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Martin Walser’s *Tod eines Kritikers*: A ‘Crime’ of Anti-Semitism?

Even before the publication of *Tod eines Kritikers*, Martin Walser found himself accused by the critic Frank Schirrmacher of having written an anti-Semitic attack on Marcel Reich-Ranicki. When the text became available, others followed suit and Walser’s whole oeuvre was examined for the same ‘crime’. Walser had many defenders and, on the basis of the opposing comments, it is impossible to reach a conclusion. An examination of the text is made difficult by the narrative structure. Although Schirrmacher’s accusation appears dubious, the satirical attack on Reich-Ranicki and critics in general in the television age does not constitute one of Walser’s best novels.

It is normally axiomatic that awareness that a crime has been committed rests on the existence of evidence of that fact. If one takes the example of what is generally seen as the most heinous of crimes, namely murder, it is usually the discovery of a body that will provide such evidence. If this principle is applied to a ‘text crime’, then one might assume that the very least that could be expected would be the existence of a text. This was hardly the case, not even for his journalist colleagues, not to mention the general public, when the head of the Feuilleton section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frank Schirrmacher, accused Walser of such a crime in the 29 May 2002 edition of his paper.1 Walser had personally handed over to the newspaper an uncorrected copy of his *Tod eines Kritikers* manuscript in the hope and probably the expectation that, in keeping with a tradition going back a quarter of a century, it would serialise the work prior to or simultaneously with its publication in book form. The result of Schirrmacher’s intervention was that the manuscript was quickly made available to other critics and that publication as a book for the general public occurred well before the planned August date.

When the novel became available, readers were presented with the story of how a writer, Hans Lach, following a condemnation of his latest work in a television show devoted to literature, threatens the show’s all-powerful presenter, the star critic André Ehrl-König, at the party following its transmission, whereupon the critic disappears. It is assumed, on the basis of the threats he has uttered, that Lach, who is quickly taken into custody, has murdered him, with all traces of the deed
...and the body having been covered by freshly fallen snow. In the event, the critic has run off for a few days with a young writer and duly reappears. What had provoked the wrath of Schirrmacher, and subsequently others, was the perceived closeness of the negatively portrayed critic to the doyen of German literary criticism, Marcel Reich-Ranicki. That Ehrl-König appeared to share the same Jewish background as the real-life model was enough for Schirrmacher to make the accusation that Walser’s novel was anti-Semitic, or at least contained anti-Semitic elements.

To state his viewpoint, Schirrmacher used the form of the open letter, a genre that is always likely to titillate the reader, even those of self-proclaimed quality newspapers, since it panders to the human trait of inquisitiveness by appearing to give insight into private matters. Personal correspondence is traditionally based on the assumption of privacy; when letters were no longer opened and read by state officials, the privacy thus guaranteed was seen as a sign of increasing freedom in the country concerned. Even today’s computer generated letters sent to thousands of recipients seek to create the illusion of private personal communication by using the name of each recipient at their head to imply that the proposition is directed solely at the individual named. In the case of Schirrmacher’s letter, the sense of being a party to something personal is increased by the use of formulations that suggest, if not a friendship (the formal form of address is used), then at least something more than a distant relationship, since the supposed recipient is ‘Lieber Herr Walser’, a term repeated throughout the text, and the final greeting is the relatively informal ‘Mit bestem Gruß’.

The textual crime of anti-Semitism of which Schirrmacher accused Walser was one that for obvious historical reasons is always taken particularly seriously in Germany. After having outlined the plot, he tells Walser that it is not acceptable for him to hide behind concepts such as fiction and literary perspective. Nor does it matter whether the book is good or bad. One might have thought that this was a major issue for a literary critic such as Schirrmacher. What counts apparently is that the book stems from hatred and that it is marked by anti-Semitic clichés. The logic of this is that, regardless of context, any expression in literature of anti-Semitism or any other distasteful ideology by any figure is unacceptable, again not the stance one might expect from a leading literary critic. There is also the question of whether good writing can stem from hatred – the example of Jonathan Swift may be pertinent in this context. Despite his assertions, Schirrmacher does at times use the