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The Wanderer as Soldier: Robert Walser's *Der Spaziergang*, Switzerland in World War I, and Digression as Occupation

The narrator of Robert Walser's *Der Spaziergang* at one point stops into the tax office to announce that he cannot possibly pay more taxes. An impoverished writer, he works very hard but the public unfortunately doesn't like his books. The confused tax inspector blurts out, "Man sieht Sie aber immer spazieren!" To which the narrator magisterially responds

'Spazieren,' gab ich zur Antwort, 'muß ich unbedingt, um mich zu beleben und um die Verbindung mit der lebendigen Welt aufrecht zu halten, ohne deren Empfinden ich keinen halben Buchstaben mehr schreiben und nicht das leiseste Gedicht in Vers oder Prosa mehr hervorbringen könnte. Ohne Spazieren wäre ich tot, und mein Beruf, den ich leidenschaftlich liebe, wäre vernichtet. [...] Spazieren ist für mich nicht nur gesund und schön, sondern auch dienlich und nützlich.' (*Der Spaziergang* 54)

This speech, through which the narrator justifies his walks not as unavoidable luxury but as plain necessity, raises questions about the function of walking and the status of usefulness in the text. The narrator does not *do* much of anything throughout the piece: he visits the tailor, has lunch, walks into the forest, has conversations with passersby, sends off a provocative letter, gathers flowers, muses about culture and technology. Primarily, he evades his responsibilities. What does use *mean* in a text where nothing of any traditional use is done—in which, in fact, the only continuous activity is the walk itself? As Samuel Frederick points out, in a work entirely made up of digression, the meandering nature of the narrator and the text itself becomes the point, rather than a series of entertaining distractions. As the narrator patiently tries to explain, without the walk he wouldn't exist.

Twelve years after the end of World War I, Bundesrat Rudolf Minger gave an impassioned defense of the Swiss army in the forward to a history of the Jura-grenze. It begins, somewhat defensively,

Es ist notwendig, immer und immer wieder laut zu verkünden, dass unsere Armee unentbehrlich ist. Wir bedürfen ihrer, um die hohe, vor aller

Welt übernommene Pflicht zu erfüllen, unser Land und Volk aus eigener Kraft zu schützen ... Mehr als einmal erhob sich drohend die Gefahr eines Einmarsches der kriegführenden Heere auch in unser Land! (Fuhrer 15)

Minger retrospectively exaggerates the threat level. At no point during World War I was an attack on Switzerland actually very likely, although the French did plan (and dismiss as impossible) an offensive strike in the summer of 1915.¹ The passage concludes, “Unentwegt hielt die Armee treue Wacht, und ihr allein verdanken wir die Unversehrtheit der Schweiz, als ringsum Millionen Menschen und Güter von unschätzbarem Wert vernichtet wurden” (Fuhrer 15). Minger argues that, while the army never saw battle, it served its function as a deterrent to bellicose forces on both sides. Surrounded by combatants, Switzerland managed to remain neutral through a combination of deft diplomacy and the performance of war-readiness. Although simple in hindsight, this accomplishment impresses particularly in contradistinction to the situation in Belgium for instance, a country that also began the war with an attempt at neutrality and suffered enormous losses nonetheless.

In this essay, I discuss *Der Spaziergang* in connection with the Swiss military effort during World War I, to show how the narrator’s ostensibly aimless walking resembles the defensive marching the army performed from 1914 through 1918. Rife with military inferences and depictions of soldiers traveling to the front, the text obsesses about the war without seeming to concern it explicitly, which authors like Paul Keckeis and Peter Utz have recently pointed out. Both the *Spaziergang*’s narrator and the Swiss army garner little respect and seem to demand an overly effusive defense. But in addition to the question of usefulness, walking fills and controls space in a physical and metaphorical way, and as such, performs a militarily productive function. In the book as well as in the Swiss Army, walkers move in response to the anxious uncertainty of wartime in a country that, while not officially a combatant, behaved very similarly to one. In the midst of fear of an unknown future and frustration with a monotonous present, walking in circles served as a movement to dispel tension, even if not in itself a conventionally productive action. Thus, walking becomes a military maneuver, in both the Swiss Army and in the text as battleground.

The comparison of Walser’s texts to a battlefield has been made before, but most often in the context of a metaphorical battle between those in the center of society and those at the periphery. Valerie Heffernan claims that *all* Walser texts depict a Herr/Knecht dialectic, although sometimes it is disrupted, upside-down, or overturned in the course of a story, as wanderers, like Walser biographically and like his *Spaziergang* narrator, fight back against their implicit exclusion from society. As Heffernan explains, “Walser’s writing demonstrates and reflects his inner conflict, his wish to be accepted and yet his will to be different. The text thus becomes a battlefield where the tensions between central and marginal, es-

established and revolutionary, conformity and resistance are fought out" (15). Heffernan's argument builds on a post-colonial perspective that utilizes Homi Bhabha's work to locate forms of otherness at play in Walser's texts, written as they are by a quintessential societal outsider. She references psychologists Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, arguing that all social interaction, action, and reaction coalesce into a battle for dominance. Dieter Borchmeyer similarly argues that the Herr/Knecht dialectic in Walser dramatizes a kind of smallness and self-effacement on the part of the servant ("verborgenes Herrschen, als eine Art umgestülpter Aristokratismus" [1]). Claudia Albes also notes how one conventional understanding of Walser's narrator is as a social outsider, wandering on the margins as he wanders through the text (23–24).²

However, this explanation, in which Walser is an outsider posturing from the margins, does not go far enough in accounting for the militancy of Walser's conversational encounters. In Heffernan's metaphorical battlefield, combatants struggle for primary social position and Walser works to overturn social norms as an outsider disrupting the status quo. While Heffernan's approach opens up a way to think about Walser combatively, it reads the aggression in the text solely as a social critique and therefore glosses over the broader environment of modernist anxiety and wartime aggression. Pervaded by this insecurity, walking in the text expresses a generalized anxiety and insecurity inherent in 'fighting' a war that the Swiss Army is not actually fighting, but rather 'walking.' Societal exclusion may be a concern, but the prevailing worry is the war and one's impotence in the face of it.

Der Spaziergang exemplifies certain aspects of literary walking, a broad tradition connecting Goethe, Heine, Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Bernhard.³ Walser, as a walker himself and a writer of walkers, rose from this tradition to write texts that often conflate writer, reader, and walker. As the narrator enthuses, "Indem du dir, lieber Leser, die Mühe nimmst, mit dem Erfinder und Schreiber dieser Zeilen sorgfältig vorwärts in die helle, gute Morgenluft hinauszumarschieren, nicht eilig und hastig, sondern lieber nur ganz säuberlich, behaglich, sachlich, bedächtig, glatt und ruhig, gelangen wir beide vor die bereits vorgemerkte Bäckerei mit Goldinschrift" (14–15). The narrator equates reading and walking as activities that require similar kinds of participation; where the character is following a path, the reader is following the words, intertwining physical page space and imagined space within the narrative.

Additionally, the verb "hinauszumarschieren" gestures toward the text's conflation of walking and marching. Rebecca Solnit, a theorist and historian of walking, points to the *Wandervogel* movement, which, "like so many situations in the history of walking, raise[s] the question of when walking becomes marching" (158). Walser's narrator dances with similar questions. In other texts explicitly concerned with his wartime experiences, Walser cheerfully conflates the two activities, describing military marches as one would a pleasant stroll: "Beim Militär ist manches ohne Frage riesig nett und hübsch, wie z.B. mit Musik durch friedliche, freundliche Dörfer marschieren, wo Kindergruppen, Gruppen von

Frauen und blühende Bäume am Weg stehen" (Walser and Greven 330). Elsewhere he lauds marching with further encomia, enthusiastically asking: "Marschieren in Reih und Glied auf sauberer Straße, so durch das schöne, reiche Land hin, ist das nicht herrlich?" (Walser and Greven 330). The following section will examine the military references in *Der Spaziergang* and compare them with the contemporary reality.

Walking and Marching: Soldiers in Switzerland and Der Spaziergang

When *Der Spaziergang* was published in 1917, critic Eduard Korrodi lauded it for being so entirely unwarlike: "Da der Spaziergang kein Gewaltmarsch, sondern eher ein Rundgang ist, besorgt der Dichter seine dringendsten Geschäfte" (Echte 311). But on closer inspection, Korrodi misses the mark on two counts. First, the text includes plenty of evidence of soldiers and fighting, including the aggressive conversational style employed by the narrator, and is not unwarlike at all. The war inundates the town; soldiers pass through its roads, train cars carrying troops hurry towards the front; "Jungens mit hölzernen Waffen bewaffnet, die den europäischen Krieg nachahmen, indem sie sämtliche Kriegsfurien entfesseln" play beside the narrator's walking path (76–77). Peter Utz even goes so far as to say that the story articulates "als Diskursform der Abschweifung ein militärisches Stilideal, das er in ironischer Mimikry nachspielt [...] er imitiert den Tonfall eines Krieges" (96).⁴ The narrator may extoll the virtues of peace, art, music, and culture, but his surroundings do not reflect these interests.

Second, the Swiss war effort *was* closer to a "Rundgang" than a "Gewaltmarsch," as shorter Walser pieces like "Etwas über den Soldaten" and "Beim Militär" demonstrate (these will be examined in greater detail later). Walking in *Der Spaziergang* can, then, be read as a part of the war effort, at least in the mind of the narrator. If soldiers marching in circles can be considered useful for Switzerland, then our narrator walking in circles can be useful as well, and vice versa. This is why the *Spaziergang* narrator focuses so anxiously on the usefulness of walking, in the face of his own skepticism and that of the townsfolk. His small "Rundgang" mirrors the military's much more important one.

This connection becomes apparent in the narrator's defensiveness of his walk, first in his own mind and later out loud. Early in the story, a "Kamerad vom Landwehrbataillon 134/III, ruft mir beiläufig zu: 'Du spazierst wieder einmal, scheint mir, am heiterhellen Werktag.' Ich grüße ihn lachend und gebe mit Freuden zu, daß er recht hat, wenn er der Ansicht ist, daß ich spaziere" (18). The interaction with his friend clearly bothers him, although he blithely admits to his seeming unproductivity and protests, too much, about how useless frustration would be: "Sie sehen es mir an, daß ich spaziere", dachte ich im stillen und spazierte friedlich weiter, ohne mich im geringsten über das Ertaptwordensein zu ärgern, was ganz dumm gewesen wäre" (18). Silly or not, the interaction clearly upsets the narrator, as evidenced by his repetitive assurances to the contrary.

As shown in the quotation with which this article began, the narrator defends

his walks (and therefore his writing) as useful and necessary at the tax office: “Auf einem schönen und weitschweifigen Spaziergang fallen mir tausend brauchbare nützliche Gedanken ein. [...] Spazieren ist für mich nicht nur gesund und schön, sondern auch dienlich und nützlich” (54). But almost immediately after this long, impassioned justification, the narrator must stop his forward progress at a railway crossing and wait for a train of soldiers passing by:

Der vorbeisausende Eisenbahnzug war voll Militär, und alle zu den Fenstern herausschauenden, dem lieben teuren Vaterland Dienste weihenden und widmenden Soldaten, diese ganze fahrende Soldatenschule einerseits und das unnütze Zivilpublikum andererseits grüßten und winkten einander gegenseitig freundlich und patriotisch, eine Bewegung, die rund herum liebliche Stimmungen verbreitete. (60–61)

On the one side there are soldiers, dedicated to the war effort and serving a noble purpose, and on the other side there are useless civilians like our narrator, taking a walk.

In another sense, however, the narrator clearly counts himself *and* the soldiers as productive members of society, particularly if the narrator were himself a soldier home on leave. This interpretation, which would align the narrator with the soldiers, resonates with other sections of the text. At one point he complains, “anhaltendes Schreiben ermüdet wie Erdarbeit” (34), a reference made militarily relevant by the realization that digging was one of the Swiss army’s main activities. At another point, he explains how writers are like generals, as both must constantly reevaluate the terrain and decide how best to expend resources. Writing only differentiates itself by being a little bit harder: “Auch Schriftsteller treffen oft, wie Generäle, langwierigste Vorbereitungen, ehe sie zum Angriff zu schreiten und eine Schlacht zu liefern wagen” (28). When the narrator aligns his literary output with the war, he not only gifts himself and his writing the imprimatur of legitimacy, but also seemingly mocks the war effort, in a move Utz sees as ironic mimicry (96).

The narrator himself might be closer to the war than he first appears. The line “Kamerad vom Landwehrbataillon 134/III” presents an ambiguity: either his friend happens to be in the militia, or the narrator and his friend met and served together in that particular battalion (18). In a not uncommon conflation of author and narrator, this is the exact company in which Walser served as well. Numerous critics, including W.G. Sebald, Samuel Frederick, Claudia Albes, Carl Seelig, and Valerie Heffernan, have discussed the convincing similarity between Walser’s narrators and his own biography, usually in the context of his love of walking and his marginality. *Der Spaziergang*’s narrator echoes Walser’s biography particularly closely: an impecunious writer taking a long walk around Biel, which is Walser’s hometown as well as the place where he wrote this piece. And although he never mentions it explicitly, it is not unreasonable to assume that this narrator is also a

soldier home on leave. Paul Keckeis points out that, unlike Spitteler and Inglin—Swiss writers whose work has been closely identified with the First World War—Walser has mostly been considered an apolitical writer, despite his military service and writings that explicitly concern that service (Keckeis 102).⁵

An examination of Walser's own military service displays the walking of the *Spaziergang* narrator on a broader scale: as the marching of Walser the soldier. Assigned to the third Division of the *Landwehrkompagnie 134*, Walser began service on 5 August 1914 in Erlach and remained enlisted throughout the war. Stationed for several months at a time in different locations, he always returned to Biel in between periods of service. After Erlach, he served in Saint Maurice, close to the borders with France and Italy. Subsequently he was stationed in Cudrefin in the northwest, Wiesen in the east, Ticino near the Italian border (where he dug trenches in 1917), and finally Courroux (close to his hometown of Biel, in the northwest) in the winter of 1918 (Echte 299–301). These crisscrossing deployments sent him all over Switzerland, in a pattern common to many Swiss soldiers (Führer 529).

His letters during service, particularly those to his close friend Frieda Mermet, shed light on his activities. A letter from Feldpost Cudrefin on 18 April 1915, provides a typical example.⁶ He mentions the soldiers' quarters, the wine, the weather, and when he will be coming home (*Briefe* 87). His description suggests that while soldiering in the Swiss army may not have been a pleasant experience, it was incomparable to the hellish Western front. In a letter exactly six months later, on 18 October 1915, Walser describes the situation of the troops as uncomfortable, but only because they had to camp outside and all came down with colds, and that he hurt his chest while carrying stones (91).⁷ Though physically difficult, particularly for a writer in his late thirties, the work never rose to a truly strenuous level.

More challengingly, the absence of a purposeful task bored him. On 20 July 1917, he reports from "Monti della Cima im Tessin, wo wir auf Wache stehen, d.h. manchmal mehr liegen und herumfaulenzten als stehen" (*Briefe* 109). The monotony and dreariness of the work, one of the most formidable issues facing the Swiss army in general, increased in the face of long terms of service, which averaged well over a year despite the leaves of absence (Führer 529). Walser mentions this again in August of 1917, confessing "der Dienst ist mitunter etwas eintönig; doch gibt es immer wieder kleine muntere Abwechslungen" (*Briefe* 110–111).

His general impression, of boredom and physical exertion but not undue hardship, recalls the concern with "usefulness" present in *Der Spaziergang*. If the soldiers simply build walls, dig trenches, and keep watch, what for? "Etwas über den Soldaten" explains how the "Eintönigkeit" of army work all serves a purpose: "nur zahlreiche Wiederholungen ein und derselben Übungen bringen einen höheren Grad von Tüchtigkeit hervor, und Tüchtigkeit ist auch Schönheit, und Schönheit ist jene Geschmeidigkeit, die an die seltsame Maschinerie und Technik eines Traumes mahnt" (Walser and Greven 328). Literarily, the "Eintönigkeit" of military service has been made into a virtue. The *Spaziergang* narrator has a similarly

high opinion of repetition, which he can tie into his elitism about ‘true art’ and ‘true writing’ (82),⁸ because the constant need to be confronted by newness signifies petty small-mindedness and an absence of inner life. In fact, many Walser scholars consider repetition to be stylistically central to his work. Claudia Albes points out how closely connected repetition and walking are (she counts ritualistic repetition as one of the six characteristics of a *spaziergänglicher* text). Or, as Samuel Frederick explains, “the repetitions produce a sustained textual dynamic, a kind of stylistic restlessness [...] manifest[ing] the pure, unfettered movement of narrative proliferation, always open and in flux” (49).

Boredom, monotony, repetition, walking as occupation: for Walser, these negative characteristics of military service become, stylistically and explicitly, purposeful activities. In part this seems an anxious attempt on the narrator’s part to justify his experiences, but also on some level an earnest expression of the army’s actual function, which was largely just to *be* there. To broaden out from Walser’s personal experience and writing, the next section will consider how the monotonous, repetitive nature of Walser’s army life was reflected in the larger war policy of the Swiss military. The lack of actual battle was of course intentional; the war in Switzerland was fought by soldiers giving the impression of being powerful and pervasive enough to deter invasion.

Covering Space and Performing Power

In some ways, the Swiss technique worked perfectly for World War I combat. Theophil Andreas Luzius Sprecher von Bernegg, Chief of Staff during the war, wrote in 1927 about his “Verzögerungskampf” policy, the tactics of delaying, detaining, and eliminating threats rather than beginning with any offensive objective (Fuhrer 525). Unlike combatant nations, each of which attempted attacks on the others and suffered disastrous fatality rates and little geographic success, the Swiss strategy simply required building strong defenses and waiting for the battle to come to them. These defenses were erected all across the country, not just at the borders where one would expect to find them. In keeping with Sprecher’s plan to fortify and defend five key zones, trenches and artillery repositories were built in “wilden und oft schwer zugänglichen Gebieten der beiden Hauenstein-Passübergänge, im Wilerholz beim sagenumwobenen Grünhag der Schlacht bei Murten oder gar auf der Cima die Medeglia hoch über Bellinzona” (Fuhrer 18), all deep within Swiss territory. The country was fully occupied with soldiers.⁹

It would be too simple to say that the standing army and appearance of power saved Switzerland from attack, but, as Fuhrer notes, neutrality’s usefulness in war closely aligns with the believability of a display of power (538). In three cases, the dissuasion effect of the Swiss army’s reputation was particularly clear: in March 1888, Feldmarschall Graf Moltke warned against any attack on Switzerland due to the fierce resistance he anticipated from the Swiss people.¹⁰ Graf Schlieffen in 1898 warned against a southward attack on the Western front explicitly because of the strong Swiss army.¹¹ And finally, in 1930, French generals

opined that the Swiss policy of “Verzögerung” would be the only thing between France and an attacking German army in the future.¹² As illustrated by Sprecher’s *Berner Rede* in 1927, he too attributed Swiss success to the show of strength made by the standing army.¹³

The Swiss attempted to keep war far away from home by filling the homeland with warlike defenses and soldiers. Sprecher clarifies this vital performance in his *Landesverteidigung*: “Ob unsere Armee dem angeführten Zwecke genügt, das hängt aber auch gutenteils von der Wertschätzung ab, die sie in den Augen militärischer Autoritäten des Auslandes genießt. Je höher dort ihr Wert eingeschätzt wird, um so eher können wir darauf zählen, dass sie die Nachbarn von einer Herausforderung abschreckt” (Fuhrer 539). Regardless of whether the show of strength was indicative of a real ability to repel invaders, it was successful in preventing military confrontation. The warring powers stayed out of Switzerland and carefully did not cross any borders around Elsass (Fuhrer 532).

The anxiety about occupation and its purpose, played out in *Der Spaziergang*, reflects in microcosm the anxiety experienced by Switzerland and its armed forces during the war, as everyone waited to see whether blanketing the Swiss countryside with soldiers and performing battle readiness would succeed as a defense. The narrator of *Der Spaziergang* employs similar tactics in his attempt to feel protected, covering as much space as possible and performing his readiness to fight, not only through walking but through talking as well.

The text is organized around a series of evasions, digressions, and effusions. These acts, however, are themselves aggressive because, by evading and digressing, the narrator sees himself as actively participating in the war effort. For the Swiss Army, evasion of confrontation *is* itself a kind of participation. Like the army, the narrator evades confrontation precisely by puffing himself up and occupying as much space as possible. Despite a war effort largely defined by the evasion and deferral of direct combat, and the hasty redefinition of militance as primarily defensive and evasive, Walser’s narrator picks fights anyway, because his evasiveness/digressiveness occupies the conversation and is therefore inherently aggressive. Uncomfortable with his own passivity, the narrator uses the digressive means at his disposal to conquer as much conversational territory as possible. These attacks, as considered in close detail in the following section, illustrate the anxious insecurity provoked by the idea that covering space is inherently of military use.

Word War I

The narrator uses the dual methods of walking and talking to take over space. The two actions function in concert, in a manner alluded to by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Walking, Certeau claims, is an “appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian” and “a spatial realization of place (as the speech act is a sonorous realization of language)” (180). For Certeau, the walker or the speaker activates the interpenetration of self and world by performing a subversive counteraction to a system controlled by social structures. By walk-

ing, the walker creates a certain space of her own, counteracting the established landscape through which she moves. By speaking, the speaker similarly appropriates language, taking control of a system otherwise beyond his grasp.¹⁴

I argue that not only does walking instantiate space; language instantiates space as well in a literary text because it occupies page space and the corresponding (imagined) audial space. Although spoken words occupy time and not space in the lived world, a diegetic speech act in a printed text is inherently spatial because the reader sees it as part of a page. Walser's digressive writing and his narrator's expansive loquacity draws attention to just how much of the conversation the narrator takes up, inviting a spatial metaphor for a diegetically temporal experience.

Like the policy of the Swiss military, the warlike demeanor demonstrated by Walser's narrator in *Der Spaziergang* is largely a performance designed to cover or appropriate conversational space, delay the enemy's attack, and bluster into bloodless victory. Walser's narrator treats conversations like battles, which he can win by occupying more page space and imagined audial space than his opponent. The walker as soldier fights with his words to cover all his ground safely, and thus prevent others from conquering it.

These tiny acts of aggression highlight the narrator's misplaced pride in his occupation of the town, which he demonstrates by aggressively covering it through his walk, as well as through his verbal effervescence. Usually, those he confronts remain nonplussed, grow confused, or barely respond, making his militancy strange and ambivalent. When the other character does fight back, the narrator retreats.

At play here, and throughout *Der Spaziergang*, are several layers of a metaphorical war, fought by writers, characters, and Switzerland as a whole. First, the book itself is a published weapon that one uses to attack the enemy. Discussions of the relative merits of books are battles fought out by reviewers and critics in the press. As Heffernan has made clear, Walser's relationship to his critics began with little respect and deteriorated throughout his career, making the fact that he would not be granted recognition within his lifetime increasingly clear. The narrator's interaction with the bookseller early in the text illustrates his ambivalence about the popularity some literature enjoys and some does not. He asks the bookseller for the best book available and is given a text that the merchant swears is the most widely distributed book of the year, but has no answer for whether the book is "wirklich auch gut?" (10). The merchant's confused reaction, "Was für eine gänzlich überflüssige und unstatthafte Frage" (10), depicts at once the narrator's frustration with how popularity and excellence are unthinkingly equated, and allows the narrator to dismiss the bookseller haughtily before continuing on his way, buttressed by his assuredly better taste and understanding.

The narrator often engages in this sort of conversational battle, suspiciously aggressive even when not attacking another character. His flights of florid speech may identify him as a writer, but they also indicate his militant outlook. Lacking a sense of his value in the world, the character carves out a space for himself through lan-

guage. The protagonist speaks like he has something to prove, over-emphasizing his education and fluency with gratuitously florid combinations of words. Walser, by writing in this overdone style, self-consciously enacts the same anxiety: the fear that no one will take him seriously as a writer without his going above and beyond to prove his linguistic bona fides. Towards the end of the story, this technique is made completely ridiculous by the sign for lodgings, which the narrator reports as having nearly 700 words printed on it (*Der Spaziergang* 78–81). The existence of such a sign is far beyond improbable, and the overflowing language presents another instance of words trying too hard to take up space and thereby failing in their ostensible task (to inform the viewer that a hotel exists here).

Oral overabundance appears again and again throughout the text. For example, the narrator gives unnecessary lectures, to uninterested listeners, and seems unable to take their inattention as a reflection on him. Even the interactions not clearly marked as assaults are nevertheless aggressive, usually in the form of unsolicited onslaughts. He accosts an “actress” with a 400-word speech about her beauty and talent on the stage, to which she politely responds, “Vielmehr muß es mich freuen[...] aber bezüglich Ihrer Vermutung muß ich Ihnen eine Enttäuschung bereiten. Ich bin nie Schauspielerin gewesen” (24).

This mistake doesn’t faze him, as the narrator blunders more often than not. But somehow overabundance, even of something factually wrong, can, in his mind, make up for inaccuracy. Several pages later he delivers another 400-word speech to a young girl, lecturing her on the nature of singing and on her responsibility to train her raw talent. The girl does not respond at all, and the narrator admits that he’s really just speaking to hear himself talk: “mehr nur zu meinem eigenen Vergnügen redete, als um von der Kleinen gewürdigt und begriffen zu werden, wozu ihr die nötige Reife fehlte” (38). Linguistic abundance pleases him, marks his territory, and makes him feel secure.

His interaction with Frau Aebi provides another clue as to how abundance and the narrator’s aggression are connected. Invited to dine with Frau Aebi, the narrator begins to eat his lunch but quickly realizes that his hostess will not let him determine when he is finished. As she cuts him slice after slice of meat and closely observes his meal, he grows increasingly frightened, anxious, and filled with a sense of dread. Eventually, he must stop: “Ich vermag unmöglich, weiter zu essen’, sagte ich dumpf und gepreßt. Ich war schon nahe am Ersticken und schwitzte bereits vor Angst” (40). His hostess responds with polite platitudes, saying he cannot possibly be full yet, and then continues into a speech redolent of military sacrifice, demanding he submit himself to her will and possibly to death:

Ich möchte Sie recht herzlich bitten, sich in das Unvermeidliche gutwillig zu schicken; denn ich kann Ihnen versichern, daß es für Sie keine andere Möglichkeit gibt, vom Tisch aufzustehen, als die, die darin besteht, daß Sie alles, was ich Ihnen abgeschnitten habe und fernerhin noch abschneiden werde, säuberlich aufessen und einstecken. Ich fürchte, daß Sie

rettungslos verloren sind [...]. Ein jämmerliches, klägliches Schicksal steht Ihnen bevor; aber Sie werden es mutig ertragen. Wir alle müssen eines Tages irgend ein großes Opfer bringen. Gehorchen Sie und essen Sie. Gehorsamkeit ist ja so süß. (41)

Frau Aebi's aggressive feeding mirrors the narrator's verbal overabundance. She demands that he fill himself with food and doesn't care about his appetite. He, similarly, talks without troubling himself over his listener's interest. Both figures express an oral aggression made spatial: she takes over his space with her words and forced feeding, filling him past endurance, in the same way he attempts to overrun the neighborhood with his speeches.

The narrator leaves the meal with Frau Aebi without displaying signs of physical distress, but much more aggressive than at any previous point in the text. He immediately goes into the post office to mail a letter, which, as is revealed later, contains an inflammatory provocation to a "leitende einflußreiche Person" (46). The letter could not be more insulting, with the narrator accusing his correspondent of snobbery, weakness, betrayal, robbery, and violence, thereby precipitating a "Kriegszustand" and "den Abbruch der diplomatischen, besser: wirtschaftlichen Beziehungen" (46). Having declared war (and committed professional suicide), the narrator seems invigorated and "marschierte kuragös zum Schneider" (47).

At the tailor's, the narrator carefully maintains control of the interaction. The tailor welcomes him with an overstatement of his excellent tailoring abilities and a handshake that is "fast ein wenig zu kameradschaftlich" (47). Eager not to lose the upper hand too early, the narrator cautiously fires back, "Ich komme...um unverzagt und hoffnungsfroh zur Anprobe zu schreiten, indem ich mancherlei befürchte" (47). As he tries on the suit, his worst fears are realized, and he flings his dissatisfaction and invective at the tailor. He has only just begun when he rhetorically demands how the tailor could guarantee fit and cut when the suit has been so "verpfuscht" (48).

The tailor then interrupts him: "Den Ausdruck 'verpfuscht' verbitte ich mir verbindlich," and the narrator must reply politely: "Ich will mich fassen, Herr Dünn" (48-49). This exchange shifts the balance of power. Rather than giving a prolix diatribe, the narrator's antagonist forces him to confront the other person in the room. The narrator attempts to take the offensive again, accosting the tailor with one creative insult after another: the trousers are "einfach abscheulich," a "ganz elendes, dummes und lächerliches Kunstwerk," and the tailor's work "beweist einen Mangel an Intelligenz" and an "Abwesenheit jeden Talentes" (50). But the tailor, unlike most recipients of the narrator's oratory, refuses to back down, and has the effrontery to respond with a long speech of his own, appealing to his illustrious clientele and even proclaiming: "Der Anzug sitzt sehr gut" (50). Having lost control of the verbal battle, the narrator decides to give up:

Da ich einsehen mußte, daß es unmöglich sei, irgend etwas auszurichten, und da ich mir sagen mußte, daß meine vielleicht nur allzu feurige und

ungestüme Attacke sich in eine schmerzliche und schmäbliche Niederlage verwandelt hatte, so zog ich meine Truppen aus dem unglücklichen Gefecht zurück, brach weich ab und flog beschämt davon. (51)

Combative conversation in *Der Spaziergang* illustrates an oral logic made spatial. Confronted with an uncertain place in the world, the narrator walks and talks his way around the town and surrounding countryside in an attempt to situate himself. He uses aggressive linguistic forays to fill the space around him with the sound of his own voice, and to prevent anyone else's voice from intruding and thus attacking his primacy.

Conclusion

Walser's prolix characters, for which he is well known, are not all concerned with the war or Switzerland's fragile position in relation to it. Simon Tanner appears before the war begins and *Der Räuber*, with its excessive digressivity, will not arrive until 1925. Linguistic effusiveness, however, can achieve varied purposes; in addition to the aims described by Frederick, digressiveness can be utilized as a form of control or occupation. In the wartime atmosphere of *Der Spaziergang*, this kind of expansiveness expresses itself militantly. Digression is a technique through which Walser the author holds the reader's attention and arrests his eye movement, in the same way the *Spaziergänger* controls the space he's wandering and blathering through.

While armies make little headway attacking each other's trench fortifications, *Der Spaziergang's* narrator linguistically and ambulatorily conquers the entire town and its surroundings, winning the imaginary war for page space. As he walks, he thinks and talks, and through this intellectual work, which he vehemently defends as work, he occupies linguistic space (visually on the page and aurally in imagined space) and simultaneously geographic space (in the fictional landscape and in the town of Biel).

Analogously, the Swiss military at the time performed an elaborate semblance of war readiness, in which thousands of soldiers marched around all corners of the country. Although the success of this fighting force cannot be judged by traditional metrics (since it never saw combat) the strategy unimpeachably succeeded as a deterrent. This anxious gap, between the appearance of utility and the stamp of conventional success, is reflected by the narrator's obsession in *Der Spaziergang* with the issue whether or not his walk (and by extension, he himself) has a purpose.

Notes

¹ France planned an offensive, called H(elvétie), in summer 1915 *through* Switzerland, the plan being to continue on and attack Germany from the south, but it was dismissed as unfeasible (Führer 533).

² "So verstehen sich Walsers einsame Spaziergänger nicht selten als romantische Wanderer; außerdem greifen sie, durchaus zeittypisch, die Mode der Flanerie wieder auf, und schließlich

manifestiert sich in den Texten das zeitgenössisch gleichfalls virulente Muster der Vagabondage, des unfreiwilligen 'Spazierens' heimatloser sozialer Außenseiter." (Albes 23–24)

³ The nineteenth-century "wanderer" figure ranged from Wilhelm Meister and his edificatory years of travel, to Novalis's yearning Heinrich von Ofterdingen, to Heine and his sharp, political observations in *Die Harzreise*, to various vagabonds and journeymen searching for work in the wake of industrialization (Gottfelf's Jakob or Karl von Holtai's Anton Hahn).

⁴ Baudelaire's Parisian flâneur, and Benjamin's discussions of him, brought the wanderer into the modern urban landscape, a strain of thought further developed by Debord and the Situationist International. Philosophical heavyweights like Kant, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, another sort of literary walker, depended on daily strolls for rumination and solace. See Cusack for an in-depth consideration of Walser's progenitors and Frederick for the digressive character of literary walking in Walser, Bernhard, and Stifter.

⁵ See Utz for a full list of military metaphors in the text.

⁶ These pieces include "Beim Militär," "Der Soldat," "Etwas über den Soldaten," "Der Arbeiter," and "Phantasieren."

⁷ "Wir sind hier in Cudrefin, einem kleinen netten Städtchen am Neuenburgersee, Gegenüber liegt am andern Seeufer Neuenburg. Der Dienst ist durchaus annehmbar, und das Wetter ist seit zwei Tagen prachttvoll. Morgen werden wir in Gampelen das neue Gewehr fassen. Wir haben eine Soldatenstube, wo man lesen und schreiben kann, was eine überaus praktische und schöne Einrichtung ist [...]. Der Wein ist hier übrigens ausgezeichnet. Geschlafen wird wie gewöhnlich auf Stroh in einer Schulstube. Da [ist] die [Luft] meistens dumpf und schlecht, weil so viele Leute in der Stube zusammenleben. Doch über derlei Unannehmlichkeiten setzt man sich leicht hinweg [...]. Sobald der Dienst aus ist, was in ca. 3 Wochen der Fall sein wird, komme ich an einem schönen Sonntag zu Fuß wieder einmal über den Montoz zu Ihnen nach Bellelay[...]. Es grüsst Sie freundlich Ihr Robert Walser/ Soldat" (*Briefe* 89)

⁸ "Wir sind 3 Tage lang draußen in den Wäldern gewesen und 3 Nächte haben wir im Wald übernachtet. Das war für Alle sehr anstrengend, dies können Sie sich denken [...]. Ich habe mich beim Steintragen dumm gebückt, und seither einigen beständigen Schmerz in der linken Seite der Brust. Auch haben wir uns alle mehr oder weniger erkältet, doch wird das schon vergehen." (*Briefe* 91)

⁹ "Der ernsthafte Schriftsteller [...] fürchtet sich folgerichtigerweise nicht vor einigen natürlichen Wiederholungen" (82).

¹⁰ The narrator's anxious pacing, and his attempts to frame it militarily, do not prefigure the military urbanisms of the 21st century, but rather sketch out an increased apprehension about the function of the wanderer as an individual within an ever more bewildering society. In the 21st century, urban scholars like Stephen Graham have expressed concern over "the extension of military ideas of tracking, identification, and targeting into the quotidian spaces and circulations of everyday life" (xi). For Walser's narrator, the quotidian spaces of everyday life have indeed become a battlefield, but only in the character's own mind. Without the totalizing force of a superpower behind it, the narrator's militance remains a half-conscious mental exercise rather than an expression of the state's control.

¹¹ "[...] nicht zu unterschätzenden Widerstand eines Volkes zu entfesseln, das völlig entschlossen ist, sein Gebiet mit bewaffneter Hand zu verteidigen" (Qtd. in Fuhrer 538)

¹² "[...] verwarf 1898 eine Südumfassung der Westfront explizit auch wegen der starken schweizerischen Armee" (Fuhrer 538).

¹³ "Es sei in Zukunft nur der Verzögerungswirkung der Schweizer Armee zuzuschreiben, wenn die deutsche Armeeführung wie im Ersten Weltkrieg auf einen

Durchmarsch durch die Schweiz verzichte" (Qtd. in Fuhrer 538).

¹⁴ "Sie wollen aber nicht übersehen, dass, hätten die Kriegführenden nicht Vertrauen in unsere Armee gehabt, sie sei imstande, einen Angriff gegen sie zu einem mindestens opferreichen und langwierigen zu machen, jede Partei leicht auf den Gedanken hätte kommen können, dem stets mit Misstrauen betrachteten Gegner zuvorzukommen und den zerstörenden Kampf auf fremdes Gebiet zu tragen, um das eigene zu schonen" (Qtd. in Fuhrer 538).

¹⁵ "The act of walking is to the urban system what enunciation (the speech act) is to language or to the system of available utterances. At the most elementary level it has a triple 'enunciative' function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian (in the same way that the speaker appropriates and assumes language for himself); it is a spatial realization of place (as the speech act is a sonorous realization of language); and finally it implies certain relations between differentiated positions, that is, certain pragmatic 'contracts' in the form of movements (in the same way as verbal enunciation is an 'allocation,' a 'positioning of the other' in relation to the speaker, and establishes a contract between speakers)" (de Certeau 180).

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