

## PREFACE

One of the most refreshing things about this collection of Musil's plays and writings on drama is that it brings us close to Musil, the man, living in his particular milieu and time. When he throws his hat into the ring of the Viennese theater world with his two finished plays, *The Utopians* and *Vinzenz and the Mistress of Important Men*, he is participating in the melee in a way that seems anathema to the character of the self-exiled and eventually politically-exiled author of *The Man without Qualities*. When we read his witty and sardonic reviews of contemporary theater productions, we feel his excitement, his irritation, his frustration, and his competitive edge. We share his despair and also his hopes.

We see the innovations of the time through his own eyes, as if we were seeing them ourselves: Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theater, the Yiddish troupes, the Jessner staircase and other Expressionist innovations in stage design. We experience the stirring atmosphere of Weimar Germany and the fallout of Russian revolutionary activity, hear the grumbling agitation of the workers' movements and the rattling of militaristic sabers, and even glimpse the "young people of Christian-Aryan worldview" who break up a controversial production of Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, with "Nibelungen-brass-knuckle-rings in their pockets".<sup>1</sup>

We sense the still-echoing shocks of World War I — palpable in the wounded bodies of soldiers, in the shattered idealism of a generation. We take the temperature of the encroachment of advertising, the cinema, and the commodification of the "culture industry". Psychoanalysis, Relativity, the "New Woman," Jazz music, "Primitivism," Cubism, Dada, and Cabaret are all here — from before the war and after — as seen through Musil's exceptionally clear eyes.

And since this is a moment *in between*, when many of the personages, cultural artifacts, and ideas of the old world still linger, as relics and ghosts of the pre-war period, we see Musil looking backward too, trying to understand what happened to art, to education, to society, and why; trying to salvage what is precious and to re-evaluate those values that no longer serve.

The plays and critical writings in this volume were written between 1924 and 1929. All of the people who animate the reviews will have their lives turned upside down in the blink of an eye. Many, who in Musil's pages, exhibit extraordinary verve and spirit will perish in concentration camps in the next decade. Others, like Musil himself, will go into exile and find their creative lives in shambles. Others still will

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<sup>1</sup> *Theater Symptoms* [###]

collaborate with Nazism or with Soviet totalitarianism. This is a moment in time. A pregnant moment.

Musil is advocating in these pages for an intellectual and emotional aliveness, a freedom and openness — in artistic and ethical experimentation — which the coming decade would brutally crush. Perhaps we are at the juncture of a similar moment even now. May his words, written with such urgency and passion on the eve of catastrophe, remind us of the important role of art as irreducible aesthetic and ethical experience.

## INTRODUCTION

The planets spin, the elements unite according to laws that are themselves connected to other laws; but in every law that we know, something exists, just as it does in ourselves — a law that is precisely just the way it is, some kind of constant, a fact, an irrational, once-in-a-world, reckless self-persisting something, and the irrationality of mimicry and of the world touch each other through this pantomime; adventure and *ignorabimus* meet in the moment of a felicitous gesture. (*Theater Symptoms II*)

A critic as artist and artist as critic, Robert Musil maintained that “there could be no such thing as significant criticism that would not be literature, and, aside from pure lyric poetry, no significant literature that would not be criticism.”<sup>2</sup> In his 1929 response to attacks on a pirated and recklessly adapted premier of his play, *The Utopians*, he addressed his own critics, simultaneously leveling an attack on the state of contemporary literary criticism. “I have been called an unraveller,” he wrote, “but I struggle to achieve synthesis.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, he lamented “the breathtaking non-intellectual spirit that fills not only the atmosphere of the theater, but our literature as a whole.”<sup>4</sup>

The years 1921 to 1924 constituted the height of Musil’s participation in the world of theater as both critic and dramatist. He later had plans to collect his writings on theater into a book, which he considered calling *Pathology of the Theater* or *Theater from the Outside*. In one notebook entry, he writes that “A pathologist would be able to diagnose a great

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke II*, ed. by Adolf Frisé, Vol. II: *Prosa und Stücke. Kleine Prosa und Aphorismen. Autobiographisches. Essays und Reden. Kritik*. (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) 1188. Hereafter *GW II*.

<sup>3</sup> *Theater Symptoms* ###.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ###.

deal about our time through the theater.”<sup>5</sup> Marie Louise von Roth, whom we thank for reviving an interest in Musil’s theater writings with her 1965 collection of the original German theater reviews, notes that criticism was central to Musil’s character, and that, despite some admired models such as Alfred Kerr, Franz Blei, and Alfred Polgar, even as a critic he considered himself an outsider.<sup>6</sup> Comparing himself to Thomas Mann, he notes that he is Mann’s extreme opposite in his critique against “almost everything,” concluding: “partially that signifies my untimeliness; partially a kind of naughtiness! It suggests: autism, negativity, fanaticism and its variants ....”<sup>7</sup> In addition to these tendencies, the reader should further be warned that Musil is likely to critique writers, such as Karl Kraus and Thomas Mann — who had achieved the sort of popular success that eluded him — more harshly than seems justified.

But, as Oliver Pfohlmann writes, “Neither before Musil nor after him was there an author who demanded more than he from literary criticism as an institution of the literary world. Parallel to his praxis as reviewer, he developed his critical conception against the backdrop of a utopian understanding of literature, wherein literature was considered responsible for the ethical progression of humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, even though Musil may have taken up his various assignments as a theater reviewer out of naughtiness or negativity, or for practical reasons, i.e., to earn much-needed cash, his commitment to the questions involved, including work on the plays and play fragments he wrote during the same period, was profound. In his “Author’s Afterword” to the forthcoming volume 10 of his Robert Musil *Gesamtausgabe*, Walter Fanta directs us to a contemporary assessment of Musil as critic in a theater magazine, under the headline, *Viennese Critics. The Younger Generation*. After noting that Musil’s work as literary writer, mathematician, and engineer schooled him for criticism, the 1925 article concludes: “He is easily the most objective of the local writers and he writes a German which is no fluff and all core [...]. He always has something to say. Musil is not a born critic; he has a calling.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Musil, *Tagebücher I* [Diaries], ed. by Adolf Frisé (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) 631. Hereafter *TB I* (or *TB II* for Vol. 2, containing the notes, appendix, and index).

<sup>6</sup> See Marie Louise von Roth, “Musil als Kritiker,” in *Gedanken und Dichtung: Essays zu Robert Musil* (Sauerbrücken: Sauerbrücken Drückerei und Verlag, 1987) 59–74. Hereafter *Kritiker*.

<sup>7</sup> *GW II* 569.

<sup>8</sup> See Oliver Pfohlmann, “Literatur- und Theaterkritik,” in *Robert Musil Handbuch*, ed. by Birgit Nübel and Norbert Christian Wolf (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016) 414–429 (quote from p. 415). Hereafter *Handbuch*.

That he currently has no steady position as critic in Vienna is lamentable, but is really more evidence of the exceptional quality of this brain.”<sup>9</sup>

In the 1920’s, Musil was on the staff of the *Prager Presse* for one year as theater and art reviewer, and worked for other papers in Czechoslovakia, as well as in Austria and Germany. He reported almost exclusively on Viennese theater, which included guest appearances from Berlin (Vienna’s rival in the German-speaking theater world), from Eastern Europe (sometimes via troupes who had emigrated to the United States), and translations from European and British productions.

Pfohlman tells us that Musil wrote 56 reviews for the *Prager Presse* between March 1921 and August 1922 (sometimes up to three a week). He wrote for the *Deutsche Zeitung Bohemia* (also in Prague) from September to December 1922 and began to write more for Viennese papers beginning in 1923. Between November 1923 and January 1924, Musil wrote five theater reviews for the Viennese *Abend*; but the fact that reviews had to be written at night, immediately after the performances, was excessively tiring. Another short stint was at the Viennese paper, *Der Morgen*, where he was laid off due to complaints about the severity of his reviews; and he published his more extensive theater-critical essays, the series referred to as *Theater Symptoms*, in his friend Ephraim Frisch’s *Der Neue Merkur*.<sup>10</sup>

As Roth notes, Musil’s reviews, “are written in a lively, scintillating, sarcastic, intellectually-immaculate language, in a precise, bellicose style.... [R]eminiscent of [Alfred] Kerr, this language shatters in terse formulations the apparent shimmering of non-art, eviscerates in exacting analysis the scaffolding of simulated values, to clear a place for true art.”<sup>11</sup> The writing style, although elegant, light, graceful, and often extremely humorous, may occasionally seem dense in its English form, since even in German Musil’s writing — made up of complex intellectual puzzles, puns, subtle irony, and sheer brilliance — sometimes seems to burst the bounds of what language can do. His tendency to remain objective, to resist closure where one might expect a conclusion, can sometimes leave readers (including seasoned Musil scholars) in the dark about his judgments. Musil is capable of holding multiple aspects of any question up in the air at once, even within one sentence. German helps a writer to do this sort of suspended idea-juggling; English not so much. Thus, I have had to break up many very long sentences into smaller ones. Some readers might wish that I had broken up even more — but to have done so more than I have deemed necessary would have sacrificed the

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<sup>9</sup> See Walter Fanta, “Author’s Afterword” to the forthcoming Vol. 10 of the *Robert Musil Gesamtausgabe* (Salzburg: Jung und Jung, 2020), not paginated at the time of this printing. Hereafter *Gesamtausgabe*.

<sup>10</sup> Pfohlmann, *Handbuch* 418.

<sup>11</sup> Roth, *Kritiker* 70–71.

sense of energetic urgency, the frustration, the ecstasy that erupts from the critical texts.

Of his many reviews, I have chosen less than half, according to the following criteria: the reviews that best articulate Musil's theoretical poetics; those that treat important milestones, actors, and directors of his time; and those that have the most significant connections to his other more well-known work. To the series *Theater Symptoms I, II*, and *The 'Decline' of the Theater* (which Musil himself referred to as *Theater Symptoms III*), I have appended the related essay, *Once Again Theater Crisis and Renewal*. A planned fourth installment of the *Theater Symptoms*, providing practical recommendations, was never written.

According to his own avowal, Musil was spurred on to the writing of his two finished plays, *The Utopians* and *Vinzenz and the Mistress of Important Men*, by his negative assessment of the contemporary offerings. *The Utopians* (1921) — which took him approximately ten years to write and which he considered one of his major works — was written, he explained, to 'finally, for once, bring some spirit into the controversies surrounding the theater.'<sup>12</sup> It was awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize almost immediately, but was only premiered in 1929, against Musil's wishes, under the directorship of Jo Lhehrman — a con-man who could almost have come right out of one of Musil's own plays. Of the second, *Vinzenz and the Mistress of Important Men* (1923) — a farce that was performed to enthusiastic audiences even before its publication in book form — he reported, "[B]ecause, for once, it just all finally got to be too stupid, I have written a play in 14 days."<sup>13</sup> Both were written in tandem with his close analysis of contemporary theater and as partial answers to the problems this analysis posed.

When our self-proclaimed *monsieur le vivesecteur* begins, in the theoretical essays and reviews, to take apart the nature of theater and to provisionally put it back together in a more utopian mode in his own plays, he does so via his own characteristic methodology, his signature combination of "precision and soul." Intellect was required, but also an acknowledgment of the realm of the *ignorabimus*, i.e. that which cannot be known. The theater, made of words, gestures, dramatic structures, ideas, allusions, and something "once-in-a-world, reckless," made up of thought, but also of the "irrationality of mimicry and of the world" itself, is the miraculous juncture of an intellectual "adventure and *ignorabimus*" — the enervating and irreducible boundary between knowledge and mystery.

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<sup>12</sup> See Robert Musil, *Briefe [Letters] I 1901–1942*, two volumes, ed. by Adolf Frisé (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981) 202. Hereafter *B I* (or *B II*, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, containing notes, appendix, and index).

<sup>13</sup> *TB II* 839.

But, Musil laments, this ravishing boundary experience is rarely attained in the works of his contemporaries. Mostly, the contemporary theatergoer experiences a mundane muddle of commercial entertainment: cheap thrills, banal scenarios, and hackneyed tricks anticipated by the audience beforehand. With the exception of Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theater, the Yiddish theater, and some other rare individual directors (Reinhardt, Jessner), actors (Moissi, Lina Lossen), and authors (Büchner, Shaw), the avant garde does not usually satisfy him either. Despite his sometimes sweeping criticisms, in his investigation of the problems and possibilities he is nevertheless always able and even eager to find something good in even bad works, exceptions to the rule, surprising exceptions to generally dreadful productions. Some people, though, are practically above criticism.

He calls his experience watching the Moscow Art Theater one of "the strongest shocks and the deepest moments of happiness, which art, which life, is capable of providing" and "the perfection of theater," despite the fact that he "did not understand a word." Yet, in general, language — the poetic force and lyricism of a play's *words* — is of vital importance to his assessment of its worth. We see him calling attention to the centrality of words, over and over, as in his review of Büchner's *The Death of Danton*, wherein we read:

Büchner's words are like an outbreak of fever, conjuring up colorful, beautiful, irregular spots that merge into each other now and then to form strange figments. In the beginning was the Word: that goes for the whole epoch. And before the Word, was Shakespeare.

Of Shakespeare's language, in the same review, Musil raves:

[O]ne mustn't think now about *the thing*, but must enter in somewhere through *a word*; then one must let go of the word, the way one lets one's hand drag a pencil after it; yet in a peculiar way — and then Shakespeare's word-world appears, and along with the word, the world.<sup>14</sup>

This celebration of the word is a polemical stance against the increasingly visual and non-verbal techniques of dramatic Expressionism.<sup>15</sup> Although in his early years (in 1914) as a literary

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<sup>14</sup> *Theater Symptoms*, ###.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter H. Sokel, who writes, "The projection of abstract ideas and psychic situations into symbolic images and happenings is one of the basic features of Expressionist drama. Consequently, language loses the pre-eminent rank it held in traditional drama [... and] an immediate appeal is made to the audience's

reviewer for *Der Neue Rundschau*, he was supportive and enthusiastic about young writers such as Franz Kafka and Robert Walser, by the 1920s Expressionism is faulted with having no ideas, Impressionism with elevating emotion over thought, and political art with presenting ideas that are too ideologically one-sided. He wants ideas, but not just any ideas. He wants *spirit* — denoted by that untranslatable German term, *Geist*, which, along with *spirit*, can also mean *mind*, *intellectuality*, *cultural life* — but decidedly not the kind of pseudo-spirit to be found in mindless emotion, simulated passion, or empty-headed “idea-howling.” The right conditions for a “spiritual” art (with a different accent than Kandinsky’s) up to Musil’s standard seem to include an almost miraculous synthesis of at least two complementary but opposing forces — a coincidence of opposites within the creator’s own personality. In a review of Franz Werfel’s play *Goat Song*, Musil elucidates these two requirements of creation. One is “vision”:

One element of writing is the vision, the sight, the waking dream, the passivity, being overwhelmed with lights, shadows, the shapes that life takes; the writer lays beneath the tree of life and suddenly he sees the existence of something that is not himself.

The other, he explains, is a personal force, a will:

Because being able to immerse oneself in the not-self is the one half of writing; the other half is the opposite: to be able to immerse oneself in one’s self — to be able to will, to impart meaning. The writer sees the existence of his Not-Self before him, in fragments, sounds, or echoes: what does he do with them? He begins to interpret them, to connect, to amplify.

The ability of the artist to see what is *not self* is reminiscent of Yeats’ idea of the “anti-self”; but in opposition to an anti-formalist tendency in contemporary works, Musil seems to stress the need for the second quality — an artistic hand and eye, a guiding, distinguishing force. While a mediocre writer may have one of these capabilities (Werfel, in Musil’s estimation, had only the former), only the great writer has both. Even if a writer had these and other requisite qualities, society and its institutions, due to their inherent resistance to the new or to “the independent” (as Musil calls it in his wonderful review of Shaw’s *Saint Joan*) would inhibit creative development at every turn. To foster the personal, social, spiritual conditions wherein such miraculous synthesis

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visual sense rather than to its conceptual thought. The memory of empirical reality, with its demands for causal logic and plausibility, is suspended.” *Anthology of German Expressionist Drama: A Prelude to the Absurd* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1963) xviii. Hereafter *Anthology*.

**Commented [RH1]:** Aren’t you limiting this to one element? Below he speaks of two: of the not-self, clearly a form of Keats’ NC, and will.  
I am not sure I understand your point. He says right here that the One and then THE Other half..  
If there is a way I could open it up I am happy to, but he seems to be saying here at least that there are two halves.

might be possible would, Musil acknowledges, be a utopian feat. But that is also, he asserts, no reason to avoid the attempt. Despite his well-known skepticism and his ironic ridicule of simple-minded schemes for socio-political or aesthetic reform, despite his devastating subsequent experiences in the 30s and 40s — caught between the *dystopias* of German Fascism on the one hand and Soviet Totalitarianism on the other — Musil never fully abandoned the preoccupation with utopian thought which runs through his theoretical and creative writing of the 1920s.

Thus, after much deliberation, I have chosen to translate the title of his first play (*Die Schwärmer*) as *The Utopians*. Early alternative titles considered by Musil include: *The Weak Strong Ones*, *The Friends*, *The Hypocrite*, *Loneliness*, *The Last Way*, and *The Anarchists*, all stressing different possible aspects of the play's significance.<sup>16</sup> An early translation by Andrea Simon chose the somewhat negatively-weighted title, *The Enthusiasts*, and other American Musil scholars, like Burton Pike, who wrote in 1961 that the play was possibly Musil's finest work, called it *The Visionaries*.<sup>17</sup> Christian Rogowski shares the entry for the German term, *Schwärmer*, from Grimm's dictionary, revealing that it comes from the verb "to swarm," is etymologically related to the erratic, irregular movement of bees, was an "emblem of deviant, erratic behavior," and "became a term used for religious dissenters in Luther's time." Georg Christian Lichtenberg, who is quoted in Grimm, may have been one influence on Musil's thinking: "There are *Schwärmer* without capabilities, and then they are really dangerous people." There are certainly echoes of this aphorism throughout the play, but what Rogowski misses is that these echoes include an exploration of what happens when *Schwärmer* do have "capabilities." Rogowski concludes that Musil uses the term throughout his writings in a "clearly derogatory fashion" and that it "simultaneously evokes rebellious non-conformism, ecstatic irrationalism, and erotic infatuation."<sup>18</sup> Yet, while the words "Schwärmer" and "utopian," like the word "mystic," can be used as terms

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<sup>16</sup> See Rogowski, *Dramaturgy* 73, and Burton Pike, who noted the considered title, *The Anarchists*, in his *Robert Musil: An Introduction to his Work* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961) 96. Hereafter *Introduction*.

<sup>17</sup> Burton Pike wrote that, "After the dust has settled around *The Man without Qualities*, Musil's only serious play, *The Visionaries*, may one day be considered his finest work. It contains in distilled form, and with the greater strength of a distillation, most of the important elements of the later novel as well as many of its subordinate concerns." *Introduction* 71.

<sup>18</sup> See Rogowski, *Dramaturgy* 96. Rogowski also argues for a more negative interpretation of Musil's theatrical conception, stressing Musil's doubts about the viability of theater as a social medium in a fractured, heterogenous society. While his assessments are eminently reasonable — Musil did have such very justifiable doubts and they are an important aspect of his criticism — I maintain that he never abandoned his own species of utopian thinking.



of abuse, for Musil they both had other, very important, positive connotations as well. Norbert Christian Wolf, noting that “*Schwärmer*” are “devotees of an ‘other,’ a ‘second’ reality, formulated pointedly: mystics,” summarizes a general critical assessment that this association is not to be taken negatively, “but primarily indicates a principled openness.”<sup>19</sup> And, of course, the term *Schwärmer* can be traced back to Nietzsche’s Dionysian revelers, whose ecstatic, dis-individuated swarm-like dancing is a vital counterpoint to Apollonian form and reason. Those who like to think of their Nietzsche and Musil as rationalists may be comforted: the precise recommended measure of Dionysian to Apollonian is as indeterminate in Nietzsche as is the optimal proportion of rationality to mysticism in Musil’s conception.

But we do know that late drafts for *The Man without Qualities* are rife with a variety of utopias, which the author *in extremis* considered as possible endings for the unfinished (unfinishable) novel. None was more favored than his “utopia of the next step,” a mode of life and thought prefigured in *The Utopians* and in *Vinzenz and the Mistress of Important Men*, whereby an action may only be judged by what it brings in its wake, *ad infinitum*. This utopian state constitutes a radical resistance to closure and final conclusion, manifest in a life of creative aliveness and presence that is represented by another of Musil’s favored utopias: the “Utopia of the Motivated Life.” As Albrecht Schöne pointed out in his brilliant essay on the use of the subjunctive in Musil’s novel, this mode of thought (like the subjunctive case that expresses it) is anathema to rigid (and declarative) systems. The utopian thinker, the **possibilitarian**, would, thus, be the first person to be expelled from any established utopia.<sup>20</sup> An ossified utopia, in other words, is already dystopian. The utopia of the next step is not a place or a fixed system, but a resistance to deadly habit and dull conformity, a creative openness, the only state wherein art can be created and experienced — in effect, a utopia without delusive ideals. As Thomas in *The Utopians* says to an outraged Miss Mertens: “Ideals are dead idealism”<sup>21</sup>. And Musil’s serious engagement with utopian thought, from these early plays and critical writings through the last decade of his life and the last notes for his life’s work, are also a measure of the central social role he assigned to art.

In his critical writings, the pathologist of culture gathers symptoms of a pandemic of cultural decline by dissecting the diseased body of the Viennese theater world of the 1920s, in order to come to an understanding, not only of the living organism of all of art, but also of the

**Commented [RH2]:** Bit of an ungainly word. What of: dreamer of possibilities?  
Well, it is a constantly used term in Musil studies...from the translation of the novel. We could overturn this, but those familiar with the English translation will be acquainted with this term.

<sup>19</sup> See Norbert Christian Wolf, “Die Schwärmer (1921)” in *Handbuch* 157–190, this quote from 161.

<sup>20</sup> See Albrecht Schöne, “Über den Gebrauch des Konjunktivs bei Robert Musil,” in *Euphorion* 55 (1968) 196–220.

<sup>21</sup> *Theater Symptoms* [###].

social and political conditions most conducive to its thriving. Theater, because of its closer involvement with commerce and its more traditional social aspect, was more immediately touched by the general trend toward commodification and the vitiating effects of the evolving “culture industry” than the novel or the world of poetry, and thus provided a preview, so to speak, of the degradations to come. Monika Meister calls attention to Musil’s precedence as an early diagnostician of this “culture industry, as later defined by the Frankfurt School.” Before Adorno and Horkheimer, Musil analyzed “the forfeiture of valid ethical norms that might direct society within the context of a contemporary vacuum of values and the lack of a reciprocal aesthetic relationship between form and content.”<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, before Bertolt Brecht<sup>23</sup> or Antonin Artaud, whose dramatic theories of disruption are more well-known, Musil saw in theater a conducive experimental realm for transformative social experience. Musil anticipated Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) by employing radical techniques of surprise and disruption in his plays, breaking the illusion of the theater frame; but his vision of drama was different from Brecht’s more didactically political “epic theater.”<sup>24</sup> Brecht, like Musil, eventually came to criticize what they both deemed the anti-intellectual, primarily emotional appeal of Expressionism, but his favored intellectuality was of another sort.<sup>25</sup> The important difference is that while they both worked to destabilize the status quo, exposing the absurdities of modern life and the hypocrisies of capitalism and commodification, Brecht did so in service to a new ideology (Marxism), while Musil tore away the veil of assurance without providing a new solidity to replace the old discredited one. Musil’s destabilized world is a fact of life; Brecht’s is a stage on the way to a new artificial order. Musil divests us of our false security and leaves us with a radical existential uncertainty. Theater, instead of a temporary propaganda tool for destabilizing the state, becomes an eternally regenerative ritual space wherein the social body and each ultimately isolated individual must continually encounter a terrifying, but liberating, openness.

Theater also made manifest Musil’s interest in the aesthetic tension between internality and externality, or thought and action. Consider the chapter in the novel entitled, “A Chapter That May Be Skipped By Anyone Not Particularly Impressed by Thinking as an Occupation,” wherein we

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<sup>22</sup> See Monika Meister, “Drama, Theater” in *Handbuch* 657–662, these quotes, respectively, from 661 and 657–8.

<sup>23</sup> Musil only mentions Brecht in passing, and usually derogatorily, in his notebooks and letters. Although he would have had the opportunity to see some of his early productions, there are no reviews or mentions of specific works.

<sup>24</sup> See Rogowski, *Dramaturgy* 194.

<sup>25</sup> See Sokel, *Anthology* x and xxi.

are suddenly introduced to the problem of narrating a man thinking. As should be clear by now: Musil's theoretical writings and reviews of plays are not only relevant to drama, but to all of art. Moreover, in Musil's definition of art, they are therefore relevant to all of life, including politics, physics, psychology, biology, history, sociology, mathematics, religion, economics, and love. In fact, one of his most pointed critiques of the theater of his day is that its theoreticians and practitioners treat it as something separated from a multifaceted — and irreducibly *real* — life and thought. It is at once too removed from life — too artificial — and too inartistic. It lacks both mind and heart, both form and incommensurability, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Or it has only one and not the other necessary part of the mystical pairing. For, as Musil writes in a review of the Moscow Artists, theater is emphatically not — “an ersatz life for those who want to be told about life or need to be entertained, nor is it a society amusement; it is, rather, meaning-making, interpretation of life, a ministering to humanity.”<sup>26</sup>

One of the ways Musil explains theater's failure to fulfil this “meaning-making” role is by his differentiation between what he calls “illustrative” and “creative” theater. The former, the most common, is caught in the rut of mimesis, copying not even life but merely theatrical tropes. The latter grows from out of the individual complex character of the artist in each particular work of art, is consistent unto itself alone, and brings something utterly new and previously unimagined — not in a forced, provocative, or cheaply sensational fashion, but simply by being true to its own inner artistic necessity:

[T]he illustrative is compared with the challenge of a creative theater, one that reflects the fact that we are actually made of spirit. Do not fear, we can still eat lobsters, conduct politics, and do everything else that is human (we should do this!); and as far as I am concerned, one can conceive of the spirit as materialistically as one wants. But we do not want to deny that the most meaningful moments are those wherein we are enlivened by some mysterious thought that carries us beyond ourselves and into the vastness of the universal. I admit that I don't know how to express this; since all of these words, *thoughts, spirit, idea*, have been abused and have earned, thereby, a bad name. Nevertheless, we know how to differentiate quite clearly between whether we are doing something in our lives in response to an internal spur or not. We know quite well that we can be vehement, and nevertheless remain hollow inside. We know quite well that we can have the most noble feelings and can express the grandest convictions, but that in the next moment nothing remains of them but the dregs. There is such a vast difference between our growth and our ossification, a difference that opposes all of the worthy

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<sup>26</sup> *Theater Symptoms ###*.

distinctions we flaunt — a difference that resists all of these exclamations mightily. And, briefly said, one must create a growing, evolving theater.<sup>27</sup>

In answer to the problem of a theater degraded by the priorities of actors and directors (stardom, cult of personality, financial and popular success), Musil postulated not only the “creative theater,” but also “the writers’ theater,” an intellectually and spiritually-challenging theater activated neither by the market nor by the actors’ desire to shine, but by the words, ideas, and images of poets who were vitally engaged in the creation of new art forms commensurate with the multi-dimensional nature of the modern experience. But Musil’s advocacy of an evolving, living theater is paradoxically just as likely — in fact, more likely — to put forward classical playwrights, like Shakespeare or Goethe, as exemplars than one of his contemporaries. His critiques, thus, sometimes read as more reactionary than modernist, even though he excoriated his contemporary critics for their resistance to new work, even though he rallied with incomparable fervor for the necessity of fostering new playwrights. His belief in the primacy of the role and task of the individual creative artist as genius was traditional, with roots in the Enlightenment and in Romanticism, heavily influenced by Goethe as model and by Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Mankind*. But his conception of the world with which that genius had to grapple was a very modern one:

[T]he tragic conflict between the individual and the law must now be replaced by an avowed conflict with the laws of earthly existence — a conflict that is often unresolvable, but always bearable. Therein lies the difference between the Enlightenment times, which believed in the autonomy of the moral laws and reason, and the time of empiricism, which recognizes an infinite task with only partial progresses.<sup>28</sup>

This fundamentally modern shift from a world of moral laws and reliable truth to one of unresolvable — but bearable — conflict and uncertainty is threaded through every line and every formal move in Musil’s works. This is not, as should be clear from the discussion about utopias, a nihilism, but a brave and radical *amor fati*.

Thus it should be no surprise, and is no contradiction, that although Musil’s analysis of the conditions of theater is undertaken with painstaking accuracy, although it does arrive at a handful of theoretical principles, any particular proffered law may ultimately be obviated in

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, ###.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ###.

the face of something more compelling than itself: a measure of unfathomable aliveness. He takes the pulse of a work of art, a play, a novel, a work of criticism, to test whether it throbs, whether it is made of the most palpable tension possible between the norms and the deviations, the rationality and the irrationality that make up a “motivated” lived life — or he declares it dead: nothing but a conglomeration of ossified techniques, formulae, and clichés.

So much — too much — of the art and criticism of his time was, he found, caught in a cycle of repetitive iterations of the *self-same* — that “*seinesgleichen*” that would make up part of the title for Part II of *The Man Without Qualities*.<sup>29</sup> Part III of the great novel (“Into the Millennium: The Criminals”) breaks out of this deadening cycle through radical deviation, not only in the realm of morals and conduct of life, but also in its formal aesthetic experimentations.

The “other condition” of the sibling lovers’ mystical criminality is the realm of utopian creative experimentation, the timeless ‘second’ reality of aesthetic experience central to Musil’s critical theatrical principles and to the form and content of his dramatic writing. The play, the meaningful work of art, should be an ethical and an aesthetic experience, it should be *erschütterend* (shattering, explosive, convulsive); it should, to use another image from Musil’s novel, “tear the paper” of normal reality, revealing other more vividly-seen realities.

Musil sometimes seems to be defending and sometimes attacking Naturalism in his theoretical writings. He constantly objects to plots and motivations that do not make sense, are inconsistent, or not life-like. Yet this is not exclusively an attack on the level of abstraction or the symbolic nature of a work. In so far as Musil well knew that metaphor could be even more expressive of the real complexity of life than a supposed mimetic depiction, his critical arrow is aimed at any artistic formulations (whether allegedly Naturalistic or abstract) that are haphazard, that do not seem to have grown out of an inner necessity or truth, at hastily thrown-together hack work, posing as profound.

“Naturalism,” he wrote, “gave reality without spirit; Expressionism gave spirit without reality; both are non-spirit.”<sup>30</sup> His tendency to lean toward rather than away from, Naturalism might, however, seem clear in his preference for the work of Stanislavski’s Moscow troupe over the anti-Naturalistic productions and theories of Expressionism, except that he argues that it would be a mistake to call what the Moscow Artists do Naturalistic: for they elevate the natural beyond the quotidian banal.

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<sup>29</sup> Eithne Wilkins and George Kaiser translated the title, “*Seinesgleichen* Geschichte,” more literally as “The Like of It Now Happens,” while Sophie Wilkins, under Burton Pike’s editorship, arrived at the philosophically justified “Pseudoreality Prevails.”

<sup>30</sup> *GW* // 1058f.

This is what Musil aims for. Neither otherworldly fantasy, nor dull and pedestrian stories about dreary people, but real life at its highest and most spiritual pitch. This enlivening crisis or crux is often to be found in the tension between habitual conformity and creative interruption to patterns.

Musil's two finished plays anticipate the novel's aesthetic and ethical tension between the self-same and the criminal, creative variations that interrupt its habitual circling. In *The Utopians*, we find a powerful early metaphor for the tension between patterns and creative alternatives, presented later in the novel as the "two dozen cake pans" into which life is too-often poured and thus limited. In the 1921 play, Regina and Thomas talk about the way they used to walk along the patterns in a carpet (now in the house inherited by Thomas and Maria) as children. Thomas laments:

*(Pointing to the patterns Regina has been walking on)* One never escapes from what has been predetermined. Sometimes I feel as though everything was already decided in childhood. Climbing, one always comes back to the same place, circling over the emptiness around a predetermined outline. It's like a spiral staircase.

And yet, like Ulrich and Agathe in *The Man Without Qualities*, and Alpha and Vinzenz in Musil's second play, their entire protest against the *self-same*, their resistance to normal life and its dissatisfying requirements, requires precisely that they do step out of the predetermined lines in an imaginative act of ethical aliveness. To do so is terrifying and catapults one beyond the pale of normal, conformist social life. The "tragic conflict" between an isolated human being and the vast and terrifying world of unlimited possibilities is described by Thomas in *The Utopians* as the state of a man alone on his own plank amid infinity; and this image is central enough to Musil's thinking about theater's higher aims that he quotes this passage (as the words of "another writer"), in a review of Ernst Toller's *The Lame Man*, to illustrate what he deems "the suffering of Everyman, when he notices his loneliness among his fellows in that moment when it is a matter of the deepest things."<sup>31</sup>

Although Musil's "farce," *Vinzenz and the Mistress of Important Men* is, on its surface, lighter and less challenging than *The Utopians*, the "feeling of not being at home in the world," writes Burton Pike, "is not merely a comic pose"<sup>32</sup> for Alpha, the "mistress of important men," who calls herself an "anarchist." Nor is it a pose for Vinzenz, her childhood friend, who returns after an unexplained absence of 11 years to play a

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<sup>31</sup> *Theater Symptoms ###*.

<sup>32</sup> Burton Pike, *Ibid.*, 98.

role similar to that of Anselm in *The Utopians*: the role of confidence man, but also classic fool, of the actor who reveals that all the other more serious-seeming characters are also living a sort of farce. Neither Anselm nor Vinzenz nor Alpha, on the one hand, nor Thomas and Regina, nor Ulrich nor Agathe in their own way on the other, can commit themselves to easy answers or a solid sense of reality. Thus, the theatrical tricks played by Musil on the audience in his “farce” parody not only the theatrical conventions of his time, but also the conventions and trappings of any semblance of a stable, certain position in real life. Behind what Pike calls Vinzenz’s “sophistic detachment ... lurks a refusal to commit himself or accept the world .... [M]ore exactly than any character in Musil’s earlier works, except Anselm and possibly Thomas ... Vinzenz prefigures Musil’s ultimate man of possibility, Ulrich.”<sup>33</sup>

The same concerns and themes run through all of Musil’s works and are found, in scintillating form, in many fragments of fiction, plays, essays, and aphorisms. I have only included a few of the many dramatic fragments from Musil’s *Nachlass*, partially due to a question of space and time, but also because many may be too sketchy and disjointed for the general reader’s enjoyment or illumination. I have left out the lengthy unfinished fragment entitled *The Little Napoleon (or Panama)*, which is a farce inspired by Musil’s experience of corruption as a soldier in WWI. Nor have I included the lengthy notes for a work called *The Tortoise*. Many smaller (1 to 2-page sketches) have also been left out.

In addition to the prelude, *The Zodiac*, probably a parody of Expressionism’s excesses, which was published in Musil’s lifetime, but never continued, I have included three unfinished fragments: *The Double I*, *The Stylite*, and *Tempora Maier*, in part because of their charm and their interest to me personally, and in part because of what I deemed their relevance to the other material in this volume. *Tempora Maier*, especially, as a depiction of a dystopian society that exiles its authors and represses nuanced, intellectual thought, is a delicious satire of our own contemporary scene. The reader will hopefully find that, despite — or, why not? — perhaps *because* of Musil’s serious commitment to art’s ethical and social role, these and the other works in this book are a good deal of fun.

This is, of course, in keeping with Musil’s main criterion that art, as in Novalis’s definition of *philosophieren* quoted in Pater’s “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, is “*dephlegmatisieren, vivifizieren*”. Maria, in *The Utopians*, speaks the Nietzschean phrase, in opposition to her husband Thomas’ relentless rationality: “I think that the only proof for or against a person is whether one rises or sinks in his

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 100.

presence.” And even Thomas, who resists such anti-logical<sup>34</sup> pronouncements, proclaims in the last scene that he, too, is a dreamer, who, like his alter-ego, his creator Robert Musil, is so rational that he must indeed include the realms of dream, of mystery, of uncertainty in his ultimate honest picture of the world. He, like Vinzenz, is another prototype of Musil’s man without qualities, who is simultaneously necessarily a man of possibility, an eternal utopian, whose radical openness is a window on the abyss at the edge of “adventure and *ignorabimus*.” To another character, Regina, Thomas avows their common ailment and talent in some of the play’s last lines:

I am ... a dreamer. And you a dreamer. People like us just appear to be unfeeling. We wander, watch what the people who feel at home in the world do. And carry something inside ourselves that we do not sense. A sinking down through everything into bottomlessness at every moment. Without going under. The condition of creation.

And this sometimes uncomfortable, difficult, lonely, radically honest “condition of creation” is not only a cosmological moment, but is, at once, and just as importantly, a “creative condition” — the condition in which life-changing art may be born and experienced.

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<sup>34</sup> It has been suggested by Rogowski and others that the names Thomas and Anselm in the play are references, respectively, to Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury, “whose dictum *credo ut intelligam* Musil cites on several occasions” (Rogowski, *Dramaturgy* 102).



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