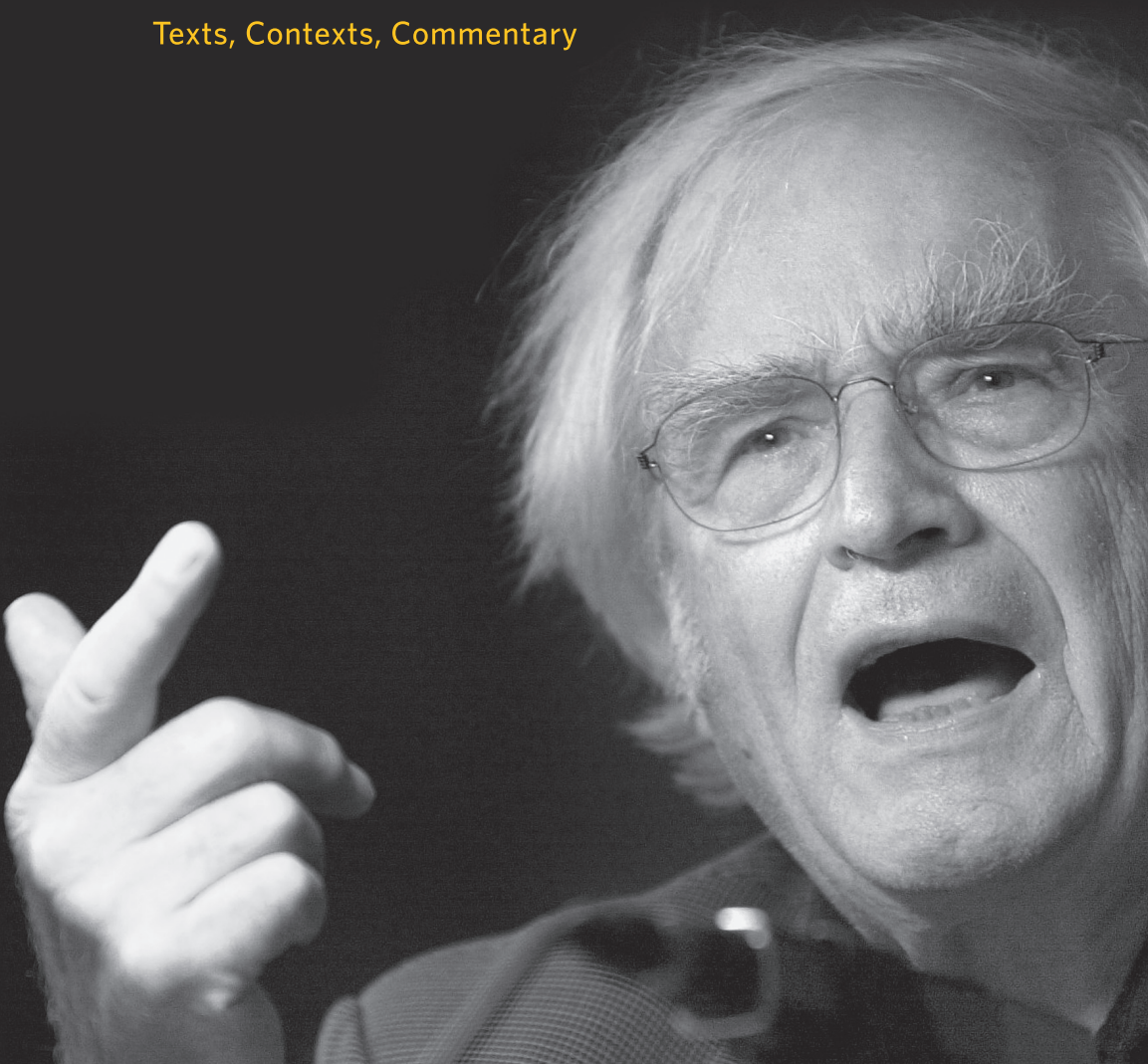
THOMAS A. KOVACH & MARTIN WALSER

The BURDEN of the PAST

Martin Walser on Modern German Identity

Texts, Contexts, Commentary



The Burden of the Past

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Thomas A. Kovach
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For my daughter, Leah

Contents

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Thomas Kovach
Tucson, Arizona
June 2008

The Burden of the Past

Introduction

On October 11, 1998, Martin Walser, one of the most prominent of the postwar generation of German writers, gave a speech at St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt am Main as he formally accepted the "Peace Prize of the German Book Trade." This speech, which took place in a historically weighty setting — the church had been the site of the German National Assembly during the 1848 revolution, arguably the first (albeit short-lived) democratic institution in German history — addressed what Walser called the exploitation of the Holocaust, the use of Holocaust remembrance by unnamed individuals to keep Germans in a perpetual state of guilt. The speech was received by the assembled notables with a standing ovation, with one significant exception: Ignatz Bubis, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, attacked Walser in the press the next day for making incendiary comments designed (in Bubis's view) to stir up ultra-nationalist and antisemitic elements among the general public. This led to a rather ugly public debate between Walser and Bubis, one that to this day remains a milestone in the troubled history of Germany's struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past. Despite Bubis's attempts to defuse the acrimony, finally even withdrawing his comment about the incendiary nature of the speech, a bitter aftertaste remained.

Shortly before his death in August of the following year, Bubis, who had devoted much of his adult life to strengthening the position of the Jewish community in Germany and insisting on the possibility of post-Holocaust Jewish life in Germany, lamented in an interview that his life's work had been in vain, and requested that he be buried in Israel.

In 2002, Walser published his novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (Death of a Critic), in which the corrupt central character was a thinly veiled portrait of the German-Jewish literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki; this led even many of those who had defended him earlier (notably Frank Schirrmacher of the leading daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*[1]) to attack him for displaying an antisemitic agenda.

An outside observer might easily conclude that an apparently "respectable" postwar German author had been exposed as a closet Jew-

[1] Subsequently referred to as *FAZ*.

hater and/or right-winger, and this has indeed been the view taken by some in the years since. And yet, as Walser's defenders have pointed out, it is rather problematic to make such charges against a man who in the 1960s was noted for his left-wing political engagement (including a brief flirtation with the German Communist Party) and who, even more significantly, had taken the lead among German intellectuals in dealing not only with the Nazi past in general but specifically with the issue of the Holocaust; in his 1965 essay "Our Auschwitz," written in response to the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, he spoke explicitly of collective German responsibility for the Holocaust and expressed his disdain for those who sought to evade this responsibility by focusing all the blame on the individuals on trial. How is it that the same person who in the 1960s seemed a model for his generation in dealing with the Holocaust and calling on his fellow Germans to acknowledge their share of responsibility for Nazi crimes, in the 1990s and since emerges as someone complaining about the burden imposed by Holocaust images and attacking the Berlin Holocaust Monument, then still under discussion, as a "nightmare"?

In the volume that follows I do not pretend to offer a definitive answer to this question. Rather, by presenting this and several other of Walser's speeches and essays dealing with issues of the German past in English translation, and by providing historical context and commentary on these texts, I hope to give readers a perspective from which they may begin to consider the issues that, as will become clear, concern not only Walser as an isolated figure but all of German society, East and West, in its ongoing struggle to deal with the Nazi past and its own conflicted feelings regarding that past.

* * *

Martin Walser was born in the town of Wasserburg, on Lake Constance in the south of Germany, in the year 1927. He himself was later to assert (in the essay "Handshake with Ghosts") that the fact of his being a German born in the year 1927 is more significant than any ideological orientation he may have displayed as a postwar intellectual. By this it may be assumed he meant that he was of the generation too young to bear any responsibility for the rise of Hitler or for crimes committed by the Nazi regime — he was a six-year-old child when Hitler came to power in 1933, and eighteen when the war ended in 1945 — but old enough to have witnessed, if only from the perspective of a provincial town, the realities of life under the Nazi regime, and to have served in the army as a

young recruit. He thus entered adulthood under the shadow of his country's catastrophic defeat (in fact spending several months as an American POW at war's end), but, even more significantly, under the shadow of the postwar revelation of the horrors perpetrated by the German state.

After his release he completed his secondary-school studies and then began his university studies, first at the University of Regensburg, then (from 1948 onward) at the University of Tübingen, where he received his doctorate in 1952 with a dissertation on Franz Kafka. His choice of topic is worth noting, given the accusations of antisemitism that have been leveled at him in recent years, and the fact that in 1950 Kafka's place in the pantheon of major twentieth-century writers was nowhere near as secure as it is now. During Walser's student years he was heavily involved in student theater, and after his arrival in Tübingen he began working with the *Süddeutsche Rundfunk* (Southern German Radio[2]) in Stuttgart. His first literary efforts were in fact radio plays written to be broadcast over the SDR.

Walser was not involved at the start with the writers who formed the famous *Gruppe 47,* an organization of young German writers who set out to make a clean break with the Nazi past, favoring realistic prose anchored in the present. But he won the group's prize in 1955 with his short story "Templones Ende" and was henceforth associated with the group and some of its well-known members, such as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll. In 1957 he published his first novel, *Ehen in Phillipsburg* (*Marriage in Phillipsburg,* 1961), for which he received the Hermann Hesse Award. The previous year he had left his job with the SDR in Stuttgart and returned with his wife to the Lake Constance region, where he has lived ever since. At the same time he traveled widely, notably making several trips to the United States, the first in 1958 to participate in the Harvard International Seminar at the invitation of Henry Kissinger. His 1960 novel *Halbzeit* (*Half Time*), the first of the so-called Anselm Kristlein trilogy and still regarded as one of his major works, brought him greater renown. However, his primary focus in these early years remained the drama. Interestingly, his 1964 play *Der schwarze Schwan* (*The Black Swan*) is widely regarded as one of the first literary texts by a German author to deal with issues of German national guilt for crimes of the Nazi era; its young protagonist is driven to suicide by his discovery of his father's involvement in wartime atrocities.

[2] Subsequently referred to as SDR.