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## Robert Musil's Utopian Essayism: Beyond Unresolvable Dialectics

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In a chapter on "Metaphysics and the Novel," the phenomenological thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the increasing affinity between literature and philosophy, which occurs in fin-de-siècle culture:

For a long time it looked as if philosophy and literature not only had different ways of saying things but had different objects as well... Since the end of the nineteenth century, however, the ties between them have been getting closer and closer. The first sign of this reconciliation was the appearance of hybrid modes of expression having elements of the intimate diary, the philosophical treatise, and the dialogue. (qtd. in Luft 26)

Writing between the two World Wars, the highly "philosophical" writer Robert Musil belongs to a formidable generation of like-minded philosophers and critics. These thinkers include Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Lukács, and novelists such as Franz Kafka, Hermann Broch, and Thomas Mann, among others. For these writers, the "end of metaphysics" and the so-called "crisis of the novel"—which can also be seen as a more general crisis of writing—were experienced as parallel expressions of the crisis of traditional liberal culture (Luft 12-13).<sup>1</sup> Whether in Benjamin's concept of "the fragment as philosophical form" (Adorno qtd. in Luft), or in Lukács's notion of the Platonist choosing the essay as the appropriate form for a period of transition, or in Musil's elaboration of "*Essayismus*" as philosophy, the emphasis was always on the small step, the insight, the broken form.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Musil views the identity crisis brought on by the destruction of the Hapsburg Monarchy with its sterile conventions and outdated moral outlook, as liberating and exciting. In fact, Musil's concept of "*Essayismus*," emerges out of this period of turbulence and radical change: it offers him the opportunity to experiment with the remaining rubble of the old world order. In *Gedanken und Dichtung* Marie-Louise Roth asserts that *Essayismus* not only indicates a style of writing, but encapsulates Musil's entire *Weltanschauung*:

Der Schriftsteller bringt den Begriff "Essayismus" zu seiner extremen Konsequenz, indem er die Literatur, ja die Kunst selber als Essayismus betrachtet. Der Begriff "Essayismus" dehnt sich bei ihm aus, indem er über die Kunstgattung hinweg, eine existenzielle Tendenz, eine Lebensform und eine Poetik darstellt. Essayismus ist mehr als eine Form und Stilhaltung, er ist eine Denkstruktur, eine Lebens- und Weltanschauung, eine Ethik und eine Poetik. (104-105)

By examining Essayism's various literary incarnations, we are struck by the ways in which it becomes an epistemological problem for the twentieth-century writer. Walter Moser calls Essayism "l'écriture de la crise"—a style of writing emblematic of an era riddled by ideological uncertainty and massive transition, in which both the traditional values and prevailing new ideologies fail to fill the moral and spiritual void in the lives of individuals whose world was forever altered with the onset of World War I.

A highly idiosyncratic concept, Essayism grows out of Musil's observations on the essay, which becomes the favorite vehicle of expression for many of his contemporaries because of its extraordinary ability to synthesize hybrid modes of expression. Narrative and non-narrative forms of writing, as well as distinctions between philosophy, literature and cultural criticism break down in the essay's flexible and expansive form. Musil's notion of Essayism is of course not entirely unique: it can be traced back to the birth of the essay with Montaigne and Lord Bacon, and also shares affinities with the writings of notable contemporaries, across a wide range of disciplines. It distinguishes itself radically, however, through a remarkable utopian quest to overcome dialectics, which anticipates the work of influential modern thinkers such as Derrida and his followers.

Although he does not provide us with a precise definition of essay that delineates its boundaries and specifies its ties to Essayism, Musil does explicitly state in "Über den Essay," —the only known theoretical text on the subject—that the essay should be a combination of the ethical and the esthetic, which he also associates with "content" and "form": "Für mich knüpfen sich an das Wort Essay Ethik und Ästhetik" (*Gesammelte Werke*, 8: 1:335). As the perfect synthesis of these two seemingly contradictory attributes, the essay had to fulfill a "sacred" mission: providing the world with the spiritual orientation it had long been lacking. Perceiving himself a *Dichter*,<sup>2</sup> rather than an essayist, Musil believed that the essay should unite the concrete, formal elements of expository prose, with the intangibility of poetry:

Zwischen diesen beiden Gebieten liegt der Essay. Er hat von der Wissenschaft die Form und Methode, von der Kunst die Materie...Er sucht eine Ordnung zu schaffen. Er gibt keine Figuren, sondern eine Gedankenverknüpfung also eine logische u. geht von Tatsachen aus, wie Naturwissenschaft, die er in Beziehung setzt. Nur sind die Tatsachen nicht allgemein beobachtbar, und auch ihre Verknüpfung ist in vielen Fällen nur eine singuläre. Er gibt keine Totallösung, sondern nur eine Reihe von partikularen. Aber er sagt aus und untersucht. (*Werke*, 8: 1335)

Indeed, establishing the essay's generic qualities has been a problem critics have faced since its earliest history. From the sixteenth century onward, the tendency has been either to view essay-writing in terms of its content, which resists critical definition and systematic categorization because of the diversity of views encompassed, or to focus primarily on the essay's formal structure. This division among critics arose when its "founding" fathers, Montaigne and Bacon, took diametrically opposed stances in their treatment of the essay. Although Montaigne is considered the one who first conceived of the essay, it is Lord Bacon who delineated its boundaries, and gave it form and shape. Paradoxically, Montaigne's *Essais* have almost nothing in common with Bacon's *Essays*, except for the title, which Bacon copied from Montaigne despite his unfavorable view of him:

Montaigne und Bacon verkörpern, bereits in den Anfängen der Gattung, zwei entgegengesetzte Möglichkeiten des Essays. Vereinfachend lässt sich sagen: auf Montaigne geht das 'Essayistische' als schriftstellerische Haltung, auf Bacon der 'Essay' als geschlossene literarische Kunstform zurück. (Rohner 67)

For Montaigne, the process of discovery that an "essa" entails is more important than its actual result: Montaigne is concerned with imparting the process his ideas undergo to the reader, leaving them always open to modification and change, whereas Bacon aims to present the results of his finished thinking process. Where Montaigne is spontaneous, poetic, ironic and open, Bacon is rhetorical, conservative, forthright and moralistic—the subtitle to *Essays* being "Practical and Moral Advice."

By describing the essay as structured by "*Wissenschaft*" and as constituted by "*Kunst*", Musil in fact unites Bacon's rigorous systematic approach to the essay with Montaigne's affinity for improvisatory writing, and thus establishes that the two must necessarily function as a unit, the one shaping and modifying the other. As the perfect mixture of science

and art, the essay is perceived as residing in an "in-between" ("Dazwischen") domain, on the border ("Grenze") in what Musil called "einem gewissen mittleren Niveau." Formed and shaped by the tensions in "Essayismus," the essay becomes a field for experimentation, a sort of "life science" different from the empirical sciences:

Il doit devenir 'science de la vie', grâce aux libertés dont, contrairement aux sciences rationalistes, il bénéficie: mobilité interdiscursive, mise en contact de l'hétérogène, irrespect des dichotomies. (Moser 21)

According to Musil, the label "Essayist" should not only be given to those who practice the art of essay-writing, but also to novelists, philosophers, scientists and "ordinary" individuals who are guided in their work and lives by the principles of Essayism.

Moreover, the label "Essayist" could also be given to positivist scientist and philosopher Ernst Mach, who served as an early role-model for Musil. Exerting a powerful influence on many other fin-de-siècle literati as well, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hermann Bahr, Stefan George and other members of the *Jung Wien* literary movement, Mach stands apart from other nineteenth-century thinkers because he is the first who seriously attempted to reconcile scientific and philosophical discourses. Indeed, Mach's condemnation of the ego—epitomized by his famous phrase "Das Ich ist unrettbar"—becomes the motto of an entire generation of writers, serving as the key criterion in all questions relating either to ethics or aesthetics.

What Bahr and other members of *Jung Wien* found appealing in Mach's work, is the notion that sensory data is the basis of all knowledge. Sensations are of course understood by this group of writers as analogous to "subjective states." Bahr, Hofmannsthal, and other members of *Jung Wien* conclude from Mach's *Analyse der Empfindungen* that since the "physical" necessarily impinges upon the "psychical", reducing everything to "sensations", then they are free to describe their experiences in as subjective and impressionistic a manner as possible—these experiences alone being real. Musil, on the other hand, asserts that a purely subjective analysis is shallow, touching only the surface of things. Indeed, Musil is most critical of the sort of "philosophical impressionism" associated with the so-called "Expressionist" and "Feuilletonist" essays, which ironically emerge out of Mach's positivism.

To Musil, both Expressionism and Feuilletonism are not analytical enough—the writer's emotions completely dominating the subject matter. Distancing himself from writers such as Altenberg, Schnitzler, and even contemporaries like Bahr and Thomas Mann, Musil finds that Impression-

ism and Expressionism are basically the same thing: both present "spirit" without reality. In his *Tagebücher*, Musil notes:

"Expr(essionismus) das wäre der Gegensatz zu Impr(essionismus.) Aber was ist mit Impr(essionismus) gemeint? [...] Ich konstatiere einschaltend, dass ich — für — diese(r) — älteren — Generationen von Dichtern nicht die geringsten Zugehörigkeitsgefühle habe, ja dass ich ihr Gegner bin, wenngleich ich sie in manchem schätze. (1: 596-597)

As far as the *Feuilleton*—a literary and cultural essay featured in journals such as *Neue Rundschau* and *Neue Freie Presse*—is concerned, Musil has nothing but contempt for it: "Der Feuilletonismus, selbst der in der *Neuen Rundschau* oder im *Pan* ist mir zu ekelhaft" (*Tagebücher*, 1: 654). Musil displays such aversion for the *Feuilleton*, because to him it represented the decadent *l'art pour l'art* attitude, which prevented the reader from making any rational assessment of what was being discussed and which was, for the most part, devoid of "ethical" content.

In his quest for ethical truth, Musil seeks a third possibility, which does not favorize either subjective or objective modes. Not surprisingly, therefore, Musil tries to determine in his doctoral dissertation on Mach if empirical science can in fact speak in the name of philosophy without losing its objective status. Significantly, Musil establishes that by aligning natural science with philosophy and psychology, Mach ends up casting doubts on his right to talk on behalf of the sciences. According to Musil, Mach unwittingly unleashes a revolution by betraying a sort of "relativism" in his point of view in regard to scientific discourse, as well as his own status as researcher. Musil goes on to assert that "subjective" and "objective" discourses become inextricable in Mach's work, and consequently everything takes on a "subjective" guise.

Mach's theories can never be interpreted in the same manner; in different contexts and situations, Musil proves that they signify different things, and consequently the essential parts of Mach's argument serve an opposing view from what he had intended. Attempting to "order" Mach's theories systematically, Musil discovers that they do not have a strict, methodological structure, but function much like aphorisms. Ironically Musil warns against the "dangers" of an aphoristic style of writing, stating that ideas isolated from a logical sequence often continue leading an "irresponsible" life of their own! We know, of course, that after completing his dissertation on Mach, Musil turns down a university teaching position in experimental psychology, and decides to become a writer whose style is largely "aphoristic."



Musil's attitude toward Mach remains highly ambiguous: on the one hand he admired Mach for attempting to prove that there was a link between science and philosophy, on the other hand, he criticized him for not being "scientific" enough in his approach to either subject. Indeed, Musil's ambivalence toward Mach carries over into his idiosyncratic conception of "Essayismus," which he forges out of the pitfalls and contradictions he uncovers in Mach's writings. Like Mach, Musil approaches speculative issues pertaining to ethics "scientifically": his quest in literature is to apply the rigorous precision of science to the realm of ethical and esthetic relations, the realm of the idea. To Musil, only the aphorism—which he criticizes in the work of a "scientist" such as Mach, but finds indispensable in his own work as an Essayist—could express the immediacy of the ethical. (By aphorism, Musil of course refers to the Nietzschean type of open-ended, enigmatic observation, rather than to the more conventional definition of aphorism as "a brief statement of principle or truth.")

Moreover, Musil conceives of ethics as not having anything to do with facts. As Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin observe in Wittgenstein's Vienna, the basis of ethics is the subjectivity of conviction, and its sphere is that of the paradoxical (179). (According to Janik and Toulmin, many prominent writers and philosophers of the Hapsburg Empire view art as man's sole access into the realm of spirit. These writers are considered "ethical" because they believe that language should be transformed into an instrument of the spirit, which will change people's lives.) Significantly, Musil's assertion that the essay should be a combination of the concrete and the abstract, the aesthetic and the ethical, or what he calls "Ratioide" and "Nicht-Ratioide" realms of knowledge—stems out of the writer's innermost utopian aspirations. Seeking a "dritte Möglichkeit," the essay delineates the limits of the 'sayable' through its form, and conveys the transcendent, paradoxical character of all ethical issues through its content. Musil therefore often couples "Essayismus" with the term "Utopie," because he perceives them as essentially anchored in "der andere Zustand," or the "other condition," defined as a contemplative state which embodies those instances when borders between subjective and objective epistemologies cease to exist.

Musil explains that in fact, utopia and essay are both founded on the notion of "Möglichkeit (possibility) and hypothesis, and thus remain inextricably bound to each other: "Utopien bedeuten ungefähr so viel wie Möglichkeiten." (Werke, 1:24) Associated with experiment and heterogeneous mixing, the term "Möglichkeit" most closely approximates Musil's conception of "utopia." For, as far as Musil is concerned, utopia signifies possibility.

Utopien bedeuten ungefähr so viel wie Möglichkeiten; darin dass eine Möglichkeit nicht Wirklichkeit ist, drückt sich nicht anderes aus, als dass die Umstände, mit denen sie gegenwärtig verflochten ist, sie daran hindern, denn andersfalls wäre sie ja nur eine Unmöglichkeit; löst man sie nun aus ihrer Bindung und gewährt ihr Entwicklung, so entsteht die Utopie. (Werke, 1: 246)

Possibility, like metaphor, contains an element of truth ("Wahrheit"), and falsehood ("Unwahrheit"); the two are firmly interlocked. What prevents possibility from being actuality, are the circumstances, or conditions surrounding it. Viewed from another angle—and thereby freed from its former restraints—possibility becomes reality. According to Musil, one must perceive what appears as mere possibility from another lens, outside oneself. It is only when one comprehends the integral connection between binary oppositions such as "truth" and "fiction"—which Musil calls at one point "die Verbindung von exakt und inexact, von Genauigkeit und Seele" (Werke 252)—that one reaches "die Utopie des anderen Zustands." The quest to fuse binary oppositions—intellect and sentiment, precision ("Genauigkeit") and soul ("Seele"), thus implicitly metaphor ("Gleichnis") and reality—is what Musil believes should be the goal of "die höhere Humanität."

Within this context, Essayism acquires a utopian role: to synthesize dichotomies and reinterpret the categories of history, ideology, culture, knowledge and literature. For Musil, Essayists are thus naturally perceived as "utopian" thinkers, whose creative endeavors and personal lives are permeated by Essayism:

...ihr Reich liegt zwischen Religion und Wissen, zwischen Beispiel und Lehre, zwischen amor intellectualis und Gedicht, sie sind Heilige mit und ohne Religion, und manchmal sind sie auch einfache Männer, die sich in einem Abenteuer verirrt haben. (Werke, 1: 253-254)

He insists that it is the responsibility of Essayists to change our perception of reality, and transform the world. According to Musil, the key to "Bildung," (education), and thus also to instituting social and political change, lies in overcoming dialectical thought, which places "Ratioide" and "Nicht-Ratioide" in opposition to one another:

Ich weise noch einmal auf den Unterschied von ratioide und nicht-ratioide hin, den ich nicht erfunden, sondern nur so übel benannt habe ...Hier liegt der Schlüssel zur 'Bildung'. Hier sind der rachitische Idealismus unsrer Tage und ihr Gott ausgekommen.

Hier wäre zu verstehn, warum der ergebnislose Kampf in der heutigen Zivilisation zwischen dem wissenschaftlichen Denken und den Ansprüchen der Seele nur durch ein Plus zu lösen ist, einen Plan, eine Arbeitsrichtung, eine andre Verwertung der Wissenschaft wie der Dichtung! (*Werke* 8: 1059).

Although Musil himself never succeeds in what, by nature, seems an impossible endeavor, he makes us aware of this "*dritte Möglichkeit*," which Derrida shall name "*différance*". Here, it is important to note that although Musil refers to "*der andere Zustand*" as a "*dritte Möglichkeit*," it should not be confused with the Hegelian "third term" (*terzium datum*), which occurs in order to "raise up," "idealize," or "*aufheben*." Technically translated by Derrida as "*relève*," "*Aufhebung*" designates the situation when a contradiction between two terms is

resolved or lifted up according to the syllogistic process of speculative dialectics, into the self-presence of a theological, or onto-teleological synthesis. (*Positions* 44)

Significantly, Musil's notion of "*der andere Zustand*," like Derrida's "*différance*," does not indicate ultra-differentiation: it neither springs from a prior moment of unity nor attests to undisturbed harmony.

If Musil's project is doomed to fail, and thus remain in the realm of "utopia," it is only because we are imprisoned in an essentially dialectical thinking process, and therefore cannot help but reduce "*der andere Zustand*," or for that matter "*différance*," to a word, or a concept—what Derrida calls a "metaphysical name."

For us, difference remains a metaphysical name; and all names; that it receives from our language are still, so far as they are names, metaphysical ... Imprisoned within the closure of metaphysical thinking and locked into the necessity of naming, we celebrate difference as a master name, a unique word, a founding concept. (*Speech and Phenomena* 158-159)

Along the same lines, Musil's coinage of the idiosyncratic term "*der andere Zustand*" suggests an effort to circumvent the limits of conventional language, even though he necessarily falls into the trap of trying to name the unnamable.

Prefiguring the critique of Hegelian dialectics undertaken by Derrida and his followers, Musil attempts to face up to the full implications of this problem in ways that these later thinkers have not often done. Indeed, he

is not content to dismantle the Western metaphysical tradition, but struggles to offer something in its place. While Derrida's "*différance*" as he conceives it remains an abstract, theoretical realm, paradoxically, although Musil recognizes the unattainability of his utopian project, he nonetheless attempts to put his ideas into practice. We see this tendency not only in his fiction, but also in his cultural essays published between the two World Wars. In his work, Musil tries to make his notion of "*der andere Zustand*," or utopian *Weltanschauung* bear on present socio-historical reality, arguing that the twentieth-century European citizen must be ethically reeducated and reformed, abandoning a teleological view of history, untenable in the modern age. Ultimately perhaps he fails, but his example remains as a challenge for future generations: How can we learn to think outside of those very "forms" which bestow our utterances with meaning, and therefore give us life?

## • NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In his book, Luft explains that the novel reached its peak in German culture much later than in France or England. This occurred as a result of Germany's unstable socio-economic conditions, which delayed the rise of a bourgeois reading public until late in the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The German word "Dichter" signifies not only "poet", but "writer" and "philosopher" in the loftiest sense.

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## The Autobiography of Pietro Giannone

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Pietro Giannone (1676-1748), although born in the Gargano region of Northern Apulia, was a prominent figure in the forensic circles which governed intellectual life in the final years of the Seicento in Naples. He trained as a lawyer, but he is chiefly remembered today for his historical writings, the *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli* and the *Tirregno*. However, in this paper I shall examine another work by Giannone, the *Vita scritta da lui medesimo*, his autobiography. This was Giannone's last work, written in the final years of his life during his imprisonment for heresy in the castle of Miolans in Piedmont and it was published posthumously in the nineteenth century. Naples was home to the birth of the great autobiographical production of the Settecento,<sup>1</sup> and Giannone's work was an integral part of this tradition, although it is very much overshadowed by the justly famous contemporary autobiography of Giambattista Vico. Nonetheless, the *Vita scritta da lui medesimo* by Pietro Giannone is a work which merits its place among the paradigms of the genre in Eighteenth Century Italy.

Before the recognition of autobiography as an autonomous genre in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> the few examples of "*vite*" are often hybrid texts. Perhaps the most famous example is that of Giambattista Vico's *Vita scritta da se medesimo* in which the author describes the act of writing his autobiography as both a philosopher's and a historian's task. Vico is the most famous participant of the "*Progetto ai letterati d'Italia*" proposed by the Venetian scholar, Giovannartico di Porcia, with the idea of preparing a collection of the intellectual autobiographies of his most illustrious contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

In the following study of the literary character of Giannone's autobiography, I shall seek to understand the author's formal and stylistic models.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of a non-canonical genre such as autobiography, Giannone's *Vita* respects the definition, offered by Philippe Lejeune, of the autobiographical pact with the reader: the triumvirate of protagonist-narrator-author professes his sincerity to the reader.<sup>5</sup> In order better to understand Giannone's concept of this "*genere non-canonical*," I intend to focus on two types of personal writing which seem to have been his principal models.