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The Triumph of Subjectivity. Martin Walser’s Novels of the 1990s
and his Der Lebenslauf der Liebe

This article seeks to situate Walser’s novel of 2001 Der Lebenslauf der Liebe within the context of his efforts in the course of the 1990s to rewrite the outcomes of his early work, and in particular to proclaim the triumph of subjectivity over the oppressive banality of social conformity, political correctness and instrumental reason. This entails a sympathetic reading of the author’s relegation of social and political ‘reality’ in favour of an empathetic exploration of the psyche of his protagonist, Susi Gern. In a postscript to the article, I discuss the theoretical difficulties raised by a sympathetic reading of this kind of an author whose very exclusion of such social and political ‘realities’ as the Holocaust and contemporary racism has provoked such controversy.

In September 1998, only a few weeks before his controversial speech on receipt of the Friedenspreis der deutschen Buchhandlung in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main, Martin Walser insisted to the Süddeutsche Zeitung: ‘Politik hat mich nie interessiert’ ¹ For the author’s critics, in both senses of the word, this statement stretches credulity. In the 1960s, Walser was vocal in his protests against the repression of the Nazi past, and against the Vietnam War and the Emergency Laws,² and had ruminated, albeit with some ambivalence, on ‘Engagement als Pflichtfach für Schriftsteller’ ³ In the 1970s, his attention turned to the question of German identity. Thus he began to ruminate on the emerging collective fixation on the Holocaust in the Federal Republic: ‘Wenn wir Auschwitz bewältigen könnten, könnten wir uns wieder nationalen Aufgaben zuwenden’,⁴ so an essay of 1979. In the 1980s, in further speeches and articles, he linked Auschwitz to the ‘Strafprodukt Teilung’ ⁵ and inferred a global enthusiasm for keeping Germany both divided and down. A novella of 1987, Dorle und Wolf, even sent its protagonist out on a daring voyage of the imagination to Memel (Lithuania), Riga (Latvia), and Revel (present-day Tallinn in Estonia) — cities in the east with long German histories in the east but lost in 1945 — albeit with a half-apology: ‘Nicht daß er’s wiederhaben wollte. Den Verlust bedauern dürften wollte er’.⁶ In 1990, many saw in Walser’s open joy at German unification a dangerously nationalist edge; Günter Grass, for example, famously castigated his wayward colleague for possessing ‘zuviel Gefühl und zu wenig Bewußtsein’.⁷
As if to confirm his seeming transformation into an arch-conservative, Walser has also time and again protested against the ‘Tugendterror der political correctness’. This theme is present in the 1991 novel, *Die Verteidigung der Kindheit*, dominates *Ohne einander* (1993) and *Finks Krieg* (1996), and is at the core of *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998). Division, national identity, the ‘instrumentalisation’ of Auschwitz, the need for a return to German literary and philosophical traditions, and the banality of the Federal Republic link these four novels to the *Friedenspreisrede*. Here, politics and aesthetics come together in a response to Marcel Reich-Ranicki’s accusation that Walser had ‘omitted’ to mention Auschwitz in *Ein springender Brunnen*, a semi-autobiographical work set in the Nazi period: ‘Nie etwas gehört vom Urgesetz des Erzählens: der Perspektivität. Aber selbst wenn — Zeitgeist geht vor Ästhetik’.

Looking back over Walser’s fiction in the 1990s, the decade appears to have been an intensely political period for the author, with much to belie the author’s claim of not being interested in such matters. At the same time, it would be wrong to reduce Walser to a merely political author; indeed, he has spoken on a number of occasions of the way in which he simply responds to ‘provocations’. This chapter will thus focus on the non-political dimensions to his writing. In his latest novel, *Der Lebenslauf der Liebe* (2001), in fact, politics are almost entirely absent. Its protagonist, Susi Gern, is more concerned with the failures of her love-life and the inadequacy of her bank balance than with the monumental events that shaped the fifteen year period in which the novel is set, from the mid-1980s to the millennium. Even when she casts her mind back further, over the twenty years that precede the inception of narrative, hers is a periodisation based on love affairs rather than politics: ‘1962 bis 1965: Salim. 1965 bis 1968: Shankar. 1968 bis 1972: Lofti. 1974 bis 1977 Dirk Pfeil. Dann bis 1985: Annoncenmänner’. There are allusions to the stock market crash of ‘black Monday’ on October 19, 1987 (189-190) and to the obsessive ‘Marktfundamentalismus’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s which allowed currency speculators such as George Soros to make a killing at the expense of the Bank of England during the exchange rate mechanism fiasco of September 1992 (273-274). These finally lead to the ruin of Susi’s feckless and faithless husband, Edmund, and perhaps hint at Walser’s conservative anti-capitalism. Yet they are background detail in a plot which is primarily about Susi’s efforts to compensate for her husband’s infidelity, the miserable routine of buying off those