The ‘Great Unread’ and the Microgram

In this paper I am writing about reading. More specifically, I am writing about two different kinds of writing that each take a certain stance towards reading. One of these is of the critical, or theoretical, kind: it considers what role reading has to play in the study of literature, and presents an argument for a reorientation of the reading practices of literary scholars. The other kind is literary writing that has its narrators and lyrical voices reflect on the process of reading. Both forms of writing are, to an extent, focused on an activity that forms the condition of their own possibility, though the latter acknowledges this transcendental overlap much more explicitly than the former.

I.

"[W]hat we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more."

Franco Moretti assures us that we, literary scholars that we are, know how to read texts. Considering the general perception of the value of humanist study in the present, this (self-)congratulatory assurance may well cast a warm and fuzzy glow over the mental image of myself hunched over my desk, engaged in scholarly labor, safe in the knowledge that at the very least there is something I indeed know how to do. (The opinions of experts, after all, are supposed to count for something, and in this mental image Moretti might for a moment appear to assume the role of the expert and testify on my behalf before the court of unfavorable public opinion. Surely, like Faust, someone disenchanted enough to be considering a deal with the devil still must be sure of knowing something — and unlike Faust, Moretti will not claim that this something is the very fact that we cannot know anything).

But soon the glow dims. For all the competence that literary scholars display in reading—which is to say: in interpreting—texts, according to Moretti the way in which that competence is applied has reached a dead-end of sorts. We may be capable of continuing to develop an indefinite number of readings, but we will not, Moretti claims, thereby be answering any truly interesting, novel questions. For

2 Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 48; Margaret Cohen, “Narratology in the Archive of Literature,”
him, that interest lies with units of significance that are either much smaller than whole texts (devices, tropes, or themes employed in texts), or much larger (whole literary genres, national literary traditions, or even the literary field—Weltliteratur—as a whole). In the interstices of those extremes the text may well disappear, but to Moretti losing texts as objects of reading will not be a great loss; indeed, less text will be more knowledge, specifically theoretical knowledge. One key problem with more readings of texts, in Moretti’s eyes, is that these readings are at risk of becoming something like an empty display of skill—a skill, he insists, that we certifiably possess. My first hesitation here is related to this assurance itself: is the ability to read—in the sense that Moretti develops, that is, and not simply in the sense of connecting morphemes into words, words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs and textual wholes—really such a given? Is it not much rather the case that literary scholarship, or at least a certain kind of such scholarship, entails learning to read anew, with fresh eyes, rather than simply assimilating content along an exceedingly familiar pathway?

It appears that for Moretti one reason for the alleged fruitlessness of more reading is precisely the fact that, he claims, we already know too well how to do it. Another related but distinct criticism that both he and Margaret Cohen offer has to do with object choice. The range of texts that actually are submitted to close readings by the vast majority of literary scholars, they claim, is exceedingly narrow if measured against the entire historical archive of published texts, which in turn are dwarfed by a whole universe of unpublished material. Canon formation has worked—and continues to work—towards distilling the essence of a given literary tradition to an exceedingly small number of texts that are actively transmitted, and of which new readings continue to be offered. While this canon does grow and get updated with the passage of time, its primary function remains that of the role of an exclusionary device. In light of the limitations of our cognitive capacities, and of time, it stands to reason that we need to make choices as to which texts out of all known texts we decide to read, if any. The very necessity of such selection indicates to Moretti and Cohen\(^2\) that the practice of close reading of a limited number of texts is epistemically deficient: it attempts to draw general conclusions about the nature of literature from too small of a textual base. An additional criticism of an unacknowledged tendency towards reinforcing canonicity is articulated by Cohen. She claims that there is a correlation between particular theoretical commitments of literary critics and the texts they single out for interpretation, and provides the example of deconstructive investigations of selfhood having often taken Romantic texts as their objects.\(^3\) In a similar vein, Moretti has complained that New Criticism and Deconstruction tended to develop their theoretical arguments from a markedly small canon of texts,\(^4\) his implication being that this restricts the reach of any

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\(^3\) Cohen, “Narratology in the Archive of Literature,” 53.

theoretical claims these paradigms may have been making about literature as a whole.

But to what extent could they, or can we, make such encompassing claims at all? I am inclined to take Cohen’s and Moretti’s observation seriously that the sheer enormity of what Cohen has called “the great unread”—that is, the massive archive of literary texts both past and present that simply does not figure in the reading that the vast majority of literary scholars undertake—raises questions as to how literary studies could make any number of large-scale claims about whole literary traditions, literary periods, let alone literature as such. One response to this skepticism might be to stay clear of such encompassing pronouncements, or to offer them with appropriate qualifications.

That, however, is not what Moretti and his collaborators in the Literary Lab at Stanford propose to do. They are not seeking to limit the epistemic ambition of their critical observations, but rather to support wide-ranging claims with an equally wide empirical basis of quantifiable information, namely an archive of hundreds of thousands of digitized, searchable texts. I cannot possibly hope to do justice in this paper to the long history of literary study conceived as Literaturwissenschaft in one form or another, with some of those forms much closer than others in methodological terms to quantitative work in the social sciences and other fields. What I do want to try to do, however, is to highlight the specific role of reading in relation to the creation of knowledge as envisioned by Moretti and others. What sets apart this direction of digital quantitative work from other theoretical attempts that have taken inspiration from science—empirische Literaturwissenschaft, various forms of narratology and structuralism, or even 19th-century positivism—is Moretti’s explicit claim that in his framework, reading is not a substantial component of the creation of knowledge about literature. Simply taken as an additional perspective on what we can do with texts (and literary texts among them), having computers count word frequencies or sentence types, plot paragraph lengths or map locales mentioned in novels seems to be potentially instructive; and certainly, even given the considerable technical challenges that accompany any work with large databases and the information they can provide, computers, not human brains, are ultimately the best tools for carrying out this kind of quantitative work.

But when it comes to reading, Moretti’s quantitative formalism aims to be doing more than only offering an addendum to existing scholarly practices. In contradistinction to quantitative treatments of corpora drawn from a very large archive, reading as the tracing of meaning (and in this one would have to include those kinds of readings that attend to the nature of the trace and the instability of the meaning which it marks) emerges as either self-evidently facile,

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5 “Reading ‘more’ seems hardly to be the solution. Especially because we’ve just started rediscovering what Margaret Cohen calls the ‘great unread’ … there are thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand—no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will” (Moretti, Distant Reading, 45).

methodologically compromised, or epistemically retrograde. The challenge has a certain robustness to it, not least because in the recent past the reading practices of literary scholars (who, to be sure, perhaps never really have figured as models of how non-professional readers might interact with texts) do not exactly appear to be suffering from any marked inflation in terms of the cultural capital they wield. In addition, while digital practices in contemporary culture—despite the obvious importance of images in the digital realm—still are very much textual as well, the kinds of reading that it tends to support are often different from the sort of immersive reading that the critical notion of close reading long ago made into an ideal. Comparatively speaking, the reading encouraged by quantitative formalism (to the somewhat limited extent that reading is involved here at all) is perhaps more akin to parsing a website or a newsfeed for isolated elements than it is to reading an extended text; scanning a corpus for very specific keywords, or the comparative analysis of sentences drawn from any number of different texts without attending at all to the context in which these sentences appear is, as Moretti readily acknowledges, not to be confused with what we more traditionally call reading. All the same, one could certainly argue that this methodological shift is nothing if not timely, not least because this kind of (non-)reading is practiced with the help of the very devices that also encourage skimming, scanning, and surveying in other contexts and ways. The proposed paradigm shift does, however, raise a question that many clickbait victims, or avid watchers of the witty summarizing enactments of literary classics with the help of Playmobil figures, may have had occasion to ask themselves: why read? Why read, indeed, if the purpose of reading, other than to provide entertainment (to which even Moretti readily subscribes), is a mere display of ready facility (‘I interpret because I can’), or a means of merely entrenching somebody else’s prior interpretive moves without adding anything of substance, or even—and perhaps most dubiously—contributing to the perpetuation of a certain

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7 It should be noted here that Margaret Cohen, whose coinage of the “great unread” Moretti adopts, sees more of a continuum between extant reading practices and work in the digital archive, allowing that “reading in the great unread entails attentiveness to the materials of the archive. It also entails humility before the vastness of the task and a retreat from totalizing ambitions” (Cohen, “Narratology in the Archive,” 61). Still, the reading strategy she advocates is markedly different from close reading in that the text here “takes on its importance as the abstraction of a class rather than in its unique specificity” (ibid.).

8 In an interview on the subject of teaching digital literacy, Ellen Carillo phrases this shift as follows: “How we read has already changed. Skimming and scanning have become the default reading practices for so many of us. Engaging in focused, deliberate, and uninterrupted deep reading seems almost a Sisyphean—if not antiquated—task. What we need now is to be aware of those changes. We must consistently ask ourselves, Why am I reading? and then think about how best to read to achieve the intended goal. In some contexts, skimming and scanning will suffice but not in all contexts. If we become more conscious of why we are reading, we can become more mindful readers of whatever it is we are reading.” (https://style.mla.org/digital-literacy/, accessed August 2, 2018)

9 See the YouTube channel Sommer’s World Literature to go: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbagsbpXwh06P1QMHrff44A

10 Moretti, Canon/Archive, 297.
canon by continuing to focus one’s interpretive efforts on certain well-known texts at the expense of a whole archival universe of other material?

This is the provocative challenge that Moretti issues to the profession of which he forms part (in the institutional sense), but from which he is aiming to distinguish himself by means of laboratory work that he explicitly separates from reading. My initial response to this challenge would be not to dismiss it out of hand, much as it threatens to upend my own practices of looking at literature over the last quarter century. One reason not to dismiss it immediately is that it rests on some arguably accurate observations as to which texts a majority of literary scholars actually read; I believe Moretti and Cohen are not wrong to point out that the vast majority of literary critical work is performed on an exceedingly small amount of source material if compared to the overall size of the archive. This holds true even after thirty-odd years of increasingly opening up literary studies towards cinema studies, media studies, the study of popular culture, and other fields that together have significantly enlarged the scope of objects considered suitable for analysis. Yet, the size of the archive continues to dwarf the active corpora that most scholars operate with. Their belated canonization notwithstanding, figures like Kleist, Kafka, or Benjamin are not ‘discovered’ in literary studies every week. Much of this clearly has to do with human cognitive limitations; Moretti himself points out that the archive contains hundreds of thousands of texts which, although many of these may have been popular at an earlier point in history, will rarely if ever be read again. It certainly is not the objective of quantitative formalism to argue that they should, or to prepare the ground for this to happen eventually. Quite to the contrary, Moretti’s essay on Conan Doyle and other detective fiction of the same period essentially tries to reconstruct why Doyle’s work ultimately found more readers than that of his competitors, i.e. why in terms of the development of the genre there is arguably a distinct reason for Doyle’s texts having become more popular (i.e., canonical) than other comparable texts in the archive. Quantitative formalism ultimately does not aim to expand the canon, but to include (many) texts outside the canon in its investigation of large-scale formal properties of texts. Moretti’s provocation may thus be rephrased in the following, somewhat paradoxical way: there is an untold number of literary texts that should receive scholarly attention (in the aggregate) although they are most likely not worth reading; interesting new questions may be asked about a large number of texts which are, by themselves, not interesting enough to seek out to read. This paradox throws a rather peculiar light on the nature of knowledge generated in literary studies; for Moretti, substantially more knowledge can be generated by reading less (not more), by disregarding the semantic dimension of texts at the expense of their formal properties. Essentially, literary studies transforms itself into a discipline concerned not with objects identical to the ones that any non-scholar could recognize and cognitively assimilate—that is, texts—but rather with objects too large and too dispersed to be assimilated without the help of machines, that is: large corpora.

In the natural sciences we have long been familiar with legitimate objects of research that only become visible with the help of specific instruments and which, for the practical purposes of our quotidian interaction with the world, do not exist in
the same way that macroscopic objects like chairs exist. We cannot see neutrinos on the sidewalk when we walk down the street, but physicists will tell us that they are in fact there. In a way similar to particle physics enlarging our knowledge about objects that we cannot discern with the naked eye, quantitative formalism, we might say, endeavors to help us discern literary patterns that we cannot discern when we read a single text, or a rather limited number of them. One important methodological difference in this analogy between fields, however, is that the re-description of the world in terms of objects or elements previously undiscerned still refers in some sense to the same natural world, even if a new scientific paradigm comes to be accepted in describing that world. When it comes to quantitative descriptions of literary corpora, by contrast, the descriptions of the new objects effectively identified pertain to a different world, large portions of which are a veritable terra incognita from the perspective of reading. The fact that this world—the archive—has considerably more contents than any that we could survey with the naked, reading eye is one thing; but what is the status of a world of cultural objects such as the “literary field” in which we do not actually find ourselves as participants, that is, as readers? Abstract theoretical knowledge about molecules or subatomic particles still involves me as someone interacting with these objects, though I do so unwittingly in many (though perhaps not all) ways. Abstract theoretical knowledge about literary objects disconnected from reading, by contrast, does not involve me at all. A world of literary texts that I am not expected to actually read is akin to a world of which I may have a map, but which remains walled off for me to a significant extent. While the map may provide some amount of information about this world, at bottom it is not meant to facilitate access. Many projects pursuing this kind of information processing, such as large-scale investigations of genre, must rely on received knowledge of how a given text should be classified in selecting a given corpus out of the overall archive; any substantial attempts, in turn, to modify such classifications would have to resort to an engagement with the meaning of texts, or perhaps with what de Man called the “modalities of production and of reception of meaning” that are the domain of literary theory. Either of these, however, would involve reading. Can literary studies based on distant reading—executed with computational help and at the expense of human close reading—be of a relevance similar to that of particle physics or econometrics even as it downplays the importance of the seemingly quotidian contact with texts that comes through reading? One could well consider this a key question at a time when literary studies is continually

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11 Of course, any non-physicist will know that it does only to the extent that this knowledge is mediated by means of natural language; Gadamer puts this point as follows: “What would we know of modern physics, which so visibly transforms our lives, from physics alone? All presentations of physics which are directed beyond professional circles owe their effect to the rhetorical element.” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik, Ideologiekritik. Metakritische Erörterungen zu Wahrheit und Methode.” trans. Jerry Dibble in The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present, ed. Kurt Müller-Vollmer. Bloomsbury, 1985. Orig. in Kleine Schriften I. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1967, 117-8.

called upon to justify its very existence and the alleged relevance of the kinds of proficiency it seeks to develop. If intensive or close reading becomes secondary at best, do we spend less time honing that skill? Is there a moment when we have “read enough” so that then we can, or even should, start unlearning what we have just tried to learn? In a way not made explicit by Moretti himself, his arguments from hermeneutic exhaustion, and for reading through texts rather than actually reading them when it comes to formulating compelling questions about them, do resonate with a number of tendencies that increasingly characterize cultural approaches to reading outside the field of literary studies as well. In this way his provocation is constructive because it helps us avoid the assumption that certain practices of close reading, for example, are self-evidently successful when it comes to assimilating texts. This being said, what distant reading and quantitative formalism have trouble bringing into focus is the central importance, particularly in modern literature, of an active reader who is called upon by the text to constitute that text in the first place. Wolfgang Iser memorably coined the phrase of the literary work as a “virtual” one insofar as it relies for its actualization on the consciousness of a reader. For the quantitative formalist, the works that make up corpora and the entire archive are obviously not of this virtual kind, since readerly consciousness and its concern with meaning (whether or not it is budgeted for in the “blanks“ of the literary text as Iser theorized) are explicitly excluded from this methodological regime. And yet it is precisely this auto-reflexive and reader-dependent character that distinguishes many forms of literature—and more inclusive approaches to textuality would argue: texts as such—from mere information.

II.

Robert Walser’s texts are as suitable a case as any to examine the role of the reader as a necessary rather than a contingent component of literature. They truly are Literatur für Leser, even though—or perhaps more strongly: in outright defiance of the fact that—Walser had an exceedingly hard time actually reaching those readers, largely writing, as he did, on the very margins of the literary marketplace. By some estimations, Walser’s work (or at least his novels) may perhaps be counted as canonical, but it certainly occupies a different realm of any canon of modern German literature than does that of some of his champions (Kafka, Hesse, Benjamin). Walser incessantly struggled to see much of his work in the latter part of his career into print, and much of it was published only in far-flung and minor venues. Finally, and this is hardly the least of it: many of his texts are difficult to read. Whether it is the frequent shifting between first- and third-person perspective in his prose pieces, the often imperceptible transition between the registers of irony and earnestness, or the sheer inaccessibility of certain acts of narrative whimsy—Walser’s reader cannot afford to be passive, expecting to feast

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13 Moretti, Distant Reading, 53 n.19.
on low-hanging semantic fruit. One particular feature of Walser’s prose style which any machine-aided quantitative analysis would be hard-pressed to capture is the stark dissonance between a high frequency of seemingly idyllic descriptions of natural and social scenes, replete with diminutives and the occasional, well-placed Swiss-German lexical item on the one hand, and, on the other, the abiding sense of desperation that speaks from and through this seemingly casual and weightless surface; “sobbing is the melody of Walser’s loquaciousness”15 is how Benjamin describes the *formal* transcription of this desperation into prose, a form unlikely ever to be discerned by quantitative methods.

Walser’s copious production of prose pieces (as well as a smaller number of poems and dramatic scenes) over the course of almost 30 years is peculiarly attuned to its existence in a world of readers, which readily explains why a number of these pieces explicitly dwell on the act of reading. A remarkable feature of several of the reading scenes is their anticipatory treatment of some of the very challenges to (close) reading that are arguably at stake in present reading practices: distraction, social utility and embeddedness, the dependence of the writer on readers as gatekeepers of publicity, the pitfalls of reading too quickly. In the following I will unfold some of these scenes for you, something that I will only be able to do as a reader of Walser’s text.

**Zwitschern**

Almost exactly a century ahead of its time in its invocation of mediatic birdsong, Walser’s early prose piece “Vom Zeitungslesen” identifies newspapers as a medium that *twitter*. Still firmly within the epoch shaped by the printing press, newsprint is imagined here as large flock of white-feathered, black-spotted birds that disperses around the globe on a daily basis. Production and global distribution is only part of how newspapers shape communication; the other side of the coin, and a necessary one for newsprint to actualize its reach, is the necessity of readers at the other end: “man muß Zeitungen aufmerksam lesen, sonst überfliegt man das Interessanteste, ohne es kennengelernt zu haben.”16 [One ought to read newspapers carefully, for otherwise you will fly through the most interesting parts without even noticing them.]17 It takes careful reading, however, to be able to parse what the twittering says, and to unlock the “most beautiful and deepest things” (28) that the narrator claims they contain. That is the paradoxical promise of the never-ending news cycle: what escapes us today in view of the incessant onslaught of additional information will be back in similar form before too long, perhaps tomorrow.18 Because the song issuing from this medium remains by

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17 I would like to thank Anthony Zilli for his help with compiling and drafting the translations included in this text.

18 *Was uns heute entgangen ist, wir hoffen, es morgen in einer frischen, teilweise ähnlichen Gestalt wiederzusehen, und in der Tat, Gedanken, Dinge und Taten sind einander durch
and large the same, it has a tendency to encourage superficial reading, leading to easy distraction on the part of readers. As a resident of Berlin at the time this piece was composed, Walser would have been well attuned to the common characterization of the modern metropolis and its products at furthering distraction and dispersal of the self at the expense of depth.¹⁹ His piece duly enlisted the opposing, rural scenario as the place where the newspaper still repays the effort of reading slowly. Old people with enough time on their hands, in particular, are given to honoring newspaper writing with such careful reading, and able to read “beautifully” (29) in a way that must escape those city dwellers who consume the paper while standing in the streetcar or even while walking (31). Walser’s decision to dwell on rural subscribers reading newspapers à rebours in this way, and associating such reading practices with old age, implies, of course, that they tend towards being the exception rather than the rule and are likely to disappear with time. Reading is not dead, and it was not dead in 1907, but it undergoes transformations and cannot be taken for granted. Even if it should be true, as the narrator claims, that “wherever man resides, there is reading” (31), which would have included all the places to which the Neue Freie Presse—the Vienna newspaper in which Walser’s prose piece was originally published—was distributed, this does not preordain how human beings, including those in Vienna, read, and whether skimming, flying through, or over (Überfliegen), the twittered text comes to be preferred over reading closely.

Call to Inaction

If readers may be distracted, it is certainly a longstanding critical commonplace in Western thought that the activity of reading itself may constitute a distraction from what some would argue are more important things. As such, reading may relate in contradictory ways to the notion of utility, a dynamic that Walser examines in the

¹⁹ A few years later and writing in the same city, Georg Simmel famously described the contrast between metropolitan and rural life as follows: “Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it. Lasting impressions, impressions which differ only slightly from one another, impressions which take a regular and habitual course and show regular and habitual contrasts—all these use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates. With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. The metropolis exacts from man as a discriminating creature a different amount of consciousness than does rural life. Here the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly. Precisely in this connection the sophisticated character of metropolitan psychic life becomes understandable—as over against small town life which rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships” (Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities, ed. Richard Sennett. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969, 48).
prose piece “Lesen,” composed ten years after “Vom Zeitungslesen.” On the one hand, as an aesthetically driven activity reading may distract us from engaging in useful, socially valuable action. As 18th-century moralist critiques of reading for pleasure—and of female reading in particular—routinely show, bourgeois conceptions of the social were formed though reading practices under the crucial assumption of a translatability of the reading experience into the social realm.

Habermas described this connection of the 18th-century reader to her social surroundings as follows:

On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature; from his experience of real familiarity (Intimität), he gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former. On the other hand, from the outset the familiarity (Intimität) whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealed to a wide public of readers. The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted.

Writing at the beginning of the 20th century, Walser is clearly less sanguine about any intrinsic coupling of reading and common social purpose, which leads him to praise reading on account of rather un-enlightened grounds. The value of reading, he proposes, lies not in educating us about beneficial social action, but rather in distracting us from acting altogether. Since human beings are far from being given to act solely in useful or benevolent ways, the very fact that reading may distract us also means that it may keep the reader from coming into conflict with others, and from potentially harming them. Two of the primary ways of intersubjective conflict and harm are the drive to action and, perhaps as a subordinate, the drive to accumulate by means of working. Reading counteracts both of these: it is contemplative, and it takes up time that might otherwise be spent working (vita laborans). It has a certain moderating, sedative character, although it is not necessarily as harmless as it might appear on the surface. A good book may raise the reader’s expectations vis-à-vis her own life, and these expectations may well

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21 In his history of reading in the city of Bremen, Rolf Engelsing notes that it was only the combination of entertainment and edification that increasingly legitimized female reading in the wake of Richardson in the mid-18th century, allegedly enabling a woman to become a prolific consumer of edifying novels “precisely because she was not otherwise distracted or prejudiced by anything” (Engelsing, Der Bürger als Leser. Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974, 309). While pure entertainment was considered suspect, reading “in order to assert herself and to create for the bourgeois family—on whose status her own depended—the rightful place in social life” (307) now was seen as acceptable, even desirable, for a woman.

go against the moderating effect of reading that would otherwise seem to support a benign acceptance of the status quo. This is the point where the mimetic identification of reading material with one’s own life may become problematic, to say the least. Walser performatively makes the point by inserting the short narrative “Die Gottfried Keller-Leserin” into the prose piece “Lesen:” in this case study of sorts, the female reader laments the limitations of her own life in comparison to Keller’s books, but is soon convinced by an inner voice that, in fact, it makes no sense to measure one’s life against the fictitious reality encountered in reading. The ‘supplementary’ reading thus added by Walser to the earlier claims in the prose piece underlines that reading of a work such Keller’s, if taken at face value, may upon reflection indeed support self-moderation. But to what extent does Walser’s own reader have to follow in the footsteps of the narrator here? Do we take that narrator’s word for it when he characterizes Keller’s writing through the eyes of his female reader as “nobly comfortable” (edelbehaglich)? And if we do not, what is the upshot of this genial portrayal of reading? Perhaps that there is a much less benevolent flipside to the bourgeois value system stabilized by the kind of reading extolled here, a coin of which the willingness to harm others in view of profit is but the other side. As the author of “Die drei gerechten Kammacher,” Keller would surely be among the first to recognize this. His exposure of the scheming of the comb makers for personal profit in the exploitative social context of capitalism, and his satirizing of the effects of edifying reading in the figure of Züs Bünzlin make clear that readerly perception need not correspond with reality. In fact, the values of industriousness, humility, and modesty that Walser’s fictional Keller reader takes away from her reading are in stark opposition to the desolate ending that befalls Jobst and Fridolin in Keller’s story, robbing them of the “reputation that careful and justly calm people enjoy,” leading the former to commit suicide, and the latter to lead a marginalized social existence. In their case, action in the social realm occasions just the sort of troubling outcome against which Walser’s narrator prescribes the distractive cure of reading. According to his logic, the educational power of reading will not necessarily help prevent exploitative scenarios such as the one Keller sketches out, which the fictional reader’s response to Keller makes clear. The “beautiful” (schöne) reading advanced by this “nice, young, good woman” (185) sees in it nothing but the affirmation of idealized bourgeois values. But the arguable shortcomings of this reading are not so much a personal fault, nor are they in any way specifically gendered. Rather, Walser manages to reflect the problem back to the reader—who may well be neither nice nor young, neither good nor female—of his own prose piece. Like the reader about which he is reading, this reader must develop her own reading of the text before her. She must settle on how to interpret Walser’s characterization of reading as “segensreich,” “fesselnd,” and “nützlich,” all of which are attributes that point in multiple different directions. Like the fictional Keller reader, Walser’s reader might ultimately come to the conclusion that it would be foolhardy to reevaluate one’s life based on one’s reading material, but that is by no means guaranteed, nor is there any clear indication on Walser’s part

that an ironic reversal would necessarily force the opposite interpretation. What he does force the reader to do, however, is to reflect on their own position as reader, which requires, in turn, that there be someone doing the reading. This is what makes Walser’s text into a literary text, and one that could not emerge through a perspective that simply catalogued the claims of Walser’s narrator as affirmative statements about the nature of the reading process. Simply by nature of its form, “Lesen” contains “Die Gottfried-Keller-Leserin,” and reading about the reader puts the Walser reader herself into the picture. The interpretive demands put upon her by this structure do not suggest that interpretation were nothing more than a redundant repetition of an activity we know how to perform already.

Product
A writer seeking to sustain himself financially through his writing must produce. Walser, whose repeated attempts at holding down salaried employment between the mid-1890s and 1921 were always limited in duration, lived by this imperative. On an elementary level, Walser’s case shows that this pressure to supply may even blur the distinction Hannah Arendt proposed between work and labor; whereas she took ‘work’ to signify a creative involvement with the world, a production of things independent of nature, ‘labor’ for her was characterized by the nature-bound cyclical sustaining of the life process. For Arendt, the creation of literary works falls squarely into the former category, not the latter. Walser’s incessant production of prose under difficult material conditions, however, is not always easy to distinguish from what could qualify as labor, and Walser himself characterized it as such in the 1920 prose piece “Der Buchdeckel.” Even though the writing narrator in this piece finds himself absorbed in the creation of a work (Werk), that creation takes the form of labor described as excessive, machine-like manual production:


[Was I not nearly a typewriter? […] There was no time off. Overtime was taken as much as possible. I did not once think about compensation; all thoughts went towards the work. What did I know of an eight-hour work day? In private I had great hopes and believed in many things, such as

that the book would be read with as much joy as I felt when writing it. Almost without my wanting it to, it swelled up and expanded; yet at least I taxed my brain while it did so. Little by little, its volume grew into something considerable. After all, a colleague even expressed to me his honest appreciation. The manuscript already weighed two and a half pounds and looked liable to grow by the hour.

Writing turns the writer into a quasi-machine consistently accumulating pages, and although it is intellectual work that requires hard thinking, to a degree the material aspect of this accumulation does separate it from the will. Writerly output—2.5 pounds worth of manuscript and counting—is measured in quantitative terms just as any product manufactured during an eight-hour work day, or in overtime, might be. The twist to Walser’s satirizing self-characterization here turns on the fact that the value of this “considerable” material output depends on readers who would eventually read what has been written. While the writer laboring away may well believe in, or count on, the existence of such readers in the manuscript’s future, it is far from a foregone conclusion whether readers will in fact materialize who will experience as much joy reading it as the author who labored in producing it in the first place. In fact, as Walser goes on write, the question of whether anyone at all, joyful or not, will be reading the published work is undetermined. Readers, free to read or to decline, are working on their own time, which is not the enthusiastically dilated time of the laboring writer. In the prose piece, both the publisher and the printer, speaking from experience, counsel the writer to be patient, and the first reviewer responds by complimenting the author on the book cover but defers actually reading the book to an unspecified later time. In this way Walser folds the dependence of the writer on the reader back into his writing by composing a prose piece that has as its ‘subject’ the very disjunction between enthusiastic composition and an imagined apathetic reader. Literature needs readers, even if what those readers get to read is a story of the refusal of one of their own kind to read.

All things considered, of course, things might turn out even worse for the writer: his manuscript might never even see publication, further reducing its chance of finding any readers at all. This is the scenario Walser conjures up in “Das letzte Prosastück” (1919). While this is not actually his last prose piece (Walser would continue writing for over ten more years), Walser’s narrator here contemplates ending his writing career after years of enthusiastic but largely unsuccessful attempts of getting his work published:

Zehn Jahre lang schrieb ich fortgesetzt kleine Prosastücke, die sich selten als nützlich erwiesen. Was habe ich dulden müssen! Hundertmal rief ich aus: “Nie mehr wieder schreibe und sende ich”, schrieb und sandte aber jeweils schon am selben oder folgenden Tag neue Ware, derart, daß ich meine Handlungsweise heute kaum noch begreife. (321)

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[For ten long years I have continually written little prose pieces, which rarely proved worth the trouble. What have I not had to endure! A hundred times over, I cried, “Never again shall I write and send out!” only to write and send out new productions every time on the same or the following day, to the extent that today I can hardly believe this course of action myself] (146)

The writer willingly provides a constant supply of new product (Ware) to the gatekeepers at publishing venues, whom he dubs with various institutional titles such as “Bibliothekare” (322), “Dirigenten” (323), “Minister” (323), eventually sharpening the hierarchical difference between himself and them to call them “Götter und Halbgötter” (323), “Riesen” (as opposed to dwarves like himself), “Herren” (as opposed to serfs), “Übermenschen” (326), and “Diktatoren” (326). His work ethic and patience in sending out materials, however, is not rewarded by these professional readers: his work is ignored, and his requests about the status of his submissions are rebuffed or ridiculed. As in “Der Buchdeckel,” the joy of composition (mixed as it is with hard labor) is not echoed on the readerly side, counteracted by the lack of air and resonance that comes with the lack of publicity for written work condemned to the drawers or wastebaskets of editors. Even in those cases where publication does much belatedly occur, work may be diminished for lack of earlier exposure (“alt, matt, blaß und bleich” [322]), or—possibly worse—the eventual reception by a reading public will not live up to expectations:

Wird eine Sache mits Mühl und Not perfekt, und erscheint dann solch ein mageres, armes, um Nachsicht bittendes, kleines zartes Prosastück im Druck, so steht der Autor vor neuer Schwierigkeit, nämlich vor dem nie hoch genug geschätzten Publikum. Ich will es lieber mit weiß nicht was als mit Leuten zu tun haben, die sich für die Erzeugnisse meiner Feder interessieren. Jemand sagte mir: “Schämen Sie sich nicht, mit solchem Gesudel vor die Öffentlichkeit zu treten?” So sieht der Dank aus, den diejenigen ernten, die sich mit Abliefern von Prosastücken ihr Brot verdienen wollen. (325)

[Once something has finally been made perfect, with trouble and care, and a poor, scratty, fragile little prose piece begging for mercy appears in print, the author faces new problems, namely the never sufficiently esteemed public. I would rather deal with I don’t know what than with people who take an interest in the products of my pen. Someone said to me: “Aren’t you ashamed to go before the public with such scribbling?” That’s the thanks you get if you try to earn your bread by supplying your fellow man with prose pieces.] (149)

The esteemed reading public can be a problem. As bad as readerly rejection due to lack of interest at the editorial level may affect him, the narrator takes even less well to being criticized by those limited numbers of “interested” readers who do get to read his published work. His decision, in light of this emotional cost, to stop writing and to earn his living in a different way in the future (“Endlich habe ich unter die nachgerade erstaunlich große Rechnung den Abschlußstrich gezogen” [325]
At last I have drawn a firm line under the truly astoundingly great column of figures; 149] follows with some plausibility from the (non-)reception of his work. The fictionalized recording of such fruitlessness of writing in writing, of course, did find readers in Die Rheinlande, a cultural journal that itself would only survive for another three years after Walser had this piece published. While we have no immediate record about how readers of this journal published in Düsseldorf responded to Walser’s piece, its publication does suggest that writing for readers is, to some degree, a bearing witness to the fact of potentially being without them. The writer needs them but can never be sure that he has them. One might say that this uncertainty is one condition of literature, and one that distinguishes it from other products in the marketplace. One way to study literary reception, of course, is to factor in the success of a certain text, or a certain genre, during a given time period, measuring critical and popular response in quantitative ways (publication history, library circulation, critical reviews, etc.). While we can surely learn from scrutinizing data sets like these, and while this may help us identify the size of a vast field of unread texts, we may also attend to the literary reflection of un-reading in the texts themselves. This requires reading.

Writing Reading Writing

Writers cannot be writers without having been readers, nor without continuing to be readers as they write. Unlike scholars, writers of literary texts do not necessarily write about what they have read, but their reading activity may still leave its traces in their writing. It may even, in the words of the deciphering editors of Walser’s micrograms, help keep a writer from running out of material. Many of Walser’s prose pieces and poems are marked by intertextual references to canonical figures of European literature. In some of his micrograms from the mid-1920s, however, he also draws on his readings of popular fiction, genres that fall squarely into what from a contemporary critical perspective may be considered the “great unread.” The texts are not identified by name, and their invocation is certainly not meant as any kind of normative critical gesture. The most accurate way of describing it is perhaps as a sort of reader response: the author as reader of popular fiction, taking a cursory reading of a popular source text as literary raw material.

One such microgram begins with the following sentence: “Und nun spielte er leider Klavier, daß es wie eine tiefinnerliche Verheißung klang, man fängt zwar einen Roman nicht so an.”[And now he unfortunately began to play the piano, as if sounding out an innermost promise, one should however not begin a novel like that.] Walser thus begins his own piece with how not to begin, and in doing so has already managed a beginning. The writing method used in the micrograms—the


28 Walser, Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet, 1:115.
“Bleistiftmethode,” as Walser himself called it—has been described as a lowering of the barrier to beginning to write: using the margins of documents used for other purposes as the canvas, writing in pencil rather than in pen, and, of course, writing in an abbreviated form of stenographic Kurrent script of such miniscule size that many years of sustained puzzle work were required to actually reveal writing behind what initially appeared to be non-semantic scribbling. Just as the form of writing employed barely qualifies as writing, so, too, the first sentence presumably lifted from a popular novel. The narrator of Walser’s piece, posing as the casual reader of this unidentified sentimental novel, hardly disguises his difficulties in sticking with this questionable choice of reading material before transitioning—within the same sentence—to a different diegetic level that takes off from the first: Ich las mich auf’s Unerschrockenste durch zahllose ungerechtfertigte Zeilenunterbrechungen, überschlug zweihundert Seiten in glücklichster Gewissenlosigkeit, hatte immer Schokolade zur Hand, damit mir der Mut nicht abhanden komme, und gelangte auf einer schönen grünen Wiese männlich zum Entschluß, das Buch wegzulegen, indem ich es als gelesen betrachtete, indem ich noch wahrnahm, wie die niedererliebende Angehörige von ausgesprochenen Bürgerkreisen wieder zum häuslichen Verstand kam und zum Kind zurückkehrte, und wie die Gräfin Cirke, aber ich rede jetzt von einem Manuskript, dessen Verfasser eines Tages im Niederdorf gesehen worden sein soll und uns von da an auf Jahre hinaus entschwand, unruhig am Fenster ihres zierlichen Palaisleins stand und in den von Nachtigallensang umwehmutvollen Garten hinabsah, als es am Gartentor klingelte. [Most intrepidly I read through countless unwarranted line breaks, flipped over two hundred pages with happy unscrupulousness, always keeping chocolate at hand so as to not let my spirits wane, and, at a beautiful green meadow, reached the manly decision to put the book aside, considering it read, noting how the Niederer-loving member of decidedly bourgeois circles returned again to domestic consciousness and reverted back to being a child, and how the countess Cirke, but now I am speaking of a manuscript whose author is said to have been seen one day in Niederdorf and then to have slipped away from us for years to come, was standing uneasily at the window of her dainty little palace and looking into the garden, filled with wistful nightingale song, when the bell at the garden gate rang out.]

Invading the scene of the popular source text, the narrator’s interpolation through the diverting invocation of a fictional “manuscript” here creates a deviation that subverts the gender clichés with which that initial source text liberally operates. Lengthy descriptions of an affair between a “most plain, average missy” and the dashing, piano-playing Captain Niederer (hence Walser’s adjectival neologism “niedererliebend”) are thus overlaid with the narrative of an evening dinner at the castle of Countess Cirke/Cirze/Kirce (Walser keeps altering the spelling

throughout the piece) and her unannounced guest, the would-be poet Spatz. In this narrative branching, entirely different gender dynamics are in play: the countess detests sentimentality while Spatz is upfront about his lack of gallantry. Expected developments such as romantic kissing scene are teased only to be avoided, the narrator’s justification being that “Autoren wie ich überlegen es sich monate-, ja jahrelang, ehe [sie] es zu einem Küßchen kommen lassen” (117) [authors such as I will contemplate for months, even years, before letting things come to a kiss]. Unhindered by such romantic standbys, Spatz spends the hours after dinner not on the couch with his host but rather sleeping by himself under a tree in the castle garden, dreaming “er sei verpflichtet, ein Buch zu schreiben, und wisse nicht wie anfangen” (118) [he was obligated to write a book, but did not know how to start]. The reader is thus faced with a triple mis-en-abyme of writer’s block: Walser, resorting to the Bleistiftmethode to overcome the first, creating a narrator who overcomes his own block (the second) through transitioning from reading and paraphrase into writing “his own” fiction, the latter of which contains the figure Spatz whose dreams are haunted by the fear of beginning to write (the third). As he returns back inside to his host, admitting that he has been “strongly aestheticized” (118) by spending a lot of time in literary circles, the countess offers him to become her personal poet, the chronicler of stories she would tell him, effectively solving his problem of finding material. Here the narrator leaves the diegetic level of the “manuscript” and transitions to an ekphrastic description of an image showing a romantic couple falling to their death from a rock face—another example of material taken from elsewhere. The magic of literary creation—Circe is, of course, the sorceress encountered by Odysseus, first as a threat, then as a helper—lies in the transformation of found material. Having performed such a transformation here, Walser’s narrator can close his story—“du kleiner, anscheinend feiner, immer eigentümlicher Roman” (118) [you little, seemingly fine, always peculiar novel]—that has propelled itself from a thoroughly clichéd place (“one should however not begin a novel like that”) to an ending much less clearly defined. Reading, he has shown, can serve to combat (the fear of) writer’s block: reading not to assimilate information, nor for aesthetic pleasure (except perhaps in an ironically reversed way, as kitsch or camp), but rather to gather material. Superficially grazing in the textual meadow, and going on to work with—or to deconstruct—the found textual objects.

Legibility
Walser’s microgrammatic script has the remarkable quality of enabling the author to compose text while withholding it from (almost any) readers; until Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang undertook the years-long project of deciphering the 526 texts of varying length found in Walser’s Nachlaß, it literally had to be considered legible only for the author. 30 As reported by the editors, the process of transcribing Walser’s minuscule and abbreviated script was as much an interpretive as a transferring endeavor, routinely forcing them to revise earlier readings of certain words in light of later passages that contained what appeared

30 Werner Morlang, “Nachwort,” in Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet, 4:419.
to be the same word. A certain small percentage of the text, marked as such in the published edition, defied all attempts at semantically sensible transcription. As the previous section has begun to demonstrate, the sheer philological challenge of establishing the textual basis of the micrograms is closely matched by the difficulty of semantically parsing them. The aestheticized Spatz memorably contextualizes his dream of writer’s block by claiming that “too much understanding [Verstehen] can make it so one no longer understands anything at all” (118)—a challenge that the reader of Walser’s micrograms might well recognize from experience. Reading many of these texts does not follow the arc conventionally associated with understanding a literary text, or with recognizing the features of a familiar literary genre. The “novel” that the narrator of “Und nun spielte er leider Klavier” brings to a close after the equivalent of just a little over three pages of print, for example, can hardly be called such, even though the self-reflexive structure of the piece certainly recalls plenty of features of the modern novel en miniature. The fact that this text and its microscripted companions never were written directly explicitly for readers other than Walser himself (who used much of the microgram material as early drafts for pieces that would later appear in print) may well contribute to shaping the limits of understanding here. It should be noted, however, that even many of his later published texts push the boundaries in this respect; a notable example was Walser’s literary reaction to having been rebuffed by an editorial reader, Eduard Korrodi of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, in a manner not dissimilar to what is described in “Das letzte Prosastück.” Rather than backing down, as that piece playfully implies, Walser ended up successfully submitting a poem to the Prager Presse, entitled “Der beleidigte Korridor” (1927), in which he mocks the circumstances of having been refused due to “Korridorungnade.” As Morlang points out, the obscure pun on the proper name of a Swiss critic (Korrodi/Korridor) hardly would have resonated with newspaper readers in Prague (where Walser generally had had more success getting published and being read), but this lack of context and the more sympathetic reception in a distant city arguably egged him on even more, writes Morlang, “to unsettle his readers with the most bizarre figments of his imagination.”

In this case, then, the context of publication provides something of a key to unlocking Walser’s literary whimsy, something that is not the case across all of his work.

If a writer is nothing without readers but cannot be assured of having them, a reader needs a text but cannot necessarily feel any more assured about knowing how to read it. Walser’s thorough familiarity with literary history, with the “literary circles” that mislead his character Spatz down the path, possibly, of too much understanding, is constantly played off against his willingness to disrupt our readerly expectations. While it could certainly be argued that we know how to read what Echte and Morlang have transcribed, or what Otto Pick decided to publish in Prager Presse, this only puts us at the potential beginning of literary knowledge, not its end. Close reading might or might not reveal that a text such as “Das letzte

32 Morlang, “Nachwort” (op. cit.), 419.
Prosastück” suspends itself between the legibility of the printed page and the fictionality of its announced raison d'être, but any attempt at passing judgment on this question at least needs to commit to reading.

III.

Taking distance from reading to focus on the “great unread” in two entirely different senses—namely a) either those innumerable works that once were read, maybe even in great numbers, but have been forgotten and/or no longer receive critical attention; or b) whole literary traditions not accessible to a given scholar to linguistic barriers and/or lack of available translations—is to take a very different perspective on unread-ness, or non-readability. As Moretti argues, large corpora of such texts "don't speak to us, which is to say, they have no meaning in the usual sense of the word." Removing meaning—the thing that literary critics study, even if that study should involve a questioning of its very integrity as a concept—to the periphery of the picture is not so much a problematic byproduct of this approach but rather its methodological core. While it seems quite sensible to bracket the question of meaning in order to pursue the inquiry of certain formal patterns in large arrays of texts, such inquiries are at risk of taking what they have bracketed to be far more self-evident, stable, and accessible than it is. A reading of Walser’s work in terms of what would be thus suspended by a quantitative formalist approach shows that the very question of how to read not only addresses the semantic dimension of the text but also its formal characteristics as a text among other texts, both published and unpublished. To the extent that this dimension is not reflected in corpora and the way in which they are studied, it may be correct to say that the literary quality of texts assembled in corpora subject to this type of investigation tends to disappear. It was W.G. Sebald who pointed out the peculiar nature of Walser’s writing in its weightlessness, lack of categorizable features, and resistance to systematic inquiry, but arguably these are the very qualities—challenging as they are for the reader—that qualify it as literature.

Walser’s attachment to the marginal, the forgettable, and the vanishingly small stands in marked conceptual opposition to the interest in bigness that registers in Moretti’s and Cohen’s championing of the great unread, of Big Data, for literary study. While Moretti, as quoted at the outset of this essay, argues that less (text) may make for more (knowledge of literature), the accompanying argument for an archive of maximal size, joined to the critique of close reading strategies as limiting

Moretti, “Patterns and Interpretation,” 297. As Amir Khadem has rightly pointed out, the conflation of a) and b) is highly problematic and calls for closer specification of what is meant by “unread” in any given case: “The attempt to expand the range of study faces a serious problem when it does not acknowledge the difference between the literary merits of, say, an anonymous story published in a pulp magazine, and a groundbreaking historical novel written by a Middle Eastern writer. Both may be unread in the perspective of a Western scholar of World Literature, but they do not call for the same methodological attention” (“Annexing the Unread: A Close Reading of ‘Distant Reading,’” Neohelicon 39.2 [2012]: 418). Walser’s micrograms and poems arguably present yet another variant of what may be considered ‘unread.’

themselves to too small of a canon, actually amounts to the opposite claim when it comes to data, namely that *more is more*. The benefit of large data sets, however, can only emerge in the context of their homogenous systematic treatment, and under the assumption that those semantic features that have led to certain prior classifications of a given text within that archive are no longer up for questioning. Moretti might put it another way, namely that they do not pose problems that are interesting from a conceptual point of view. It makes some sense that he treats the quantitative formalist method as the opposite of reading, since from a reader’s perspective it may be exactly the small detail within a large corpus that prompts reflection and, possibly, analysis. Walser’s aptly titled late poem “Das Wenige” (1930)\(^\text{35}\) is written from just this sort of readerly perspective:

Das Wenige

Es war einmal ein Herr Autor, 
der seine Zeit damit verlor, 
daß er viel flotte Worte machte 
und es zu Ruhm und Ansehn brachte. 
In seines hübschen Stübchens Enge 
schrieb er an Büchern eine Menge, 
doch alles, was ich von ihm las, 
mich nicht so int’ressiert’ als das, 
was er auf einer einz’gen Seite 
in ungeahnter Herzensweite 
mit einem Tone sammetsatt 
geschrieben und gedichtet hat.

*The Less*

*There once was an author in his prime, 
who in the end spent all his time, 
drafting quick word after word, 
finding fame and esteem in the world. 
In his neat chamber’s tight little nook 
he wrote a great deal, book after book, 
though of everything of his I’ve read, 
nothing so occupied my head 
as that which he, on a single page, 
following his heart’s unknown ways, 
set down in poetry and in print, 
with the full-throated tone of pure velvet.*

\(^{35}\) Walser, *Die Gedichte* (op. cit.), 199.
Walser’s own lack of literary fame notwithstanding, he, too, was a prolific producer of text whose reader may be drawn to particular details on a single page, even if the tone may not be reminiscent of velvet (as the tone of this poem certainly is not). Quantity, then, does feed back into the dimension of meaning, as selection and focus are themselves part of the process of reading literature. While there is a limit to how many “flotte Worte” we will ever be able to process as part of that process of selection, and while the choice not to read remains open to us as a reaction to that limitation, Walser’s writing, voluminous and microscopic at the same time, presents a good argument for choosing otherwise.

Coda: Re-Translating Celebrity

Walser’s preoccupation with literary fame (and his own lack thereof) underlies more than a few of his late poems. In many of these he resorts to lexical choices in holding up rigid rhyme schemes that veer far from ‘high literary’ poetic practice into the satiric and parodic, echoing the questioning of literary-critical value judgments also on a formal level. One particular poem of this kind that is found among the micrograms and had never previously made it into print plays out the opposition between lyrical I on the one hand and a canonical literary success story on the other in the genre of translation. More specifically, Walser’s lyrical I appears in this poem as a re-translator of Paul Verlaine’s celebrated poem “Il pleure dans mon cœur,”

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville;
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

Ô bruit doux de la pluie
Par terre et sur les toits!
Pour un coeur qui s’ennuie,
Ô le chant de la pluie!

Il pleure sans raison
Dans ce coeur qui s’écoeur.
Quoi! nulle trahison?...
Ce deuil est sans raison.

C’est bien la pire peine
De ne savoir pourquoi
Sans amour et sans haine
Mon coeur a tant de peine!

The tears are falling in my heart
The way the rain falls on the city;
What is this languorous dart
That pierces through my heart?

Oh, gentle sound of the rain,
On the ground and on the roofs!
For a heart feeling boredom’s strain,
Oh, the song of the rain!

Tears are falling for no reason
In this, my heartsick heart.
What! there was no treason?
This grief is for no reason.

Truly, the hardest sorrow
Is not even to know why,
No love, no hate—today, tomorrow—
My heart is filled with so much sorrow!

although the resulting poem may be read as commentary on re-translation much more than as an actual retranslation of the source text:

Hier wird sorgsam übersetzt
das Gedicht von Paul Verlaine,
wo der Regen hat genetzt
jene Dächer der Seine.

Ganz Paris steht grau in grau,
nach der Sehnsucht ich mich sehne.
Sieh’ mal an, ich mach miau,
ähnlich wie einst Paul Verlaine.

O du mehr als schon genug
übertragenes Gewähne,
einst vor zwanzig Jahren frug
ich auch sehr nach Paul Verlaine.

Stimmungsvoll ist zweifellos,
was ich dehne da und dehne,
punkto Neuigkeit war groß
unser Papa Paul Verlaine.

Gebet eine Zwiebel mir,
daß die Träne mir auch träne,
die einst unsrem Paul Verlaine

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36 The English translations both of this poem by Verlaine and of the following Walser “re-translation” are by Damion Searls, in Damion Searls, “That Old Goat!”, The Paris Review, 30 Sept. 2015. The version of Walser’s poem translated here includes an additional stanza (stanza 3) that is not included in the Echte/Morlang edition.
rinnelt' auf das Schreibpapier.

Höchste Zeit ist's, wie ich meine, daß nun endlich Robert Wals sich auch mal vorstellt als ein Verdeutscher von Verlaine.37

*Here is a scrupulous translation of a poem by Paul Verlaine, the one about the inundation of the roofs along the Seine.*

*All of Paris gray on gray now,*  
*I long for longing in the rain.*  
*Looky here, hear me meow,*  
*much as once did Paul Verlaine.*

*Oh you flight of fanciful stuff already translated more than enough,*  
*twenty years back I too did deign to be interested in Paul Verlaine.*

*Moody and atmospheric, doubtless,*  
*is what I here take up again; great too with respect to newness was our Papa Paul Verlaine.*

*Lord, send me an onion*  
to bring forth tears of also mine  
like those that, for our Paul Verlaine,  
on ink-covered paper once did run.*

*Now it is high time, I'm just sayin', for at last our Robert Wals to show his face when duty calls and put into German Paul Verlaine.*

In contradistinction to the celebrated author of the source text, the lyrical I as translator does not strive to deliver the “news” (*Neuigkeit*) of original literary creation but rather, much more modestly, a copy of such originality that, consequently, is not “great” (*groß*) but rather small. Of course, this famous poem has previously been translated into German, so the act of “careful” (*sorgsam*) re-translation must arguably care for something that has not been attended to in

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previous attempts. What this alleged re-translation certainly does not focus on is the content of the original poem: Verlaine’s attempt to poetically capture a sense of empty longing, boredom, and melancholy (“langueur,” “ennui,” “deuil,” “sans raison,” “sans amour,” “sans haine”). Where Verlaine’s lyrical I cries “without reason,” Walser’s lyrical I claims to need the physiological stimulation of an onion to be able to approximate this tear-inducing affect; and not possessed of the same longing as Verlaine, he is reduced to desiring that longing itself. Parodically, Walser’s lyrical I compliments himself for the lyrical mood (Stimmung) he is invoking, although it is, of course, a mood that is altogether at odds with Verlaine’s original poem. Where the conscious eliciting of a melancholic mood becomes the subject, that mood itself obviously has no place.

If Walser’s “re-translation,” then, disrupts the very mood its lyrical voice strives to bring about by non-poetic means, what is it for which it cares? It is the fame of the French poet that separates it from its Swiss-German pseudo-translator, its “Verdeutscher.” What previous translations of this poem (plentiful in number, as Walser notes, and most of them doubtlessly more faithful) will not have focused on is one particular para-textual part which remains—as in any text that is published non-anonymously and hence may help accrue fame for its author—strictly untranslatable: the proper name of its author. Walser’s poem fixates on the name “Paul Verlaine” as the marker of literary success and paternity, repeating it in every stanza. Beyond simply repeating it, however, Walser in his role as a careful Germanizer inscribes it into the rhyme scheme in such a way that a reader reciting Walser’s German poem would need to pronounce the elongated diphthong in “Verlaine” not just as a French reader would pronounce it, but also in other, distinctly less authentic ways. Whereas the first stanza pairs “Verlaine” with the proper name “Seine” and so initially prompts the accurate French pronunciation, stanzas two and four pair it with “sehne” and “dehne,” phonetically prompting [eː]; stanzas three and five pair it with “träne” (prompting [ɛː]), and stanza five goes even farther afield with “meine” (prompting [aiː]).

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38 Stefan Zweig’s translation of this poem (presented as a “Nachdichtung”), to name one example, takes care to preserve the rhyme scheme, the number of stanzas (which Walser does not), and, arguably, the poetic mood of the original while allowing itself a good amount of freedom in its phrasing; see Zweig, “Regenlied” in Rhythmen. Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1983, 217.

39 It bears noting that Verlaine’s literary fame—his “symbolic capital,” as described by Bourdieu—by no means implies that his social existence was not, in many ways, just as precarious as Walser’s own (see Pierre Bourdieu, The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, 268-9). Walser himself hints at this contradiction in the concluding lines of his published poem “Gedicht auf Paul Verlaine” (1926): “Obschon er eigenhändig flickte seine Hosen, / blühn seine Werke wie die Rosen / und bleibt er einer der bedeutendsten Franzosen” (Walser, Die Gedichte, 181) [Though he was left to patch his own clothes, / his works bloom like the perennial rose / and he lives on as a Frenchman that everyone knows.]

40 The diphthong—which is what Walser playfully elongates (“was ich dehne da und dehne”)—is sometimes classified in German as grammatical companion to the “Dehnlaut”, with the latter doubling the same vowel, the former pairing different vowels.

41 For obvious reasons the English translation cannot capture this key phonetic structuring of the poem.
The *Verdeutschung* in this poem is hence happening hardly on the semantic level; the only two words shared between the two poems as direct lexical translations are *pluit/Regen* and *toits/Dächer*, with “Träne” appearing in the original poem only as a verb (*pleurer*). Rather, it is phonetic in nature, with Walser writing a poem for German readers, some of whom—it is gamely imagined of poetry consumers reading translations of a famous French symbolist poem—may not know how to properly pronounce the last name of its author. Playfully, Walser thus lowers himself to the level of the German-izer “Robert Wals” who loses a suffix in fitting himself to the role, “taking care” as he plays second fiddle to a literary forefather—someone who, unlike Walser, needs no introduction, and whose name may yet be mispronounced abroad. This re-translation is a transporting of the connotations of literary notoriety across a phonetic gap, one that opens only for a reader, reciting the text on the other side of that opening.

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