

# A Literary Collage: Martin Walser's *Brandung*

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The literary device of a play within a play has been used with some frequency, but fiction which employs the literary work of other authors to develop its theme and plot must be considered exceptional. Martin Walser's novel *Brandung* (*Breakers* or *Surf*), published in 1985, therefore stands apart, not only because it has this feature, but also because it contains a multiplicity of such excisions and allusions. In essence, *Brandung* is a collage of references to and quotations from the works of Rilke, Heine, Shakespeare, and William Faulkner; in addition, it places great emphasis on the retelling of a story written by one of the characters, Kirk Elrod, with the result that Walser is able, by creating a fictitious novel within *Brandung* itself, to comment on his own fiction. This convoluted structuring is also intended, so I would suggest, to provide an analysis of the nature of literature, which, according to Walser, affords a means of defining and crystallizing the self.<sup>1</sup>

By availing himself of a protagonist, Helmut Halm,<sup>2</sup> who has taught at the pre-university level in Germany and is generally conversant with German and comparative literature, Walser has prepared the way for the presentation of his literary tour de force. Through the agency of an old friend with whom Halm has been out of touch for many years and who has become the chairman of the German department at a university in Berkeley, California, he receives a temporary appointment to teach there during the fall semester. Since Walser himself was a guest lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley in the autumn of 1983, an autobiographical element must be considered to be yet another aspect of this multilayered novel.<sup>3</sup> The courses assigned to Halm are Intermediate German, a class which Walser leaves unchronicled, and Conversational German. Halm's infatuation with Fran Webb, a student in that course, the typical "California girl"—blond, tanned, and physically well endowed—becomes the novel's focal point. Her questionable interest in conversational

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<sup>1</sup>See Martin Walser, "Porträt Martin Walser: Ein Gespräch mit Anton Kaes," *German Quarterly* 57 (1984): 440; "Es ist natürlich das eigene Innere, das man mit Büchern, die einem wichtig sind, ertastet."

<sup>2</sup>Halm appeared previously in Walser's 1978 novel *Ein fliehendes Pferd* (*A Runaway Horse*).

<sup>3</sup>The autobiographical factor in Walser's fiction has been emphasized by literary critics and acknowledged by Walser himself; see, e.g., Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Martin Walser* (Bern: Francke, 1971) 67.

German—although she has studied briefly in Vienna, she declines to participate in class discussion—would lead anyone knowledgeable about American university students to conclude that Fran has chosen a subject which will require the least effort for a (potentially) good grade. Even the untried professor from Germany arrives at this conclusion.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this end, however, Fran must elicit the cooperation of her instructor. Her after-class sessions with Professor Halm begin on the basis of the irrefutably logical premise that as a German academician he will be flattered by being asked for his help in interpreting a Rilke poem, selected by Fran as the topic of an essay she is preparing for a composition course—a subject in which she knows herself to be quite incompetent. With Halm's study of Rilke's renowned "Der Panther" ("The Panther"), Walser sets his plot in motion and avails himself of an opportunity to let literature itself comment on the nature of the literary arts.

Halm approaches Rilke's poem in a translation by the American poet Robert Bly. He judges this version to be too pedestrian and unintimidating. Therefore, he and his student are encouraged to make their own translation in concert. This activity produces a sense of exhilaration so strong in Halm that he is impelled to end their tête-à-tête abruptly. Ironically, the paraphrase which the two readers of Rilke join in reciting—not unlike Dante's ill-fated lovers Paolo and Francesca—is a much-flawed rendering of the poem. Lines such as "It is a dance of power around a point in which a great will *tends*" and "Rarely enough the *drape* of his lids lifts up totally *silent*" (59) are almost proof of the impossibility of conveying the power of "Der Panther" in another language. In an ensuing after-class session with Fran, Halm in Walser's stead begins an explication of the function of literature by suggesting that she focus her composition concerning the poem on the subject of her reception of it. Her essay describing the loneliness she felt as an American student in Vienna which she found mirrored in "Der Panther" earns her an unimaginable "A" from her English professor. The sense of a different but not incompatible kind of isolation must have been the emotion evoked in Halm by this dramatic manner of reassociating himself with Rilke's poem; with the panther's incapacity to relate to the world beyond his cage's bars, Halm equates his own world-weariness, his having grown "old" (he is fifty-five). Together with Rilke, Walser, for his part, would have experienced the isolation of the self-absorbed artist which "Der Panther" also depicts.

The success of her endeavor to establish a good relationship with her German professor and to impress her professor in her composition course brings Fran back to Halm's office when she is about to begin her next writing assignment. She has selected, quite implausibly, two poems, Shakespeare's difficult 129th sonnet and an obscure poem by Stefan George to consider for a topic and requires Halm to make the final choice. He decides that she should comment on the 129th sonnet, which deals with the perversity of lust. The unlikely coincidence linking Fran's improbable exhibition of literary sophistication with Halm's perfervid infatuation is evidence of the aura of fiction with

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<sup>4</sup>Martin Walser, *Brandung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 60. All references are to this edition.

which the self surrounds its commonplace existence. Once again Fran composes, instead of an explication of Shakespeare's poem, a personal account; she tells how she has kept her boyfriend Glenn Birdsell at bay while she works on her essay. In Halm's overwrought state of mind, he convinces himself that he must possess her at all costs and that Fran's composition concerns tantalizing not only her boyfriend but also him. In the final analysis, his pursuit of a woman thirty-five years his junior remains on the level of an excursion to the beach and a romp in the dangerous surf, even though the departure of his wife Sabine for Germany at this juncture to care for her seriously ill father provides Halm with further impetus to give his imagination free rein.

Walser supplements this tale of a love foreordained to remain platonic with depictions of other troubled marriages. Particularly relevant to Walser's theme of the pain inflicted on one another by a husband and wife by an act of adultery is the story in *Brandung* which describes the collapse of the marriage of Elissa and Rainer Mersjohann—he is Halm's sponsor at the university. Elissa's promiscuity and the contention between them for the love of their son Jamey have accelerated Rainer's decline into alcoholism and the neglect of his professional obligations. The ultimate consequence of his despair, his suicide, is another instance of the melodramatic propensities of the novel's plot, its fictional dimension.<sup>5</sup> This bourgeois tragedy occurs too late in the story to bring about a change of direction in the reckless course of Halm's pursuit of Fran, which has in the meantime had rather serious consequences.

Although Fran's essay on Shakespeare's sonnet about lust earns her only the unfortunate grade of "C-," she still elicits Halm's help with her next writing assignment, the subject of which is to be either Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* or *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will*. For whatever reason, since it cannot be assumed that she is familiar with either comedy, Fran elects to discuss *Much Ado about Nothing*. Halm, who knows Shakespeare's work relatively well, draws the hasty conclusion that Fran has deliberately or somehow instinctively chosen the play with a subplot which mirrors to some extent their relationship. In their interaction the characters Beatrice and Benedick conceal their liking for one another by constantly warring verbally with one another. Halm wants to interpret Fran's choice as a sign that she understands that he keeps hidden what he cannot risk revealing. He persuades her that her theme should be the underlying meaning of the banter in which Benedick and Beatrice engage, argumentiveness as an indication of depth of emotion. To underscore the relevance to *Brandung* of Beatrice and Benedick's use of persiflage to ward off the mutual attraction they feel, Walser juxtaposes the relationship of Halm with Fran and that of Halm with Carol Elrod, the witty and efficient departmental secretary, who is also the much younger wife of Kirk Elrod, a prominent writer and adjunct professor. Halm has always relied on Carol to guide him through the maze of rules and regulations through which he must

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<sup>5</sup>Siegfried Mews in his knowledgeable article "Martin Walsers *Brandung*: Ein deutscher Campus Roman?" *German Quarterly* 60 (1987), proposes (233) that Rainer's suicide is brought about by his failure to abide by the "publish or perish" commandment which presumably prevails in American academic life.

wend his way as a teacher; she also allows him to bring to her desk the stories of his professional woes. Although he tries to keep from her the intensity of his feelings for Fran, he becomes aware that, by making light of his frequent out-of-class meetings with Fran, Carol means to convince him of his misunderstanding of Fran's obvious gratitude for his helpfulness. Halm, while analyzing the Beatrice and Benedick relationship as it applies to Fran, does not shrink from drawing conclusions which apply, even more directly, to his close association with Carol (194). He realizes that in the light of their fondness for one another, expressed in the chaffing tone of their conversations (Halm is much less adept at repartee than Carol), their similarity to Beatrice and Benedick is clearer than that of a taciturn Fran and somber Halm.

In addition to advancing the plot of *Brandung* by giving Halm the hope that Fran is beginning to sense the ardor of his love, Walser's borrowing of motifs which occur in *Much Ado about Nothing* has the propensity to represent further commentary on literature itself, the compass of which is limited by its being a structure of words. As such, the literary work remains imprecise in its message and narrow in its emotional range; by comparison, music is more direct and richer. At this point in the novel, Walser concerns himself with Halm's preparations for a lecture he has been asked to deliver (for an impressive fee) on Heine's poetry.<sup>6</sup> During the course of his stay in California, Halm has altered the concept of his talk. His original title "Emigration als Emanzipation" ("Emigration as Emancipation") which has an autobiographical import, namely the contrast between the quietude and intellectual decline of his life in Germany and the adventuresomeness of his life in California, has faded into oblivion and been replaced by "Laura and Asra." The two figures, each from a different poem, symbolize, respectively, the indifference of the object of the poet's affections and the languishing to the point of death of a slave, an Asra, who experiences a forbidden love. In an ironic turn of the plot, Halm not only fails to deliver his speech which rather openly contains a message for Fran about the nature of their relationship, but he also becomes aware subsequently that she had not even intended to hear him speak. A combination of anxiety and exhaustion (he had been exercising to maintain his vigor) had caused him to faint at the podium before he could utter a word.

However, Halm's misfortune garners him a slight reward; Fran's concern for her professor's well-being is activated. Although she has discouragingly received another "C-" for her latest essay, she does not hesitate to ask him for his assistance in choosing a theme for the next literary topic in English composition, William Faulkner's novel *The Hamlet*. On this occasion, Halm does not have the advantage of being knowledgeable about the work with which Fran has to contend; he is soon mired down in the complexity of Faulkner's prose and befuddled by the world of the American deep South. He is forced to orient himself to this dark continent and find himself and his situation depicted in the characters and events of a singular time and place. As a novelist who is also a

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<sup>6</sup>At Berkeley Walser himself gave a public lecture on the subject of "What Is an Author?"; see "Portrait Martin Walser" 433.

literary critic, the author of a favorably received book on Franz Kafka (*Beschreibung einer Form* [Munich: Hauser, 1961]), Walser has particular insight into the capacity of fiction to give substance and form to fantasies. Through Faulkner's portraiture of Eula Varner as the embodiment of the feminine mystique, an Eve in a Mississippi hamlet, Halm—himself an alter ego of Walser—realizes that his fascination with Fran has a mythic dimension. However, when he suggests to Fran that she make Eula the subject of her essay, she demurs, preferring to analyze Labove, a young schoolteacher who lusts after Eula in vain. Because he compares himself to Labove, Halm tries to dissuade Fran from fixing her attention on Labove and his inevitable downfall. Risking all (unlike Halm) when he finds himself alone with Eula, Labove tries to take her in his arms. She shrugs off his embrace and admonishes him with the words: "Stop pawing me . . . You old headless horseman Ichabod Crane."<sup>7</sup> In the throes of complete frustration Labove takes flight. Notably, in this scene Faulkner has, by quoting from Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," used the device of literary allusion, if not as extensively as Walser in *Brandung*.

Since Fran does not find her relationship with Halm reflected in Faulkner's book, but continues to regard (in all likelihood) their after-class meetings as the expression of friendship, Halm lacks occasion to force his attentions on her. In conversations with himself, which Walser recreates by pitting a bold HE-Halm against a rationalizing I-Halm, Halm berates himself for this failure to seize the opportunity. The HE-Halm is soon encouraged in his intention to be forceful by the fact that Fran has rather casually invited him to attend a filmed presentation of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, being shown for a class she attends on the opera. Overestimating the significance of this invitation, Halm buys himself clothes, designed for the young, to wear on his "date" with Fran. Halm's choice of apparel puts him on a level with Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* who dresses in a startling fashion to please the lady who, he believes, is attracted to him; the play is also one that Fran's English professor has at one point proposed as a topic. In addition, this situation can be seen as an indirect allusion to Thomas Mann's "Der Tod in Venedig" ("Death in Venice"), in which the protagonist Aschenbach tries to look younger and more appealing to the young man he loves. Halm's hopes that he will have Fran's companionship exclusively at the showing of *Die Walküre* are dashed when she appears with her boyfriend Glenn, the university's best water polo player. As it happens, both the young people, together with Halm, are affected by the emotion-laden music, and Halm is witness to their embrace and passionate kiss at the beginning of an intermission during the presentation. Halm is so overwhelmed by the sight of this perfectly mated couple, the counterparts of Siegmund and Sieglinde in the opera, that, like Labove, he runs away. Irrationally, too, he is convinced that there must be an incestuous element in his love for Fran; he is certain that Fran's eyes resemble his own and are those of a sister. Although Walser makes no allusion in *Brandung* to Thomas Mann's "Wälsungenblut," in which a latter-day Siegmund and Sieglinde fall into each other's arms as if to defy Sieglinde's

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<sup>7</sup>William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1940) 122.

circumspect fiancé and morality itself, the relationship between the novel, the opera, and Thomas Mann's story is obvious.

Fran's final effort to give expression to her gratitude to Halm for his assistance in writing her essays and for the "A" she will predictably receive from him brings Halm another invitation, this one to a farewell party in his honor at Fran's home. On this occasion Halm finally holds Fran in his arms as he dances with her. In a drunken state he falls down with her. Bumping into a fireplace ornament, both are hurt. Their final parting takes place on campus; after reassuring him that she does not hold her having been injured against him, she waves farewell with one of her crutches (she has a fractured ankle). Halm takes his infatuation with her back to Germany. It may be that he has also kept in mind a comment Fran had made, her lengthiest statement in the novel, about men like Labove who attack women: "Studies of rapists have shown that the destruction of what was desired stops the desire" (in English; 249). Since this book in which the works of other authors supplement plot and characterization contends that all people have a fictitious account of their lives, Walser provides his protagonist's impassioned pursuit of a much younger woman with a literary end. Halm receives a curt letter from Carol Elrod which contains a newspaper clipping describing Fran's death in an auto which plunged over a collapsing cliff edge into the Pacific surf; because of her injured leg, she had been unable to escape. The fact that this accident is reported in very mangled English (310; in contrast, the student newspaper account of Halm's fainting spell which Walser reproduces has few, if any, flaws) tends to suggest that Halm himself rather than Walser has written this conclusion to his frustrating love affair.

While the pertinence of the literary allusions and excisions in *Brandung* is clear, the relevance of including a summary of Kirk Elrod's novel *Inspiration Inn* is less apparent. In the company of great literature, the sketch of this rather unfocused novel is unmistakably out of place. It is not, like *Brandung* itself, primarily a love story. It tells of a Swiss immigrant, John Frey (a symbolic name, together with that of Webb, Birdsell [Vogelfänger], etc.), who discovers a strange hostelry in a secluded California cove, presided over by Gret, the gaunt daughter of the apparently deceased proprietor. She sits (mythically) at a stone table before the hotel, waiting for the opportunity to relate to a chance visitor the story of her father's life. Frederick Stabler, yet another immigrant from Switzerland, so Gret's narrative begins, found success in the West as the inventor and manufacturer of water pumps. In a somewhat remote fashion Stabler's achievements resemble those of John Augustus Sutter. The industrial complex which Stabler built, including housing for his uniformly abstinent workers, is similar in its utopian aspirations to Brecht's American city Mahagonny; its downfall is also as inevitable (112). In the stock market collapse of 1929 Stabler lost his wealth and retreated with his family to the house on the Pacific. Besieged in his hideaway by those who would rescue his wife from her supposed captivity, he was accidentally shot; his last words were "Thank you." Subsequently, Gret transformed their retreat into an inn. To preserve her father's memory, or as it is put in *Inspiration Inn* (the name indicates that it is a haven for storytellers), to redeem him, Gret continues to tell his story. Having

heard it, John Frey makes the chilling discovery that Gret is none other than Stabler himself—he had first dressed in women's clothes on board the *Titanic* in order to get into a lifeboat. At the close of *Inspiration Inn*, the narrator reveals that no one has been able to locate the hotel in recent times. It seems to lie in the same limbo as the disappearing town Germelshausen invented by another German author and traveler to California, Friedrich Gerstäcker.

The odd mixture of adventure, history, and fantasy—in sum, the elements of all fiction—has an overtone of myth (the assertion that an American publisher had accepted Kirk Elrod's manuscript in itself suggests the fairy tale). In writing his story within a story, Walser places himself in the ranks of those European visitors who have explored the Golden State. The treasure he has found is a golden lode of fable; thus Kirk Elrod becomes another alias of Martin Walser and *Inspiration Inn* an account of Walser's encounter with his hermaphroditic poetic muse. Under the circumstances John Frey, who "finds" Gret and listens to her story is yet another version of the author of *Brandung*;<sup>8</sup> like Walser (and Max Frisch, to name a particularly influential contemporary Swiss author) he keeps a literary diary.

There are indeed even more layers in Walser's literary collage, perhaps less conspicuous allusions than those considered here.<sup>9</sup> Walser would, no doubt, want readers to create their own patterns, omitting and adding literary references. The purpose of including this material in the novel by way of quotations and allusions is, of course, not to test the readers' perspicacity but both to undergird the plot by giving it an ironic substructure and to analyze the nature of literature itself by compelling readers to consider pertinent examples. Like the surf it is the force, that is, life, with which the writer contends and also the story with which he emerges from that encounter.

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<sup>8</sup>Walser's assigning to his characters symbolic value has been evident even in his early (and stylistically experimental) novels; see Schwarz 33.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Carol is close both in name and personality to Goethe's Charlotte in *The Elective Affinities*. Halm, as weak as a reed, resembles Werther. Charlotte (Lotte) in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is another married woman who toys with an admirer (Werther).