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Walser's *Heimat* Conundrum

Long interested in the notion and attraction of *Heimat*, especially his native Lake Constance area, Walser largely escaped criticism for that aspect of his writing as long as it remained essentially local and, importantly, appeared more than balanced by an otherwise indisputable commitment to political, social, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives that were clearly *politically correct* and *of the left*. However, once his articulations of the need for “belonging” moved from the local to the national, once his *Heimatgefühl* metamorphosed into a *Nationalgefühl*, he had broken a liberal taboo that earned him all sorts of criticism, even condemnation. In this essay I discuss the development of Walser’s notions about *Heimat* and their relationship to the evolution of his attitudes toward hotly contested concepts like Nation, ‘German Identity’, and Volk. The result can be understood as Walser’s *Heimat* conundrum, but this discussion points out the fact that it is hardly Walser's *Heimat* conundrum alone.

*Heimat*, an enticingly simple and, on the surface at least, innocent-sounding, almost quintessential German word, untranslatable according to numerous commentators, became after 1945, and remains to a certain degree in today's post-unification German context: on the one hand, charged, controversial, tainted still by its use and abuse in the vocabulary and reality of National Socialism, therefore suspicious, and viewed by some as even unusable except only very locally, or perhaps on Sundays or holidays; and on the other, in apparent contradiction, comforting and reassuring, evocative of Alpine hiking and beer gardens, village festivals and gatherings of hometown friends, community clubs and the sanctuary of ‘home’. A word and concept with a split personality? The question deserves further exploration.

Post-war German-language authors could certainly write about their hometown or region of origin without raising eyebrows or overt criticism, even from literary critics on the left: witness for instance the response to Heinrich Böll's Cologne, Günter Grass's Danzig, or Uwe Johnson's Mecklenburg. By the mid-1980s, in fact, a minor revival of literary renderings of *Heimat* led one critic to claim: ‘Es heimatet sehr in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur.’ Nonetheless, if signs of nostalgia for an earlier time crept in too overtly, or if a lack of critical perspective was perceived in those descriptions or narratives of place, the label of ‘cold warrior’ or revanchist for the ‘unenlightened’ perpetrator of such portrayals, regarded as too reminiscent of Nazi ideology, usually followed. *Heimat*, the word and the multi-faceted and unstable concept it signifies,
has been for many a provocation, a ‘Reizwort’, in the overall context of the new democratic, post-1945 West, and even in the officially internationalist and socialist East. In the postwar context, the association of the word and concept, not only with the Nazi era, but also with the so-called Heimatvertriebenenverbände, especially some groups of Sudeten Germans and their purported goal of regaining their ‘lost German homelands’ in the east, made the notion of Heimat all the more suspect. Although Martin Walser intended it to be understood more literally, no doubt, when, at the beginning of his play Eiche und Angora, he had his character Gorbach assert ‘Unsere Heimat, Alois, ist arg zerküftet’², it could not have been more prophetic when understood metaphorically either. Certainly the discussions about ‘Heimat’ have been ‘arg zerküftet.’

My intention in this essay, however, is not to discuss at any length the general problematic of Heimat as a word and concept in post-World War II Germany, but rather to seek insights into what I have chosen to call Martin Walser's Heimat conundrum. The political, social, historical, and linguistic context for that endeavor is, nonetheless, important, and that makes a brief introduction necessary if we are going to understand Walser's conundrum in its context. Since the mid-1980s at least, numerous excellent book-length studies and collections of essays (general, historical, sociological, and specifically focused) have appeared on the topic of Heimat.³ Additionally, a virtual plethora of individual essay-length discussions of Heimat in the general sense and Heimat in German and Austrian film and literature, each with a specific focus on particular authors, filmmakers, or works, has also emerged during that time, illustrating, despite the controversial or perceived questionable nature of the concept and its usability in the postwar situation, that a good deal of scholarly and serious interest in Heimat clearly exists to the present day. My own attempt to gain a better understanding of Walser's complex and controversial concept and use of Heimat, both for its own sake as an intriguing and significant aspect of his writing, but also for its relationship to his efforts to rehabilitate and push the largely discredited and intensely contested notions of ‘Nation’ and ‘Volk’ into a more positive light and toward renewed usability, has benefited immensely from many of these studies, analyses, and discussions of Heimat, Nation, and German identity.

From the very beginning of his writing career in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Walser has demonstrated a consistent penchant for confronting head-on disquieting, difficult, and controversial issues. During the conference from which the essays in this volume have developed, one