The Child in the Dark: On Child Abuse in Robert Walser

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Walser's Combinatorics of Domestic Violence

"The beggar-child sat in the snow, yet did not freeze. The child had received a beating at home, why, the beggar-child did not know."[1] To those who grew up with violence in the family, the Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser affords the opportunity to make sense of what had to remain opaque to the younger self. Rachel Louise Snyder asserts in her notable recent study *No Visible Bruises*: "Domestic violence is hard to talk about. . . . It is vast and unwieldy, but it's also utterly hidden."[2] Though societies against cruelty to children were founded in the late nineteenth century and the first legal trials were held in the same period, it nevertheless took until the 1970s for a term like *child abuse* to be firmly established. In the seventies, pediatricians increasingly created awareness of a problem for which "the reluctance of observers to enquire into

1. Walser, *Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben*, 9:307–8 (hereafter cited as *SW*). For many of the German texts I have drawn on this source, consulting available English translations of Walser's texts and slightly modifying them when necessary.

2. Snyder, *No Visible Bruises*, 8. This work was listed among the best ten books of 2019 by the *New York Times*.

how the trauma happened" presents an "important feature of the syndrome,"[3] as Selwyn M. Smith affirms in *The Battered Child Syndrome*. This seemingly empirical account of child abuse thereby opens onto a literary and aesthetic problem with which it is not fully equipped to reckon—that of the conditions of presentation: the problem of how violence is or is not narrated, of how narration or the lack of it may redouble this violence, and of how the effaced or nonnarrated may nonetheless leave behind legible traces.

In this article, I want to open the question of domestic violence in Walser's texts. As I find it remarkable that this question has barely been asked, part of my investigation is to seek explanations for this omission. Given that I am exploring a new question for scholarship, my analysis is survey-like in character, erring on the side of the extensive rather than the intensive. Walser tests out and displays countless constellations of domestic violence with almost combinatory fervor: we have men who batter their wives and sons (*SW*, 10:87), a woman who castrates her partner and fries his penis (*MG*, 5:125),[4] a sympathetic "Murderess" who hacks her husband to death because he is lazy (*SW*, 5:100–101). There is mention of a father who sexually abused his daughter with no signs of remorse (*SW*, 9:270) and another father who shoots his son out of mere envy (*MG*, 1:493). A woman asks her stepdaughter for a kiss—the same daughter she just tried to have killed (*SW*, 14:77). We read about children who neglect their impoverished parents or lock them in the basement (*MG*, 5:241). Then there is the sister who, in the place of the mother, slaps her younger brother (*SW*, 9:175), or the two brothers who embrace each other in strangulation (*SW*, 9:213). Quantitatively speaking, however, the majority of the descriptions relate the violent abuse that children suffer at the hands of their parents and how these children integrate this experience into their worlds, which is why I concentrate on this relation.

Though the very fact that Walser depicts child abuse throughout his oeuvre is exceptional, the depiction itself offers no straightforward critique or condemnation of what it depicts but is instead "exemplary" in a complex sense: Walser's texts systematically deny the abuse they relate and thus in a sense reproduce its most distinctive, most distinctively insidious feature. Walser presents and disavows domestic violence in the same stroke. The present article poses

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3. Smith, *Battered Child Syndrome*, xi. See also Kempe and Kempe, *Child Abuse*, 5. Larry Wolff blames the private-public distinction for this state of affairs: "The brutalization of children was always a strictly private family matter, unrecognized as a public social evil" (*Postcard from the End of the World*, 4).

4. Walser, *Aus dem Bleistiftgebiet* (hereafter cited as *MG*).

the question of how to interpret this double maneuver: Do Walser's literary texts obfuscate and perhaps even tacitly condone the brutalization of children? Or do they rather display denial itself, the denial that is an integral aspect of the phenomenon when it comes to child abuse?

It is well known that Walser, after having been diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1929, was forced to spend twenty-seven years of his life in psychiatric wards, up to his death in 1956. When it comes to the contradictory or fragmentary, "schizophrenic" dimension of Walser's writing, my goal here is not to investigate whether Walser himself was the victim of abuse but to respect what Gilles Deleuze calls "the power of an impersonal" in literature, which means not "treat[ing] the indefinite as a mask for a personal or a possessive: '*a* child is being beaten' is quickly transformed into 'my father beat me.'"[5] I thus intend to move away from the pathologizing view of Walser (and of psychic nonconformity more generally)[6] and instead lay bare Walser's awe-inspiring *capacity* to combine representational modes in such a way as to stage the cardinal conceptual challenge posed by domestic violence: its resistance to being perceived as violence in the first place. Walser's pluralization of perspective and tonal alternation thus lead in two contradictory directions: toward a polyphonic "objectivity," the attempt to grasp and do justice to the "whole" of family violence by presenting every position, but also toward the point at which multiperspectivism collapses into denial precisely by leveling all positions. Or, to put it in the language of empathy: family violence in Walser is based on excessive empathy with one position and the subsequent severing of empathy through an abrupt change of tonality.

Why We Do Not Speak of Child Abuse in Walser

In Walser's little worlds, children are locked in, locked out, beaten, slapped, or dragged around. It is astonishing that the scholarship does not address this brutality—yet there are good reasons for this omission, which directly relate to the public image of Walser but also to Walser's disposition toward violence.[7] First, the way we view Walser has been shaped by his most famous readers— who are not necessarily his best or most dedicated readers, however renowned they may be. Hermann Hesse and Susan Sontag, for example, successfully

5. Deleuze, "Literature and Life," 3.

6. A particularly fine example for this approach is Gisi, "Das Schweigen des Schriftstellers." Gisi uncovers through archival research how certain "symptoms" of Walser's alleged schizophrenia were actually produced by the psychiatric apparatus, which in no time had turned the writer Walser into an experimental object.

7. Nagel, "'What Murderously Peaceful People There Are,'" 103–7.

advertised a pacifist image of Walser;[8] W. G. Sebald and J. M. Coetzee access Walser's texts through his experience with mental illness and institutionalization, that is, in elegiac form: "His own uneventful yet in its way harrowing life was his only true subject."[9] Then there are the highly influential interpretations by Walter Benjamin and, in his wake, Giorgio Agamben.[10] The following passage from Benjamin marks Agamben's starting point: "They are figures who have left madness behind them, and this is why they are marked by such a consistently heartrending, inhuman superficiality. If we were to attempt to sum up in a single phrase the delightful yet also uncanny element in them, we would have to say: *they have all been healed.* Admittedly, we are never shown this process of healing."[11] If we agree with Benjamin that Walser's characters, in their "childlike nobility," have been healed, or if we believe, with Agamben, in "the natural innocence of his creatures,"[12] then any talk of child abuse in Walser's texts is misplaced. As a consequence, we have a legitimate conflict of interpretations here: if, as Benjamin argues, Walser's characters have been healed of personhood and subjectivity, how can we then account for the apparent violence in Walser's text? Further, if we are never shown the process of healing, as Benjamin concedes, how can we be sure that these characters are indeed healed, saved, redeemed and not just repressing, introjecting, splitting? As scholars of literature, we usually expect the threat of biographism to arise from a psychoanalytic approach, which is a justified worry in Walser's case, too, given the series of articles by psychiatrists who read his works as a case study for schizophrenia.[13] But does that mean that an antipsychological mode of reading safeguards the work from this interpretative danger? In what follows, this question becomes particularly urgent in relation to the topos of "the mature child."

Second, attention to aggression in Walser is almost entirely absorbed by the discourse on masochism. There is indeed an awareness in Walser that violence is not the negation of relation but an intense form of relation, a form of binding: "through pressure and strokes . . . still originates a relation, a rage, a

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8. Hesse, "Poetenleben," 57–58; Sontag, "Walser's Voice," viii: "The moral core of Walser's art is the refusal of power; of domination." Sontag's praise of Walser's "radical passivity" recently has met some resistance from Ben Lerner in "Robert Walser's Disappearing Acts."

9. Sebald, "Le Promeneur Solitaire," 120; Coetzee, "Genius of Robert Walser."

10. Benjamin, "Robert Walser"; Agamben, *Coming Community*. See also, continuing Benjamin's and Agamben's approaches to Walser, Plug, *They Have All Been Healed*.

11. Benjamin, "Robert Walser," 258.

12. Agamben, *Coming Community*, 31.

13. Anderssen-Reuster and Reuster, "Robert Walser "; Lyons and Fitzgerald, "Case of Robert Walser"; Partl et al., "'Meine Krankheit ist eine Kopfkrankheit.'"

beating of the heart and that is a kind of connection [*Verbindung*], too," proclaims the protagonist of Walser's first novel, *The Tanners* (*Geschwister Tanner*, 1907) (*SW*, 9:149). Little room is left for the kind of pain that cannot be called voluntary[14]—as is the case when children suffer harm inflicted by their parents. The only child character who has provoked some resonance in the secondary literature is that of Silvi in *The Assistant* (*Der Gehülfe*, 1908), whose suffering the protagonist documents alongside his own lack of resolve to improve the girl's dire situation.[15]

A third and final reason for the denial of child abuse in Walser is that, as children are involved, the question of masochism directly feeds into the dangerous Freudian myth of "the seductive child,"[16] which seeps into many readings of *Jakob von Gunten*, a seventeen-year-old in a situation of dependency who is romanticized as a subversive superhero. Indeed, Walser's children often give the impression that the violence is not really affecting them. In the prose piece "The Child Grew, but It Did Not Know That" ("Das Kind wuchs, aber es wußte das nicht")—one of the micrograms, penciled mostly during the twenty-seven years of forced internment—an omniscient narrator relates: "That [the child] for once got birched [*Prätsche erhielt*], pleased the boy, because he was flattered by the indescribably fleeting thought that one ascribed something like importance to him" (*MG*, 5:230). As Walser scholars have repeatedly remarked, these children do not really sound like children—more like child-adults.

Empathy with the Abusive Parent

In a technical regard, what is at stake are questions of perspective. Given that we are speaking about modernist artworks, this amounts to a pleonasm (I might just as well say that I am investigating excess in the baroque, or self-reflexivity in Romanticism, or containment in classicism, or the role of the detail in realism . . .). That is, the radicalization of narrative perspective and focalization is

14. Two rare accounts of Walser's sadism can be found in Peter von Matt's reading of Walser's letters to Frieda Mermet, "Wer hat Robert Walsers Briefe geschrieben?," 100–102; as well as in Evers, "Robert Walser and Violence."

15. Hendrik Stiemer comments almost critically that the assistant is "emotionally far less in command [*souverän*] than the protagonists of Walser's other novels" (*Über scheinbar naïve und dilettantische Dichtung*, 133).

16. For the Freud of and after "Dora" (1901), the seduced child is also the seductive child. Whereas in "Zur Ätiologie der Hysterie" (1896) Freud still considered sexual abuse of children the source of hysteria, he later—in introducing the concept of psychic reality—revised this theory in "Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie" as well as in "Meine Ansichten über die Rolle der Sexualität in der Ätiologie der Neurosen" (both 1905).

of course at the heart of the modernist project at large. So, what new insights could scenes of domestic violence possibly harbor in regard to the function of perspective in modernism? Two insights: first, the context of domestic violence changes the sense of the device of multiperspectivity; second, the context systematizes multiperspectivity in a unique way. When readers try to come to terms with the abundance of perspectives offered by Walser, they usually do so through the motif of masks[17] and *Maskenspiel*.[18] Yet Walser's multiperspectival renditions of family violence are far from the whimsy or caprice that are all too easily associated with the notion of *Maskenspiel*, which means we have to find a new tool kit for our analysis.

The way in which Walser focalizes scenes of domestic violence proves also to be exceptional in relation to other renditions of domestic violence; usually, events of family violence are related by an unfocalized narrator, by the character under attack, or by a compassionate intradiegetic narrator—but narration almost never approaches the perspective of the "aggressor." By contrast, Walser's aggressors are allowed to speak about their motives and hence to defend themselves against this very label. The first assumption challenged by a character like Frau Tobler, the negligent mother from Walser's second novel, *The Assistant* (which, like *The Tanners*, centers on the self-destructive drives of a family), is therefore the belief in the naturalness of parental love. Frau Tobler justifies why she allows the servant to brutalize her daughter Silvi as follows: "She simply did not love Silvi and in fact couldn't abide her. Could one force oneself towards love and goodwill? And what kind of feeling would this be, which is so forced and gagged [*ein erzwängtes und hervorgewürgtes*]?" (*SW*, 10:235).[19] The mother presents herself as mistreated by something akin to the symbolic order. In a similar manner, the sadistic father in Walser's "Father's Letter to His Son" (written around the time of his father's death in February 1914) complains that the parental script should allow for a little "cathartic" cruelty: "Shouldn't poor, worry-ridden fathers, continuously strung up with the deplorable, miserable daily-bread-thoughts [*Täglichen-Brot-Gedanken*], as amusement and relief, also allow themselves little, fine, teasing malices? Remember that" (*SW*, 4:74).

Walser likens being a parent to playing a role one cannot emotionally fill. Thus, right before Herr Tobler deals his young son Edi "a blow on the head that

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17. On the discourse on Walser's masks, see Gees, *Schauspiel auf Papier*; Kurzawa, "'Ich ging eine Weile als alte Frau'"; and Whalen, "Masks of Robert Walser."

18. See, e.g., Gees's chapter on the "Maskenspiel" in *Schauspiel auf Papier*, 66.

19. Walser, *Assistant*, 235.

could have knocked down a strong man" (*SW*, 10:195), the father is described
in terms evocative of the theater: "Tobler's entrance [*Auftreten*] always made
Joseph fear a scene" (*SW*, 10:194).[20] Similarly, another father figure, who reg-
ularly "thrashed both his sons," is depicted as only "play[ing] the angry tyrant,
a role with which he was, as ugly as it may be, besotted [*vernarrt*]" (*SW*, 4:29–
30).[21] With this, family violence is doubly fictionalized.

      In addition to letting the parental aggressor have the word and derealizing
their actions, Walser makes another radical perspectival decision in his por-
trayals of family violence: he has the child victims empathize with their abusive
parents, granting these violent deeds a certain psychological depth. In the satir-
ical prose piece "The Boys Weibel," published in *Simplicissimus* in 1908, we
come across the following reflection: "What follows are tree-high strokes with
a stick [*ein Stockwerk gesalzener Hiebe*]! Strange how one can manage at the
same time to torment one's father mercilessly [*aufs Blut zu ärgern*] and to pity
him because he has it tough. After all, childlike love is alive in cads too [*Fle-
geln*]" (*SW*, 15:98). If one finds the shifting of accountability slightly perverse,
then "The Story of the Four Happy Lads" ("Die Erzählung von den vier
glücklichen Knaben") goes even farther in this direction:

> The four lads were . . . the happiest boys [*Jungens*] because they lived at their
> parents' in a paradise called strictness.
>
>   Every moment, they had to offer their backs or their heads to receive [*zur
> Inempfangnahme*] well-pointed hits and they did this with a pleasure that one
> can call indescribable. Thus, they grew up under convulsions and trepidation,
> and they had gotten so used to trembling that they experienced it as a loss
> when they entered into life and unlearned sweet fearfulness [*die süße Ängst-
> lichkeit*]. (*SW*, 17:317)

Perversion originates in parental conditioning. Like Benjamin in *The Critique
of Violence* (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*), Walser problematizes an economy of
(unjust) means and (allegedly just) ends by having his narrator excuse violence
in that it is pedagogical, in this case leading to a successful military career:[22]

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20. Walser, *Assistant*, 195.

21. In the same anti-essentializing manner, Barbara Becker-Cantarino employs the word *role* in her
descriptions of abusive father figures in early modernity (referring to the "Herrenrolle" of the "Haus-
tyrannen" as well as to the "Herrschaftsrolle des Hausvaters") in "Die böse Frau," 122–23.

22. For the sake of contrast, I wish to quote the Swedish socialist reformer and feminist Ellen Key, to
whom Walser alludes in his works (*SW*, 19:126–30): "Numerous are the cases in which bodily punish-
ment can occasion irremediable damage, not suspected by the person who administers it, though he may
triumphantly declare how the punishment in the specific case has helped. . . . What burning bitterness

"How these four lads were scared of the beatings and how this fear worked to their advantage. Where earlier there was fear, now are epaulets. Those who once had subjected themselves now did not shy away from any power. That is a success, right?" (*SW*, 17:318). The invisible psychic "marks" of violence give rise to visible signs of military, masculine distinction, signs of the right and capacity to enact violence on others.[23]

Given that Walser creates a narrative economy that weighs the child's perspective against the parents', the predominant affects on the side of the children are confusion and self-doubt. In "The Little Girl from Berlin" ("Die kleine Berlinerin"), published in *Neue Rundschau* in 1909, a twelve-year-old portrays her father as follows: "Daddy can be lovely [*reizend*], in a way he is always nice, but sometimes he gets angry—about what one cannot know, and then he is ugly. . . . Fathers sin, especially in this regard. I feel that vividly. But who doesn't have any weaknesses, no, no faults at all? Who is without sin?" (*SW*, 4:93). The daughter rescinds her critique of the father through a variation of the Gospel of John's "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone"; she then interrupts herself, interpolating that whenever she says anything critical about her father, these are only his own critical thoughts arriving via detour: "I explicitly say: at my father's, I generally live like in paradise, and if I detect flaws in him, then this is doubtlessly because his intelligence has passed from him to me, so that it is his, not my, intelligence that sharply observes him" (*SW*, 4:94). This degree of disorientation is no longer captured by the usual ambivalence toward one's parents; the Walserian ironic topos of parental "paradise" suggests, rather, that children are subjected to the violence of their almighty parents while in a prelapsarian state of not-knowing.

The sense of vertigo increases in the more autobiographical pieces. In 1916—the year in which Robert's brother Ernst died in the psychiatric hospital Waldau, to which Robert himself will later be taken by his older sister Lisa—he writes "The Picture of the Father" ("Das Bild des Vaters"): "When the mother showed herself to be furious [*sich heftig zeigte*], then this behavior could not cause anyone more pain than herself. Isn't life a riddle? May anyone hope or audaciously conceive oneself to be able to solve it?" (*SW*, 7:164). The mother's aggression is equated with an act of auto-aggression.

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and desire for vengeance, what canine fawning flattery, does not corporal punishment call forth" (*Century of the Child*, 146).

23. Walser appears to ironize the idea of success by adapting it to the syntactic logic of Freud's famous proclamation "Wo Es war soll Ich werden," dealing with the question of why modern subjects are not immediately understandable to themselves in *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen*, 86. See Jacques Lezra's essay on the history of this formula and its genesis in Schiller's *Don Karlos*: "Primal Scenes of Political Theology."

Once more, a first-person narrator undertakes the attempt to thematize the mother's aggressivity in a microgram: "Like [my father], my mother had an inclination to benevolence as well as to—what is perhaps unsuitable to mention—fits of rage, whereby [*indem*] there exist qualities in us and in other people that one may rather perceive than affirm in writing or speech" (Meine Mutter neigte ebensosehr wie [der Vater] sowohl zur Güte wie zu, was ich vielleicht unstatthaft finde, zur Sprache zu bringen, Zornesanwandlungen, indem es Eigenschaften an uns und anderen gibt, die man eher nur wahrnehmen als schriftlich oder mündlich bestätigen darf) (*MG*, 5:91). Mention of his mother's fits of rage is immediately disqualified in an asemantic anacoluthon ("whereby"); the only way to bear witness to what must remain in the family is by way of *praeteritio*. How might we make sense of this act of *aisthesis* that is invoked only to be subtracted from discourse, invoked as what cannot be affirmed? What is at issue in this sort of subtraction or negation? Does it encode a desire for explicitness and disclosure despite itself? Might psychoanalytic notions such as splitting and disassociation help us think through this doubled, self-subtractive mode of expression?

Excursus: Ferenczi's "Identification with the Aggressor"

I still aim to find a language to account for what goes on in Walser's depictions of children's speech and thinking when these children reflect on the aggression directed at them by their parents. Though one might find the way in which children empathize excessively with their aggressive mothers and fathers in the tone of little adults to be dubious, perverse, or ridiculous, the secondary literature tends to take these utterances literally and to celebrate the sentiments they express: Peter Utz marvels at the "subversively explosive power" of these children;[24] Klaus-Michael Hinz emphatically speaks of Walser's child characters as "child-like heroes";[25] Christopher Middleton refers to Walser himself as a "*puer aeternus*" (a forever boy).[26] Against such idealizations, Davide Giuriato, the author of several texts on Walser's children, objects that Walser's conception of childhood is free of any romanticization and criticizes Hinz's use of the genius term for Walser's child characters as "overburdening."[27] Giuriato rightly points out that the child characters are far from "ruling" over their parents or

24. Utz, "Die Kalligraphie des *Idioten*," 110.
25. Hinz, "Wo die bösen Kinder wohnen," 317.
26. Christopher Middleton traces the term back to Jungian Gestalt psychology, notably to Marie von Franz in "A Parenthesis to the Discussion of Robert Walser's Schizophrenia," 191. See also Morlang's "Nachwort" in *MG*, 4:423–24.
27. Giuriato, "Robert Walsers Kinder," 125n5.

pedagogical institutions.[28] It is the topos of "the mature child" (*das erwachsene Kind*) that seems to solicit romanticizing misreadings.[29] How can we shed light on its oddity without becoming complicit in this idealization? The formulation is to the point, provided that we understand this "maturity" not as an exceptional or heroic trait but as the result or effect of a prior violence.

Psychoanalytic object relations theory is particularly suited to make sense of the children's split voice insofar as it traces the subject's modalities of relation back to childhood. In 1943 the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald Fairbarn wrote that it was "high time that psychopathological inquiry, which in the past has been successively focused, first upon impulse, and later upon the ego, should now be focused upon the object towards which impulse is directed."[30] Object relations theory has been shaped by the pioneering work of the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi—the training analyst of Melanie Klein, who in turn became the most prominent proponent of object relations theory. Whereas to many, Ferenczi became known as "the analyst who dared to speak the truth about the frequency of child abuse," Pamela Thurschwell comes to the more measured judgment that "Ferenczi, more so than Freud, seems drawn towards the inextricability of fantasy and a brute, material reality."[31] Object relations theory brings forth a unique willingness to tarry with the realities of child abuse. Ferenczi coined the term "identification with the aggressor" after having grappled with patients who had been victims of child abuse "hypocritically" tolerated by the parent(s), patients who were subject to "unbearable punishments [with] a fixating effect,"[32] or other forms of severe parental abandonment. In his last published paper, "On the Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child" (1933), Ferenczi expresses dissatisfaction with his analytic career: he admits that he has failed to alleviate the suffering of these patients and moreover that they are still eager to please him and reluctant to confront him about his shortcomings:[33] "Gradually I came to the conviction that patients have an extremely refined feeling for the wishes, tendencies, moods, likes and dislikes of the analyst, even should these feelings remain totally unconscious to the

28. Giuriato, "Robert Walsers Kinder," 126.
29. Giuriato, "Kindheit, Naivität, Dilettantismus," 337–39.
30. Fairbairn, "Repression and the Return of the Bad Objects," 59.
31. Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking*, 116.
32. Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking*, 292.
33. Ferenczi's paper led to his expulsion from Freudian psychoanalysis: Freud took Ferenczi's theory as criticizing his own rejection of his theory about the etiology of hysteria; Freud had initially declared hysteria caused by sexual abuse, which he later "corrected" by introducing the concept of psychic reality, which led to the seduction theory, including "the theory of the seductive child." See Masson, "Strange Case of Ferenczi's Last Paper," 147.

analyst himself. Instead of contradicting the analyst, instead of accusing him of certain misdemeanors or blunders, patients *identify with* him."[34] Ferenczi realizes that certain patients experience him as an aggressor or enabler and therefore repeat an old coping strategy for trauma. Having been victims of domestic violence, these patients had to identify with their aggressor when they were children as a way of coping, if not surviving: "*The still not well-developed personality [of the child] responds to sudden unpleasure, not with defense, but with identification and introjection of the menacing person or aggressor, an identification based on fear.*"[35] This introjection process includes the aggressor's feelings of guilt because such feelings have the potential to otherwise incite the vengeance of the aggressor. After having identified with the aggressor, the child feels "split, innocent and guilty at the same time; indeed his confidence in the testimony of his own senses has been destroyed."[36] The aggressor is no longer so much an external reality as an intrapsychic reality.[37] Crucially, this splitting entails a traumatically accelerated maturation:

> Here one can confidently speak of *traumatic* (pathologic) *progression or precocity* in contrast to the familiar concept of regression. . . . Shock can cause a part of the person to mature suddenly, not only emotionally *but intellectually as well*. . . . Fear of the uninhibited and therefore as good as crazy adult turns the child into a psychiatrist, as it were. In order to do so and to protect himself from the dangers coming from people without self-control, he must first know how to identify himself completely with them.[38]

We have to consider the possibility that Walser's "mature child" could also reflect a precocious maturation process caused by trauma: a traumatized child, with the latter being likened by Ferenczi and Ruth Leys to a "wise baby," a "guardian angel," a "psychiatrist," or "a totally objective and unemotionally perceptive philosopher."[39] The psychoanalytic viewpoint is invaluable here inasmuch as it provides a compelling speculative link between Walser's generally

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34. Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 285.
35. Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 291.
36. Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 290.
37. "Identifying with an aggressor requires acute sensitivity toward them. The victim must know what the aggressor intends, exactly who the aggressor wants her to be, and how the aggressor will respond. When trauma becomes expectable, this sensitivity may develop into a chronic, anxious hyperalertness and also an extraordinary interpersonal attunement toward others. As suddenly as these capacities are gained, the victim's contact with his own emotional life is lost, dissociated. Genuine emotions are too dangerous" (Frankel, "Identification with the Aggressor and the 'Normal Traumas,'" 79).
38. Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 293.
39. Ferenczi, *Clinical Diary*, 82, 105, 172, 203. See also Leys, *Trauma*, 132.

overlooked scenes of parental child abuse and the very representational material, the topos of "the mature child," that has enabled readers to either justify or ignore the violence of these scenes. The point, then, is not to make Walser or his oeuvre the mere patient of Ferenczi; instead, Ferenczi's thinking allows us to uncover an additional layer of complexity in Walser's oeuvre, a complexity that several generations of idealizing readings have ignored. This entails no reduction of the literary to the empirical, as if Walser were mere fodder for a case history, but points to the literary dimension of so-called experience, one of the most fundamental insights of psychoanalysis. Walser's texts in turn grasp and reflexively theorize this literary dimension of experience—and never more than when they "show" the mystification of violence.

Hard Joining, Alternation of Tones

Walser's literary scenes make clear that domestic violence presupposes a particular mode of relation, more exactly, an overconnectedness with the violent other that yields a certain disconnect with one's own psyche. In the course of the analysis, we have come to modify two earlier assumptions: first, I have argued that the surprising empathy that Walser's children show toward their abusive parents must also be read as a form of identification with the aggressor. Second, we have come to look anew at the scholarly topos of the "mature child" in Walser as a potentially traumatized child. In the second part of this article, I address another Walserian technique for representing family violence—just as much as Walser evokes excessive empathy, he also interrupts it, and just as much as Walser promotes apathy, he also lets words of violence and vulnerability slip in. I would like to examine this technique of severing or splitting in a first example, extracted from an inner dialogue on childhood in a prose piece with the lapidary title "All Sorts of" ("Allerlei," 1911):[40]

> Suddenly, tears well in your eyes. What is happening to you, attached [*attachierter*] perfect traveler? Are you feeling something painful? Yes, I am sunken in an ocean of wistful [*wehmutvollen*] memories. . . . Suddenly it is to me, perfect world traveler, as if I were traveling back into the joy-overflown, dear childhood. What a bliss it is to be small! I feel as if I wanted to be thrashed by daddy [*von Papa verprügelt werden*] here and now. (*SW*, 3:138)

It is the change of tone that interests me here: first, the prose piece is soaked in melancholy, giving rise to the expectation not exactly of "happy emotions" but

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40. Soreanu elucidates the complexity of the process of "splitting" and argues that there is "a silent Ferenczian turn" in the work of Klein, who is commonly (mis)taken as having invented the concept ("Psychic Life of Fragments," 423).

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at least of *something* lost that is worthy of being mourned. The exact moment when this modest trust is disappointed is marked by a sudden switch from high to low style: "I want to be thrashed by daddy [*von Papa verprügelt werden*]" (*SW*, 3:138). In this manner, Walser regularly produces *inconcinnitas* (i.e., stylistic "incongruity") in his representations of domestic violence. Indeed, these Tourette-like moments paradoxically provide for some sanity insofar as they attest to a disharmony that would otherwise go unremarked. Often, this effect is achieved by nothing more than a single word that does not belong, like the outcast of the family. Norbert von Hellingrath, in his commentary on Friedrich Hölderlin's Pindar translation, coined the term "hard joining" (*harte Fügung*) to describe these kinds of syntactical and metrical inconsistencies, which upset the flow of a sentence through a quick change or contradiction, necessitated by emphasis on one word alone, which then appears to be isolated and autonomous.[41] There is a related phenomenon in Walser's prose; rather than Walser working through metrical or even syntactical manipulation, his version of *harte Fügung* is achieved largely by disturbances at the levels of lexicon, diction, and phonetics. More specifically, he does this in at least five different ways: first, by interspersing poetic language with colloquial phrases (as in the example above) or by oddly mixing bureaucratic formulations with a colloquial expression (e.g., "had to deal a proper smacking" [geeignete Trachten Prügel hat verabfolgen müssen] [*SW*, 15:98]); second, through the very occasional and thus unexpected use of violent words (e.g., "convulsions" [Zuckungen] [*SW*, 17:317]); third, by sudden switch to dialect (e.g., "that the child for once got it" [Prätsche erhielt] [*MG*, 5:230]); fourth, by letting the reader stumble over multisyllabic composita (e.g., "fits of rage" [Zornesanwandlungen] [*MG*, 5:91]); fifth, by the use of expletives (e.g., "idiot" [Dummkopf[ ] [*SW*, 4:29–30]).

Usually, when in the secondary literature on Walser reference is made to Hölderlin, it is because both literary oeuvres have been literalized as documents of madness.[42] But the broader effect that interests me is a change of tonality

41. Hellingrath, *Pindarübertragungen von Hölderlin*, 5.
42. Given this tendency in Walser studies, the editors of the micrograms, Bernhard Echte and Werner Morlang, try to rescue Walser from pathologizing readings by dating his "mental shattering" (geistige[ ] Zerrüttung) (*MG*, 3:5). Yet even this attempt comes with its own perils, as Richard Sieburth shows in introducing Hölderlin's *Hymns and Fragments*: "Biographers have variously dated the origins of the night that descended over the entire second half of Hölderlin's life. Some locate its beginnings in the spring of 1802 beneath the blazing sun of southern France or in the catastrophic news of Diotima's death later that summer. Others turn the calendar further back and focus on the acute depression that led Hölderlin to flee Jena in mid-1795, numbed by a crisis whose features curiously anticipate his subsequent breakdowns. In the end, however, chronology can tell us very little: as Foucault suggests, the truth of madness lies outside of history and, to that extent, remains forever mute" (introduction, 8).

(which could also be called, citing Hölderlin, an "alternation of tones" [Wechsel der Töne]),[43] which occurs when something is dissolved into its opposite. Accordingly, one could say that Walser dissolves one emotional tonality into another: proceeding from happy to unhappy or the other way around. In the earlier-mentioned prose piece "Johanna," the first-person narrator recalls how at the age of nineteen he lived in a pension with the family Senn: "[Senn] thrashed both his sons, Theodor and Emil Senn. The poor boys received strokes [*Hiebe*] because they mimicked their idiot father's bad behavior. Frau Senn was a kind, poor, plagued woman, totally the pedantic ruler's [*des kleinlichen Gewalthabers*] slave. Food was good" (*SW*, 4:29–30). "Food was good"? The description of graphic family violence is comically juxtaposed with praise of the cuisine; the violent household even becomes the backdrop for a platonic love story.

Or take the first sentence of "The Little Girl from Berlin" ("Die kleine Berlinerin"): "Today papa boxed my ears, of course he did it very paternally, tenderly" (Heute hat mir Papa eine Ohrfeige gegeben, natürlich eine echt väterliche, eine zärtliche) (*SW*, 3:88). It is left to the reader to fulfill the disturbing task of uniting the two antagonistic affects of aggression and tenderness. Robert Musil pointed out that if people normally treated feelings "as if they were grounded in the things themselves," then Walser was unique in describing a theater fire not as "a terrible misfortune" but as "a superb misfortune or a well-deserved one," or even as "a delightful misfortune."[44]

Excursus: Bion's "Attacks on Linking"

How does Walser manage to engender excessive empathy and interrupt it a moment later? Having rendered the first phenomenon plausible through Ferenczi's "identification with the aggressor," I reflect on the second moment, of severing empathy, through Wilfred R. Bion's essay "Attacks on Linking."[45] Ferenczi is connected with Bion through the intermediary figures of Michael Balint,[46] who studied with both Ferenczi and Bion, and Klein, who was analyzed by Ferenczi and who analyzed Bion in turn. Both concepts—identification with the aggressor and attacks on linking—result from Ferenczi's and Bion's work with diagnosed schizophrenics, and both concepts circle around the difficult notion of "splitting," which Ferenczi and Klein regard as resulting from

43. Hölderlin, "Wechsel der Töne," 287.

44. Musil, "Die *Geschichten* von Robert Walser," 89. Morlang speaks in the afterword to Walser's microscripts of the "collision of the nonsensical" (Zusammenprall des Ungereimten) (*MG*, 4:426).

45. Bion, "Attacks on Linking," 93.

46. Michael Balint's *Basic Fault* is influenced by both Ferenczi's and Bion's reflections on the potential sources for analysts' failures in the therapeutic process.

"projective identification," with the difference that Bion is interested in the impact splitting has on language.

Bion defines the link as a "function" of relating to an object (including the mother).[47] Linking is based on projective identification, which determines "a relationship of empathy with the object by providing the possibility of putting oneself in somebody else's place and, in doing so, understanding his feelings better."[48] Bion argues that some of his schizophrenic patients, robbed as children of the possibility of a positive form of relation, later on experience any form of understanding (be it by the analyst or an "understanding" person) as a "link" or a "bond" that has to be severed immediately.[49] Bion provides several linguistic examples from his practice for the "destructive attacks which the patient makes on anything which is felt to have the function of linking one object with another":

> The patient comes into the room, shakes me warmly by the hand, and looking piercingly into my eyes says, "I think the sessions are not for a long while but stop me ever going out." I know from previous experience that this patient has a grievance that the sessions are too few and that they interfere with this free time. He intended to split me by making me give two opposite interpretations at once, and this was shown by his next association when he said, "How does the lift know what to do when I press two buttons at once?" . . . My second example . . . : the patient speaks in a drowsy manner calculated to put the analyst to sleep. At the same time he stimulates the analyst's curiosity. The intention is again to split the analyst, who is not allowed to go to sleep and is not allowed to keep awake.[50]

At first, the kind of behavior Bion describes seems opposed to the submissiveness that worries Ferenczi in some of his patients. So how can we make sense of the fact that these two contrasting phenomena appear in Walser's oeuvre and even in the same text? Case studies that work with different patients inherently produce different outcomes. Ferenczi's "identification with the aggressor" and Bion's "attacks on linking" give such opposed impressions that their results actually seem to mirror each other; when it comes to empathy and linking, perhaps excess and deficiency are two sides of the same coin. If one puts the two theories together, they even complement each other, or indeed together

47. Bion, "Attacks on Linking," 102.
48. Grinberg, Sor, and de Bianchedi, *New Introduction*, 26.
49. Bion, "Attacks on Linking," 99, 98.
50. Bion, "Notes on the Theory of Schizophrenia," 24–25.

constitute the two sides of what another famous proponent of object relations theory, Gregory Bateson, called a *double bind*—when there are "two orders of a message and one of these denies the other." According to Bateson, schizophrenia may arise from the causal linking of two emotional demands or injunctions that are mutually exclusive, originally formulated toward the child by one or both parent(s); exemplary phrases are "'Do not see this as punishment'; 'Do not see me as the punishing agent.'" Bateson emphasizes that "the secondary injunction is commonly communicated to the child by nonverbal means. Posture, gesture, tone of voice."[51] We have found similar patterns on the intradiegetic level in Walser: the ongoing demand to engage with victims' and aggressors' viewpoints alike and, at the same time, with attacks on these evocations of empathy; we have read family stories of perfect harmony, interrupted by hard, disharmonious joining. We have also attested to something like a *meta–double bind* created by Walser through the connection of these two techniques: immersion paired with modes of anti-immersion, such as irony, preterition, oxymora.

Death by Empathy: The Child in the Dark

Walser's abrupt tonal changes can take place between various texts and over decades; this is the case for the motif of the lone child trapped in the dark. According to Bion, "The fantasy of being incarcerated" is an essential experience of the psychotic part of the personality,[52] which not only feels persecuted by split objects but also has been stripped of the symbolic use of language as a means of escape. Walser's cooped-up child brings us to his most extended depiction of an act of parental violence: in *The Tanners* a two-page episode imagines a child who has been locked into a dark space by the parents, as punishment for an unnamed transgression. The representation is minimalist, bordering on sensory deprivation.[53] In a sort of claustrophobic infinite regress, the sleepless protagonist Simon Tanner thinks of sleepless small children who are afraid of the dark:[54] "He thought of small children who are afraid to enter dark rooms, who cannot fall asleep in the dark. Parents instill in their children the

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51. Bateson, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," 207.

52. Grinberg, Sor, and de Bianchedi, *New Introduction*, 32.

53. A strikingly similar episode of parental "punishment" occurs in the opening of Marlen Haushofer's *Himmel, der nirgendwo endet* (1966), where a little farmer's girl is confined in a deep barrel (7–10).

54. From time to time Walser's protagonists identify in this way with helpless children, such as in Walser's "Night-Thoughts" ("Nachtgedanken"): "In sleepless nights we all resemble helpless children" (*SW*, 17:144).

most dreadful fear of the dark and then, as punishment, lock recalcitrant ones up in silent dark rooms" (Er dachte an kleine Kinder, die nicht in dunkle Zimmer zu gehen wagen, die nicht einschlafen können im Dunkel. Die Eltern prägen den Kindern die fürchterliche Angst vor dem Dunkel ein und schicken dann zur Strafe die Unartigen in stille, schwarze Kammern) (*The Tanners*, 83–84; *SW*, 9:56). Parents teach their children to be scared of the dark in order then to be able to instrumentalize this fear in punishment: thus explains the narrator, in a variation on the Nietzschean insight that pain and suffering are the most powerful mnemonic techniques.[55] Everywhere the child turns, darkness prevails: "There the child clutches at the darkness in this thick dark and finds only darkness" (Da greift nun das Kind im Dunkel, im dicken Dunkel und stößt nur auf Dunkel) (*The Tanners*, 84; *SW*, 9:56). The deictic *Da* has a local ("there") as well as a temporal ("at this moment") sense, with the latter provoking a switch from the simple past to a present tense that takes on the quality of a historical, or as I would argue here, a *traumatic* present, which following Käte Hamburger yields the effect of making past events present by putting them in front of our eyes in an especially vivid manner.[56] The narrator has entrapped us in a *phantasia* or *hypotyposis*, as defined by Quintilian:

> The person who will show the greatest power in the expression of motions will be the person who has properly formed what the Greeks call *phantasiai* (let us call them "visions"), by which the images of absent things are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem actually to see them with our eyes and have them physically present to us. . . . Emotions will ensue just as if we were present at the event itself.[57]

The German term is *Voraugenstellen*, of which Walser makes *ex negativo* use here, insofar as what we see is an overwhelming *nothing*. It is on account of this blindness that we morph into the child in the dark. Moreover, the deixis shifts the focalization from the third-person narrator to the child—we are entering the mode of free indirect discourse: the subsequent sentences give us the viewpoint

55. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 38. Walser marks the paralogistic character of this thought through an ambiguous use of the phrase "as punishment" (*zur Strafe*). For the sentence to make sense, one would have to translate the phrase temporally: "when the time for punishment comes." However, Susan Bernofsky opts for a more intuitive translation of *zur Strafe*: "as punishment." The latter has a causal implication: *If you do X, then—as punishment—Y will be done to you*. In this way, "as punishment" presupposes a certain syntactic order of "cause and effect" or "misdemeanor and punishment." It is one of Walser's typically sneaky moves of weak rebellion that he assigns the first position—the position of misconduct—not to the child but to the parents, who misstep by imbuing the child with fear of the dark.

56. Hamburger, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, 84–92.

57. Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, 59–61.

of the child character while still retaining the perspective of the embedded narrator Simon Tanner. D. A. Miller poignantly calls free indirect style a "paradoxical form of an impersonal intimacy"; Timothy Bewes terms it "a 'mixture' or 'composite' of subjective and objective perspectives."[58] Indeed, for a short period of time, the rapprochement between Tanner and the imagined child becomes so intense that it is unclear whether the narrator contains the child or the child contains the narrator. One could interpret this as a politically radical "abandoning of perspective,"[59] if one imagines the adult narrator converging with the marginalized child. At the same time, however, this "non-anchored subjectivity," which Bewes celebrates, may also function as a symptom of crisis, of uncontrollable fusing and splitting, whereby the narrator ventriloquizes the child's anxiety and the child begins to sound strangely omniscient.[60]

One could perhaps identify in this coincidence of linking and unlinking the unsettling psychic process of "disassociation," which Ferenczi, Klein, and Bion refer to as a form of *splitting*: "under the stress of imminent anger," elucidates Ferenczi, "a part of the self splits off in the form of a self-preserving psychic instance wanting to give help, and . . . possibly this happens in early—even the earliest—childhood."[61] If the mediating narrator thus also takes on the quality of a dissociated child self, then his ensuing account increasingly splits him into "good narrator" and "bad narrator" analogous to a Kleinian "good breast" vs. "bad breast":[62]

> The child's fear and the darkness are soon the best of friends, but the child is not managing to befriend its fear. The child has such talents for feeling fear that the fear just grows and grows. It soon overpowers the little child, being

58. Miller, *Jane Austen*, 60; Bewes, "Free Indirect."

59. Bewes, "Free Indirect."

60. Bewes, "Free Indirect." Just how problematic such a notion of empathy is, in its assumption of inseparability, becomes brutally evident in Hortense Spillers's reflections on "flesh," on the "empathy" of the master with the slave in Arthur Jafa's *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*: "We were available in the flesh to slave masters, in the flesh, immediate, hands on. I can pluck your little nappy head from wherever it is, bang, don't care nothing about who your mommy and daddy is or how many babies you got here, bam. That's flesh. Another word to explain it is 'empathy.' The flesh gives empathy." Spillers defines empathy as the body of the slave offering itself to the master in its total availability; Fred Moten returned to her words in his lecture "Transubstantiation and Cosubstantiality," stating that the empathy invoked by Spillers demanded for a poetics of violence. Moten speaks of a "brutal empathy, this utterly brutal openness to violation." Though I do not want to do away with the specificity of slavery and racialized violence, I do believe that this singular violence must be considered when we grapple with another extreme "openness to violation": that of the child toward the adult, to which Spillers refers in the beginning.

61. Ferenczi, "Child Analysis," 131.

62. Klein, "Envy and Gratitude," 179.

such a large, dense, heavily breathing entity; the child might wish for example to cry out, but doesn't dare. This not daring increases the fear even further; for there must be something utterly terrifying there if the child is too frightened even to utter cries of fear. The child believes someone is listening in the dark. (*The Tanners*, 84)

[Des Kindes Angst und das Dunkel kommen ganz gut miteinander aus, aber nicht das Kind mit der Angst. Das Kind hat soviel Talent, Angst zu haben, daß die Angst immer größer wird. Sie bemächtigt sich des kleinen Kindes, denn sie ist etwas so Großes, Dickes, Schweratmendes; das Kind würde zum Beispiel gern schreien wollen, aber es wagt es nicht. Dieses Nicht-Wagen vergrößert noch seine Angst; denn etwas Furchtbares muß da sein, wenn man nicht einmal vor Angst Angstschreie ausstoßen darf. Das Kind glaubt, jemand horche im Dunkel.] (*SW*, 9:56–57)

In *Transparent Minds* Dorrit Cohn argues that psychic narration lends itself to the mediation of the "unverbalized, penumbral, or obscure" thoughts of child characters,[63] whose ways of knowing are notoriously difficult to fathom. The same could be claimed about Walser's narrator, whose tone remains impenetrable: Are the narrator's euphemistic expressions for terrifying things ("fear and the darkness are soon the best of friends" or "the child has such talents for feeling fear") grounded in naivete, or is his voice tainted with a slight cruelty? Cohn critically assesses the power relations in free indirect discourse, arguing that the mediated character often is "dwarfed by authorial glosses."[64] This power imbalance is intensified where the narrated character is a child. Walser may therefore be problematizing the "didactic" dimension of the narrative as yet another register of pedagogical violence.[65]

An additional aspect of *style indirect libre* acted out in the fantasy of the child in the dark is its "(expressive) noncommunication,"[66] by which Ann Banfield means that in represented speech the expressive function of language is freed from the communicative one: the child is too scared to make a noise, its communicative activity is reduced to hearkening, while the narrator is able to transcribe the child's silence all too verbosely: "How melancholic it makes one, thinking of such a poor child. How the poor little ears strain to hear some faint little sound" (Wie schwermütig einen das macht, sich solch ein armes Kind vorzustellen. Wie die armen Öhrchen sich anstrengen, ein Geräusch zu erhorchen)

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63. Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 46.
64. Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 24.
65. Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 23.
66. Banfield, "Where Epistemology, Style, and Grammar Meet Literary History," 415.

(*The Tanners*, 84; *SW*, 9:57). Description becomes excessive, as if the narrator were savoring each detail up to the last diminutive. These slips of sadism suggest that the narrator ventriloquizes not only the child but also the aggressor. At this point, the alternations between the child and the embedded narrator imagining the child are gaining in speed—which again can be interpreted as a process either of splitting or of merging: "And if one were to think of someone approaching—approaching softly, dreadfully softly. No, it's better not to think that. Better not think that. The one who thinks that, dies of fright along with the child" (Denke man sich jetzt, daß jemand herankäme, leise, fürchterlich leise. Nein, das lieber nicht denken. Lieber das nicht denken. Derjenige, der das denkt, stirbt mit dem Kinde vor Schreck) (*The Tanners*, 84; *SW*, 9:57). Here we have a second instance of hypotyposis or fantasia that is immediately revoked (as if that were possible) in the form of another *praeteritio*. Walser arouses a disturbing eroticism by playing with proximity and distance, getting closer and farther away, climaxing in a magical speech act that turns a subjunctive into an indicative and combines negation and affirmation: "The one who thinks that, dies of fright along with the child" (*The Tanners*, 84). The last sentence is absolutely sovereign while also strangely in solidarity with the child; it is as if we were getting ourselves over to the abyss with the child, but cannot reach it because we flinch at the very last moment. If trauma is caused by the absence of an empathetic other, then this sentence stages our ethical failure. But what then would "victory" be? To die together with the child of terror, in a single-sentence, linguistically induced catastrophe: death by empathy. For Walser, empathy poses at once a supreme ethical objective and a fatal risk. Accordingly, the narrator abandons at this point the child perspective for good and turns toward the absent parents instead, by way of a finger-wagging apostrophe: "Children have such sensitive souls, how could one be thinking up terrors for such souls! Parents, parents, never shut your recalcitrant children in dark rooms if you have first taught them to fear the dark, which is otherwise so dear, so sweet" (So zarte Seelen haben Kinder, und solchen Seelen solche Schrecknisse zu denken! Eltern, Eltern, stecket nie eure unartigen Kinder in dunkle Kammern, wenn ihr sie vorher gelehrt habt, Angst vor dem sonst so lieben, lieben Dunkel zu empfinden) (*The Tanners*, 85; *SW*, 9:57). The fantasy of the child in the dark has cradled Simon Tanner to sleep in a last "dissociative oscillation."

Affective Mobility: Both Sides Now, No Side Now
The child in the dark is actually a leitmotif pervading the Walserian oeuvre. Yet what distinguishes it from other tableaux is its outrageous affective mobility. The earliest repetition of *the child in the dark* occurs in the unpublished microgram

"The Rascal" ("Der Schlingel," 1927):[67] the narrator confesses that just thinking of the eponymous rascal causes him such "emotional turmoil" (Ergriffenheit) that he must blow his nose (*MG*, 4:37). A boy is confined to an even tinier space: a box in the attic. However, the affective situation turns out to be the opposite of the episode from *The Tanners*—for here is a boy whose loving upbringing has enabled him to befriend the darkness, to the degree that the latter has become "too interesting for him to want to escape it, because he had to be inclined to experience it as exciting" (wurde für ihn die Dunkelheit . . . zu interessant, als daß er Lust hätte haben können, derselben zu entschlüpfen, da er sie an sich als spannend zu betrachten geneigt sein mußte) (*MG*, 4:40). At the same time, a beautiful, worried mother is searching everywhere for her darling boy. The comical tone could be informed by the Kantian insight that laughter results "from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing,"[68] which in this case would play out intratextually as well as intertextually.

In subsequent representations this sense of the comical turns increasingly sadistic: the microgram "For This Very Reason, Terrible!" ("Gerade deshalb, entsetzlich!," 1928) relates how, during a nightly thunderstorm, a boy "whimpered like a little dog" (winselte es hündchenhaft) (*MG*, 5:196). The mother is amusing herself with some cultural activity and the boy's fear is rendered ridiculous by way of pleonasm: "He was situated in the midst of black pitchdarkness [*Stockdunkelheit*] and dark blackness and his fear was even extradark [*extradunkel*]" (*MG*, 5:196). Although here—like in the segment from *The Tanners*—the narrator turns toward the readers demanding "Mercy for the child!" (Erbarmen fürs Kind) (*MG*, 5:195), this plea cannot be taken seriously. The text is at its most earnest when the narrator admits that it provides him a great deal of "pleasure" (Vergnügen) (*MG*, 5:196) to imagine the scared child: "I would give a lot if the description of his wailing [*Geheuls*] left me with a perfectly tranquil artistic conscience" (*MG*, 5:196).

In the last fantasy in Walser's oeuvre about a person locked in a dark space, it is a father: the microgram "To Lock the Own Good-Soul Herr Papa in a Cellar!" ("Den eigenen seelenguten Herrn Papa in einen Keller zu sperren!") describes how a ravishing young woman locks her father into the basement, listening giddily at the door "that enclosed the enclosedness, from which one heard the most indulgent whimpering [*das gutmütigste Gewimmer*] that one might have ever heard" (*MG*, 5:241).

67. Davide Giuriato recently wrote on "Der Schlingel" in *Grenzenlose Bestimmbarkeit*, 108–12. Just as I read the child in the dark as a persistent yet constantly changing figure, Giuriato sees the *Schlingel* as an exemplary figuration for the discourse on infinite determinability of the child around 1900.

68. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 209.

How to interpret such an obsession with one motif in an author? We can either read the phenomenon as a diachronic sequence or a coherent conceptual structure. Historically, the most pronounced development is an increase in sadism, which, however, could be claimed about many of Walser's late texts, authored in the mental asylum. By comparison, in a conceptual regard the repetition of the motif of "the child in the dark" in different tonalities teaches us something crucial about domestic violence: the problem of domestic violence is intrinsically perspectival even as it at the same time presents the tragic knowledge that psychic mobility is risky. Walser seems to be reacting to the impossible demand of giving an objective representation of family violence—one that would include the perspectives of all parties involved and of all tones in which an incident could be narrated. Yet what his literary examples also teach us is that having multiple perspectives risks having no perspective at all, or that the generalization of empathy may become indistinguishable from the functional obliteration of empathy.

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