The Writing of the Sense of Shame in Robert Walser's Novel Fragment *The Robber*

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ABSTRACT

Robert Walser's late novel fragment *The Robber*, composed during his Bern period, contains a distinctive and sustained phenomenon that may be called the writing of the "sense of shame". Taking *The Robber* as its central object of analysis, this article systematically examines three dimensions of Walser's writing of the sense of shame. The study first clarifies the concept of the sense of shame, which denotes an active, preventive withdrawal and a sustained concealment. It then interprets, from three perspectives—the Robber's rebellion against imposed identities, the mechanisms of social isolation, and the novel's circuitous mode of narration—the ways in which the protagonist's social and aesthetic identities are concealed, showing how concealment itself becomes a poetic principle and how the sense of shame assumes the function of constructing both identity and text. The study finds that Walser's writing of the sense of shame is not merely a description of an individual's social situation but a profound testimony to the crisis of subjectivity in modernity: the naming strategy of the "Robber" constitutes an appropriation of social stigma; the repeated inscription of embodied humiliation exposes the operations of power within social norms; and the narrative subject's continual stopping on the verge of speech transforms the sense of shame into a poetic principle of ontological significance.

Keywords: *Robert Walser, The writing of the sense of shame, The Robber.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In his essay about shame and the feeling of shame, Max Scheler argues that the feeling of shame is the fundamental mark that distinguishes the human being from both god and animal: god has no need of shame, for nothing is lacking in him; animals are incapable of shame, for they remain wholly unaware of themselves. Only the human being, suspended between animalitas and divinitas, is compelled to confront the fissure of his own existence through the feeling of shame (Scheler, 2017: 168, 172, 201). This feeling of shame in the ontological sense acquires an exceedingly distinctive form of articulation in the work of Robert Walser (1878–1956). Throughout his life, Walser wrote this persistent affective posture, deeply embedded in the texture of his texts—the writing of the sense of shame.

In 1929 Walser was admitted to the Waldau psychiatric clinic near Bern, and in 1933 he was transferred to the sanatorium in Herisau, where he remained for the rest of his life. From 1924 onward, his writing had already begun to take an almost clandestine form: in pencil, on scraps of waste paper, envelopes, and the blank spaces of calendars, he wrote in a script miniaturized to the point of near illegibility—texts that later scholars have called the "Mikrogramme". These manuscripts fill six volumes, the great majority of them unpublished during Walser's lifetime, and they constitute a special corpus of "unpublished writings": they are at once testimony to the writer's growing rupture with the publishing market and the reading public, and the product of a radicalization of his poetic strategies.

Among these pencil manuscripts, the novel fragment *The Robber* occupies a central position. Written in 1925, this full-length novel takes as its protagonist a down-and-out writer called "the Robber" and recounts his wanderings, failures, and acts of self-concealment on the margins of society. In his afterword to *The Robber*, Jürgens observes that the robber novel tells of "the self-

understanding of an artist who is aware of his own otherness, suffers under the pressure of social convention, and must nevertheless assert this otherness under precisely these conditions" [1] (Jürgens, 1976: 140). The text is saturated with the fear of "being seen", anxiety over the exposure of identity, and defense mechanisms characterized by disguise, evasion, and self-deprecation—all of which correspond to the basic structure of the sense of shame.

Yet a survey of Chinese and international Walser scholarship shows that existing research has focused largely on the published texts of the writer's early and middle periods, such as *Jakob von Gunten*, while systematic investigation of the affective-poetic dimension contained in the late Mikrogramme—above all of the core category of the "sense of shame"—has so far scarcely been undertaken.

This research gap is no accident. As an affective phenomenon, the "sense of shame" has long occupied a marginal position in literary studies. Scholarly attention to the question of shame has tended to concentrate on the more dramatic experience of shame—that intense emotional eruption accompanied by the collapse of boundaries and the degradation of the self—whereas the comparatively gentle "sense of shame", that persistent, interiorized affective disposition whose mechanisms of response are hiding and avoidance, has received considerably less attention.

Walser's writing of the sense of shame should not be understood simply as the pathological expression of an individual psyche; it is, rather, a strategy of self-defense—the last resort by which an individual, confronted with the social gaze and the devaluation of his worth, preserves his subjectivity through concealment and withdrawal. From this perspective, Walser's nearly self-effacing Mikrogramme is itself an extreme, materialized form of the sense of shame: the shrinking of the handwriting, the marginalization of the writing space, the text's approach toward a state of "unreadability"—each of these is the poetic counterpart of the sense of shame.

This study chooses the "sense of shame", rather than "shame," as its central analytical category, on the basis of a careful discrimination within the German lexicon of affect. In German, shame (in German: Scham) designates the emotion as a whole, with an emphasis on intense emotional eruption and the collapse of the boundaries of the self, whereas the "sense of shame" (in German: Schamhaftigkeit) designates a more enduring, more inward affective and behavioral disposition whose core modes of response are hiding, avoidance, and dissimulation, rather than violent confrontation. In Walser's texts, the protagonist rarely undergoes a dramatic collapse of shame; far more often he displays a chronic, permeating posture of shame-proneness: he constantly changes identities, takes refuge in fictions, and answers the mockery of others with self-mockery. This affective response corresponds less to the eruptive structure of Scham than to the sustained mechanism of withdrawal characteristic of Schamhaftigkeit. Norbert Elias observes that the intensification of self-monitoring in modern society leads the individual, in social interaction, constantly to anticipate the scrutiny of others and to adjust his behavior accordingly (Elias, 2013: 498). Walser's Robber is an extreme case of precisely this civilizing process: his sensitivity to "being seen" has reached the point of obsession, and his ever-renewed strategy of self-concealment in writing can be regarded as a poetic compensation for a frustrated sense of shame.

2. THE REBELLION OF SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC IDENTITY

2.1 The Stigma of Bourgeois Society

The very first sentence of *The Robber* introduces us into an ambiguous narrative space: "Edith loves him. More on this later." (Walser, 2000: 1). This sentence itself constitutes a gesture informed by the sense of shame—the narrator withdraws before exposing his subject, much as the shame-sensitive subject hides itself beneath the gaze of others. But who is this subject enveloped by "love"? The protagonist never appears under a real name; he goes through the world only behind a borrowed mask of identity - "the Robber". The choice of this appellation is by no means accidental; it contains the central cipher of Walser's writing of the sense of shame.

Within the German literary tradition, the "robber" carries the indelible legacy of Schiller. The robber band led by Karl Moor in Schiller's drama is a figure of rebellion against the aristocratic social order and of refusal of bourgeois convention. Walser's Robber continues this figure in another dimension: the protagonist of *The*

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, translations from German and Chinese are from the authors of this article.

Robber likewise "permanently violates the rules" (Andres, 1997: 138), threatening the values and order of bourgeois society, and it is for this reason that he is named the "Robber"—a naming that is at once a response to the accusations of the surrounding world and a covert defense of his own identity. Walser's Robber commits no illegal or disorderly acts; what he embodies are such qualities as kindness, wisdom, leisureliness, and wit—qualities that the mainstream values of bourgeois society entirely disregard. The narrative subject "I" of the novel speaks hyperbolically of the Robber's "book of sins" (Walser, 2000: 36), yet his robberies consist only in having "pilfered numerous landscape impressions" and "affections" (Walser, 2000: 20), and in having robbed "stories in that he was constantly reading those little popular novels and fashioning purely original tales from the contents" (Walser, 2000: 27). In other words, the object of the Robber's plunder is not property but aesthetic experience itself—the aesthetic act of transforming the world into literary material. Here the paradox of this naming reveals itself completely: the stigma of bourgeois society is inverted into a metaphor for aesthetic identity; the Robber is no longer a destroyer of the moral order but precisely another name for literary creation.

The interrogation of the Robber in readers' letters further highlights the ethical function of this naming strategy. The Robber's once diligent writing is called "robberies" by anonymous readers (Walser, 2000: 20), which shows that his name and his conduct alike constitute a rebellion against the mediocre, conformist identity of bourgeois society. The Robber receives a large number of readers' letters reminding him "not to stop performing the duties of his so useful vocation" and demanding of him, "Whatever has become of your once so sought-after and splendidly remunerated robberies?" (Walser, 2000: 20). This description is at once an irony directed at literary writing and a lament for failure: "sought-after and splendidly remunerated" applies only to successful and celebrated writers, and such treatment has long since departed from the down-and-out writer "the Robber" of the novel. To recall the Robber's former glory is both a futile emphasis on this writer's brilliant past and, seemingly, a hint of regret and unwillingness to accept the present. The novel's comparison of the Robber's literary writing to "robberies" is likewise a provocation against the literary conventions universally recognized by bourgeois society. With his ironic self-naming, the Robber both responds to the surrounding world's accusation that he is a failed writer and covertly seeks a justification for himself: if I am a "Robber", then my poverty, my being misunderstood, my incompatibility with society are all implications proper to this identity. That is to say, shame is here transformed into a preemptive self-protection—before others can cast a humiliating gaze, the subject has already erected an ethical line of defense by stigmatizing itself.

2.2 "Robberies" as Literary Writing

The Robber's provocation of the literary institution does not stop at the level of naming; it permeates his attitude toward writing itself. The novel contains a confession that appears casual but is in fact sharply pointed: "all of us penners of tales and novels are bastards" (Walser, 2000: 125). This statement pushes the logic of the Robber to its extreme: if all writers are "bastards", then literature itself is a collective act of transgression. Walser is not expressing literary arrogance here; rather, in a self-deprecating manner, he reveals literature's awkward position within the social order—writing can neither be subsumed under the category of productive labor nor readily gain recognition within the value system of bourgeois society. In analyzing the Robber's literary manner, Jens Hobus summarizes his rebellion and plundering in four aspects: 1. an aesthetic practice of appropriating the world; 2. the transformation of these experiences into literature; 3. the specific literary practice represented by intertextuality in writing; 4. the thereby illegal appropriation and generation of "literary" property (Hobus, 2018: 185). But we may add a further perspective to this account of rebelliousness: the Robber's conception of writing is a rebellion against the literary canon. This analysis reveals the deep structure of Walser's literary practice: the Robber is not a character but a literary methodology.

A textual detail of even greater tension is the relationship of "robberies" between the Robber and Edith. The Robber tells the narrator "I" about his love affair with Edith, a female character in the novel, and together they turn these experiences into literary material. Edith feels that the Robber is "robbing" her (Walser, 2000: 126)—because their love affair has been imperceptibly transformed into literary material. The paradox here is that the act of writing itself is an appropriation and betrayal of intimacy: the more the Robber lays hands on genuine feeling, the more he succeeds in literary terms. This self-referential narrative structure

makes *The Robber* a novel about the impossibility of writing.

The Robber's self-naming is a conscious performance. He feigns social deviance through the exaggerated figure of the criminal, yet beneath this performative shell he conceals an extremely sensitive, vulnerable subject of shame. This dialectical relation between feigning and truth endows the writing of the sense of shame with a particular aesthetic tension—the narrator's oscillation between exposure and concealment resembles exactly the predicament of the shame-sensitive subject caught between advance and retreat before the gaze of others.

Carl Seelig once recorded Walser's candid reaction to literary convention: Walser told Seelig that Bruno Cassirer wanted him to write some short stories in the manner of Gottfried Keller. Walser laughed out loud. (Seelig, 1990: 31–32). The laughter arises from a feeling of absurdity produced by radical disagreement, and it may also be a way of covering up his own embarrassing situation. The complex emotions contained in this laughter—both contempt for bourgeois literary taste and a measure of self-mockery about his own situation—map precisely onto the shame-sensitive posture with which the Robber faces the literary institution: he knows full well that he does not meet the social expectation of the useful writer, yet he refuses to purchase recognition with compliance.

2.3 Shame as Self-defense

At this point we may ask: what ethical function does the Robber actually perform as a mask? An observation by Schafroth offers a point of entry. he once remarked that the Robber's conspicuousness seems illogical: the antisocial person need not concern himself with society, nor society with him. This useless fellow should never have received society's attention in the first place. (Schafroth, 1978: 292) This seemingly categorical judgment in fact reveals a deep defense mechanism of the shame-sensitive subject. The Robber's self-naming allows the subject to occupy in advance the position of social exclusion, thereby transforming the humiliating gaze of others into a self-chosen marker of identity. That is, shame here is no longer a passively endured affect but an active ethical strategy—by being the first to admit that he is out of place, the subject instead acquires a strange freedom.

To a certain extent, the feeling of shame can be transformed into a mechanism of self-justification: the subject defuses the threatening force of others' evaluations through self-deprecation. The Robber is the aesthetic embodiment of precisely this mechanism: he refuses the stigma by accepting it and transcends shame by embracing it. This ethical posture of advancing by retreating confirms exactly the fundamental characteristic of the sense of shame—the sense of shame is active withdrawal and prevention.

3. SOCIAL ISOLATION AND DEPERSONALIZATION

3.1 Poverty and Shame

If the Robber mask provides an active ethical defense, then the novel's ruthless exposure of the theme of poverty presents another face of the sense of shame—the passive shame induced by a drastic decline in social status. The core thesis of Neckel's *Status und Scham* finds ample textual confirmation here: there exists a structural correlation between the feeling of shame and social status, and the loss of social status is directly transformed into an experience of humiliation (Neckel, 1991: 16). In *The Robber*, the very first time the narrative subject mentions the protagonist the Robber, he refers to him as "this good-for-nothing" (Walser, 2000: 1). The cruelty of this self-designation lies in the fact that the subject not only accepts society's degrading naming of the poor but internalizes it as part of his self-understanding.

The father's crime repeatedly invoked in the novel—having no money—brings the theme of the intergenerational transmission of shame to the fore. "In an epoch of widespread impoverishment, poverty is hair-raising" (Walser, 2000: 100); this paradoxical formulation reveals the social mechanism by which the sense of shame is generated: precisely when poverty becomes a universal phenomenon does individual poverty become all the more unbearable, for the object of comparison is no longer the normal other but others who are equally poor. In other words, a relative sense of deprivation is here transformed into an absolute self-negation.

The Robber's artist-like shame-sensitive temperament makes him a stigmatized being before the work ethic. The Robber is unable and unwilling to transform himself into a commodified, useful producer. This economically determined feeling of shame is no longer an affective fluctuation at the

level of individual psychology but a social symptom of the crisis of modernity.

3.2 Mechanisms of Social Isolation

The humiliation endured by the Robber is not an abstract social critique; it permeates everyday experience in embodied ways. One of the novel's most striking scenes narrates the seemingly trivial bodily act of blowing one's nose: "There was certainly no dearth of nose-blowing in the Robber's vicinity. Why did so many people, when he walked past, engage in elaborate nose-blowing..." The narrator adds that these people use the sound of nose-blowing to say to him, "What a pity it is about you" (Walser, 2000: 49). Everyone around covers his nose and unabashedly avoids and isolates the Robber, so that his living space is severely compressed. The mechanism of humiliation here deserves close scrutiny: nose-blowing, as an excretory bodily act, emits a sound that is itself an acoustic violation of another's space; when this sound is aggressively used as a response to the Robber, it constitutes a subtle form of social exclusion—one that marks the excluded person's abnormality not through language but through bodily noise. In other words, society marks the Robber in a "non-verbal" way: his bodily space is invaded by the bodily sounds of others.

The Robber's way of responding to this everyday humiliation is significant: he throws cigarette stubs down the throats of people who yawn at him—"the Robber's Revenge" (Walser, 2000: 43). In analyzing the agency of the feeling of shame, Yu points out that shame can become an affective driving force for the individual's resistance to social norms, propelling the subject from passive endurance toward active action (Yu, 2025: 56). The Robber's cigarette-stub revenge is an epitome of precisely this process of transformation: it returns bodily humiliation in an extreme, bodily form, converting the psychic energy accumulated by the sense of shame into an act of resistance with a ritual coloring. Not without irony, this resistance confirms exactly the Robber's transgressive identity—from a Robber who was merely named, he becomes a Robber who actually commits violence, even though the symbolic significance of this violence far outweighs its actual harm.

Corresponding to the nose-blowing scene is another scene of humiliation: the encounter occasioned by "girlish manner" (Walser, 2000: 14). In male social settings, the Robber displays a certain feminine, bashful posture and thereby incurs the contempt of the men around him. This scene reveals the deep connection between gender norms and the sense of shame: within the regulatory system of masculinity, bashfulness is regarded as an emasculating defect that destroys the confidence and decisiveness a male subject is supposed to display. The exclamation that he has "not one friend to show for himself" (Walser, 2000: 1) voices the lonely situation of the Robber, who has been stripped of his qualification for male sociability—because he cannot perform the gendered social role, he is expelled from the male community. Seidler's discussion of the mechanism of the gaze in *Der Blick des Anderen* (in English: *The Gaze of the Other*) may serve as a reference: the other's gaze not only sees the subject but, in the very instant of seeing, assigns the subject a particular social position and gender identity (Seidler, 1995: 53). The humiliating gaze the Robber endures within the male group is precisely such a violent act of position assignment.

3.3 The Depersonalized, Blurred Identity

If the Robber is the novel's most manifest identity mask, then Kaufmann's statistics reveal another level of identity strategy: the work as a whole employs 105 different designations to refer to this narrative subject, the great majority of them derogatory or blurred in character (Kaufmann, 2016: 289–290). "This good-for-nothing", "lummox", "dullard" (Walser, 2000: 1, 5)—and on the novel's last page he is still called "a true Croesus of foolishness" (Walser, 2000: 141). The very multiplicity of these designations constitutes an operation of depersonalization: the subject is no longer a "self" with a unified core but the intersection of various naming strategies. Hübner aptly observes that in Walser's texts, names no longer perform the individualizing function they had in the traditional novel; the narrator tends to portray characters through abstract attributes rather than proper names (Hübner, 1995: 124). The deeper implication of this naming strategy is that it dissolves the trinity of "name–identity–individuality" on which bourgeois subjectivity depends, replacing it with a fluid, unstable, shame-saturated form of subjectivity.

The following passage from the novel's ending can almost be read as a programmatic declaration of Walser's poetics: "It isn't right for everything to be uncovered, illumined, otherwise what would the connoisseur have left to ponder?" (Walser, 2000:

139). "The most clear-as-day obscurity and unplumbedness" (Walser, 2000: 139)—this seemingly contradictory formulation penned by Walser is precisely the core of this poetics. The subject needs to conceal himself not only because the sense of shame drives him to evade the gaze of others, but also because concealment itself is elevated into an aesthetic value: what is undisclosed preserves the space of imagination, and blurred contours possess more poetic charm than clear lines.

This preference for namelessness is not unique to *The Robber*. In the prose piece *Sonst zieh´ ich immer erst einen Prosastückkittel, also eine Art Schriftstellerjacke an* (in English: *Otherwise I always first put on my prose smock — that is, a kind of writer's jacket*) Walser writes: "Es schickte sich für ihn nicht, einen Namen zu tragen, aber die Namenlosigkeit machte ihn glücklich" (He had no name. Having a name would not have suited him; having no name made him feel perfectly happy) (Walser, 1985: 68). This intertextual echo shows that namelessness is a structural feature of Walser's poetics of the sense of shame—when the subject refuses to be named, he fundamentally evades the possibility of being captured and fixed by the gaze of others.

4. POETIC STRATEGIES OF CONCEALMENT

4.1 The Sense of Shame as Narrative Strategy

The concrete manifestation of the poetics of the sense of shame in *The Robber* is the narrative subject's persistent stopping on the verge of speech. The opening line's "More on this later" (Walser, 2000: 1) already anticipates this narrative posture: discourse is suspended just as it is about to touch the core, and meaning is deferred just as it is about to become clear. This narrative rhythm exhibits a high degree of isomorphism with the behavioral pattern of the shame-sensitive subject—does the shame-sensitive person not do exactly the same in social situations, withdrawing just as he is about to expose himself, falling silent just as he is about to be understood?

The Robber's narrative strategy forms an interesting correspondence with this: he constantly postpones the final revelation of the self, escaping the violence of fixation through endless deferral. The novel's 105 designations are the extreme embodiment of precisely this strategy of deferring fixation—when the subject possesses so many names, he amounts to having no name at all; when identity is in perpetual flux, it acquires the freedom of never being captured.

Greven once acutely observed that Walser's texts are pervaded by a close affinity with the qualities of the actor and the actor's longing for the theater (Greven, 1992: 33). If we cross-reference this observation with Antonowicz's judgment—that the protagonists of Walser's prose grimace and are quite obviously disguised (Antonowicz, 1995: 56)—then, from the perspective of theatricality and performativity, we can outline a picture of the performance of shame: the narrator is not expressing a pre-existing self but producing the multiple possibilities of the self within the process of performance. In other words, stopping on the verge of speech is not a failure of expression but a productive strategy—one that opens up a space of imagination in the interstice between silence and speech.

4.2 The Aesthetic Value of Concealment

Walser has a famous dictum: "Suchen ist schöner als Finden" (Seeking is more beautiful than finding) (Walser, 1986: 60). This aesthetic credo finds ample practice in *The Robber*. The novel's entire narrative process can be regarded as a carefully orchestrated act of "seeking"—the seeking of self-identity, of literary form, of social position—while the actual "finding" is permanently postponed. The ending directly echoes this credo: "the reader will be astonished to ascertain, we still haven't given a name to [him …] Let us see to it that ponderers, thinkers, feelers survive in our midst." (Walser, 2000: 139)

"The most clear-as-day obscurity and unplumbedness" (Walser, 2000: 139) is no longer a rhetorical paradox but a poetic principle with ontological implications. In discussing the complexity of the feeling of shame, Zhang points out that shame cannot simply be classified as a "negative emotion" precisely because it simultaneously contains the dual orientations of withdrawal and self-protection (Zhang, 2026: 148). From this perspective, "obscurity" is the barrier with which the shame-sensitive subject resists the gaze of others, while "clarity" is the precision of the text's internal structure—the two appear contradictory, yet at the level of the writing of the sense of shame they achieve a high degree of unity. In other words, the reason Walser's text presents itself as "the most clear-as-day obscurity" is precisely that it organizes, in an extremely artful

way, an effect of non-organization, achieving, with the most carefully designed strategies, the semblance of a natural outpouring.

In his afterword to *The Robber*, Jürgens interprets the Robber as embodying the self-understanding of an artist who is aware of his own otherness and suffers under the pressure of social convention (Jürgens, 1976: 140). This judgment precisely captures the subjective condition of the writing of the sense of shame: the artist is shame-sensitive precisely because he simultaneously occupies a double position—he is both a part of society (subject to the pressure of its conventions) and society's outside (aware of his own otherness). It is this double position that makes the writing of the sense of shame possible and that lifts the figure of the Robber beyond the scope of personal biography into an allegorical expression of the existential situation of the modern artist.

With this we have completed our analysis of the three dimensions of the writing of the sense of shame in *The Robber*: at the level of identity, the Robber as a mask embodies the strategic function of the sense of shame as ethical self-defense; at the social level, poverty, isolation, and anonymization reveal the sense of shame as a social symptom of the crisis of modernity; at the poetic level, the poetics of the sense of shame and the narrative strategy of stopping on the verge of speech elevate the sense of shame into an aesthetic principle of ontological significance. These three dimensions are not independent of one another; they interpenetrate and mutually reinforce, together constituting the complex picture of the writing of the sense of shame in Walser's Mikrogramme. The writing of the sense of shame itself, in the dialectical movement between concealment and exposure, points toward a literary possibility that transcends the individual.

5. CONCLUSION

Scheler could not have foreseen that the affective form of the sense of shame would acquire such acute universality in the context of modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Walser's writing of the sense of shame is by no means a mere outpouring of individual psychology; inscribed in its recurring, circling narration is the shaking of the foundations of subjectivity in an entire epoch. The narrative subject of *The Robber*, who constantly belittles himself and persistently evades the gaze of others, exists in a state that resonates disquietingly with what Helmuth Plessner described as "exzentrische Positionalität" (eccentric positionality)—the human being is neither a purely bodily being nor a purely spiritual one, and this ontological intermediate position is itself the generative soil of the sense of shame (Plessner, 1975: 293–302). Walser's narrator pushes this "eccentric positionality" to its extreme: he can obtain no stable coordinates within the social structure, nor can he anchor his identity in language; the sense of shame thereby ceases to be an occasional psychic event and becomes the fundamental attunement of the subject's being-in-the-world.

When the narrator refers to himself with 105 different designations, what he performs is a fragmentation of the subject—this is not a postmodern playful carnival but the complete disintegration of a shame-sensitive subject before the order of modern society. The sense of shame here becomes the affective symptom of the crisis of subjectivity: it is at once an expression of Walser's personal spiritual predicament and an allegory of the human condition under the conditions of modernity as a whole.

For Walser, the writing of the sense of shame is not only testimony in a phenomenological sense; it is also an ethical practice. This proposition receives a distinctive mode of enactment in Walser's texts—the narrator comes to know himself through the writing of shame.

The narrator's characterization of his own writing as "robberies" in *The Robber* is a typical example: the narrator actively takes upon himself society's stigmatizing designation, transforming the shameful label "Robber", imposed by others, into an aesthetic badge of self-identification. On the surface, this self-stigmatization is a submission to social judgment; in reality it harbors an ethical agency—by acknowledging shame in advance, the narrator internalizes external sanction as an ethical act of self-discipline.

Walser's elevation of the sense of shame from the domain of private affect to an aesthetic principle of ontological significance is one of his most distinctive contributions to German-language literature. The narrative's persistent hesitation, the deliberate deferral of meaning, the intentional concealment of the subject—these formal features stand in a deep relation of isomorphism with the affective structure of the sense of shame.

"The most clear-as-day obscurity and unplumbedness"—this seemingly paradoxical

aesthetic principle is in fact the core mechanism of the poetics of the sense of shame. Walser's narrator oscillates forever between approach and retreat, wavers between confession and dissimulation, and this poetic posture precisely replicates the ontological predicament of the shame-sensitive subject: longing to be seen yet fearing to be seen through. "Seeking is more beautiful than finding" articulates the ontological import of the poetics of the sense of shame—meaning lies not in arrival but in the process of seeking itself, just as the shame-sensitive subject consists not in possessing a stable identity but in that never-ceasing dialectical movement of self-exploration and self-escape. In his analysis of the sense of shame, Böhme regards language and symbols as cultural clothing used to cover human nakedness (Böhme, 1997: 232). He thereby directs attention to the contradictory unity of showing and concealing, and conjectures that language may possess a doubleness of revealing and hiding. Walser's poetics is precisely the literary embodiment of this doubleness. The writing of the sense of shame is thus not only a literary technique or a stylistic choice but a poetic stance in an ontological sense: it takes the acknowledgment of inexpressibility as its premise and the maintenance of expressive tension as its aim, opening up a distinctive aesthetic space at the boundary of utterance.

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