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## Woyzeck And Hamlet Recast In The Twentieth Century – Two Of Martin Walser's Dramas

Gertrud Bauer Pickar

“Es sollte nicht abgelehnt werden, daß eine große Figur der Literatur neu und in einem anderen Geist behandelt wird.”<sup>1</sup> Brecht made this statement in a discussion of Hanns Eisler's opera libretto *Johann Faustus*, but it is no less an appropriate defense for Martin Walser's *Eiche und Angora*<sup>2</sup>, whose leading figure has been called a “trivialisierten Woyzeck.”<sup>3</sup> In this paper I would like to consider the nature of Walser's utilization of literary models in both *Eiche und Angora* and *Der schwarze Schwan*,<sup>4</sup> two of his dramas which have suffered adverse criticism because of their reliance upon literary models, and discuss the manner in which he has adapted and modified them, thereby creating new and original works.

Central to the drama *Eiche und Angora* is the pathetic figure of Alois Grübel. Exploited and deprived of human dignity, he is a direct literary descendent of Georg Büchner's Woyzeck. Both of these figures depict simple, well-intentioned individuals, victimized by the society in which they are forced to function. Both have willingly, but without comprehension, subjected themselves to “medical research” and experimentation and exhibit the harmful consequence of their treatment. Woyzeck needed the extra cash, Alois's motivation was less realistic: “der Doktor Moser hat gesagt, ich tät das für die ganze Menschheit, das ist ein schönes Gefühl, Herr Kreisleiter, wenn man etwas für die ganze Menschheit tut . . .” (p. 36). As a result, both are harassed by a “doctor” who attempts to analyze their behavior and proudly comments upon their mental or physical deviations or aberrations. In *Woyzeck* the doctor gleefully notes, “Er hat die schönste aberration mentalis partialis, die zweite Species, sehr schön ausgeprägt. Woyzeck Er kriegt Zulage!”<sup>5</sup> In *Eiche und Angora*, Dr. Zerlebeck similarly commends Alois for an emotional outburst, “Bravo, Alois, bravo. Diese Aggressionstendenz direkt auf die Apathie, das ist sehr interessant” (p. 68). In both cases, the doctors are fanatic about the importance of their work. The former exclaims once, “Es giebt eine Revolution in der Wissenschaft, ich spreng sie in die Luft” (p. 417). The latter, who meets all objections with the phrase, “es geht um die Wissenschaft,” protests loudly when his project is dismissed as a “Randproblem,” insisting, “Über kurz oder lang kann die halbe Menschheit in unseren Lagern leben, und wir stehen, medizinisch-anthropologisch gesprochen, mit leeren Händen da” (pp. 58-59). His primary concern is the psychology of the prisoner, for which he believes Alois has provided the key – “die Kenntnis dieses Phänomens der Magenonanie” (p. 58). The absurdity of this last term recalls the use of “Viehshionomik” in a scene in *Woyzeck*. In other cases, key words are repeated. The reference to Woyzeck's “fixe Idee” is echoed in the description of Alois as “ein einfacher

Mensch, aber die Idee hat er begriffen –” (p. 26). The comment about Woyzeck, “Er läuft ja wie ein offnes Rasirmesser durch die Welt, man schneidet sich an ihm” (p. 419) is recalled by Alois’s self-descriptions: “Ich war verhetzt, Herr Kreisleiter. Ist einer erst einmal verhetzt, der schneuzt sich auch mit dem Messer, wenn’s verlangt wird von ihm” (p. 10).<sup>6</sup>

Woyzeck’s barber profession is suggested by the task which Gorbach assigns Alois in scene four – that of shaving Maria’s head. Dr. Zerlebeck, who is annoyed that Alois missed his appointment, comments, “Sieh mal einer an: Alois ist unter die Damenfriseure gegangen” (p. 44). The role of Alois as barber plays a larger part in the earlier version. There the stage directions state, “Alois bürstet Maria die Haare vom Hals, bläst auch welche weg. Benimmt sich eher wie ein Friseur” (p. 34). Alois emphasizes his task by explaining his slowness and distaste for it, “Ich krieg den Krampf in die Hand, Herr Kreisleiter. Die hat so dicke Haare, das bin ich nicht gewöhnt. Angora, das geht Ihnen anders durch die Hand, als das Stroh, was die auf’m Kopf hat” (p. 35), and Zerlebeck complains further, “Und daß du der Dame da die Haare auf Staatskosten so schön schneidest, ist das auch ein Befehl? (p. 42)

Ultimately each is reduced to the point where he destroys his love-object – Woyzeck, his Marie; Alois, his Angora rabbits. Both are pathetic figures in their awareness of their loss. Woyzeck says almost nostalgically, “Aber, Andres, sie war doch ein einzig Mädel,” (p. 385) and Alois comments, “Ach, Herr Direktor, daß ich einverstanden war mit dem Hasenmord. Das begreif ich nicht mehr. Und zur Strafe darf ich jetzt nicht mitsingen” (p. 107).

As already indicated, the similarities do not cease with the main figures. The rivalry of Marie and Margreth over the drum major is echoed in that of Maria and Anna for the Pole Jerzy. Gorbach shows the same fluctuation in attitude toward Alois, as the Captain toward Woyzeck, and a similar instability of nature. Marie, in yielding to the drum major, destroyed her relationship with Woyzeck and deprived him of the basis for his happiness. Anna’s deed which torments her is aimed also at Alois’s most treasured possession – his rabbits. Both women are griefstricken and repentent. Marie, unable to pray or find solace in the Bible, laments: “Ich bin doch ein schlecht Mensch. Ich könnt’ mich erstechen” (p. 413). Anna believes that she is harassed by crows which follow her everywhere. She turns to heavy drinking, her condition steadily deteriorates, requiring eventually psychiatric treatment.

In both works, comparisons between man and beast, inherent in the use of Woyzeck and Alois as laboratory animals, are numerous. Woyzeck’s wiggling ears are viewed by the doctor as marking the transition to the ass; Alois’s sterilization resulted in his “nightingale nature.” Woyzeck is compared to a cat in lack of scientific instinct, Anna says of Jerzy in the first version, “Eher kannst du einem Hund Anstand beibringen als so einer” (p. 17). Alois parrots racist ideas of an earlier epoch, “Der Unterscharführer Schöck hat aber gesagt zu uns: dem Alois seine Angorahasen die sind so hoch über einem normalen Hasen wie der deutsche Mensch über dem Untermenschen” (p. 25), and the use of the rabbits to expose racist views is continued throughout – even appearing once in the form of a pun,

where Alois is described as not being “hasenrein” (p. 99). In a scene omitted in the later version, Alois states, “es ist nicht alles ein Mensch, was Menschenantlitz zeigt . . . Es ist nicht alles gleich ein Mensch, was aussieht wie einer” (p. 27). This seems to be a variation of the description of the horse in *Woyzeck*, “Ja, das ist kein viehdummes Individuum, das ist eine Person. Ei Mensch, ei thierischer Mensch – und doch ei Vieh, ei bête” (p. 412).

In the face of these and numerous other similarities in imagery, dialogue and attitudes, Walser’s modifications of the Büchnerian figure are significant. Alois is presented as quieter and more controlled than Woyzeck, for he is shown after his first cure – we never see him “verhetzt” as he describes his own condition during an earlier period. In the first published version, Potz in anger calls him “Den berüchtigten Alois, den Erzterroristen, der schon einmal un ein Haar die Kreisleitung angezündet hätte . . .” (p. 48), and Gorbach, recalling that earlier time, chides Alois in Walser’s revised version, “Du hast es einfach zu wild getrieben” (p. 10). Later in speaking of him, Gorbach states, “Ja, eine Wandlung hat er durchgemacht. Wie ein Lamm ist er zurückgekommen aus dem Lager, umgänglich, hilfsbereit und ein tief gläubiger Nationalsozialist” (p. 50). This in turn is corroborated by Zerlebeck, “Aus einem roten Terroristen ist ein braver Zweibeiner geworden” (p. 57).

Furthermore, while Büchner depicted the final stage in the disintegration of a personality in a fixed point of time, Walser chooses to place his figure in a series of situations at spaced temporal intervals: April 1945 during the last months of the war, postwar Germany in 1950 and restoration Germany in the early 1960’s form the background for scenes in *Eiche und Angora* and provide elements essential to the portrayal of Alois and his troubled existence. He is presented repeatedly as a well-meaning but dullwitted follower who grasps the prevailing ideology too late and relinquishes it too slowly. As a result, he is doomed to failure, for the society which Walser depicts, demands immediate accommodation to its contemporary complexion for success, or even survival. There is an ironic ring to Maschnik’s admiring words: “Direkt Stadtrat könntest du werd’n, Alois, so begreifst du alles” (first version, p. 94).

In the process of presenting what Walser calls “the acclimatizing machine that is civilization,”<sup>7</sup> the peculiarly Büchnerian quality of the schizoid personality is eliminated. It could not have borne the repeated portrayal within a span of nearly twenty years which the format of *Eiche und Angora* demands – nor could it have withstood the recurrent internments in mental institutions to which Alois is subjected.

In its place, Walser adds to his Woyzeck-basis, qualities and elements associated with other traditional figures, thereby modifying and enriching the character composition. A prominent role is given to features of “der treue Diener” or servant. Here Walser draws heavily upon the literary convention which depicts the servant as an inferior to his master in the world of society, but as his superior in the natural world, a convention fully illustrated in Sir James M. Barrie’s “The admirable Creighton.” Tramping through the woods with Gorbach in the initial scene, Alois is clearly Gorbach’s superior in stamina, physical fitness and knowledge of the terrain. A keen observer of nature, Alois moves with ease and enjoyment through the woods, whistling like a bird, while Gorbach stumbles, pants and complains. When it is a matter of survival, Alois displays ingenuity

and devotion not unlike that exhibited by Major Tellheim's Just in *Minna von Barnhelm* and Leon "der Küchenjunge" in *Weh dem der lügt*. Alois leads Gorbach to the safety of a hilltop lookout when the town is in danger of attack and gains possession of a gun at a crucial moment. It is he who speaks with the voice of sanity in the period of general hysteria, pointing out that the signal flare would be of little help in broad daylight (p. 23), and who solves the dilemma when no one is sure if they will be found by the SS or the French, and it is Alois who has the presence of mind to suggest, "Anstatt zu streiten, sollte man vielleicht daran denken, wie man unsere Situation auf französisch expliziert" (p. 71).

In a social framework, however, Alois is unvaryingly submissive – and devoted – in his role as a servant. He exhibits genuine concern for Gorbach, carries his coat, and expresses motherly anxiety when Gorbach wants to change to lighter clothing. Loyal beyond expected norms, Alois is prepared to be shot (at the end of scene one) or hung (scene five), just to prevent possible later unpleasantness for Gorbach.

Alois's *naïveté* is coupled with such resilience of good spirits that despite repeated adversities and disappointments, he is able to say, "Sie wissen, ich bin ein Glückspilz. Es ist fast schon eine Schande, daß es mir immer so gut geht und der Welt geht's immer schlechter. Überall die Spannung, und ich hab mein schönes Leben in St. Fazzen" (p. 115). A veritable "Hans im Glück," his kinship to the simpleton of the Brothers Grimm is undeniable. This identification with the "fool" or "Hanswurst," – supported throughout the play by Alois's behavior and speech – is elicited initially by his cap. The scraps of Angora fur, sewn on a cloth base leaving patches of cloth visible, give the cap a checkered appearance, reminiscent of a jester's garb. Alois wears this cap during much of the play, and at one point Gorbach draws attention to its comical appearance: "Und paß auf, daß du nicht den Franzosen in die Hände läufst, sonst halten sie dich für'n Parlamentär mit deiner komischen Mütze!" (p. 47). In the final scene, Alois expressly rejects the *Hausmeistermütze* which he had worn during one period, and in a gesture of self-recognition, picks up his fur-trimmed cap, choosing to depart for the asylum wearing the fool's cap.

There are times, however, when Alois's remarks hover on that razor's edge between *naïveté* and ironic wit, between the guileless innocence of a "Hans im Glück" and genuine wiliness. The most important incident marked by such ambiguity is his saving the town from destruction and its citizens from battle by selling the pelts of his white Angora rabbits which the townspeople proceeded to display as flags of surrender.

This feature is probably responsible for the occasional comparison of Alois to Schwejk. "Der brave Soldat Schwejk" is also a composite figure, combining features of the "servant" and "fool" archetypes. Naive yet wily, he is a skillful mixture of unbelievable stupidity and the ability to come out on top of any situation. Alois is as loyal to the political ideology thrust upon him as Schwejk is to the Austrian monarchy. He, too, is willing to submit to physical humiliation or to be sacrificed for the common good and displays the same resilient good nature. However, the affinity of the two figures arises from their parallel character composition rather than from literary dependence.

Alois does not exhibit Schwejk's most unique quality — his gift of gab and his relentless narrative urge. His is rather a midway point between the inarticulateness of Woyzeck and the excessive garrulity of Schwejk. Despite the similarities with Schwejk, the literary model for Alois remains that of Woyzeck.<sup>8</sup> Within *Eiche und Angora*, Alois the fool, Alois the loyal servant, and Alois as a twentieth century Woyzeck merge into one, a varied yet homogenous whole. The new and convincing figure which emerges is one tailored to the specific historic context and dramatic framework of Walser's play and designed to serve Walser's particular intent.

*Der schwarze Schwan* (1964), in its relationship to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, presents a different use of preexistent material and form. Here not a specific individual or figure type, but the format of the Shakespeare drama is deliberately utilized and emphasized and the reliance upon *Hamlet* is basic to the character, the situation and the development.<sup>9</sup>

Rudi Goothein, a young man of delicate constitution who has been subjected to academic pressures, is confronted by evidence of his father's complicity in Nazi atrocities. No ghost but a scrap of paper containing concentration camp orders signed by his father has thrust this realization upon him. Confused and unable to assimilate this knowledge or reconcile his image of a father and a loving family man and successful restoration industrialist with that of a Nazi criminal, he agonizes about his father's crimes and his own untested potential for evil. In desperation, he seeks a voluntary confession from his father, though at the same time dreading the admission and the capacity for evil which it would make his birthright. Brought to the sanatorium of a former colleague by his father, who refuses to acknowledge the cause of his son's condition, Rudi exaggerates his symptoms and enlists the support of four other inmates in the production of a play designed to force his father to admit his guilt.

Their model is clearly revealed by both the stated intent of the production and the staging of the play, in which the transformation of a Nazi war criminal to a restoration business tycoon is depicted. Paralleling Shakespeare's scene of Hamlet instructing the actors (Act III, Scene 2), Rudi's opening remarks in the sixth scene of *Der schwarze Schwan* are addressed to his "actors" and pertain to the coming production. Since, however, Rudi's play makes no pretense at professionalism, elocution is not an objective and would, indeed, be out of place in the amateur surroundings. Rather than being concerned with loss of effectiveness through buffoonery or exaggerated delivery, he stresses strict adherence to the text, fearing his mental-patient actors might be inclined to slip into expression of their own private aberrations or neuroses. Thus the famous admonition is replaced by the more mundane warning in *Der schwarze Schwan*, "Und wer seinen Text vergißt, hört auf, fragt mich, verstanden. Improvisiert einer, fliegt er raus" (p. 55). Rudi stresses, "Bei den Lebensläufen, immer kommt ihr ins Plaudern und Ausschmücken. Wenn ihr euch jetzt nicht beherrscht, habt ihr mich hier zum letzten Mal gesehen" (p. 55).

In the scene with the actors, corresponding to Shakespeare's work, Rudi's opening remarks are addressed to his actors and concern the approaching production. Goothein

and Liberé subsequently enter and Goothein's initial line, "Guten Tag, Junge, wie geht es Dir" (p. 56) parallels that of the king, "How fares our cousin Hamlet." Both Rudi and Hamlet answer with imagery which baffles the questioner. Rudi's answer, "Ach, Papa, es könnte jeden Tag besser gehen. Ich muß richtig aufpassen, daß meine Nachtigall nicht zu groß wird, weil sie doch jemand's Eule sein kann. Das weiß man ja leider nie," recalls that of Hamlet's, "Excellent, i' faith; of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air promise-cramm'd; you cannot feed capons so. (Act III, Scene 2)."<sup>10</sup>

The similarities do not end here. Hamlet's prying with Polonius is echoed in Rudi's bantering with Liberé, his doctor; the delicate, demented Ophelia is parodied and paralleled by Tinchen, a hefty, mentally retarded woman of thirty who wanders on and off the stage, repeating snatches of children's songs and verses, such as "Itze ditze Silberschnitz,/ Itze ditze drauß . . ." (Tinchen's mental condition, however, is due, in this the scientific twentieth century, not to the inattentions of Rudi or family tragedy, but to childhood meningitis.)

Though in Walser's drama, the staged play does not produce its intended effect and Rudi ultimately commits suicide, the similarities are undisputable. Despite the apparent relationship to Shakespeare's drama, Walser claims to have been startled when one of his friends who read *Der schwarze Schwan* asked him if it didn't bother him, that the play was so reminiscent of *Hamlet*. He describes his reaction and with a naiveté which fails to be convincing states: "Mir war zwar beim Überarbeiten des Stückes aufgefallen, daß da Hamlet-Situationen passierten. Aber daß das ganze Stück jenen übermächtigen Schatten herbeschwören würde, hatte ich nicht befürchtet."<sup>11</sup>

Walser, despite his confident posture, apparently felt the implication of his friend's comment to be a negative one, and he was concerned enough about prejudice against reliance upon pre-existent forms to publish a detailed justification of his procedure in an essay entitled "Hamlet als Autor."<sup>12</sup> It is an interesting essay because it both reveals the concern of an author for the criticism of imitation and presents his defense of such procedures.<sup>13</sup> In essence, his case consists of three parts. The first is basically neither original nor refutable — the influence of Shakespeare as a natural, unconscious and automatic phenomenon. Walser contends that by the time one is conscious of Shakespeare, one has already assimilated him and his works. His effect is like that of an environmental influence. Walser contrasts the formative role of Shakespeare with that of an author like Joyce and claims: "Was man als Schriftsteller etwa bei Joyce lernen kann oder lernen muß, das spürt man schon während der ersten Lektüre. Shakespeare gegenüber ist man angewiesen auf unbewußte Erfahrung" (p. 51). Walser analyzes his relationship to Shakespeare further, insisting that "weder Größenwahnsinn noch die gegenteilige Art von Blindheit mich in diese Atmosphäre brachten, sondern eher ein zeitgeschichtlicher Umstand" (p. 52).

Rather than lingering on the degree of his reliance upon *Hamlet*, which might only emphasize the "non-original" aspects of his work, Walser sought defense in the appropriateness of his choice. This second point stresses the strong, traditional affinity Germans have felt for Shakespeare and especially for Hamlet, citing as corroboration the

oft quoted phrase, “Deutschland ist Hamlet.” Particularly the German youths of his generation (those who grew up in Germany between 1933 and 1945) identify with the figure of Hamlet. Indeed Walser claims Hamlet is “der intime Bundesgenosse jener Generation” (p. 52). He contends, “Wer damals geboren wurde und jetzt seinen Vater sucht in den Handlungen von damals, der ist auf eine traurige Weise prädestiniert für das Verständnis aller Hamlet-Einfälle” (p. 54). He shares the ambiguity in feeling Hamlet felt toward his mother and its effect upon his desire to learn the truth; he, too, has been thwarted by vague answers and been often casually dismissed; he similarly vacillates between condemnation and comprehension. Thus in a sense, *Der schwarze Schwan* becomes an expression of the generation gap, which provides both its theme and its conflict.

However, while members of his generation see themselves portrayed by Hamlet, Walser claims their fathers do not share this awareness; they compare productions, apparently oblivious to the pertinence of the play to Germany’s recent history. To force the fathers to confront their past and their sons’ unanswered questions about their role in those years, Walser asserts he undertook to rewrite Hamlet in a contemporary framework. His discussion of this decision, which constitutes no less than an adoption of Hamlet’s use of the theater as a means of forcing a change in the external world, forms the third part of Walser’s defense. Speaking of the stimulus and the potential he found in Hamlet, Walser writes: “Er regt an, die Bühne zu benützen zur Darstellung des gerade Geschehenen, daß alle miteinander Zeugen werden; das öffentlich wird, was geschehen ist; daß zur Sprache gebracht wird, was verschwiegen wurde” (p. 58).

By the conclusion of the essay, Walser has come almost full circle – from a reaction of authentic or simulated surprise at his friend’s comment to an avowal of the appropriateness of his utilization of *Hamlet*. Not only does Walser intentionally portray the Hamlet-conflict within the drama and employ the device of using the production of a play to induce a confession of guilt, but Walser himself, at least in retrospect, sees himself as Hamlet, writing his play for his own generation, using the theater as a vehicle with which to force a confrontation with their fathers. The essay which was originally intended to obscure the derivation of the drama, concludes with a programmatic proclamation of conscious identification with Hamlet. Although it would be legitimate to question the validity of this view of theater and to question the success of Walser’s proclaimed intent to write a work which would serve to furnish an entire generation with the means of bridging the communication gap between generations, the essay does provide insight into Walser’s intents and theories, and his use of literary models.

Walser in spite of his own reluctance to admit it, does indeed imitate – adopt, adapt and modify literary figures and structures. This, however, carries no aesthetic indictment, for Walser, both in his utilization and subsequent modifications of a literary figure in *Eiche und Angora* and in his adaption of the *Hamlet* structure in *Der schwarze Schwan* has made an original contribution to the German stage.



- <sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt a.M., 1967), XIX, 533-534.
- <sup>2</sup> *Eiche und Angora. Eine deutsche Chronik*, Edition Suhrkamp 16 (Frankfurt a.M., 1963). Reference will also be made to the first version, published under the same title, Frankfurt a.M., 1962.
- <sup>3</sup> Günter Blöcker, "Der Realismus X," *Merkur* XIX (1965), 392.
- <sup>4</sup> Edition Suhrkamp 90 (Frankfurt a.M., 1964).
- <sup>5</sup> Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (Hamburg: Wegner, n.d.), I, 418.
- <sup>6</sup> In a passage deleted in the revision, Alois repeats the image, stating: "Ich war verhetzt, verstehen Sie, Ist einer erst einmal verhetzt, der putzt sich die Ohren mit dem Messer, wenn's verlangt wird" (p. 61).
- <sup>7</sup> See "Schnellporträt eines Zeitgenossen," *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen*, Edition Suhrkamp 109 (Frankfurt a.M., 1965), pp. 66-68.
- <sup>8</sup> Rainer Taëni's criticism of *Eiche und Angora* in his *Drama nach Brecht* (Basel, 1968), assumes the identification of Brecht's Schweyk as Alois's model and then, comparing Walser's drama with Brecht's *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*, proceeds to designate the variances in the format of the two works as deficiencies in Walser's work.
- <sup>9</sup> This is not intended to deny the role or presence of both incentive and material from the external, non-literary world. Indeed, the figure of Rudi Goothein bears many traces of the actor Klaus Kammer to whom the drama is dedicated, and its genesis is linked to the case of the euthanasia professor Warner Heyde alias Sawade and two of his associates. See Werner Mittenzwei, "Der Dramatiker Martin Walser" [Nachwort], in *Martin Walser, Drei Stücke* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1966), pp. 298 ff.
- <sup>10</sup> A reading of the Schlegel translation of these lines makes the similarity even more apparent: "Vortrefflich, mein Treu; von dem Chamäleons-Gericht. Ich esse Luft, ich werde mit Versprechungen gestopft; Kapaunen kann man so nicht mästen." (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1966), p. 62.
- <sup>11</sup> *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen*, p. 51.
- <sup>12</sup> Reprinted from *Die Weltwoche*, Nr. 1597 (1964) in *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen*, pp. 51-58.
- <sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that Walser does not call upon Brecht in his self-defense, despite his undeniable debt to Brecht and the appropriateness of a reference to the latter's numerous adaptations, revisions, and dramatizations.