypocritical manner in which the narrator assumes the role now of the absentminded know-nothing, now of the prudent organizer' conveys not merely authorial unreliability but perhaps also embodies the ironic conditions of any novel's composition and self-presentation (108). For Echte, the robbery found in Walser's microscript novel therefore marks the end of an age of literary grandeur of the Schillerian kind: his main character is not so much a heroic rebel as a cheap confidence trickster, a petty adventurer and a bit of a crank. The question of the relationship between protagonist and narrator further complicates our reading of *The Robber*. Echte observes that they are, in fact, 'on the same (fictive) level of reality' (109): each of them is therefore caught up in a *doppelganger* situation. For Echte, however, the protagonist-as-robber does not merely personify 'the splitting-off of the antisocial tendencies the narrator is unable to integrate into his own personality' (110), since such displacement only repeats the act of concealing goods, dishonestly placing them elsewhere, of which any robber is guilty. In projecting the robber thus, the narrator is therefore forced to look at himself in the mirror.

A brief review of this selection of scholarly contributions to the field of Walser studies is useful in the sense that it provides some critical resources for reading his correspondence. A sense of diminution or 'smallness' that pervades Walser's texts also establishes one context in which to read the letters; the relationship of writing to work (including writing work like that of a clerk) is similarly a concern in many of his exchanges; while themes of nature, culture, power and politics, sexuality and gender permeate missives to Mermet down the years. The question of the subject-position of the writer (for example, as an 'I') is also an abiding concern of the present study, strongly informing the subsequent chapters of this book as both critical and creative contributions to the question of how to read Walser's letters to Mermet. The question of the child is, as already stated, an extremely challenging aspect of this correspondence, and doubtless demands more critical attention and debate. If all these critical writings are germane to the Walser–Mermet correspondence, the aforementioned essay by Elke Siegel stands out as a direct engagement with it, shedding light on the various connections between Walser's epistolary practice and fictional writing, but also exploring the role his letters play in shaping his own sense of subjectivity and sociability. In Walser's personal correspondence, much more than in his professional exchanges, Siegel shows how he 'experiments with language, style, forms of address, and signatures' (47) in ways that suggest a close relationship to the short-form prose in particular. These 'epistolary performances' rehearse key elements in the development of Walser's fiction, including the creative disruption of more normative authorial or narratorial subject positions located in first-person speech. In his personal correspondence with women, meanwhile, Siegel focuses on the strange interplay between writerly (indeed postal) distance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the approximation of desire and carefully balanced intimacy found notably in the gift-exchange of food items. Here, the pleasure of eating and the experience of hunger found in Walser's letters help to refigure images of circulation and reciprocity at the heart of traditions of epistolary writing. Set in the context of his sharp appreciation of issues arising from 'the commodification of literature', 'the precariousness of the writer's existence in modernity' and the contemporary forms of power structuring 'social existence and desire', Walser's 'culinary-epistolary poetics' (49) represents a particular transformation of the legacies of epistolary fiction in the interests of a ceaseless re-examination of what is demanded from human relationships by notions of civility and care, gratitude and giving, and so forth. Often this exploration is not without irony in Walser's letters, and it frequently strays into images (and indeed writing practices) of excess overflowing the decorum of merely

transactional social exchange. Nonetheless the idea of hungry longing connecting eating, on the one hand, and corresponding through letter-writing, on the other, suggests the intractability of sociality itself even as it crosses postal distance – or even as it risks getting lost in the mail. At a time during and after the First World War when the literary marketplace was drying up and food supplies were dwindling, a recursive interplay between the exchange of pieces of food (*stücke*) and of small pieces of writing sometimes called *prosastücke* by Walser became a structuring feature of his correspondence with Mermet, accompanied as it often was by the food parcels she sent. If the 'quasi-domestic exchange system' (55) generated by such ritual 'feeding' encourages comparisons with a patriarchal model of the household in which the masculine relationship to food production is limited to displays of appetite and appreciation, demand and satiety, then nevertheless Siegel finds in Walser's culinary-epistolary poetics a glimmer of subversion as much as the recreation of power. Precisely *as* bits or fragments, the pieces – whether of food or writing – always threaten to break up the possibility of absolute integrity at the heart of powerful forms of identity or mastery, becoming themselves free-floating synecdoches, parts in search of a 'whole' that is nevertheless already consumed by the bit-by-bit logic that grants such pieces their very possibility in the first place. Letters and food, in other words, exist only in terms of a certain 'transport' of meaning and delight that short-circuits the very idea of self-sufficiency on which power frequently rests. As such, Walserian hunger is not only a means to subjugate the (feminine) 'other' through the continual insistence of male desire, producing a highly gendered division of (domestic) labour; nor does it entail simply a shallow performativity much like the apparent submissiveness of an insatiable baby bird. For Siegel, Walserian hungering also represents an always-unfinished and unstable practice of sharing in which neither donor/writer nor recipient/addressee ever quite add up to a self-identical entity as such – in which, indeed, the two never quite become 'one' (the exchange of forms of sustenance that are fleeting or partial is more characteristic of the Walser–Mermet relationship than any such consummation). This would be a practice, then, in which the 'other' (including the other-in-oneself) in fact becomes constitutive. Such a sharing practice includes Mermet's safekeeping of texts clipped from newspapers – 'a postpublication parallel world of textual circulation' (60), as Siegel puts it – as well as her guardianship of those letters Walser wrote that later formed the basis of short stories. In such a context as this, mastication and digestion as transformative types of 'transport' chime with the images of gender fluidity found throughout Walser's writing.

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From Kafka to Coetzee, writers as well as critics have paid attention to Walser's texts. For example, in 1990 the American author William H. Gass wrote rather poetically (indeed, Walserishly?), and yet very insightfully, of him: 'His transitions are as abrupt as table edges; non sequiturs flock his pages like starlings to their evening trees; the pieces turn, almost savagely, against themselves, or they dwindle away in apparent weariness.'[32] Sebald's well-known essay 'Le Promeneur Solitaire', meanwhile, describes the 'seismographic precision' with which Walser 'registers the slightest tremors at the edges of his consciousness'.[33] Sebald's text is itself a highly creative, poetic essay connecting Walser's writings to his own through the narrative performance of uncanny linkages tying death to life and memory to writing, as the author ranges across the troubled landscape of the European twentieth century of which both writers were so much a part. Walser's impact has therefore not only been felt in the world of literary criticism; his work has also made a lasting impression in the creative sphere. His influence upon the visual arts can be shown in paintings by the English musician and artist Billy Childish and the American painter Joan Nelson, as well as in works by Mark Wallinger, Josiah McElheny, Rodney Graham, Thomas Schütte, Tacita Dean and Moyra Davey that were brought together for an exhibition in Basel in the early 2010s. *A Little Ramble: in the spirit of Robert Walser* includes a series of creative engagements with Walser's work by several of these artists.[34] Films by the Quay Brothers, including a feature-length adaptation of *Jakob von Gunten* entitled *Institute Benjamenta, or This Dream People Call Human Life* (1995) starring Mark Rylance, constitute further important engagements with Walser. Meanwhile, Paul North's edition of Walser's *Answer to an Inquiry* (itself a short work written in the form of a letter containing a set of theatrical instructions) is accompanied by more than 40 drawings in a collaboration between the translator and artist Friese Undine.[35] Among these creative offerings, Elfriede Jelinek's text 'on/with' Walser, *er nicht als er* (2004) features in Chapter 3 of the present book. It does so in order to suggest that the performative conditions of address such as are found in letter-writing in fact condition the theatricality of the work; and, in this sense, that creative reworkings as much as scholarly interpretations of Walser acquire validity through their capacity to (re)-stage formal as well as critical problems. For similar reasons, too, the next chapter leads from the critical questions entailed by a reading not only of Walser's correspondence but also Kafka's (in which we find certain similarities but also important differences) toward texts by Derrida and Cixous on letter-writing that demand formal and textual (re) invention of themselves.

Notes

1 Elfriede Jelinek, *Her Not All Her*, translated by Damion Searls (London: Sylph Editions, 2012).
2 Robert Walser, 'The Walk', in *Selected Stories*, 54–104.
3 The pieces included in *Fritz Kocher's Essays* can be found, in English translation, in the first part of a *Schoolboy's Diary*; 'The Rowboat' also features in the latter collection (85).
4 Elke Siegel, 'To Pieces: Robert Walser's correspondence with Frieda Mermet', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, edited by Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan (Evanston , IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 47–64. Further page references will be given in the body of this chapter.
5 Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten*, translated with an introduction by Christopher Middleton (New York: New York Review Books, 1999).
6 Both these plays can be found, in English translation, in *Fairy Tales: dramolettes*, translated by Daniele Pantano and James Riedel, with a preface by Reto Sorg (New York: New Directions, 2015).
7 Walter Benjamin, 'Robert Walser', in *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (1927–30), edited by Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2005), 257–61.
8 Robert Walser, 'Balloon Journey', in *Selected Stories*, 14–16.
9 Robert Walser, 'The Little Berliner' (translated by Harriet Watts), in *Berlin Stories*, translated (with others) and including an introduction by Susan Bernofsky (New York: New York Review Books, 2012), 71–7.
10 Also in *Berlin Stories*, 106–10.
11 Robert Walser, *The Robber*, translated with an introduction by Susan Bernofsky (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books, 2000). Further page references will be given in the body of my chapters.
12 Werner Morlang, 'The Singular Bliss of the Pencil Method: on the microscripts', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 12.2 (1992), 95–105; 98.
13 This text can be found in *Selected Stories*, 148–51.
14 See Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan's introduction, 'Robert Walser: modernist at the margins', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, 3–19.
15 Susan Bernofsky, *Clairvoyant of the Small: the life of Robert Walser* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2021), 8.
16 Bernofsky, *Clairvoyant of the Small*, 308.
17 Max Brod, 'Kommentar zu Robert Walser', *Pan* 2.2 (1911), 53–8.
18 Robert Musil, 'Die *Geschichten* von Robert Walser', *Die Neue Rundschau* 25.2 (1914): 1167–9, translated as 'The *Stories* of Robert Walser', in *Robert Walser Rediscovere*d, 141–3. Musil challenges those readers who too hastily attribute to Walser's prose a lack of 'ethical depth'.
19 See Sontag's foreword to *Robert Walser: selected stories*.
20 Elias Canetti's remarks are made in *The Human Province* and are reproduced in *Robert Walser Rediscovered*, 151–2.
21 Walser is reported as making these remarks in Carl Seelig's *Walks with Walser*, translated by Anne Posten (New York: New Directions, 2017), 13–14.
22 Peter Utz, 'Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*: a "zero" point of German literature', *Robert Walser: a companion*, 143–69.
23 Paul Buchholz, 'Out of a Job: giving notice in *The Tanners* and *The Assistant*', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, 125–41.
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28 Valerie Heffernan, 'Parodies of Power: Robert Walser's dramatic scenes', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, 211–27.
29 Anne Fuchs, 'Robert Walser's *The Robber*: an exercise in camp', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, 251–68.

30 Barbara Natalie Nagel, 'The Child in the Dark: on child abuse in Robert Walser', *New German Critique* 49.2 (146) (2022): 107–32.
31 Bernhard Echte, 'Robert Walser's *Räuber* Novel', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 12.2 (1992), 106–13; 106.
32 William H. Gass, introduction to *Robert Walser, Masquerade and Other Stories* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), x. Cited in Frederick and Heffernan, 'Robert Walser: modernist at the margins', 3–4.
33 W. G. Sebald, 'Le Promeneur Solitaire', introduction to *The Tanners*, 27.
34 *A Little Ramble: in the spirit of Robert Walser* (New York: New Directions, 2012).
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Part I
Writing Robert Walser

1
Addressing the question – of letters

In the first part of this chapter, I want to revisit the critical writing devoted to Franz Kafka's correspondence with Felice Bauer, in order to establish the interpretive grounds for a critical comparison with Walser's letters to Frieda Mermet. While the latter exchange has drawn comparatively little scholarly attention to date, the letters to Felice have been the source of important readings by notable critics and thinkers. As such, I will argue, these letters provide an important comparative resource especially in terms of the critical possibilities of reading generated by them. Elias Canetti's book on the topic may be considered a landmark study, published as it was just a couple of years after the letters to Felice first appeared in print during the late 1960s; while Deleuze and Guattari's influential conception of what constitutes a minor literature is indebted not only to Kafka's texts in general, but (through the authors' account of the politics of desire) to the 'problem' of this correspondence as a key to Kafka's writing practices overall. If academic readers are somewhat divided about the extent to which Kafka's letters exploited Felice by taking her as a foil for the author's own literary devices (this is the dominant but not exclusive perspective in the critical literature), my approach is to contrast seemingly overlapping aspects of the two sets of letters in order to argue that they are tellingly different. Walser is often linked to Kafka, frequently through rather superficial comparisons occasioned by that fact that, before the latter's fame was fully established, Robert Musil once deemed Kafka's prose 'a special case of the Walser type'.[1] The relationship of both writers to the broader arc of literary modernism in the German-speaking world, as well as their mutual connections in its cultural sphere, no doubt justifies some sense of affinity – not to mention important thematic linkages (from the socio-economic as well as cultural experience of office work and family life, to the professional challenges and sexual politics of their writing), which together define something of

a shared history. In this chapter, however, I will focus specifically on the culinary motifs found in both sets of correspondence, in order to contrast what may be termed (following Barbara N. Nagel) the passive-aggressive hungering of Kafka with the 'connoisseurship' of freedom that Walser advocates in one of his own stories.

In the case of both sets of exchanges, of course, only one side of the correspondence still exists. Felice's letters to Kafka are entirely lost, just as those from Frieda Mermet to Walser no longer survive. Kafka wanted both sides of the correspondence to be destroyed, but Felice did not keep her side of the bargain; in Walser's case, one may presume that, if he preserved Mermet's letters for any period of time, the letters probably did not outlive his regular changes of address. Walser routinely sent clippings of his work published in newspapers and magazines to Frieda or to his sister Lisa for safekeeping in the library above the Bellelay schoolhouse. This supports the idea that Walser was economical with any papers that travelled with him from one lodging to another. In Kafka's case, the disappearance of Felice's side of the correspondence only fuels the recurrent image of her as fictive 'muse', the absent creation of Kafka's own literary needs and an empty vessel for anxious flights of imaginative fancy on his part. The concluding section of this chapter asks not so much what happened to Felice's or Frieda's letters – although one wonders what sort of research project, if any, such questions might lead to (or at any rate what sort of adventure it might lead us on). Instead, the following question arises: What may be done with such an absence, above and beyond the simple banality of remarking it? How does the absence function – and is that function only a consequence of the letters disappearing after the fact, or does it have something to do with a more intrinsic aspect of their original existence *as* letters, indeed the existence of all letters in general which, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, are defined as such by the constitutive possibility of their non-arrival. Neither Felice's nor Frieda's letters arrive for us (in a material sense) as critical readers of the correspondence in question, nor can we be entirely certain of their arrival in so far as the original addressee was concerned.[2] Obviously, Kafka and Walser alike write letters that are demonstrably *replies*. But we cannot know the number or contents of those missives that may not have made it through to them. (As many will know, the very thought of a deficit of correspondence is a constant source of anxiety for Kafka; it also causes Walser to grumble or fret now and then.) Neither, for that matter, can we know which and how many of their own letters failed to arrive – whether all of Walser's made it to Bellelay or whether some of Kafka's went missing on their way to Berlin. What this means is that,

in each case, the correspondence cannot be characterised by a clear-cut opposition between presence on the one (masculine) side and absence on the other (feminine) side. Of course the women kept the letters, not the men, which suggests a certain reversal of poles, if not of roles – but that is not what I mean. What I mean is that the 'absence' of the women's letters should not be situated too hastily on the thither side of the exchange, as if the 'presence' of the surviving letters (by male authors) should be defined first and foremost by their capacity to withstand and outlive the loss of the other (female) 'half' in more or less intact form. We assume, for example, that we can still somehow read Kafka's letters without Felice's; that Walser's missives are in some sense legible despite the gaps resulting from Frieda's lost replies. Such assumptions are of course absolutely laden in gender terms, in ways that could be enumerated at some length. But my main point is that the 'presence' and legibility of the surviving texts is defined by what is (perhaps unknowably) missing from them, just as the condition of every letter in general is the possibility of its non-arrival. That missing part, that supposed 'lack', is not just 'feminine' since, at the most obvious level, we cannot know what is missing from the 'male' side: whether that entails letters not kept by the female recipient; or, for that matter, whether it involves letters written by men, whose contents may be affected by the fact that the author had not received something in the post, whether it was expected or not. Holes open up everywhere, in other words. They are so prevalent, in fact – if only in their inescapable possibility – that they define the correspondence as such. In that strict sense, we are not now left with simply one 'side' of the letters (whether those from Kafka to Felice or Walser to Mermet) but with … something else, something more and less than half, an incalculable remainder beyond presence/absence, a hybrid defined by what it is not.

If what is supposedly lost or absent from the correspondence is a constitutive if typically occluded part of them, then the fact that this 'part' is routinely feminised through its association with letters by women that are now missing or lacking undoubtedly colours the critical literature in ways that require redress. Not least since such an assumption only replays the hyper-anxious and reproachful charge of 'absence' that is the very stuff of Kafka's letters to Felice. The latter sections of this chapter therefore seek to elaborate a deconstructive reading of so-called lost correspondence that avoids the trap of gendering 'lack', in favour of attending to a more complexly constituted set of forces and relations that structure (and indeed destructure) the possibility of letter-writing in general.

Writing Felice

In a letter dated 14–15 January 1913, Kafka wrote to Felice Bauer: 'Alas, it is not my mistress who calls me, it's only the letter I want to write to her.'[3] Such a sentiment has proved compelling for the critical reception of their correspondence. Elias Canetti's *Kafka's Other Trial* (1969) offers a sustained analysis of the author's relationship with Felice, the daughter of a Viennese insurance agent whose employment had led the family from Felice's Silesian birthplace to Berlin.[4] Kafka met Felice in August 1912, at Max Brod's family home and, having become engaged to her – twice in fact, although the engagement was broken off – continued a correspondence until 1917, the couple meeting only infrequently during the years they maintained contact. Canetti not only contextualises Kafka's exchange of letters with Felice in terms of his growth as a writer but makes it a condition of such development. Kafka meets Felice around the same time he shares with Brod the manuscript of *Meditation*, writing to Brod subsequently that the question of the final arrangement of texts making up the collection risks succumbing to the immediate influence Felice had upon his thoughts. While, soon afterwards, Kafka suffers a dissonant reaction to the physical incidence of Felice's company, he nevertheless begins writing to her five weeks later, mentioning in his first letter the photographs of the 'Thalia journey' he had shown her during their meeting – a reference to a trip he undertook with Brod earlier that summer. They had visited Weimar and, while looking around the Goethe House (the home of German letters, one might venture to say), Kafka met the custodian's daughter, quickly becoming captivated by her. This led to a burst of correspondence, the intensity of which was – according to Canetti – subsequently transferred onto Felice. Thus, on the evening of their meeting, Kafka was equipped, as Canetti puts it, 'with everything that might bring him encouragement: the manuscript of his first book; the pictures of the "Thalia" journey […] and in his pocket an issue of the magazine *Palästina*' (7–8) – the latter sparking an impromptu agreement, sealed with a handshake, that Felice and Franz should take a trip to the Promised Land. It is as if their first encounter is, in a literary sense, powerfully overdetermined: Kafka visits Brod, a fellow writer, armed not only with his manuscript but with a set of photographs and a pamphlet that together blend literary allusion and aspiration into a cocktail of romantic promise. At the heart of this reading, Felice is less a real person than the addressee of letters that Canetti describes as 'more gripping and absorbing than any literary work I have read for years past' (4). Her side of the exchange being entirely lost, and the

pair meeting only infrequently during their long correspondence (often an unsatisfactory experience – and one that Kafka himself repeatedly blocked, placing all sorts of obstacles in the way), Canetti takes her for a cipher. Felice is depicted as, among other things, an avid reader and enthusiastic copyist of manuscripts – such a revelation causes Kafka to bang the table in amazement, as he himself recalls in a subsequent letter – as if the particular activity of transcription so overwhelms Kafka's sense of Felice that her personality itself becomes almost palimpsestic. Canetti argues that it is the feeling of distance from her, reinforced through letter-writing, that grants a sense of security for Kafka. The letters afford a stimulus that constitutes itself at one remove, without the perturbation caused by intrusive physical contact. Himself a punctilious reader of the letters of Kleist, Flaubert and Hebbel, Kafka's letters convert love itself into a form of epistolary experience.

Two nights after his first letter to Felice, Kafka writes 'The Judgement' – a text that unusually enough causes him little subsequent dissatisfaction. He writes it in a single sitting over the course of one night-time. Canetti calls it '*hers*; he is indebted to her for it, and he dedicated it to her' (16). As a masterpiece of Kafka's writing, Canetti highlights the proximity of its composition to the first letter written to Felice in September 1912 (rather than its relationship to his actual encounter with her in August). Over the next few months, while their correspondence was still intense, Kafka went on to write several chapters of *Amerika* and *The Metamorphosis* in quick succession. Canetti remarks that the literary quality of his notebooks also improved during this period, creating greater resources for his fictional writing. The exchange with Felice, meanwhile, becomes so regular and concentrated as to emulate a daily journal: 'His diary stops during this period – the letters to Felice are his expanded diary, with the advantage that he really does write an entry each day' (14–15). One notable feature of this routine is that it permits repetition – 'veritable litanies' (15), as Canetti puts it – which in turn helps to twist and turn thematic patterns of writing into Kafkaesque shape. Moreover the letters are not merely exchanged but become tokens of exchange in their own right, motifs for other aspects of the writer's life. For instance, Kafka 'piles up uncertainties within myself before they turn into a little certainty or a letter' (12), the letters themselves entering into tangible correspondence with his own anxious psychology. (On another occasion, as Canetti shows, he entreats Felice: 'Please be kind to my poor book!' (16) as if it – *Meditation* – were a person; and, in a further letter, he exclaims: 'You don't like my book any more than you liked my photograph' (18).) Kafka also complains of interruptions at his place of

employment, as though office work and letter-writing vie uneasily for control of the author's hand. At one point, anxious to preserve his own self-image as a solitary, nocturnal author, he asks Felice not to write to him from her bed at night, thus setting up a series of highly determined exchanges between correspondence and fiction, day-time and night-time writing, engagement and detachment, the feminine and the masculine, and so on. Where a lover's jealousy is concerned, meanwhile, Kafka becomes rivalrous not with imagined suitors as such, but only with other writers whose texts compete with his own in so far as Felice's approval might be concerned. His marriage proposal to her, communicated not in person but by letter, is accordingly described by the author himself as a 'treatise', as Canetti himself highlights (49). Across these various examples, then, the letters to Felice serve as markers of both connection and separation, sameness and difference, identity and exchange; even the relationship between love and writing itself oscillates between figurative interrelationship and the defensive redrawing of frontiers.

Kafka's writing begins to falter, Canetti suggests, when he comes to suspect its reliance on the specific nature of this exchange as precisely a literary prop rather than a deeply personal compact. Nevertheless, this turn of events does not bring to a halt the connections between life and writing derived from his relationship to Felice. Canetti describes the breaking-off of their engagement: Kafka is brought to account in rather public circumstances when, in July 1914, a 'tribunal' (as Kafka subsequently calls it) is held at the Askanischer Hof hotel in Berlin. For Canetti, this provides inspiration for *The Trial* – in particular, the execution in the final chapter. From Kafka's diaries, the linkage is clear to see, particularly through comparable use of language associated with legal cases, notably relating to accusation, defence and punishment. The final demise of their relationship is also mediated, indeed constructed, by means of letter-writing. As Canetti points out, Kafka's last letter to Felice in October 1917:

> reads as if it were hardly written for her. He puts her far from him, although she is already far away; his glassy statements do not include her and are addressed as to a third person. He begins with a quotation from a letter to Max Brod: Brod had written that Kafka's letters bore witness to a great tranquility, as if he were happy in his misfortune […] The greater part of the letter consists of a reply written to Max Brod, approximately quoted and mailed four days previously. (129)

Felice is inched out by means of the same set of literary connections between Kafka and Brod through which she was constituted as an addressee in the first place, as if they were part of a conjurer's vanishing act that brought her on stage only to make her disappear. Kafka's letter is 'cold as ice', observes Canetti. It informs her of his state of health but pointedly does not ask after hers (which had been a convention of their earlier exchanges). It discourages her from further contact only by bringing up the fact that he has instructed his closest literary friends – all of them men, Brod included – not to visit in future.

As in Walser's correspondence with Frieda Mermet, food and eating plays an important role in the exchanges between Kafka and Felice. Reportedly, during their first meeting, while looking intently at the Thalia pictures, Felice had neglected her meal; when Brod commented on the fact, she expressed disgust for those who constantly ate. Canetti suggests this would have caught Franz's attention due to his 'restraint in matters of eating' (9) – Kafka's best-known story on this topic obviously being 'The Hunger Artist'. He himself was known to be obstinate in his resistance to certain foods – including, most frequently, meat – and famously refused his family's own eating habits. Part of Kafka's writerly fantasy of complete isolation, shared in his correspondence with Felice, was the idea not only of nocturnal silence but also of food being placed at a remote distance from the locked cellar in which he would work uninterrupted, to be reached only by mild exertion and consumed slowly and mechanically as a mere necessity (40). Nevertheless, Canetti emphasises how Kafka's sense of his own weakness is presented in terms of his thinness and lack of body fat (24–5), 'the thin man and the dead man' coming to be 'seen as one […] allied to the idea of the Last Judgement, there emerges an image of his corporeality that could hardly be more forlorn and fraught with doom' (27). At times, Canetti suggests, Kafka even displays a peculiar admiration for fat people. Moreover, *Kafka's Other Trial* describes how after the 'tribunal' Franz all but gorges on meat, apparently in defiance of Felice (93) – even though other episodes of meat-eating are accommodations seemingly designed to placate her, the menu being 'an important item in this love affair' (110). Canetti himself resorts to the trope of eating to characterise their relationship more broadly, for instance: 'There is one letter in which he puts twenty questions to her about her work; his voracity increases, and he becomes insatiable for news about it' (115). Meanwhile, a plan for the couple to meet in Munich is supported by an invitation extended to Kafka to give a reading in the city. Canetti writes: 'He knows that reading would be

a source of strength for him; Felice, too, now that she is concerned and obedient, gives him strength. In Munich, both sources are to be joined, each intensifying the other' (117).

Felice and reading/writing are once more intimately connected, this time through the language of nutrition – that is, of the weakness or strength derived from nourishing food or its lack – which forms part of a Kafkaesque 'litany' found throughout the correspondence itself. However, the Munich escapade results only in a quarrel in a pastry shop (fittingly enough), which Kafka describes as 'ghastly'; the failure of their meeting arouses in him a sense of guilt which, while it is sufficiently deep as to not 'need feeding from outside', nevertheless forms part of a constitution 'not strong enough to gulp down this food very often' (119). Once more, motifs or tokens of exchange linking literary to lived experience serve dual purposes, joining and separating almost in equal measure, the investment in figurative connections leading almost inevitably to defensive retrenchment – albeit by means of the very same language and, indeed, linguistic set of relations. As much as he appreciates how these particular patterns work, Canetti is also drawn into them and indeed repeats them on several occasions. On top of which, he hardly makes an attempt to credit Felice with much agency or indeed any voice, either through his reading of Kafka's own letters or in his claims about the importance of them to Kafka's literary development. Instead, he retrenches – pointing out how different the pair ultimately were, how unliterary she actually was, and so forth. In this, of course, Canetti repeats as much as analyses Kafka himself. If Felice is assumed to be a mere cipher, an encrypted part of Kafka's literary development, then the allusive thematics of food generate a fraught economy of desire and resistance that is not only evident in the letters themselves but that is also reproduced in Canetti's dual emphasis on the extent of Felice's significance and the importance of her absence (like food itself).

The influence of Canetti's study can be found in a variety of subsequent sources. For instance, Peter F. Neumeyer has written about the interplay of proximity and distance shaping Kafka's letters to Felice.[5] Neumeyer notes that, when Kafka tried, however anxiously, to 'associate himself in a social enterprise of this world – the Jewish orphanage which employed Felice Bauer', he would 'never really commit himself to direct action or to total personal involvement. Whatever he did, whatever he said with regard to the orphanage, was through the mediation of the postal service, and the surrogate of his beloved' (352). Kafka's constant quizzing of Felice over the details of her time at the orphanage (including his constant recommendations of book choices for her students) amounts,

for Neumeyer, to an almost violent appropriation of her experience for himself, the means of which is, tellingly, 'postal' as much as it is 'literary' or 'romantic' (353). Kafka advocates, on her part, a near-vocational immersion in the enterprise (for which Zionism is the recurring motif) that itself forms the basis of a renewed spiritual connection between them; and yet the (postal) mediation of this intense intimacy reinscribes distance – and indeed conceals a certain detachment – at the very heart of the relationship. The proxy connections between the orphanage, books and letters, spirituality and love not only form linkages but define complex interactions that delineate and constrain as much as they configure the relations in question here. The chance of withdrawal and isolation is therefore always held in reserve, and it is the letter – the potential non-arrival of which is absolutely constitutive – that writes this double possibility into social relations and affairs, be they romantic or educational, personal or institutional.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, meanwhile, offer a different interpretation of the role played by Kafka's letters to Felice in structuring both his connection to and retreat from a world outside.[6] Noting, like Canetti, Kafka's fascination with the correspondence of predecessors such as Flaubert, Kleist and Hebbel, his own letters are described by them as 'devilish', deterritorialising love by substituting a '*diabolical pact*' with writing for the '*wedding contract*' itself (592). Indeed, the letters *are* this pact, not only forming part of it but granting its very conditions of possibility (like Canetti, the authors note how 'the elements of the literary machine exist already' in Kafka's epistolary writing). Deleuze and Guattari characterise the 'machinery' of the letters as rhizomatic but also vampiric: they suck blood (of the victim Felice) but also cross imposing thresholds – albeit with dark trepidation – in order to hazard such carnivorous appropriation. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the *suject d'énonciation* – the speaking subject of the letter – and the *sujet d'énoncé* – the subject that is spoken of by them – in order to suggest the double nature of Kafka's epistolary practice, its self-blocking amid the deathly fiction of vampiric movement or travel (indeed, they go so far as to suggest that, in the end, Kafka's letters 'exorcise proximity' (598)). Here, the writer-as-correspondent is all but engulfed, eaten up, by the postman as true agent of this (erotics of) exchange, the messenger rather than the author becoming the prime – if mutant or monstrous – figure catalysing the 'movement' of the letters themselves. Thus, the 'Faustian diabolical pact is derived from a distant source of strength, as opposed to the closeness of the marriage contract' (594). No wonder, as *suject d'énonciation*, Kafka is figured in terms of remote incarceration, recurrent

paralyses and impending disappearance. Meanwhile, the novels and stories – which Kafka thinks of destroying as if they themselves were letters – are brought into an integral relationship with his correspondence ('one must consider the letters in general as fully belonging to the writing, *hors-d'oeuvre* or not' (595)), precisely because they configure a politics of desire in which language and power intersect as the very components of 'the writing machine' itself. From this, we are told, it is important to 'understand why certain genres such as the novel have naturally taken advantage of the epistolary form' (595). Within the Deleuzian–Guattarian writing-machine, the 'animal-becoming' or total metamorphosis of the author – dissolving into a near-molecular transformation or reorganisation – is accompanied by a continual retracing of the blocked exit, which itself shows a way out that Kafka's stories are themselves unable to take. The escape sought is from 'the violence of a bureaucratic Eros, law-enforcing, judicial, economic, or political' which brings us back to the exorcism of a certain proximity found in the letters to Felice (602). As such, however, it is a mistake to construe this exorcism in terms of an idea of 'refuge' or of the 'ivory tower' (605) since Kafka's 'rhizome' or 'burrow' precisely connects to the entire network or machinic assemblage Deleuze and Guattari wish to describe:

> The creative escape route involves the whole of politics, the whole of economics, the whole of bureaucracy and of justice: it sucks them, like a vampire, to make them produce sounds which are still unknown and which belong to the near future – fascism, Stalinism, Americanism, *the diabolical powers which are knocking at the door*. (605)

Thus, Kafka is 'a political author' as much as 'a prophet of the future world' because his writing engages a system of gears, a complex circuitry or politics of desire that cannot be fully co-opted by 'laws, states, governments', even if it also flows through them. Deleuze and Guattari therefore conclude their essay by rejoicing in the comic joy of Kafka's 'desire' – the politics of which is nevertheless traced in a very particular way: 'Everything is political, beginning with the letters to Felice' (606).

Kafka's obsession with food, what he will eat and what he will not (forming a series of connections linking meat, the animal, teeth and mouth, eating and fasting) is also, for Deleuze and Guattari, 'one of Kafka's main problems with Felice'.[7] While the vegetarian Franz is weak, thin and bloodless, Felice attracts him because she has 'muscular arms,

rich with blood' and 'great carnivorous teeth'. The vampiric quality of the letters is thus reinforced: as a footnote to *Kafka: toward a minor literature* points out, Franz will only eat meat in the company of (or in reference to) Felice; in another note, meanwhile, Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the fact that, during their first meeting, Kafka notices her 'bare throat'.[8]

Regardless of the politics of desire of the letters which Deleuze and Guattari identify in terms of resistance to interconnected forms of power, the exploitative nature of Kafka's correspondence with Felice hardly seems in question. This feeling seems widely shared across the critical literature; for instance, Elizabeth Boa argues that Felice – as 'muse' rather than bride – is a particular construct of desire reducing her to merely a textual figure of the imagination, while Julian Preece similarly points to the correspondence as effectively an abuse of the epistolary form and tradition of the *Brautbrief* (letter of courtship) that empties Felice of any meaning beyond the role she plays in Kafka's fantasy life.[9] However, some critics have looked at the issue differently. For instance, Jill Marsden revisits the interconnected array of bodily references found in the letters in order to argue against simple narratives of exploitative appropriation on Kafka's part.[10]

Marsden focuses on the correspondence with Felice in order to explore the 'power of the letter' in terms of a theory of its materiality. She writes of the letters: 'They are profoundly important material things yet for the most part they record matters of profoundly little importance' (20). According to Marsden, Kafka's delight in the 'physical being' of Felice's missives is almost irrespective of their subject-matter. Instead of showing interest in more substantial topics such as Felice's opinions, aspirations or ideals, his obsessive concern with seemingly minor details bears this out: it is as if triviality is so elevated by Kafka that the simple fact of the correspondence, rather than its content, is what really matters. Drawing parallels with Nietzsche's interest in 'nearest things' – forms of immediacy resistant to the abstractions of metaphysics that, for Marsden, connect Nietzschean philosophy to a possible materialism rather than a 'pre-critical determinism or positivist ontology' (25) – she argues that the letters 'materially orient' Kafka to Felice. It is 'the material element of their mutual writing' (30) that allows this orientation to matter in a double sense: both to acquire significance, and to take material form. Between these two senses, Marsden suggests that the letters manifest nothing less than a 'style of living' (32). Tracing language and figuration throughout the exchange, she concludes that the letters may indeed 'function as bodily organs' (28) not in the sense that they literally become living organic matter but because they form a sort of connective tissue

through which Franz and Felice almost seem to share and swap body parts or functions: 'This stream of writing is the essential circulation fuelling their relationship and, like blood coursing through their fused bodies, all that matters is that it keeps flowing' (28). By arguing that the letters enact 'nearness' as a more-or-less fluid form of materiality, this reading somewhat erodes the borders of a series of oppositions (presence/absence; life/writing, etc.), which tend to structure critical assumptions about the exploitative nature of the exchange, and which indeed give those structuring polarities a gendered form. In conclusion, Marsden writes:

> Kafka liberates the *Brautbrief* from its cultural location in the conventions of courtship. Assuming the letters have to be about something more than themselves is the greatest obstacle to their appreciation. Kafka's letter-writing is a means of conditioning rather than merely recording reality, an embodied orientation of thought […] Felice is touched by Kafka's letters and he is closer to her in a profound sense when writing than at any other time. (32)

Here, the connection of flesh and blood to a vampiric imagery of consuming violence is not only resisted, but its meaning is transformed; for Marden, Kafka's correspondence with Felice brings to life the bodily functions and forms that feature within it, precisely through this sense of the material pulse of the exchange.

But Marsden's is not the only possible reading of the materiality of the letter as integral to the form their relationship takes. Barbara Natalie Nagel points out that Kafka was an enthusiastic reader not only of the letters of Flaubert, Kleist and Hebbel but also those of the nineteenth-century German realist author Theodor Fontane.[11] Indeed, there are four postcards to Felice sent during August 1916 where Fontane is specifically mentioned. Here, Kafka seems to identify with Fontane's complaints about his wife, rehearsing them through extensive quotation before closing one of his missives with the pointed remark: 'So today Fontane wrote you a postcard instead of me.'[12] The complaint in question concerns Emilie Fontane's dissatisfaction at her husband's decision to quit an unfulfilling administrative job at the Berlin Academy of the Arts. For Nagel, however, Kafka's wider intention is not simply to side with the novelist against the harshness of his wife's reaction, but in fact to 'correct' Felice's probable sympathy for the author's predicament, albeit in a passive-aggressive manner that allows Emilie her point of view despite the fact she is obviously unjust. This passive-aggressive gesture on Kafka's

part applies not only to Emilie but also to Felice herself – all the more so, since he quickly brushes off this literarily constructed admonishment as something that is only casually meant. Kafka's passive-aggressive epistolary style is reflected not only in the twisting-and-turning double binds of language and implied meaning found throughout his letters to Felice (Nagel describes them variously as a lethally charged 'semantic minefield', 'an epistolary hell', and a scene of constant transferential anxiety (65–6)), but also in their material incidence as a postal phenomenon, if it can be put that way. Nagel notes that, during the years of their correspondence, collection and delivery of the mail happened far less frequently in Berlin than Prague,[13] allowing Franz to bombard Felice with an excess of letters while feeling constantly aggrieved about a deficit of replies (the language he uses frequently conveys either an insatiable sense of hunger or a nearly unbearable starvation for which the sufferer could not possibly be to blame). Deleuze and Guattari similarly suggest this passive-aggressive aspect of Kafka's correspondence by writing that he 'never stops muddling the tracks; he sends yet another letter, which reworks or denies the one he has just sent, so that Felice will always be behind in her replies'.[14] From this perspective, the materiality of an epistolary 'style of living' that for Marsden rescues Kafka from stronger charges of exploitative appropriation of Felice is recoded as a persistent practice of passive aggression. Through the material exchange of letters, managed by Kafka in the way Deleuze and Guattari suggest, anxiety is converted into a form of control and indeed is produced as one modality of that control in the face of anxiety itself – in other words, doubling with itself to counteract itself. Nagel concludes her chapter by reflecting on the complex and unstable literary effects that cross-contaminate both literature and letter-writing: on this particular battleground, the objectification of the woman as a literary phenomenon allows the affective author as jealous lover to enjoy the ambiguity of control that literature always seems to entertain:

> The battle between the female lover, or wife, and the male author is fought around the question of whether the literary belongs to clear signification or to ambiguity. Is the literary on the side of control, or the giving up of control? Of course, distinctions like these are regressive, especially when talking about an author like Kafka, a master of ambiguity. And yet, this opposition is instituted where the author function collides with the function of the jealous lover; that is, where affect merges with critique. At this point, the female companion turns into an object of literature. One can call this bad

> critique because it is *too* affective, jealous – but at the same time Fontane and Kafka show that critique is always already libidinal. The libido of the author is always literary. (70)

Writing of Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, to which we shall return shortly, Michal Ben-Naftali remarks that, for Derrida, the heterogenous and mixed genre of the letter runs 'the whole gamut of literary genres. Far from being the bastard of the kingdom of writing, it is identified with literature itself.'[15] Albeit from the repressed margins of literature, correspondence therefore traverses the literary from one end to the other. But here, the question of the 'feminine' intensifies to an almost extreme point.

The Hunger Artist and the Gourmet of Freedom

Given the suggestive resemblances and overlapping contexts (literary and thematic, cultural, historical, and gender-related) of the two exchanges, it is interesting not only to compare Kafka's letters to Felice with those Robert Walser sent to Frieda Mermet, but to recall the grounds of scholarly debate surrounding the Kafka correspondence when considering the critical possibilities – indeed, the stakes of reading – in so far as the latter exchange is concerned.

Elke Siegel, let us recall, insists on the intricate connections between Walser's epistolary practice and his fictional writing, linking them to the way in which a certain type of subjectivity is at once constructed and deconstructed in the cracks between what Deleuze and Guattari distinguish as *suject d'énonciation* and *sujet d'énoncé*.[16] Furthermore, it is through this same deconstituting play of forces that a particular kind of sociability can emerge. Experiments with language, address and signature create, for Siegel, a remarkable series of Walserian epistolary performances in which the traditional narratorial subject-positions located in first-person speech give way to a more fluid world of possibilities where irony at once regulates and flouts the borderlines between writerly distance and desire. (Such effects can similarly be traced in Walser's fiction, notably in his experimental novel *The Robber*.) Above all, it is the gift-exchange of food items that governs the complex and strange economy of Walser's letters to Mermet. The expected or reported pleasure of eating, the experience or alleviation of hunger, does not so much give rise to a 'culinary-epistolary poetics', but rather the reverse; or, better still, the relationship between eating and writing can be dominated

by neither term since each is, undecidably, an expression of or condition of the other. For Siegel, this state of affairs seems to mirror the bonds between Walser and Mermet in the sense that their relationship is not so much non-hierarchical as it is not stably hierarchicised. If, as Nagel's essay ends by implying, no fixed hierarchy can withstand the (libidinal) capacity of the literary to undermine its own instituting distinctions, Walser's letters to Mermet – in comparison those received from Kafka by Felice – enact differently the interplay between the 'author function' and that of the *suject d'énonciation* of the *Brautbrief*. Whereas Kafka's passive-aggressive manipulation of this interplay exploits the instability of hierarchies through writing – for example, by seeming to dispute Fontane's criticism of his wife only to level criticism against Felice all the more subtly and stealthily – Walser's recurrent self-deprecations and indeed ironical outbursts constitute instead an excess that overwhelms the insidious decorum of traditionally gendered relations.

One may argue that Mermet's inclusion of food parcels along with her correspondence fulfils a quasi-domestic protocol of exchange following the patriarchal paradigm of the household, but it is nevertheless important to recollect that, for Siegel, such 'pieces' of both food and writing (*stücke/prosastücke*) are consumed by (means of) a logic in which the part is not subsumed by the whole. Instead, they figure in an always-shifting, non-closed economy in which the minor term (e.g., the part) resists domination by the major one, just as the servant evades subjugation by the master. (This even applies to moments in the correspondence, such as in June 1926, when Walser asks rather testily for some of his texts – a distinct part of his corpus – to be returned, on the strength of its non-belonging to Mermet but also to him, being rather in the public ownership of readers who are themselves, ironically, at the point of vanishing or losing hold in this case. Power therefore drains from the exchange rather than being consolidated through it and, by the time of the next letter, Walser is to be found quickly backing down.) Walserian hunger, in other words, is not simply a means to subdue the (feminine) 'other' through an insistence on the primacy of male desire – although, of course, it always runs the risk of the very same sleight of hand that may be detected in the passive aggression of a Kafka letter. As we saw in the previous chapter, Nagel herself points out the connection between the empathy for an aggressor one finds in Walser's abused characters, and the mixture of tenderness and aggression that distinguishes those 'stylistic incongruities' that register his resistance to dominant modes of narration. From Siegel's perspective, however, Walserian hungering represents less a struggle for control between the two parties of a correspondence

(e.g., the interminable economy of desire and resistance one finds in Kafka's letters) than an inconcludable practice of sociability in which neither party can ever become self-sufficient or fully satisfied. What is foregrounded here is the nature of sustenance – whether feeding or being fed – as itself always delightfully (if tantalisingly) fleeting or partial. Moreover, Walser often corresponds with Mermet not only about morsels she has sent, but about other snacks or meals he has recently enjoyed (frequently outside of his own home, sometimes in transit), which may be deemed an act of epistolary sharing not confined to a purely domestic food economy established between them. On other occasions, meanwhile, Mermet flirtatiously withholds as she gives, for example in a letter from April 1918 when (if Walser's reply is to be believed) she seductively teases him about an earlier erotic remark he had made about her mouth chewing pralines or bonbons. Here, the sexualised play of giving (in) and holding (out) enabled by the image of a sweet toyed in the mouth performs to an ultimately submissive expression of male desire – one that seems to enjoy its own momentariness and passivity rather than seeking a powerful foothold through any type of sexual objectification of the female 'other'. All of this, then, marks certain important differences between the two correspondences we are comparing.

Food is indeed always transitory, as Walser's story 'The Sausage'[17] amply demonstrates: like the erotic instant, the pleasure afforded by eating cannot (and must not) last. The consumption of sausages in particular rehearses the delicious torture of a delicacy already consumed, a mouthwatering treat that lies behind rather than ahead of us: 'A few minutes ago, the best, juiciest sausage was still there incarnate, but now, alas, due to my all-too-precipitate consumption, the tasty sausage has vanished, rendering me inconsolable. What was still there a moment ago is now gone and no one can ever bring it back' (81). The quandary of the sausage-eater is indeed not only the subject-matter of Walser's story but the defining difficulty of the text itself, since the dilemma of writing (and reading) is – like eating – the very predicament of desire, the tantalising game of the fort/da. The narrative's own relentless replaying of the problem performs exactly this connection between eating and writing:

> What was violated could be unviolated, what was gobbled could be ungobbled, what was snapped up could be unsnapped, had I been more careful and abstemious […] What has vanished could be here and what's dead could be delightfully alive. What was gruesomely masticated and mauled could be whole, but alas it's been mauled, bemoaning it won't help. (82)

Such repetition is, indeed, all the story *is* (unhelpful bemoaning carries on for many more sentences). But if there is nothing outside the quandary of sausage-eating, including the text itself, the fort/da of a constantly vanishing instant is rehearsed with such comic ingenuity that any suggestion of a melancholic male ego quickly disappears in a burst of laughter.

Siegel suggests that the gift-exchange underpinning the 'culinary-epistolary poetics' of the Walser–Mermet correspondence served as a bulwark against the economic instrumentality of modern life, offering Walser a counterpoint to the commodification of literature that increasingly defined his literary career. Just as, through writing, he sought to resist the social and economic forces with which he also had to negotiate as a writer, so as a correspondent Walser resisted succumbing to a passive-aggressive 'turn' of the Kafka type that his own 'stylistic incongruities' nevertheless made possible. What is at stake in techniques of passive aggression is, of course, a certain retrenching detachment conducted in the guise of some form of cordiality or propriety that seems to affirm interpersonal connections. If a seemingly elegant form of detachment is indeed the issue, this provides the means to bring into even sharper focus the contrast between Kafka and Walser as correspondents. For the passive-aggressive withdrawal of a Kafkaesque Hunger Artist (managing the resistance of his own desire through the discipline of passive-aggressive techniques)[18] is not the same thing as the curious 'independence' of the 'connoisseur and gourmet of freedom', as Walser once alluded to himself.[19] Such connoisseurship, indeed, is how Walser formulates 'difficult' freedom at the end of his 1928 'Essay on Freedom'. Here, freedom comes from an estranging independence of the purest kind found in dreams; and yet it seems to consist in the paradoxical predicament of the refined woman who 'partly forfeits her candor, that is, her freedom' (181) through turning a blind eye to the insensitive taking of liberties on the part of others (such as Walser himself, no less) – a wilful nicety that is itself precisely an expression of her refinement and indeed her freedom. The price of freedom, in this sense, is its own constraint caused by the freedoms of others. And that would be one way to construe the resistance of Walser's epistolary practice to – its retreat from – the forms of aggressivity of which it no doubt runs the risk. That the example of freedom given by Walser involves a woman compensating for in order to overcome the 'freedoms' taken by a man – perhaps none other than Walser himself – is surely telling (not least in respect of how we might view the Walser–Mermet correspondence). By reappropriating those freedoms within the 'difficult' expression of her own, she displays the

very type of connoisseurship to which Walser himself aspires. Not only because of the reversal of gender roles they entail, such freedoms seem very different from those Kafka took at the expense of Felice; the sense of 'freedom' that emerges from Walser's essay therefore provides a way to read the Mermet correspondence as a complexly composed exercise in (indeed, an essay on) liberty, as much as sociability. A corresponding freedom, in a variety of senses, one might even say.

Lost in the post

At the beginning of this chapter I asked how we might think differently about the fact that the letters written by Felice Bauer and Frieda Mermet no longer survive, in order to avoid the banality of merely restating their loss – which in itself risks some rather insidious effects, not least in terms of gender politics. But I also suggested that we might want to rethink the missing correspondence so as to counteract a prevailing tendency that represents gaps in the exchange as a detraction from rather than a constitutive feature of it. Such a tendency, I suggested, commonly reduces those missing elements to an ostensibly self-evident idea of female absence or lack, whereas not only was it the case that the women rather than the men retained letters, but perhaps more significantly such a feminised image of 'lack' is in fact wilfully produced not only by Kafka's own correspondence but by much of the academic criticism that follows in its wake. In order to challenge this state of affairs, then, we would need to think of the constitutive nature of missing parts in a way that made it possible to resist not only traditional assumptions about gender but the frequently unquestioned gendering of the problem itself.

In order to make a start on the first aspect of this question and clear a pathway to the second, I want to turn to *The Post Card* by Jacques Derrida, since it invites us to think about the very nature of correspondence and the postal effects that condition it.[20] Before coming to this important work, however, I want to begin with another essay by him that itself claims to be a missing part of the book. 'Telepathy'[21] contains – so we are told in a footnote – the text found in assorted cards and letters that should have appeared along with them in the first section of *The Post Card* ('Envois'). However, the material contained in the essay – all of it dated from the same week in July 1979 – was apparently mislaid until too late on in the publication process of the book. Indeed, Derrida professes to include only a portion of the rediscovered writing. As such, we are not presented with a scene of fully restored presence achieved by

the rehabilitation of a temporarily absent part. Such a scenario, indeed, would correspond to a certain telepathic fantasy. In wishing to overcome the medial effects of language, or by attempting to dispense with the implications of *address*, the dream of telepathy is that of a pure form of communication that is unfractured by such effects. However, by focusing on the fact that Freud's interest in telepathy is worked out through a series of undelivered lectures, 'Telepathy' takes us back to a key theme of *The Post Card* itself, namely that the delivery of a 'text' to an addressee is always contingent on the possibility of non-arrival (mimed, indeed, by the purported circumstances of the composition of 'Telepathy' itself). In these circumstances, Derrida warns against the naïve assumption that telepathy would guarantee unmediated communication beyond the interposition of a postal or telecommunications system (or, put differently, before the advent of writing in its enlarged, deconstructive sense). Instead, for Derrida, telepathy by definition registers a distance within the self-presence of a subject that merely repeats rather than overcomes the problem of mediality – compounding, indeed, the anxiety of nascent tele-technical networks that gave rise to fantasies of telepathic communication in Freud's own time.

In 'Le Facteur de la vérité', meanwhile, one of the three essays included in *The Post Card*, Derrida argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, Lacan's seminar on Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' remains in thrall of a traditional hermeneutics of disclosure and truth – of the very same kind that inspires dreams of telepathy. For Lacan, the purloined letter in Poe's story acquires its significance without discernible reference to an available 'content' (what is 'inside' the letter is never revealed to the reader and, as the plot thickens, this is increasingly beside the point), thus exemplifying the primacy of the signifier over signified, the letter over the subject. Yet, since this insight serves to illustrate the profundity of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the letter is in a certain sense restored, redirected or, one might say, 're-posted' to the truth by Lacan himself. According to Derrida, this restitution or re-posting of the signifier to the signified reinscribes the letter's 'lack' within what is, for psychoanalysis, its proper place: the truth of the phallus or, in other words, the thinking of an original presence upon which lack supervenes as castration. For Derrida, this notion of castrated presence echoes the classical, pejorative sense of writing as the fallen exteriority of living speech in its original self-presence. Thus the metaphysics of truth, logos and presence are shown to underpin Lacan's notion of the 'symbolic' as the place of castration ('*le manqué à sa place*': missing-from-its-place, lack-in-place-of). Once lack is restored or returned to its proper place – that of the phallus as

signified – Lacan's theory of the 'symbolic' is shown to be in conflict with a Derridean thinking of the postal effect that, in its always disseminating *différance*, cannot be re-posted to the truth.

Derrida's 'Envois' constitutes a writing-performance of the postal law elaborated by *The Post Card*. It records a series of textual fragments – ('You might consider them, if you really wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence' (3)) – taking the form of postcards and letters directed to an unnamed recipient (it is unclear, indeed, whether the addressee is singular or whether they are somehow plural) composed by a writing-subject whose proper name is signed ('Jacques Derrida') but whose signature is nevertheless recognised as remaining in some doubt ('we might be several' (6)).[22] Ostensibly they are love letters and, as such, play with the conventions associated with *Brautbrief* or letters of courtship that we have already mentioned in a German rather than French context. Not least, gender and sexuality are put into constant play throughout this supposed correspondence. Innumerable pages could be devoted to such aspects of Derrida's text since, throughout 'Envois', the double question of letters and of love gets locked in an exchange that seems as interminable as it is overdetermined. Suffice it to say, the metaphysics of love become intimately, perhaps fatally, entwined with a metaphysics of presence in these fragments, albeit the very conditions of address of the (love) letters overwhelm such intimacy – or burn it up, as is said in 'Envois'.[23] For, here, the word love is as much a form of address as the expression of a feeling; or, at any rate, its status as the former always enters into and disrupts (as much as enables) the possibility of the latter. We will come back to this question of the conditions of address shortly, by turning to another text by Hélène Cixous. For now, however, I simply want to note that, in contrast to Derrida's image of Lacan as a veritable postman of truth, restituting presence to the phallus as signified, 'Envois' confronts us with the incomplete remains of an exchange that may never have taken place – one that never 'arrives' as such but that is always somehow 'in the post'. Like telepathetic communication, letter-writing by definition registers a distance within the self-presence of a writing-subject; in Derrida's terms, such writing must necessarily *space*. Hence 'Envois' is repeatedly broken up by elliptical gaps, each calculated 'by a blank of 52 signs' (regardless of the nature of the supposedly missing material) inserted in the place of whatever 'incineration' has occurred – the arbitrariness of this insertion reflecting the fact that 'the totally incinerated *envois* could not be indicated by any mark' (4–5). Furthermore, part of the correspondence concentrates on the discovery of a postcard depicting the illustration by Matthew Paris of Socrates and

Plato taken from a thirteenth-century '*fortune-telling book*, an astrological book' (12). This portrays Socrates writing at a table,[24] while Plato stands at his back, seeming to direct the entire writing process. The image, played with by Derrida at great length, conjures a shocking about-turn of the philosophical cliche that holds that Socrates never wrote and that Plato was his scribe. For Derrida, such a truism rests on a metaphysics of presence that privileges speech as the pure form of meaning over writing construed as an extrinsic and derivative form of recording prone to error and abuse. The image is compelling for Derrida because, through a striking reversal (which, if not treated carefully, would unduly simplify his own thinking), it recalls deconstruction's transformed notion of writing as the generalised domain in which speech and language take place. If *spacing* as the condition of writing constitutes the possibility of all speech, then the idealisation of the latter in terms of notions of truth's disclosure or the consistency of meaning is always deconstructible, since such a representation of speech depends on that repressed 'other' (writing) that both threatens and enables it from the outset. The repressed or missing part, that which is excluded or excepted from an imagined 'whole' (the 'wholeness' of speech), is what makes the latter possible while putting its very possibility in question.

That such an insight occurs in a text that sees Derrida attend to the question of the 'postal' as the scene of writing's deconstructibility reconnects us to the shifting problematic that defines the critical question of the missing letters in the Kafka–Bauer or Walser–Mermet correspondence: here, it is no longer merely a question of how to approach what is absent, but how to rethink its representation as absence. Hélène Cixous's *Love Itself in the Letterbox,* itself less a memoir than a postal returning of memory – indeed of love's memory – concerns itself with just this question. The text finds Cixous sorting through old love letters: 'I was in a state of eternal agitation with them / and almost all of them ended with the word *fidèlement*.' Cixous calls this a 'sad and sorry word a word unfaithful to itself a synonym of synomym', the synonym of which quickly turns out to be '*fuidèlement*, flightfully' (75). In order to be worthy of the name, faithfulness must reproduce itself as a constant amid the most extreme of altered circumstances. Faithfulness acquires its meaning not at the point of inception, in the passion of its original expression, but through a long process of reiteration that, by definition, engages with change in an unconditional way. Reaching its apogee, faithfulness must therefore consider itself strangely out of joint with the very conditions in which it is to be found – subjecting them, in fact, to its own unconditional nature. In order to be truly faithful, in other words, faithfulness cannot be

faithful to its conditions of possibility. Faithfulness is thus proven through resistance of the very context that grants its meaning – a resistance so profound that it borders on a sort of infidelity or betrayal. By continually replacing or reiterating itself in circumstances where the radical necessity of a deferring difference is concealed as, in fact, the precondition of absolute constancy ('a synonym of synonym'), faithfulness takes flight. (Perhaps as an after-effect that is also somehow originary in so far as these letters are concerned, Cixous goes so far as to take them with her on a plane to the south of France, as if their maddening flightiness is aptly airborne.) What better rendition of the postal law might be possible than the one found in this reflection on the faithful/faithless signature of the love letter? And yet one must be wary of any such rendition, of 'sending' masquerading as a 'return' in the sense Derrida detects in the Lacanian discourse of the letter. Cixous's own text not only appreciates but in fact assumes the problematic status of this very same state of affairs, indeed the complicated performativity it imposes or demands: 'You, when you signed faithfully *fidèlement,* you who were already you in poem, you knew what you were doing by sending me this word without any doubt, but did you know what this word did to me? *Fidèle ment*, faithful lies' (76). The faithfulness that remarks or insists on its own fidelity – as every faithful act or expression indeed must – is instantly bound to deceive (because things have inevitably already changed, for it to be able to do so). This is true even of a well-intentioned deconstructive discourse of the 'other' truth of fidelity. As much as she experiences 'eternal agitation' by rereading old love letters years later, Cixous's text itself wrestles with the problem of *fidèle ment* or *fuidèlement* to the extent that Cixous herself not only receives but is destined to send 'faithful lies': they come not only from another and from the past, but also from a future into which she her(other)self writes or, rather, is written.

The originary divisibility of the (love) letter, between faithfulness and infidelity, truth and lies, sameness and difference, presence and absence, recalls of course not only the problem of lost correspondence but the critical disaster of reducing it to a gendered division characterised by feminine 'lack'. In another part of her book, Cixous worries about the *actes manqués* of mislaid letters – or, in other words, the 'accidentally-on-purpose' circumstance of their disappearance. 'I didn't keep them. I didn't throw them out', she writes (91). Their absence is thus maddening in the sense that it is inexplicable, a 'total catastrophe' as she puts it – 'I will not even have destroyed these letters', so that even their loss is questionable (93). (One or other of them always seems to be missing, unaccountably, 'one less or more' (106), so that letters simply cannot be counted on.)

Despite thinking of herself as a 'frenetic keeper' (perhaps like Mermet or Bauer) Cixous regrets certain letters from Cortázar, Genet, Foucault, Derrida, and her own children, letters that are now gone: 'I became aware of these. There is no word. Inexpropriations of myself – when I turned over my correspondence to the beautiful Bibliothèque Nationale de France I discovered that a large part of my treasures were missing' (91).

Cixous treasures her letters. They are not discarded lightly, by no means – and not even intentionally. But, just as it is in the nature of treasure to be lost, so it is the fate of letters to be mislaid – even if they are kept, or even if awareness of them is retained. Every letter is indeed an 'inexpropriation of myself' – Cixous's word is an impossible one. Letters do not just 'expropriate' those who send or receive them. Instead, a further twist – one that converts the quasi-tragic exclamation of 'no words' into an almost laughably impossible word – adds the preposition 'in-' as a prefix that at once interiorises, encloses, enfolds or folds over the original even as it does … something else. 'In-' marks the possibility of a negative (for example, in words such as 'inactive' or 'inadmissible'); but, in this case, it seems to bring something home, however uncannily, turning expropriation inside out, dispossessing it of its meaning as dispossession even as it redoubles that very sense, performing an expropriation of expropriation's definition in a way that echoes the predicament of faithfulness itself. The 'inexpropriation of myself' through the loss of letters that are nevertheless *treasured* only reperforms the always-divisible experience of correspondence itself, regardless of whether it is 'lost' or not. For all correspondence is so mislaid – the 'inexpropriated' letters of Cixous must include those taken into in the BNF as much as those that never made it. Meanwhile, a letter once-read – or indeed never-read – that is nevertheless reread years later begs a host of questions: 'Did it ever arrive? To whom? Who was I? Who have I been, who have I ceased to be? And you, who are you, and no longer remember. Did-it-arrive-all-the-same?' (103). This, of a letter sent to Cixous by her lover but for some reason addressed to his summer address, his mother's house – how did it ever reach her? 'A letter addressed to me-at-your-house at your mother's house' or 'to non-me *à jamais chez tois*, for(n)ever at your home?' she writes (103). The most homely of homes, that of the mother, is the subject of a certain misaddress, or rather the address is misapplied in a certain way since the letter is for Cixous and indeed reaches her somehow, at some point, meaning perhaps that it both arrived and did not arrive at its intended address. She therefore asks: To whom was such a letter faithful, or unfaithful? (104). This postal predicament affects addresser and addressee alike ('To whom? Who was I? Who have I been, who have I

ceased to be? And you'?) in a way that precisely recalls the experience of 'inexpropriation' spoken of by Cixous, an experience that is itself *à jamais chez tois* ('forever with you').

The addressee (who is both agent and subject, 'self' and 'other' of address) is always on the move, it is not just the letter. They are a moving target, like Robert Walser. As Ben-Naftali reminds us, *The Post Card* is, among other things, a demonstration of the fact that the French word *carte* includes 'the anagram *écart* which marks an interval, tear, split' (36)[25] and, as the anagram itself shows, the postcard itself may also be violently, destructively torn up. Indeed, for the reasons we have already described, its form of address can never be received intact by the addressee nor be returned intact to the sender. Neither is left in the same place by the correspondence, nor (as the apparently redirected letter to Cixous demonstrates) can they ever find themselves totally 'in sync'. As Ben-Naftali puts it:

> The experience of Romeo and Juliet, Derrida will write elsewhere […] illustrates the essential impossibility of an absolute synchronicity […] The ultimate certainty is that one must die before the other […] The one carries the death of the other for it is impossible that each of the two survive the other. Yet nevertheless, the impossible happens […] Romeo and Juliet each experience the death of the other, observe it, mourn it. (39)

If through love we embark, along with the 'other', toward an always-asymmetrical destiny determined by death, then the fantasy of romantic love is staged as the tragi-farcical denouement of Shakespeare's drama. For the 'impossible' synchronicity that allows a semblance of romantic reciprocity in dying is in fact never quite 'synced'. It is a simulation, in the end, a play. Just as the postcard, even if it eschews the envelope, continues to conceal and to keep secrets,[26] so the deaths of Romeo and Juliet are experienced as *contretemps* – in French, both syncopation and mishap.[27] Here it is neither a matter of presence nor absence but, in the case of both, a certain rhythm or timing that plays one off against the other. Correspondence *is* this timing/mistiming beyond presence/absence, as we have suggested in more ways than one. As it turns out, presence and absence do not fall on either 'side' of a stable division – whether in the loss associated with death, or in the gaps of a missing correspondence – but are marked instead by an internal divisibility that (de)constitutes them as non-self-identical doubles.

> What will we burn, what will we keep? […] I would cut out, in order to deliver it, everything that derives from the Postal Principle, in some way, in the narrow or wide sense (this is the difficulty, of course), everything that might preface, propose itself for a treatise on the posts […] And we burn the rest […] The rest, if there is any that remains, is us, is for us, who do not belong to the card. We are the card, if you will, and as such, accountable, but they will seek in vain, they will never find us in it. ('Envois', 176–7)

Notes

1 Robert Musil, 'The *Stories* of Robert Walser', in *Robert Walser Rediscovered: stories, fairy-tale plays, critical responses*, 141–3.

2 In the context of claims by the National Library of Israel to the literary estate of Franz Kafka, supported by a court judgment in Tel Aviv, Judith Butler has commented on what she calls a 'poetics of non-arrival' that characterises all of Kafka's writings, including the correspondence, which provides the basis for a resistance of such claims. During a lengthy discussion published in the *London Review of Books*, in which many examples of this non-arrivalist poetics are discussed, she concludes: 'I have tried to suggest that in Kafka's parables and other writings we find brief meditations on the question of going somewhere, of going over, of the impossibility of arrival and the unrealisability of a goal. I want to suggest that many of these parables seem to allegorise a way of checking the desire to emigrate to Palestine, opening instead an infinite distance between the one place and the other – and so constitute a non-Zionist theological gesture.' See Judith Butler, 'Who Owns Kafka?', *London Review of Books* 33.5 (3 March 2011), 3–8.

3 Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, edited by Erich Heller and Jurgen Born, translated by James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (London: Vintage, 1999), 183. All further page references are given in the body of the chapter.

4 Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial*, translated by Christopher Middleton (London: Penguin Classics, 2012); orig. *Der andere Prozess* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1969). All further page references to the English translation will be given in the body of the chapter.

5 Peter F. Neumeyer, 'Franz Kafka and the Lie', *Journal of Modern Literature* 6.3 (1977), 351–65.

6 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Kafka: toward a minor literature: the components of expression', *New Literary History* 16.3 (1985), 591–608; orig. in *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1975): see 28–42. (The latter translated as *Kafka: toward a minor literature*, translated by Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 30 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).)

7 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: toward a minor literature*, 20.

8 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: toward a minor literature*, 30, 93, 97.

9 Elizabeth Boa, *Kafka: gender, class, and race in the letters and fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 64; Julian Preece, 'Kafka's Correspondence with Felice Bauer and the Literary Tradition of the *Brautbrief*', in *Kafka und die Kleine Prosa der Moderne/Kafka and Short Modernist Prose*, edited by Manfred Engel and Ritchie Robertson (Würzberg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010), 117–29. Both cited by Marsden (see note 10 below), 21.

10 Jill Marsden, 'Orienting Nietzsche's "Nearest Things" in Kafka's Letters to Felice', *Mosaic: an interdisciplinary critical journal* 50.3 (2017), 19–34. Further page references are given in the body of the chapter.

11 Barbara N. Nagel, *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond: flirtation, passive aggression, domestic violence* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). Further pages references are given in the body of the chapter.

12 Cited in Nagel, *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond*, 62. She refers to Kafka's postcard to Felice Bauer, Prague, 13 August 1916; the phrase in German is: '*So heute hat Dir also Fontane statt meiner geschrieben*' (a slightly different version can be found in the English translation (1999), 519).

13 Here, Nagel draws on work by Hans-Georg Pott, *Die Wiederkehr der Stimme. Telekommunikation im Zeitalter der Post-Moderne* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1995), see 77.
14 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: toward a minor literature*, 596.
15 Michal Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation: on deconstruction's disillusioned love*, translated by Mirjam Hara with a foreword by Avital Ronell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 32. Further page references will be given in the body of my chapter. Incidentally, in *The Post Card* (see below, n.20) we read the following remark about Kafka, whose letters to Milena are mentioned several times, and perhaps even imitated or spoofed in places: 'You had me read that letter to Milena […] he wrote only (on) letters that one, one of the last along with Freud finally' (35). And later, on the same page that Derrida mentions the 'great correspondences' of Kafka and Freud: 'The end of a postal epoch is doubtless also the end of literature' (104).
16 Elke Siegel, 'To Pieces: Robert Walser's correspondence with Frieda Mermet', in *Robert Walser: a companion*, 47–64.
17 Robert Walser, 'The Sausage', *Little Snow Landscape*, 81–3.
18 As his fame and thus desirability recedes, of course, Kafka's Hunger Artist sits quietly and sulkily in a forgotten corner pretending not to care for the neglect shown him by an erstwhile audience.
19 Robert Walser, *Selected Stories*, 179–81.
20 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, translated with an introduction by Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Further page references will be given in the body of my chapter.
21 Jacques Derrida, 'Telepathy', *Oxford Literary Review* 10.1/2 (1988), 3–41.
22 At one point it is as though 'Envois' attempts a confession – 'As if one could not pretend to write fictive letters with multiple authors and addressees!' (84) – but of course this occurs in a text that recognises from the beginning that doubt is cast on its signature and therefore its authenticity or sincerity as such.
23 On this point see Michal Ben-Naftali, for example 35–6, 47. In the 'Envois', on the impossibility of a 'first' or originally present letter, we read: '(this is why one cannot replace, except for laughs, the formula "in the beginning was the logos" by "in the beginning was the post"). If the post (technology, position, "metaphysics") is announced at the first *envoi*, then there is no longer A metaphysics, etc […] nor even AN *envoi* […] There is not even the post or the *envoi*, there are posts and envois' (66). For similar reasons there can be no 'great central post office' nor a unified and coherent history of the post (66–7).
24 Although, as is pointed out in the 'Envois', if you look closely at Paris's image, technically Socrates is not *presently* writing, even if he is about to write or has already written (here, there is a point to be made once more about writing in relation to conventional philosophical assumptions about speech as original language characterised by immediacy or 'presence'): see *The Post Card*, 48–9.
25 This anagram – described as an inversion, perhaps like that of Socrates and Plato – is mentioned in *The Post Card* as if it too were something of a surprise (37).
26 However, in 'Envois' we also find this: 'What I like about post cards is that even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter' (12).
27 See Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', in *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 414–33.

2
Her Not All Her, writing performance: Jelinek on/with Walser

In the first section of this book, we noted that a host of renowned authors have paid tribute to Walser's texts and, indeed, several have done so through the exercise of creative as much as critical writing. From Sebald's 'Le Promeneur Solitaire' to various experiments in literature and language, such endeavours have indeed 'extended into other media', as Reto Sorg notes in his afterword to Elfriede Jelinek's play, *Her Not All Her (on/with Robert Walser)*.[1] Tracking this tendency, Sorg lists 'Percy Adlon, Fischli/Weiss, the Quay Brothers, João César Monteiro, Mark Wallinger, Rosemarie Trockel, Stray Ghost, Thomas Schütte, Tacita Dean, Billy Childish, and more' (34). However, in this chapter I want to focus solely on Jelinek's play itself, through which I will argue the case for creative rather than just critical engagement with Walser's life and writings, particularly by reading *Her Not All Her* in order to reflect further on the question of the subject of correspondence precisely as this is (de)constituted by the interrelated conditions of address and gender (as explored in the previous chapter). In approaching Jelinek's play in this way, my contention is that these conditions are best exposed by their creative *performance* rather than by critical analysis alone.

Her Not All Her comprises 12 long plotless paragraphs and an epilogue. The play was first performed at the Salzburg Festival on 1 August 1998, in a production by the Swiss director Jossi Wieler. It has since been staged at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin (2012) and numerous other venues throughout Europe, having been translated into several languages. Jelinek herself is, of course, much celebrated, having won the Georg Büchner Prize in 1998 and both the Franz Kafka Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. Her work has engaged a wide variety of genres and taken many different creative forms including prose fiction, poetry, screenplays and polemical essays, libretti and ballets,

musical composition, plays for the radio, video and film art. As Sorg notes, however, despite her literary debut as a novelist Jelinek has worked mainly in theatre since the 1980s. The construction of the play itself, in keeping with Walser's texts, follows its own idiosyncratic form and unconventional laws, as Sorg puts it (32). *Her Not All Her* is characterised by a polyphonous assemblage of non-self-identical or hybrid voices, of which Walser's may be one (Jelinek states in her epilogue that 'most of this text, too, is from him' (29)) – even if the latter is undoubtedly recast and reperformed in particular ways. However, this technique is not employed simply in reference to the psychological breakdown that led Walser to hear voices before his committal to an asylum (and indeed afterwards). Neither is it just part of a restatement of the artist's role as purveyor of ambiguity or contradiction. Nor for that matter does it merely constitute another literary evocation of the disintegration of the modern 'self'. More complexly, the play's formal construction sheds light on the performative conditions and limitations of address, not least by redoubling them as a function of its own particular theatricality. Jelinek's epilogue states: 'Robert Walser is one of those people who do not mean themselves when they say "I". It is true that he never stops saying "I", but it's not him' (29). I want to show that this predicament is that of a *subject of address* as much as of modern subjectivity itself, the conditions of which therefore open onto the very question of correspondence that is behind my own engagement with Walser.

Stage direction

It is important to start with the single stage direction that precedes the play it is undoubtedly also a part of: 'A number of people to each other, all very friendly and well-behaved (perhaps lying in bathtubs, as was once the custom in mental hospitals).' This indicates that the ensuing text is to be shared among several voices, although there is no further direction about which sections of dialogue might belong to whom (if dialogue is even the right term, given that recognisable formal conventions are not closely followed). Not that any of the above-mentioned 'people' are named or identified in any way. In the play itself, we have only those textual clues that hint at the enigmatic presence of a Walser-like subject while also implying moments of authorial utterance, each of which (as Sorg suggests) seem to 'cut across, overlay, multiply, dissolve, and counteract' the other (33). But these 'voices' are also played with – and indeed played off against one other – in a text from which we infer that there

are other, unknown voices involved. The stage direction itself suggests a convivial atmosphere not characterised by tension or conflict, so that we might expect the combined interactions of these voices (to whomever they may belong, and in whatever part) to be relatively harmonious. The reference to bathtubs (which is also, of course, a reference to Walser's incarceration) suggests the possibility of a relaxed mood, although the custom in asylums during the early twentieth century was not only the use of warm baths to calm agitated patients but also other hydrotherapeutic treatments involving ice-cold water to slow blood-flow to the brain, thus decreasing mental and physical activity. The use of continuous baths lasting several hours or sometimes days, in circumstances of controlled sensory deprivation, may have induced a level of calm bordering on sedation, but was also obviously oppressive. If we do encounter 'friendly and well-behaved' human intercourse in the text that follows, then the fact that it may happen in such circumstances of protracted immersion, following the now-discredited 'custom in mental hospitals', therefore gives pause for thought. If there are any discordant elements or disruptive forces underlying the supposed companionableness of the scene, we might suspect them to result not only from stifled hostilities between the various unnamed participants, but from submerged inner divisions within each of their unnumbered 'number'. Congeniality is itself possibly disagreeable, just as the conditions of free-flowing sociability are themselves largely forced. Jelinek's lone stage direction also reminds us surreptitiously that we are in highly contrived circumstances: the madhouse and the theatre repeat one another in producing induced states of human experience that are meticulously planned and organised but that also play with forces beyond their control.

From the beginning therefore we have the sense that, in order to do justice to Walser's own capacity for irony, its doubleness or otherness needs to be intricately (re)performed and not just insightfully described or expertly analysed. It requires, in other words, another work. In Jelinek's play, such a performance finds its conditions in some of those experienced by the writer himself, at the very edges or end(s) of his own writing – at the point writing dissolves into certain forms of theatricality or confinement that are not merely an after-effect or consequence of a life story or a 'lapse' of the self, but that accompany writing's very possibility from the outset.

These considerations only serve to complicate the play's opening line: 'Wait, don't sit down!' (5). To whom is this addressed? Does it speak to one or a 'number of people' on stage who are about to lower themselves into a bath, or is it directed at members of the audience about to take their

seats (which would mean that the play has already started before it has even begun)? And by whom is this injunction spoken? The possibility of an addressee that is at least double, not to mention several, complicates this question from the first. The play is turned inside out by its incipit, which introduces the undecidable possibility that it is spoken by one actor to another, or by the playwright to one or all of their characters, or by an actor – or indeed the playwright – to the audience, or for that matter by an actor in the audience to the people on stage, and so on. Such equivocation is absolutely formative: it inherently conditions the work, as much as it demands creative decision-making in any particular production of the play.

Whoever (or whatever) it may be, this addressee, they are told: 'Your soul is peeping out of your body as though a work lay there inside you like a slumbering goddess, wanting to get out, even in her sleep.' A work, a nascent literary work perhaps (since it 'has a nice stretch inside you, as though what it wanted was to become language'), is detected amid precisely this undecidable nexus of possible relations. The thing 'inside you' is in fact called a 'soul' although in its desire to 'become language' it wishes at the same time never to 'have anything to with itself again'. If this sounds like an allusion to Walser's own writing as a self-conscious form of creative disruption centred on a narrative subject traditionally located in first-person speech, then the play performs anew the very same Walserian gesture by phrasing the allusion in the second person, making it the condition of ambiguous and indefinite address.

Company

This state of affairs recalls a text like Beckett's *Company*, the (auto)-biographical atmosphere of which vies with certain formal challenges inherent in its construction.[2] In *Company*, it is an unknowable other (itself written by who knows whom) that effectively writes the subject. While the text is deliberately littered with images from Beckett's life and writings, it has therefore been described by S. E. Gontarski as one of Beckett's late, 'closed space' works characterised by the 'innovation' of a 'new character' – one that is 'devised' on the strength of 'someone else's imaginings'.[3] Thus, the subject of the narrative – 'one on his back in the dark' – is seemingly the addressee of a 'voice' that speaks in the second person, a voice that says, for example, 'You are on your back in the dark', 'You first saw the light on such and such a day', 'Your mind never active at any time is now less than ever so', and so on (3–5). (Just like the voice

in Jelinek's play which says 'Your soul is peeping out of your body […]'.) However, the uncertainty surrounding this voice's object of address is soon apparent:

> Though now even less than ever given to wonder he cannot but sometimes wonder if it is indeed to and of him the voice is speaking. May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking? Is he not perhaps overhearing a communication not intended for him? (4)

Of whom and to whom the voice speaks – whether to and of the 'one on his back in the dark' or to and of another – is a question that cannot finally be answered since, while the voice seems to apostrophise, it nevertheless continually resorts to the second person in an impersonal and general sense: it speaks to an unnamed 'You'. This undecidability (de)structures the text's writing of a subject: the possibility that the voice speaks *to* another means it may also speak *of* another altogether. Thus, use of the second person contrives a sense of intimacy, indeed of the immediacy of address, that in fact deconstitutes the subject and indeed the possibility of first-person speech: 'Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not' (4). As the first person therefore reverts once more to the second ('He cannot […] You cannot'), the reader is swept into the same predicament as the subject, and is thereby converted from a subject to an object of the text, perhaps another 'new character' devised on the strength of 'someone else's imaginings'. Thus, the borders of the text become as dislocated as its 'internal' space and workings; the supposed closed space of (auto)biographical subjecthood is incalculably or unreckonably opened.

But who, then, says 'You' in *Company*, 'You cannot', 'You shall not' (or, for that matter, in Jelinek's play, 'Your soul peeping out')? The question *Company* insistently asks is: 'And whose voice asking this?' Which unavoidably raises a further question: 'Who asks, Whose voice asking this?' To seek to identify a 'voice' *as such* necessarily implies that it has become the object of address *of another*. Which other? To ask the question merely recreates and in fact redoubles the predicament. As such, the very possibility of attributing identity emerges only on condition of an always unidentifiable 'deviser' (of *Company*/company) that nevertheless establishes the (impossible) conditions of possibility of a discourse of the subject. As Alain Badiou has noted, the unnameable origin of the nameable in Beckett entails a 'trickier' figure than that of the opposite

or double, and indeed goes beyond the limits of a formal paradox, since there is always a 'three-fold configuration' – *another still* – which opens as much as closes on this 'third' side.[4]

Jelinek's play casts us into exactly this type of uncertain yet highly determined and elaborately constructed situation. We are not yet beyond the first few lines of this short work, not yet much beyond an unaccounted 'number of people […] perhaps lying in bathtubs', perhaps in earshot – like us – of an injunction: 'Wait don't sit down! Your soul is peeping out' – a 'soul' wanting to become language so that it can 'never have anything to do with itself again'. The text goes on: 'Now here is where you pass away, relieved', this perhaps rather paradoxical passing-away *here and now* being associated with 'someone out for a walk'. If this sounds like a reference to Walser ('your work, my dear sir, is quite strange!'), the 'soul' of the work is nevertheless not masculine since it is still that of a strangely transmutable goddess, a 'peculiar apparition' (7). (*Her Not All Her*: The play's title in German, *er nicht als er*, means literally 'He Not As He', juggling the sounds of Walser's name without them quite adding up to a whole, just as the translation conjures the title anew in respect of gender: '*-er- not -al-er*', as Jelinek writes in the epilogue.) The road travelled by the walker repeats or reinforces the paradox of a passing-away here and now, since the steps taken on a walk catch the figure up with, but also take them away from, themselves. We are, once again, in the midst of a splitting of the subject occurring via walking as much as via writing – if indeed writing and walking are distinct activities for Walser. And since the overspilling, imploding fragmentations of *er nicht als er / er not al er* come to a head in the play's very heading (referencing sense of direction as well as title of work), the question of the subject's (de)constitution is always already gendered. This is not just encountered 'on the way' but is always *in the way of* things.

On/with Walser

'Now who does the writer mean by himself?' the plays asks. It is a question that seems to allude to a text like Walser's 'Walser on Walser', in which the writer addresses himself but then views the results as if contemplating a letter that is addressed to him.[5] Such letters may be sent (as presumably they often were), he concludes, by concerned parties worrying over his literary future. He conjectures that they seek to wake him up, even though it was while he 'slept' as a writer that the experiences occurred that led to his first novels. The writer asleep therefore provides the conditions for

the writer awake. Writing comes from a place other than itself, and so it is as a writer and a not-writer simultaneously that Walser (but which one?) answers the imagined complaint. In other words, he defends his writing/not-writing by narrating the paradox that at once divides and connects the two Walsers. He concludes that he wishes to go 'unnoticed', although given what precedes such an expression of desire it is rather difficult to know whether he means as a writer or as a person or as both; in the end, the text entreats the reader to take the 'living Walser' for what he is, having already stated that such a 'living Walser' has both nothing and everything to do with the writer (93).

In Jelinek's play, the question is resolutely not answered; instead, the goddess – 'His goddess' – merely inspects her fingernails and rushes off, having appeared on briefly in 'Western thought'. Her nails, like those of a vulture, nevertheless claw away at his 'exterior' as though picking at the fried liver on his plate. The first paragraph of *Her Not All Her* therefore ends in an estranging confusion of author and work, of what is big and what is small, of what is loud and what is silent, as if the key themes in Walser's texts – those responsible for his writerly identity, or what Reto Sorg in the play's Afterword calls the 'Walser Myth' – do not so much solidify as liquefy it.

We therefore move to a dreamlike state, go on a dream-walk almost, which takes us to the fairy-tale palaces, magic castles and forests of Sleeping Beauty. The allusion to Walser's own play is obvious. But, again, we are soon reminded of the artifice that allows this seeming entry into Walser's work. The sound of a Mozart aria conjured by Jelinek quickly transports us to a record store, 'the woman next to me, a shop-girl maybe twenty-four years old who has never heard such sounds or anything like them' – sounds that 'draw forth tears of enchantment' since they have her 'by the throat' (7). Beneath a mesmerising, rapturous state we find more sinister elements afoot – violent possession, invasive seizure – recalling the soothing submersion of people in madhouse bathtubs.

If music, like walking, transports us to the 'elsewhere' of ourselves, 'language is worth as little as life itself, for it is life itself' (7). This Walser-on-Walserish paradox leads us into the next section of the play, which starts: 'LIFE. Now mine for example is worthy of a novel!' Is this Jelinek talking? Of course we cannot be sure, it may be a Walserish 'voice' ('most of this text […] is from him') or, for that matter, some other imaginative deviser of company who speaks to the potentially multiple addressees of the play. ('I'm sitting in jolly company', we are told, but it is the company of 'lines' and 'thoughts' which stand up to take their leave just when the party gets going, therefore taking seriously the play's inaugurating injunction:

'Don't sit down!') 'Really the only reason I write is so as not to have to deal with myself! Shadows made real then made over to others' (9). The text mixes veiled references to Walser's writings with other literary and artistic allusions (Strindberg's 'beasts of prey', Mozart's 'cheerful melodies', Kafka's judgement, a thousand years of European culture, in fact, expanding and contracting with all the Alice-in-Wonderland fluidity of Walser's smallness), before circling back to what seems like Jelinek's own self-reflections: 'What brings you hurrying thither with the other women writers of note – where does your memory point?' (15). Orientation proves as difficult as Kant found it when trying to establish direction by means of a 'sensory topology referred to the subjective position of the human body', as Jacques Derrida has put it, which, at a certain angle to reason, orients space according to the felt difference between left and right.[6] The question of uncertain (stage) direction with which the play begins (and that is perhaps compounded by its very heading) is thus reprised. Where to point, and at what? 'Are you looking for me?' (15). Self-reflection is itself undermined (as much as it is enabled) by what a mirror does to orientation: to what is left and what is right. 'You won't find me in me, but if you go down on one knee you're welcome to look me over!' (15): a momentary solution to the problem is found by reference to a knowing servility or coy obsequiousness of the kind that recalls so much of Walser's writing. The looked-for other (for example, travellers passing anonymously through train stations) may not be found but can certainly be observed from this point of view. Meanwhile, the looked-for self thinks it knows 'where I am' but nevertheless admits it is often 'not at home in myself!'. Instead, it is usually in transit, on a 'path' somewhere, and thus subject to a 'defenceless staying out' (17), in a tram, for example, where passengers steady themselves by hanging on to a slender strap above their heads. It protests being looked for: 'What, won't you stop seeking me? Stop! I hereby free you from my unfreedom!' – an allusion perhaps to Walser's own 'Essay on Freedom', in which (as we have already seen) the price of freedom is the constraint it places on the freedom of others, for example the 'unfreedom' caused a woman of refinement by the liberties taken by men like Walser himself. But, nevertheless, company is sought through a rendezvous negotiated by a sort of letter: 'I am putting a slip of paper for you here on the kitchen table with the information that I am on my way to you, in public view all around' – like a postcard in fact, conveying correspondence out-of-doors, a secret out in the open. 'I am invariably nimbly off again before anyone can figure me out' (19), lost in an almost illegible traffic system of roundabout exits and lane signs.

Point me in the direction of home – Kant's question of orientation, a question of the body – 'Is your room as thin as mine? Why has it lost so much weight?' (19). The door is left unlocked, as it would be in an asylum. Returning from an 'outing or excursion', for instance a walk, this room is a 'cheerless zone of the diseased'; it is like a train stopped while the passenger waits for their ticket to be checked, validated 'by you', by an unnamed/unnameable other: 'I don't know you. Have we met?' In and out, from room to forest, from one room to another: 'It's possible that all the other rooms, every time I needed them, already had claims on them from elsewhere' (21). The sought-after room is, in this sense, like a looked-for self – displaced or re-placed by the desire of the other (even if this desire looks very much like one's own). Nonetheless, the very last room, the one not given up by the Christmas-Day walker, should still have 'suspected something and held me back when I wanted to go out into the snow' – a ghost speaks of its sense of belonging to a room it can no more abide (in):

> It welcomes me back in on good days, while I continue to raise the objections fetched forth from the being of my memory – but this was a bad day. Memory is thought! But who remembers death? No one can do that. No, this time this room did not take me in. (23)

The room, the body, all direction lost in death, beyond recollection, unnameable. Suddenly we are in a freight lift, two of us, at maximum capacity, unable to bear any additional weight, death weighing on things like a lift rattling up through a mineshaft. Then memory, like death, comes by for afternoon tea – the latter another Walserian allusion – and we are back at a social 'gathering' where company is a matter of taking (liberties) and not giving (we are, after all, taking tea), or, in other words, a self-interested extraction of social value. The stranger or wanderer is peculiar here, the only true recipient of hospitality worthy of the name, but still it is all a shameful spectacle. The hospitality of writing, that is of purposefully devising company, evokes nothing less than the prospect of the penal colony: 'Some may throw my words into the penal colony of a poem and hope that though they do not belong there they can at least learn something while they're there […] The great, important sight of it has to come from somewhere!' (23).

Even if that somewhere is the no-man's-land of a penitentiary for exiles, the company of *Company*, the unnumbered and unnamed 'cast' of the play itself.

In the penultimate paragraph of Jelinek's play: 'I don't want anyone to see what I know just by looking at me. I want to know that what's in me will not outlast me' (23). In space and time, whether through memory, reflection or thought, dream, language or vision, the self cannot reconcile itself to itself, whether despite its own desires or because of them. It wants to be different from itself, hidden, finite, the vanishing point of itself. Self-protection, whether by means of words or sleep or deadened memory or social manners, always seems to backfire. A forced absent-mindedness will have to do, acting like a temporary death that hints at the future recognition that may come from beyond the grave. But, for now, best to go unnoticed – in this, the very same hope stirs. One must therefore disappear, one way or the other.

At (or as) the last: 'Now I'm leaving the building. I will reach myself soon and nevertheless still be dead, right on time, if I hurry. I was right dead on time' (27). Despite – indeed because of – the certainty of death, the subject's arrival is never certain. Like a (lost) letter, it meets itself neither in the present as a timely 'now' ('I will reach myself soon and nevertheless still be … right on time, if I hurry'); nor does it find itself in a past that was once present, since arrival past-tense is marked above all by a time after the time in question, which we may call 'death'.[7] Dead on arrival. Which also always means dead before arrival (in advance of, but also in the face of). A dead letter. Undeliverable/unreturnable.

he not as he her not all her…

Notes

1 Reto Sorg, 'Afterword: in the penal colony', in Elfriede Jelinek, *Her Not All Her*, translated by Damion Searls (London: Sylph Editions, 2012), 32–6. Further references to both this afterword and the play itself will be given throughout the chapter.

2 Samuel Beckett, *Company*, published alongside *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* under the title *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996). Further page references will be given in the body of my chapter.

3 See Gontarski's introduction to Beckett, *Company*, 'The Conjuring of Something Out of Nothing: Samuel Beckett's "Closed Space" novels'.

4 Alain Badiou, *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003), see 11–13. For our purposes, this 'third' is in other words undialecticisable.

5 Robert Walser, 'Walser on Walser', in *Girlfriends, Ghosts, and Other Stories*, 91–2.

6 See Jacques Derrida, 'Mochlos; or, the conflict of the faculties', in *Logomachia: the conflict of the faculties*, edited by Richard Rand (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 3–34: 31.

7 In fact, the writing-subject always expresses itself prematurely, 'drowns out the wonderful silence by speaking too soon' (27), causing the (unnameable) silence from which it derives (like the 'You' of Beckett's *Company)* to itself fall silent.

Part II
Bellelay

Author's Note: The sections of 'Bellelay' drawing on Robert Walser's letters are based on the correspondence found in Robert Walser, *Briefe 1897–1920*, vols I and II (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), although in no way do they purport to be translations from the original German. The opening pages are based on the interview conducted with Frieda Mermet by Paul Ignaz Vogel, published in *Neutralität* 5.3 (1967), 15–19. My thanks are due to him not only for his cooperation but his enthusiasm regarding the project. I am also grateful to the Robert Walser Centre in Bern for allowing me access to the letters Frieda Mermet wrote to Carl Seelig, and especially to Lukas Gloor for his assistance.

Biel

By complete chance a journalist met the grandmother of an old school friend he was visiting in Basel. It was the late 1960s. In her hands the journalist noticed a book by Robert Walser. After a moment, he asked whether she knew that Walser was now considered modern. Apparently, this question provoked the strangest look, and he discovered that this woman, now 90 years old, had known the writer for many years. Her name was Frieda Mermet. Coincidences are nothing if not often lucky ones, as the journalist himself remarked. Frau Elli Muschg must be thanked for arranging the exchange that followed, which took place over several days. What is transcribed below reflects Mermet's memories as she looked back over the letters sent her by Robert Walser between 1913 and 1942. Once completed, she took the transcript and added to it, writing in a beautifully precise hand. It took her a long time. But it is all in her own voice – a voice that rereads those letters, remembering the other texts he wrote and sent her, telling the story all these years later – from Biel and Bern to Herisau – as if it were just another version of the long, disjointed novel that Walser made of himself through every piece of writing he undertook. In the pages you are about to read, Robert's voice is only heard through hers, and there is no other. At any rate, let's not complicate things. During the course of the interview, Mermet – by no means a woman of society, culture or education – showed herself to be someone who'd spent a lifetime among books and words: finally, this seems to be the nature of her correspondence with Robert Walser or, at least, the prime element in which other aspects are contained.

The Editor, *Neutralität*

I remember everything. I was working in the Bernese Jura, at the Bellelay sanatorium, when I first met Robert Walser. The clinic itself was housed within the steep grey walls of Bellelay Abbey, formerly the abode of

Premonstratensian monks – the White Canons. Built in the Baroque style during the early eighteenth century, it stands on the site of an ancient monastery, said to have been founded by the prior of Moutier-Grandval, who took a vow while lost in the deep forests hunting wild boar. Hence the name 'belle laie' – in French, beautiful sow. The legend is contested by the variations of spelling from the early years of the abbey: Balelaia, Belelagia, Belelai, Belilaia, Bellale, Bella Lagia, Bellelagia, Bellilagia – all from the vulgar Latin, meaning beautiful forest. The director of the hospital was one Dr. Hiss, who'd come from Basel. He was highly thought of by colleagues and patients alike, worshipped by expectant mothers as a delivering angel, and frequently called to Les Genevez to bandage heads when too much absinthe had been drunk in the taverns. The institution mainly admitted those considered to suffer incurable mental illness. The director told me Bellelay was to provide good food, warmth and care, and that was all.

Dr. Hiss explained the work. I had the laundry room under me as well as drying and ironing. The washerwomen unnerved me because they were unfamiliar and restlessly quiet. The sanatorium employed inmates in various capacities: shoemaking, carpentry, tailoring, gardening – only the farming and horse breeding were outside the monastery walls. It was beautiful under the mountains beneath the tall, dark trees, with green pastures and colourful meadows in springtime. At first I didn't have Louis with me. I left him behind in Birsfelden. I'd been married to a coachman and had lived in France for a time, but I'd left. One Sunday my little boy came for a visit and the manager – such a nice woman – made us tea. Louis was three years old. Dr. Hiss took one look at him and said 'Oh, it's a shame when a mother can't have her child with her – keep him here in the institution! If you pay a small fee, then nobody can complain.' So he grew up in Bellelay. Fraulein Walser was the teacher at the Bellelay school. Robert was living in Biel at the time. He took a room in a temperance hotel near his family home, and he'd visit now and then. Outside of school hours, the three of us took long walks across sunlit fields and hills. I remember once we walked as far north as St. Ursanne. Herr Walser had never seen it. Do you know the legend of St. Ursanne? The Virgin Mary sometimes descends from heaven to earth and wanted to do so again, but Peter was at a loss where to send her. Thinking about it for a while, he made a little town especially for the Madonna, and that's St. Ursanne. Lisa made a solemn promise on her mother's deathbed to look after Robert and Fanny, the two youngest of eight. I still remember her anticipation when he returned from Berlin just before the war. She could hardly wait until he was home. Robert came back as if he'd been shipwrecked.

Louis remembers Fraulein Walser sliding over a chair to Robert at mealtimes. He didn't talk much to children. He was usually starving. He ate and ate and Louis watched in amazement, which caused Robert to exclaim: 'What are you looking at? It's indecent to look at other people's plates!' When Lisa was young, she was considered the most beautiful girl in Biel. She had beautiful eyes. But then Robert had beautiful eyes. The Walsers were a large family, the grandfather having had six children, the great-grandfather ten. Robert seemed helpless, mainly in the sense that one felt the need to help him. Women's associations often gave him money. But he was a real Swiss, Robert Walser, and could be tough. I recall him sitting in front of the schoolhouse one evening with the night watchman, who said: 'Herr Walser, I have a nice, cheap watch for you'. Quick as a flash, Robert pulled from his pocket the gold timepiece inherited from his father, exclaiming: 'I already have one!' He couldn't bear the pity. Later, in Waldau, after he'd worked in the garden or glued paper bags, we'd sit in the rose garden and drink tea, and he'd tell me all about Shakespeare. Afterwards, when he was moved to Herisau, Robert would wait for me at the train station and we'd find a tavern for lunch. Later, before parting ways, we'd order a snack and when I asked: 'Herr Walser, would you like something else?' he'd swallow down another beer and say: 'Now I've had everything I like!' I always thought of Robert as a delicacy, not for everyone, and certainly not for the hungry. He was often dreamy, and a Swiss doesn't dream. They should have both feet on the floor. But the walker always has one foot headed somewhere else, the toes hanging in mid-air for a moment before falling back to earth. Even if the other leg is planted firmly on the ground, it's only there for the sake of leverage.

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Lisa would teach the children of the staff in a one-room schoolhouse on the outer perimeter of the sanatorium, beneath a steep grey wall and under tiles groaning with snow in the wintertime. She lived above the classroom in a dimly-lit apartment with a little kitchen to the side. There were many books and a piano and a big table. There were quite a few pictures, too, including Karl's teenage portrait of his younger brother dressed as the protagonist of Schiller's *The Robbers*, sporting a floppy sun hat with a colourful scarf, another wrapped loosely around his waist, a heavy embroidered shawl draped across his shoulders – all looking like the forgotten contents of a dressing-up box found in the attic – brandishing a slim pistol in his right hand and, in his left, what looked like the handle of a cudgel or a dagger, tucked into the makeshift cummerbund. His legs

faded away beneath the downward curve of the thigh, as if Robert was up to his knees in foggy brown water. The expression on his face, half-shaded by the wide brim, was girlish and theatrically severe. In a story from his Berlin years, Robert writes of a young would-be actor, Wenzel, having just seen Schiller's play and rehearsing the main part, dressing up in a velvet vest his father once wore at weddings, topped by his uncle's old coat (an enigmatic trophy from a town along the Mississippi), with a silk sash around his hips and ranger boots on his feet. On his head, a felt pan with a duck's feather; in his hand, a greyish pistol. Wenzel's acting style consists, it seems, in flinging his hair about a lot and pulling faces in the mirror. Gripped by theatrical fervour, he writes to a wealthy banker humbly seeking patronage, but the reply is disappointing: 'Beware of a career on the stage, it is seductive but treacherous, glittering costumes and beautiful words will surely overexcite and mislead an otherwise sensible and industrious citizen such as yourself, whom I am therefore assisting all the more earnestly in my refusal of funds.' The City Theatre will not take Wenzel; another letter to a notable actor of the day results in a disastrous audition. The local drama society is duly joined; some paid work is acquired in the form of a transcription of an historical tragedy, of which Wenzel makes a passionate defence when his father threatens to toss it in the fire. In the end, the young man absconds from his own acting debut, a prince's lackey whose part is to receive a slap in the face. He is both indignant at the role and ashamed for not playing it.

Before Bellelay, Lisa used to teach in an orphanage in Bern and, before that, in the lakeside village of Täuffelen, just south of Biel, surrounded by sunlit orchards and vineyards. Robert had stayed there, soon after the turn of the century, empty-pocketed, sleeping on a straw mattress, and taking long walks during the day while Lisa attended to the children, sometimes writing when he could. After Berlin he'd made his way to Bellelay, climbing through the tall dark fir trees up to the hospital grounds; just as he had done during his stint at Täuffelen, Robert would delight in little acts of domestic assistance, making tea, washing up, bringing in wood for the stove. Neither of the siblings were particularly young anymore. But the springtime meadows, with their deep-blue Greek valerian and yellow flowers, were as inviting as the shores of the Bielersee, and Robert could spend long hours reading if he wanted to. Now and then he'd mail a story or engage in correspondence, steering clear of the children as he took his letters for posting. As warmth and colour spread through the season during that first visit, advance copies of one of his collections arrived and, later on, some volumes by Max Brod – one of them including an essay on Robert's own work. Lisa seemed to live in

a world that faced inwards, shielded by mountains or by the books lining the living room walls or by the green countryside that rose up around her. She was neat and well-drawn, so to speak, light in colour as if painted by the air itself, but sharp in the way a memorable sentence strikes you from time to time. With an unhappy love behind her, Lisa's sober practicality was often in stark contrast to the still-visible traces of a sort of capering prankishness that, in Robert's personality, outlasted his teenage years. But he was more dutiful around her, his older sister, and there was certainly a stiffness that Robert sometimes hid behind when the mood took him. That he loved and admired her was obvious; their relationship was, however, like a mouthful of over-seasoned soup that demands a gulp of water, so that Robert's mind would soon strike out into the open fields, heading beyond them back towards the city and the streets.

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The first letter I have from Robert, of nearly 200 over the course of many years, was dated December 13th, 1913, more than half a year after he left Bellelay. It was sent from the Blaues Kreuz hotel, where Robert's room was on the attic floor next to the chambermaids' quarters. That was all he could afford. The tone is outwardly rather shy. Not formal or mannered, exactly, but actually rather engaging in a simple way. From the first line, Robert speaks of himself and his sister in a single breath, mentioning a Sunday recently shared with her. It's a decorous gesture, sounding a note of family and friendship. Robert thanks me for a piece of cheese I sent him – presumably justifying his note by way of exchange. He recalls our time in Bellelay with fondness, the meals shared in the canteen, the pleasant conversation, the entertaining hours spent in my company. Robert asks after my son, hoping he has been a good boy and a source of happiness. Only then does he venture to ask whether Frau Mermet might consider penning a little reply, saying how much he'd like it if I did. You can send it via my sister, he says, with obvious propriety. Mention of Lisa prompts him to imagine the time we pass together in her quarters above the schoolroom, the laundress and the teacher, but he also recalls the Sundays spent alone at home – like a dutiful husband, says Robert. It is a daring moment in such a seemly text. You can see from my letter that I've been thinking of you, he writes, before signing off with kind greetings.

The next letter from Biel, left undated, begins with Robert's apologies for the lateness of his response. He thanks me for my reply, particularly the sentiments I convey about my son. You cling to him with heartfelt love, you are very fortunate, and undoubtedly a good mother. I can imagine your worries for the future. But all mothers face a time when their children

are grown up. Your happiness will consist in his becoming a good man, whether he is near or far away. You must not fret, the joy a child brings enfolds the future; but for the time being, Frau Mermet, he is still small and belongs to your tender heart alone. Nothing can dim such happiness; it is infinitely beautiful. Take solace in the fact that there is no higher calling than a mother's existence. She is life itself and, as life begins to embrace him, he is bound to resort to goodness and liveliness; even if life teaches him need, it will be a parent to him by such hard instruction. Robert ends the letter adorably. It is as if he wanted to draw himself into a mother's love – my love for my son – while at the same time, despite all the reassurances, dwelling on what might lay outside it. Robert's loneliness as much as the blessings of motherhood could be counted in those handful of lines. Whether that was a calculated piece of courtship, I do not know. Perhaps, when reading my letter, he grasped the tacit allusion to certain constraints on our relationship and took those into consideration in the cleverest of ways. There is no suggestion of rivalry – that is, of Louis as a rival – except that instead of competing for such love he seems to want a share of it.

A flurry of exchanges. Robert writes to thank me for my lovely letter, which gave him a great deal of pleasure. Lisa had mentioned to him that I wished to travel to the city to do some Christmas shopping. He asks my arrival time on Monday and promises to meet me at the train station. He will accompany me, he says, while I buy presents for my son. The treasure of a mother's heart will be happy to find such gifts under the tree; for this reason, it is indeed an important trip.

Did you get to Bellelay safely with your belongings, Frau Mermet? It was such a short time we had in Biel, otherwise we could have talked longer, but one is always hurried when one has business to attend to, and there was so much to buy. I wish I could have brought everything back for you. Here, in Biel, the mountain is radiant – already thick with white snow beneath a fiery blue sky, the forest covered with shimmering frost. I climbed yesterday and again today, with very great enjoyment, but what I most hope for is the chance to go walking with you. It was so cold in the streets, wasn't it? What a pity we didn't have time for the mountain. Climbing in winter warms you like an oven, and the warm sun is shining high on the peaks. How are you and your dear boy? I've already had a couple, in fact four sips of the schnapps you were so kind as to give me, straight from the bottle. Thank you, dear Frau Mermet, for your kindness. I will think of you a little every day. It's a joy to think of your dear eyes, your dear face, and your dear slender figure. May I think of you dearly, dear Frau Mermet? Your Robert.

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The life of a laundress at Bellelay was, for the most part, quiet and orderly. The patients who washed and ironed were mainly untroublesome. I can't help but feel that the work meant something. Coming to the laundry seemed of benefit to them. There is an amount of pride in a clean and well-pressed bedsheet. My own life was just as neat and tidy, in the main. I worked. I read, I walked, often with Lisa. There were many hours for reading, especially in the winter evenings. Lisa had a good library, as I mentioned – her brothers sent her books and the newspapers were brought up with the post. I remember Robert once wrote to me that the greatest German poets had to fill whole laundry baskets with verses in order to leave any kind of impression after they were gone. The paths across the meadows and the fields were as well known to us as the squares of linen and the lines of favourite volumes – although in each case, because of the repetition, it wasn't unusual to spot something you hadn't seen before. It was in my profession to look hard, to find the less visible traces, the unnoticed marks, to keep abreast of them somehow. That's a methodical operation, to be sure, although sometimes it needs a bit of cunning. But there was light and air at Bellelay, and, for the most part, time and work happened in the air and the light. I was as quiet as I liked to be, and company could be kept just as quietly. Time measured the space across the courtyard or the distance through the countryside as clouds drifted across the sky – although time can play tricks, it can expand in the heat, for example, or bend and tilt on the rare occasion one is running late. Small distances are sometimes more deceptive than great ones. But, all in all, a laundress is in less danger among the mad than she is anywhere else. And the sky, vast and quiet and safe, covered and kept us – the women and the men.

Being a laundress in the cities of Europe was a different matter. That was not me, not at all! Such women worked from dawn until late at night. When they weren't bumping through crowded streets lugging heavy baskets of linen on their hips, they laboured in the terrible heat of cramped basements. The conditions encouraged bronchitis and tuberculosis. Abdomens swelled and throats became inflamed. There was little sanitation. The constant tumble of soiled garments made the air dirty and dusty, and the smell of stale food and cheap soap sickened one's breathing. The cloying heat of the furnace that warmed the seven-pound irons violated the modesty of the women. Doors and windows flung open to allow a gasp of air put them on show to passers-by in the road. Vendors selling cheap brandy and wine often set up makeshift canteens at the laundry doors – sometimes, audaciously, inside the premises. A washerwoman's pay was meagre, and there were always

more women than work. In the night-time hours left to them, many had to find other ways to escape the continual prospect of debt. During the daytime, laundered cloth was carried to and from family homes, but also from and to the rooms of bachelors. In terms of salary, the ironers fared a little better since the work was often more skilful, an intricate tussle with blouses and bonnets and shirt buttons punctuating the tedium of sheets and curtains and tablecloths. Like the giant mouth of an oven, a miserable camaraderie swallowed up the daily squabbles that broke out.

The reason I speak of them is that the painters and writers, the artists of Europe, showed laundresses in a particular light. Washerwomen, in various states of undress, were ruddy and swollen, drunk and distracted and open in a commonplace way; the ironers were petite and coquettish, almost a little elegant and perhaps capable of a secret. Laundresses were something to be dreamt of, arms and shoulders bare in the maddening heat. Sometimes they were pictured dancing at café concerts. In the theatres and salons frequented by the middle classes, in the newspapers and popular prints, the desires of men were stirred by laundresses. Whether it was a feisty, flirtatious, goodtime-ishness, or a no-nonsense, thickset fleshiness, or a dreamy indolence, they were desired. But these same qualities allowed such women to be guiltlessly demeaned or forgotten or put back to work once that desire was fulfilled. In France, Edgar Degas was more sympathetic. His pictures didn't give in so readily to this image of laundry girls. Or at any rate the paintings seemed to answer back somehow, defying the longing they provoked. I remember Robert once writing that he thought Cézanne may have looked upon his wife as if she were fruit set on a tablecloth; but then I also recall Robert speaking of Cézanne's fruits as if they themselves *looked* and as though they were capable of laughter – and of Cézanne's tablecloth as if it had a soul. Degas, meanwhile, was somewhat estranged from his family, which had fallen from grace. He was known to be distant with people and was perhaps a little ambivalent about women. The sense of distance one finds in his portraits of laundresses is as tangible as it is strange. Perhaps he deliberately kept that distance, since by means of it one finds a certain consideration.

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The letters from Robert began to get bolder and a little more poetic, all at once. He writes about the socks I sent him, not knowing how to thank me and finding himself at a loss for words after the schnapps. A new language may be needed, he writes – the most lovely gallantry, in order to do these gifts justice. Last summer, he says, I often thought of you and your friendly,

dear face; ever since we have been corresponding with one another, my thoughts are with you every day. There's something of a secret, isn't there, Frau Mermet, owing to the fact that each of our letters pass through my dear sister's hands? Nobody at Bellelay notices anything. Secrets are like treasures; they promise something beautiful. Robert tells me he would like to sit with me and gaze into my eyes, the silent conversation lasting as long as possible. Unheard and unseen, these words hide themselves away, as beautiful as melting snow beneath a clear, warm sky.

Another letter, soon after New Year, with season's greetings and sincere thanks for the two letters received from me. On New Year's Day in Biel, he tells me, Lisa cooked an excellent soup, and the sausages were simply heavenly, although 'heavenly' is the wrong word for sausages (he puts the term in inverted commas for effect). Papa Walser's apartment in Biel is certainly cosy at this time of year. His thoughts still on his stomach, Robert paints a picture of himself in the restaurant at Blaues Kreuz. Through the entrance, past the crowded tables, you will see him eating, pressed into the corner. He imagines, by comparison, how cold Bellelay must be. I should wear warm gloves so that my lovely little fingers don't freeze, and warm stockings and shoes to keep my feet warm. The festivities will soon be over – no bad thing, Robert concludes.

His next letter begins by asking about Louis's cough. Robert hopes my little darling will soon be free of it, and I of the worry. Before long, he assures me, the boy will be romping about in his snow shoes once again. Robert speaks of a young man he saw in the street, who reminded him of my son. He waxes lyrical about parenting, as if it were a heavenly commission, speaking about the care of the young as a sort of high service. Soon he is lost in a rather strange tirade about irresponsible elders got up in their finery, hedonistic fops whose disregard for the poor starving children of the world constitutes the most outrageous form of neglect. I'm treated to the elaborate image of freezing infants in tattered clothing, roaming the city streets with barely enough to eat. From this, Robert concludes the following two things. First of all, only children should be dressed up. Second, while people should be stricter with themselves, you can't be strict enough with children. It is an odd place to end up in such a letter, and I am left with an idea of the very young as peculiar objects of discipline and spectacle. Robert asks how I am keeping. He is thinking about my mouth. First of all, he imagines it eating, snacking. He tells me he loves my mouth, would love to place a small kiss on my lips. It is beautifully big, he tells me.

*

Dear Frau Mermet, Thank you for your so clever, kind, loving letter. Your handwriting is full of such lovely, delicate, mischievous flourishes. In my thoughts, I kiss your dear little fingers one after the other, since they have made such an effort to write, giving me enormous pleasure. What are you up to, you and your dear boy, the dear little young gentleman?

Robert hopes I am in rude health and all smiles. He once more mentions my lovely, pretty mouth. He has seen some nice little slippers in a shoe shop in Biel. I'd like to slip them on and then kiss your delicate feet. What do you say to such boldness? Robert asks. He wonders about my dreams, whether they are sweet these past nights. One Sunday the previous summer we had walked together across the Stierenberg, through the high grass, and I had lifted my skirts and, as Robert walked behind me, he was able to look at my lovely, soft, full legs. The news from Biel is that Fraulein Kessi from the Blaues Kreuz has become engaged to the postmaster and, while neither is terribly young, everyone at the hotel is excited about it.

Robert's next missive, sent near the end of January 1914, is – as he acknowledges in closing – much more serious than the last letter, which he dismisses in passing as somewhat frivolous and witty. Between receiving these two notes, I had visited the Walsers at their father's home in Biel. Robert recalls our time together washing and drying dishes. He makes a point of praising the intelligence of my conversation and mentions how difficult it is to do justice to matters of the heart during such brief exchanges. The letter itself sees Robert try a different persona than the last. In these neatly written lines, he is not the flirtatious lover dreaming of raised skirts and naughty kisses, but an earnest suitor capable of dispensing husbandly advice. Robert sends money, suggesting that I buy something for Louis; better still, he says, put it in a savings account – but without the boy's knowledge, so as not to spark childish desires. The letter is once more full of sincere praise for my talents as a mother, but nevertheless offers a little lecture about the virtues of discreet and unobtrusive love, which – like the savings account – is all the richer for being hidden beneath strict treatment. I wonder if this letter betrays Robert's sense that he had gone too far last time, that he should perhaps heed his own advice: the extravagant suitor, profligate with words, is now the sober investor wanting to put credit in the bank. That I am to take a lesson in immoderate parenting in consequence of this is, however, a little rich. The master-of-the-household image to which Robert aspires is bought at a price I find a little hard to accept.

A brief letter, barely days afterwards. Robert's father has died suddenly. Robert is shocked but is having to adapt and accept the loss. Papa died beautifully. He was always so strong, so convivial, even while suffering. Life is indeed a strange dream, Robert muses. When can I expect a letter? he asks.

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In a short piece from that year, he writes about remembering – the sweetness of a fresh green spring, a freedom as vast as it is undisturbed, the passing hours like the gentle rocking of a pleasure boat, the mountains and the moon and the forests and the sky, a mother cradling her child and a father on his deathbed – remember this, remember this, forget nothing, neither the bliss nor the graves, neither the beauty nor the unkindness and indifference, forget none of it. That same year, Robert wrote about visiting the grave of his mother, long since dead, the graveyard green and wet and still after the rain had fallen, as if it were somehow listening. Robert's quiet intrusion almost affronts the dissolving, beckoning silence.

His family, part of a growing middle class in Biel, specialised in selling toys in his father's general store, which also stocked haberdashery and stationery, leather goods and other trinkets. Living in quarters attached to the shop, the Walser children rarely wanted for playthings: dolls, wooden blocks, magic lanterns. Robert was the second youngest of the eight, none of whom had children in later life. I'm not sure what that tells you about the whole situation. Robert was born in a backroom of what had been nicknamed the Revolutionary Salon: the building belonged to Alexander Schöni, renowned Swiss republican who helped smuggle political refugees across the German border. The Walsers sold cheap, popular goods. The commercial success of the shop proved to be short-lived, however, the business acumen of Robert's father being a great disappointment to his mother. Robert was a playful child, a scallywag. He would get into scrapes, play tricks, cause pandemonium. Social rules seemed inconsequential from an early age. Robert's manners could be impeccable or sadly lacking, depending on his mood. Together with Karl, his older brother by a year, the adolescent Robert was a handful, gaining a reputation in the social and artistic circles in which they mixed – Karl learning much faster how the game should be played. Robert would dabble with flamboyant outfits, raise eyebrows at parties, offend people. Toy with them, you might say.

There is a story Robert writes of a children's game that features plate-sized beer-mats rolled down the street outside a restaurant, as the author watches on. A small dog is encouraged to join in, and there is

much laughter and joy. The dog, the children, the onlooker and even the coasters – themselves brought to life by the fun – share an equal billing in this puppet-theatre. But happiness is not so much shared out as it is newly created by the little game improvised from these new-found toys, repurposed bits of card. An exuberant public spectacle of revolving mats turns out to be something of a revolution – a 'sum of insouciance' Robert calls it. The whole scene is observed from the window above by a lonely and majestic women and, in a flash, the entire game is reframed. The irresponsible triumph of the dog's busy tail provides a motif for growing misgivings on the part of the author. Suddenly the silliness of the dog, and of the game itself, becomes apparent. The animal proves all too eager to relinquish the little round trophy snatched up in its jaws, happy to be relieved of the burden. Freedom equates with surrender all of a sudden. The woman comes down from the window and, passing by, her dainty feet smile at the writer, who finishes up the woman's servant (as is so often the case in Robert's tales), giving in to his new mistress in exchange for pieces of dry bread. As ever, though, it's a sort of contract, a sort of recompense for the world-turning silliness left behind.

As any parent knows, children's playthings – balls, bricks, string, paper and pencil, dolls, cars, trains – are troubled objects, a cause for tears as much as joy, a source of conflict as much as happiness. Toys make children apprehensive and uneasy as much as they cause excitement and promise no end of fun. Children see themselves reflected in the smallness of toys but, through them, often play at being adults – even if in the most vicious of ways. It is as if the theatre of family life is acted out through child's play. I have seen dolls being dismembered, furious wishes uttered, terrible fantasies entertained. Afterwards, reparation is often sought, the infant throwing themselves to the floor with contrite tears. A toy can be a source of protest but also confession, whether truthful or not. The tearful child is a picture of sincerity, but the spectacle they make of themselves sometimes feels like part of the game, rather than its conclusion. The parent, the adult, is often being toyed with as much as the toy itself. And, of course, children squabble over playthings as part of sibling rivalry, which seems to me to conceal a wish for survival as much as victory – whether it is an older or younger brother or sister who is seen as a threat. In other words, rivalry is driven by fear as much as power. And all sorts of pacts are made in these circumstances, including with oneself.

A balloon is a toy, of sorts. Robert once wrote a story about ballooning. Like the child themselves, you could say that a balloon is a young, supple skin stretched over emptiness, pulled tight across thin air. It's a picture of completeness, roundness, in which a melancholy sense of lack or loss can't

help but linger. It floats up and away, so lovely as to be a little stomach-turning; unspeakably grand and delicate at the same time. Robert's tale of a journey by balloon, inspired by the night-time ride he took with Paul Cassirer just before the war, is prose bathed in moonlight suspended high above silver rivers. Houses litter the forest landscape like dropped toys, and the dark trees are full of the songs of ancient sleep. The balloon is a floating eye, winking across the sky, looking down upon a dream, upon forgotten sorrows and murmuring loneliness. Its gaze is met by the vast roundness of the earth below, and it bobs upwards like a child bounced on a grinning uncle's knee, untouched for an instant by the warm caress of hands that toss it into the air. Delighting in the secrets of its propulsion. A balloon is a thing of hysterical cheekiness, but it is also as sad as a clown. The line of the horizon, curving harder the higher you go, reminds me of Robert's *feuilletons*, floating up harmlessly from the bottom of the page, beneath the political news – pretty little entertainments no doubt, but also playthings aspiring to a certain edge. Deceptively half-formed, as ordinary and peculiar – in Robert's hands at least – as the familiar and the everyday. The *feuilleton* paints a street scene, offers a humorous sketch, dabbles in fashion, theatre, gossip, bumping up against the thick black line toward which it ascends. But remember, a toy is a troubled object, as small as a child but handled with adult intent, like the infant that turns out to be the uncle's plaything. Robert once described the *feuilleton* as a snail's shell, a little round enclave slower than the tortoise chasing the hare, written for a little bet that it might make a little money. Detached as a floating child. In the end, the newspaper editors turned their backs on these little pieces by Robert, as if they trifled in ways too strange, too disturbing for an audience wanting an altogether different kind of lightness.

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A while later, still early 1914, another letter from Robert. After a long season of rain, it is a beautifully bright, blue day in Biel. Spring flowers are beginning to bud, and there is a bouquet of delicate forest blooms on my bedroom table. What does your room look like, Frau Mermet? Perhaps you'd describe it to me in your next letter? I carry your dear boy, the sturdy young fellow, on the back of my thoughts, as if I were his mount. You will certainly be sitting amid winter whiteness in Bellelay, because I saw the Montoz this morning covered in snow. But spring will come to you in good time, and then the fields will be that rich, beautiful green I so admired last year. Today, in a Nidaugasse shop window, I saw a lovely pink lady's leotard and also a snow-white one. You need something like that, Frau Mermet, something warm on your delicate body.

He'd love to see me in such a lovely soft garment – an angelic sight, he says. You must dress warmly, Frau Mermet, put on warm pants in the bad weather. He is sure I am angry and resentful because he dares to speak of my under-garments in such a way, so delicately and carefully hidden from view as they always are. I would like to see your lovely panties, dear madam, and kiss you wearing them. But I'll stop there, for fear of saying too much more.

Robert writes again, thanking me for the description I sent him (as requested) of my room in Bellelay. I wonder what he will do with the mental picture it conjures up. He complains that my visits to Biel are rushed, and too full of chores and errands in town. The rest of the letter lingers on a memory he has of looking through the little skylight in his hotel room. He'd lifted me up, holding me closely for a moment. Robert wishes it could have lasted longer, and dreams of another chance in the future. Will you wear your things like that again? The next letter cannot forget the sight of my naked back as I adjusted my garments; I remember struggling in the low-ceilinged closet. He wants to see more next time. Before Robert signs off, I'm chided for hesitating when the conversation turns to affairs of the heart, of avoiding or changing the subject.

*

It is late spring 1914, and Robert dreams of us walking together in the meadows and foothills of the Jura mountains. A letter tells me he plans to visit Bellelay, just as soon as the new walking shoes arrive that he ordered some time ago. As ever, he begins with mock formality, wishing me all good things: pleasant hours spent in the warmth; lovely entertainments; a fine horse and carriage; maidservants; a perpetual good mood; nice dreams and good weather; millions in the bank; eternal youth. Robert's little joke turns out to be a foil for something else. He praises my modesty – a person with such a good heart and such serenity of the soul can be happy with barely nothing. Robert dresses up that bare nothing in a white skirt, white shoes and stockings, white knickers, a hat, parasol, gloves – all white. My flushed cheeks beneath a warm summer sky bring a touch of colour to this picture of innocence, complemented by the idea of a dark red flower on the breast, a little circle of deep rose. It isn't hard to imagine what he's thinking of. Robert pictures me at work in the heat of the washroom, undisturbed and alone. Soon he will come to Bellelay.

*

A letter comes soon after his visit, Robert returning to Biel on foot, a brisk march he says, arriving at the church tower by noon, just before the rain begins – what luck! He plans an early swim tomorrow in the Bielersee. The weather is still warm, and Robert mentions how Louis must be sweating in the heat. He pictures us close together during a whole afternoon. Moving closer, Frau Mermet, you will be sure to find something, he says. I can guess what. Robert fondly remembers that he took off my boots after we had walked.

The outbreak of a terrible crisis in Europe. Having spent a Sunday in Bellelay, Robert writes a brief note describing his return journey. With no breakfast in either my stomach or satchel, as soldiers are wont to say, I marched off at eight o'clock this morning, Frau Mermet, and flew down to Dachsfelden on the way to Biel, having woken only 20 minutes earlier, on account of the red wine we drank the night before, my thoughts recalling the lovely game of *flohspiel* we played. Robert recalls this little game of tiddlywinks as the scene of a certain intimacy between us. The next letter begs forgiveness for his lapse in writing, which is explained by a stint of military service. He had been called up, along with men of his age, to build fortifications, practise marksmanship, keep watch. Accustomed to hardship and physical exertion, Robert struggles less than the others, but still finds the going tough, although the early mornings seem to suit him well. In his letter, he says he must exercise restraint, since careless talk can be dangerous. We must acknowledge certain rules, for example concerning information about the whereabouts of stationed units. During one spell with the army, at Hägendorf, southeast of Basel, work on the border defences had to be conducted under camouflage, I later learn, so as to avoid visibility from the air. The letters are nice exercises in small talk; I sense a mixture of boredom and thoughtless ease. He thanks me for a package I sent containing some clothing, even though the size was too big. There is little news from the Blaues Kreuz, no gossip about the chambermaids to report. He offers to accompany me shopping in Biel next time the opportunity arises. Robert dreams of another game of *flohspiel* in which the victor wins unlimited kisses – would I like to play such a game?

*

Robert is back home in his room at the hotel and sends belated thanks for the Christmas gifts – sweets, handkerchiefs, a good bottle of red wine. He recalls our conversation during a walk to Leubringen, looking out over the Swiss plateau and the mountains, all the way from Mont Blanc to the Alpstein. I remember we picked our way through the Taubenloch gorge, beneath towering grey rocks sodden with thick green moss, careful not

to slip on the jagged stones jutting out of the shallow water. Hazy slivers of light spilled into the deep trench. According to local legend, there was once a young man who loved a girl so gracious, so delicate, that she was nicknamed *die Taube* – the dove. The couple wished to be married but, fleeing the clutches of an amorous noble, the young woman threw herself into the gorge – a beautiful flightless bird. Robert recalls that while we walked I'd made an allusion to marriage, because of Louis. He remembers every word. It is early 1915.

Robert writes another letter, notably long by his recent standards, which he'd faithfully promised me. Yesterday, beneath a clear blue sky, he'd climbed the Bözingenberg, looking back and ahead at the Jura and the Alps, deep in snow, all the while thinking of me hard at work in the Bellelay laundry. Frau Mermet, you have a son whom you love and whom a certain writer of these lines also loves because he is such a dear young boy. Robert praises my slender figure, my bright eyes and sweet mouth. He mentions the *flohspiel* game again, and hopes I smile sweetly. Soon Louis will go to Bern to begin his secondary education. He is 12 years old. Robert knows how hard the separation will be, so draws attention to the benefits. Louis will learn much, even things that a mother cannot teach. He'll surely be in safe hands. While away, a son will always be in his mother's thoughts; thoughts are the freest thing in the world and can fly anywhere, over endless seas and through vast deserts. Bern is not, however, on the other side of a sea. So you don't have to be too afraid of sending the boy to Bern, Frau Mermet, soon it will be spring again. Time will fly like a thief, giving and taking worldly sorrows whether one is good or whether one is bad. Forgive me, dear lady, for suddenly I'm speaking like a priest! When all I desire is to amuse you, to lift your mood. Yesterday I saw in a local shop window some nice warm stockings, Frau Mermet, and I dreamt of putting them on your lovely legs, very attentively, carefully pulling up your skirt a bit. Changing tack a little, Robert relates an entertaining episode involving Dr. Gustav Adolf Frey, president of the local anti-alcohol federation, and a chambermaid from the Blaues Kreuz. It won't be the last time he's laughed at, says Robert. My room at the hotel is always nice and warm, he writes – perhaps I'll warm up your room too, dear Frau Mermet? It's obvious what he means. A while ago, apparently, Robert came across the picture of a slender lady in tight, snow-white breeches posing in front of a camera. She had the most charming, elegant riding whip in her hand. I'd like to be a groom and lift you up onto the saddle, he says; perhaps the groom would press his face to the seat and plant kisses where the breeches had touched the leather. May I ask you, Frau

Mermet, for something rather dear to me? I'd love to have a pair of Louis's pants, maybe you could send some that are old or that he has outgrown. I would treasure them, adore them in fact. Robert signs off with the formality one has come to expect.

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Early February, 1915. Dear Frau Mermet, I have just read your few lines with the happy news that my sister Lisa is doing better. Thank you for the parcel I received along with your letter. I have sent the jam jars back to Bellelay. Robert's younger sister Fanny visited Biel yesterday, he tells me, and together they strolled up to Leubringen, where we had taken a walk just recently. Stopping at an inn, the landlady told Robert that the woman accompanying him on his last visit must have left her notebook lying around, and handed it back to him. I was surprised to find my own letter tucked into its pages, writes Robert. He chides me for my carelessness and teases me about the contents of my journal. The Leubringen landlady had given him an inquiring look, perhaps a disapproving one. No matter! – it wasn't that bad! Robert exclaims.

It is now two years since Robert returned to Switzerland. He reminisces about the long trek that night from Tavannes to Bellelay, beneath a wonderful starry sky. Today at the Blaues Kreuz they served a delicious sauerkraut. Robert plans a walk up to the Bözingenberg, where he can look back into the Jura and think of me. He thanks me for sending a pair of Louis's pants, just as he'd asked, parcelled up with some socks of his that I'd mended. Make of that what you will. They almost remind me of women's underpants, says Robert, which I'd like to see on a dear person who has a funny little nose and is as slim and pretty as a young tavern girl.

*

Waiting for the springtime, as winter's light recedes, I read Robert's poetry. What does the light do? What is its natural inclination? Can such a thing even be said? In an office-poem from *Gedichte*, published while Robert was in Berlin, the moon eyes you like a boss. But what does it see? A clerk scratching his neck in embarrassment as the supervisor looks on, knowing himself to be a writer hiding in plain sight? In another, a snow-lined path shimmers with light thrown up into the trees. It animates their branches like the pleading hands of children. In 'Brightness', one of his best-known poems, a miracle opens up smiling. Can such a thing be witnessed? Verses scintillate with light, sometimes as unseeable as it is strange. Among the first lines of Robert's published by *Der Bund*, the poet's unseeing eye falters among nature's most colourful, most womanly

dreams. They reach out, instead, like a hand stroking the cheek of a blind man. In these poems, blinding suns bring out the glow of bright shadows. The sky tires of light, while inside the house a rounded lantern is extinguished in the way a wound gapes. Light wounds. Clouds circle the world's silence as if they were dancing. The poet convalesces. He is adrift in the fog of morning. Adrift with longing, lost from home, set aside: I go out for my walk, / It leads a little way / and home. Then without sound / or word I'm set aside (*Beiseit*).

Around this time, while in Biel, Robert wrote a short story on the subject of 'Ash, Needle, Pencil, and Match'. He starts by claiming he'd once written a much-applauded treatise on ash, bringing to light certain qualities that had been curiously overlooked. For instance, ash is absolutely incapable of resistance. Blow on it, and you'll find it utterly obliging. This shows its inconsequentiality, but also its supreme modesty – the endearing sense ash has of itself that it's good for nothing. In this respect, ash could not be more different than the wood it once was. It's almost nothing – step on it, and you are hardly conscious you've done so. And yet the special character of ash consists in the fact that it invites the study of insignificant things that turn out to require unexpected amounts of attention. The needle is another small curiosity: although small and fine, it won't entertain rough treatment. The pencil is similarly paradoxical: it must be sharpened over and over to work properly, even though each sharpening brings it closer to an eventual, inevitable state of uselessness. At which point it is usually disregarded quite thanklessly. Finally, the delicate little matchstick is mentioned. Its value is stored up in its own idleness, lying asleep in a box, awaiting the moment its tiny head will be scraped until it catches fire so it can truly become itself, the thing it was meant to be, which all of a sudden turns to non-existence, the infinite nothingness of an extinguished flame. Alive only in its own death, the matchstick expresses the tenderest kind of love in the service it performs, and it collapses and expires as a part of this expression. What remains, after the crisis, is not emptiness – far from it – but, instead, the barely perceptible residue of what is most valuable of all.

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Mid-April, 1915. Robert is enduring another spell of military service. He thanks me for the bacon and cheese I sent, confessing that the cheese has already been devoured, and he is making short work of the bacon. He is in Cudrefin, a small town on the shores of the Neuenburgersee. The men sleep in the school room, on a crowded floor covered in straw. But there is a place he can write, which, at the very least, keeps him out of

the nearby inn. The local wine is excellent, and the weather is good, so he can't complain. Robert's stint will be over in about three weeks. The Jura will soon be warm and green again, and he promises himself a climb over the Montoz to visit Bellelay on a beautiful Sunday.

By mid-October, Robert is anxiously waiting to hear whether he will be redrafted for military service before Christmas. I send him some more socks, which he'd be able to use. He is pleased to hear, by the way, that my son and I wear stockings made of the same wool. Robert savours the warmth of a pair of stockings that reach above the knee. At Blaues Kreuz, he is busy cleaning his shoes, and relishes the prospect of cleaning mine and Louis's, but complains that, due to the maid's carelessness, he has had to sweep his own floor. Before long, he is writing again, thanking me for sausages, cheese, a pair of handkerchiefs and a nice, warm shirt, since he is out in the woods for three nights. The soldiers sleep in barns and schoolhouses, in worsening cold, and Robert complains of chest pains on his left side, having bent to pick up some heavy stones. I'd asked if he'd like a second shirt, which pleased him, since the first fitted perfectly this time. As snug as a woman's breast against one's own body. He enquires how we are, Louis and I, and recalls the boy's pants once more. The captain gave the soldiers a good dressing down yesterday, I'm told, but it was like water off a duck's back. Robert writes sitting in a charming inn, sipping cognac as the bells ring heartily for the Sunday sermon.

Another letter, thanking me for the lovely gifts, a shirt, sweet fried pastries and cheese. Robert is now stationed in a Catholic village in the Hauenstein mountains, and sleeping in a dance hall. On Sunday most of the men visit their families, while Robert takes a nice stroll. He imagines me in warm winter clothes and recalls a time at Bellelay, after a walk, when my feet were so hot I needed to take a footbath. I would love to wash your feet, and kiss between your hot little toes. Near the end of October he writes again, thanking me for the food parcels and requesting schnapps. Fusilier Walser would be happy to take a quantum of it. A brief note the following week, thanking me for the schnapps, some of which he has drunk already, Robert huddled in the *Soldatenstube*, writing on his knees, praising the virtues of work for mortals such as us who are as restless as they are imperfect.

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It is early December and, back at the Blaues Kreuz, Robert writes to me of the Christmas markets in Biel, which so delight the children. Wanting Louis to share in the excitement, he sends me 25 francs. I may buy anything I like that would make the boy happy; it will be a great pleasure

for Robert to think of the joy such a gift would bring. He reminds me I had mentioned a pair of Louis's trousers that were torn, and contemplates the gratification to be had in carefully mending the garment. If you love someone, you surely also love their clothes, like everything else that surrounds them. Isn't that so, Frau Mermet? But the implication of the letter is that I might buy more shorts for my son with Robert's money. I can't help wonder if he hopes for the old ones, in exchange.

I send Robert an umbrella as a Christmas gift. He is delighted and talks of it glowingly as a constant companion in the future. I'm celebrating Christmas at home in Bellelay, and Robert is happy that I'm having some new clothes made for Louis to mark the occasion. He tells me I'm certainly not wrong to refuse him skis as a present. Skiing isn't anything terribly important, it's probably just a fad.

Mid-February, 1916. A letter asking my forgiveness that Robert has not written for quite some time. The coming of rain reminded him of his umbrella, and therefore of me. Recently it has been either snowy or dry, and he has been busy with so many things. It is now three years since Robert returned to Switzerland. (It is also a year, I think to myself, since marriage was last spoken of.) He will never forget the journey back from Basel to the Jura. Robert sends greetings to Louis and me, and promises a visit soon. Spring is just around the corner, and he looks forward to the climb over the Montoz to Bellelay. How does Louis look in his new clothes? If I don't write so much, Frau Mermet, that doesn't mean I don't often think of you with a warm heart.

It is nearly mid-March. More apologies for the absence of a letter. Once the snow has retreated, I will surely make the trek to Bellelay, and will stay longer this time. Are you well, Frau Mermet? I've just had my Sunday shave and I'm settling down to submit a new tax return. Robert tells me about a minor row at the Blaues Kreuz: Anna, the new housekeeping girl, is making his bed very badly. I rise early and work diligently, he writes, as is necessary in such serious times. The carnival parades forbidden in 1914 are now tolerated again, and at the cattle market there are carousels and booths and a bit of music every evening. But loitering in masks on the open street is rightly prohibited – it wouldn't do during wartime.

Robert sends his thanks for my gifts: more socks, which are warm and comfortable, and some nice coffee. He wonders if I think him spoiled and ungrateful. He asks about Bellelay, about the new head warden and Lisa's sore throat. Then, looking down into the square beneath his window, Robert becomes distracted by the lunchtime crowds and breaks off writing in search of a meal. A blank band across the middle of the page conveys a spell of silence, when his mouth is full, but on returning to his

room Robert reports that the food was very good, although he ate his plateful wedged between some other diners, including Gustav Adolf Frey – he of the recent Blaues Kreuz intrigue. Just as his gratitude for the socks had led him to dream of helping me with my stockings, so Robert's lunch makes him want to metamorphosise into the handkerchief I'd use to clean my mouth after eating. He recalls a visit we made to the Moronberg, the three of us – Robert, Louis and I – making the ascent on a morning that was warm with blue skies and beautiful greenery and colourful flowers and willow trees. Should we go on another summer walk, Frau Mermet, I'd like to lift you gently over the little countryside walls, to feel the weight of your dear, delicate body.

A letter towards the end of March. Spring will soon be here, and love will follow in its footsteps. Tender winds will blow around your dear face and your lovely little nose, Frau Mermet. Robert reports a dream he had of Louis: he carries him on his shoulder like a horse carries its rider – Robert on all fours on the ground, and Louis riding him, spurring him on with his young legs, whip in hand to deal out lovely lashes. I read on quickly. At the Blaues Kreuz, one day is just like another, with bad and good weather – which goes for the eating, too, Frau Mermet, because the food here is much the same. Gustav Adolf Frey is conspicuously tired of his stay at the hotel, but not me. Not at all. There are men who suffer from constant impatience, but I don't mind the routine. Besides, I'm long past the fever of my youth. When you write, it is as if we touch – adieu, Frau Mermet, with my warmest wishes.

December, 1916. A letter thanking me for the delicious red wine which he drank yesterday together with the gingerbread biscuits I sent him. Robert confesses he has no discipline where indulgence is concerned. The weather has turned, and he hopes I am dressing up nice and warm, three pairs of stockings and two or three warm skirts and legwarmers on top of all that. He remembers to thank me for the gift of some more socks. As he has done several times before, Robert reassures me that if Louis is sometimes a rascal it's only natural in a young boy; he must have had a lot of fun in the snow while it lasted. It was nice to wash and dry the dishes together in Lisa's little kitchen just recently, and he promises another Sunday visit soon. PS, I enclose 20 francs, Frau Mermet, please accept without the slightest fuss, for Louis's savings account or anything you may want to buy him.

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July, 1917. A postcard from Mesocco Castle, Robert having been stationed near Bellinzona at the foot of the Alps in Ticino. A brief line recalling a trip to the Misox valley during a glorious spell of weather. Towards the

end of the month, a letter from the same region, near Locarno and Lake Maggiore, where the men continue to stand guard (more lying down and lazing around than standing, says Robert), reporting sunny conditions with the exception of a hailstorm, smashing against the church roof in the nearby village of Rebdorf. The local wine is mild and easy to drink. Robert writes sitting in front of a farmer's hut, awaiting breakfast. When will peace finally come? Nobody knows! – Patience, Frau Mermet. It's hard to tell whether he's bored or anxious. This stint of military service will probably last another eight to ten weeks. The food isn't too bad, probably the fresh air and exercise makes it taste better. But there isn't much cheese, which is a pity. Better eating can be had on St Petersinsel in Bierlersee. He'd sent me a copy of his little walking book, and was glad I liked it.

I send cheese, packed up with biscuits and some butter, which is more difficult to transport but a treat nonetheless. A few days later, in early August, Robert writes to thank me. He is in All'Acqua in the Bedretto valley, stationed in a tiny village with a post office, chapel and hospice. The high mountains are still streaked with snow near the source of the Ticino. He will soon be on the march again, to Airolo and then probably further south, to Roveredo. Hopefully, a discharge in September will see him back in Bellelay for a visit. The butter tasted very good, I know it was a bit of a nuisance to package, Frau Mermet, but a very good idea on your part. The cheese was wonderful with some good bread and a sip of wine. Sleeping on straw sacks is thankless, but I'm used to it by now. It's midday on Sunday, when normally most people go for a walk, so he signs off with the usual greetings.

September 2nd, 1917. A postcard. In less than a week this spell of military service will be over, and Robert will return to Bern. He dreams of the Jura and Bellelay. It is the Day of Rest and so of course Robert plans a walk through the fields and meadows near Roveredo. He sends greetings to Lisa, to whom he writes too seldom**.** Later in September, a letter from the Blaues Kreuz. He has been back in Biel for a couple of weeks. Robert apologises if he has been neglectful in thanking me for recent gifts. He has started work again, he says, and next week I will find a small sketch published in the Sunday supplements. He is also going to send me a copy of a little book that is coming out soon, his collected poems. In the absence of a novel, this brings him some money and hopefully keeps him in the minds of editors and the thoughts of a reading public. Robert recalls our recent days in Bellelay, how lovely and quiet it was gathering blackberries among the pasture and fir trees. Is Louis romping about during the holidays, Frau Mermet? You mentioned the

possibility of future employment with a mechanic in Zurich? Say hello to Lisa, I hope to see her this week. She told me that drinking coffee made her heart palpitate. On the Stierenberg, in the warm sun and good air under the fir trees, a soldier dreams of slipping into a small hut, carefree and comfortable, and enjoying a few simple pleasures. Civilisation, refinement – it's all too complicated; the world of trade seems hectic, but the economic circumstances are obscure. None of it causes happiness; we should surely be able to live more quietly and calmly, writes Robert.

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In 1917 'The Walk' appeared in a new series of small books commissioned by Huber. It was to be one of Robert's most popular tales. The walker in question loops around Biel's Zentralplatz, visiting on his travels a bookseller, a bank, the post office, the Commission for Revenues, and a tailor's shop, as well as having luncheon with Frau Aebi, whose warm hospitality extends to the brutal force-feeding of her guest. He encounters a seemingly bereft giant, Tomzack, on the fringes of the city. Along the way, there's a professor plodding under the sheer weight of knowledge, a peripatetic chemist on a bicycle, a bric-à-brac vendor on the up-and-up, and two elegantly straw-hatted gentlemen. There's a baker's shop with the most gaudy commercial frontage, a piano factory, an avenue of poplars lining a blackened river, electric trams, cows, peasant women riding carts, beer wagons, workers, a goods station, a travelling circus, shops selling paper, meat, clocks, shoes, hats, iron, cloth, groceries, millinery, and fancy goods, and everywhere you look there are advertisements – Persil, milk chocolate, 'Unsurpassed Soups', 'Durable Heels Made of Continental Rubber', properties for sale. And there's a noticeable theme running through all the walker's dealings. When pressed, the bookseller can't account for the popularity of his store's most popular title. The visit to the bank brings news that the walker's account is to be credited with a thousand francs – a philanthropic donation. It's unaccountable, but the sum is deposited nonetheless. At the post office, the walker sends a letter berating an unnamed person with a high opinion of themselves. But as soon as the letter is posted, its author worries he's guilty of a mistake and the miscalculation may put him at a certain disadvantage. The tailor, meanwhile, has made the walker a badly fitting suit that doesn't fit the bill. But it's in the tax office, the last of these trading establishments, that this recurrent question of accounts takes a new turn. Because it's here that the walker gives an account of himself, or rather of his walking. He starts by informing the revenues officer that as a *homme de lettres* he is of dubious income, whatever the taxman may think, and, rather swankily,

requests that his rate of taxation be set at the lowest possible level. (In Switzerland, a tax haven from the late nineteenth century onwards, it was not unusual for the wealthy to set their own rate of tax, but not poor writers.) The superintendent replies: 'But you are always to be seen out for a walk!' Presumably he supposes that walking is less taxing than the work it happens instead of. The walker is swift to correct him. Walking *is* work. On a walk you collect literary observations. Even if it's not taxing, it's a professional pastime. He spends a long time in exposition of this fact, recounting his experiences of that morning and afternoon. This takes up several pages, and it's as if the story becomes even longer than itself. How could you decide on the rate of tax for a writer when accounts such as these are so maddeningly difficult to tally up? Writing won't stay still long enough to be sufficiently accountable. Does the writer behave like the poorest of men, almost outside the tax system, or like the richest, moving accounts from one place to another with great aplomb?

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February 1st, 1918. It's only today that he's able to thank me for the shirt I gave him for Christmas, things having been so busy. He hasn't worn it yet but will do when he gets home in the spring. Military duty calls, probably for about eight weeks from the middle of this month. Despite distractions, Robert has found time to start a new book, another collection, which he says was hard going. When the snow comes, he'll have time to write another letter. In Biel it's been thick fog for the last fortnight, which is surely monotonous, although apparently it went unnoticed until today because he's had both hands full. If only this tiresome war would finish. Up until now his room at Blaues Kreuz has been nice and warm – the hotel porter sees to it. But they say that wood and coal supplies will probably soon be exhausted. Everywhere you read about revolution – how quiet, by comparison, is Bellelay and the Jura pasture! On Magglingen, writes Robert, I'm sure I've seen red *Franzosenhosen* in the bushes.

A letter from Courroux, a pretty village close to Delsberg. It's nearly the end of February, and Robert has about a month of military service ahead of him. The men are sleeping in a drafty old dance hall and, he tells me, the food is good if you're hungry. Robert complains about the lack of cheese, and asks if I can send him something nice to eat. Once the spring comes, when everything is mild and green again, he promises to visit Bellelay, perhaps in uniform.

March 13th, 1918. After a Sunday walk through the mountains to the lovely village of Lisberg, Robert writes to say he will be discharged from duty next weekend and will be back home for Easter. It's a relief to

him, since he's found this spell of military service a bit tough. A couple of weeks later, a letter from the Blaues Kreuz tells me he's back in his old room and has everything arranged nicely. Robert is well provisioned, eating the tastiest bacon and enjoying good sticks of butter with his sister Fanny in her new lodgings. He asks me to send his grey-green suit once mended – no hurry, Robert says, I know it will arrive in immaculate condition, beautifully pressed by your lovely hands. He wishes me a happy Easter and the juiciest Easter cake, full of sweet raisins. The following week, a thank-you note arrives. I'd sent him a Good Friday parcel of two pairs of long socks, some pork chops, chocolate, biscuits and bread – all of which he's already devoured. The tea, however, is saved for later. Robert remarks upon the lovely packaging: gold-bordered blue button boxes, shoeboxes, and corset boxes, which set his imagination racing. I'd like to eat a bonbon or a praline you'd chewed a little, letting it fall out of your dear little mouth into my hand, and I'd eat it straight from there, taking it up between my lips. Changing the subject, Robert makes derisory mention of Hans Mühlistein (who had once crossed Fanny's path) and his rich paramour in Münich. Mühlistein was a journalist and poet, and a friend of Hodler and Mann. In contrast, Robert sings the praises of Gottfried Mind, the late-eighteenth-century woodcarver from Bern, some of whose pencil drawings he had recently seen. I wish nothing so much as that you have an Easter table full of the best things, Robert writes – fish and cake and the finest cream for you and Louis. Soon the fields will be green and full of scent and sunshine once more, the Beroy forest will come alive, and I'll make my way to Bellelay.

The end of April, 1918. Thank you, Frau Mermet, for such a tasty morsel, packaged in such a nice little box, which I spread on fine, tender bread and ate with relish, thinking of a certain lady with every bite. Since it's Sunday morning, and finding I have stationery, I'm settling down for a little chat with you. Your return letter was so lovely, alluding as it did to bonbons and pralines in such an alluring way – I trembled over that line a good while. Perhaps – please? – I'll hear it from your own lips on some occasion. I know you worry about Louis. Love triggers a hundred thoughts while the careless go carefree. Robert tells me he's about to start organising a pile of his poems into a volume – several weeks work, if he can pull it off. He's just read in the newspaper that a certain Dr. Rudolf Willy had died in Mels, aged 62 years (Robert himself turned 40 this month), a learned scholar of the universities of Bern and Zurich but also an incorrigible bachelor, a kind of cave-dwelling bear. Having known Dr. Willy in Zurich almost two decades ago, Robert wrote a story about him. A conflict at the university had caused Willy to resign his position. He'd

been imprudent enough to attack high-ranking people out of conviction, out of passion for the truth and an intense dislike of mediocrity. A true Swiss, he was incapable of insincerity and could not accept the humiliating necessity of submission. But Robert extols the virtues of conformity. It's good, he says, when a man makes concessions for the sake of sociability. Robert quotes Goethe, who obviously knew what he was talking about: *Es ist dafür gesorgt, daß die Bäume nicht in den Himmel wachsen* (care must be taken that the trees don't wash up in the sky).

The last day of June, 1918. You'll be wondering, Frau Mermet, why I haven't written for quite a while, although it hasn't been so long since we walked together through the soft pine forest up on the beautiful Stierenberg, looking out over the Jura mountains. In Sutz, by the Bielersee, everything is crimson with cherries and redcurrants. The woods above Biel are now beautiful with dark, rich greenery. Yesterday new troops gathered at the local station, but for the time being the Bernese *Landwehrleute* aren't involved. By early evening the streets around the City Church fill with young and old alike, and last night there was a hunger demonstration on the main square: young men, Jewish women, workers, lively music, the waving of red flags. A few people climbed into the fountain to give impassioned political speeches. It's not as bad as in Russia, thank goodness, but things are getting worse, says Robert, who watched the whole scene from his window. During a rainy spell across the whole of Switzerland, he has spent the last two weeks reading *Don Quixote*. Cervantes worked on the novel for 20 years. Robert wants to tell me that the best work takes time and patience, whereas most writers today quickly produce books that are simply thrown onto the market with no prospect of an enduring legacy. Whole worlds can be found in *Don Quixote*, and when you turn the last page it's like walking out of a beautiful forest that you dream of visiting again. He jokes that he's subjected me to a literary treatise, one he could turn into a hefty volume. If you had a little tea I would be pleased to receive it, Frau Mermet, and perhaps a wedge of cheese? No hurry, of course.

July 10th, 1918. Robert writes to thank me for my letter and the package of cheese and tea, along with thick bread and butter, which tasted wonderful. Half-jokingly, he pens some lines about the mysteriousness of women. I think he's still a little dizzy about the bonbons. He tells me in passing that the rooms on the top floor of the Blaues Kreuz are being redecorated, a bright coating of white paint battling the peeling wallpaper. He'd climbed the Spitzberg and picked a bouquet of flowers, writing about his expedition in the newspaper; but in Biel, the day before yesterday, he saw a young man being beaten, and

now a battalion of soldiers has been dispatched to maintain law and order – which is actually a bit shameful for Biel, Robert thinks, although there's also been trouble in Basel and Zurich. I myself read that one of the demonstrators, a member of a social democratic youth organisation, had been killed. I know hope, I prefer not to hope, Robert says – What's the use of all this?

Early August, 1918. Because of all the lovely parcels, Frau Mermet, do I find myself under your slippers? Would it please you to own me skin and hair, much like a master owns a dog? You'll probably laugh at such questions. I've a good deal of sugar and tea, and the two large eggs were very good, but cheese and butter is always best. Your packages are always so adorably perfect, so neatly wrapped by your tiny hands. Robert takes the opportunity to dream a bit about mail order: ladies' trousers, aprons, petticoats, panties, fine embroidery and lace, all making a person giddy for a moment, everything twitching, shimmering with the charms and secrets of women. Do you know what I wish for, Frau Mermet? That you were a lady of nobility, and I was allowed to be your maid and wear a maid's apron and wait on you and, if you weren't satisfied, if I had somehow aroused your displeasure, you would give me a slap, wouldn't you? That would be an even nicer life than the life of a writer, which of course isn't bad. A nice kind of poet, aren't I? Robert has been unwell with influenza, *Spanische Grippe* in fact; he isn't fully recovered yet, and is spending time reading novels, including a very serious and sad one, he tells me, where a young Italian takes his own life for the love of his fatherland and because he loves a woman who belongs to someone else. The book is called *Die letzten Briefe des Jakob Ortis* by Ugo Foscolo. Robert thought it might come to mean as much to the Italians as Goethe did in Germany. I'm straining your dear eyes with this narrow scribble, aren't I, dear Mama? Do you mind me calling you that? (He'd addressed the letter that way, in fact: *Liebe Mama, mit andern Worten*.) Then I'd have to be obedient, like a little boy, or you'd be severe and punish me. I'd have to kneel down in front of you and ask forgiveness, and you'd treat me just as your whim dictated. Such thoughts! – you should pinch my nose tightly between two fingers and give me a firm look, Frau Mermet. But enough silliness …

*

Service – about which I know something, at least as much as Robert does! – befits not only the naturally compliant but also the intelligent, because, after all, there are many good reasons to fall in line. And then, for the smarter person, service sometimes compensates failure with recognition and a certain type of reward. It is at the very least an occupation, I mean

that it keeps you occupied, which for those with at least half a mind is frequently a benefit. There is often a quietness in servility, which can, of course, be dutiful but is just as likely to be sly – not that it need result in defiance, only that it's not entirely sincere. I don't mind that. A soul that is broken or bent or slavish in character craves approval if only to scorn it – perhaps because such a soul cannot bear the praise it wishes for. But maybe it is different for women, there's a making-do involved. As I said, my patients in the laundry are quiet and seem to like the work. Outwardly at least they are conscientious to a fault. I think Robert imagines that masters and kings appreciate what service means, above all others; that servility is a peculiar expression of what is intelligent and noble rather than what is base. But now I think of it, sometimes there is nothing so grand in Robert's wish for service – the butler school in Berlin, for instance, seemed a devil-may-care piece of work. Unless, of course, it was just a clever disguise to conceal some truer desire of which he felt ashamed. Mind you, service isn't the same thing as duty. In *The Tanners* Robert lampooned his brother Hermann, dubbed Professor Klaus in the novel, who knows thousands of duties both large and small, duties so compelling he feels obliged to lurch into enormous, crumbling edifices of duties made out of masses of disagreeable duties, duties built up from a solemn fear that some duty might go unrecognised and therefore unfulfilled. Duties beget duties, and they pile up on one another. As time goes by, the dutiful Klaus even learns to reproach himself for neglecting the duty to be at least a little bit happy. I think that Robert was describing the inevitable failure of dutifulness, as if it were bound in the end to be disrespectful of itself. Robert himself turned the relationship between duty and insolence into a conundrum. In one scene from *The Tanners*, the mistress of the house clumsily breaks a prize piece of porcelain, and – caught in the act – she's livid that her servant couldn't be found responsible. For his part, the servant falls to his knees to clear the mess. But in so doing he allows his cheek to brush against the mistress's garments. The deliberate sauciness goes unscolded, bringing vexation and shame but deference too.

In a short piece that appeared after Robert had entered Waldau, many years later, he remarked that Gottfried Keller had become a civil servant, which – unlike Balzac or Dostoevsky, say – kept him out of the literary profession for a decade and a half. Meanwhile, Goethe traded his literary stature for a courtly position – Robert describes it as 'administrative'. One author may write without interruption or break, another may not. No doubt Keller had his reasons. Some writers make an inauspicious start but improve with maturity, while others burst forth only to succumb to their own shortcomings. Robert is rather dismissive

on the question of which should be preferred – the point is, every writer is the composite of two individual entities, the artist and the citizen, and each must resign themselves to the nature of that combination.

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September 7th, 1918. Robert apologises for the absence of a letter. Correspondence with editors has kept him busy. The recent bout of illness was helped by some nice honey given to his sister during a trip to St. Peterinsel in the Bielersee. He remembers tasting the same honey for breakfast in Bellelay; and remembers me, too, in my smart little apron, like a pretty young girl. It makes him think of the little governess, as he calls her, at the Blaues Kreuz. She's on vacation, but apparently he's been thinking about her. Her slim figure, Robert says, is just like mine, and she's my size, but her character is altogether different – less gentle, more earthy, so it seems. You should not worry that I mention her to you, he says, because in all honesty there's no comparison. On his last visit to Bellelay, Robert recalls, he was somewhat agitated. He puts it down to worries over his writing. The collection he's been planning is proving difficult, and the newspaper pieces are less in demand. The long war has made conditions very tough for artists and writers. It causes him anxiety not to be sitting at his desk writing, although that's when he is happiest and most at ease. It takes courage, writes Robert, to continue in a profession that now promises very little except a modest living; but desertion among poets should be considered a disgrace! He's recently heard from Karl, who is finding it hard work in Twann, on the southwesterly shores of the Bielersee – he's used to Berlin and a much larger apartment, and his wife is missing the distractions of the city. Robert signs off with hopeful remarks about some of his writerly commissions, and mentions a new novel (which I know to be *Tobold*) that will keep him from Bellelay for a good while, perhaps.

Robert sends a long tirade about the war. Straw-brained, mutton-headed idiots, donkeys running ammunition factories (the moneyed Swiss have thrived in that regard), hundreds of millions of people around dining tables where there is almost nothing to eat (he thanks me for the latest food parcel, extolling the virtues of simple bread and butter), people crawling like ants in the dirt, a mass of helplessness, misery spreading right across the world. Silly little boys could do better than our leaders, who are more childish than children. Men are bankrupting us, he says; women like you, Frau Mermet, should be queens. I continue to think of you every day, and among the hazelnut trees on the mountain yesterday I picked nuts and thought about last

autumn when we did the same thing on the Stierenberg. In your letter, you said the two of us would get along very well if we could only talk together again, and I agree and believe that too, we'd laugh and talk for hours on end.

October 16th, 1918. It's getting colder, but winter always brings beautiful things. Hopefully it will be the last winter of the war. Robert does not wish to sound too optimistic, but it's obvious that both sides are now looking for peace. The Germans will lose the war, he says, but what does that mean? There's plenty of loss on both sides, and whoever has lost will doubtless win again in some other way. France was humiliated in 1870 but is now victorious. Among the French there are those who thirst for revenge, which Robert finds petty and foolish. Woodrow Wilson has made a good impression on him, but the big winner in Robert's opinion is Ferdinand Foch. He speaks of the personal attributes required for peace – modesty, diligence, and so forth – which one never finds in nation-states themselves. Forgive me, Frau Mermet, if I sound like a priest or a column in the newspaper. We'll see how this drama ends, it's not over yet. He tells me about the walks he's recently taken, one to Büren, the other to Aarberg, both charming, old Swiss towns on the shores of the Aare. In Büren, Robert tasted a very good apple pie in a friendly coffee shop, made by the owner herself, a divorcee who told him her husband had been (he puts it in quotes) a 'bastard'. Well, this woman had to go outside for something and so she put on her shoes in the next room by crossing one leg over the other, which Robert says was rather entertaining for a 'bastard' like him to watch. After the apple pie, he bought some pretzels in the bakery, some chocolate in the colonial store then found somewhere for a couple of glasses of wine.

On the Aare bridge he'd seen an interned German soldier. The long walk did for Robert's shoes, however, which have been sent to Basel to be re-soled. In your last letter, dear Frau Mermet, you wished that you were still young and beautiful. Was that because of the little governess at the Blaues Kreuz? If I'm honest, there are indeed more youthful women with prettier faces than yours, but you are neither ugly nor old, added to which you have a delightful nature. Much depends on beauty, of course, but there are other attractive things for a man. In Biel there are many pretty young girls, and naturally I like to look since youth is captivating. But I myself am not young anymore, and neither do I desire to be! It's what's on the inside that counts, Robert tells me. He ends by calling this rather underwhelming struggle for words 'philosophising'. But beneath his signature is written another handful of lines arranged like a poem – something he has not done before. *Robert Walser: who is in your thoughts*

every day, although of course he often thinks of other things, which you will no doubt immediately forgive, because you are dear and deserve every appreciation.

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'The Battle of Sempach', published a year before *Gedichte* in the German weekly *Die Zukunft*, was a story Robert wrote about the famous defeat of the Austrians in July 1386, their knights being beaten by Swiss peasants in a victory that proved a turning point for the Confederacy. It was written during the same period as 'Kleist in Thun', Kleist himself having considered the Sempach battle a fitting subject for a play he never wrote, as Robert's own story points out. In 'The Battle of Sempach' it is the bright sun – 'actually more than bright' – that lights everything. Heavy armour shimmers in the heat, heavy bodies and flushed faces peek out from metal helmets. The sun spills over clinking and clattering weapons. It burns the hay and the dust, making little patches of haze near the men and the animals. Horse flanks glisten with sweat, light floods the soldiers' plumage and the fruit trees in the meadows and hills. The sky, cloudless and distant, is scented with blue. This Walserian sun is not the sun that, on some memorable day hundreds of years ago, scorched the bones of the Austrian army, soon to collide unexpectedly with the Swiss on a country road to Lucerne. It is a novel sun that falls on the column of men as if they were, in Robert's own terms, a radiantly scaled snake, a fattened and cumbersome lizard, a stretch of cloth stitched with arcane shapes and figures, an embroidery of the type that ladies might trail – 'elderly and domineering ones, as far as I'm concerned', he writes in a fit of authorial intrusion. In other words, a brightly invented sun, actually more than bright as he himself writes, throwing new light on the creation it makes possible. This sun, shining on each assembled word of the text, hangs itself high above the 'as far as I'm concerned' attitude – with a quick repetition of phrase, Robert calls it exactly that – of a rough-and-ready military power, an Austrian army about to be knocked off course. The repetition causes a swift change of tone, exposing a mighty legion to something unexpected, on the page as much as on the battlefield. Something laughable, their stirrups as big as snowshoes, footmen feeding titbits on long silver forks to mounted lords swaying unsteadily in their saddles. The more-than-bright sun shines over the entire 'punitive expedition', which Robert describes as a 'statutory rape, bloody, scornful, histrionic things'. The language fills the scene in the way oppressive sunlight falls upon a nicely painted window dressing. The sun nearly cooks the pampered brows of those Austrian nobles whose hair is oiled and sticky with perfume. It kisses

their milky, ungloved hands as much as their unhelmeted heads with its stale afternoon breath. Alone among his men, Leopold of Austria's troubled look worsens when a fly, encouraged by the heat, sticks to his eye. At around two or three o'clock in the afternoon, the sound of a horn pierces the headachy tedium of the day. It causes wild shouting and the taking-flight of flaming monsters. The sun spits out dark rays, jolts of hellish light, and sound thickens like the summer earth and sky and like the thickening mass of bodies coming together. Austrian lances seem to make short work of the Swiss confederates, skewering chests with easy competence, until Arnold von Winkelreid, folk-hero of Sempach, steps forward. In this theatre of sunlight, he falls on lance after Austrian lance to force a breach in the Hapsburg lines, his body becoming a bridge that gets trampled underfoot of the advancing Swiss. And in the blink of an eye, the knights are no match for the fleet-footed peasants. They suffocate in their armour or are drowned in the lake by thick-ankled herdsmen or horses' hooves; or, caught in their own stirrups, are smashed to pieces in the throng, tripped up by their elegantly narrow *poulaines*, despite many a tip having been hastily cut off. Leopold is felled like the rest. Heads smash against the ground; bleeding, their upturned eyes are filled with the sun's anger, just as their stomachs are turned by the indignity of hand-to-hand combat with slavish farmers. At long last the light begins to die, and the mountains rediscover their fine, cold contours. They seem to tip forwards. Bodies and valuables are piled up, faces are cleaned of blood from sheer curiosity. Fine young Austrians are found split open, holding onto each other with dead smiles. Soon afterwards, ordinary men – the only things to outlive the sun – go back into the high valleys, where nobody can afford such dazzling legends for long. In 'The Battle of Sempach' history collides with nature beneath a Walserian sun; what survives is a more prosaic Swiss, falling back into the silent hills.

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October 24th, 1918. Dear Mistress – I hope that you and the young master are doing well. My writing has been going well, having somehow crawled out from under itself, and I've come to understand the work I need to do over the winter. (Robert is speaking once more of a new novel.) It's no small reassurance for a poet who often gropes around in confusion. Therefore, I have a certain duties ahead of me that I must fulfil, although you'll doubtless say that I've not only duties but also desires to gratify where you are concerned. You certainly have a right to demand much from me and to be my strict little mistress. But allow me this freedom for the time being; as much freedom, in fact, as Robert Walser wishes

– who wants to be loyal to you and think of you dearly each day, as if he completely belonged to you, and you could do whatever you wanted with him. But this note is actually a petition, a begging letter. Would you be so good, Frau Mermet, as to send some sugar for my tea? Your little pooch thanks you for the butter, bread and cheese and the two pork chops. I shan't say much about politics today, dear Madam, in fact nothing at all. In my mind, I always hear your lovely laugh and I see your mouth and the way you sit and move. There's something enchantingly young about you, despite your long and considerable experience of life. Yesterday I saw a girl with the most wonderful eyes at the offices of the newspaper. Her mouth was unusually expressive. I assure you she turned her delicate head twice to look at me. I'm telling you this so you know that the chap you correspond with isn't so unattractive to others, and not such a bad catch after all. But still there are many young, pretty things in the world, you'd be amazed! Farewell and warm greetings from your old and useless (if not completely useless) chauvinist bachelor – you already know what his name is.

November 1st, 1918. A thank-you note for the sugar. Today Robert writes on chocolate paper. He's sent his winter suit to Bellelay to be repaired. It's cold in the room at the Blaues Kreuz, though he's not unused to enduring that type of hardship. Peace must be just around the corner, don't you think? I expected a letter from you on Monday, Frau Mermet, but I'll be happy to wait a little longer. You have a lot to do, and it's better for your health to go out into the fresh air, walk in the forest or simply chat with someone. I hope you and Louis are in good health. He's supposed to start his apprenticeship with a locksmith in Birsfelden soon. Don't think about it too much, Frau Mermet, such things must happen, as you well know. I wanted to send a special thank-you for the cheese in the gold-rimmed, snow-white box. I take and I receive and hardly give, people will say. All sorts of people have died here in Biel, and the schools are still closed. *Spanische Grippe*. Even the captain of the guard succumbed. Maybe it will snow up there soon. I was on the mountain yesterday and it was wonderfully warm and sunny. I thought of Bellelay. I promise that I love you – if I've said it before, there's no harm repeating it, is there?

November 15th, 1918. Just a few words today. I'm in the middle of writing and I've made real progress – although there's still a lot to do. How is my suit coming along? I'd be delighted to get it by the end of the month. The trousers I'm wearing are torn at the knees. Dare I send you some socks to mend, since you offered? Does it matter they're unwashed? The general strike is over, what a mess! Some died, and in Biel there've been a number of beatings. The army is on the streets to keep order. But

the railways are running again, as is the post office. For the time being the workers should choose to work instead of wanting to govern. Germany is in the hands of the socialists, but the war isn't over yet. Let's hope peace negotiations begin soon.

December 6th, 1918. A soldier's coffin has just been carried to the station with a drumbeat. It's like this every day now. You get used to it. Whether because of disease or not, these are still signs of the *Weltkrieg*. There's absolutely no rush for the stockings, just take your time. I'm afraid I'm asking too much of your little fingers, Frau Mermet, so please don't overexert yourself. Everything is still and quiet here in Biel, and I sit quietly at my desk each day. I get a letter now and again, one from a certain other lady. Don't make a face, it's not possible for me to leave you. Or maybe you have someone else, someone who writes letters more diligently and flatters better than I do? By the way, I've taken to smoking a pipe. I got an old one from papa's secretary, and I smoke it to honour him. I'll write to you again soon without waiting for an answer,

Walser Robert Otto.

(Namely, Otto the Great and Robert the Small. Robert the stupid and mean. There's an old folktale called Robert the Devil. I firmly deny being a devil, except maybe a poor devil, because I am poor and when I have a wife I'll be even more so. But I like living in poverty. I'll always have a piece of bread to eat because I'm not a lazy dog, even if such immodesty stinks a bit. In the Middle Ages there was a wily adventurer named Robert Guiscard, a Norman who conquered Sicily because Sweden was too cold for his liking. Kleist wanted him for the protagonist of a drama, but the play never reached the stage.)

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Written while Robert was in Berlin, 'Kleist in Thun' pictures the German poet holed up on a river island nearby the lakeside Swiss town where the author himself had spent a few months during the last year of the nineteenth century. In the story about Kleist, the year is 1802. Kleist crosses a little bridge – so says Robert, more than a hundred years later, but of course with no certainty – and he pulls the bell rope to inquire about cheap rooms. Kleist had not come to Switzerland to write but, despite declining health, he travels into Bern to meet literary friends. He starts to write *The Broken Jug*, sickening from an overwhelming sense of beauty. Kleist is a character one might find in the pages of a *roman*, his elbow on the windowsill, head propped in hand, staring hard beyond the old voices he wants to forget. Spring falls. Beneath the mountains, the lake is wrapped in a fragrant white mist, while the fields thicken with colour.

Kleist swims, the bluish green water a distraction from writing. On market days there is pipe smoke and the music of lifted skirts and the smell of cheese. The night-times are sickly warm. When it rains, the whole place shivers. Dirty clouds drift across the deep valley and suddenly everything is very small, pressed right up against your nose. Kleist's chin juts forward into the darkness as if contemplating a death leap. His sister comes to collect him. He slumps in the rear of the coach as it rattles away from the island, like a puppet with the strings cut. A dreamy little smile struggles against the block of stone in his mouth.

But finally one has to let it go, says Robert. There is a marble plaque in front of the island villa to commemorate Kleist's stay, he notes in closing, which any traveller to the region can read; Thun stands at the entrance of the Bernese Oberland and is a popular destination visited each year by thousands of foreigners; it had a public trade fair about four years ago.

It is said that before writing 'Kleist in Thun' Robert has read Büchner's novella on Lenz, about whom he had also written while in Berlin. Lenz had been banished from the court at Weimar, his ejection having been endorsed by Goethe, who apparently called him asinine. Robert's own protagonist is a badly-behaved stocking-kisser. After a mental breakdown had driven him across southern Germany and Switzerland, Büchner's Lenz ventures through the mountains of eastern France in search of Johann Friedrich Oberlin, whose family was known to reside in the Bavarian town of Walderbach. The sky is grey and damp. Low clouds oppress the fields and valleys and the wet, dark green pines of the forest. The mountain paths run with little streams and a wet fog shivers on the hillside. Lenz pushes on as if in a dream. He's irritated that he cannot walk on his head or make the crossing in a single stride. At Walderbach, Oberlin welcomes Lenz into the parsonage, knowing of his plays. But soon he's out in the streets again. Suicide fails him. The next morning they ride into the valleys to teach peasants about prayer and irrigation and the laying of roads. By night-time, Lenz is throwing himself into the fountain once more. He will not return home at his father's behest. He's tormented by the recollection of Friederike Brion, Goethe's erstwhile lover for whom he suffers an unrequited passion. He takes to his bed, and confesses to Oberlin the endless presence of a terrible voice usually called silence. A missing portion of Büchner's text implies some sort of violence leading to Lenz's expulsion from the Oberlin household. A coach takes Lenz through the mountains, through the Rhine valley, to Strassburg. So he lived on, Büchner notes in closing. Years later, Lenz's emaciated body was found dead in the streets of Moscow.

I have a feeling that 'Kleist in Thun' pulls the leg of Büchner's dark burst of laughter. Robert himself wrote a short piece on Büchner's flight across the border to Strassburg – he was on the run from the authorities, having written a revolutionary pamphlet. Büchner has the pages of *Danton's Death* tucked in his pocket as he strides along a moonlit country road. Germany is an old folk-song, Robert jokes.

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It's the week before Christmas. Robert thanks me for the cheese and the bacon, wrapped by my own dear hands. Everything you touch becomes something dear, Frau Mermet, and everything you wear. I surely owe you a letter in which the little word 'love' appears a hundred times, each in a different and unexpected way. I'm surprised you're not yet remarried, dearest one. Robert wishes he could change all that, but says he'd need to offer something better than life at Bellelay. I am in good hands up there, he says. Yesterday, he saw a beautiful young girl with red cheeks, sparkling and fresh, and the loveliest eyes. She walked in the daintiest of boots. Youth has all the advantages – the sole drawback is that one can only get older! Last night Robert dreamt he was with a troupe of tightrope walkers and played the trumpet to accompany the act. Afterwards he ate soft ripe pears. They tasted wonderful. You are as lovely and soft, he says. Forgive me if I liken you to something so delicious. I still have enough sugar for the time being, but could you send some tea? Along with a letter, perhaps, written in a severe style, full of commands and instructions, the way you sometimes speak to Louis. I think about it often. Love is certainly something beautiful and strange. I hope you get a good, crispy feast for the coming festivities, and send my thoughts and wishes.

A while later, Robert comes up with a short piece based on these recent letters. It begins, on the edge of winter, with some sweetly surprising autumn apples that I'd sent him. There's a pretty young girl who's seen running off like a deer. The story echoes Robert's idea that the true victim of age is youth not the mature self. He wanders through the forests and the fields, a writer away from his desk. The wide open plane of water surrounding the Peterinsel is like a dream of springtime. Biel, the old town itself, is an ageing lover rejuvenated by her own charms. Old landmarks whisper silently, as much of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel as the Byzantine Empire. To the north lies the Jura, its slopes blanketed by beech and firs, and one can take a stroll to Delsberg or Pruntrut; to the south, meanwhile, one finds Bern and Thun and the Alps. Beneath the Wessenstein, it's easy to reach Neuenburg or Solothurn – whether in ladies' shoes (me) or soldier's boots (him). Robert's autumn outings

to the lowlands of Büren and Aarberg, their heads just above water, recall memories of wine and beautiful old buildings and the sunshine. The woman in the Büren coffee shop makes a brief appearance in the tale, albeit a less scandalous one than in his letter. The bridge at Aarburg occasions a joyful outburst. I would be surprised, writes Robert, if the times we live in were not favourable to women – before extolling the advances in culture and education that happened during the rule of Bertha in Burgundy during the Middle Ages. Each woman can reign like a queen over her own world. Robert hopes it will snow abundantly this winter. You love snow, too, don't you? he asks in closing.

December 29th, 1918. Robert hopes I had a good time on Christmas Eve. He's bought himself a new hat, and he's obviously very proud of it. He plans to wear it on Sundays, since the old one is still good enough for weekdays. It's a German-style hat, he tells me – no longer very much in fashion. It cost 12 francs: in 1914 it would have cost half that! Robert tells me he's bought bread and butter using the ration cards I send him. While shopping for food in Nidau he saw a German woman, a poor war widow of whom there are now thousands all over Europe. This mad conflict has disfigured all of us, but he hopes the New Year will bring order, industriousness, tranquility and peace. They are fighting on the streets of Berlin, Frau Mermet – the newspapers describe complete chaos. Switzerland is solid enough, he ventures. Yesterday there was a great storm, causing havoc for umbrellas and hairstyles. Robert tells me of his plans to write regularly through the winter, sitting at his desk each day until he's earned the spring. Our walk to Leubrigen was delightful, dear one, and it was lovely sitting together with a drop of wine. So you're 41 already? I don't mind that. None of us is getting any younger. The other day I found a girl's hair band in Bozingenstrasse, a black ribbon, and I took it home and kept it. Robert imagines us living together with Lisa, himself as a husband, but both of us obeying 'Fraulein Walser' (as I always call her in our correspondence) to the absolute letter.

March 6th, 1919. Robert has been working hard and tells me he has finished the new book. Soon the meadows will be green again and the trees will bloom, but in the meantime the winter has been put to good use. Robert has written to Lisa asking to visit Bellelay this Saturday, and to spend Sunday with us. He's awaiting her reply, writing of his eagerness to taste the food served up by our new cook and to see Louis before he leaves. Time flies so quickly, you can't stop it, and you wouldn't want to, because that would stop everything. I no longer need to heat my hotel room because I don't have to sit at the table for so long, but there's little news because that's all I've been doing up until now.

April 12th, 1919. Thank you for the food parcel. I don't thank you for the letter I didn't receive, because obviously that's not within the realm of possibility. But a writer likes to eat, so thank you. I've been busy and have another piece of work behind me, a compilation of 30 short pieces. We're on the edge of spring – has Louis already left for Birsfelden? I hope to get a letter soon, it needn't be a long one. Last Sunday I wanted to go to Bern, but nothing came of it because I heard nothing from Fanny. There'll soon be flowers again in the Jura, and you'll learn to dress up again in Louis's absence. We must let the young ones live, it's only natural and I'm sure he's in good hands. The official restrictions mean no meat this week, but I'll manage. I can't dish out a lot of news, though, because the weather has kept me indoors.

May 11th, 1919. Dear Madam, Forgive me that I haven't written for so long. I've been working hard, and some things are done, although there are also some newer things demanding my attention. There's a good deal of correspondence with editors and publishers to deal with. But at least now I can get out of the room more, into the open air where it's bright and warm. The cherry blossom was enchanting last week, and a bottle of dark Freiburg beer in the nice tavern in Aegerten tasted wonderful. I expect you found out about the death of my brother Hermann, whether from the newspapers or other reports. (Robert's other brother Ernst had died in late 1916 after nearly 20 years in Waldau asylum, and now all must bear the suicide of this gloomy, introverted professor!) I was in Bern with Fanny at Easter, Frau Mermet, but didn't see Hermann because he didn't return from vacation until the following night. It was 10 days later that I got a telegram from Lisa, and then of course I made arrangements to attend the funeral. Fanny was the most affected, in fact it made her ill. Both my sisters will probably be back in Bellelay soon, and Fanny will probably stay for a while. Lisa behaved steadfastly, which is of course the best thing. I'm writing you this letter to show you that I'm thinking of you, and I hope to be able to get up there this month or next. I'd really like to give you a kiss, would you mind? I didn't get to write much this winter and I'm sure you were disappointed in me. You should scold me badly, you know. Would you like to meet on Sunday afternoon, around four o'clock, in Tavannes, not only because it's a shorter journey for both of us, but because when I'm in Bellelay Lisa naturally places demands on me, and it's harder to talk. Write to me and tell me what you'd like to do. Might you send me some tea and sugar? Don't send any meat because I've come to dislike cold meat. I do like the uncooked flesh of a woman, but that's not for eating, it's just for fun.

August 5th, 1919. My letter obliges Robert to write some words in reply. He hopes I'm well and feels sure Louis will be busy writing to me. He thanks me for sending a cake from Lisa, which was very good. Robert explains an application he has made for financial support from an overseas agency, the Relief and Creditors' Association for Russia, to which he was directed by the Swiss Finance Department upon requesting a loan against monies held in Germany. (He didn't qualify, it turns out, since the funds were only for the Swiss who'd fled Russia during the war.) Writing is probably one of the least rewarding professions at the moment, he tells me. But he has high hopes for the new book as well as a volume of his entire poetry. I know Robert tries to interest editors in collections featuring unpublished pieces and other items from his bottom drawer, so to speak – newspaper and magazine prints and so forth. But he's having little success, and the newer work is proving difficult, too. Next year, he writes, I could always become a warder in Bellelay or kaiser of I-don't-know-which empire, or join a bureau or take a job as a factory worker. I'm treated to a report of a recent festival with resounding music and whole families covering the forest floor. Robert closes by speaking warmly of Biel, saying that he never wishes to leave. Recently he visited his father's grave, which he says looked very nice.

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November 10th, 1919. Robert tastes a variety of apples that's new to him, bought for a snack on a Sunday walk. Beneath a cheerful blue sky, the birds hopped and buzzed on the Magglingen this morning as though spring had come early, but by afternoon the weather was blustery with rain. He thanks me for the tea and sugar, very belatedly, and for the sausages that he ate, hungrily, with a good slab of bread. I also hear about his coffee-drinking habits in the hotel restaurant during the evenings. The little governess, as he once called her, has now left the Blaues Kreuz. Her replacement seems nice, but not as nice apparently as the *Oberbefehlschaberin* of the Bellelay laundry. Now it's getting colder, and the thought of me warms him up, he says, saving on wood and coal. I'd written to tell Robert I'd been to the fair in Basel and he replies that yesterday, in fact, he'd met two young women from that city on the promenade. They were pushing a pram and talking about children's dresses. Now Robert writes sitting at a table where a couple of girls are having lunch. But you don't have the slightest reason for suspicion, Frau Mermet, since I'm no longer of an age to pull stupid pranks. He's read some beautiful French books over the summer and autumn, mentioning in particular Lesage's *Gil Blas*, a long but very entertaining novel from the

age of Louis XIV. He's off to get a shave in Nidau and is wearing the little collar that I gave him during a visit to Bellelay, which evokes memories of me. Maybe you'll come to Biel over the winter, Frau Mermet? Do you still dress up on Sundays? What clothes are you wearing? Robert wants to have a suit made – a few years ago he wore a suit for 30 francs, which made him feel properly dressed, but nowadays one would be hard pressed to find anything for that sum of money.

December 13th, 1919. Dearest Frau Mermet, I've received your kind parcel of socks and cold meat, for which I thank you very much. You were right to come to Biel again, as you do every year, and you must have enjoyed the little Leubringen walk. Wasn't it eerily romantic to be in the Taubenloch gorge once more? The long icicles and the raging water – what a cheerful force of nature! If only people were so strong. I was interested to read in your letter of Louis's visit to the cinema – how nice to be young and experience things for the first time! The new wallet was a good purchase, since it opens and closes beautifully – I thank you for this, as well as for the butter slices. I ate them with tea before going to bed, and they tasted delicious. You certainly have a good kitchen up in Bellelay. The bread is good too. Today I also tried the nuts and the chocolate, and the sugar is in the sugar bowl. I'm sending pictures by Honoré Daumier, the Parisian draftsman and painter from the last century and, as you may know, a famous political caricaturist. I cut them out of a magazine with the scissors I use to trim my moustache. Today I offered my Heidelberg publisher a new book, actually just a small book, and I am hopeful of the reply.

October 11th, 1920. A note containing the usual thanks for food packages and enquiring after my son's wellbeing. The demands of work make life a bit sour as well as sweet, Robert writes. But he claims to have made some progress over the summer. He's earned money in Germany and it's held in account over the border. (The money was lost when the currency collapsed a couple of years later.) The main thing, writes Robert, is that you stay healthy, hardworking and satisfied with your own diligent labours. Sacrifice is what makes us happy. But, for my part, I know things are not going well for a writer like Robert Walser. Printing paper was short, the war hadn't helped matters, and literary tastes were changing. Publishers wouldn't pay as Robert would've liked, and the German mark was falling fast. On top of which *Tobold* hadn't been accepted, despite his best endeavours in different quarters. Various handouts from foundations and the like provided only a brief reprieve at most, and a small legacy from Hermann wouldn't keep the wolf from the door forever. Another letter arrives, meanwhile, just over a week later. A hasty but earnest

thanks for all that has gone into his stomach, and news of a walk over the Weissenstein. In Solothurn, cheery girls in country costumes were selling chocolate in the streets to help fight tuberculosis. Needless to say, Robert bought some of it, together with some chestnuts – and, while he was there, he looked a little into the wine glass (as they say). He's sent a short piece to a Swiss weekly newspaper, something about Kleist in Paris. In my last letter to Robert, I wrote that a poet seems to me like a mother who cares for a dear child. It pleased him greatly, bringing up memories of the last time he sat with Louis at the dining table. Robert is worried that my son's absence may be troubling me. He speaks about his own sister, thinking she takes things far too seriously and is need of a family of her own, something to care for.

October 29th, 1920. Robert asks if I will send him shoe grease for the winter. This week he took a walk over the Chasseral – such excursions compensate for the endless work involved in keeping one's professional life going. Writing is merciless. Louis will be spared it, since presumably it is of little consequence for a mechanic whether one writes badly or not – whereas my own writing at school delighted the teacher, Frau Mermet, but look where that got me? A poor poet, a useless piece of furniture. Nowadays every mother should be happy if her son has no talent for handwriting. But still, I can soon send you a book of mine, having just received news that *Seeland* will be published before long.

November 16th, 1920. Dear Frau Mermet, I very much appreciated your letter with such clever comments on the recent reprint of *Der Proletarier*. I've just smeared my shoes with the shoe grease, which has softened the leather wonderfully. I can report that the reading evening in Zurich, arranged by a literary acquaintance, went very well. During the few days I spent there, several people made a good impression on me. The whole journey was undertaken on foot – I had little choice about the matter – and in fact a small sketch about the entire episode is already drafted. I'll tell you more when I visit over the winter. Lisa recently mentioned that I might think of becoming a warden at Bellelay … Robert is anxious to know my thoughts on the subject. It's not the first time he's mentioned it. But an alternative prospect is afoot in Bern, so it seems – a temporary position at the State Archive. Fanny spotted it in one of the newspapers. For now, the weather in Biel is wonderfully spring-like and warm. Once the letter is finished, he plans to venture out into the fresh air.

December 13th, 1920. Robert is pleased to hear that I'd prefer to see him working happily at a distance, as he's been doing for quite some time now, rather than becoming morose and useless in Bellelay. Which would inevitably happen, wouldn't it, Frau Mermet? He makes a point of saying

that my letter was nicely phrased. Robert comforts himself with the fact that two books have recently come out – *Komödie* and *Seeland*. The long wait for their publication strengthens his resolve a bit. Since I reminded him, he's sending some socks to mend.

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Back in 1916 Robert published a short story, 'Frau Bähni', which contains a portrait of well-known art dealer Paul Cassirer, the cousin of his publisher Bruno. Paul Cassirer it was who arranged a balloon ride that inspired the story written near the end of Robert's Berlin years. In 1907 Cassirer offered him the post of secretary to the Berlin Secession, which boasted new premises on Kurfürstendamm. Robert was engaged for a six-month period over the late spring and summer. His role mainly involved dealing with correspondence on Cassirer's behalf. The job didn't last long, although afterwards Robert was still invited to Cassirer's parties. 'Frau Bähni' is the story of a powerful fellow, Bösiger, who compels his youthful protégé to come along on a social visit to a beautiful woman. Bösiger enjoys the company of his sidekick because he is of absolutely no importance, not more than a plaything. Bösiger sits like Napoleon in the lady's parlour while she plays the piano. He's agitated, his posture is stiff, his smile awkward and ugly. The atmosphere is tense. It is as if Bösiger is at some sort of disadvantage, and he rankles inside. At last he blurts out his love, and it is rejected out of hand. Indignant at the snub, Bösiger makes a long speech protesting his ill-treatment. The young novice cannot tell if the whole situation is in earnest or not – as he observes, truth is beside the point in high social circles where cleverness and appearances outweigh sincerity. Herr Bähni arrives home, and a genteel atmosphere is restored. The protégé finishes his story by expressing sincere admiration for such a controlled performance. One is left wondering whether this secures his initiation into a social world where truth is out of the question. If the admiration is indeed sincere, it doesn't belong with the contrived manners of the Berlin elite; if mocking, his final words only repeat the insincerity they condemn. Either way, the sidekick can no more be said to fit in than he can be deemed outside the habits of polite society, Robert's narrator loitering in the corners of the drawing room. Cassirer, meanwhile, was to shoot himself in 1926 rather than sign the divorce papers issued by his wife's solicitor. Several years earlier, in 1909, Robert wrote 'The Little Berliner', a story about a young girl assumed to be Paul Cassirer's daughter. It begins: 'Papa boxed my ears today, in a most fond and fatherly manner, of course'.

Robert's last years in Berlin are also told through his stories. He lived with one Frau Wilke, then Frau Scheer. Wilke, once a schoolteacher, gave

him lodgings in a ruined mansion close to the tramlines on the outskirts of the city. Wallpaper fell from the plaster in lamentable shreds, while an old writing table in the corner promised prose sketches and essays that he'd fire off to editors around the globe. Wryly, perhaps, Robert mentions *Mercure de France* and *The Peking Daily News*. Little thought had been given to ventilation, evidently, but the room suggested a certain cosiness that comes with being forgotten. Wilke is already as dead as the house itself; afterwards, Robert remembers her lonely, cold hands, her weightless footfall on the landing, her forgotten things laid out on the bed. Wilke's rooms are taken by the owner of the house, Frau Scheer, who allows him to keep his digs. She's a child of the *Gründerzeit*, when fortunes were made overnight. But Scheer's husband, an enthusiatic socialite and terrible spendthrift, squandered the money. Robert mentions a rumour that, before illness carried him off, she had plotted his murder. Meanwhile, her remaining wealth seems as fragile as Robert's own poverty – it's a cheap coat that does for a season. Like Bösiger, Frau Scheer craves Robert because he has nothing. Landlady and tenant are both abandoned in that visitorless house, old ghosts the both of them, in nobody's memory any longer, waiting for nothing except a war they don't know is coming. Scheer's own memories litter the kitchen like unwashed dishes or dusty piles of business papers, so old they are no longer legible. Meanwhile, Robert turns errand-boy, strolling around as if he were a private secretary while actually doing menial chores. He knows it, too – 'as a punctual and trusty Scheer employee …'. It's a little bit of theatre which means he lives free of charge. Frau Scheer's death is called a battlefield casualty. Her deathbed dreams are of innocence and poverty; reckless as a gambler, she wants to give everything away to Robert. There is no possible response to such a horror, so he just changes the subject. And that is more or less the end of Robert Walser in Berlin. Now, years later, Biel has gone the same way.

Bern

The civilised world is the rushing world. It lies before us like a responsibility or an unfinished task. That is its vanity, even if every effort is made not to boast about it. The people who try to be civilised are civilised people, or rather they are trying to be. It is as if the future is caught up in a repetition of words that seems to be saying the same thing but isn't. Robert writes such things on the centenary of the birth of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825–98), the Swiss poet and historical novelist whose story of the Thirty Years War is a tale of protestantism doing business with treason and murder. In the civilised world, meanwhile, centennial editions published in Meyer's honour are placed on prominent display in the bookshop window. Outside, Bern officials observe a mannered reticence in their dealings with others, for example journalists. Theatre-folk quarrel, and a white-stockinged girl kicks along in red high heels. French is spoken. The sky, or rather the skitter-brained author, goes around hatless. Like any other, Bern is a place where it is unnecessary to remark on the smallness of children, despite the obvious existence of larger ones; where a little time might be taken to read, in the liberal press, an article on a recent railway accident; where poems insist on being written; where warm, autumn sunlight splashed upon the clean-swept streets and buildings encourages the imagination to holiday in the hills and vineyards, the island forests and lakes of the Swiss countryside. Someone is cycling back from the fruit and vegetable market, and a beer wagon passes by. Lunch was taken several hours ago, three to be exact. In the meantime, a young man is rightly rebuffed for the verses he has written to a girl whose gloves stretch over tiny fingers and hands. The world rushes as much from impatience as anything else. It folds in on itself at every point, touching everywhere without quite coming together.

This piece was from the year that Robert wrote to me from Bern asking that I send money to secure a copy of his latest book, *Die Rose*, and suggesting I encourage others at Bellelay to do the same. The price he mentioned was awfully high. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The book didn't sell. Robert's novels were now behind him by more than a decade and a half, and he was in the process of being forgotten. I'm years ahead of myself. Let's go back.

*

February 15th, 1921. Bern, Murifeldweg 14. Dear Frau Mermet – The city's outskirts, to the east of the Aare, are full of newly developing districts and the streets are smartly bourgeois. It's only now, after a month and a half of being here, that I'm writing to you. You'll say I'm neglecting you a bit, and I can't argue with that, but I'm not just sitting in my room in Biel like before. I spend the whole day in the archive down in the cellar of the old Rathaus, leafing through old writings, old files, letters, reports, ordinances and decrees. Making indexes, coming home quite late in the evening after only a short spell outside during lunchtimes. I took a stroll to Laupen on Saturday, so I'm getting to know my surroundings quite well. But I don't have much other news. Those who work hard have very little to tell. If you're interested, I can report that I recently lost a tooth, and now I have to walk on God's dear earth with a considerable gap, like a small child. Many would take that rather badly. A terrible great hole, like an unfilled bit of a bookshelf. Years earlier, during the war, Robert had written a story about toothache in which the pain had sent him roaring into the fields like King Lear, dashing home to strike his head against the wall and slap his own face like Sancho Panza when finding his donkey was lost, smashing up valuable chairs from the Biedermeier period, screaming in the night and gulping down the finest cognac to no effect, and then taking a knife to himself before finally visiting a dentist and getting embroiled in an irritable yet flirtatious exchange with the nurse in which, at last, he gladly confesses to being the poor writer they'd taken him for at the surgery.

There are lots of pretty girls here, Robert tells me in his letter, but everyone is always in such a hurry, and that's why you don't get much out of it. At least I'm happy that I work every day – it gives me a good conscience. How are you, Frau Mermet? How is it that you don't write anything about your stockings? Are you playing the long-suffering liverwurst? If I didn't know you better, that'd be a tragedy. P.S. Don't send any tea to Bern, I didn't come here to drink tea, although if you have a nice leftover sausage that'd be another matter. R.W.

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Later in 1921 Robert was to write a series of short pieces on the topic of 'news' in which he mentions a magnificent tooth falling out. The author – in receipt of a salary and bequeathed a certain sum by a dead uncle – is now well-dressed, sporting a tip-top hat. He settles his debts without delay, attends lectures on Dostoevsky and psychiatry, and goes to the theatre. Up to his neck in old paperwork, correspondence, regulations and directories, he enjoys a clear conscience. The world is open and invites a sense of belonging, even if his heart is no longer young. He says he feels at home. Self-confidence grows to the point of conceit, he has parquet flooring in his room, and perhaps only Hesse leads a more genteel life. A broken mirror does nothing to dim the spirit, he eats whipping cream and is occasionally happy, walking out in the evenings to distract himself, since he cannot write. Fleeting relationships and the thought of the future are not unpleasant; he writes of visiting little towns by the Aare and a brief exchange of letters with a woman, now apparently at an end; Robert wonders whether he's already a bit bored of all this. In the next instalment, over-imbibers in the audience at a burlesque theatre are pandered to by the owner, young women affectedly smoke cigarettes, somebody loudly proclaims themselves the stupidest person alive – obviously incapable of considering they might be mistaken, quips Robert. The waitresses smile while the cash register rattles. On a different subject, he says, recently I hiked to …

Thun

A continuous operation of the legs, covering distance upon distance, past several villages, through a forest, in Heimberg the inns sport signs commemorating Swiss history, Wilhem Tell and a Rütli scene celebrating the formation of the Confederacy. The sight of Thun castle announces Robert's return to the place he once served as an office clerk. Like a tourist he eats cake, window-shops, walks up the castle steps, in the churchyard catches the drifting sound of a rehearsal for a performance. The mountains shimmer in the sunshine while he visits the island where Kleist stayed. The last instalment features a little art exhibition, the painter emerging from behind a screen to welcome the occasional guest; Robert meets an unobtrusive lawyer, about which nothing is said; he heralds a wonderful night's sleep in a pull-out bed; suavely drinks liqueur with an American in a hotel lounge; and wears a pocket watch. Then he talks about a …

Newspaper

Whether or not to read it, since he does not care a jot about it – although it fascinates him just the same. Its unimportance proving compelling, like an acquaintance – and everybody has acquaintances. They cause a certain degree of aversion, don't they?

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April 18th, 1921. Bern, Murifeldweg 14. I still have to thank you for the sausage you sent me, Frau Mermet. It's been some time since then, so I've been a bit hesitant to write, which I hope you'll excuse. I'm unsure how long I'll stay here in Bern, but it's been heartening to know I can return to another kind of work than writing. I take a brisk walk every Saturday and have got to know the surroundings very well. Since I last wrote I've visited the Emmenthal and been to Sumiswald and Huttwil and Burgdorf, and last Saturday I was in Thun. The little town looked so lovely with its elegant castle rising proudly above the square. On Sundays I usually drink coffee with Fanny. Her young gentleman, Arnold, isn't at all well. He recently got the flu and is in a very bad way. Life is certainly palatable in Bern. but you'll say you like Basel better and feel as though I went to America. It might seem that way – I was in Biel for so long, in room no. 27 at the Blaues Kreuz with the hotel governesses and chambermaids. One of the latter, the second to last, Rita, was nice and funny and such easy company when she came into my room and sat on the windowsill and chatted, always bringing another book for me to read. Last summer was the loveliest of all the summers I spent there. I had a different bouquet of flowers on the table every week, each one more beautiful than the last. There were so many flowers on the mountain in Biel. Being allowed to clean the Sunday boots for one of the maids, that was so charming. I wrote well last summer, too, things I hope to publish this year. All in all, I'll never regret staying in Biel for so long. Yesterday I wrote to one of the young schoolmistresses I knew in Ticino, whom I visited after the war. She told me in a letter that she'd sat and read *Geschwister Tanner* to a friend of hers, a convalescing seamstress. I think of you always. Warm greetings to my sister Lisa, R.W.

April 26th, 1921. Bern, Murifeldweg 14. Monday evening. A prompt reply to my letter. Robert has taken a stroll to Hofwil, where the Bernese patrician Emanuel von Fellenberg founded an institute dedicating itself to the education of all – rich and poor, locals and foreigners alike. Hofwil is set on a hill, he tells me, above a small lake surrounded by forest and villages, very near to Münchenbuchsee and Zollikofen. Returning to Bern

at six o'clock in the evening, Robert met a smartly dressed lady with a beautiful face, spoiled apparently by a moustache as black as shoe polish. The day before, there had been a motorcycle race and a dog show. Arnold is still very unwell, and it's likely he'll be sent away to recover. Robert pays me the compliment of praising my resilience – my good health seems to him a sign of my capacity for love. I'd invited him to Bellelay for Pentecost and he cheerfully replies: 'I am yours to command'.

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In a short essay on Ferdinand Hodler's 1885 painting 'The Beech Forest', published in *Prager Presse* in December 1925, Robert remarks on a monument recently erected in Bern to commemorate the Swiss aviation pioneer Oskar Bider. He expresses irritation at the tendency to scorn memorials like this one and to deride the artists commissioned to make them – in this case the sculptor Herman Haller, who once made a bust of Robert's brother Karl. Those who throw in their two-cents-worth assume that the meaning of such pieces should be immediately clear. Public art should be absolutely transparent to everybody, they say. The merest prospect of debate is a scandal. A reproduction of the Hodler picture, meanwhile, is discovered in a bookshop window near to the monument. Robert recalls seeing the original hanging in its owner's home, in a sort of maid's room. Well, paintings do have to get hung somewhere, he says, it isn't a picture for the parlour. While eating open-faced sandwiches and drinking tea, he indulges in elegant conversation with his figurine of a hostess about the Swiss poet Carl Spitteler. In the painting, meanwhile, a dense mass of slender trunks reach up into a pale sky. The branches are almost bare against the cold winter sunlight. They practically rasp, rattle and shiver in the cold. One sees a forest edging forward into the field of vision almost like the frozen advance of a dying army, except that for Robert it is so blue with cold as to verge on green. Nevertheless, almost involuntarily we sink our hands in our pockets at the sight of it. In the painting, shadows make paths into a darkening interior where it is as though we are already invisibly lost – even while seeing far, far beyond the forest into the most distant distance. It is as if the writer is stirred by the prospect of an artistic image infinitely disappearing before our eyes, and our gaze vanishing within it.

On other occasions Robert spoke warmly of watercolourists, whom he described as the *feuilletonists* of the visual arts. They're suited to the painting of butterflies or short pieces for the piano, he says. Watercolours often miniaturise, so they can nicely capture the cloud-topped mountain villages of the Alps when viewed from a distance. Writing in the newspaper

about an exhibition of Belgian art presented in Bern in 1926, Robert starts with the appropriate remark about public sponsorship by the two nations, which dictates the choice of venue and the selection of pieces. But soon enough he drifts into an adjacent gallery showing older Bernese paintings from the Renaissance. One of the artists was a provincial governor in the same region where Robert undertook a brief stint of military service during the war. He stops in front of an old Belgian painting depicting the fall of Icarus. The artist Brueghel, who trudged across the Swiss Alps in order to behold the public splendour of the Italian cities, portrays his subject through a dizzying drop downwards. It is as if the artist's own high ambitions go to his head, and he falls out of the sky as though falling from a mountain.

Long before, in the summer of 1913, Robert had published a short text in *Die Zukunft* about a painting by his brother made 10 years earlier. *The Dream* is set on a vaulted bridge that arches over dark water beneath the lamplights of the city. Two figures are crossing over – an improbably tall red-headed lady dressed in floating chiffon-pink going hand in hand with a Pierrot almost half her size, wearing narrow pantaloons, a wide-sleeved white blouse with large black buttons, and a dunce's cap. The woman towers in front of dark silhouetted trees. Her black-gloved fingers grasp the boy firmly but seem to cause him to float up, a puppet yanked by its strings, a blank paper cut-out lifted to the light. The figures seem to glide into the foreground, their heads bowed like shadows of the dead. Robert dreams he's the puppet boy of this dark, beautiful dream. Parentless, alone, without an inkling of hope, without thought, he is as free as air, joyously lost, inhuman. Just a scent, a feeling. A small thing that climbs into the woman's heart, she as high as a pink-iced celebration cake, veined with sweet pink fringes. He swims in pleasure, tiptoes through space. He is her child, her mouse, a pocket trophy.

*

June 9th, 1921. Bern, Murifeldweg 14. Robert begins apologetically once more. Time has flown and he has been uncommonly busy. The letter tells me about the return leg of his recent visit to Bellelay, through the Weissenstein to Solothurn to embark on a train journey back home. I especially liked being in your room, he says, kept just as it was while Louis was growing up. There isn't much news from Bern, except that on a walk Robert had met the cook from the Waldau asylum, Fraulein Schneider, an almost oppressively fat person (he says) who was sweating a lot in the heat of the day. Robert has bought a new pair of shoes, and tells me about the bureaucratic complications of his recent tax return. The things you have to do!

The postwoman from whom he buys stamps and collects his correspondence has, he informs me, a wart in the middle of her forehead. What do you think? Would you like to have one too? Forgive me for the silly question, Frau Mermet. He sends eight small *feuilletons* from the Zurich newspaper, whether to convince me or himself about his current fortunes as a writer I cannot tell. Maybe you'll send me a piece of cheese and some tea again? Robert closes with his usual warm greetings.

Another letter, this time after a fortnight's visit to Bellelay. Robert offers a new example of the fact that, in his opinion, the Walser women do not deal openly and honestly with their brother. While he'd been away, one of Fanny's friends – a certain Fraulein Wannenmacher – had accompanied his sister to Murifeld and visited Robert's landlord. Even though he had spoken to Fanny earlier about how unpleasant he found this woman! Fanny knew how much he disliked her! Robert's letter is full of exclamation marks and wild underlinings. Please keep this under your hat, dear Frau Mermet. But you will certainly find that their behaviour towards me is provocative. I've long since noticed this in secret. But don't get upset about it for a second – the thing is just to laugh it off! Robert adds a postscript beneath his signature: a certain Herr Eckert plays his stupid part in all of this, obviously wanting to drive the Walser siblings apart. I've known for a long time that he's pointing a spear at me, but I don't take seriously people's intrigues against me.

June 30th, 1921. Bern, Murifeldweg 14. Robert encountered the Waldau cook again, by the old bear pit, accompanied by a young girl apparently. She'd asked him if he knew Herrn Gerber, the estate manager at Bellelay. In a restaurant Robert sometimes frequents, a waitress who lasted no more than a single day collapsed three times in pain. What strange illnesses there are nowadays! Dear Frau Mermet, I'm sending some stamps for Louis, including the ones you asked me for. Fanny has rented a room for a month's vacation – how nice it would be if fresh summer winds cooled the air a little. Robert sends me a short essay on his writing by Heinrich Jacobi, since it was recently published in the Leipzig newspaper. He makes an elaborate joke at the expense of the writer Emil Schibli, friend and admirer of Hesse, adding a note at the end: *While one may laugh a little rudely at Schibli's corpulence, he is nonetheless a clever person, and it's always much worse to scoff at stupid people*. Why don't you ever write me a mocking, playful letter, Frau Mermet? I know it's not naturally your style.

Out of the blue, Robert starts to write to me in French. He doesn't say why. He is *un maitre de la langue boche* he says, and *aussi* the language *des animaux and des oiseaux*, but his French is not good. I'm thanked in

French for gifts of hard Jura cheese and tea and sugar, and told of his walks in French, and he tells me about the cattle shows and exhibitions of painting in Bern, Hodler among them. He's hard at work on a petit roman. *Peut être je ferai en mois d'Octobre un voyage suisse et nous pouvon alors nous revoir* – he'll come to Bellelay. It's as if Robert has somehow left the country. French is common enough in Bern, but it's as though he's writing across a border.

The French experiment continues. *Chère Madame, je viens vous remercier votre belle lettre française*. I'd replied in French, and he praises me for the *joli mots* – you write even better in French than German, Frau Mermet, *est'ce vrai*? Robert sends me something – *je vous envoye ici un Kunst und Künstler-heft* – a booklet of reproductions of portraits of women by Goya, celebrated painter *espagnole*, along with a little essay he wrote last spring. The letter falls back into German, but a strange broken German, a little twisted and bent. He signs off, however, with some French words set out like a poem:

J'ai passé huit
jours au lac de Thoune
et c'était magnifique.
Vous le connaissez aussi.

October 26th, 1921. In German once again. A hurried trip to Biel, on foot, on a military errand: in early December, Robert has to report for inspection to ensure his army equipment is in good order. Biel did his soul good; while in town, he hiked to Täuffelen, where all those years ago he'd visited Lisa, writing about it in *Geschwister Tanner*, a book he remembers more often than the others he wrote. He didn't stay at the Blaues Kreuz, he tells me. I think that's all over …. The fact remains I no longer write to Fraulein Wolff, he says, if only because of you. If she wants passion, she can read Monsieur Schibli's novel. A tram ride. Robert saw Hodler's pictures of servants being carried out of the exhibition building near the Kirchenfeldbrücke. Fraulein Wolff wasn't with me, so you don't need to worry in the least. I wrote today, just because I wanted to say hello to you. I'll send you a piece of mine in *Pro-Helvetia* when it comes out.

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In 1925, just as things were beginning to decline, Robert wrote a short text about himself. It begins by informing the reader that they're going to hear the writer, Walser, speaking; but the addressee is in fact himself,

Walser, the writer. As though opening a letter addressed to himself, Robert considers the text before him; but considers it as though he'd opened a letter from one of those people concerned about his more recent accomplishments and, therefore, his future prospects in the writerly profession (for example, his own family). Is he asleep in me, the writer? Do they wish to wake him up? But I was asleep as a writer when I took the job that led to *The Assistant*, and *The Tanners* grew out of a long period of waiting, of a life lived unconsciously, as it were. Robert is suggesting that to write one must first of all not write, or at any rate first of all not be a writer. At any rate, says Robert, many are of the opinion that there's too much scribbling about nowadays, and I agree with them. I am in no way concerned, therefore, that I find myself asleep – indeed, it's wholly agreeable to me. But nonetheless the books I wrote testify that living is sleeping, in so far as Walser the writer is concerned.

But – could you even drink your coffee when you wake up in the morning, could you even dare to draw breath, thinking these things as a writer? I have survived the terrible desire to be published. I have survived that. But can I survive these excuses, however warranted they may be? How can I survive the truth about writing when it becomes an alibi?

Each day, Walser takes a little walk and he helps the waitress lay the table and involves himself in all manner of things so as to experience life as this terrible excuse. No wonder he yearns for sleep … sprawled out, exhausted, having done nothing, asking 10 years' patience from the letter-writers, wishing his literary peers greater success.

To go unnoticed is as awful as it is inevitable, he writes. If I am ever to write again, I must retreat further from writing. I therefore refuse to notice those noticers who no longer notice me, or who never noticed me. But for god's sake stop confronting me with my early books. You overestimate them. And take the living Walser for what he is. That last sentence seems impossibly complicated, given what's gone before.

In another piece, Robert attempts to answer the question of being under-appreciated. As if he had been surveyed on the matter. It is barely a year later. Robert finds he has nothing to complain about. He finds he is still courted, still longed for, and women of a certain social standing are delighted by the slightest attention he shows them. His sense of self is revived on a daily basis by the finest Dutch cocoa drunk in the morning. The cupboards are stocked with wonderful wines, and he regularly receives flattering letters from girls whose mothers would like to meet him while taking tea. These letters ornament the pretty little compartments of his escritoire. To live up to all this, he's as discriminating as can be, haughty and ungrateful. Publishers seek him out, and he does nothing

to contest the high regard in which he is held. Although neither does he stoop to make the kind of efforts that might increase his reputation. Once in a while, writes Robert, a little golden bird flies trustingly into my hand. No, generally speaking, I am quite content with the degree of under-appreciation I receive as a poet.

In a story that emerged much later, after Robert found himself in Waldau, the yearning for social recognition is labelled 'bourgeois'. Robert had been reading a book in which he notices a character whose place among the bourgeoisie is assured by their capacity for 'being interesting'. It is in this character's nature to kiss the hands of ladies almost effortlessly; literary knowledge affords him immense social ease, but he is also snooty about the everydayness of life. A certain flair for what is polite and picayune, for the little niceties, barely conceals his vanity. His entire manner, in fact, implies the insignificance of others. On certain occasions, writes Robert, such a character guesses that this behaviour belittles him. Such a suspicion is described by the author of the tale as the usual 'anti-bourgeois' accompaniment to the bourgeois entrée itself, in fact the bourgeoisie's stock-in-trade. Never-to-be-what-you-are: the bourgeois and the writer, each at war with themselves.

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Bern, Manuelstrasse 72. It is the first days of 1922. A brief note from a new address contains seasonal greetings. Robert still resides amid the quietly grand streets of the eastern suburbs. With his letter comes a little book – the diary of Ulrich Bräker, the 'poor man of Toggenberg', first published in 1789 and full of *Lebensweisheit*, as Robert puts it, or pearls of everyday wisdom – he calls the book a souvenir, remarking that he doesn't know how long he'll stay in Bern. Another letter soon afterwards: Robert saw a marvellous performance of *The Magic Flute* during a trip to Zurich. Another asking me if I'll mend his old suit, Robert having bought a new one, and news that he has been invited to the literary club in Zurich to read from his work. The next letter sees him back in Murifeldweg, although at a different address – apparently there is some hostility from these neighbours of Robert's former landlady towards her. She herself called Robert a lout and a rascal and a lover of the vaudeville ladies! To which he replied: Only in the case of one Genevan woman – which seemed to infuriate this Frau Walker all the more! Anyway, he's pleased not to have to hear the wretched piano being played to the cat. Aid for Starving Russia has invited Robert to become a committee member, but his reply indicates only moral support – obviously he's hoping to avoid a financial contribution. But the newspapers are full of stories of terrible famine and

even cannibalism, he says. Meanwhile, most of Robert's thoughts seem to concern the question of where best to practise writing in future – Zurich, or perhaps Vienna or Salzburg? Conflicting opinions from professional colleagues amuse him greatly. And he's submitted a manuscript (*Theodor*) to Insel, who long ago published *Fritz Kocher's Essays*. In February, I receive some slight correspondence about the magazines he reads and writes for; then in late March another letter thanking me for the repair of his old suit, which Robert discovered on returning from the Zurich literary club where he claims to have read for several hours between sips of red wine – a bit shocking for some of the audience – in a beautiful old guildhall, and to warm applause. He'd stayed in Zurich for two weeks as the guest of a painter, and was in very good hands, he says, getting to know all sorts of people from artistic circles, and going to the cinema and the theatre, hearing Beethoven's *Fidelio* along the way. This occasions a remark about his own little 'infidelities'. In Zurich everyone thinks I look younger than I really am, Frau Mermet, and I've even started to feel young again on the inside, in fact without the smallest effort. Life has seemed very, very nice to me lately. Am I wrong in telling myself that? I don't think so, and I don't think you do either.

Bern, Kramgasse 19. A letter beginning in French – *Ma très chère Madame Mermet* – saying that Robert has changed address again, moving to a pretty little room in an old house in the heart of the city, the home of a certain Madame Lenz. He has been to the cinema to watch a picture called *The Mystery of Bombay* and has also seen the historical romance *Le fils de madame sans gêne* – a film adaptation of a vaudeville piece. Oh, and I ate the most marvellous Bernerplatte, Madame Mermet, with sausages, some good meat, sauerkraut, potatoes and beans … but the weather is not good, we hope for better in the days to come. The letter crosses the road, back and forth, between French and German. Excuse my miserable French, Robert says, and adds a note calling himself a happy vagabond – *à la Croix bleue* he was an inmate for seven-and-a-half years! *Voulez-vous m'écrire bientôt? S'il vous plait!*

*

Robert left behind many unpublished pieces, some of the later ones concentrating on the question of art. For example he wrote about the artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard, who died in obscurity in Paris in 1806, having been acclaimed during the last decades of the *Ancien Régime* for his exuberant rococo style. An Academician from the 1760s onwards, Fragonard had studied under the likes of Chardin and Boucher, before touring Italy with Hubert Robert to paint the gardens of the rich, with

their grottos and fountains and temples. The picture that secured his admission to the Academy was bought by the king and eulogised by Diderot. Later on it was the Revolution that deprived him of patrons, and Fragonard was forced to decamp to the south of France. For a long time he was forgotten in French art and simply excised from the history books. One of Fragonard's most famous paintings, a commission that other artists apparently would not take, was *The Happy Accidents of the Swi*ng (1767). Robert writes about it, having taken an interest in the composition, although without having viewed the original. He calls it a 'slipper picture'. A rococo beauty is being swung back and forth in a prettily coiffured park. While one gentleman (presumably the preferred suitor) pushes the swing, another reclines in the manicured shrubbery, whence he enjoys an unimpeded view of the lady's billowing underskirts each time she rises above him. The other fellow, the swing-pusher, seems cheerily oblivious. Suspended in mid-air, the forward thrust causes the woman's delicate little house-shoe, a backless mule of cerise satin, to fly up past high branches into the sky above. Of itself, this slip of the slipper would let loose the erotic feeling of any painting of the period. But in the case of Fragonard, this little piece of flying footwear draws the eye away from the more shocking bit of the picture: as she passes over him, the young man can see right between the lady's white-stockinged legs. All modesty is abandoned with the forsaken slipper, and it takes us a second look to appreciate that the blushing-pink airborne item is far from the most risqué part of the painting. The boy in the bush hardly notices it; his gaze is fixed elsewhere. There is another story about Fragonard's painting *The Stolen Kiss*, completed almost 20 years later. Robert observes that the action in the picture takes place before the railroads existed, before central heating or petroleum lamps, before the streets were properly lit (before electricity, that is). The page boy who figures in the painting, sneaking a kiss from the rose-scented housekeeper through parted red velvet curtains and a half-open garden door, would therefore be entirely ignorant of twentieth-century schooling or aeroplanes or the telephone or cinema. But what is not new is the kiss itself. He has obviously done that before. Indeed, the feigned reproachfulness of the maid – leaning both out of and into the kiss, her hand clasping the boy's lapel as if to push him away while at the same time pulling him closer in – adds to this sense that a fair bit of kissing had happened already. All the while, she glances about to make sure nobody will see. The same forces are at play as 20 years earlier, the same to-and-fro between exposure and concealment, yielding and resistance. Constancy doesn't get one very far, Robert concludes, nor does it ensure admiration: instead, one must be driven to distraction.

Around this time, he also wrote a short piece about Napoleon III: more double-take writing. It announced itself as resembling a joke. The emperor is pictured with his famously dainty beard, poking his walking cane at a Courbet painting hanging in a Parisian gallery. He is remembered as a ruler who spent part of his youth as a would-be rifleman defending the turreted castle at Thun, which formed the gateway to the Bernese Oberland. In the same town as the castle, of course, Kleist composed *The Broken Jug* and worked on his infamous tragedy *Robert Guiscard* (a version of which was abandoned to the flames in Paris), the aforementioned comedy flopping in Weimar in none other than Goethe's hands. Apparently, Napoleon III was seldom without his cane. But does Robert mean to imply that an entire war was lost just because a work of art was struck in this manner? By no means, he says – it just goes to show that connections, inferences (the real subject of the piece) have their limits. At any rate, it is a strange business, whatever may link major artists to minor rulers. Napoleon III's most distinguishing feature was his marriage to a beautiful woman, Eugenia, known for her breathtaking wardrobe and magical demeanour. Robert seemingly drifts off-topic, reflecting on the peculiar fact that von Bismark – adversary of the reconstructor of Paris – read Heine, despite his own conservatism. It seems the only inference to be drawn is that, while good fortune followed the dispassionate fan of German literature, the emperor's antipathy towards his countryman's art exposed him to the worst luck. Robert turns attention to Emperor Wilhem, defeated in war, whose instinctive loathing of *Rinnsteinkunst* – gutter art – erroneously extended to Delacroix. It appears that the disparagement of artists, regardless of national allegiances, does not bode well for esteemed leaders. In Karlsbad, where Beethoven and Goethe once discoursed while strolling along the promenade, Edward of England ditched a performance by the renowned Grete Wiesenthal before the dance had concluded. Apparently, he found it too unaffected, too natural to qualify as ballet in the proper sense. Edward's consequent lack of misfortune therefore demonstrates the rule of which it seems to make an exception: love of artistry proves itself the talisman of sovereign power. Robert brings this little notebook extract to an end, foregoing (he says) the tears of a romantic person. After all, as we were told at the beginning, it smacks of a mere quip.

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It's Christmastime and I get a long letter from Robert, whose snakey, squiggley, scribbly lust for life is still bubbling and buzzing and boiling, he says, even if I'm always capable of pacifying and subjugating him.

('Schriftsnörkel' is a word Robert is delighted to coin.) He's got some money out of his editors for Christmas, without having to lift a finger and without even having to pluck the smallest string of his soul. Money is just as sacred as Christmas itself, he says, because without money you can't decorate a solitary Christmas pine. Robert asks about the tree in Bellelay: Was it just as big this year? Please send a bottle of white wine, dear madame, and, if possible, a few biscuits and a few words in a letter, as if I'm dining in Biel and not in Bern, where I – Robert Walser – learned how to step cross the balustrade of the Aarebrücken like a tightrope-walker and almost drowned in the water one summer while bathing under a heavenly blue sky. Didn't I, in fact, walk to Geneva in about 30 hours last autumn? Soaking wet but proud of myself, on arrival I bumped into the former veterinarian in your own, praiseworthy district, Herr Bernard, who complained to me in affecting tones of his longing for the canton of Bern – just like a dutiful and hardworking Bernese! I look after my sciatica like an 80-year-old man, Frau Mermet, trotting around every day on the pretty promenades to keep up my strength, and heating my room carefully as though pampering a spoiled prince. Robert tells me he spent Christmas in the Schweizerhof hotel, near the trams and the train station, where the tree was on fire with mischievous lights as if for his personal edification; he bought a copy of *The War Cry* from a white-bearded Salvation Armyist and tried to strike up a conversation with a bare-armed madame, although without very much success. He saw a girl grin and was reminded of Herman Hesse's treatise on the subject in a recent newspaper article, which he scoffs at for its mannered intelligence. On second thoughts, he says, I might have been a little too forward with the bare-armed lady, but only in a Christmas Eve-ish sort of way! There used to be a count's son who went out into the world to get to know fear; I, on the other hand, amble around to learn what a slap in the face tastes like from a lady's hand. But Robert's hopes in that regard remain unfulfilled. It's only the white wine that spills a little cheekiness into the deep cup of my gallantry, Frau Mermet – so perhaps you could send some? Among the festive literary fare shoved under his nose, Robert enjoyed four Bärndütsch poems put into a green-covered pamphlet together with some old German popular songs. I didn't do too much this year, he writes (in fact, nothing substantial had appeared for a long while); I gave a few geniuses the time to unfold themselves with some luxuriance; but I'm still probably the newest great Swiss poet and as such don't remain perfectly faithful to you because that's for other, more boring types.

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January 4th, 1924. Bern, Kramgasse 19. From the window of Robert's room you can see the church wall, patched with new bricks, which has a roundish stain that he's been using as a makeshift target in Napoleonic feats of snowball-throwing. Did I know that Napoleon, during his schooling in Brienne, was famed for it? The letter is a literary meditation on the meaning of 'stürmte' and 'Gestürmt'. We Lords of Creation 'storm' in many ways, he writes: in love, in warfare, and in politics. In 1914, Europe obviously 'stormed'. But it's also true that Robert often 'storms' the grape, as he puts it – just yesterday the two bottles I sent him, one red and one white, were cracked open and their contents dispatched in a fury of drinking. Almost everyone has 'stormed' at some point in their life or else they are an idiot sent by God, which Robert wouldn't wish upon anyone. What do you think, Frau Mermet, of this little history of 'storming'? He's currently reading Jeremias Gotthelf, *Jacobs, des Handwerksgesellen, Wanderungen durch die Schweiz* (1947). Gotthelf's sentences taste like meat, he says; you read them as if you were eating a crispy roast. Gotthelf seems wonderful to me in almost every saying and sentence, Robert declares; whatever he wants to say can fall out of his mouth straight into mine. Would you do me a service, Frau Mermet (I'm terribly happy to be served, the born servant enjoys it) and send me, from my sister's library, *Geld und Geist* by Gotthelf, as well as the Italian novellas by Stendhal? In return, I'm rather reluctantly promised a kiss.

The next letter thanks me for sending the books he requested. Isn't it astonishing that such a volume as *Geld und Geist* can be acquired and read by a simple woman, if you don't mind me calling you that, 80 years after it was written and printed? That alone doesn't mean it's a good book, of course, but in this case it's wonderful, even if the adjective is sorely misused these days.

Robert sends me 'two lousy stupid bits of prose' of his that recently appeared in the papers, by way of thanks for the biscuits I sent, and tells me he's been to Biel, dear Biel, for a military inspection. In the second-class buffet he bumped into old lady Gurtner, formerly of the Blaues Kreuz, pompously dressed like Madame de Pompadour, and he hid behind a pillar upon catching sight of her. It was understandable enough, Frau Mermet, but not exactly subtle! Robert visited some old haunts, for which he received a scolding from the kommandant. He says it was well deserved. On Magglingen Robert happened upon a teacher he knew who invited him to go sledging together with her schoolchildren, which turned out to be great fun; he also met Pastor von Gottstatt, out with his son and daughter, and asked without thinking how everything was at home, only to discover his wife had recently died! The embarrassment

was only dispelled by eating a good sausage in the tavern. Later on, while attending a performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan* at the Bieler Stadttheater, a young woman insisted on speaking in loud whispers to her mother throughout the whole play. It turns out Robert knew her from the Blaues Kreuz, a Bohemian by birth, not a duke's daughter but an actress. Robert decides to tell me Wilde's personal history, dwelling on his fall from grace and his imprisonment, which Robert attributes to carelessness in sexual matters.

Bern, Fellenbergstrasse 10. Robert had some difficulties getting into a new residence and has been tottering around with a face like the Crucified One. I'm not sure why, while he was away, he lost the old place. After making some enquiries, he's finally lying down in a room near the Tobler factory, in an undistinguished area to the west of the city, to read some passages from the New Testament of all things. He'd been asking at a building owned by the Swiss Association of Christian Hostels, which had dormitories for craftsmen and workers. But the new apartment has a balcony, it turns out, with room for a desk. Last Sunday Robert saw wonderful pear blossoms on a country road, putting his face into flowers that smelled like a Parisian perfumery. He spent some time at the Schützenmatt with two young fitters from Basel and wasted 50 centimes at the Hippodrome riding a horse. Robert saw some cute girls riding a white steed, causing him to fall off – which called for a lusty drink of wine.

July 22nd, 1924. Bern, Fellenbergstrasse 10. Robert sends me some torn socks to mend and asks whether he'd missed my arrival when he waited at the tram stop and could see me nowhere. Were you really here, Frau Mermet? And, if so, did you enjoy the military parade? It featured costumes and scenes from the history of the Swiss Confederation – Robert saw it from the lawns of the theatre square. The letter mentions the fairy tale of a prince who mislays his crown while idling in the grass. Another note arrives a few days later. He's happy to hear I enjoyed the torchlit procession in Bern and is sorry that the light betrayed us and we somehow failed to see one other. By the way, do you know that your most obedient servant R.W. recently visited his sister-in-law Fridolina in Basel, where he behaved incredibly politely? She asked for my writerly opinion of her poetry, Frau Mermet. Fridolina tries her hand at the most difficult form of verse there is, the Alexandrine, which requires an appreciation that only the best French authors – Racine, Molière, etc. – can master. I could see she wasn't up to it, Robert says – I tried to explain the deficiency to her as gently as possible, but I'm afraid I robbed her of her highest dream, that of publishing the stuff. She's a very nice woman but, after all, poetry has to be understood.

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A treatise from Robert about annoyance, for which his word is *chitti*, or *chittinen* or *chittig*. (Years earlier he'd written a short story about 'hat-chitti' – the boiling anger of boys knocking hats off one another in fits of rage.) He's eaten at smart restaurants and, in front of all the diners, has performed exasperation with the waitress, practising his displeasure with great aplomb. In Robert's opinion, the art of it has to do with a certain degree of premeditation, some cold-blooded scheming. You sit there and suddenly you see the possibility of being *chittig* right in front of you. The waitress doesn't want to pick up the umbrella from the floor. You know very well that she won't do it, and that's exactly why you're asking her to do it. Now the *chitti* arises, and it grows and swells by the minute. Fine cavaliers defend the *chittigen* girl against the *chittigen* Robert Walser, and they do so with conspicuous gallantry. It's cartoonish. The wonderful thing about a *chitti* is the exact foreknowledge; for instance, Frau Mermet, I staged a charming white wine *chitti* in the casino by Bern Konzerthaus, which was due to the fact that the waitress overlooked pouring wine into my glass. The nice thing about *chittinen* is that you laugh terribly about it in private. Perhaps boyhood memories play their role. Robert recalls terrible *chittinen* at home and in the forest, which he remembers with sheer bliss. At the moment, he says, I have a very serious *chitti* with a shopkeeper on Marktgasse (a not-unattractive woman who scolds him for looking at her in a bothersome way). The playfulness needed to provoke such infuriation is something Robert loves and does not question.

The next letter tells me that he's moving out of the room he's been living in, on Fellenbergstrasse, either today or tomorrow. It's difficult to find a place to stay that's as nice as well as cheaper, and he hasn't found anything suitable yet. Robert sends me a second suit to press, having asked me to iron his other one (after signing off, he remembers to thank me – what would I have thought if he'd forgotten?). I'll write again soon, Frau Mermet, just now I'm in a hurry, my friends scoff and my enemies cast their eyes on the ground in front of me. My dear sister-in-law Trude, Karl's wife, once said to me in Berlin: 'Röbu, you have your enemies'.

December 17th, 1924. Bern, Junkerngasse 29 (the poorer part of a long tributary lined with tall buildings close to the city's arcades). Robert lets me know his new address but hasn't anything noteworthy to report. What would he like for Christmas? The reply seems rather deflated. Anything from your hand I'll receive with all my heart, Frau Mermet, whatever it may be. A few days later, he sends the gift of an almanac he's been given by a publisher, which he says has many beautiful things in it, and reminds me about his suit.

January 9th, 1925. Thank you my dear, good mother, or rather French *Maman*, for the Christmas present of a new shirt, which fits me very well. I took a beautiful walk to the Bantiger summit, a view full of poetry offered as if to a child, served up like a round and colourful fruit on an ornamental plate. I served in the local elections last Sunday, Frau Mermet, which might surprise you. Robert sends me a book of lectures by Ludwig Hardt, which mentions his own work (the tale of Büchner's flight). Another note sees Robert likening his own efforts to those of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Austrian writer and librettist, as if he is somehow looking for himself among his European peers. But my health is very healthy, Frau Mermet, and all my illnesses are ill. It is a strange letter with a postscript that alludes to a ghostly vison he seems to have of the deeply entangled ordinariness of life.

February 6th, 1925. A letter from a new address, Thunstrasse 21, informing me he's moved to Kirchenfeld. *Die Rose* has now appeared, I'm told, which can be ordered directly from the bookshop or from the publisher – but I assume that such a fine woman as my dear, esteemed Madame Mermet would rather send the author trustingly by mandate 20 francs, which admittedly is a bit expensive, and her most humble servant R.W. will quickly send the book, neatly wrapped with blessings. I kiss you like a Galician peasant on the hem of your lovely underpants and send my regards, etc.

February 10th, 1925. Robert now has the money in his cash register (so to speak) to secure a copy of the collection and, from the supplier to the orderer, he asks for a little patience as he awaits its release from the publishing house. I know it will be a specimen copy, and that he's in need of the cash.

February 23rd, 1925. Thunstrasse 21. Robert's letter starts by heralding me with some fine words. He asks whether, by summoning up all his courage, he might be bold enough to enquire if the new book pleases me to some extent, at any rate in part, whether it makes a halfway good impression at least. I now have two more copies in stock, he says, which I'd be inclined to sell to the ladies at Bellelay (whom you did mention had asked about it) for the sum of 15 francs each. Is that the price you yourself would suggest, dear Frau Mermet? I suppose you know that the business I'm running here is not entirely free from objections, in that the books in question are author copies, which it is not customary to sell. Yet I appreciate the ladies at Bellelay so much that I turn my hand to this business somewhat involuntarily.

It's the end of February. Robert congratulates me – and why? May I confide in you, Frau Mermet, and tell you there are now no more free

copies for sale of *Die Rose* since last night I sent special packages to Vienna and Prague, namely to Herr Hofmannsthal and Max Brod, both of whom are famous enough that you can write to them without giving their street address. Max Brod is a noted theatre critic and Hofmannsthal is perhaps the best-known poet of the former Danube monarchy. You see, that's why I congratulate you, because now you're in company that sets the tone, so to speak. Robert also tells me that a letter he's received from Thomas Mann describes the author of *Die Rose* as clever and distinguished, a seemingly well-behaved and yet naughty child, a paradoxical mixture. Robert is obviously very pleased with himself, having rediscovered a sense of himself as a writer to be reckoned with, and now he has no reason – indeed no opportunity – to act questionably in business matters. He even begs forgiveness for his little joke (that's what he now calls it) about selling the author copies in Bellelay. Meanwhile, the actress Gertrud Eysoldt – a rising star of the German cinema – has written to Robert from Berlin, and he tells me that yesterday he saw *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, a film based on a novel by Selma Lagerlöf, starring Greta Garbo in her first leading role. He says that she wore wonderful arm-length gloves – first white, then black – and her beautiful Swedish hands should be considered the loveliest in Europe. Had I read that Friedrich Ebert, president of the Weimar Republic, just died? While in high office he was often heard to say, with gentle paternalism: 'It's not so easy.' In a postscript, Robert notes that he's received from the publishers in Berlin Thomas Mann's 1300-page novel *The Magic Mountain*, which he will study closely in order to form an opinion. Then some gossip. I know a very pretty woman that I've seen on the street who has beauty spots on her cheek, he says; if I'm not mistaken, she pays for better society and has one boy in particular. But what I wanted to tell you, Frau Mermet, is that, while dining in one of the better restaurants, I was talking to a mother who had a noisy child, and the child got a smack on the hand and indeed a smack on the mouth for its natural talent as a speaker. The little girl was very pretty and the mother obviously a little jealous of the fact. Naturally! When we are jealous, we tend to be serious and moralising, it's difficult to avoid it. But, on the other hand, what is difficult can be beautiful and beneficial, for example if the girl had been chatting intimately with her father and the mother became impatient, telling him sternly that the child shouldn't always make itself so important. Robert closes by confessing that he envied the child a little for its relationship to the mother, speculating that it may have been illegitimate. I wondered why the father, seemingly rather important at the finale of this little tale, had suddenly to disappear – like Friedrich Ebert perhaps. The

whole letter gives the feeling of a man's world almost beyond Robert's fingertips, for which he continues to reach, and a world of women that prompts strangely connected desires.

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Bern, Gerechtigkeitsgasse 29. Robert has moved once more, though is still in the heart of the city; the first letter from his new address amounts to a lengthy discourse on the treatment of sciatica, since I had written to him about Lisa's worsening condition. I can tell you from my experience a couple of years ago, Frau Mermet, that sciatica is primarily treated with putting on warm bags (he has reverted to underlining words and phrases), small sacks of beans that are warmed up until extremely hot and applied to the very spot which is, as it were, the root of all evil. Then at the same time twice a day, in tea or warm milk, be sure to take aspirin. The third and perhaps most effective form of treatment is irradiation with electric light, Violettlicht if that's available. When I was suffering from sciatica I was given saline injections, which certainly helped a great deal, although this requires an experienced doctor, Frau Mermet, the nurse providing only assistance. Baths should be used only when the healing has progressed. As soon as possible, the patient (whatever their social standing or class) should diligently attempt to walk, although undue effort may risk a relapse. While in hospital, I was specifically discouraged from peeking out of the window. It may be worth my sister considering a health resort such as Schinznach. Sciatica is a treacherous disease that needs exact remedies, Robert concludes. No doubt it would be more pleasant for Lisa if she could stay in bed upstairs in Bellelay, while of course observing the treatments he has so carefully outlined. Please read this letter to her and pass on my best regards. P.S. if transport to Biel or Bern is required, an ambulance could be ordered by telephone!

April 7th, 1925. Another long letter. To start off with, Robert earnestly sings my praises. His gratitude for the friendship between us takes up several lines. Robert has written a short piece about the 'Hubler evenings' in Bellelay (the Hublers helped staff the sanatorium and the nursing home, one as a chef and the other as a housekeeper, and they held carefree gatherings from time to time). It's since been sent for consideration to a publishing house in Zurich, apparently. Next there are some literary reflections, mainly of a French variety – he mentions Maupassant, a most productive writer, both of novels and newspaper articles, and Marcel Proust, recently dead but never seeming to run out of breath, his volumes continuing to fill the bookstores. Robert speaks of Proust's inspiring spirit as a writer who fascinates American

connoisseurs of European art and culture, a Parisian living and working in the intellectual capital of the world. A Berlin newspaper once claimed that if Robert Walser were French he'd have been 'academicised' a long time ago, securing his long-term reputation. Maybe the writer of the article was right, Robert ventures. But, after all, I'm more comfortable in the German language, and Germany is something completely different from France. In the German-speaking lands, poets seem to have been invented mainly to compose songs of praise about the tiny-sized shoes of medium-sized serving girls, which is by no means to be underestimated. Unlike Latinate French, German is essentially poetic, the language of the troubadours, of epic songs, of images, allegories and parables, not of abstract ideas or logical terms. Robert concludes by saying that great German poets had to fill entire laundry baskets during their lifetimes, in order that well-deserved oblivion nevertheless bequeathed them some sort of legacy – what a strange lot theirs has been! The great Russian poet Gogol – with whom you may not be familiar, Frau Mermet – went quite insane and died a miserable death. Apparently, Robert read this in the *Journal de Genève*. But that death was long ago, and Maupassant and Proust have gone too. I can tell that Robert is still trying to judge his literary standing, both now and in the future. He's still wondering about the reputation he's capable of leaving behind. Dreaming of the Russians and the French, he imagines himself somehow over a border – only to retreat, to backtrack, suggesting a little Swiss holiday we might take together, before signing off.

During the spring and early summer he sends me more material for safekeeping – some of it already published, some of it fair copies of manuscripts – together with some socks to mend.

July 21st, 1925. A postcard from Biel. Robert is staying in the Blaues Kreuz, awaiting a military inspection, and asks whether he might visit Bellelay while he's nearby. Suddenly it is late August. Robert tells tales of artistic acquaintances who own a house on Lake Thun, stories that have inspired an article. Yesterday he held in his hand a toad (in Bernese German, *Chrot*) and it twitched and trembled like the poor creature that young girls dread – apparently the little rascals are very cold-blooded and, as such, timid and sensitive to nerves. Yesterday he was also lucky enough to sit next to a capricious young child in the casino (which has a beautiful chestnut tree garden), whose mother had to tell her: 'Next time you can't come along', the child's naughtiness being a secret source of pleasure for Robert and the mother alike. May I return two books that I borrowed from Bellelay, Frau Mermet, with the request that you pass them on to my sister? And may I express my worry that it might rain for several days

while we are on vacation? Will you furthermore allow me to say that it seems strange you haven't written to me at all, and I'd think it nice if you'd oblige yourself to do so. Robert recently sent the 'Swiss literary pope' Herr Korrodi an essay on the taming of lions, which might have been a bit strong, a bit too masculine, for his newspaper. The day before yesterday, while eating lunch, he spoke to an elderly gentleman, a former schoolmaster who had taught his pupils about humanity, about the state, about alcohol and finally about so-called fallen women, and Robert told him that such women might be considered a social necessity because a high proportion of the masculine world is clearly dependent upon such lapses of behaviour. School teachers are mainly nice people, Robert writes, but they are often stilted and too fond of polemics. In the course of the debate, the elderly man had apparently told him to think about his mother. Robert shuns such moralism; the letter dryly observes that the veneration of motherhood, to which R.W. is prepared to subscribe, is nevertheless likely to put some women at a distinct disadvantage. In a bookshop window Robert has seen the brand new novel by Fankhauser, with a note attached to the book written in the circular script so characteristic of the Bernese hand. Of course I had to laugh a little, he writes, because the note showed me that the people of Bern don't know Fankhauser very well, otherwise it wouldn't be necessary to draw their attention to his Bernese background. Fankhauser presents himself as European and, because he does so, the booksellers have to emphasise the fact that he's one-eighth Bernese – a little bit of a hoax, but of course trade allows it. Dutifully reprising his role as literary obituarist, Robert notes the recent demise of Swiss author Jakob Christoph Heer, who wrote for elegant and noble ladies before the war, the kind of women who now read cubist novels – the origins of which Robert traces back to the Treaty of Versailles, of all things. He ends, rather stiffly, by stressing that he's fulfilled his own sense of duty in sending a letter he felt was owed to me.

August 29th, 1925. Holiday plans. May I humbly remind you, Frau Mermet, that last time you took too many 'necessities' that didn't turn out to be necessary. Please, out of consideration for the porter, who is none other than I, travel with as little luggage as possible! This occurred to me yesterday while taking a bath, he says. Don't take any of Jakob Wassermann's novels with you, otherwise we'll get rain (Wasserman wrote *Melusine*: in folklore, Melusina is the spirit of sacred, free-flowing waters), but instead entrust yourself to chance, which will undoubtedly provide you with reading material along the way. Come on holiday like an experienced traveller, as light as a feather. He has made his point.

Late October, 1925. Robert's letter shows him at his irascible worst, and in caustic mood. It's quieter today, apparently, but yesterday his room was plagued with constant noise from outside. There seem to be too many people who think they're not really alive, dear madam, if they can't make noise like bastards! Did you read in the papers about the terrible abuse committed by a Swiss army officer? He let a young girl lead the way into the forest, then forced her to comply with a whipping. The little one cried terribly and, afterwards, of course, reported him. Robert confesses he finds the case interesting, almost laughable, although if it were up to him he'd strip the gentleman of his epaulettes and see to it that his stupid nose was whacked in front of the whole battalion. The letter then strays into barbed contemplation of the German writer Emanuel von Bodman, cuckolded by his second wife, Blanche de Fabrice. On the shores of Lake Constance one may find the ancestral dwelling of this German cuckold, Robert tells me, although the cuckold himself has been living in Zurich for many years while writing half-length verses so finely balanced that they seem to expire the moment they come into being. Robert believes that this giant of marital self-pity envies R.W. for his comparative youth ('Youth being just one of my talents!'). An author such as this thinks poetry should be written as if one has years lying around the place! Fankhauser wrote a novel on the subject, *Die Brüder der Flamme*, and Robert plans to better the example, although isn't sure where it might be published. Meanwhile, he mentions a certain volume of essays that has come onto the market, devoted to the topic of harmonious union of all things, featuring contributions by important writers like Mann and Jung, and including a piece by the Princess Lichnowsky, a woman made rich by the war – her husband serving as German ambassador in London two years beforehand – and known as one of the most beautiful ladies in Europe. Apparently, Robert once struck up a conversation with said husband of the princess on the premises of the Berlin Secession, and had the good fortune of being able to confirm that he belonged to the same tribe as von Bodman himself. In other news, Danish author Johannes Anker Larsen is to give a lecture in Bern shortly, babbling on about his own affairs no doubt. Robert complains grumpily of having a lot of snot in his nostrils for a while, due to a bad cold that is now beginning to pass. He mentions a budding correspondence with a 17-year-old girl from the Rhineland, whom I now know to be Therese Breitbach. I prefer to say as little about that as possible. He also tells me Lisa had arranged a lunch appointment with one Frau Kümmerly, who ran a card publishing company together with her brother Heinrich Frey. Robert ate nonstop for the whole afternoon. It gave him stitches in his stomach. He regales

me with the domestic intrigues of the family – in fact, an incestuous bourgeois pantomime. The letter leaves me exhausted, as much from its immoderate tone as from its length.

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A story about angels: an angel is judicious in waiting, waiting until they are needed. Until they receive notification, that is. Even if the delay is longer than anticipated, they must be able to exercise restraint. Robert does not want to make an angel of himself, and he does so only to create enough distance that such an angel (the angel of himself) might be preserved as an object of veneration but also curiosity, like an icon – or, better still, like a piece of ribbon or something in a man's own pocket. Which means that if an angel like this felt pursued, that would be a mistake – and a pitiable one at that! A scrap, a plaything, the victim of faithless conviction, the angel inevitably succumbs to disenchantment and doubt. Robert's angel, the one about whom he writes in this little tale, is not unlike those of Paul Klee – unheavenly, forgetful, poor, sometimes a little ugly, Klee's angels, like bestial spirits with distracted smiles and a distinctly worldly air of otherworldliness, a brittle line scratched across the chalky emptiness of a sheet of paper. Angels must endure us within themselves, where we hardly belong. Perhaps that's why they show up on the brink of a crisis. That's where they await us, slightly grinning.

At this time, Robert was evidently thinking a fair bit about angels. A year earlier he speaks of a saving angel without, for all that, resorting to piety. In a little play, meanwhile, the devil converses with an angel. At times their voice is a hybrid one, just as if one person were reading the letters of another, 'half fish, half plant', neither evil nor good. The devil proclaims himself destitute and, tired of his audience as much as his villainies, he stumbles upon the obvious idea that the devil isn't modern. The angel replies that they are both in the same boat. No one needs heaven anymore and there's not much going on in hell either. The chance of salvation is no more than the occasion for laughter. God is lost in thought, and the world waits.

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Bern, Thunstrasse 20, to the east beyond the Aare. Robert begins by recollecting how he'd behaved like such a Berner while on holiday, with his sauerkraut and sausage. He's been reading obituaries in the newspaper again and tells me of the recent demise of the bookseller and publisher Alexander Francke, who gave up his spirit in the same way that the devil took the emperor of Anam (whose late-nineteenth-century death

was reported with some uncertainty at the time, since it was unknown whether natural causes or violent revolution were to blame). Anam, Robert explains, is near India, on the other side of the world, and now under French sovereignty. It is said to be a fabulously beautiful and very delicate country, where the men are almost indistinguishable from the women, which he concludes is probably a strange thing. Yesterday Robert had a nice walk on a warm November Sunday, where he crossed paths with lovely village women in the darkness of the early evening and girls in the bright daylight. What else did I want to tell you, Frau Mermet? Aha, I remember. Yesterday morning I met people who greeted me in a charming way, but I no longer seemed to know who they were. A woman with three children, two girls and a boy – it turned out to be the doctor's wife who'd visited Bellelay the previous spring. I thought it odd he'd forgotten, as did he … This leads Robert on to the church renovations at Bellelay, which he personally regrets, finding poetry in the dirt of the old building, a poetry that's lacking nowadays – this ruined silhouette swaying about in the gloriously bright half-light. What is modern, he writes, is often sober and prosaic, but nevertheless invites the strange contrasts brought up by what is old. Meanwhile, I'm sent some newspapers and two books in which a little more of his work appears.

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About this time, Robert published a piece called 'Am I Demanding?'. It begins rather abruptly. His attention is drawn to authors of important novels, while his own time is taken up corresponding with publishers. Society women are cautious around him since, even by his own estimation, he may be a little odd, and his manners while often genteel are not always so. The doctors, he writes, often enquire disbelievingly whether it's true he has nobody to look after him. He reads – if it can be called that – his newspaper each lunchtime, and worries whether he's forgetting to report other important matters of this type. These reflections are a prelude to the main substance of the piece – once more he's changed his domicile. He likes looking for a room, since you can nose about in houses you'd otherwise not see. For instance, he saw something nice from the baroque period with old paintings hanging along the corridors. Attics are a favourite. Amid these sentences on the topic of moving address, other concerns arise. He longs to read a novel in French once more, and wonders whether he should apply for a position. A nice enough room with a good view across the countryside had to be discounted because it was unheated. The outlook from this cubbyhole was as limited as the prospects of the poor people who owned it – just a tiny window. One

could see the People's Nutrition Building across the way. Although the property had once been the home of a literature professor, a janitress who now works there is known to him – he'd met her while she ran a boarding house. In any case, the table was too small for somebody who writes such a great deal. Later, a dark room off a courtyard is viewed, and a rather cheeky exchange is had with the landlady. The question recurs of what it means to be cultivated. He worries over it, just as he worries over the memory of a woman with delicate feet he once met in a shop – it might be a delusion – whose interest in him seemed ambiguous. It's gradually becoming 'serious', my situation, he writes. The decision to write a novel of the psychological kind has been reached. Another room seems attractive – bright and sunny, dressed with clean linen and boasting a chaise longue that he'd have positioned otherwise. The landlady, however, seems put off by his enthusiasm. She needs time to decide ('You are very demanding, aren't you?') and asks to be telephoned later on. The story calls her 'the woman who sought salvation in delay'. In any case, his new lodgings are decent enough. He believes he can still make something of himself and adds that an actress has written to him saying that the thought of Robert Walser cheered her mood.

Another short piece from this period, on the subject of shop windows. Who doesn't like window-shopping? Hats and ties in one place, frankfurters and wieners in another, the great painters gratis in blousy reproductions, the taste of chocolate in your mouth for the price of just a little peek. Violets and oranges, antique scenes from Swiss history, Emmental or Gruyère, *Äpfelmütschli* from a bakery in the Aareberggasse, *Schenkeli* in the cafés, shoes (which, in the case of a woman, should not be bought as a present, since that is unseemly) and jewellery, brooches and necklaces. Embroidered handkerchiefs and corsets. Writers, we are told – especially of a journalistic bent – are exempted from the prohibition to look. Stationery stores pleasantly bring up the idea of certain correspondences. In a second-hand shop, there's an ivory of Christ, arms outstretched, feet perforated. It's only a sketch, Robert concludes.

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Bern, Elfenauweg 41. Robert writes from his new address, a former princely seat, as he puts it; or, more correctly, a manor house set on an English-style estate above the river, once occupied by a Russian grand duchess, then lived in by a well-to-do Bernese family, until it was taken into municipal ownership after the war. You can easily imagine, Frau Mermet, how I gaze over the green lawns towards the beautiful green waters of the river. I'd have afforded a magnificent room in the city, but it

seemed a bit expensive to me, and I'm so terribly frugal – although lately I've been squandering a bit now and again which, I assure you, won't be repeated. Robert thanks me for repairing his socks and tells me a young waitress who has since bolted from Bern complimented him because he'd picked up a knife she'd dropped, with all the agility of a squirrel. The serving girl had nice frizzy hair but seemed lacking in education. I've now been promoted by my young Rhineland acquaintance (the girl to whom he writes) not to the status of a count, he says, but to the status of an ally.

December 22nd, 1925. Dear Frau Mermet – If only I weren't so busy I would have accepted with great pleasure your kind invitation to come up to Bellelay tonight to have a look at the Christmas tree in all its radiance; as things stand, I regret I have to decline. But I believe you'll be greeting my sister Fanny instead, and then, in any case, there'd probably be insufficient room for me to sleep. Lisa will doubtless need her rest and, in the sum of things, I'd lack the necessary amount of comfort, which I nowadays claim especially since I live in the grandeur of Elfenau! Wishing you a happy Christmas, and I greet you with about seven to eight holes in my pants, which luckily I took the trouble to plug only yesterday – thank God I now look decent again, almost good enough for the salon!

December 30th, 1925. A thank-you letter for the Christmas food parcel I sent. He made short work of it, apparently. New Year lurks around the corner, says Robert, like a white-haired old man. Fankhauser, the writer from Bern, has withdrawn to the town of Brienz by the lake, apparently choosing marriage to a schoolteacher over city life. He probably washes dishes now and writes novels on the side, Robert chuckles. Meanwhile, to reassure you that I'm not completely idle, Frau Mermet, you'll find a dozen or so new articles of mine included with this letter, which I'm sending for safekeeping. When spring draws nearer, I hope to breathe in the Jura air again, and visit Bellelay. But for now I'm busy and, thank God, healthy. Please thank Lisa for her gifts, and wishing you both a Happy New Year!

Nothing until the middle of February. Robert sends a magazine that includes something written by him – another addition to the Bellelay library of Walser publications. (He always covers his tracks a little by drawing attention to other interesting articles I might like to read in the material he sends.) Robert is still holed up in his Elfenau 'hermitage'. In Bern you meet so many coarse, simple people, Frau Mermet: I recently wrote to a Berlin editor that it was very important to me not to be mistaken for one of these *Bernerjoggelis*! The next letter, weeks later, is very long. It reels and whirls, hectors, and explodes in comic bitterness, feeling a bit crazed. Robert speaks of the working-class children in Elfenau (he

calls them friends) whom the law and society recoil from. He evokes the tale of the Pied Piper and infanticide in Palestine. In Bern, all the doors of the house are now being slammed. Thrown shut without care. It's indecent, but such disregard is taken as a token of cultural superiority, just as rudeness is imagined to be a healthy expression of intelligence. If he were not a polite person the crudest language would be in order, says Robert, even if it'd sully such fine writing paper. Bern boasts many distinguished women housed in gracious style (for example, a lady he saw in the department store: taking a liking to her at once, Robert asked the shop girl what her name was, which he nevertheless thinks it's best to keep to himself). But in Bern he mostly knows a few hostesses and shop daughters, oh, and a certain Herr Hans Bloesch, librarian and writer, recently the founder of a federal association of the friends of Greece, whose wife plays the violin or the organ, although he's never heard of her. One may sneer at literary gentlemen and ladies, but for heaven's sake not at painters and their wives, because painters are *Übermenschen* and their wives air their dirty laundry over a nice hotel dinner – just as they'd done in Murten, Frau Mermet, where we holidayed last year. (There had been an unpleasant incident in the dining room between Robert and the other guests, which resulted in the termination of our stay.) How readily the decent ones become indecent, he observes. Robert rails against the bigoted atmosphere – no more dirty than anywhere else – found in that shabby hotel, especially the filthy painter's wife whose antics almost made him vomit. Robert claims she pursued him afterwards. Out of chivalry, he writes, I accepted her invitation but with a lack of enthusiasm that infuriated her. Robert calls her a little sow with a tiny tail and pink skin, nothing more than ham for sale! I can very well judge rudeness, he says, I'm the rudest Berner who's ever existed. He sends a few excerpts from foreign newspapers: Russia interferes in China's affairs, of course it's all just lame excuses; a Zurich newspaper has an article about August Strindberg, who Robert says was highly superstitious due to mental overexertion, and consequently afraid of everything – but Walser, your devoted servant, is afraid of nothing! He reports the death of Paul Cassirer, who recently shot himself in Berlin because his wife grabbed his nose with her fingers, as Robert puts it (meaning her infidelity followed up by divorce papers from her solicitor) – 'and in front of those who didn't need to see it!' Meanwhile, he complains about money. The Rowohlt publishing house doesn't pay me a red cent, Frau Mermet, for my contributions to the literary world. A newspaper in Berlin gives me as much for eight articles as Rowohlt does for 30 pieces. That's because newspapers are read and bought, whereas books are read but not bought – just borrowed. The letter

closes by mentioning a review of Herbert Eulenberg's polemic against Shaw, the brilliant donkey as Robert calls him. What's clever about him is he makes full use of his stupidity.

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March 25th, 1926. Bern, Elfenauweg 41. A dutiful letter returning some books borrowed from Lisa. Robert includes a volume of Maupassant for me to read, bought at the Bahnhofhalle. I'd be happy to be considered small, he says, compared to such a writer.

April 6th, 1926. A note requesting that I ask the local shoemaker for a new pair of slippers, since Robert's old ones have worn out. He encloses a picture of the style he wants. I'm told, with evident delight, that he's received payment from Berlin for two recent stories about Voltaire and Stendhal.

April 19th, 1926. A letter supplying precise details of his shoe size (42 or 43) and other relevant measurements, so there can be no mistake on the cobbler's part. Robert tells me about his strained relations with Eduard Korrodi (or Krokodilödeli or Korrodeli, Krokus, Tit. Korrodibus, as R.W. nicknames him). Korrodi had taken over editorship of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* during the early war years, regularly giving Robert a Swiss audience (although, as time went on, his enthusiasm for all-things-Walser resulted in threats by readers to cancel their subscriptions). By the mid-1920s Robert was having to look elsewhere, outside Switzerland – *Prager Presse*, especially – to place his work. Korrodi himself had become critical, calling Robert's prose overly complicated and referring to it as emotional bric-à-brac. By the time of this letter their relationship was at breaking point, and Robert tells me about a note he'd written to a Zurich publisher painting Korrodi in an unfavourable light. It had apparently come to the latter's attention, resulting in something of a stand-off between them. Robert's letter includes a P.S.: his instep measures 38cm.

April 22nd, 1926. Robert encloses a hand-written letter from a woman who lives in the house at Elfenau, Frau Gall, complaining about the amount of time he spends with the children. After a few words about the general lot of poets, he readies himself to tell me the tale.

> First of all, I'll roll myself a cigarette.
>
> Please be patient for a second.
>
> And now, I'll press on with it.
>
> A windstorm rushes through this place, unsettling things.
>
> My cigarette is ready, now I'll light it up.

This Frau Gall has a child, he tells me – a little girl named Trudi (a nine-year-old, one of five), who has seemingly taken to Robert. But all of a sudden, Frau Mermet, Trudi looks at Yours Truly a bit differently, and I realise things between us aren't quite right anymore. All the Elfenau kids are used to the fact that Herr Walser looks for Trudi Gall and Trudi Gall always looks for Herr Walser – of course, these are trifling matters, he writes, but people like the playwright Bernhard Show or Schofel, or whatever his name is, evidently take them seriously, terribly seriously in fact. Shaw apparently writes somewhere that 'it all stems from the fact that we have the habit of forbidding children from bothering us'. But Robert insists he has the habit of being unreservedly friendly with children. The letter from Frau Gall confirms this, and I am urged by Robert to be discreet with it. Robert ends with some remarks about Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer, as if to somehow anchor his affinity with children. He accepts my invitation to visit Bellelay for a few days in the coming month and promises to write again before then.

A few days later, another letter. Money from the Prague presses has arrived by bank transfer; but unfortunately, Frau Mermet, you only get 20 francs for a hundred crowns. The bank cashier asks Robert for a form of identification that he doesn't have. I've never had that in my life, he fumes, not even in Berlin! Robert has made some new slippers from leftover material sent him by somebody during the war, at the time of his army service. He plans to spend a day in Biel; this year is his last military inspection. An exhibition of Belgian art in the Kunstmuseum and Kunsthalle in Bern leads him to tell me about the two Brueghels, the Elder and the Younger, the latter sometimes known as 'de helse Brueghel' (or Hexenbreughel, as Robert puts it), the Elder being the greater painter, a teller of stories as well as an artist – but of peculiar tales, the kind told well only by art. There was also a Rubens on show, of whom you must have heard, Frau Mermet – a very beautiful self-portrait, languid and touching, like a reflection in a mirror. It's a picture of gluttony, of a once-handsome man distracted by his own half-forgotten thoughts. This is what such a person looks like, says Robert, a good-natured, talented person – but fate tossed worldly pleasures like walnuts into his lap rather than straight at his head.

May 5th, 1926. Junkerngasse 26. A short note informing me of Robert's new address. His Elfenau landlady could no longer provide lodgings – apparently her son was getting too big to share with another sibling and needed a room to themselves. I wonder how much this sudden departure owes to the Gall affair. Nevertheless, Robert is looking forward to holidaying in Bellelay.

May 14th, 1926. If it is still my wish that he should visit, and I've nothing else to say on the matter, he'll come for lunch next Sunday. I am so looking forward to seeing you again, Frau Mermet, and spending a day in the happiness of your company, thank you for the kind invitation, and warmest greetings in the meantime.

I send a telegram the next day: *Sobald wie möglich, Mermet*.

*

I'm thinking of the beautiful holidays with joy!

Bern, Gerechtigkeitgasse 50. Dear Frau Mermet, A lady wishes to familiarise herself with some poems by me, and I am of course obliged to accommodate her request. So, dear Frau Mermet, would you kindly return the little batch of printed poems I sent you – I mean, those clipped from the newspapers, not the rest (with which she is already familiar). One other thing. A magazine in Basel, *Individualität*, would like to reproduce a photograph of me in the summer issue. In Lisa's room, next to Karl's portrait, there's that one with all the hair. (It was taken in Biel, near the turn of the century: Robert the young writer, a clump of hair sticking up awkwardly at the crown, hunched up in coat-sleeves so short that his hands and wrists stick out like pale and slender branches criss-crossed at night-time.) I'd like to use this picture. Of course, Lisa will get it back later. Could I ask you to send it to me straight away? Warm greetings to the ladies at the dining table, and to you. Your Robert Walser.

N.B. There are also some prose writings clipped from newspapers that I'd like to have back, from the *Prager Presse* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*. Shall I send a stamped envelope, with the laundry perhaps (which, however, is not urgent)? Of course, keep the other books I gave you. Only the newspaper pieces, please. Oh, and 'Ruine' and 'Ophelia' too. And 'Ausflug' and 'Sonntagsspaziergang'. (He reminds me of the sources.)

June 7th, 1926. Gerechtigkeitgasse 50. But Frau Mermet, you fulfilled my request only very imperfectly – how am I supposed to understand that? I am writing to you straight away, since it seems you are not as loving and loyal as I thought. Where is 'Nachtgedanken' from the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the two little flowers 'Das Grün klagt' and 'Der Glucklichte' from the *Prager Tageblatt*? I need to have all of this back. I asked you to keep it carefully so I could have it. These things don't belong to you and, although I am the author of them, to me neither, but to all educated German-speaking people. Where is 'Konrad Ferdinand Meier-Feier' from the *Prager Presse*? (Robert goes on to list a number of other pieces not previously mentioned.) I need you to hand me all of that. I also want 'Brentano' from Lisa – please tell her – as well as 'Der Neue Merkur'.

I need to have that too. And how about 'Der reiche Jüngling' from *Der Bund*? I want to see this 'Young Man' again, because he got his *Gesicht* from me! Because all this is my property, isn't it, Frau Mermet, and it's also the property of everyone who's interested in it. Please consider this and make sure that I get back every piece, to the very last. At the very least, everything from the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Prager Presse*. And from *Die literarische Welt*, 'Das Duell' – I don't want to do without it! In addition, please send that small note saying how successful this essay is! But, but, dear Frau Mermet, I never believed that your devotion could be so flawed. That's a surprise to me, that is! What if I went to tell the English envoy here! He'd make an astonished face, for sure. Why didn't you return everything to me promptly and accurately? I ask you that in sheer astonishment and, nevertheless, as always, greet you warmly.

June 9th, 1926. A note thanking me for sending the various pieces exactly as asked, and letting me know that he doesn't need the others I suggested. Robert tells me he's now satisfied with me. But, really, it was only a question of the more recent newspaper work, which he now has. And Lisa still has a few recent things, perhaps I could send those from time to time? He raises the question of whether he should feel some sense guilt over the whole episode, but it's quickly dismissed amid reticence and pride.

June 29th, 1926. A request for a good piece of the finest Jura cheese, which Robert enjoys with his tea. Only the best please, since he's taken the trouble to write.

August 21st, 1926. Bern, Luisenstrasse 14. Notification from R.W. of a new address, about which he tells me little except the price is 40 francs. But it's a smart street of nice villas, at the fringes of the suburban district just outside the loop of the river. He encloses a piece from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* about a Bern family he knows – five sisters, only one of whom is unmarried – Robert reminds me I had said this was not the best 'milieu' for him, but he disagrees, saying these women are harmless and arouse his curiosity and, in any case, I needn't be concerned because the unmarried sister is entirely unattractive, although understandably she wishes for a husband like all of her sisters. That wasn't why I was worried. The letter is a small, familiar, disheartening blow – a misfire at a distance.

October 7th, 1926. A report of Robert's *wanderung* from Bellelay to Bern (over 75 kilometres): On the Grenchenberg ridge I stopped to eat, he writes, with hunger rising sharply before a sudden fall on the Hasenmatt, just like the Dying Gaul. I marched from Solothurn to Bern at night, in my shirtsleeves. Lisa's dog Jim pulled a long face when I said goodbye in

the schoolhouse – my farewell to everyone upstairs was *fein*, *flink*, *nett*, *unauffällig*, *d.h. französisch*. Zurich radio had aired something involving some of his stories, for which Robert demanded a fee that embarrassed the producer.

November 29th, 1926. A little letter thanking me for mended socks. The literary world isn't getting any easier, apparently – Robert heard from a renowned Zurich poet that he'd had to pay his publisher part of the printing costs for a recent work.

December 7th, 1926. Frau Mermet, I am sending back two books that belong to Lisa's library and that I read with great pleasure. I'm also enclosing a small magazine that, as you can see, is entitled *Das Gewissen*, which probably means the European conscience in particular. You'll find my name among a number of writers who sympathise with its aims (namely, internationalism and committed literature) – the editor is a fighter, waving his quill about, the ink splattering high. I also enclose two published prose pieces and ask you for the following: please send me *Wissen und Leben*, which contains four of my poems, and that collection you have that includes another three. (It's as if he's gathering a little family of texts around himself.) You'll have seen from the newspapers that the bill for a state monopoly of grain imports was defeated by referendum. It doesn't flatter our political leaders. Paul Maillefer, the liberal, who up until now has perched in an extremely tasteful, half-lit, almost secluded corner of the salon, has benefited from all this. Robert Grimm, leader of the general strikes in 1918, has the rare distinction of being a vice president who didn't get the top job. There comes a time when you need people who don't talk so much about themselves. Grimm is loud, and to be loud is usually to be empty. Anyway, Grimm is un *peu déja usé*. That political romance is over.

P.S. as far as cheese shipments are concerned, I would definitely prefer a portion from Bellelay abbey, *Tête de Moine,* the nutty old Monk's Head, the one they sometimes grate into cheese rosettes.

*

January 3rd, 1927. Luisenstrasse 14. A person grows old and frail, Robert writes, and when one reads in the history of the world how people become rotten with lice and die in the most miserable way … well, then the pettiness of our habits, hopes and thoughts can strike a person as laughable. He's had some more success in Prague with poetry, but Zurich is harder because of Korrodi. Two days before Christmas he underwent his last military inspection and has been discharged from the Swiss army. Robert thanks me for the Christmas gift of a shirt and wishes me a Happy New Year.

January 19th, 1927. In a story published by a women's magazine in Frankfurt, he'd boasted of girlfriends who darn his stockings or at least have them mended, which is lucky for a poor writer. Renoir's *La Loge* illustrated the cover, and the editors told him the little contribution had been well received. He sends an article from the *Berliner Tageblatt*, which he thinks I might enjoy.

February 12th, 1927. Robert tells me he'd surely be recognisable in any small German town, no matter where it was, because his prose pieces have travelled all over Germany and eastern Austria, and even as far as Hungary. They are like energetic little dancers turning and twirling until they sink to the floor from exhaustion. It's true that his writings appear in major newspapers but also get distributed through agencies and reprinted in the smaller German-speaking press. Robert sends a copy of the 1926 Christmas edition of the *Franfurter Zeitung* Women's Supplement, which includes a picture of the Russian painter and writer Marie Bashkirtseff (who died young) together with excerpts from her correspondence with Guy de Maupassant, and some torn socks in need of mending. He tells me a German friend has just died to whom he owes something as a writer. I think he means Siegfried Jacobsohn, the theatre critic, one-time advocate of Max Reinhardt and famous for a spat he had with the *Berliner Tageblatt* that resulted in claims about some plagiarised reviews. By the time of this letter Jacobsohn had been dead for almost a year, Robert having spoken of him rather maliciously in the past.

February 21st, 1927. Robert asks me to resend the photograph of him – the one from Lisa's living room wall with hands folded almost in prayer, which appeared in *Individualität*. It is for use by another magazine, he explains. I'm told it is not necessary for me to write a letter at the same time.

The next letter is dated April 13th. I'd been complaining of being tired and had told Robert that Sister Marie was ill. He hopes things will improve. Robert complains that his poetry has not made its mark in Germany, but only in Czechoslovakia. It's the month of Karl Walser's 50th birthday, time passes with unrelenting composure, and Robert insists that no-one has yet been born who can prevent Karl from being ruthless in his quiet, subtle way. He continues to write and wishes for a temperate climate, thanks me for the care of his socks, and reflects that he's relatively slim again, thank God. At 20 I was more discouraged than today, he says, even though the years are beginning to weigh on me like lead. Robert sends Easter greetings to Lisa and the Hublers and everyone. *Enfin*, cheer up!

June 1st, 1927. Robert accepts an invitation to spend a few days in Bellelay. Upon his return, a letter dated July 12th sends back some books from Lisa's library. Her appearance has changed quite a bit, he notices; and, as if a little shocked at how much his sister has aged, Robert worries about her bad dreams. The missive includes a request for tea and grateful thanks for the laundry. The spat with Korrodi rumbles on in the background, and Robert alludes to particular repercussions happening in the literary world as a result, but he strikes a defiant pose. He also hints at a certain affair, some might say a scandal, brewing at Bellelay: to wit, a nurse working at the sanatorium had written some anonymous letters to Director Oskar Rothenhäusler, resulting in a legal action (within a year, in fact, Rothenhäusler had resigned from his position).

August 31st, 1927. 'Today I wrote three letters of complaint, for which I hold responsible those who gave me cause to do it!' Robert boasts of a new piece coming out in the *Prager Presse*, 'Das stolze Schweigen' – the proud silence. But business is slow, and Robert swims languorously in the Aare every day to ensure precipitateness is discouraged. He sends special greetings to the director and his wife.

September 20th, 1927. Robert's attitude to the newspapers he writes for seems increasingly fraught. The sub-editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* has apparently written to him asking where he prefers to holiday in the autumn – which Robert takes as an ill-judged attempt at humour and, in fact, a thinly veiled slight (hinting that a break from writing may be due, in other words). It's clear Robert thinks it's because his writing is becoming too daring, too savoury for a bourgeois audience. In the springtime he'd declined an offer from Korrodi to write a regular column in his paper, still indignant that Herr K. – eager to lord it over R.W. – had rejected pieces already accepted in Prague. I can do very well without Korrodi and his like, writes Robert; the Zurich newspaper pays well enough, and in Zurich snobbery is not an issue. Some would like to take me for a shepherd boy, a dreamer from another world, but that doesn't suit me at all, I'm actually devoid of such traits, and I've no wish to play the reconciling angel, I don't have the appetite, I don't feel like it. I lack the naïveté for that – the honest broker usually finds himself a bad way, while others connive brazenly behind his back. Robert sees through it all and stands above it, he says. He finishes by telling me of a visit he recently made to the grave of his brother Hermann in the nearby cemetery. It's a dignified spot, imposing yet unpresumptuous – in contrast to the charmless world of the newspapers, a place entirely to Robert's liking.

November 30th, 1927. Another long letter, with the usual thanks for provisions, containing more of Robert's reflections on the recent episode

concerning Director Rothenhäusler. The whole affair makes him think of a waitress in Bern, in whom a certain traveller took a particular interest, telling Robert he was inclined to propose marriage since she seemed a great prospect as a housewife. The girl – a decent, meticulous sort – is still unmarried to this day, he says, and still lovely. The gentleman in question, meanwhile, drank too much and did it too openly. Dear Frau Mermet, wouldn't Rothenhäusler have acted more wisely to see the affair for what it was, a mere trifle, and not risk such personal damage by taking a strict moral stance and making so public a defence of himself? Robert has written an elegy for Maximilian Harden, one-time editor of the now-defunct *Die Zukunft*; he's also had reason to write indignantly to the editor at *Simplicissimus*. Munich is suffering from poor financial conditions, and the magazine is struggling. In fact, Robert concludes, the economic crisis is a permanent one and writers should perhaps demonstrate more forbearance and understanding than he himself is sometimes capable of. Yes, indeed. More not less discretion is sometimes apt. Above all, he concludes, self-rediscovery is the watchword for any author, and that requires periods of rest. What I write doesn't just fly into my mouth as if this were Cockaigne, Frau Mermet! – it must be coaxed, encouraged, inveigled.

December 26th, 1927. A note of gratitude for Christmas gifts, and news that two pretty little pieces have been published in the *Prager Presse*. If one is to practise writing nowadays, dear Frau Mermet, the utmost caution is needed – for instance, one never writes: 'I remember', and so forth. That is now considered *mauvais* in literary culture. If a writer tackles memory, they must task themselves with converting its truth into something contemporary. Nonetheless, to immediately contradict myself, some wonderful new authors are writing memories of youth, like Federer and Huggenberger. But generally it's advisable to write of hope rather than memory. Hope is *chic*, and besides it's neater and tidier than reminiscences, which is what people now want. Robert treats me to a long dissertation on why the name Willy is more contemporary than that of Keller. The latter leaves a dissatisfying aftertaste, apparently, while the former shines brightly, having connotations of good will; the latter suggests a dark place underneath, even if stocked with wine. Perhaps he's thinking of Willy Storrer and Wilhelm Keller, who'd worked on the *Individualität*. Meanwhile, Robert tells me about a letter he wrote to a magazine in Basel that spurs thoughts of today's obsession with economics. Nowadays everything revolves around the economy, he says. Almost everyone wants to be an economist solving economic problems. Take the example of thrift. Some people advocate its social value while

others promote spending. Economic altruism is admirable, says Robert, but if somebody gives away a large amount of wealth, and then falls on hard times and has to do whatever is necessary to recoup their fortune, inevitably someone else is impeded as a consequence. Economic debate has reached a point of morbidity, he concludes. Cheap or expensive, modest or sophisticated, the thought of money encourages a crude mentality running through humankind like a fever. Robert regales me with stories of his Christmas evening, of the fir tree in the *spanischen Weinhalle* and a long and ostentatious speech by someone with a peg on their colossal nose. He hints enigmatically of the cosiness of a night with strangers, a man and a woman. Yesterday he drank coffee in the *deuxième* at the railway station. Best wishes for the New Year from Robert Walser.

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January 6th, 1928. Bern, Luisenstr. 14. Robert asks for Fanny's address so he can write to her. Two years earlier, Fanny had moved to Latvia after her marriage – he'd spoken of it several times since and had been keeping up with her news, so must have lost her details. He also requests two volumes from Lisa's library, Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and the *Complete Works of Gotfried Keller*. One likes to read something from time to time, Frau Mermet and, at the moment, I lack reading material, although now and again I buy a cheap novel from the kiosk, about 30 or 25 centimes each, not in the category of good literature but sometimes well-constructed nonetheless. This writing business is going badly just now, but the fact that my literary stocks are falling shouldn't be cause for discouragement. The book market is impossible for most authors today. The great novelists, those who are long since dead, seem grander now than ever – understandably so, because nearly all writers nowadays have a head full of farts.

March 7th, 1928. Robert returns the books he'd borrowed, saying goodbye to them as one does old friends with whom a reunion has rekindled the warmest of sentiments. He urges me to read Goethe's novel, a deeply poetic work that is perhaps difficult for readers today who expect laughter, happiness and good cheer. The letter praises Goethe as a unique and original writer to whom one cannot possibly do justice in a few passing comments. Robert will be 50 years old in five weeks' time. Fanny has asked him for some French books, Stendhal and Balzac, which he duly orders from the Bellelay library on her behalf.

April 17th, 1928. A short letter. Robert accepts an invitation to visit Bellelay in May; there is a guarded note of optimism about his writing career.

July 4th, 1928. Robert plans a swimming holiday in August, perhaps sooner, and writes to thank me for the socks and shirt, with handkerchief and collar attached. 'Herr Stumpp, Emil Stumpp from Konigsberg, a bungler and dabbler, which is to say, a draftsman by profession, drew a portrait in the Zurich *Annalen* for my stupid, completely superfluous birthday, although it's not a magazine that particularly favours me!' … Stumpp had written of Robert's burning, dark eyes and obstinate demeanour, his threadbare appearance and his near-perpetual expression of defiance. Before drinking wine together, they had walked along the Aare at twilight to the Bärengraben where, so the portraitist was told, Lenin often stood. Robert encloses a newspaper article from Vienna, 'On the Occasion of Walser's Fiftieth', about which he harrumphs and grumbles a bit. While sitting in the Bern Casino with a glass of beer that apparently cost 90 centimes, he read a nice letter from Korrodi – it seems they've patched things up a little. He promises to send *Weltchronik* and mentions a little essay by Walter Kern in *Individualität*, in fact written as a fictious speech by the 50-year-old himself, which Robert says turned out reasonably well nonetheless. But he hasn't heard anything from his *Baslerfreunden* associated with the publication. There will undoubtedly come a time, Frau Mermet, when I'll get my act together, and I'll say something in the Basel newspaper – I storm now and then, and while I need a little love sometimes, eventually I come to see the world with tremendous clarity once more.

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A short piece from around this time, the protagonist of which is told he suffers, although does not believe it; a character whose eyes had once flickered and blazed but without explanation, whose lips had once kissed the golden shoes of an *artiste* only to find they tasted of a thin varnish, and who enjoyed the fact that others saw him as a child. Somebody a little frivolous, as frivolous as an elegant garment, at times seemingly heartless and capable of finding boredom edifying. Someone whom, we are told, never tried to be a man of the world.

Another example. *Embonpoint*. It means, roughly, plumpness, referring to the fleshy parts of the body, such as an ample breast or curvaceous buttock for instance – although connotations of sensuousness are endangered by an encroaching sense of stoutness, the girth of a rotund belly, perhaps even the onset of a sickly type of corpulence. But, still, a healthy pudginess, a ruddy chubbiness, is what's mostly implied by the original French term, meaning 'in good condition'. A certain heaviness that is nevertheless far from unattractive, a particular

quality of well-roundedness – that's what the word is mainly aiming at. Voluptuousness, in short. Late in his writing career, Robert pens a short piece on the topic. The subject of the tale seems to have everything going for him. An exemplary figure, strong-willed and decisive, a tackler of things. Forthright, courageous, he inspires confidence in everyone around him. The young are emboldened in their ambitions, while his own peers dream of nothing more than comradely association with this man. His would-be betters, for their part, are reduced merely to brooding contempt. Meanwhile, writes Robert, he aged. Then our hero starts to bumble and tumble – in fact a single slip in a matter which was taken as read, as simply his due, signals the beginning of an irreversible decline. The expansive arrogance and suppleness, once treated as a given, is simply gone. He becomes cramped, rigid. What's good is what pleases, Robert remarks – *Embonpoint*, what a droll word! Probably that's what finally eluded our hero, the story concludes.

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Autumn is on its way. A letter arrives with a package, returning a volume of Schiller that belongs in the Bellelay library. *Die Räuber* is, of course, a favourite play of his. Yesterday, Robert writes, he met a young man on the street who'd been unlucky in affairs of the heart. He looked as if life had slapped him in the face. Robert hadn't read all of the Schiller this time round, since writers must read sparingly at all costs – in any case he tends to forget what he's read. At lunchtime he was seated next to a *joggeli*, a coarse and simple fellow capable of causing great laughter. There are lots of oddballs nowadays, Robert says, but the most amusing ones are often the sour-tempered moralists. Another letter on October 1st, and then in mid-November another, more packages of books, dutiful thanks for gifts from Bellelay, the latest on his *Schriftstellergeschäfte* (his writing business), sardonic remarks about well-stocked bookshop windows.

December 18th, 1928. Dear Frau Mermet, Christmas will be here soon. I've written about Christmas many times before. I'm used up on that topic. I'm pleased that you don't neglect to think of me, even under the new management (Hans Knoll had replaced Rothenhäusler by this time). Thank you for your kindness in sending the laundered shirts and mended socks, the butter and the cheese. I've been taking my coffee in the Bahnhofhalle for weeks – it's currently very good there. Robert speaks wearily of a Christmas Eve invitation. 'When was I last in Bellelay, for cosy evenings in the schoolhouse?' he wonders. Last week Robert was in Burgdorf with his cousin Marty, who was good enough to give him a suit. I hope your son is well and you too, Frau Mermet, in spite of the

loneliness of Bellelay. I kiss you in my thoughts, gratefully, for your way of remaining friendly towards me. Maybe I'll go back to Biel sometime in the near future. There are still a few things of mine in the Blaues Kreuz, in a sugar box. Doktor literarissimus Korrodi wrote me another letter, and I should have the grace to reply. I'm considering it. Editors still squabble over my work a bit, but I try to let the fresh air in. And the bookstores still teem with new volumes … Lisa had written a letter to Robert saying that Fanny was about to lose her position, and he rails against 'the scoundrel barons who've enslaved the Latvian people for centuries'. It'll be bad for Fanny, but no matter, worse things happen, he concludes. It's a shame that the revolution couldn't deal with the guilt-ridden nobility. *Mais, mon dieu, je parle ici comme un héros! Adieu, chère Madame Mermet*, *ich bin ein böser Bub, nicht wahr*? But I wish you a Merry Christmas. Never forget my deep respect for you. My business, die Schriftstellergeschäfte, is miserable over the festive season, but that won't stop me – good cheer and above all breakfast fried eggs, all swimming in hot butter.

December 27th, 1928. The last letter from Luisenstrasse, sent with hopes I had an enjoyable Christmas. I like to think about Biel from time to time, Frau Mermet, about my time in the Blaues Kreuz, about the parlour girl there, about the Magglingen and the Taubenloch Gorge and how nice it always was in the winter-time. In fact I'm thinking of a visit to the Biel theatre very soon, which I'm looking forward to greatly. He thanks me for choosing a shirt – you know, he says, I'm no good in terms of taste or colours or anything like that. Not very meticulous. In writing, too, it's my experience that works are at their most colourful when nothing is said about colour. It's also true in life, and in love it's similar. The less said the better. That which goes unmentioned lives most vividly. Robert tells me he spent Christmas with a certain Herr Kistler and family, recent acquaintances in Bern. His wife is very nice, Robert says, and at the same time rather cunning. Apparently she said, over and over throughout the day: '<u>Mein</u>' Herr Walser (Robert makes a point of underlining this word). She completely monopolised him, apparently, by feeding him chocolate fondant. Robert calls her a *gefährliches Baby, d.h. ein Kind*. At the turn of the year, 'meine' liebe Frau Mermet, I wish you all the best, and I remain yours, your devoted Robert Walser.

Waldau

Lisa took Robert to Waldau on January 24th, 1929. He'd been examined by the psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler, who'd been Ernst's doctor during his time in the Bern asylum. In the early 1920s, it had been Morgenthaler who'd published the first monograph on what became known as Art Brut, with Adolf Wölfli – a Waldau patient since the 1890s – serving as its inspiration. Morgenthaler ensured Wölfli had a constant supply of stationery, the pencils worked down to tiny stubs gripped between the madman's fingers as he fought to combat a dread of unfilled spaces ('horror vacui') represented by the empty sheets of paper. The circumstances of Robert's incarceration were as follows. Robert's landlady, Martha Häberlin, had sent word to Bellelay informing Lisa that Robert had behaved threateningly with a knife. He'd asked both Martha and her sister to marry him, so Lisa told me, and then invited them to stab him to death. Morgenthaler learnt that Robert had of late become increasingly depressed and fearful, sometimes delusional, sometimes screaming in the night. In the aftermath of the incident with the Häberlins, Robert expressed a wish to stay with his sister in Bellelay, but neither the doctor nor Lisa thought it advisable. Robert's sister followed Morgenthaler's advice and took Robert straight to Waldau, a grandly built sanatorium on the outskirts of town, where he was committed that same day. His first letter, nearly a week later, was to Lisa. It expressed gratitude and offered reassurance – Robert had been able to sleep and read, he hoped for a period of calm and, with some relief, mentioned a seemingly conciliatory letter from Fraulein Häberlin. He was pleased to report that the radio played music during the daytime, and he made a point of asking Lisa to remember Herr Walser to me, his dear Frau Mermet.

Robert wrote to Lisa again in early February, eager to allay some of her worries, telling her he felt reasonably calm, especially when reading, and imagining playfully her reproaches for his excessive smoking. He'd tried his hand at chess for the first time and had been playing billiards too. Robert mentioned that he'd begun speaking to the other inmates, just as

if he'd taken up the pen – or rather pencil – and written something. He'd been talking to them, in other words, as if the conversation were part of one of his stories. And he'd helped another patient brush and polish the parquet flooring, which was good exercise. At Waldau work therapy had replaced the straitjacket long ago and, under the direction of Wilhelm von Speyr, modern techniques of shock therapy were not favoured. Sleeping, it seemed, had become a little easier, though he did not like to sleep in a room alone but preferred the dormitory. Robert had been reading Tolstoy. *Der lebende Leichnam* ('The Living Corpse') struck him as more delicately European than staunchly Russian – a literary dish from the salon that was much less terrifying than he'd thought. He said he was less afraid because he'd stopped writing, that it had been a *Schaffenskrisis* that drove him into such a terrible predicament, along with loneliness and paranoia. Robert asked Lisa to think of him from time to time, but not too much, and perhaps write or visit soon if the hospital allowed it. And he mentioned a letter from me, with fondness. He also promised to write to Fraulein Häberlin, which I understand he did, expressing regret for the distress caused and returning the apartment key at her request. Mind you, he used the Luisenstrasse address in his correspondence with a number of people for several years afterwards, no doubt for obvious professional reasons; although, needless to say, this would have risked some complications with the post. Robert told his doctors, to whom he spoke very carefully and deliberately about his decline, that he'd stayed in Luisenstrasse too long. The absence of change hadn't helped the situation, in fact it had affected his nerves.

March 21st, 1929. Bern, Waldau. Liebe Frau Mermet, my sister Lisa let me know that you plan to visit me next Sunday, which of course I look forward to very much, since I haven't had the joy of seeing you and talking to you for a long time. He asks if I'd bring some tobacco and Parisiennes (a Swiss brand of cigarettes). I look forward to your visit with pleasure, Frau Mermet, and greet you warmly.

May 14th, 1929. We haven't seen each other for a long time – How are you? Is your son still with you? Bellelay must be beautifully green and blooming in the springtime? I remember the times we walked by the Bierlersee, through the meadows and up into the mountains. Robert has been working in the hospital gardens and has been keeping up with the papers, although his interest in the news seems to drift. I hope you'll visit me soon, Frau Mermet. I remember walking by the beautiful, old, tall firs. How stupid that everything had to happen like this.

Christmas, 1929. I haven't written for a long time, though I still have the fondest memories of your visit last spring. Toiling in the flower beds, I think of you and beautiful Bellelay. Nowadays if I write, I do it early in

the mornings, less prose nowadays but about a hundred separate poems in my journal since arriving here. Thank you for your festive gift, and I wish you the happiness of the season. I hope you'll visit again soon, which would make me very happy. With warm greetings to you and to the ladies at Bellelay. In gratitude, Robert Walser.

After that, very little. Each letter is short and often simple. A note dated April 21st, 1930: Today is Easter Monday, so in Biel they will be making *Käsekuchen*.

December 29th, 1929. For a long time I didn't receive a letter from you, and I can well understand that your busy occupation means each day slips away easily. Since I became ill, I can no longer mean to you what I used to mean – I understand that. But, my dear Frau Mermet, the few lines you sent along with the new shirt gave me great pleasure. Christmas passed pleasantly enough, hopefully yours too. Tenderly yours, R.W.

January 5th, 1931. A note expressing great enthusiasm that I may come soon.

September 10th, 1931. To thank me for my visit, remembering the words we spoke to each other on that lovely afternoon – What wonderful weather we had! The newspapers had just reported the untimely death of the editor-in-chief of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Hans Kloetzli), although, for literary types like me, says Robert, it's an interesting fact but not such an important thing after all. It's the 100th birthday of the German author Wilhelm Raabe, long since dead, about whom you may have read, Frau Mermet. The Shakespeare that we spoke about in the rose garden was, *is* beautiful. Now and then I pen a little poem or a small bit of prose, you know, and sometimes I send something out to old friends.

January 4th, 1932. The familiar seasonal exchange, just a handful of lines: And now here we stand – me here, you there! – before the times ahead of us.

May 18th, 1932. This time thanking me for a birthday present. I am still in Waldau, he says. The days, the weeks go by. He tells of an article recently sold in Germany, a rare occurrence in that country these days. Robert laments the psychological state of a defeated nation, but he supposes that one must submit to the inevitable, and asks whether I might visit again in the course of the year.

December 27th, 1932. Festive greetings from the writer Robert Walser, with thanks for the gifts and with gratitude for my recent outing to see him.

May 22nd, 1933. An Easter message. What lovely days we've had lately, and if you're thinking of coming again, I'd be delighted to see you, he writes.

Herisau

A year later, May 14th, 1934. A letter from Herisau, where he'd been since the previous June, agreeing to my visit ('in possession of the few lines you wrote me some time ago, I thank you for wanting to come to Herisau'). Von Speyr had retired from his position at Waldau in March 1933 and the new director, Jakob Klaesi, sought almost immediately to reduce the asylum's population (which had risen to nearly 1,000 inmates), lessening the overcrowding by finding new homes for patients who were quieter or less sick. It was recommended that Robert be transferred to work at one of Waldau's outlying agricultural colonies, but he refused. At that time, he expressed a wish to be released in order to live independently once more, but the doctors weren't convinced. Lisa was no more capable of taking Robert than in 1929 – but she knew it might become a distinct possibility if he were simply discharged. In these circumstances Klaesi's advice, which was followed, was that Robert be sent to another asylum that fell within the official canton of citizenship for the Walser siblings. Based on their lineage through the paternal line, this was in the rural east of the country. Incarceration in that part of Switzerland would mean that the canton would assume responsibility for Robert if he were ever to become a ward of state. He himself was completely opposed to the idea – the Herisau hospital, where he would be sent, was under the directorship of Otto Hinrichsen, a literary dabbler with whom he'd had occasion to fall out a long time ago. In any case, Robert had never in his life set foot in that bit of the world. But Lisa and Klaesi had their way. On the day of his transfer, June 19th, he simply refused to get out of bed. Force was needed. On arrival, he flatly refused the offer of a private room, mistrusting Hinrichen's condescension (it was obviously deemed a quiet place for a fellow writer to get back on his feet). The manual work undertaken by the inmates was less therapeutic and more commercial – gardening was replaced by gluing paper bags or teasing wool. In Herisau, Robert lost control of his financial affairs and was declared legally incompetent. And he withdrew. He just withdrew.

*

In 1915 he'd published a short piece on the poet Hölderlin. A wanderer amid dreams and the imagination ('always hanging on the neck of nature', as Robert puts it), Hölderlin's tragedy was that poverty forced him to abandon the freedom that caused the heart of poetry – his heart – to throb. Poetry that was written at night under a thick canopy of blameless trees, or beneath the clouds amid flowers chattering in the meadow. Robert said of himself that he could not write without freedom. In the story, Hölderlin suffers a soundless shattering of clarity. But he continues to write. You and the world are an ocean, Robert writes of Hölderlin. Everything that is small bewilders and sickens you, everything vast and unbounded causes a terrible spasming. The nothingness in-between is simply joyless. Patience is beneath you, impatience hacks you to shreds … In actual fact, in the story itself, it is Susette Gontard, Hölderlin's most passionate love and wife of his employer, who says these things. Such things I would never have said.

Just before Waldau, there had been an 'Essay on Freedom' – of this grand idea, Robert begins by saying that its definition would also include putting-on-airs, acting squeamishly, shilly-shallying, and so forth – all of which is not discounted from a sense of freedom's importance. Freedom tolerates no freedom other than itself, Robert writes. It's curious. It frowns on the 'unprofitabilities' it smilingly encourages. It can lead you astray. A man returns home in the evening and, upon approaching his house, sees two people, a couple, looking out of the window. Such a thing might temporarily strip the free person of their sense of freedom, says Robert. But upon entering the house in order to challenge the intruders in some way, the man finds they are not in fact there. The sheer unreality of this situation robs him of his own feeling of personhood, and he becomes 'pure independence', free of even the personal characteristics associated with freedom. A second example concerns a beautiful woman whose freedom is expressed by way of her refinement, which is itself affronted by the freedoms others take, leading her to adopt a more reserved demeanour than her own freedom might like. Freedom includes another side of itself, in other words, a side that cannot be experienced as freedom in the usual way. It is difficult and produces difficulties, Robert concludes. It fails itself in order to succeed. But only the connoisseur and gourmet of freedom could appreciate this, he writes.

*

January 2nd, 1935. Robert tells me he had sauerkraut and pork followed by meringues with whipped cream for Christmas dinner. He hadn't received the shirt I'd sent him, although a note a few days later confirms the happy surprise of its arrival.

April 23rd, 1935. An Easter exchange, Robert having spent the Sunday outdoors, walking. Hopes of better weather to come. A year on, 1936, two days after his 58th birthday, another note of thanks for the gifts I sent. Robert is looking forward to the visit Lisa and I promised him. A Christmas letter at the end of the year, then nothing for 12 months, until, at the end of December 1937, a short note with nostalgic mention of Biel and Bellelay.

May, 1938. A thank-you on Robert's 60th birthday. A couple of notes in the later spring about a visit I'd planned, taking Robert for a day trip to Bregenz on Lake Constance. Then Christmas letters, birthday and Easter letters, a few telegraphic lines, barely enough to fill a post card.

December 30th, 1940. You'll now have a new teacher at the schoolhouse, Frau Mermet (Lisa having retired). By this time Robert's legal cantonal guardian, a local industrialist once optimistic about his chances of recovery, had written in his annual report that it was unimaginable Robert would ever be released.

A last letter dated April 20th, 1942, remembering Biel and Bellelay and the Jura – how happy were the pastures!

*

Carl Seelig, who visited Robert in Herisau from the mid-1930s onwards, taking him for outings every now and again, recalled his round and childlike face, cracked and bloodshot as if it had been struck by lightning, his mouth like a landed fish gaping for breath, the bottom lip bulging, the frayed collar losing its shape, the crooked tie and worn-out olive-green suit, Robert stopping occasionally with expired cigarette held under a snuffling nose to admire a meadow or a priory or a baroque house. Always without an overcoat but with the inevitable umbrella clasped in frozen, blood-blue hands. Brisk, stiff, purposeful. Herr Seelig recounted how they would drink dark wines from Berneck or Buchberg or sparkling Bavarian beer swallowed between mouthfuls of nut crescents, talking over a lunch of meat soup and veal in mushroom-cream sauce, or bratwursts and mashed potato, about Goethe or Stendhal or Hölderlin or Georg Büchner, or about the reading he had borrowed from the asylum library (a Smollett, for instance) or, more often than not, Gottfried Keller. Followed by something sweet from the pastry shop washed down with a *café crème*, Robert becoming less quiet and mistrustful with each passing

day and year, meeting him at Herisau train station in the snow or beneath an overcast sky or under leaden rainfall, sometimes riding the Appenzell railway together to Gais or Urnäsch where in 1673 (according to Herr Seelig) the last bear in Switzerland was killed, or striding out over the fields towards St. Gallen. Seelig remembers Robert talking about Karl's theatrical designs for Reinhardt's *Tales of Hoffmann*, and about the time the brothers spent together in Berlin, living in a studio with a cat named Muschi, and of a letter from Thomas Mann that spoke of Robert as a clever child. Then a farewell drink in the station restaurant at twilight. Earlier that day, the happiness of clouds.

*

I met Carl Seelig at Lisa's funeral, in early 1944. Robert had declined Lisa's request that he visit her in hospital in Bern before she died. Not long afterwards, Herr Seelig wrote to me about my correspondence with Robert. He sent a beautiful volume of poems that I'd wanted, and I was grateful for his involvement now Lisa had gone. I'd promised to send the letters. But the more I thought about it, the harder it was to keep my word, not least since Robert was still alive. Nevertheless, I told him I'd begun the difficult task of reading through everything, written as it was in very small letters. I told him I had to buy stronger glasses made especially for the purpose, to give me any chance of deciphering Robert's handwriting at all. I wrote to him playing the character I imagine he expected of me. After retiring I moved from Bellelay to Basel, taking a small apartment on Weidengasse by the old canals and mills, to be near my son. I told Herr Seelig that, because of this, some of my things were hard to find. Many were still packed up. But I skimmed the letters and knew I couldn't give them away. I said it wasn't because they were too intimate, but because they were uninteresting except as a record of Robert Walser's difficult literary dealings, which could readily be discovered elsewhere.

It wasn't for almost a decade, when Carl Seelig set about writing his biography of Robert Walser, that I agreed to send the letters. I remember that I pitied him the loss of a wife and a mother. I pitied him his loneliness. I remember writing how much I'd have liked to hear from Robert, and whether a visit to Herisau could be arranged. Under new management, certain restrictions had been introduced. Even if Robert was inclined to receive me, I didn't know whether it would be possible since I wasn't a relative. Lisa had helped me gain permission in the past. At any rate, I knew that one must exercise caution where Robert was concerned. As I wrote to Herr Seelig, *darf ich nicht mit der Türe in's Haus fallen* ('one mustn't crash into the door of the house'). As for the letters, I couldn't

possibly know whether Robert would approve, but I agreed to send them. Louis had spent a weekend helping me put everything in order, which was difficult because so much hadn't been dated and it was so long ago, and the handwriting was so small and fine and delicate. Reading it again was painful. I saw all the wit and intelligence, and I laughed and remembered, and I saw a living imagination drowning in the night. That Robert had a friend in his solitude was a comfort, but I asked for the letters to be returned as soon as possible in their original envelopes. In closing, I told Herr Seelig that, unfortunately, I hadn't listened to the radio broadcast he'd recommended, 'Albert Einstein and Switzerland'. My 14-year-old grandson had homework in the evenings, so we didn't turn on the radio and, as was often the case, I missed something interesting.

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'The very question of a subject is at stake in this enchanting book. Intriguingly, each chapter has a different voice: from a man writing about Walser to a man writing as a woman speaking as Walser, with a chorus in between that produces an exhilarating threefold reading of strangely connected desires.'

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Reading Robert Walser concentrates on the letters sent by the author Robert Walser to Frieda Mermet, the laundry manager at a Swiss psychiatric hospital where his sister worked as a teacher. Their exchange continued from 1913 to 1942, covering the time when Walser's literary fortunes declined, after which he himself was placed in an asylum for almost three decades before his death in 1956.

This epistolary history provides a reflection on the question of correspondence and literature, particularly the subject of lost correspondence, gender, the question of address and the performance of identity. Simon Wortham frames the letters with an extensive critical biography about the life and writing of Walser, whose work has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years. As her side of the exchange no longer survives, the book concludes with a fictional reimagining of Mermet's response to Walser's letters. This creative part is carefully introduced by chapters on epistolary writing in a range of critical settings from modernism to literary theory and deconstruction, as well as exploring what is at stake in creative engagements with a literary legacy of this kind.

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