

## The Autobiographical Subtext in Martin Walser's *Letter to Lord Liszt*

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Martin Walser's novel describing the troublesome, self-destructive relationship between two sales representatives, *Brief an Lord Liszt* (1982; *Letter to Lord Liszt*, translated by Leila Vennewitz in 1985),<sup>1</sup> has been adjudged by most critics to be another example of Walser's continuing attack on the German *Wohlstandsgesellschaft* in the sixties and seventies, the reign of big business in a commercialized, anti-individualistic society. In an interview with Walser, Anton Kaes discussed the development of this theme in his work and proposed: "Your earlier novels ... made you well-known as a chronicler of the FRG's economically thriving society.... However, you seem somehow recently to have given up a panoramic overview of society in favor of more restricted and concentrated anecdotal descriptions [of that society] (for example in *The Inner Man* or *Letter to Lord Liszt*)." <sup>2</sup> In response to this comment, Walser explained that he had indeed newly changed the narrative stance in his fiction. Not only had he begun to use a third-person narrator instead of a first-person one, but he had also limited himself to depicting one protagonist in his relationship to an inimical world as personified by a single one of its inhabitants. Kaes inquired further as to whether this concentration on one individual might incline Walser to use autobiographical material more readily since he seemed to be associating his own malaise with his protagonist's. Walser replied: "My fictive character is a reaction to that which, I, in order to avoid my being indiscreet in regard to myself, call my shortcoming. The figure is therefore the expression of that shortcoming."<sup>3</sup> In general, and especially in the matter of *Letter to Lord Liszt*, interpreters of Walser's work have paid insufficient attention to its confessional aspects; thus, one eminent critic, Frank Pilipp, attributes (admittedly not totally) the "sorrows" of Walser's protagonists to their inherited lack of social standing.<sup>4</sup> While it must be conceded that this character "flaw"—e.g., Franz Horn's despair as a result of his socially induced self-effacement—is patently the motivating factor in bringing about the downfall of Walser's protagonists, I shall seek to

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the English translation, published in New York by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, will be given in the text after the rubric LL. References to the original will also be given, following the abbreviation BL, referring to Martin Walser, *Brief an Lord Liszt* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Anton Kaes, "Documentation: Martin Walser," *German Quarterly* 57. 3 (1984): 434; my translation.

<sup>3</sup> Kaes 434–35.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Pilipp, "Von den Nöten des Kleinbürgers," *Leserfahrten mit Martin Walser*, ed. Heike Doane and Gertrud Bauer Pickar (Munich: Fink, 1996) 55.

shed some light on the almost overlooked autobiographical element in this configuration as it appears in *Letter to Lord Liszt*.

The outstanding feature of the novel is its epistolary nature; the text is a written letter in its entirety. An auctorial narrator introduces the "I" of the letter-writer in twenty pages and dismisses him with the same terse objectivity in the few pages which describe the letter's ultimate fate—to remain unsent, a discarded literary exercise. As soon becomes apparent, the author of the letter, Franz Horn, is writing it in order to settle the score with Horst Liszt, his competitor in a struggle to remain in the good graces of the tyrannical head of the firm for which they work in a semi-managerial capacity. Clearly, Walser has chosen their names for the sake of the symbolic values they convey. "Franz" and "Horst" represent in a German context the ordinary; they are common names. Their family names are explicitly more unusual. The anomalous "Horn," while not unique, suggests a hidden reference to the title of Walser's earlier and critically celebrated novel *Das Einhorn* (*The Unicorn*, 1966). In it the first-person narrator and protagonist records at great length the aural and emotionally debilitating emanations of the modern world of business enterprise which engulfs him. The assumption that the woes inflicted on the principal character are those of Martin Walser himself can readily be made. The name "Horn" in *Letter to Lord Liszt*, therefore, attests to the fact that, as in the "Einhorn" novel, the same confessional aura is present. In regard to Liszt, whom Horn considers to be his adversary and at the same time in a strange way his counterpart, an alter ego,<sup>5</sup> the conclusion can but be drawn that the name evokes the brilliance and fame of the composer and pianist Franz Liszt. In his fictional guise, Walser's Liszt is not only a competitive business associate of Horn's but also exemplifies the goal of self-assurance and superiority which he (Horn) continually aspires to attain. Horn addresses the letter to Liszt in order to berate him for the poise and air of success he unabashedly exhibits from Horn's point of view.

Awarding Liszt the title of "Lord" serves a double function. In the first place, this ennoblement provides that touch of irony which is ubiquitous in Walser's novels. Here the implication is that nothing aristocratic can come into being in the cutthroat world of big business, especially not in that part of it which is engaged in the manufacture and sale of false teeth and surfboards. Even more significantly, however, Horn's attribution of the quality of "lordliness" to his fellow worker represents an acknowledgment on Walser's part that the rivalry between Horn and Liszt is rooted in more than their contention in the commercial realm. Their vying with one another has a literary aspect; this assumption may be made on the basis of the prominence of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's epochal "Letter of Lord Chandos," an essay-like and yet fictional

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<sup>5</sup> As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf has indeed proposed in "Walser's *Letter to Lord Liszt* and Hofmannsthal's 'Letter to Lord Chandos': On Comparing Literary Texts," *New Critical Perspectives on Martin Walser*, ed. Frank Piliipp (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994) 89, 104.

work, depicting a crisis in his life as a writer. Clearly, this text has a relationship to *Letter to Lord Liszt* and must be taken into consideration in ascertaining the full meaning of Walser's tale. In his "story" of the letter which the fictional author Philipp Chandos writes to his friend, the historical personage Francis Bacon, Hofmannsthal sets out to explain why his (Chandos's) activity as a writer has ceased entirely. In sum, Chandos has reached the debilitating conclusion that words cannot encompass reality, that all literary activity is ineffectual. Because Horn decides that writing his letter and leaving it unsend will suffice, it can be considered to exist, in the final analysis, largely as a kind of therapeutic device which can bolster the morale of its author. Like Chandos, Horn writes to someone he considers to be a second self in order to give vent to his own frustration.

In light of the fact that Hofmannsthal has projected himself and his difficulties as a writer into the (real) world of another literary luminary, Walser's epistolary story lends itself to being interpreted as a similar instance of the confluence of fiction and reality. Writing in the postmodern era in which multilevel texts in fiction abound, Walser can avail himself of the opportunity to voice personal concerns while engaging in the practice of using the novel as a vehicle for psycho-social criticism. His friendship with Uwe Johnson, a fellow-novelist in postwar Germany and fellow-seeker of the kind of international recognition and critical acclaim accorded to Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll, provided Walser with the occasion to sketch a Francis Bacon, that is, a figure based on an actual writer, to broaden the limited horizons of the business world which forms the background of *Letter to Lord Liszt*. The careers of Walser and Johnson have a considerable amount of similarities. Both grew up in the era of National Socialism and confronted the phenomenon of a shattered and divided Germany, Johnson in the East, Walser in the West. They took part in several meetings of the Gruppe 47, the organization which undertook the task of resuscitating German literary life in the 1950s and 1960s. Subsequently, they and their families developed close ties; the Johnsons, living in West Berlin, went house-hunting—as it turned out, in vain—for the Walsers, who were living in crowded quarters in Stuttgart. In regard to literary matters, Walser professed during an interview that Johnson's was the only body of contemporary German literary work that he had read and would want to read in its entirety.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of their close personal and professional association took the form of only slightly disguised references to one another in their fiction. Thus, when a pipe-smoking character named Karsch turns up in Walser's *The Unicorn*, critics and readers of both authors can but assume they are being called upon to identify the real person behind this fictional façade. Since Karsch is the name Johnson has chosen for a self-portrait he has included in a number of his stories (note the title of a collection of these: *Karsch, und andere Prosa*, 1964), the true

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<sup>6</sup> See Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Martin Walser* (Bern: Francke, 1971) 68.

identity of Walser's character becomes self-evident, at least to well-informed readers. In turn, at a later date, Johnson drew a portrait of Walser as he appeared to the protagonist and the narrator in *Jahrestage* (1983; *Anniversaries*, 1988); they depict him in the book as a playfully womanizing visitor to the neighborhood in New York City in which the novel places them. Johnson named this character Anselm Kristlein, after one of Walser's protagonists. By way of a retort, Walser soon thereafter drew a rather unattractive picture of Johnson in the guise of the character Rainer Mersjohann<sup>7</sup> in his novel about the professorial life on a California campus titled *Brandung* (1985; *Breakers*, 1987). By depicting Mersjohann as an alcoholic and a cuckolded husband, Walser seems to be alluding scathingly to the most unfortunate circumstances in Johnson's private life. In the novel Professor Mersjohann—who, because of the inner turmoil he endures, finds himself incapable of making a major address at a meeting of his confreres—commits suicide. His premature death in the fiction duplicates to an extent Johnson's death early in 1984, which, although it proved to be due to natural causes, was at first shrouded in mystery and suspected of being a suicide. As a final instance of the close relationship between Johnson and Walser, mention must be made of the fact that they shared a publisher, the Suhrkamp Verlag; thus they were both attended to by the editor Siegfried Unseld (perhaps a model for the figure of Thiele in the novel) and afforded use of the outstanding abilities of the translator Leila Vennewitz.

The contents of Horn's letter to Liszt, his associate and rival in the firm which employs them, pertain to a series of encounters or rows they have had; these have exposed the common fate they share in being underlings which has undermined their respect for one another and, indeed, their self-respect. In particular, the letter describes and deals with their most recent and acrimonious quarrel in which they are engaged while waiting at an inn for the arrival of their omnipotent boss Thiele, who has promised to pick them up. Like a transcended divinity—the date is Ascension Day—he fails to appear. Horn begins his epistle to Thiele's right-hand man, a position he (Horn) had once held and had had to forfeit to "Lord" Liszt, by comparing their likenesses and dissimilarities. The picture he paints of Horst Liszt contains elements of Horn's admiration for and envy of his fellow-worker; it also allows the knowledgeable reader to speculate about the resemblance between Liszt and Uwe Johnson. According to Horn, Liszt exudes an air of infallibility. The feat of writing a four-volume novel with a plethora of details, culled from memory and the course of Johnson's life lived in defiance of reaching an accommodation with the political status quo which he deplors, attests to his sense of his own mental and moral superiority and his self-assurance. On a more intimate level, Johnson's appearance and his

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<sup>7</sup> The name Rainer would seem to indicate that by evoking the image of Rainer Maria Rilke, undoubtedly one of Germany's greatest poets, Walser was making reference to Mersjohann's lofty goals. The family name pertains to the "John" in Johnson and to the fact that Uwe Johnson celebrated in his fiction his (lost) homeland, the province of Mecklenburg which borders the Baltic Sea.

relationship with his wife are, it can easily be concluded, referred to in Walser's text. Like Johnson, Liszt is tall ("dieser Riesenkerl," BL 54), always wears glasses (LL 14, BL 19) and cannot drive a car. The extent of this prototype's drinking is likewise phenomenal. Horn writes: "People are now saying you're ill, that alcohol is ruining your health" (LL 42, BL 47). Again: "The trouble is, you're constantly drunk" (LL 72/ BL 77). Once more: "Whenever you show up these days, you reek of wine ..." (LL 106, BL 110). These caustic remarks also constitute a rebuke Horn makes to himself; he is very much the drunkard that he claims Liszt is. As he sits writing his sometimes abusive letter to his coworker, he observes the row of seven bottles of Liszt's favorite wine that he has lined up for constant use during the composition of the letter. One may speculate that the numerous occasions on which the good friends, and authors of lower than first rank, Walser and Johnson met for dinner in a restaurant, they drank heavily and may even, more than once, have become embroiled in a wine-induced quarrel.

A likeness of Johnson's wife Elisabeth, as Walser saw her, seems to appear in the text when Horn portrays Liszt's wife as being overbearing and demanding (LL 67, BL 72). "Today I wonder whether your wife didn't persuade you that you were ugly so as to dominate you with even greater ease," Horn writes (LL 49, BL 54). In turn he belittles Liszt because he willingly endures this kind of marital rigorism and even relishes the security he finds in their wedded life. Horn, as the narrator relates, is astonished by Liszt's submissiveness: "Instructions given him by his wife in the presence of guests were accepted by him as tokens of tenderness, as if he wanted the guests to see how everything emanating from this woman made him happy" (LL 15, BL 20); he also complains that neither one of the Liszt couple ever went anywhere without the other in tow. Furthermore, Horn contends that Liszt's allegiance to Thiele has been severely shaken by Liszt's realization that his boss has a fondness for extramarital affairs (LL 61, BL 66). Pertinently, Horn's picture of Liszt as a husband has features which make an association of it specifically with Johnson ineluctable. The fact that Johnson trumpeted abroad his espousal of sexual fidelity in marriage plays a prominent part in Walser's collating of the actual and the fictional. The collapse of Johnson's marriage subsequent to his (perhaps mistaken) discovery of Elisabeth's infidelity—which he revealed to his friends and later referred to publicly and most inappropriately in a lecture on his work—plays a prominent part in the plot and thematic structure of *Letter to Lord Liszt*. Not only does Horn depict the sudden reversal of fortune in the Liszt household brought about by the breakup of the Liszts' marriage ("And now you've been abandoned by your family," LL 96, BL 101), but he also makes use of it in bringing the haughty Liszt down to his own subservient level and thus in equating Liszt with himself. Both are doomed to experience the same fate: to become worn-out cogs in a machine-driven society that await replacement. Horn's own marriage has survived only by way of having been broken and then patched up by his wife. These literary vignettes, which Walser has produced by giving fictive form to actual events and the surrounding circumstances in his own and Uwe Johnson's life, serve as an

extended metaphor that shores up his story about the demeaning existence experienced by his characters. Although they have risen from the ranks of laborers and obscure white-collar workers, they remain insecure in their upper middle-class status and feel looked down upon. In order to hold their positions, they are forced to compete with one another and are doomed to face replacement by the next generation. In *Letter to Lord Liszt*, Walser likens their situation to that which he knew as an author contending with the literary establishment in the postwar decades during which the reborn German business and literary worlds thrived. By supplying Horn and Liszt with a personal life duplicating his own and Uwe Johnson's, Walser adds depth to his characterizations.

At this point, Horn's letter—consisting of several pages of text with nineteen postscripts of varying but, in most instances, considerable length—undertakes the task of restoring the letter-writer's self-esteem at the expense of destroying Liszt's. In providing the details of Liszt's degradation subsequent to the failure of his marriage, Walser seems to be making use again of the unhappy circumstances that prevailed in Johnson's life. He had eventually determined that, because of her misstep, his wife, together with their daughter, must leave his domicile and he required that they stay out of his sight; no further mention of them was to be made in his presence. A somewhat disguised reference to this state of affairs occurs in *Letter to Lord Liszt*; Horn scolds his adversary in these words: "You have applied for an injunction against your wife to deny her the right to bear your name ..." (LL 123, BL 127). Having become aware, in the course of writing a letter to his adversary and other self, that he has divested himself of the enervating burden of self-hatred and despair, Horn determines to go on with his lackluster life and to put an end to his quarrel with himself in the person of Lord Liszt or with the meaninglessness of his life in the cutthroat world of capitalistic enterprise. (In Walser's earlier, 1984 novel in which the character Horn was introduced, the character attempts suicide in his hopelessness.) Horn's decision not to send the letter indicates that he has come to terms with his shortcomings. Like Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, he gives up his quest for fulfillment, his desire to reach the heights (in Chandos's case literary heights). In this frame of reference, Horn (or Walser) also puts aside his envy of Liszt (or Johnson), who only seems to have achieved a greater reward for his endeavors (in Johnson's case literary endeavors). The competition between the two sales representatives or two writers has proved only that vying with one another has left them open to their being manipulated by greedy and egoistic entrepreneurs. Horn is healed by recognizing that he and Liszt (or, on another level, Walser and Johnson) are being tormented by the same demon, the very lust for love and money, for success and fame, that rules the world of capitalistic enterprise. In a recent article, Frank Pilipp describes this state of affairs succinctly: "The misconceptions [of Walser's protagonists] caused by their envy of their competitors and their constant comparing themselves with those who have greater social standing and the resultant permanently unstabilized social

identity [they acquire] serve to explain their discontent, even if in a not exactly rational fashion."<sup>8</sup>

The autobiographical subtext that undergirds Walser's sociological critique of West Germany's economic revival can be considered to be another example of the new subjectivity which came to prevail in German literature in the seventies. The epic sweep of novels written in the era of modernism—both Walser and Johnson have produced such weighty novels (e.g., Walser's *Das Einhorn* and *Halbzeit*, and Johnson's *Jahrestage*)—has given way to the more compact form and inwardly directed contents of postmodernist fiction. Thus Walser's *Letter to Lord Liszt* (as well as Johnson's *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, 1981) explores the troubled inner life of the protagonist and author. However, the extension of the narrative into the realm of autobiography enlarges its scope and directs it outward, to where reality lies. In a recent interview, Walser considered the relationship between autobiography and fiction and concluded: "I don't believe that a novelist should write his autobiography. In parts of a novel [i.e., his novels] it will inevitably turn up."<sup>9</sup> Franz Horn is but another of the protagonists in Walser's stories who portray life as he (the author) experienced it in the Western world during the last half of the twentieth century. In the instance of *Letter to Lord Liszt*, this self-examination acquires additional depth in that he has made good use of his close ties to a fellow German author, Uwe Johnson, by combining with an exposition of his own consciousness the exposition of another consciousness, albeit a similar one. In reading this multilevel text readers are expected to use it as a tool to uncover the reality that lies beyond the printed page and that readers are meant to confront in the act of reading the fiction, thereby achieving a better understanding of themselves and the world in which they are situated.

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Pilipp 55; my translation.

<sup>9</sup> Amina M. Bruegemann, *Chronotopos Amerika bei Max Frisch, Peter Handke, Günter Kunert und Martin Walser* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) 180; my translation.