Shame and Identity in Robert Walser's "The Robber"*

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Abstract—"*The Robber*" is a novel of the Swiss writer Robert Walser, written in his own unique "microscript". The novel was discovered 12 years after his death and deciphered and published 4 years after then. This novel describes the situation of a writer who was marginalized by the society. The language, structure, content and materiality of this novel are different from the three novels Walser published in his lifetime. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, this article chooses the keyword "shame" and analyzes the protagonist and narrator in this novel, trying to interpret Walser's aesthetics of shame.

Keywords—The Robber; Robert Walser; shame

I. INTRODUCTION

"*The Robber*" is a novel of the Swiss writer Robert Walser. This manuscript was discovered in 1968, 12 years after Walser's death, and was first published in 1972. . The 35 paragraphs of this novel are written on 24 sheets of copper paper with tiny characters in the same way as other "microscripts". The title of this novel "*The Robber*" is added by the editor. The protagonist is a lonely, unsuccessful and thus poor writer. He was neglected by restaurant hostesses, fooled by a woman whom he admired, and ridiculed by his landlord. He was a marginalized person, and even the narrator in this novel showed his disdain from time to time.

Once the novel was published, it sparked heated discussion. Urs Widmer comments that this is the "most free and self-conscious" in all Walser's works (Widmer, 22). As Walter Benjamin believes that Walser has a Swiss "farmer-like shame syndrome" (Benjamin, 127), Widmer thinks that "characters are closely related to shame, fear, and resistance" in "*The Robber*" (Widmer, 25). If referred to Walser's character and life experience, as well as the contents of his previous works and the narrative strategies of late works, cultural anthropology, this interdisciplinary theory, provides a new perspective and theoretical support for the research on "*The Robber*".

As a unique emotion of human beings, "shame" has always been an important research direction in cultural anthropology. It was already discussed by ancient Greek philosophers. For example, Plato explains the cause of "shame" mainly from the perspective of social hierarchy (Ritter, Gründer, 1210), while Aristotle considers "shame" as a fear of bad fame (Aristotle, 124). In the 20th century, "shame" has become the focus of many important thinkers. Max Scheler believes that the dual attributes of human body and human spirit make "shame" appear (Scheler, 69). Helmut Plessner emphasizes the function of human beings as a medium and thinks that the contact between a human being and his outside world, his inside world, his together world lead to "shame" (Plessner, 1975: 303). Sartre explains the cause of "shame" from the perspectives of subject and object — that is for a human being to realize that he was the object of observation (Sartre, 457). Based on the cultural anthropological theories, this paper attempts to analyze the novel with "shame" as the starting point. The description of shame is not only reflected in the protagonist, but also to find in the psychological process of the narrator. In addition, the unique materiality and narrative technique of this novel can also help us to understand his writer.

II. HUMILIATED PROTAGONIST

What is the name of the protagonist in "*The Robber*", it never appeared in the 141-page text. In modern society, a human being and the outside world, a human being and other human beings are always in close contact, and one must play his appropriate social role. "The more the social status is linked to personal achievement, the easier a lower status is likely to lead to humiliation." (Neckel, 193) As a social marker of a person, the connection between name and personal identity should not be underestimated. In this novel, name of the robber is deprived by society. At the beginning of the novel, he was insulted with a variety of designations, known as the "good-for-nothing who has no money", "impossible person" (Walser, 1). Just because he achieved nothing and refused to conform to social norms, he was called a "robber." On the last page of the novel, he was still thought as a "noodle."

The origin of the name "robber" is explained as following. "Why was it he became a robber? Because his father was kind of heart but poor. And so then he, alas, from time to time, making use of his bare wits, clove his persecutors from top to toe..."(Walser, 101) This poor robber, with no capital and no achievements, was deprived of his social identity and his goodness, wisdom and other qualities

were completely ignored. Although he did not do anything wrong, once placed under the "social „eyes", people will openly talk about him and measure him with various social norms and standards" (Heller, 111). The society unilaterally defined him as a loser and separated him from normal social interaction, depicting him with various derogatory words

In addition to identity deprivation, people's attitude towards the robber was also very unfriendly. In that patriarchal society, the non-aggressive robber was inevitably despised. At the beginning of the novel, he couldn't "gain the esteem of gentlemen" (Walser, 1) He was also laughed at by men. "This smiling condescension was like a fountain that thoroughly dampened the Robber's little nose. Luckily, however, this sprinkling did not prove fatal. (Walser, 14) "Every one of his friends proved helpless with regard to this merciless treatment. Anyone shown to be his friend became socially unacceptable. (…) Quite simply because he still hadn't come up with a suitable novel."(Walser, 100)

Plessner believes that through the interaction with others, people recognize the position of themselves from the world around him (Plessner, 1975: 292). But unfortunately, the world around the robber did not give him the least understanding. The image of woman, which normally considered being gentle, kind and empathetic is mostly cold and ruthless. The robber sees himself as a criticized individual with low social status during his interactions with others. People try to frame him through social norms and crowd out him in social communication. This kind of accusation is unlikely to break away from. Even in a surreal scenario, the woman in a painting also criticized the robber for turning a blind eye to his social obligations and not creating value for others. This kind of behavior is undoubtedly suicide in her opinion.

What did the robber do wrong? He was just "always so undemanding, made such a show of self-satisfaction, failed to launch attacks on ladies and other desirable quantities" (Walser, 41) At the turn of the last century, along with the rise of industrialization and urbanization, people's alienation has become more and more serious. The blind worship of progress and achievement has made the whole society a high-speed train, and everyone who refuses to follow the pace was abandoned by society. The robber, as a writer, is keenly aware of this danger, so he rejected the enterprising social values. An anonymous reader wrote a letter to advise him. "Sir, do you deserve respect? (…) This letter might well make you queasy. One would like to save you, that is, wishes to compel you to amuse yourself in such a war as to come to know a feeling that will impress on you what righteousness is." (Walser, 91) People around him felt that the robber deviated from social norms and therefore humiliated him, hoping he will realize and become a civilized person. What is a civilized person? Norbert Elias once said that civilization is "to suppress one's own desires and emotions, self-alienation, self-control" (Elias, 2). So people feel that they should "wear him down, to make him irritable, nervous, and agitated. In a word, people have been trying to instill morals in him." (Walser, 36) A person who attracts attention in society is the destruction of rules (Landweer, 72). From the novel's point of view, the robber is not consciously and

systematically trying to confront the society, but forced to become the vent of the society. "People persecuted him to help him learn how to live. He gave such a vulnerable impression. He resembled the leaf that a little boy strikes down from its branch with a stick, because its singularity makes it conspicuous" (Walser, 40)

III. "SHAMELESS" PROTAGONIST

"Shame may arise when violating social norms and goals and disobeying the goals of life that society generally believes should be pursued" (Lietzmann, 15). These social norms are always implied in interpersonal relationships, and people are inspected and judged by others inadvertently. Many theorists believe that the gaze and gaze of others are important elements in inducing shame (Wurmser, 78; Bernet, 147; Seldler, 182; Jacoby, 9; Landweer, 2). Behind the eyes and the evaluation, there are social values and criteria for judging. But this did not work for the robber. "To be glanced at unkindly amuses him" (Walser, 1). While the society examined the robber, the robber was also examining this society that is incompatible with him.

Although the robber was identified by the society as a shameful person, he was not discouraged by the misunderstanding. Instead, he criticized the society in an ironic way and used shamelessness to deal with shame. "Don't care what shame; this is my last fear. On the contrary, I can ridicule the world" (Wurmser, 394). This concept is suitable to describe the robber's behavior. "Laugh at him, and he'll laugh as well."(1) In Lietzmann's view, the two simple ways to get rid of shame are smiles and smirks (Lietzmann, 172). A person can regain control of himself by laughing, and this is also an indication to others that he has not lost control.

The attitude of the robber towards insults is also intriguing. "He invited persecution. And then he developed a love for all that." (Walser, 40) The robber seemed to not feel that others are insulting him. These seemingly "shameless" behaviors are actually a satirical tone towards the authoritarian society. According to Scheler, the meaning of shamelessness is defined by the shameless people themselves and their surrounding society, and it overcomes the boundaries of social statutes. This shamelessness can be thought as a kind of resistance and protest (Scheler, 94). The robber used his maverick way to declare his disdain to the society, and he smiled at the shackles imposed on him by society. "Many conclude it must be terribly easy to carry out a course of treatment, or, training, as it were, upon my person, but they're all gravely mistaken. For, the moment anyone seems ready to start lording and lecturing it over me, something within me begins to laugh, to jeer, and then, of course, respect is out of the question, and within the apparently worthless individual arises a superior one whom I never expel when he appears in me." (Walser, 106) Trying to disintegrate the existing society will of course anger the public and be punished, which the robber fought back hard, "for he's been holding his head just as high as ever, and without seeming at all defiant".

Has the robber ever been angry with these insults? The answer is yes. "But the nature of this plan soon dawned on the Robber. Even that clan of twitch-the-digit folk, those gesticulators, had at first fairly riled him. But no more." (Walser, 43) "Countless reproaches have been made me. (…) I'd best make muself comfortable, for who knows what great masses of discomfort I'll have to meet and contend with later." (Walser, 105) The robber had too many society defined flaws. In Goffman's opinion, every flaw is an unpleasant mark, and the marked person is not a normal person (Goffman, 13), is to be swallowed up by society. The robber, on the other hand, had a tenacious resilience, and even tried to awaken the whole society with his seemingly shamelessness, hoping to achieve communication and understanding. "This socalled persecution signified for him the resurrection of a sunken world: his own, we mean to say, which, in his opinion, required animation. Merely by occupying, concerning themselves with him, people understood him." (Walser, 40f)

In addition, in order to protest against the fetish of progress, the robber chose a new role for himself. Social roles are born with human beings, "name, status and social hierarchy entitle one's role in the society" (Plessner, 1985: 230). The robber was confined to a low social status and yet disguised himself as an avoidance, introversion, and retreating lifestyle, that is, to be like a woman. There are many descriptions of this tendency. "Robber had once behaved in a truly girlish manner. This occurred at a gentlemen's social gathering. The Robber, at the time, was very, very insulted. (…) He will come more and more to terms with his own nature." (Walser, 14) The robber put on a mask for himself and hid his emotions behind this. "He studied the manners, the expressions, gestures, faced, the thought patterns of girls (…) He took careful note of this and various other characteristics and girt himself with them as with a sort of weapon."(100f) The conversion of identity is an effective means of avoiding shame, so that one can avoid the outside world, avoid self-hypnosis, and avoid the true self. This completely different role apart from the social expectations is what the robber had been transformed according to his own needs, interests and will, completely breaking through the social rules. Through this mask, the robber also satirized the indifferent society.

IV. HIDING NARRATOR

The narrator shows a complicated psychology. On the one hand, "I" often reveals the alienation towards the robber; on the other hand, "I" tries to help the robber and defend him. At the beginning, "I" and the robber were two distinct persons. The robber was only the observation object of the narrator. "On the basis of this help, he continued … his singular existence, and on the basis of this extraordinary and yet also quite ordinary existence, I am constructing here a commonsensical book". (Walser, 4f) "I" also revealed disdain for the robber. "I have to be sonstantly on my guard not to confuse myself with him. After all, I wouldn't want to make commen cause with a robber." (Walser, 62) At the end of the novel, the narrator still emphasizes the different identities of the two. "I am I, and he is he. I have money and

he has none. That's the big difference." (Walser, 141) Yet it is to notice that the protagonist and the narrator had so much in common. They were both writers and engaged in the same professional activities. The difference is that the robber had a strong self-awareness and rebelled in various ways with irony. However, "I" was a person who followed the rules and condemned the behavior of the robber by trying to "to ‚show him as he is", just this once, with all his flaws" (Walser, 34). Georg Simmel believes that shame is the result of human self-disintegration. The self is divided into an observing self and an observed self (Simmel, 144). Just like that, we may boldly speculate that the two roles, so similar, intentionally or unintentionally always entangled, could be the separated two from one same self, put an observed self on the opposite side of the observing self, as an unfulfilled self.

Deeply, the narrator is still sympathetic to the robber, and even directly involved in the narrative process, speaking in defense of the robber. "It was clear, in other words, they didn't wish him to be at ease. That wasn't so very nice of them. You're surprised to see us standing up for him."(Walser, 32) The narrator commented Edith, whom the robber loved, mercilessly. "What would it have cost you, this simple measure which would have sufficed to make him fully satisfied with you and with himself?" (Walser, 56) Is the robber's role as a frustrated writer related to the narrator? The narrator should be aware of this, after all, "there is no complete separation from the role of writing, and there is self-awareness in the role". (Widmer, 25). To support this argument, "I" even tried to protect the robber from Edith, not "to expose both myself and my protégé to her scorn" (Walser, 96).

The robber could be the result of the narrator's shame, the shame that "I" created to calm the self. There are three stages in the generation of shame. The subject realizes that he is being examined by the others, the subject recognizes the difference between himself and the outside world, and the subject re-recognizes the defective self as an object, and will be ashamed. According to Seidler, shame is a kind of separation, in which the subject is thrown back to himself when the others are present. The subject of shame and the object of shame will be united, so one only feels the shame in communication with others. Shame is not the alienation of the self, but the recognition of the self (Seidler, 11). Could the robber be regarded as the "I"'s own self-examination, separating the defective and despised part of the self, re-evaluating the self from the perspective of the stranger, correcting the self, and conciliating self. This should explain why the novel transits from describing the robber to the story of "I". "I" suddenly realized at some point, trying to keep a distance from the robber, but involuntarily put him and the robber into the same scene. Just like the generation of shame, this narration is from the perspective of externalization, then self-perspective internalization, and finally a unified self.

Finally, the perspectives of this novel are very complicated. "I" communicated with the readers, talked to the characters in the novel, and then reflected on his writing behavior. The narrator constantly talks with the readers, tried to blur the role of narrator by giving up his power as the subject of writing and hide him. The "We" that has appeared

many times could be a narrator-dispelling. People face two ways of dealing with shame. The first is to give up the defective self, and the second is to accept the defective self. Either way, it can help to build new identities. In this novel, the narrator tried to integrate with readers and melted the boundary between the world and the inner world to win a new self for himself.

In addition, many meta-narrations in the novel show a hesitant narrator. The narrator revealed his doubts and the writing self was questioned and again affirmed here. "But perhaps I'll propone this a short while longer. I've been going great guns，though. But the interruption, I trust, will not prevent me from showing subsequent enthusiasm for the very same theme." (Walser, 84f) The narrator refused to show his true intention, just as the main tendency of shame is to hide the self so that the subject can be protected and try to avoid division. Hidden is a tool for protecting yourself. "Shame protects the boundaries of self and privacy." (Hilgers, 15) It could be presumed that the narrator sees the threat from protagonist and readers, so he hides the most cherished self, which is neither to be accepted by the reader nor by the society.

V. CONCLUSION

"*The Robber*" does not use linear narration, and is mixed with a large number of meta-narrations. The narrative perspective and writing style are also complicated. The protagonist not only mocked the society, but also transformed his identity in order to refuse assimilation by society. The narrator in the novel had been caught in contradiction between the identification of and alienation of the robber. To interpret the shame-features in this novel from the narrative style, the narrator also refused to be identified and hid himself by mixing with characters and readers. Günter Anders once said, "Every self-ashamed person will try to hide his shame" (Anders, 9). The whole novel could be considered as a struggling self, as the protagonist or as the narrator, denying his identity as a writer.

The fascination of text lies in her obscuration, just as shame people always want to cover themselves. At the end of "*The Robber*", Walser wrote: "It isn't right for everything to be uncovered, illumined, otherwise what would the connoisseur have left to ponder? Let us see to it that wonderers, thinkers, feelers survive in our midst." (Walser, 139) Whether it is the text or the writer, they have to become the object of observation, thus losing the decision of themselves. Therefore, before the shame is discovered, Walser chose to mask the text. Further, the materiality of this novel is also worth mentioning. Written in microscript, this novel makes itself difficult to decipher. The resistance of being read and the rejection of interpretation may also be a sign of self-protection.

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