Narratives Unsettled: Digression in Robert Walser, Thomas Bernhard, and Adalbert Stifter by Samuel Frederick (review)

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Narratives Unsettled: Digression in Robert Walser, Thomas Bernhard, and Adalbert Stifter. By Samuel Frederick. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 237. Paper $29.95. ISBN 978-0810128187.

According to a powerful literary-critical tradition that extends as far back as Aristotle, plot is to narrative what the mean will later become to the normal curve—the standard by which other points on the curve are judged. Moments of literary digression occupy the interpretive margins like so many standard deviations. In this smart and readable book, Samuel Frederick works toward a theory of narrative that would allow us to talk about *narrative* in respect to literary works which favor digression over plot (in what follows, I render consistent Frederick's occasional habit of using italics to distinguish his broadened conception of *narrative* from a traditional, plot-based narrative). He builds a case for talking about the kind of *narrative* conveyed through an "*impulse to tell*, over and against any cohesive set of *things to be told*" (171). In doing so, Frederick inflicts damage to the influential narrative model of Peter Brooks, according to which narrative is driven always and everywhere by a goal-directed masculine desire.

Of the four main chapters, the first two are devoted to Robert Walser. In his first chapter, Frederick provides readings of two short stories, "Einmal erzählte einer," and "Der Spaziergang." A subsequent chapter examines a number of Walser's so-called microscript pieces, the short texts Walser wrote out in idiosyncratic hand. Thomas Bernhard's novel *Die Verstörung* provides the material for chapter three, and the final chapter is an examination of Adalbert Stifter's *Nachsommer*.

In Walser, says Frederick, the reader encounters "a proliferation of deviations that branch out from multiple beginnings" (27), each of which undergoes shift and change such that it becomes unfixable as a beginning. "Einmal erzählte einer," for example, adopts a narrative mode whereby *narrative* paradoxically emerges out of Walser's persistent metacommentary, either about his reluctance to narrate or about the narrative itself. If Walser's microscript texts eschew conveying events per se, Walser instead produces *narrative* by allowing plotless forms to proliferate, most typically when the narrator reflects on writing in the act of writing. Inverting the hierarchy hitherto established by narrative theory, Walser's microscripts offer discourse, which inclines toward the serialization or concatenation of events, in place of story, which revolves around plot.

Frederick then elegantly reinterprets Bernhard's well-known description of himself as a "Geschichtenzerstörer," so that it speaks, not to what many commentators have taken as an aversion to mimetic description, but rather to a false representation of wholeness. In his battle against losing himself in what Frederick (somewhat repetitively) calls the "infinite continuum," Bernhard produces works "littered with the corpses of the stories he has shot down" (103). In *Verstörung*, Bernhard effectively

leverages the Prince's madness (the infinite) against the plotted whole (the finite) in order to gesture toward a utopian state.

Prompted by Stifter's indifference to narrative causality combined with the author's enthusiasm for relaying incidental details, Frederick then reads *Der Nachsommer* as a *narrative* experiment in overcoming narration. With an eye toward bringing out the narrative qualities of the novel, its subsequent editors excised considerable portions of Stifter's text. The bulk of this chapter is an illuminating consideration of some of the most striking editorial changes they made.

What, for the reader, is the payoff of digression—defined by Frederick as "such excess, that which breaks up—*unsettles*—plot's drive for unity by means of disruption, dispersal, or proliferation" (117)? A number of answers are offered: the excess of difference conveyed by Walser's prose texts short-circuits a desire, ordinarily shared by the reader, for "resolution or orientation toward an end" (55). Walser invites a way of reading which renders the ordinary meaningful. In *Verstörung*, Bernhard marshals normative expectations of plot so as to reveal to us their incongruence "with a world that resists being totalized" (111); and Stifter's *Nachsommer* circulates in a postnarrative space from which he fashions an aesthetic of uselessness rather than instrumentality. Frederick notes in his conclusion that Walser, Bernhard, and Stifter place "the pointless and insignificant minutiae of everyday life" before the reader, and that this should be applauded if only because "insignificance is our fate" (173).

As plausible and engaging as these answers are, Frederick makes little attempt to connect them to theoretical idioms outside of the narratological tradition in which he is so well versed. Frederick's advocacy of *narrative*, for example, calls to mind Critical Theory's interest in works of art which deliberately embrace fragmentation, refusing to reconcile their various elements in a tense bid to expose the unity of social life as incongruous. If Critical Theory's interpretative practices were rooted in historical experience, Frederick—and this is perhaps the more telling point—remains equally uninterested in relaying any kind of story about modernity that would compel us to apprehend *narrative* as something indispensible. Moreover, in the absence of historical coordinates, Frederick's opprobrium of plot—which he charges variously with a "striving for totality" (3), "unifying dominance" (17), overriding influence" (8), and "self-consuming end" (57)—sometimes comes across as heavy-handed.

Although Frederick does sporadically work W. G. Sebald into his argument, he might have made more of Sebald's theoretical preoccupation with Stifter, Walser, and Bernhard, which was traceable in no small part to the circumstance that all three hailed from the German periphery. This peripherality represented a form of spatial or geographical deviation that might have served as a productive metaphor for the verbal digression manifest in these authors' collective work. Perhaps more surprisingly, there is no appearance in the book of Sebald the practitioner: his own literary project, so decisively shaped by Frederick's chosen authors, would have made a fine closing chapter, one that could have extended Frederick's implicit historical arc.

Perhaps in the end, though, we should take Frederick at his word when he states—as he does toward the beginning of his study—that the task of historicizing is one best left for a future project or to other scholars. To interweave a traceable historical narrative into his already rich account might have smacked too much of the drive for plotted completion he wishes to undermine. As it stands, Frederick has written a fine study that demonstrates his fluid command of narrative theory, and which successfully argues for the place of digressive *narrative* within that tradition.

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German Writing, American Reading: Women and the Import of Fiction, 1866–1917. By Lynne Tatlock. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 347. Cloth $57.95. ISBN 978-0814211946.

Long before German companies drew on the phrase "made in Germany" to highlight the quality of their export products, nineteenth-century publishers in the United States used the same idea to sell popular novels translated from the German to an avid American reading public.

In *German Writing, American Reading*, Lynne Tatlock introduces us to this phenomenon, drawing extensively on library circulation records, reviews, and publication data to underscore the popularity of domestic fiction by German women among American readers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Central to this phenomenon was the lack of copyright protection for foreign works, a situation which allowed American publishers to print and reprint translations of pirated German novels. Tatlock's groundbreaking study of this little-known subset of nineteenth-century Americans' reading—popular novels written by German women and translated by American women—fills a gap in American literary history and opens up a new, cross-cultural field within German Studies.

The large numbers of translated German books circulating in the United States in the nineteenth century has been consistently overlooked by American literary and cultural historians. One reason for this, Tatlock argues, lies in this literature's "multiple marginalization": the books were popular, foreign, read in translation, authored and consumed by women (11). Tatlock takes a rich, multi-dimensional approach to her analysis of this body of literature, addressing the works in terms of their plots, their translators and translations, their readership, and their reception. In so doing, she draws on approaches from book history, women's and gender studies, reception theory, and literary criticism, examining the works both as material objects (including cover art and inscriptions) and texts requiring interpretation.

In part one, "German Writing, American Reading," Tatlock expands upon the book's introduction by providing an overview of several of the nineteenth-century German women authors whose translated works enjoyed such popularity in the United