

**Walt, Christian.** *Improvisation und Interpretation. Robert Walsers Mikrogramme lesen.* Frankfurt am Main and Basel: Stroemfeld, 2015. 280 pp. €38.00 (hardcover).

Sometime during the First World War (though perhaps even earlier) Robert Walser began using a pencil to compose his literary texts in a tiny, one to one-and-a-half-millimeter high cursive (*Kurrentschrift*). Walser typically filled pages—or even just scraps of paper, old letters, calendars, etc.—with these microscripts (*Mikrogramme*), which included various genres (dramatic scenes, prose pieces, the novel, and lyric poetry), making full use of the miniscule script to fit inordinate amounts of text onto a relatively small patch of blank paper. At first glance these microscripts appear to be nothing more than scribbles, and indeed Walser's friend and literary executor Carl Seelig declared the 526 separate pages of these writings found in a shoebox after Walser's death illegible. Seelig claimed the microscripts were a "self-invented indecipherable secret code" and thus not worth much further attention. Scholars agree that these amount to only a portion of Walser's micrographic output—the rest of which is considered lost.

Fortunately, Seelig was soon shown to be mistaken in his assessment, leading, eventually, to the transcription and publication of all the surviving microscripts, though this massive undertaking took until the year 2000 to complete. Unfortunately, Seelig's description of the microscripts as an "indecipherable secret code" has not been so easily shaken. It has taken hold in the reception of Walser's work, so that the microscripts have become fetishized as ciphers of modernist experimentation and opacity. Along with Walser's lengthy institutionalization (he spent the last twenty-three years of his life in a sanatorium), the microscripts (as objects and as eccentric writing process) have fed into a mythology that has left its mark on Walser scholarship, where these penciled texts in miniature are often treated as a body of work that is qualitatively distinct from his other, published output. The story goes that they are unique performances of miniaturization consonant with Walser's own disappearing self or with his tendency toward playful submissiveness that ultimately led to silence.

Christian Walt's *Improvisation und Interpretation* is a fine antidote to this story. The book's virtues are many. It is, first of all, finely written, jargon free, and well structured. Its arguments are made on the basis of careful philological work, fortified by reasoned (and not too obtrusive) theoretical armature. Walt's central claim is simple, but powerful, especially in its consequences for the interpretation of individual texts. The microscripts, Walt argues, must be considered as part of a two-stage writing process that involved the direct composition in pencil (stage one: small script) followed by a re-writing in ink (stage two: regular-size script, in which form Walser would send them out to be published). Walt insists that Walser's own description of his shift to pencil as introducing an essential "Langsamkeit" into the writing process has nothing to do with the size of these microscripts, as has been claimed, but rather refers to the two-stage system of writing, the fact that he would by virtue of this doubled process write and re-

write each text. The relation of microscript to the second composition is key. Walt argues that the microscripts are not drafts, *per se*. The second compositions do not correct or improve on their microscript versions—they are, rather, variations on a theme. The doubled writing process thus allows Walser to maintain the spontaneity and playfulness of *Direkt-ins-Reine-Schreiben* in a way that Walt compares to jazz improvisation, in which the alternate takes that follow first takes are not any more “complete” or “correct” or “definitive.”

The relation of the two texts, Walt maintains, is therefore “not primarily genealogical, but rather above all intertextual” (28). With this observation Walt begins to develop his insights into the specific writing process Walser employed in his “pencil system,” leading to an important claim about its consequences for the texts’ semiotic properties. Walser’s method, Walt argues, mobilized multiple contextual frameworks (extra-textual and intra-textual), the modulations of which infuse these texts with richer and more dynamic registers of meaning. One of these central and critical contexts is the page itself—and it is here where the size of the microscripts matters. For because of the tininess of the script Walser was often able to cram multiple texts onto one page, a process that, as Walt illustrates, leads to a kind of semiotic cross-fertilization. Thus the minimal size of the microscripts themselves maximizes the information that on any given page is available to be pulled into the (continued) improvisational procedure of composition.

Walt’s primary chapters thoroughly and convincingly lay out the case for this process of intertextual improvisatory cross-pollination by looking closely at the ways in which meaning *moves* among texts and/or between microscript and *Reinschrift* compositions. His readings are thus not strictly speaking hermeneutic, but rather poetic, in that their goal is to demonstrate *how* meanings are generated in and through the scriptural, semantic, and aesthetic echoes that reverberate between and across various texts. In one chapter Walt focuses on “Otilie Wildermuth,” a piece that exists both in micrographic form and in a second-take composition that was however never published. Here Walt concentrates on the combinatory principle that governs meaning production as well as on the “movement of contextualization and decontextualization” that results from its intertextual allusiveness, which at one point Walt suggestively compares to sampling (122). In the subsequent chapter Walt looks closely at *Mikrogrammblatt* no. 482, which contains 10 sonnets as well as two complete prose pieces (and the opening segment of a third). The conceptual concerns here revolve around the self-reflexivity of the sonnet form and the intermediality that is mobilized by means of Walser’s allusions to contemporary cinema as well as to a painting by Titian. A final chapter considers the “*Tagebuch*”-*Fragment von 1926*, one of the longest (after the *Robber* novel) extended micrographic texts, which Walser also wrote out for publication (but apparently never sent out). This chapter develops many of the observations on intertextuality first articulated in the preceding chapters, while adding commentary on the role of the first-person narrative voice and this text’s play with the concept of “reality.”

I find Walt's close readings to be highly successful and at times truly thrilling. I find his meticulous philology with respect to the corpus of the microscripts refreshing. And I think his central thesis (the two-stage improvisatory process of composition), while at times appearing speculative, to be mostly convincing, and to yield important insights into the writing scene that produced these strange texts. A question still remains, however: why did Walser consistently privilege the second composition by selecting it for publication? It was only ever the second composition that he sent to publishers, never the first, unlike in Walt's jazz improvisation analogy, in which even after multiple takes the first take could very well still end up being selected for inclusion on the record. One obvious response is that the second composition is the only legible one. Indeed, part of the reason for writing it out in regular-sized script and legible ink was so that it could be sent to editors for potential publication. Walt suggests that in those cases in which the microscript version was already pretty "successful," the second composition reflects this by not straying too far—in some cases almost not at all—from the original. The spontaneity and unfettered playfulness of the improvised "first take" thus serves more as a text captured-in-the-moment-of-being-written-down, now only requiring transcription with minimal (or no) revision. The second composition in these cases is not really improvised at all. And yet Walser's two-stage technique still allows for the writing of that initial version "freed from the burden of finality" (21), as Walt puts it. If that were the case, however, wouldn't that burden then be palpable in those second compositions that stray quite markedly from the microscript original? Are these texts somehow less "freely" composed? The answers to such questions remain fully speculative. Walt's book provides us, however, with a philological-textual and conceptual framework with which to explore potential answers to these and related questions with more certainty.

It behooves me here to mention that the book includes 31 illustrations, three of which are in full color. It also includes a 25-page editorial apparatus in an appendix. Here we find a facsimile reproduction and transcription of the microscript page containing the first version of "Otilie Wildermuth," as well as a reproduction and transcription of the second-composition *Reinschrift* version of this text. These are followed by reproductions and transcriptions of *Mikrogrammblatt* no. 482. This apparatus follows the editorial principles employed in the new *Kritische Robert Walser-Ausgabe*, under the general editorship of Wolfram Groddeck and Barbara von Reibnitz, and published (as is Walt's book) by Stroemfeld. As of writing this review, 14 volumes (out of the planned 50-plus) have appeared, including one from the series dedicated to the microscripts, which is co-edited by Walt. This volume in particular is a stunning work of textual scholarship that confirms the argument Walt makes in his book that previous editions of the microscripts (including the six-volume transcription by Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet*) are fundamentally flawed.

Walt's *Improvisation und Interpretation* is a highly impressive work of scholarship, even on its own—that is, without its tantalizing textual appendix. While

certain readers might want to push back against some of its claims, in the end I think the book is astutely argued, not to mention solidly grounded in an intricately undertaken examination of the (extremely difficult to decipher) handwritten texts. *Improvisation und Interpretation* should find itself on the shelves of every serious Walser reader, since it will no doubt be a touchstone work of scholarship on the microscripts for the foreseeable future.

SAMUEL FREDERICK

*The Pennsylvania State University*

**Dürbeck, Gabriele, Urte Stobbe, Hubert Zapf, and Evi Zemanek, eds.** *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017. XXXIII + 449 pp. \$130 (hardcover).

This collection of essays offers an array of approaches to the environment in German culture, containing contributions that are predominantly by Germanophone academics. Therefore, it is innovative on two levels, first by addressing the dearth, until recently, of ecocritical studies on German culture and second by making German perspectives available to Anglophone audiences. The introduction gives a brief overview over previous scholarship and summarizes each contribution, but the editors refrain from providing an overarching thesis given the goal to provide a cross-section of ecocritical writings on German culture. Ultimately, the volume conveys the global nature of ecocriticism and the “transnational and transcultural nature of ecological processes” (xiii).

The twenty-six articles are arranged in five sections: proto-ecological perspectives, theoretical studies, environmental history, literary case studies, and ecological aspects in music and visual culture. The section on “proto-ecology” opens with Anke Kramer’s article on the history of the four elements in cosmology, with special focus on Paracelsus and literary manifestations of the elemental, e.g., in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s works. Heather Sullivan discusses Goethe’s nature concept as seen in his fictional and scientific writings, stressing the presence of irony in his multi-layered (scientific, theological, psychological) approach to depictions of nature. Kate Rigby, like Sullivan a prominent Anglophone ecocritic, offers a compelling discussion of the linguistic and theological implications in Herder’s thoughts on *Natursprache*. Berbeli Wanning examines Novalis and Schelling, both of whom praised the ability of literature to convey deeper insights into nature. Finally, Caroline Schaumann discusses the works of Alexander von Humboldt, arguing that the explorer expressed acute awareness for environmental problems and colonialist abuses in his travel writings.

The contributions on ecocritical theory address Martin Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, landscape aesthetics, systems theory, and risk theory. Several of the articles provide surveys of Germanophone philosophers, as seen in Silvio Vietta’s cogent explication of Heidegger’s ecological thought, or Timo Müller’s concise