

Writer Martin Walser Reflects on the Difficulties of Living with German Guilt (October 11, 1998)

Abstract

In a widely misunderstood speech delivered upon his acceptance of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, West German writer Martin Walser expresses his irritation with what he perceives as the expected rituals of contrition in literature. For him, acts of conscience are deeply personal and not the stuff of public demonstration.

Source

Experiences while Composing a Sunday Speech

[...]

In every epoch there are themes or problems that are indisputably the themes of conscience for that epoch – or that have been made such. Two pieces of evidence for the themes of conscience of our epoch. A truly important thinker gave this formulation in 1992: “It is the reactions to right-wing terrorism – those from the political center in the general public, and those from above, from the government, the apparatus of state, and the party leadership – that make visible the full extent of our moral and political degradation.” An equally important literary figure had stated a couple of years earlier: “Go into any restaurant in Salzburg. At first glance you have the impression that these are nothing but fine, upright people. But if you listen in to the conversations of your neighbors at the table, you discover they dream only of genocide and gas chambers.” If you add up what the thinker and the writer – both indeed equally serious – are saying, then the government, the apparatus of state, the party leadership, and the upright people at the next table are all “morally and politically” decadent. My first reaction, when year after year I read any number of such quotable statements from entirely serious eminences in the intellectual and literary realms, is: why doesn’t it seem that way to me? What’s wrong with my powers of perception? Or is it my too-easily-lulled conscience? For it’s clear that these two eminences in the fields of intellect and language are also eminent in the field of conscience. Otherwise the sharpness with which they cast suspicion and even make accusations could not be explained. And if an accusation goes far enough, if it is convincing in and of itself, then proof becomes superfluous. [...]

I cannot dispute such statements; the thinker as well as the writer are too eminent for me to do so. But – and this is obviously my moral and political shortcoming – no more can I agree with them. My reaction – entirely trivial, to be sure – to such painful statements: let’s hope that what’s being said to us in such blatant fashion isn’t true. [And to reveal myself completely: I simply cannot believe these pain-inducing statements, which I can neither support nor refute.] It exceeds my moral and political and political imagination, so to speak, to regard what they say as true. Inside me an unprovable suspicion begins to take hold: those who come forward with such statements want to hurt us, because they think we deserve it. Probably they want to hurt themselves as well. But us too. All of us. With one restriction: all Germans. For this much is clear: in no other language in the last quarter of the twentieth century can one speak in such a way about an entire people, an entire population, an entire society. You can only say that about Germans. Or at most, as far as I can see, about Austrians as well.

Everyone knows the burden of our history, our everlasting disgrace. There is not a day in which it is not held up before us. Could it be that in doing so the intellectuals who hold it up before us fall prey for a

moment to the illusion that, because they have labored once more in the grim service of memory, they have relieved their own guilt somewhat, that they are even for a moment closer to the victims than to the perpetrators? A momentary alleviation of the merciless confrontation of perpetrators and victims. I myself have never felt it possible to escape the side of the accused. Sometimes, when it seems I can't look anywhere without being attacked by an accusation, I must talk myself into believing, and thereby gaining some relief from the burden, that a routine of accusation has arisen in the media. Easily twenty times I have averted my eyes from the worst filmed sequences of concentration camps. No serious person denies Auschwitz; no person who is still of sound mind quibbles about the horror of Auschwitz; but when this past is held up to me every day in the media, I notice that something in me rebels against this unceasing presentation of our disgrace. Instead of being grateful for this never-ending presentation of our disgrace, I begin to look away. [I would like to understand why the past is being brought up in this decade more than ever before.] When I notice something in me rebelling, I try to seek out the motives of those holding up our disgrace, and I am almost happy when I believe I can discover that often the motive is no longer keeping alive the memory, or the impermissibility of forgetting, but rather the exploiting of our disgrace for present purposes. Always good and honorable purposes – but still exploitation. Someone disapproves of the way in which we propose to overcome the results of Germany's division, and says that in this way we are making a new Auschwitz possible. Even the division itself, as long as it lasted, was justified by leading intellectuals with a reference to Auschwitz. Another example: after exhaustive research, in one of my works I presented the story of a Jewish family and their journey from Landsberg an der Warthe to Berlin as an attempt, maintained over the course of fifty years, through baptism, marriage, and accomplishments to escape the lot of Eastern European Jews and become Germans, to assimilate completely. I said that anyone who sees everything as a road that could only end in Auschwitz makes the German-Jewish relationship into a catastrophe that was predestined under any and all circumstances. The intellectual who felt called on to comment called this a trivialization of Auschwitz. I will assume for my own sake that he could not possibly have studied the history of that family as thoroughly as I did. Even living members of that family have confirmed the accuracy of my depiction. But I'm still accused of trivializing Auschwitz. From there it's only a small step to denying the Holocaust. A clever intellectual on TV assumes a serious expression that on his face looks like a foreign language, when he shares with the world the author's serious failure, namely that Auschwitz does not appear in the book. Evidently he had never heard about the primal law of narration, that of narrative perspective. But even if he had, *Zeitgeist* comes before aesthetics.

Before one swallows all of this as a justified censure of one's lack of conscience, one would like to ask in return why, for example, in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*, which after all did not begin to appear until 1795, there is no mention of the guillotine. And when I see myself subjected to moral and political censure in this fashion, a memory forces its way into my consciousness. In 1977, not far from here in Bergen-Enkheim, I had to give a speech, and I used the occasion back then to make the following confession: "I find it unbearable to make German history end in a product of catastrophe, however bad its recent course has been." And: "We must grant as little recognition to West Germany, I say, trembling with my boldness, as we do to the East. We must keep open the wound called Germany." I think of this because once again now I tremble with my own audacity when I say: Auschwitz is not suited to become a routine threat, a means of intimidation or moral bludgeon that can be employed on any occasion, or even a compulsory exercise. All that comes into being through ritualization has the quality of lip service. But what suspicion does one invite when one says that the Germans today are a perfectly normal people, a perfectly ordinary society?

Posterity will be able to read one day, in all the discussions concerning the Holocaust Monument in Berlin, what people stirred up when they felt themselves responsible for the conscience of others: paving over the center of our capital to create a nightmare the size of a football field. The monumentalization of our disgrace. The historian Heinrich August Winkler calls this "negative nationalism." I dare to assert that this is not a bit better than its opposite, even if it appears a thousand times better. Probably there is a

banality of the good too.

Anything you say to someone else, you should say exactly the same to yourself, at the very least. It sounds like a cliché, but it's really nothing but wishful thinking. To speak of one's own failings in public? All of a sudden this too becomes just a phrase. The fact that such outcomes are difficult to avoid must have something to do with our conscience. When a thinker criticizes "the full extent of the moral and political degradation" of our government, apparatus of state, and party leaderships, then the impression cannot be avoided that he considers his conscience clearer than those of these morally and politically decadent souls. But what does that really feel like – a purer, a clearer, an immaculate conscience? To protect myself from further embarrassing questions, I will call to my aid two intellectual giants whose understanding of language is beyond question: Heidegger and Hegel. Heidegger in his 1927 work *Being and Time*: "Becoming certain of not having done something does not possess the character of a phenomenon of conscience. On the contrary: this becoming certain of not having done something can sooner mean a forgetting of conscience." That is, put less precisely: a clear conscience is as perceptible as the lack of a headache. But then it is said in the paragraph of *Being and Time* about conscience: "Being guilty is part of being itself." I hope that this won't once again be understood right away as a convenient phrase for letting off the hook those contemporary obscurantists who don't want to feel guilty. And now Hegel. Hegel writes in his *Philosophy of Right*: "Conscience, that deepest inward solitude within oneself, where all that is external and all that is limited disappears, this thoroughgoing withdrawal into oneself."

The result of this philosophical assistance: A clear conscience is no conscience at all. Everyone is alone with his or her conscience. For this reason, public acts of conscience are in danger of becoming symbolic. And nothing is more alien to conscience than symbolism, however well-intentioned. This "thoroughgoing withdrawal into one's self" cannot be represented. It must remain "inward solitude." You can't demand from others what you would like to receive but are not willing to give – or cannot give. And this is not just German idealist philosophy. It is, for example, put into practice in literature – in Kleist's play *The Prince of Homburg*. And now I can share something beautiful after all. Wonderful scenes in Kleist's play in which the conscience is respected, perhaps even celebrated, as the epitome of the personal. The cavalry general Prince of Homburg has acted contrary to orders in battle; the Elector condemns him to death and then suddenly announces: "He is pardoned!" Natalie can scarcely believe it: "He is pardoned? He's not going to die now?" she asks. The Elector replies: "I bear deep within me, as is well known to you, the highest respect for his moral feeling: he goes free!" Thus it is made entirely dependent on the moral feeling of the condemned man whether the sentence of death is carried out. If the condemned man can regard the sentence as unjust, he is free.

This is the freedom of conscience I'm talking about. Conscience, left to itself, creates enough illusion. But when it is commanded publicly, only illusion rules. Does not each person nurture and conceal deep within himself a cabinet of mirrors designed for the production of self-esteem? Is not each person an institution for the licensing of the most irreconcilable contradictions? Is not each person a conveyor belt for an endless dialectic of truth and lies? Each person a warrior of conscience led by vanity? Or am I generalizing too much here, just to find company for my own weakness? I cannot omit the question: would the general public really be poorer or coarser in conscience if poets and thinkers had not come forward as guardians of the national conscience? [...]

One would like to confront the soldiers of public opinion with this example when they, with moral pistol extended, force the writer into the service of opinion. In any event, they have brought matters to the point where writers no longer need to be read, only interviewed. The fact that the pronouncements that arise in this way are either not verifiable or flatly contradicted in the works of those authors is a matter of no concern to the guardians of opinion and conscience, since the literary text has no utility for them.

[...]

Source: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, ed., *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 1998, Martin Walser. Ansprachen aus Anlaß der Verleihung*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Buchhändler-Vereinigung, 1998.

Translation: Martin Walser, “Experiences while Composing a Sunday Speech (1998),” in *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity: Texts, Contexts, Commentary*, by Thomas A. Kovach and Martin Walser. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008, pp. 88–94.

Recommended Citation: Writer Martin Walser Reflects on the Difficulties of Living with German Guilt (October 11, 1998), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3426>> [January 21, 2025].