

Martin Walser's Portrait of Uwe Johnson in *Breakers*

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Martin Walser's novel *Breakers* (*Brandung*, 1985)¹ contributed in large measure to his prominence as a contemporary German author both because its exotic setting is the Berkeley campus of the University of California and because it thereby became almost unique as an instance of the "campus novel" in German literature. In addition, Walser's satirical and yet lenient account of the middle-age crisis faced by a visiting professor, Helmut Halm, when he falls completely under the spell of a "golden" California young woman (his student), afforded readers new insights into the writing and significance of fiction as a literary genre. In this regard, Walser has undertaken to present his own views concerning literature and its social and artistic significance by way of Halm's analysis of poems by Heine, Rilke, and Shakespeare, and two (arguably three) of Shakespeare's characters, together with an episode in William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*. These excursions into the literary realm to unearth the truths it affords occur as Halm helps Fran Webb, the perhaps unsuspecting, perhaps conniving object of his affections, in their out-of-class meetings to examine the themes she is writing for another course, one in English Composition. Thus Walser develops in the novel both a discussion of the relevance of fiction and poetry to life, and a story about men and women in their sexual relationship out of marriage and within it. *Breakers*, in the latter case, explores the marital and extramarital situations in which various members of the German department of the university find themselves. The narrator, who in this novel is a one-point-of-view observer, relating events strictly from Halm's vantage point, pays particular attention not only to the protagonist's dilemma, but also to its counterpart in the unhappy marriage of Rainer Mersjohann, the department chairman. Recent critical comment on *Breakers* has suggested that Walser's portrait of Mersjohann as a cuckolded husband and incapacitated writer may indeed be a fictionalized version of the state of affairs in the marriage of his friend and an equally renowned novelist Uwe Johnson.² This study of *Breakers* seeks to explore the extent to which Walser has used Johnson's biography in the novel, and the purpose which his appropriation of this material serves.

¹ The edition referred to in this article was published in Frankfurt/Main by Suhrkamp. *Breakers* was published in New York by Holt in 1987; the translator was Leila Vennewitz. She also translated the first three volumes and some part of the fourth of Johnson's *Jahrestage*. Her inclination to defer to British usages rather than American is evident in the choice of "breakers" over "surf."

² See, for example, Wolfgang Strehlow, "Erfahrungen mit der dialektischen Schreibweise bei William Faulkner und Uwe Johnson," in *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum II* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1993) 133 f.: "Den Roman *Brandung* von Martin Walser versteht mancher als bitterböse, posthum veranstaltete Abrechnung mit dem moralischen Rigorismus Uwe Johnsons." My translation. Many critics take Martin Walser's novel *Brandung* to be an angry retort, delivered posthumously, on the subject of the moral rigorism (in sexual matters) of Uwe Johnson. See also Wolfgang Strehlow, *Ästhetik des Widerspruchs: Versuche über Uwe Johnsons dialektische Schreibweise* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993) 136.

The friendship between Walser and Johnson and the mutuality of their concern about each other's literary career resulted from the fact that they had both experienced growing up in the Hitler era and then surviving its disastrous consequences, although they at that time were living at, so-to-speak, opposite ends of the country, Walser in southwestern Germany, Johnson in the northeast. Subsequently they both participated in the meetings of the Gruppe 47, the confederation of writers assembled to resuscitate the remains of German literature. (In his literary "autobiography" *Begleitumstände* [Accompanying Circumstances] Johnson recalls being particularly impressed by one of Walser's readings). Thus acquainted and finding themselves in the course of time to be together in their association with the Suhrkamp publishing house, they maintained both a personal and a literary relationship. In an interview with Wilhelm Schwarz, Walser once professed that Uwe Johnson was the only author whose every work he had read and would read.³ For his part, Johnson attested to the closeness of their ties on the literary level by referring to Walser in the guise of his character Anselm Kristlein; Johnson mentions in his "Interview mit Marie H. Cresspahl, 2.-3. Januar 1972," a very brief continuation of the story of *Jahrestage*, that Kristlein, in truth, Walser, had half-humorously proposed that Johnson might properly conclude Gesine's endless search for a moral haven by sending her back to West Germany to work in a bank in Bamberg.⁴ There can be no doubt that the Johnson and Walser families had close connections with each other; on one occasion, while the Johnsons were living in West Berlin, they went looking for a house that the Walsers could make their home to replace their crowded quarters in Stuttgart. In this frame of reference, one must assume that Walser knew all too well the factors leading to the eventual collapse of Johnson's marriage, especially since Johnson himself openly and audaciously referred to it in the final lecture he gave on his work (the series appeared in print under the title of *Begleitumstände*). Elaborating on this public reference to his private troubles, Johnson also published a very short novel (it is to all intents and purposes a novella) *Skizze eines Verunglückten* (1982, Sketch of an Accident Victim) which recounted in a slightly disguised fashion the events leading to the failure of his marriage. Under these circumstances, Walser could not have been aware of every intimate detail of the rift which had violently disrupted the relationship between Elisabeth and Uwe Johnson.

Relatively speaking, the literary careers of Martin Walser and Uwe Johnson progressed in a similar fashion. They received recognition as authors of significance with their first publications and, at what would have to be considered a midpoint in their literary productiveness, undertook to explore new horizons in their work. While Johnson brought out in 1970 the first part of his prospectively voluminous novel *Jahrestage* (*Anniversaries*), the beginning of the saga of a life lived in the tumultuous times of the mid-twentieth century, Walser in 1973 entered upon a new phase of his previously uninhibited examination of life in postwar West Germany. In these words Frank Pilipp describes the changes in narrative stance and approach which characterize the novels Walser wrote in subsequent years: "Thus, a more internalized and reflecting mode of portraying socio-political

³ Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Martin Walser* (Bern: Francke, 1971) 68.

⁴ Uwe Johnson, "Interview mit Marie H. Cresspahl, 2.-3. Januar 1972," in *Johnsons Jahrestage*, ed. Michael Bengel, (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 86.

issues replaces the extroverted and commenting style of Walser's earlier texts."⁵ Walser's new style proved to be, from a critical point of view, particularly effective in his story—like Johnson's *Sketch of an Accident-Victim*, a novella—*Ein Fliehendes Pferd* (1978, *A Runaway Horse*); its outstanding feature is a revealing self-portrait, presented in the guise of the character Helmut Halm. After having spent autumn of 1983 as a visiting professor on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley, Walser chose to continue his depiction of himself as Halm in his 1985 novel *Brandung*, published in 1987 in an English translation by Leila Vennewitz (also the translator of Johnson's *Anniversaries*) as *Breakers*.⁶ The strong autobiographical note which prevails in the book in regard to the protagonist had the effect of producing the impression that the entire story and all the characters were a fictionalized rendering of the situation prevailing in the German department at Berkeley, with which, it must be noted, Johnson had never been associated. Although clues to the similarity between the character of Rainer Mersjohann and Uwe Johnson abound in the text, they could be and were disregarded, especially in the light of the fact that Uwe Johnson had died in 1984 prematurely and under ambiguous circumstances in the isolation to which he had doomed himself in Sheerness, England.

An appreciation of the subtlety, however, with which Walser has made use of his understanding of Johnson's plight in *Breakers* can but enhance the value of the novel. In naming the character of the department chairman Walser exhibits the same kind of sophistication which he had originally employed in calling his protagonist Helmut Halm. The name is an oxymoron: "Helmut," long popular in Germany, implies vigor and heroism, while the euphonic Halm is the term for a blade of grass, something commonplace and insubstantial. Walser's hero in *Breakers*, as well as in *A Runaway Horse*, is a man who aspires to live life to the fullest but manages always to convince himself that such an ambition is foolish. Thus Halm's pursuit of his beautiful student, which he orchestrates (thanks to Walser's knowledgeability in literary matters) with themes found in romantic poetry and lustful prose, ends with his retreat to the comforting arms of his wife. (Her name Sabine or Sabina, while ordinary, also suggests the legendary tale of the rape of the Sabine women. The implication would seem to be that all husbands keep their wives captive.) "Rainer Mersjohann" is also resonant with implications. Not only does "Rainer" bring to mind the great German poet Rainer (originally René) Maria Rilke but also, because of this association, one of Johnson's pen names—Walter Maria Guggenheimer, as he called himself in a piece of self-criticism (not too unfavorable) with which he concluded a collection of short prose sketches *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (1964, *Karsch and Other Prose Pieces*). "Mersjohann" is a rather obvious attempt at mystification; "des Meeres," "of the sea," refers all too patently to the Johnsonian realm of Mecklenburg which borders on the Baltic. The fictional town of Jericho," the locale for the events in *Anniversaries* which take place in Germany, lies close to these waters. The relevance of "Johann" or "John" is self-evident.

⁵ Frank Pilipp, *The Novels of Martin Walser: A Critical Introduction* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1991) 2.

⁶ Martin Walser, *Breakers*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Henry Holt, 1987); quotations are from this edition and will appear in the text.

In the fiction, Walser can readily make use of his knowledgeable ability about Johnson's personal preferences to account for the appearance of Rainer Mersjohann as a professor and department chairman in a university located in the San Francisco area. A frequent visitor to New York and a number of American college campuses, Johnson expressed on many occasions his fascination not only with the literature of the United States, but also with the prospect of living in a country (particularly in New York), which, despite having had its political disasters, maintains, in an aura of hope, its democratic stance. Walser would also have known that in the fourth volume of *Anniversaries*, published in 1983 several months before Johnson's death (in 1984), he had depicted his protagonist as flying with her daughter to San Francisco for a short stay in order to let her experience the city's picturesqueness and international atmosphere before their return to Europe. In the light of these associations with Johnson's life and work, Walser begins his story of Halm's brief sojourn in Berkeley with Mersjohann's initial and quite unexpected transatlantic telephone call to Halm as a close friend with whom he has long been out of touch. Mersjohann insists that Halm, a teacher in a pre-university school, accept a teaching appointment for one semester at the university in Berkeley, since the professor giving two announced German courses has abruptly resigned and vanished. Only after he has talked himself into undertaking this risky venture and has duly appeared, together with his wife and one of their two grown daughters, in the environs of Berkeley, does Halm delve into the circumstances surrounding Mersjohann's reemergence in his life.

Halm is led to conclude that their at one time devoted friendship ("He loved this fellow . . ." Halm confesses at one point, 120) rather than the proffering of a position at Berkeley had prompted Rainer to call him. Something else besides the filling of a vacancy had been on the chairman's mind, Halm decides. He is indeed unhappily surprised by the change in his friend's appearance. His recollection of Rainer, upon hearing his voice again over the telephone in Stuttgart, had been almost reverent: "Rainer Mersjohann was a giant. But not clumsy. A refined giant. . . . Rainer Mersjohann had never been quite of this world" (1). These words can readily be assumed to constitute a description of the young Uwe Johnson. Upon being reunited with this idol of his young adulthood, Halm must convince himself that the portly and very likely inebriated man he encounters at the San Francisco airport is actually Mersjohann. Very soon, since Rainer speaks of his wife Elissa (a name which Walser is fond of using literarily) in preparing his visitors to be introduced to her, Halm senses that his friend's physical deterioration and excitability have some connection to his marital situation, and that this is the cause of the urgency of his old friend's plea that he come to California.

The charming and self-assured woman Halm first (as the fiction goes) meets in the couple's splendid home, does not give him occasion to suspect that Rainer's disorderly appearance has resulted from an unfortunate choice of a wife. Elissa immediately takes Lena, the Halms's disaffected daughter, under her wing. Whether or not Walser has sought to present a true picture of Elisabeth Johnson in the character of Elissa Mersjohann is difficult to adjudge since Johnson himself made it a matter of principle never to mention, even just by name, any member of his immediate family (mother, father, sister, wife, daughter) in commenting on his literary or personal affairs. Only in the *Sketch of an Accident-Victim* does he undertake to describe—and there expressly so—a conjugal relationship. In *Anniver-*

saries his protagonist Gesine Cresspahl is an unwed mother who has never lived with the father of her child or any man. What Halm in *Breakers* comes quickly to confront for himself is the crisis in the marriage of the Mersjohanns engendered by Rainer's stumbling upon evidence of his wife's infidelity; Rainer learns also that, indeed, it has occurred over the years. In an effort to swallow the bitter pill of this assault on his own integrity—he has been scrupulously faithful—and self-regard, he fashions an agreement by way of which he and Elissa can continue to live together. It requires her to inform her husband prior to each occasion when she intends to betray him sexually and later put on tape a description of the act.

Attributing this kind of fanaticism to a character in a fiction requires that the author establish the context within which it exists. Walser portrays Mersjohann less as a hoodwinked and, most likely, henpecked academic and more as a man, specifically a writer, with the mission of promulgating the truth. Recalling their student days, Halm describes the origins of his friend's devotion to a cause: "Rainer Mersjohann was a poet. He was the young genius needed in every college milieu to torment the mass of knowledge-seekers with his example" (3). In this way Walser exhibits how closely he identifies Rainer Mersjohann with Uwe Johnson who professed on more than one occasion that storytelling was a means to an end. "With my writing," he proclaimed early in his literary career, "I should like to establish the truth. With my stories and characters I try to come closer to actual life [reality]. This is my task; it is sufficient to afford me peace of mind [*Gelassenheit*]." ⁷ Walser in turn acknowledges Johnson's thirst for truth by assigning Rainer an equivalent obsession with being truthful. Thus in the novel Walser contends: "Whatever Rainer said could only be the truth. No more righteous man than he existed" (119). As Johnson made clear in his own story about his marriage, *Sketch of an Accident-Victim*, he considered himself to be involved in a personal relationship with Elisabeth, first his lover and then his wife, which was as extension of his literary career and concomitant search for truth. Johnson came to believe that he wrote only in concert with Elisabeth: he required her approval for every word he wrote. Therefore, the discovery of her infidelity (by no means the promiscuity which Walser describes in *Breakers*) led not only to his loss of faith in the integrity of his marriage, but also to his loss of faith in himself and his writing.

This twofold calamity in Johnson's life is duplicated in the life of Rainer Mersjohann. When Halm arrives on the scene in Berkeley, Rainer wants him to understand and thus condone the desperate measures he has taken to salvage his marriage and literary (here in an academic sense) career. So convinced of his own righteousness is Rainer that he fails to take into account the possible effects of Elissa's presentation to the Halms of her view of the Mersjohann's marital situation. Her explanation of the flaw in their marriage is a logically convincing one. While she recognizes how intense and exclusive Rainer's love for her is, she has come to realize that she does not love him in the same way, and that as a result she cannot, figuratively speaking, be warmed by a flame of such brightness (274 f.). She admits to her fear that Rainer intends to kill her. Halm is reminded, in hearing this confession, of Rainer's rantings in his presence on the subject of the difference

⁷ See Uwe Johnson, "Ich überlege mir die Geschichte. . ." *Uwe Johnson im Gespräch*, ed. Eberhard Fahlke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 241. My translation.

between betrayal and murder: "What's a murder compared to betrayal? A blessing. A murder does not really injure us. A murder lets us remain what we are. It destroys our physical selves without touching our spiritual substance. Betrayal destroys our spiritual substance" (246).

The motif of the murder of an unfaithful wife figures prominently in the *Sketch of an Accident-Victim*. Although, in actuality, Johnson eliminated Elisabeth (as well as his daughter) from his life by putting her out of his house and refusing to have any contact with her or even a glimpse of her or to endure a mention of her name, he described himself in the fiction as having accidentally struck her with such force that she died (at least the reader is led to assume that the protagonist Joe Hinterhand caused his wife's death in some such manner). Consequently, Hinterhand pleads guilty in court, but the death sentence he awaits is not the consequence; instead, because of extenuating circumstances (Mrs. Hinterhand's infidelity), he is put in prison for a short time and released in due course because of his good behavior as a convict. Hinterhand contends that, in being compelled to go on with his life, he has been subjected to a punishment worse than execution; at that, the duration of his torment is mercifully brief—he dies of unknown causes soon after regaining his freedom. In *Breakers* Walser seems to make reference to the turn of events described in Johnson's novella. He allows Elissa to express after Rainer's death (by suicide) the frustration she felt in dealing with a fanatically righteous husband and described his attitude toward their marriage in this way: "He always used legal jargon when speaking of their marriage. As far as [she] was concerned, he was permanently involved in a trial by jury" (275).

While Elissa associates her husband's untimely end principally with the disintegration of their relationship, Halm, invested by his author with his own literary interests, is fully aware of the other, equally important aspect of Rainer's desperation, namely, his inability to go on with his work. Elissa's betrayal (which Walser exaggerates in the sense that it does not indicate the true state of affairs in the Johnson household) causes Rainer to become incapable of carrying out his professional obligations; that failure more than the unfaithfulness of his wife is the root of his alcoholism. At one point in a more or less private conversation with his once close friend, Halm feels confident enough in their restored brotherliness to ask Rainer a question on a sensitive subject; the narrator reports: "At last he could ask Rainer whether he was still writing poetry [*ob er noch dichte*]. Rainer turned slowly toward Halm like a battleship but then remained quite calm, saying merely that he thanked Halm for the Amfortas question" (154). In this remark there is yet another literary reference to be added to the plethora of such references which give the novel its tone; Amfortas, a figure in the legend of the Holy Grail, must endure excruciating pain from an old wound; it will be abated or eliminated only when a pure knight appears to inquire what ails Amfortas. In a reversal of roles, Rainer looks to Helmut to show him the way to put an end to his misery. However, Halm has arrived on the scene too late. Scheduled to read a paper at an important academic conference, Mersjohann has written not a single word for his presentation to the assembled scholars. Nevertheless, he flies on schedule to Houston, where the meeting will convene; on the eve of the day on which he is to lecture, he kills himself in his hotel room. In depicting Rainer's downfall Walser has delineated the severity of the case of writer's block with which Uwe Johnson was afflicted as the consequence of his wife's disloyalty to him and his work.

Both the story of this failed marriage that Walser tells in *Breakers* and the story of the writer Joe Hinterhand and his adulterous wife in which Johnson reveals his own torment make use of the literary device of documentation. *Sketch of an Accident-Victim* is replete with quotations from a variety of authors (Ernst Bloch, Kandinsky, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Max Frisch, et al.) on the subject of the relationship between husband and wife; the import of these statements is that each of the partners in a marriage becomes a second self for the other. In *Breakers* the literary works which are cited or discussed by the only mentally lascivious Halm and his only physically concupiscent student Fran Webb concern themselves with the sexual nature of a confrontation between a man and a woman. Appropriately, Walser embellishes his text with excerpts from well-known literary works dealing with frustrated desire. (Even the caged panther in Halm's, that is, Walser's, rather inadequate translation of Rilke's poem seems to symbolize the constricted libido: "His lithe and swinging stride is strong,/and circles down into an end./It is a dance of power around a point,/in which anesthetized a great will tends" [521]). In this light Halm's sojourn in the Garden of Eden (California) can be interpreted as a tale about a middle-aged Adam, resigned to having a lukewarm sexual relationship with his wife, who falls in love with a still-young (or ever-young) Eve. In effect, Halm ventures out into the surf of passion, but rushes back out. Actually, he comes to realize that Fran has no sexual interest in an aging professor and, disregarding the urgency of Rainer's plea that he, under the sponsorship of the chairman, continue teaching at Berkeley in the next term, leaves California to return to his wife, who has previously flown back to Germany to tend her dying father. Ironically, instead of trying to succor Rainer in what would be the final phase of his desperation, Halm has turned to him for advice in the matter of his having become infatuated with his student. Remaining true to the pusillanimous character he has created in Halm, Walser depicts Halm as neglecting to follow his mentor's counsel that he immediately confess his mental infidelity to his wife and thereupon leave her since he has ravaged their marriage (as Elissa has theirs). Ultimately, back in Germany, Halm does reveal his indiscretion to Sabina; in a manner of speaking, his confession consists of the contents of *Breakers*.

Walser's patent borrowing of biographical material from the life of Uwe Johnson serves the purpose of undergirding the authenticity of his subtly satirical story. In addition, the contrast between Mersjohann's hypercritical views on sexual fidelity in marriage and Halm's recognition of the fallibility which is inherent in human nature at all times extends the horizons of this novel ostensibly about the foibles of a small group of academic intellectuals. The emphasis upon the literary activities of these pedagogues, their espousal of the significance of literature and their own writing in promoting this cause, leads the reader to conclude that there is also an autobiographical element in the fiction which gives it its authority. Walser has indeed confirmed this assumption; he asserted while being interviewed by a fellow professor before leaving Berkeley: "Perhaps, however, I can use [my experience of] America to get to know myself."⁸ In essence, *Breakers* is a perspicacious novel about writers and writing.

⁸ "Documentation: Martin Walser, Porträt Martin Walser: Ein Gespräch mit Anton Kaes," *The German Quarterly* 57.3 (Summer 1984): 448. My translation.