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CRISIS AND SELF-DISCOVERY: MARTIN WALSER LOOKS AT AGING

Margarete Landwehr

Hast du das anders erwartet? Ach ja, schon. Man fühlt sich, als sei einem etwas versprochen worden, das je länger desto weniger gehalten wird. Aber wahrscheinlich ist einem gar nichts versprochen worden. Es ist nur eine Kindheitseinbildung, dass alles gut werde. Erwachsene wissen Bescheid. Gottlieb, bist du wieder zu wenig erwachsen?¹

The disillusionment expressed by one of Martin Walser's characters, Gottlieb Zürn, when he must face another professional defeat captures the sense of desolation that plagues middle-aged men when they become conscious of their own mortality.² Awareness that "time is running out" and that many of their dreams will go unfulfilled triggers feelings of regret, despair and stagnation, typical emotions during mid-life. As with Gottlieb Zürn, a setback in one's career usually triggers the crisis and exposes the link between one's social role and one's personal life.

The personal crises of Walser's characters, then, contain an underlying indictment of their society, postwar Germany and its "Wirtschaftswunder." "Anpassung," or social adaptation, necessary for success, usually requires the forfeiture of personal integrity. A social persona, a mask of competence and self-assurance, crucial for survival in an competitive society, entails dishonesty and emotional isolation from others which leads to the disintegration of personal relationships and the loss of identity.

Although some of Walser's protagonists seek relief from their emotional turmoil in manic activity, in particular, in the frantic clamoring to regain their youth, others undergo a period of almost complete withdrawal and depression. It is the latter group that is most likely to resolve, in a limited way, their crisis by rediscovering their identity and rekindling intimacy with their spouses. The mid-life crisis, in this instance, becomes a "creative illness," in which the sufferers can resurrect the personality traits they repressed during the striving for a career and reestablish a balance in their lives.

I.

The realization of Walser's characters that their youth and physical prowess are slipping away, and that their options are becoming increasingly limited can precipitate a mid-life crisis, which often leads to a feeling of powerlessness, and to a sense of the futility of all their endeavors.³ This dawning awareness of their impotence catapults Walser's protagonists into a period of self-doubt and anxiety in which they must face not only the loss of their youthful vigor, but also the lack of aggressiveness, optimism and self-assurance that accompanied their youthful dreams of omnipotence and were essential in their earlier aspirations for success.

This consciousness of their finite possibilities, of the abyss between dreams and reality, triggers a growing sense of despair that exists at the core of a mid-life crisis and culminates in the realization that their mortality has become a threatening reality.⁴

Death, a leitmotif throughout Walser novels with middle-aged protagonists, appears in two prominent disguises: in the physical decline of the main character and in the demise of his colleague or friend, his alter ego. The loss of corporeal vitality, often a mirror of an emotional and spiritual stagnation, manifests itself as inertia, sexual impotence, or serious illness, and heralds the encroachment of old age, a painful reminder of the precarious nature of one's existence. The physical or mental deterioration, professional failure, or death of the protagonist's acquaintances suggests and sometimes even foreshadows his own eventual death.

The most obvious reference to death occurs in *Ein fliehendes Pferd* in which Klaus Buch, who is trying to save his boyhood friend Helmut Halm from "the danger of stagnation" (P 111), refers to the Bodensee as a realm of death, "Totenreich" (P 106). Buch's words prove to be prophetic: they foreshadow the life-threatening storm that capsizes the boat Halm, the main protagonist, and Buch are sailing. Buch falls overboard and is presumed dead and Halm, helpless and terrified, must confront the raging elements alone. This scene embodies the sense of impotence and fear of mortality that Halm experiences on a subliminal level throughout the novella and must confront on a conscious level during the squall.

The opening pages of *Jagd* are teeming with less blatant references to death. After his wife has rejected his feeble sexual overtures, Gottlieb Zürn confronts the inevitable signs of aging in the mirror. The facial wrinkles and bags under his eyes that he finds "unerträglich," intolerable, attest to his waning attractiveness and approaching old age. Shortly afterwards, Gottlieb, a real estate agent, receives a phone call from a prospective client who wishes to sell a house whose owner has suffered from a crippling stroke. Moreover, one learns that Gottlieb reads death announcements and accident reports in order to discover real estate that he could sell: "Hoffnungsgeschädigte, Gedeemtigte, vom Unglück Geschlagene verkaufen leichter, das war seine Erfahrung" (J 19).

The description of potential clients, usually those down on their luck, aptly depicts Gottlieb himself who appears to share in the immobility and hopelessness of the stroke victim and accident casualties. He reflects on the immense effort he requires to move-in both a literal and metaphorical sense—and on his growing "heaviness": "Bewegungen fielen ihm von Jahr zu Jahr schwerer" (J 18). This inertia, a corporeal manifestation of his feelings of impotence, is most obvious in *Das Schwanenhaus* that describes Zürn's earlier life. His difficulty in swimming embodies his sense of the futility of all effort: "Gottlieb hatte das Gefühl, bei ihm bewegte sich alles heftig und schnell, nur komme er dadurch nicht vorwärts" (Sch. 137). This sense of futility springs from Gottlieb's ineffectuality in business matters. One later learns that he has had little success in his business ventures, that he exerts an inordinate amount of energy and fretting over his potential sales without positive results. His colleagues, on the other hand, snatch away deals from him in a seemingly effortless manner.

In *Seelenarbeit*, Xavier Zürn, the father of two teenagers and a chauffeur, best exemplifies this helplessness and stagnation. In Xavier's case, it is not his ineptitude on the job that causes his despair, but rather, degrading work conditions. The denial of his bodily needs while on the road reflect his enslavement by his employer Dr. Gleitze. Moreover, the humiliating medical examination ordered by Gleitze epitomizes Xavier's almost total submission to him. The futile struggling of a beetle in water which fascinates the aging chauffeur reminds one of Gottlieb's difficulty in swimming and again portrays a sense of futility and impotence: "Der Käfer letztes Jahr in der Badewanne....Jesdesmal wenn der bemerkt hatte, dass die Wanne für einen Aufstieg zu glatt war, verfiel er in ein wildes Gezappel; ...Aber durch solche Anfälle rutschte er wieder zurück auf den Wannengrund" (S 270).

This process of stagnation and of alienation from the world experienced by Walser's characters constitute the most common traits of the mid-life crisis.⁵ A middle-aged man who is suddenly aware of his own mortality begins to look back upon his life, reappraise his past, and question his goals and values.⁶ This reappraisal involves disillusionment, a recognition that certain assumptions about oneself and the world are not true which triggers feelings of despair, confusion, or stagnation.⁷ This "mummification," depicted so vividly in Walser's works, consists of a sense that one is frozen in time, cannot go on.

Sexual impotence in Walser's works most obviously manifests this loss of vitality that men in mid-life transition often experience in both their personal as well as professional lives. In *Ein fliehendes Pferd*, Helmut Halm's impotence and sluggishness contrast starkly with the virility and seemingly endless energy of the youthful Klaus Buch.⁸ The horse itself, the central symbol of the novella and a popular literary symbol of virility, underscores the men's obsession with sexual potency. Buch's capture and restraining of the escaped animal reflects his aggressive, active stance, whereas Halm's inactivity mirrors his general passivity. Similarly, Gottlieb Zürn's futile attempt to seduce his wife Anna in the opening pages of *Jagd* foreshadows his equally unsuccessful business endeavors and his inability to deal with family crises. Sexual impotence, then, often reflects a powerlessness in other areas of the protagonist's life.

Severe illness in oneself or others serves in Walser's novels as another obvious reminder of one's emasculation and eventual death. *Seelenarbeit* presents the most striking example of the former. Xavier Zürn's severe abdominal pains, possible signs of a serious ailment, not only are subliminal reminders of his own mortality, but also underscore his inferiority to his healthy employer Dr. Gleitze. Zürn's humiliating experience while undergoing exploratory tests ordered by Dr. Gleitze remind him of his total powerlessness and his employer's control over him: "Dr. Gleitze konnte offenbar tun mit ihm, was er wollte. Xavier liess es sich gefallen. Xavier schlug nicht zurück. Nie. Nie" (S 163).

This relationship between success and health, and failure or subservience and disease is not an accidental one in Walser's works.⁹ If the former represents successful domination of the world which requires the absence of a conscience, then the latter reflects a man with some scruples and the inevitable mental and physical

suffering that accompanies a sense of morality in an immoral world. Gottlieb Zürn succinctly describes this state of affairs. While reflecting on the success of his colleague Kaltammer, he realizes that there are two choices—selfishness or selflessness: “Kaltammer, das ist der richtige Weg. Der einzige, richtige Weg. Die anderen verneinen anstatt sich selbst” (J 220). In *Jenseits der Liebe*, for example, Horn’s confident, successful and somewhat unscrupulous boss Thiele is trim, fit and self-satisfied, whereas Horn’s corpulence and alcoholic binges betray self-neglect and passivity that result from stress at work and low self-esteem. Gottlieb Zürn’s, Xavier Zürn’s and Franz Horn’s state, then, reveal the detrimental effect of work on one’s physical and mental health.

This link between professional status and well-being is most pronounced in the presence of double figures, the protagonist’s colleagues or friends whose illness or death often foreshadow his own fate. The failing health and professional setbacks of Gottlieb Zürn’s friend Schaden-Maier, for example, mirror Gottlieb’s own subconscious fears: his colleague’s deteriorating condition could be understood as a reminder of his own mortality. Zürn reflects that he too might allow himself to decline physically like Schaden-Maier if he didn’t have children (J 218).

Mr. Heath in *Jenseits der Liebe* also suggests the protagonist’s, Franz Horn’s, death and reflects his professional incompetence. The Englishman, who is losing his hair, teeth, and vitality, serves as an omen of Horn’s future. Horn, like his British counterpart, has gained weight, lives separated from his family, and is elbowed out by a colleague as the driving force in the company. Horn’s failure in closing a deal with Heath’s firm and his inertia in attempting to gain the business of the firm’s competitor marks a turning point in his career that reveals his incompetence. Liszt, a younger, ambitious rival who has replaced Horn as the boss’s favorite serves as a constant reminder of Horn’s waning energy, ambition, and self-assurance. Horn’s dilemma reflects a common work situation for those in their forties who fear obsolescence and of being thrust aside by younger, ambitious colleagues.¹⁰ Horn’s professional downfall breeds self-contempt that triggers a suicide attempt, one of the most tragic consequences of a mid-life crisis.¹¹

Walser demonstrates, then, that social forces affect one’s private life, that professional status and self-esteem are inextricably intertwined. Psychological studies substantiate this relationship. In his study on the male life cycle, Daniel Levinson discovered that often a professional setback, a “culminating event,” that marks the outcome of the careerist’s efforts and is regarded as the ultimate goal of his career, precipitates the mid-life crisis. If this event is experienced as a failure then it will deliver a crushing blow to the man’s sense of competence and his self-esteem—he will perceive his life as a failure.¹² Any professional failure, real or imagined, exercises a devastating impact on the middle-aged man, because his sense of identity and self-worth is mostly derived from his career.¹³ Consequently, the loss of his major source of meaning catapults him into despair.

Martin Walser echoes these findings, as Heike Doane notes, in *Selbstbewusstsein und Ironie*, in which he claims that the identity of the “Kleinbürger” depends on his performance at work which is evaluated by his employers: “Also seine Identität hängt

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von nichts als seiner Arbeitsleistung ab, und die wird bewertet von denen, die ihn engagieren."¹⁴ As Anselm Kristlein puts it in *Der Sturz*, "Ich fürchte, mein Leben hätte, wenn der Zwang zum Geldverdienen entfiel, sofort überhaupt keinen Sinn mehr" (St. 26).

The plot of *Das Schwanenhaus* portrays the devastating effect of a "culminating event" on one's self-esteem. Gottlieb Zürn is dimly aware that he no longer has the drive and assertiveness needed to clinch real estate deals. Nevertheless, he remains hopeful that he can sell the "Schwanenhaus," the culmination of all his past efforts and a verification of his competence. Not only does the deal fall through, but the beautiful villa is sold by a competitor, and is destroyed in order to make way for a condominium complex. This crushing professional defeat precipitates Gottlieb into a state of inertia and depression portrayed in *Jagd*. Feelings of powerlessness in his profession spill over into his personal life—he is unable to help his wife resolve family crises.

The personal crises of Franz Horn, Xavier Zürn and Gottlieb Zürn, triggered by professional setbacks or demeaning work conditions depict the unavoidable influence of society on the individual. If society teaches one to measure his/her worth by success at work, then Walser's novels constitute an indictment of such a society. The detrimental effects of work on the individual shown in the deteriorating health, self-confidence, and personal relationships of Walser's protagonists portray a society that often debilitates its most valuable members.

II.

Walser's middle-aged protagonists, disillusioned with the social values they have adapted and disappointed with their work, serve as appropriate vehicles to criticize the society which they represent. If the first half of a man's life is usually spent in social adaptation—establishing a career, a niche in society—then the second half is often devoted to discovering the "inner self," the realm of feelings and the communication of emotions.¹⁵ Social adaptation, the "Anpassung," that young protagonists such as Hans Beumann and the younger Anselm Kristlein must undergo for career and social status and the personal sacrifice it requires is questioned by their older and wiser counterparts.¹⁶

Walser best describes this difficulty in establishing a personal identity, this conflict between social adaptation and personal integrity:

Jeder möchte er selber sein. Das wird ihm schwer gemacht von allen anderen Zeitgenossen. Die Möglichkeit, er selber zu sein, hängt ausserhalb des Theaters davon ab, wie gut er die Spielregeln beherrscht, nach denen da draussen zur Zeit gespielt wird. Die Gesellschaft, das ist der immer noch dunkle Ausdruck für die Summe aller möglichen Konditionierungen des Einzelnen. Er kommt zwar fertig auf die Welt ... dann wird er zugerichtet, bis er passt. ... Er möchte zwar er selber werden, aber er will auch leben, also hat er grösser oder

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kleiner beigegeben, hat an seiner Zurichtung mitgearbeitet.
Trotzdem gelingt es selten, den eingeborenen Wunsch ganz
auszurotten.¹⁷

According to Walser, the personal is inextricably linked to the social: the individual cannot escape from social conditioning.

The choice between conformity and autonomy, as shown in *Ehen in Phillipsburg*, often involves a choice between survival and extinction. Hans Beumann accepts a position with Herr Volkmann, an influential businessman, out of economic necessity; his alter-ego Klaff, a fiercely independent young man, refuses to make the compromises Hans has made, cannot gain a foothold in any position, and eventually commits suicide.¹⁸

In mid-life, however, when professional rewards do not taste as sweet, or when failure annihilates one's self-image, the qualities necessary for establishing a career appear inadequate for a full, rich life. Walser's older characters realize that they have sacrificed personal happiness for their career. While at work, they have learned to conceal their feelings under the mask of a social persona; this practice, however, extends into their personal lives and eventually leads to the loss of one's identity and emotional isolation from their families. Beumann, for example, has learned to achieve the "correct" facial expression while dealing with business associates and to employ the appropriate lingo when writing reviews.¹⁹ This newly nurtured talent eventually is used in his personal life—he is able, much to his surprise, to lie to and deceive his fiancée Anne Volkmann with little trouble (Eh.341).

Emotional withdrawal, dishonesty and secrecy about their feelings, serves as the hallmark of Walser's male protagonists, particularly his middle-aged ones. Because of their insecurity, many of his older characters attempt to conceal their imagined or real inadequacy and vulnerability by masking their emotions. Helmut Halm, Franz Horn, and Xavier Zürn, all preoccupied with others' opinion of them, make herculean efforts to keep up false appearances. Halm, like his counterparts, enjoys projecting a false image of himself: "Je grösser der Unterschied zwischen seinem Empfinden und seinem Gesichtsausdruck, desto grösser sein Spass. Nur wenn er ein anderer schien und ein anderer war, lebte er."²⁰

Feigned joviality, artificial congeniality, the masking of anger—all are ways in which Walser's figures maintain a facade of invulnerability and isolate themselves emotionally from others. Klaus Buch's bravado masks his insecurities with his wife, Franz Horn's disguises his hatred toward his boss and colleagues with amiability, and Xavier Zürn conceals his rage toward his employer with subservience. Yet, a price is paid for all the attempts to disguise one's true feelings. Buch's wife eventually reveals the disintegration of their marriage, Horn's anger eventually expresses itself through self-destruction, and Zürn's repressed rage towards Dr. Gleitze leads to a near murder attempt (S 254-7).

This constant display of a social persona, a mask, which the protagonist eventually accepts as his "true identity," reflects a society in which advertising, the fabrication of illusions, of artificial needs, plays a central role. Helmut Halm's satisfaction over being able to deceive people reflects his milieu in which deception is a way of life:

“Täuschung, war das nicht die Essenz alles Gebotenen? Das Ziel der Scheinproduktion! War er mit seiner entwickelten Täuschungsfähigkeit und -freude nicht ein Ausbund all dessen, was hier und heute gewollt war?...Ein Repräsentant war er! Der typischste Typische überhaupt war er! Er war der Prototyp!” (P 70).

Advertising reflects, on a large scale, the fabrication of a false image that Walser's characters must produce every day in order to attain success. In *Halbzeit* the protagonist Anselm Kristlein works for an advertising firm in which he is required to create a new image, new packaging, for a product as if it were a new product.²¹ A colleague points out the deception of such an enterprise: “alles nur Verpackung, alles nur dumme List der Oberfläche, Augentrug...” (H 424). Anselm's career of deceit continues in *Das Einhorn* in which he has become a professional speaker, an “expert” on matters about which he knows little or nothing.²² This role makes him feel like a fraud, a common experience among businessmen who feel their success is a hoax.²³

Anselm's counterparts must be deceptive as well in order to succeed. Gottlieb Zürn learns that his successful colleagues write more flattering, exaggerated descriptions of the villas they intend to sell. Xavier Zürn must control his facial features while driving his employer in order to conceal his emotions. Franz Horn pretends to be fluent in English in order to represent his firm in England.

As Walser's characters discover, their social persona, the role they play at work, becomes their identity.²⁴ An individual's sense of self in contemporary society, as Erich Fromm in *The Sane Society* has pointed out, “does not stem from his activity as a loving and thinking individual, but from his socio-economic role.”²⁵ Because one's self-esteem depends on factors extraneous to the self such as the job market, one's value is reduced to that of a commodity. Men who derive meaning from their occupation have a “thing” or object identity, rather than an emotional identity.²⁶ During mid-life, however, a man's job is often no longer sufficient in providing meaning to his life. Consequently, he suddenly realizes that his sense of self, of dignity, is lost.²⁷

Walser's middle-aged protagonists discover this self-alienation, this loss of contact with one's self²⁸, when their career no longer gives them satisfaction. In *Das Schwanenhaus*, for example, Gottlieb Zürn realizes that he has allowed others' expectations to dictate his actions which has led to the loss of his true self: “Jetzt sah er zum ersten Mal, in welch ungeheurem Ausmass er sich den Erwartungen der Leute anpasste....Vielleicht sei er vor lauter Tarnung verschwunden” (Sch. 113-14). As Doane observes, the destruction of the Schwanenhaus triggers the collapse of Gottlieb's internal “Illusions-Gewächs” (Sch. 232); he must acknowledge the “Sieg der Erfahrung über Vorstellung” (233).²⁹

Kristlein also discovers the replacement of an authentic self with a projected image, a social persona: “Ich vermute, dass ich selber ein Schatten bin, der seinen Werfer verlor” (H 483). The metaphors that Zürn and Kristlein use to describe their condition accurately depict the substitution of “substance” for image, the loss of the true self for a projected self-image. In *Brief an Lord Liszt*, an older and wiser Franz Horn also realizes the power of one's social milieu, others' role in the shaping of one's personality, and the loss of authenticity, of originality: “Ich bin jetzt, was man gemacht hat aus mir” (B 135). All three characters realize that they have become

social automatons: they have allowed others to prescribe their behavior and have lost all sense of self.

This reduction of the individual to a commodity appears most vividly in *Seelenarbeit*. Dr. Gleitze, a self-satisfied capitalist, treats his chauffeur Xavier Zürn as an object: he sends Zürn for a thorough and humiliating medical examination not out of personal concern for his employee's health, but rather, in order to reassure himself that Zürn can serve as a reliable driver.³⁰ During the tests with the impersonal technicians, Zürn feels that he is treated like an object.³¹

The loss of the self, the reduction of one's value to its social role, appears to be in Walser's novels the price his protagonists must pay while attempting to share in the prosperity of the "Wirtschaftswunder," the German version of the American dream. This state of affairs constitutes an obvious condemnation of the Americanization of post-war German society. Walser strews references to American culture throughout his novels. The most striking example of this is the reference to *Citizen Kane* in *Jenseits der Liebe*. Horn views a café called "Rosebud," the symbol of lost innocence, loneliness, and shattered dreams in this American film classic which portrays the meteoric rise to success and tragic personal life of Charles Foster Kane, a newspaper magnate, and a thinly disguised portrait of William Randolph Hearst (Je.48). Kane, the embodiment of the American success story, dies alone and unloved in his drafty mansion at the movie's conclusion. The burning of Rosebud, Kane's sled and the last remnant of his childhood, symbolically portrays the severing of his family ties. The oblique reference to this film is particularly appropriate since the suicidal Franz Horn, also separated from his family and who almost dies alone, represents the dark side of the American dream: self-destruction and loneliness.

The disillusionment with the American/German dream that Walser's middle-aged characters undergo is as much an indictment of the society in which they live as the depiction of a personal crisis. The deception and subsequent alienation from others and oneself on the road to success contains a critique of the social milieu which encourages such practices. The resolution of such a crisis, therefore, must be a personal one.

III.

The fear of mortality and ensuing sense of stagnation that occurs in mid-life usually trigger two possible reactions—manic activity or depression.³² Klaus Buch in *Ein fliehendes Pferd* best exemplifies the frantic clamoring for activity so common during a mid-life crisis and consistent in a world obsessed with action. Because our society discourages introspection, many men seek external distractions from internal conflicts such as power, material acquisitions, or status.³³ They fail to recognize the deeper issues that constitute the crisis—fear of death and the disillusionment of destroyed dreams—and view the dilemma simply as the loss of youth and virility which they attempt to remedy by "recovering" or displaying their physical prowess through sports or extramarital affairs.³⁴

Klaus Buch, who marries a much younger woman after his divorce, relentlessly

pursues sports, sex, and success, and who is preoccupied with maintaining a youthful, fit appearance, embodies the compulsive pursuit of external solutions so common in men undergoing a mid-life crisis. The novella's denouement, Buch's disappearance and presumed death which triggers his wife's confession of her estrangement from him, demonstrates that such superficial remedies fail to resolve the internal crisis and merely provide diversions from the real dilemma. Despite his obsessive reminiscing with Halm about their adolescence and his May/December marriage, Buch fails to regain his youth or self-esteem.

Similarly, Anselm Kristlein, who is in his prime, engages in several affairs which offer only brief respite from his emotional turmoil. In particular, his brief experience with Orli, a much younger woman, on the idyllic shores of the Bodensee in *Das Einhorn* reveals his quest to recapture youth and innocence. The mythical unicorn, a leitmotif in the novel and the symbol of purity and chastity, represents the futility of such a pursuit: the decadent circles he lives in, his family responsibilities, and the threatening political situation—the Cuban missile crisis—jolt him out of his illusions and force him to return to reality—to his family and his obligations.

Depression and complete withdrawal from others often accompanied by suicidal or homicidal thoughts constitute a more common reaction to the mid-life crisis in Walser's protagonists. Complete seclusion, a prolonged period of non-communication, which often marks the onset of the mid-life crisis, may produce overwhelming despair, as with Franz Horn, but also provides solitude in which one rediscovers neglected aspects of the self which can lead to healing and a renewed lease on life.³⁵ Helmut Halm and an older and wiser Franz Horn in *Brief an Lord Liszt*, for example, survive the crisis rejuvenated and reconciled with themselves and their partners. The mid-life crisis can be regarded as a "creative illness," a necessary spiritual journey that can lead to a deeper understanding of one's self, and a cultivation of such neglected traits as the need for intimacy and compassion, self-development and integrity.³⁶

Introspective characters such as Franz Horn, Helmut Halm, and Xavier Zürn achieve this rejuvenation and revitalization after going through an intensely stressful period.³⁷ Reestablishing contact with others leads the character on the road to recovery. Often this solution occurs through chance. After being fired from his job as a chauffeur, Xavier Zürn is able to spend more time with his family and re-establish an intimate relationship with his wife. Xavier throws away his collection of knives, a symbolic burial of his rage against his former employer Gleitze: "Was sollte er mit Messern?...Er wird hier alles versenken, was mit Gleitze zu tun hat" (S 283). This gesture of self-liberation heralds Xavier's freedom from his debilitating anger.

The ability to discuss the crisis with their partners (as with Halm), or to write about it (as with Horn in *Brief an Lord Liszt*) indicates that the protagonist has gained insight into the crisis which can lead to a spiritual healing. Helmut Halm's confrontation with his mortality during the boating accident on the Bodensee eventually leads to a revelation of his inner self to his wife Sabine and a renewed intimacy with her.³⁸ Writing, as Franz Horn remarks in *Brief an Lord Liszt*, functions as a substitute for speaking: "das Notieren [wurde] ganz von selbst ein Ersatz für das Aussprechen" (B 82).

In his essay "Wer ist ein Schriftsteller?" Walser himself discusses the potentially therapeutic value of writing as a means to confront one's crisis, and to cultivate one's own identity:

Dass einer, der sich vom Waisenhaus zum Zuchthaus oder zur Trinkerheilanstalt "entwickelte", anfängt, alles aufzuschreiben, ist eine verständliche, aber auch eine unverhältnismässige Reaktion. Dadurch, dass er das aufschreibt, ist er noch nicht gerettet! Aber er hat doch zum ersten Mal mit der Unmittelbarkeit seiner Misere gebrochen. Er ist ihr für die Zeit, die er zum Schreiben brauchte, entgegengetreten. Er hat ein Mittel gegen sie eingesetzt. Das der Erinnerung, der Benennung, der Beschwörung, der Verfluchung, der Illusion, der Illusionszerstörung, der hilfreicheren Illusion, der Zerstörung der hilfreichen Illusion: das Mittel der Identitätsbildung.³⁹

Writing does not guarantee a sure-fire cure, as Walser observes, but the reflection, the distancing from one's problem, that it entails constitutes the first necessary step toward the resolution of any dilemma. The act of writing, of remembering, contributes to the development of one's identity.

In *Brief an Lord Liszt*, for example, Franz Horn's "letter" to his younger colleague Liszt consists of an examination of Horn's past, in particular, those circumstances that contributed to his suicide attempt. During the writing, Horn gains insights into his past crisis: he realizes that he no longer wants to be Thiele's puppet, and that others have influenced the way he has become (B 106, 135). Although he claims that nothing is left of his true self, the very fact he is expressing his anger through writing demonstrates that Horn has come to terms with long-repressed feelings and has finally discovered his "inner voice."

Horn declares that he must separate himself from Liszt, become independent from him (B 142-3). This declaration constitutes a self-affirmation, a self-acceptance that is substantiated when, several lines later, he is able to admit his professional failure (B 143). Through writing the letter, Horn has confronted some painful truths about himself and has emerged from the process exhausted but content: "Er fühlte sich erschöpft. Aber es war ihm wohl dabei. So wohl war es ihm schon lang nicht mehr gewesen" (B 147). Horn, who recognizes his strength, relishes his independence from Liszt when he realizes that there are three less bottles of Liszt's favorite wine in his home. (He used to buy the wine when entertaining Liszt.) Horn's discarding of these symbols of his subservience to Liszt appears to be a small gesture of liberation reminiscent of Xavier Zürn's severing all emotional ties to Gleitze by disposing of his knives in *Seelenarbeit*. Although it is not certain how much Horn's behavior towards others will change, the writing clearly depicts a recognition and grappling with repressed problems that has brought forth some self-knowledge and peace. The work concludes on an optimistic note: Horn leaves to attend a family reunion. The re-establishment of contact with the self and others signifies a healing, a positive resolution of his crisis.

Water, a frequent motif in Walser's novels, appears to represent both the

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destruction and vitality of life's possibilities and serves as an apt metaphor for the psychological crises Walser's characters undergo which can bring about self-destruction or spiritual rebirth. The boating accident in *Ein fliehendes Pferd* not only could have killed Buch and Halm, but also brought about a spiritual renewal—the revelation of truth in both marital relationships. In *Brandung*, the surf of the Pacific Ocean once again forces Halm to confront his own mortality: while attempting to swim in the ocean, Halm gets caught in the surf and experiences its terrible power. His total defenselessness while in the ocean's deadly grip and the ensuing feeling of paralysis resembles the powerlessness and intimations of death that Halm's counterparts go through during their crises: "Das Erlebnis einer vollkommenen Wehrlosigkeit—das musste der Grund sein für die Lähmung, die ihn jetzt befallen hatte" (Br. 122).

In *Jagd* water clearly has an ambiguous meaning—both as a destructive and a revitalizing force. In the novel's opening scene, Gottlieb's encounter with the lake brings him a sense of well-being, of oneness with nature, which takes on ominous tones at the work's conclusion when he swims in the lake after a devastating professional setback. Although the ending hints at a possible suicide attempt ["Er wird nicht mehr zurückkehren ans Land" (J 222)], the last line offers a glimmer of hope ["...er wusste, er würde rechtzeitig umkehren" (J 223)].

Although mid-life often brings about a devastating crisis for Walser's protagonists in which they are forced to question their values and the meaning of their lives, it also contains the seeds of a new lease on life, a discovery of one's neglected inner self. As with Walser's more introspective characters, if one listens to one's inner voice instead of trying to escape from the feelings of impotence and disillusionment, often a revitalization results.

NOTES

- ¹ *Jagd* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 219. All references to Walser's works (which are all published by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main) will be indicated as follows: B = *Brief an Lord Liszt* (1982), Br. = *Brandung* (1985), Eh. = *Ehen in Philippsburg* (1985 ed.), E = *Das Einhorn* (1966), H = *Halbzeit* (1960), J = *Jagd* (1988), Je. = *Jenseits der Liebe* (1979 ed.), P = *Ein fliehendes Pferd* (1981 ed.), Sch. = *Das Schwanenhaus* (1980), S = *Seelenarbeit* (1979), St. = *Der Sturz* (1973).
- ² Daniel J. Levinson, a professor of psychology in the Dept. of Psychiatry of the Yale University School of Medicine, conducted a formal research project on the contemporary male life-cycle and marks mid-life transition from ages 40-45 and middle adulthood as extending from 40-60, whereas Peter O'Connor, a practicing Jungian psychologist who is familiar with Levinson's work, made an informal study on male mid-life crisis and claims that it can begin in the early to mid-thirties and ends in the mid-forties. My definition of mid-life crisis is based more on the symptoms of the crisis, rather than on a strict adherence to chronological accuracy. Thus, I find some characters in their late forties or even early fifties still suffering from the effects of the mid-life crisis, particularly when they have failed to resolve it. Information on mid-life crisis given in this paper is based on the findings published in these two works. Daniel J. Levinson, Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward B. Klein, Maria H. Levinson, Braxton McKee, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York, Toronto: Random House, 1978) esp. 57. Peter O'Connor, *Understanding the Mid-Life Crisis* (Victoria, Australia: Sun Books; Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press; 1981) 5, 16.
- ³ O'Connor 49, 55.
- ⁴ Levinson 26.
- ⁵ Levinson 26.
- ⁶ Levinson 192-3 and 198-99.
- ⁷ Levinson 199 and O'Connor 48, 49, 58.
- ⁸ For a discussion of this novel see: "Otto—oder sind Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften* auf den Hund gekommen?" *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 102 (1983): 240-59, Margit M. Sinka, "The Flight Motif in Martin Walser's *Ein fliehendes Pferd*," *Monatshefte*: 74 (1982): 47-58, Heike Doane, "Innen-und Aussenwelt in Martin Walser's Novelle *Ein fliehendes Pferd*," *German Studies Review* 3 (1980): 69-83, Joachim Kaiser "Martin Walser's blindes Glanzstück: Funktion und Funktionieren der Novelle 'Ein fliehendes Pferd'," *Merkur* 32 (1978): 828-838.
- ⁹ Heike Doane portrays the social origins of Xavier's illness. See: "Der Ausweg nach innen: Zu Martin Walsers Roman *Seelenarbeit*," *Seminar* 18 (1982): 196-212.
- ¹⁰ Dr. Srully Blotnick, *The Corporate Steeplechase: Predictable Crises in a Business Career* (New York: Facts on File, 1984) 173-94.
- ¹¹ O'Connor cites a study done by Eliot Jacques in which a random sample of over 300 artists was analyzed and a sudden jump in the death rate was found between 35 and 39. "Death and the Mid-Life Crisis," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 46 (1965) 504-14.
- ¹² Levinson 246.
- ¹³ O'Connor 58 and Labier (26).
- ¹⁴ Heike Doane refers to Walser's observations in her article: "Martin Walsers Ironiebegriff:

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Definition and Spiegelung in drei späteren Prosawerken," *Monatshefte* 77 (1985) 195-211. Martin Walser, *Selbstbewusstsein and Ironie: Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 179.

¹⁵ O'Connor 18, 38.

¹⁶ For a discussion of "Anpassung" or "mimicry" in Walser's early works see: Gertrud B. Pickar, "Martin Walser: The Hero of Accommodation," *Monatshefte* 62 (1970): 357-66.

¹⁷ Martin Walser, "Imitation oder Realismus," *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965) 66.

¹⁸ Pickar (360) also discusses the difference between these two characters. See also: Michael Schäfermeyer, "Martin Walser: *Ehen in Philippsburg* (1957)," *Deutsche Romane der 20. Jahrhunderts: Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Königstein/Ts.: Athenäum, 1983 ed.) 309-321; for a discussion of Klaff and Beumann see esp. 312-15. Renate Möhrmann, "Der neue Parvenu: Aufsteigermentalität in Martin Walser *Ehen in Phillippsburg*," *Basis* 6 (1976): 140-159.

¹⁹ Donald Nelson (210) observes that "Beumann's behavior becomes increasingly studied and artificial" and notes that he becomes adept in three ways: "the well-rehearsed phrase," "the studied mimicry of facial expression," and "the deft employment of professional jargon." "The Depersonalized World of Martin Walser," *The German Quarterly* 42 (1969): 204-16.

²⁰ *Ein fliehendes Pferd* 80. In *Jenseits der Liebe* (55) Horn disguises his hurt with laughter: "Und Horn lachte nach Kräften mit, um nicht wieder in den Verdacht zu kommen, von der Geschichte verletzt worden zu sein." In *Seelenarbeit* (16), Zürn learns to conceal his feelings by controlling his facial features: "Das lernt man als erstes in diesem Beruf, dass man sein Gesicht unter Kontrolle hält."

²¹ R.C. Andrews (6) perceives *Halbzeit* as "a formidable indictment of the moral and spiritual values of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. "Comedy and Satire in Martin Walser's *Halbzeit*," *Modern Languages* 50 (1969): 6-10. Donald Nelson (204) claims that the central theme of *Halbzeit* is "the breakdown of social communication and the depersonalization of human behavior." "The Depersonalized World of Martin Walser," *German Quarterly* 42 (1969): 204-216.

²² For a discussion of *Das Einhorn* see: Rainer Nägele, "Zwischen Erinnerung und Erwartung: Gesellschaftskritik und Utopie in Martin Walsers *Einhorn*," *Basis* 3 (1972): 198-213.

²³ O'Connor 51-2.

²⁴ Heike Doane (1985) also makes this observation: "Weil diese Kleinbürger-Identität letztlich von der Arbeitsleistung abhängt, wie Walser mit Hegel argumentiert, bringt der Prozess der Selbsterfahrung auch in diesen Romanen die Entdeckung der Fremdbestimmung mit sich." p. 202.

²⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York, Toronto: Random House, 1955) 129.

²⁶ O'Connor 53.

²⁷ Fromm 130.

²⁸ Heike Doane (1985) makes a similar observation: "...das Selbstgefühl der Walserschen Figuren [hängt] aber ferner davon ab, dass diese Fremdbestimmung gleichzeitig als ein Selbstverlust erlebt wird." p.202.

²⁹ Doane (1985) p. 206.

- ³⁰ *Seelenarbeit* 170. Xaver Zürn reflects: "Der Chef hat ihn nach Tübingen geschickt zu den Maschinen, weil er einen Mann braucht, dessen Zuverlässigkeit von allen Untersuchungstechniken überprüft ist."
- ³¹ *Seelenarbeit* 170. Zürn reflects: "Die haben ja drauflosgeknipst, als handle es sich um eine 8 x 8-Box."
- ³² O'Connor 49.
- ³³ Levinson 18, 25.
- ³⁴ O'Connor 39-40.
- ³⁵ O'Connor 19-20.
- ³⁶ O'Connor 19-21; Levinson 242.
- ³⁷ Doane (1985) examines the development of Franz Horn, Gottlieb Zürn, and Xavier Zürn. See also: Heike Doane "Der Ausweg nach innen: Zu Martin Walsers Roman *Seelenarbeit*," *Seminar* 18 (1982): 196-212, "Martin Walser *Seelenarbeit*: Versuch der Selbstverwirklichung," *Neophilologus* 67 (1983): 262-72 and Anthony Waine, "Productive Paradoxes and Parallels in Martin Walser's *Seelenarbeit*," *German Life and Letters* N.S. 34 (1981): 297-305.
- ³⁸ Margit Sinka (52-3) also notes that Halm undergoes a transformation after his experience in the storm. Heike Doane (1980), on the other hand, argues that change is not possible.
- ³⁹ Martin Walser, "Wer ist ein Schriftsteller?" *Wer ist ein Schriftsteller?: Aufsätze und Reden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979). Walser also discusses the importance of self-expression in "Ein Gespräch mit Martin Walser in Neuengland: Aufgezeichnet von Monika Totten," *Basis* 10 (1980): 194-214, esp. 195-6. Walser states: "Natürlich mögen noch sehr viele Leute noch stumm leiden, aber es ist der Sinn der Entwicklung der Geschichte, dass immer mehr Menschen—wie man sagt bei uns—mündig werden. Mündig heisst also auch, den Mund auf tun können. ...Es muss nicht Schreiben sein, ...es kann Singen oder Tanzen oder Handstandmachen sein, d.h. nur, sich ausdrücken, sich nicht zur Stummheit, zur Reaktionslosigkeit verurteilen lassen müssen. Denn das ist das Schlimmste, wenn man nicht aus sich heraus kann..." (195-6).