

Robert Walser (1878-1956)

'Lange wohnte sie nun schon im Turm der Geduld' (1929)

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The Swiss writer Robert Walser is something of an enigma in modern German literature. Walser himself was a rather eccentric character, who spent his days writing and taking long, meandering walks through the Swiss countryside. Walser's writing was considered by many editors and readers to be strange, complex, and even bizarre. Thus, it is no surprise that during his lifetime, Walser did not achieve the kind of acclaim and success that he constantly strove for. However, since his death in 1956, there has been a gradual reawakening of interest in the writer's work. In particular, the discovery of the 526 *Mikrogramme* amongst his papers after his death, each one covered with a minuscule, barely legible script and containing the drafts of many more poems, short dramas and prose texts, has led to a renewed interest in this writer's work. In recent years, Walser's *Mikrogramme* have been deciphered and published, and these writings give us a fascinating insight into Robert Walser's unusual method of producing his texts.

Mikrogramm No.457 contains a wonderful prose text which the reader will immediately recognise as a version of the Rapunzel story from the Grimms' collection of fairytales. However, as we shall see, Walser's version of events is rather different from that presented by the brothers Grimm. When deciphering the *Mikrogramme*, the editors had some difficulty with certain words and phrases from the manuscript, and in some cases, they have hypothesized as to what the author might have written. Such instances are italicized here, to differentiate them from the rest of the text.

Lange wohnte sie nun schon im Turm der Geduld, indem sie oft ihr Haar zu ihrem Vergnügen aus dem Fenster herunterfließen und -gleiten ließ, das der Retter, der noch immer nicht mit Bestimmtheit zu wissen schien, ob er zur Arbeit des Rettens zu schreiten habe oder nicht, leise zum Mund zog, einem aus dem Ungefähren herbeieilenden und -wehenden Windchen erlaubend, mit den kostbaren Fäden, die sich in wundervollen Krümmungen um ihre eigene Feinheit wanden, zu spielen. Im Vergleich zum Turm kam sich der unten auf einer blümeligen Wiese Stehende geringfügig vor, und in Anbetracht, daß er sich die Hände derjenigen, die er eigentlich längst gerettet haben sollte, als überaus schön vorstellte und ihr in seiner Phantasie ein Gesicht schenkte, das alle anderen Gesichter in Bezug auf Lieblichkeit übertraf, erschien sie ihm mitunter wie eine Retterin, die den Retter rettete. Im Raum ringsumher sah es aus, als existiere irgendwie und -wo ein rätselhaftes Lächeln, das die Lippen der Unverstandenen selbst verziere, die ein Symbol ist. Aber auch die Rettungsersehende, in und an sich Gerettete lächelte bei der Idee in ihrem Turmgemach, daß der Retter sie nach wie vor retten zu müssen meinte. Letzterem kam amüsant vor, daß sich ihm die Wiese zum Aufenthaltsplatz trefflich eigne, daß ihn die Höhe und die romantische Gestalt des Turmes auf's Lebhafteste interessiere, die Haare der rettungslos Entschwundenen für ihn keineswegs auf Nimmerwiedersehen entflohen seien und der somit sich die Freiheit nahm, sie zu küssen, die ihn gerettet hatten, indem sie ihn vor eine schwierige Aufgabe stellten, die beides sein kann, ein Retten und ein Gerettetwerden. Das Leben zog am unerschütterlich seinen Standpunkt einnehmenden, *bestän[d]igkeitvergegenwärtigenden* Turm mit den buntesten und unerwartetsten Bildern vorbei. Der Retter sowohl wie diejenige, die gerettet werden sollte, hatten reichlich zum Verglichenwerden Zeit gefunden und schienen sich in diesem angenehmen Zustand auf's denkbar Trefflichste zu spiegeln, indem

eine Menge begreiflicher Eitelkeiten sich in ihren Seelen einnistete. Solange ihn der Wunsch zu retten belebte, blieb er Retter, und inwiefern gerettet zu werden hoffen *läßt*, blieb sie der in jeder Weise interessante und anziehende Gegenstand des Rettungseifers, weshalb/[b] ich mich auszusprechen bewegen fühlen muß: "Laßt sie so!"

[Long had she been living in the tower of patience, often, for her own enjoyment, letting her hair flow and glide down from the window, hair which her rescuer, who still did not seem entirely sure whether or not he should devote himself to the task of rescuing her, would lift softly to his mouth, allowing one of the breezes that came from nowhere, rushing by, to play with the delicious curls that wound themselves in wonderful coils around their own delicacy. In comparison to the tower, the chap standing on the flowery meadow below felt himself to be rather insignificant, and given that he fancied the hands of the woman whom he really should have rescued a long time ago to be absolutely beautiful and that in his imagination, he had given her a face that surpassed all others in its loveliness, she seemed therefore to him to be a rescuer who was rescuing her rescuer. In the area all around, it appeared as if there existed somehow and somewhere an enigmatic smile that decorated the lips of incomprehension themselves - which is a symbol. However, even she who longed to be rescued, who had in actual fact already been rescued, smiled to herself in her tower room at the idea that her rescuer still seemed to think he had to rescue her. The latter found it amusing to think that the meadow was a most appropriate place for him to be located, that the stature and romantic form of the tower was of the utmost interest to him, and that the tresses of she who had disappeared without rescue had by no means disappeared, never to be seen again, and thus he took the liberty of kissing them, since they had confronted him with the difficult task of both rescuing and being rescued. Life, with its most colourful and unexpected images, passed by the unmoving, inflexible tower, which was the epitome of constancy. The rescuer and she who was to be rescued had found plenty of time to be compared, and they seemed in this pleasant situation to reflect each other most appropriately, in that a great number of understandable vanities had nested in their souls. So long as he was inspired by his longing to rescue, he remained a rescuer, and as long as there still remained the possibility of her being rescued, she remained the extremely interesting and attractive object of his desire to rescue, which is why I feel compelled to shout out: "Leave them like that!"]

The reader approaching this text for the first time will immediately understand why the reading public had difficulty with Walser's work: The length and complexity of the sentences make the text sometimes difficult to follow, and we have the impression that the writer is more concerned with the beauty of his prose than its meaning and message. These long, winding sentences, like Rapunzel's curls, often seem like "kostbare[] Fäden, die sich in wundervollen Krümmungen um ihre eigene Feinheit [wenden]". However, the fact that this piece is an obvious rendition the Rapunzel story that we remember from childhood immediately evokes certain expectations. Indeed, Walser's fairy tale incorporates many of the features and motifs that we associate with the fairy tale, but it also plays on our expectations of the genre to produce an entirely different effect.

Robert Walser was born in 1878 in Biel, Switzerland, into a middle class family. After an apprenticeship at the bank, the young Robert found work as a bank clerk in Basel and Zurich. However, his real love was writing, and he would spend his evenings and nights writing poetry and prose. In May 1899, he got his first break, when Josef Viktor Widmann, the literary editor of the Swiss journal *Bund*, published six of his poems, and in 1904, his first volume of short stories, entitled *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*, was published by the Insel publishing house. Inspired by this success, Walser decided to move to Berlin and to devote himself full time to his writing.

Walser's years in Berlin were extraordinarily productive, and he published three novels – *Geschwister Tanner* (1907), *Der Gehülfe* (1908) and *Jakob von Gunten* (1909) – and a volume of poetry while he was living there. However, despite some critical acclaim, these works did not bring in much revenue, and Walser was forced to find some

other way of earning a living. From about 1907 on, Walser began producing short pieces or *Feuilletons* for the literary and cultural sections of the newspapers, something he would continue to do throughout his life. Even when he stopped producing novels and volumes of poetry, Walser would continue to publish prose, poetry and short dramas in the prominent newspapers of his time.

In 1913, Walser returned to his native Switzerland, where he continued to write and publish prose and poetry. However, over the years, he became more and more depressed, and finally, in 1929, he was admitted into a mental institution at Waldau. Despite being diagnosed as a schizophrenic, Walser continued to write until 1933, when he was moved against his will to another asylum in Herisau. In his discussions with Carl Seelig, Walser reflects on the difficulty of working in an atmosphere of constraint: "Es ist ein Unsinn und eine Roheit, an mich den Anspruch zu stellen, auch in der Anstalt zu schriftstellern. Der einzige Boden, auf dem ein Dichter produzieren kann, ist die Freiheit." Walser did not write or publish any more before his death in the snow on Christmas Day 1956.

The prose text contained on *Mikrogramm* No.457 is not Walser's first flirtation with the fairy tale; in fact, this genre seems to have fascinated the writer from very early in his literary career. His 'Schneewittchen', first published in 1901, offers a dramatic reenactment of the Snow White story, but the characters interrupt the action to reflect on the limitations of the storyline and on their own roles in the action. Walser's 'Aschenbrödel', published in 1902, is also based on the Grimm tale, but Walser's masochistic Cinderella is rather reluctant to leave her life of misery. It is only when the prince insists that she has no choice in her fate that she agrees to give up her rags and her bed amongst the cinders and accept the happy ending prescribed by the genre.; "Das Märchen will's. Das Märchen ist's / gerade", das uns verlobt will sehn." Walser's 'Dornröschen' drama, published in 1920, also rewrites the Grimm fairy story, but his Sleeping Beauty also proves to be rather more active and dynamic than the Grimm heroine. She initially sees no reason why she should marry the prince who woke her from her slumber, and only agrees to walk down the aisle after much persuasion. Clearly, the genre of the fairy tale, with its rigid conventions and moral overtones is a source of fascination and frustration to the writer that hopes to produce something fresh and original.

The version of the Rapunzel story contained in Walser's *Mikrogramme* dates from 1929 and indicates that this genre continued to preoccupy the writer well into his literary career. What is noteworthy about this particular *Märchen* is that unlike Walser's earlier adaptations of well-known fairy tales, this version is rendered in the prose form favoured by the Grimm brothers. If anything, this return to prose serves to reinforce the difference between his version of events and theirs. The familiar motifs and formulaic structure traditionally associated with the genre of the fairy tale are incorporated into Walser's text, but they undergo significant modifications and work to undermine rather than reinforce the rather one-dimensional world of the *Märchen*.

This can be seen very clearly in the representation of the masculine and feminine roles in Walser's Rapunzel story. The relatively simplistic gender roles presented in the traditional tale are challenged in Walser's rewriting. In the Grimm story, Rapunzel is a rather passive figure, who languishes in her lonely tower until the handsome prince gallantly steps in to save her from a life of misery and solitude. However, Walser's

heroine appears to be quite comfortable in her tower and seems amused at the very idea that the feeble prince in the meadow below should hope to save her; “[sie] lächelte bei der Idee in ihrem Turmgemach, daß der Retter sie nach wie vor retten zu müssen meinte.” Even her gesture of throwing down her long hair, which in the Grimm fairy tale provides the prince with a means to climb up the tower, is described here as something that Rapunzel does “zu ihrem Vergnügen” or for her own pleasure. Walser’s rewriting presents the relationship between Rapunzel and her prince in rather more complex terms than the Grimm tale.

Throughout this text, Rapunzel’s tower looms over this writing as a rather obvious symbol of power, and the fact that Rapunzel seems to have taken possession of the tower emphasises her authoritative position in relation to the prince. Even the prince is discomfited by this evident inequality; “Im Vergleich zum Turm kam sich der unten auf einer blümeligen Wiese Stehende geringfügig vor”. In fact, from the outset, the prince is presented as a rather weak and ineffectual character, and not at all the vigorous, strapping hero of the traditional tale. The rather feminine setting in which he is located, “unten auf einer blümeligen Wiese”, undermines any attempt to portray him as a figure of masculine authority, and in these circumstances, the prince seems entirely unconvinced about his ability to perform the task at hand. For this reason, he opts not to save the girl, but rather, to lose himself in the beauty of her lovely tresses. This fetishised image allows him to indulge his desires without ever having to confront his insecurities, and thus Rapunzel becomes for him “eine Retterin, die den Retter rettete”.

Indeed, the relationship between rescuer and rescued, which in the Grimm text is presented as a straightforward hierarchy, is challenged on a fundamental level in this text. Rapunzel, who in the traditional story is rescued by her prince, is presented here as his rescuer; and the prince, for his part, is so daunted by the task of climbing the tower and rescuing the girl that he shies away from the duty ascribed him in the fairy tale. This impasse is only solved by arresting the tale before its inevitable conclusion, when Rapunzel has not been rescued by the prince; as the narrator remarks, “Solange ihn der Wunsch zu retten belebte, blieb er Retter, und inwiefern gerettet zu werden hoffen *läßt*, blieb sie der in jeder Weise interessante und anziehende Gegenstand des Rettungseifers”. In Walser’s version of the Rapunzel story, the simple hierarchy between Rapunzel and her rescuer can only be maintained if the fairy tale is not allowed to reach its conclusion.

This decision to halt the narrative before its preordained happy ending represents a significant development in terms of Walser’s treatment of the fairy tale in his writing. His earlier *Märchen-Dramolette* question the limitations of the genre of the fairy tale and challenge its formulaic structure, but they ultimately adhere to the storyline of the Grimm tales, albeit with an element of compromise. The Rapunzel text from the *Mikrogramme* is the first to reject out of hand the foregone conclusion of the Grimm pretext; Walser arrests the narrative before the handsome prince has rescued long-haired Rapunzel from her tower and imagines an alternative ending for the fairy tale. Struck by the beauty of the tale and the characters, the writer feels compelled to capture the image at its most charming moment, and this he calls out “Laßt sie so!”.

Ultimately, this reduction of the fairy tale to an arrested image calls attention to the static quality of the genre. The beauty of these tales has meant that they have been presented and represented many times over the years; thus, Rapunzel and her prince

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“hatten reichlich zum Verglichenwerden Zeit gefunden”. These traditional stories may be beautiful, but Walser’s text suggests that they have failed to move with the times and as a result, the *Märchen* has become a stagnant and fixed form. Like the tower in this prose text, the fairy tale has remained immobile and unchanging in a fast changing world; “Das Leben zog am unerschütterlich seinen Standpunkt einnehmenden, bestän[d]igkeitvergegenwärtigenden Turm mit den buntesten und unerwartetsten Bildern vorbei.” If Walser’s earlier dramatic renderings of the Grimm fairy tales can be understood as an attempt to animate a genre that he become static and inert, then this prose version of the Rapunzel story underlines that the traditional *Märchen* are certainly beautiful, but ultimately too rigid and too simplistic to represent the complexity of modern life.

Bibliography

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See also: Robert Walser, ‘Schneewittchen’, ‘Aschenbrödel’ and ‘Dornröschen’ in: *Das Gesamtwerk in 12 Bänden*, edited by Jochen Greven (Zurich: Suhrkamp, 1978), 20 volumes, Vol. VII.

Further Reading

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