

Martin Walser: Bis zum nächsten Wort. Eine Biographie in Szenen

By Ralf Oldenbourg

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Reviewed by Stuart Parkes, Sunderland

Autobiographies, it is well-known, cannot be regarded as complete records of an individual's life and may even contain, to use Goethe's two terms in respect of the genre, as much 'fiction' as 'truth'. Both these elements are also contained in a different, more recent form of 'biographical' writing that may be associated with post-modernism. In W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*, for instance, the émigrés portrayed are undoubtedly based on real people; yet at the same time, the names of the models have been changed and the term biography is avoided. This is not the case with the 'biography' of Martin Walser to be discussed here, although it undoubtedly contains much that is neither authentic nor within the conventions of traditional biographies.

One undoubted break with the traditional biography is the giving of an active role to the biographer, who is present in the text as the 'young man'. Moreover, he is put into a specific fictional situation, namely waiting to interview Walser once the famous author arrives on the set of a play about his life. During this period of waiting he continues his research on the basis of materials about Walser handed to him by the play's producer. The reader is made acquainted with his anxieties about his task, whilst Chapter 13 includes the story of a disappointment in love. During his lunch break he has talked to a waitress, who seems as uncertain about what she is doing as he is; by evening, however, she is reconciled with her boy friend, the producer of the play, who has in any case developed into something of a bogeyman for the young man by showering him with far too much material. This part of the book clearly belongs much more to the world of the novel than to the typical biography.

Despite such interludes, most of the book, it must be stressed, is devoted to Walser. Information about him is presented, for example, in the form of a testimony from an old friend,

comments by the actors playing his parents in the biographical play and as extracts from his notebooks. In the case of these notebooks and statements attributed to Walser, it is possible to recognise quotations from his work so that the passages in question are a kind of collage made up of comments from different times and contexts. Where this kind of technique can become dubious is where Walser's own words are seemingly used against him. The section about his early plays includes a clearly fictitious 'reader's letter' attacking *Der schwarze Schwan*, which largely consists of quotations from his own writing on the theatre from this time and included in the volume *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen* of 1965.

It would of course be wrong to dismiss this biography solely because it uses a different approach, not least because the method used, based on 'fictional scenes', is made clear on the book's cover. What matters is the quality of the information conveyed. There is certainly much that is interesting about Walser's background and beginnings as a writer as well as brief surveys of the earlier works, which will be informative to those seeking background information, although they do not represent particularly deep literary analysis. Those with a good knowledge of Walser will enjoy recalling the sources for much of the text, even if they will be frustrated by not always being able to do so successfully. There are, it should be noted, no sources given for quotations, although there is a bibliography. Quite simply, this is no more a normal academic text than it is a conventional biography.

One of Walser's concerns has always been the nature of literary criticism, as his 2002 *succès de scandale Tod eines Kritikers* shows. His ideal, put forward as early as 1964 in the essay 'Tagtraum, daß der Kritiker ein Schriftsteller sei', is, as the title makes clear, that the literary critic should regard himself as a writer just as much as the author of fiction. If this ideal also applies to the biographer, Oldenburg has clearly fulfilled the wishes of his subject in this respect. Ordinary readers can also be happy with the approach in as far as the result is a fascinating book that is never dull for a moment. At the same time, many will certainly find it hard to overcome doubts about calling such a work a biography. It should also be pointed out that Oldenburg's text will not serve as an entirely reliable source for doctoral theses or even undergraduate essays, but after all there is life – or so it is rumoured – outside the groves of academe.