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Go out dancing tonight, my dear, and go home with someone,  
and if the love doesn't last beyond the morning, then know I love you.

—Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*

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## Abstract

This dissertation is a historical study of pleasure as a form of relational thought. The interest of the project is historical, formal, and theoretical: How did sexuality come to signify the subject's fraught relation to identities as units of intelligibility in historically critical moments? How have literary and non-literary forms of language represented and reacted to this modern sense of contingency? And what kinds of structural specificity in erotic pleasure have made such problematization possible then and now?

With an analysis of literary and discursive writings around 1900 and around 2000, I show how the logic of sexuality has been conceived as that of paradox, where the boundaries of identities are drawn and dissolved at once. It is the ambivalent contemporaneity of congealment and dissipation in sexual pleasure, I contend, that made it possible for it to serve as the master metaphor for modernity and its antagonism between the real and the possible. I demonstrate how the conflicts between the representational paradigms of mimesis and poesis as well as between the theoretical notions of identity and queerness are spectacles staged by this framework of thinking modernity.

The dissertation will relativize the antagonism in such views by revealing its status a contingent mode of historicizing modernity. I will offer an alternative way of understanding identity and its linguistic representation with a reading of writers and thinkers who resisted such binarizations in their reflection on sexuality. Rather than deeming identity and language as normative homogeneity that must be abolished or uncontrollable heterogeneity that must be regimented, they regarded them as orientation devices that render the world anew by making it intelligible. Pleasure is the name for this transformative experience.

## Introduction: Pleasure, 1900/2000

### 1. Identity and Queerness around 2000

Queer theory as a form of cultural politics came into existence amid a historical scene of disjunction much like modern literature. In the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, this new interdisciplinary field in Anglophone academia was pulled into two opposing directions in its effort to establish discursive authority.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it went on the offensive: its deconstructive critique analyzed various cultural and historical objects, including different modalities of identity formation, to debunk the self-naturalizing mechanisms of heteronormativity in the style of the feminist analysis on gender. On the other, it sought to posit alternative and reparative meanings of queer sexual identity that would liberate it from stigmatizing prejudices that reduced it to the normative culture's other.

Many scholars found a possibility for synthesis in poststructuralist philosophy, often referred to as “French Theory” of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig, and Jacques Derrida. What was appealing in continental thought for queer scholars was its interest in the so-called “limit experience,” which was conceived as the non-normative essence of erotic desire. With psychoanalytically inspired terms like the abject, *jouissance*, the desiring-machine, and the Death Drive, French Theory explored the marginal zones of the symbolic order that refuse to be assimilated to the existing laws of meaning—thereby discrediting its supposedly structural, and thus normatively binding, nature. Inheriting this emphasis on transgressing the limits of hegemonic signification, queer theory stylized the negative symbolic position that queer subjects inhabit as a privileged viewpoint that can bring

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 179.

about radical social revolution. In this constellation, LGBT subjects became valorized insofar as they refuse to assume a stable identity enforced by the hegemonic order.

At the same time, scholars became increasingly challenged by the real-life implication of elevating negativity as the first principle of queer lives. For gay scholars like David Halperin, Leo Bersani, and Tim Dean, this was because the “queer” essence of gay male subjectivity continued to be thought of as a desire for quasi-Nietzschean self-destruction, which was embodied in the persistent practice of barebacking (anal intercourse without condoms) among gay men and in literal deaths that ensued.<sup>2</sup> Such tension is most conspicuous in texts like David Halperin’s *What Do Gay Men Want?* (2007) where he raises an objection to the theoretical fetishization of abjection and reconceptualizes it as a yearning for survival amid social alienation. Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz’s queer of color critique questioned the sustainability of negative critique, especially for the most marginalized in the community, and aligned itself with Ernst Bloch’s Marxist utopianism in works like *Disidentifications* (1999) and *Cruising Utopia* (2009).

The valorization of negativity in the style of “high modernism” has nonetheless maintained a central position in queer theory. In recent years, its theoretical practice has developed two distinct critical habitus. On the one side, one can find an ambivalent interest in the negative affect within queer subjectivity as a tool for critical reflection on social norms. In works like Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Heather Love’s *Feeling Backwards* (2007), and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011), scholars expressed skepticism towards writing a

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<sup>2</sup> As what one now calls PrEP (preexposure prophylaxis) as an HIV-prevention tool for gay men was unavailable at the time, engaging in bareback sex still carried a significant health risk.



triumphant, progressive LGBT history while emphasizing the importance of studying bad feelings that heteronormativity as well as neoliberal capitalism continue to produce.

On the other side, one hears the activist-minded calls for more radical oppositional politics, which often target gay marriage as a symbol of cultural assimilation. For instance, Michael Warner has challenged the notion that the legalization of gay marriage should be the final goal of queer politics in *The Trouble with Normal* (1999). In *The Right to Maim* (2017), Jasbir Puar goes so far as to argue that Dan Savage and Terry Miller's 2010 suicide prevention project for the LGBT youth *It Gets Better* was a tactic of neoliberal hegemony that recruited queer subjects as the new face of American imperialism.

In this dialectical evolution of the field, scholars have curiously begun to disavow pleasure as a guiding concept, even in its queer forms. This tendency is not new. Queer theory's ambivalence towards sex can be traced back all the way to Judith Butler's reading of Michel Foucault in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she denounces Foucault's potentialization of eroticism as "an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics" that remains blind to the fact that desire is "always produced or constructed within specific historical practices, both discursive and institutional."<sup>3</sup> More recently, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and David Eng have discounted sexuality as a secondary field of experience that "postcolonial, feminist, and critical race studies have effectively deconstructed," for it exists "not extraneous to other modes of difference."<sup>4</sup> As an alternative to traditional queer theory, which merely studied "the domestic affairs of white homosexuals" like gay history and aesthetics, they

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 124.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," *Social Text* 23, no. 23-24 (2005): 12.

call for what they call “queer epistemology” that can conduct “expanded investigations of normalization and intersectionality.”<sup>5</sup>

These critiques all import the Butlerian notion of gender identity as a “stylized repetition of acts”<sup>6</sup> to art and sexuality in order to dismiss the pleasure produced in these fields as the product of naïve mimesis that replicates and reifies normative patterns of relationality. Worse, this vector of oppression is more insidious than outward repression, for it operates as the *unconscious reproduction of external norms in the interiority of subjectivity*. Unlike erotic and aesthetic pleasure that remain passively tethered to the symbolic order, deconstructive criticism as a self-consciously non-repetitive act of subversion was deemed the only method capable enough to liberate material reality from the immaterial capture of identarian discourse.<sup>7</sup>

What makes queer theory’s repudiation of sexual pleasure as well as sexual identity particularly paradoxical is not only that it denounces that which gave the field its initial impulse, the free pursuit of alternative enjoyment, but also that it suffers from historical amnesia that forgets how the articulation of queerness as transformative negativity was made possible via poststructuralist analyses of erotic experience. Putting aside the self-serving nature of queer academics’ promotion of their professional activity as the most revolutionary act, one must put in question whether the binarization of queerness and pleasure in this rhetorical constellation is valid, whereby the latter is stigmatized as uncritical, non-epistemological, and reactionary.

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<sup>5</sup> Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?,” 15.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

<sup>7</sup> A notable exception to this tendency is Mari Ruti’s interpretation of the Lacanian injunction to enjoy one’s symptom, where she argues that the forcefulness of queer desire’s unconscious can serve as a tool of resistance against the normative symbolic order. See Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

The most concerning aspect of queer theory's condemnation of pleasure-qua-normativity is its frequent stylization of "homosexual identity" as *the* figure for cultural assimilation. A quick look at the two most influential theories in circulation should suffice to justify this somewhat provocative claim. In Jasbir Puar's concept of *homonationalism* as well as Lisa Duggan's *homonormativity*, the prefix *homo* does not simply function as a general designation for homosexuality. The term becomes overloaded with political significance so that it would directly oppose radical queer politics; both in Puar's indictment of a "U.S. national homosexuality" that maintains "convivial, rather than antagonistic, relations between presumably nonnormative sexualities and the nation"<sup>8</sup> and Duggan's critique of a homosexual "politics that does not contest, but upholds and sustains them [dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions],"<sup>9</sup> homosexual identity as the metaphor for political homogeneity appears as a privileged form of mimetic desire that is complicit in oppressive normativity.

These theoretical gestures, perhaps unknowingly, revive the most virulent homophobic tropes in history: homosexuality not only as a totalitarian refusal of difference but also as its Janus-faced agent. This muddling of (male) homosexuality, however, is also not exactly the invention of the new millennium. It was prepared early on by Hélène Cixous's undisciplined conflation of pederasty, homosexuality, and patriarchy as well as Eve Sedgwick's "queering" of misogynistic "homoeroticism" in *Between Men* (1985). It was further nourished in various critiques of modernity in the likes of Jean Baudrillard's musings about AIDS, where he claims

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<sup>8</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

that the modern “pathology of closed circuits” could spread most vigorously among gay men whose “incestuousness”<sup>10</sup> mirrored the homogenizing forces of modern ideologies.

Queer thought in its current form suffers from the same paradox as that of modern literary theories. On the one hand, queerness as a form of subversive “poiesis” is called to reject any possibility of “mimetic” reconciliation with ideological “pleasures” and “identities” to the degree where one ends up condemning homosexuality itself as a form of normative assimilation. On the other, its secret desire for absolute reconciliation shines through in its desire to eliminate sexuality from its political program unless it can function as a tool that can performatively produce its ideal vision. As these two attitudes are just as contradictory as the modern subject’s position in the world, one cannot help but ask what the endgame of queer theory would be. The abolition of “homo-sexuality” for the sake of queer politics of difference? One should remember Leo Bersani’s words that “the consequence of self-erasure is ... self-erasure.”<sup>11</sup>

While debunking the continued association of homosexuality with the normative pursuit of sameness is a timely task, what is more urgently necessary in queer theory is developing a frame of thought that can go beyond the binaries of identity and queerness, sameness and difference, normativity and transgression, and assimilation and resistance. And despite Halberstam, Eng, and Muñoz’s rhetorical scoffing in *What is Queer about Queer Studies Now?*

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<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Rethinking Differences: An Interview,” in *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts*, ed. Elaine Marks and George Stambolian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 70-86; Jean Baudrillard, “AIDS: Virulence or Prophylaxis?” in *Screened Out* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2002), 2. Unlike Cixous, Sedgwick is careful enough to mention that one should not all too facily confuse homoeroticism with homosexuality. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5.

(2005), there is good reason to believe that a reflection on literary history could offer important insight into the theoretical cul-de-sac in which queer theory finds itself today.

To literary scholars, the antagonism between identity and queerness within queer studies cannot help but appear reminiscent of all-too-familiar squabbles about text and context as well as mimesis and poesis between the New Criticism and New Historicism. Queer theory's Butlerian reading of sexuality as unconscious mimesis of its normative context directly echoes the New Historicist critique of the New Critical understanding of literature as "a self-sufficient object"<sup>12</sup> or an "isolated, autonomous monad."<sup>13</sup> One should remember, however, that even the finest advocates for the New Historicism could not help but admit that "texts come to possess some limited immunity from the policing functions of their society" in "how they contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning."<sup>14</sup> If the past century of Anglophone literary criticism has taught us anything, it is that literary texts are curiously the *same but different* from their historical context and that aesthetic pleasure arises out of this very tension. Could theories of queer sexual identity learn anything from this conclusion?

It is no coincidence that an interest in the aesthetic notion of form has been recently revived in the field after decades of circular debates about normativity and transgression. As Heather Love puts it succinctly, one has begun to question the efficacy and validity of the "normative injunction to be deviant"<sup>15</sup> not only in edifying queer lives but also in historically

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Frank Lentricchia *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 342. Frank Lentricchia argues that the New Critical notion of poetic autonomy never became abolished but traveled to other concepts in its critics like Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Heather Love, *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 37.

examining them. Even in a volume like *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form* (2022), where sexuality still appears as “a scene of violence”<sup>16</sup> where “the racializing effects of dominant kinship law and symbolics”<sup>17</sup> replicate themselves, the editors Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman acknowledge the indispensability of imagining various forms of intimacy.

Avoiding the overburdened concept of norm, scholars have discovered a potential for a different kind of criticism in the newly articulated notion of form—Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015) being a prime example—as a contingent but productive mode of organization that affords sufficient theoretical flexibility to account for non-destructive queer lives. From Whitney Davis’s reinterpretation of Winckelmannian idealism in *Queer Beauty* (2010) to Ramzi Fawaz’s reading of “circles” as a “shape” of political and aesthetic organizing in *Queer Forms* (2022), one can sense a desire to envision a different form of binding that is neither normative nor transgressive but *transformative*. The following dissertation seeks to participate in these debates by historically examining literary forms of representation as well as discursive reflections on sexuality in modern German cultural history to rethink the binary of reconciliation and antagonism that is often evoked in theoretical reflections on the notions of identity and queerness as well as normativity and anti-normativity.

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<sup>16</sup> *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, ed. Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

## 2. Mimesis and Poiesis around 1900

To talk about modernity, as Dipesh Chakrabarty once put it, is to engage with its “muddle.”<sup>18</sup> Why has the modern consciousness of one’s spatiotemporal situatedness caused such distress for the human subject, compromising its optimistic promise of a radical departure from religious dogmatism and mythical thinking? And how has literature responded to this increasing sense of malaise? One may argue, to speak with Robert Pippin, that the fundamental dissatisfaction in modernity lies within its “dialectic of ‘independence’ and ‘dependence,’”<sup>19</sup> where the self-assertive subject finds itself ever more throttled by the condition of its possibility: not only by restrictions imposed on individuals by rationalized society (be it in the form of a political institution, bourgeois family, or capitalist economy) but also by the awareness that these restrictions are not “natural” but human-made (thus self-induced). The heroic autonomy of the enlightened subject who enjoys privileges over the so-called pre-moderns, it seems, can never quite rid itself of the paranoia that it might be just as unfree as its Other.

The brewing discontent of the self-conscious subject has been commented on by many historians of modernity. In *Critique and Crisis* (1954), which initially bore the title of *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Reinhart Koselleck argues that the prevalent sense of crisis in modernity must be attributed just as much to the bourgeoisie’s use of critical reason that detected a dissonance between its free thinking and political unfreedom as to the objective reality of absolutism.<sup>20</sup> In a different register, Michel Foucault notes in *The Order of Things* (1966) that

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<sup>18</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 663-675.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise* (Freiburg/München: Suhrkamp, 1979), 145.

scientific progress was experienced both as a “promise” and a “threat”<sup>21</sup> over the course of the nineteenth century, as the rapid accumulation of knowledge about the human being further highlighted the discrepancy between the contingently conditioned *cogito* and its unthought.

While the dissatisfying uncertainty in the subject’s indeterminate determination may be considered the general condition of modernity, the feeling of disorientation grew exponentially around 1900 in the German-speaking world. While literary and cultural historians’ analyses of the so-called crisis of language or *Sprachkrise*, as well as the Nietzschean death of God, may evoke an illusion that the pessimism of the time was first and foremost an intellectual one, the sense of precarity was everywhere.<sup>22</sup> As Linda Zerilli notes, it was with the opening of the twentieth century that the pluralistic relativism inherent to the historicist worldview articulated in the nineteenth century was put to the test in reality and its destabilizing effects became viscerally palpable.<sup>23</sup>

A series of identity crises in the German-speaking world during this period was a politically intensified manifestation of the modern subject’s ambivalent being-in-the-world that is unsure of its status. For instance, the anxiety around national unity and political legitimacy of the German empire became crystallized in the Eulenburg affair (1907-1909), where the alleged homosexuality of the Kaiser and his entourage *Liebensberger Kreis* became the symbol for the

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 322.

<sup>22</sup> For a summary of language skepticism during this period, see Gregor Schwering, “‘Sprachkrise’ um 1900?: Friedrich Nietzsche und Hugo von Hofmannsthal,” *Nietzscheforschung* 18, no. 1 (2011): 59-77. Schwering offers a reading of this crisis not merely as abject pessimism but as a “Sehnsucht ihrer Nutzer [der Sprache] nach einer unverfälschten Anschauung von Welt.”

<sup>23</sup> Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 92-93.



impotent nation's internationalist pacifism; the self-understanding of the Weimar republic not merely as a culture in crisis but a "culture of crisis"<sup>24</sup> led to its obsession over criminality as a perpetual internal threat that could disintegrate the nation at any time.<sup>25</sup>

Reflecting the juridical and medical origin of the word crisis, the Greek term *krinō*, the crisis worldview around 1900 called for an act of discernment that would be followed by a "critical" decision that could impel a momentous change.<sup>26</sup> In the German context, what was hotly debated was the philosophy of subjectivity that would securely situate it in the "dialectic of independence and dependence." Would a stable identity of the subject become possible when its individualistic freedom is maximized or when a collective order is strengthened, on which it can depend? Should individuals understand themselves as independent agents or dependent products of a nation and its history? As these reflections typical of German thought since Friedrich Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795) staged the project of modernity as establishing the right kind of dyadic relationship between the subject and its surrounding environment, what became articulated as solutions were two binary modes of orientation: reconciliation or resistance. Aesthetic theories around mimesis and poiesis found themselves in the middle of these debates.

In his reflections on the modernist use of language, for example, Theodor Adorno locates the problem of modernity not in the absent sense of totality in objective reality but in the presence of reductive meanings produced by the subject's malignant use of instrumental reason.

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<sup>24</sup> Todd Herzog, *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Domeier, "The Homosexual Scare and the Masculinization of German Politics before World War I," *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 737-759.

<sup>26</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 357-400.

What is necessary is not assuring the subject's autonomous identity (even in its ironic form as in György Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*) but freeing the egoistic "Selbst"<sup>27</sup> from the dialectic of dominance so that the subject would stop regarding the other only as a passive object to be appropriated. A reversal of such sadism would be possible by restoring a non-identical relationship between the subject and the object, which Adorno deemed a major task of art.

Because mimesis shares basic premises of instrumental reason by presupposing the transparency, reproducibility, and manipulability of the objective world, it comes under great suspicion in Adornian thought. In contrast to realist representation and its positive mimesis, Adorno argues, modernist art undertakes a negative poesis that interrupts the mechanical reproduction of reified meanings—which begins with the concession that the subject can neither fully understand the object nor identify its essence. Repudiating existentialist readings of Franz Kafka's works, Adorno argues that what Kafka's language performs is not a simple "Ausdruck" that unequivocally signifies the absurdity of existence but a gesture of "Verweigerung" and "Abbrechen"<sup>28</sup> that hints at yet refuses to yield a final meaning.

In *After the Great Divide* (1986), Andreas Huyssen explicates how such hostility against mimesis as a gesture of reconciliation came about in high modernist poetics. In particular, he observes how critical theory has imagined mass media as a specific type of aesthetic representation that diminishes the subject to the state of mindless passivity with pleasurable

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<sup>27</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 282.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," 251. It is crucial to note that Adorno's peculiar use of the term *mimesis* in texts like *Aesthetic Theory* differs from mine. For Adorno, a mimetic relationship designates a relationship between the subject and its object whereby the latter is not reduced to the subject's use of concepts. In other words, it is the object that remains autonomous by remaining *non-identical* to the subject. In my usage of the term, however, I refer to its more common meaning that points to the sameness between the subject and its object.

images and texts. To resist the “feminine threat”<sup>29</sup> of homogenization, modernist thought developed what scholars today would call the “hermeneutics of suspicion:” sharp binaries between “progress vs. reaction, left vs. right, present vs. past, modernism vs. realism, abstraction vs. representation, Avantgarde vs. Kitsch”<sup>30</sup> were drawn, whereby the latter group was regarded as the tools of hegemony that seduces the subject to assimilate itself into its symbolic order. In this “problematic of ‘otherness,’”<sup>31</sup> high modernism’s non-mimetic negation of reality was deemed the best strategy against so-called aesthetic ideology.<sup>32</sup>

The understanding of literary texts as a radical negation of reality, however, was not the only aesthetic vision articulated during this period. In contrast to Adorno’s creative appropriation of modern dissonance, many writers of this time, be they “modernists” or “naturalists,” voraciously sought out reconciliation between the subject and the objective world. While they also understood modernity as a moment of crisis, they did not conceive the rapidly changing modern society as the root cause of alienation; rather, the subjectivity that remains tethered to outdated traditions was understood as the source of the distress. What is necessary is thus not a retreat into subjectivity but its complete transformation. Only when modern subjectivity successfully recovers points of correspondence with external reality would it be able to regain the capacity to participate in it.

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<sup>29</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 52.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>32</sup> For a critique of this view, See Martin Jay, “‘The Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology; Or, What Does it Mean to Aestheticize Politics?,” *Cultural Critique* 21 (1992): 41-61. as well as Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015).

For example, the Viennese modernist Hermann Bahr argues in his manifesto *Die Moderne* (1890) that redemption from the modern chaos could be achieved only by reenacting mimesis between the internality of the subject and the external world or “draußen.” Similarly, the naturalist group *Durch!* argues in *Thesen der “Freien literarischen Vereinigung Durch!”* (1886) that modern art should close the impasses or “Klüfte” between the subject and its environment by conducting a grand synthesis of German Idealism, natural sciences, and art. By doing so, it would gain insight into how the world works not only here and now but also *at all times*—thereby elevating itself to the status of prophecy.<sup>33</sup>

Behind these literary movements’ efforts to create a form of life where art and reality align themselves, one can sense a megalomaniac fantasy of total control. Unlike the aesthetics of negativity that tried to limit the subject’s endless pursuit of autonomy by making use of the antagonism inherent to modernity, the poetics of reconciliation strove to achieve a complete identity between the subject and the objective world in the style of the Hegelian Absolute so that the subject will be in charge of itself as well as of the other as an extension of itself. In this utopia, mimesis would be neither desirable nor possible, for there will no longer be a Not-I to mimic; the dialectic between mimesis and poiesis would eventually come to an end, and difference would be abolished.

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<sup>33</sup> The desire to enact such expansive interpenetration of *Kunst* and *Leben* was not limited to the literary milieu. As Thorsten Carstensen and Marcel Schmid have demonstrated in *Die Literatur der Lebensreform* (2016), the yearning for reconciled life found its expression in the social sphere as well via various *Lebensreform* movements across the political spectrum in the likes of vegetarianism, youth groups, nudism, and body culture. See Thorsten Carstensen and Marcel Schmid, *Die Literatur der Lebensreform: Kulturkritik und Aufbruchsstimmung um 1900* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016).

The danger in the heroism of such avant-gardism becomes manifest in the rhetorical extravagance of its advocates, where eschatological despair exists side by side with religious frenzy. For instance, Bahr narrativizes the modern subject's struggle as a story of resurrection or "Auferstehung"<sup>34</sup> with two possible endings: the attainment of divinity (*das Göttliche*) or the acceptance of one's extermination (*Vernichtung*). Extreme religious enthusiasm appears in the naturalists' proclamation as well in its sinister-sounding call for a cultural purge or "Säuberung."<sup>35</sup>

In these opposing strands of modern literary theory, one can observe that mimesis and poesis as formal principles function not only as techniques of representation but also as metaphors for the subject's problematic relation to the world. While negative aesthetics regarded mimesis as the threat of homogenization and loss of discernment (and thereby the enemy of poesis), the advocates of mimesis valorized it as the only possibility of poietic reconciliation that must be achieved at any cost.

By articulating two different models of representation based on homogeneity and heterogeneity, modern German aesthetics unknowingly set the stage for queer theory, whose preoccupation with sameness and difference would continue to struggle with the paradoxical condition of modern subjectivity a century later. The dissertation, therefore, sets out to highlight the relevance of the tension between mimesis and poesis in German-language literature of this period to the notions of identity and queerness articulated at the turn of the twenty-first century. The two authors of interest, Theodor Fontane and Robert Musil, offer a particularly generative

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<sup>34</sup> Hermann Bahr, "Die Moderne," in *Die literarische Moderne: Dokumente zum Selbstverständnis der Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende*, ed. Gotthart Wunberg and Stephan Dietrich (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1998), 99.

<sup>35</sup> Thesen der "Freien literarischen Vereinigung Durch!" in *Die literarische Moderne*, 26.

way of thinking through the relationship between these binarized terms by imagining it not as a hostile battle that can only have one winner but as a pleasurable tension that can bring about meaningful transformations of society and its individuals.

### 3. A Methodological Reflection: Pleasure as a Critical Form

The dissertation aims to rethink modern German literature and queer theory with the following question: what kind of insight could be gained when one approaches the binary terms of identity and queerness as well as mimesis and poesis not as entities that must be either reconciled or antagonized? The examination of cultural production and political activism in the German-speaking world around 1900 will demonstrate how literary and queer theorists' staging of these binary structures as emblematic antagonisms of modernity do not always correspond to the reality of how writers wrote and how queer people understood their erotic desire.<sup>36</sup>

Modern literature, be it "realist" or "modernist," made use of both mimetic and non-mimetic devices to invent new forms of language and imagine different norms for a shared life, whereby literary tradition served as a resource to be appropriated rather than an authority to be either obeyed or resisted. Similarly, German homosexual activists at the turn of the twentieth century considered their sexuality a "normal" variation of human life rather than radically transgressive deviation; one of the major activities in their journals was building an alternative "canon" with historical figures and literary texts where they could see a version of themselves.

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<sup>36</sup> Marshall Berman has argued that this antagonistic binarization is specific to the theories of modernity developed in the twentieth century, where "modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt." See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 24.

If the pattern of relationality that grids the thought of the authors and activists in question could be called “queer,” it is because they refuse to think of sameness and difference as strictly opposing concepts—modern literature was deemed neither the same nor different from the tradition it superseded; homosexuality was different but also the same as heterosexuality as a natural variation of human desire. As literature and sexuality were considered less a prison house and more a site of experimentation in this view, they were not regarded as an enigmatic “problem” that can be resolved with a singular answer.

The eclectic selection of texts in the dissertation is to be attributed to the ambition of the project which seeks to illustrate how German writers’ and activists’ engagement with sexual experience, aesthetic form, and social norms hinged on this shared pattern of non-antagonistic and non-heroic relationality. The juxtaposition of literary analysis of novelistic works by Theodor Fontane and Robert Musil with discursive analysis of the first German homosexual magazines as well as contemporary queer theory, however, may still appear overly heterogeneous. I would thus like to offer a longer justification.

The two canonical authors of German-language literature on either side of the year 1900 have rarely been studied together. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Fontane and Musil have been canonized and studied in different national contexts, Germany (Prussia) and Austria (Austro-Hungarian Empire) respectively. Fontane’s nonfictional and journalistic works like *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (1862-1889) exhibit a strong regional and national character, and his later novels illustrate hypocrisies and contradictions specific to the Prussian society of his time. Despite its insistence that one “should not place any particular value

on the [represented] city's name,"<sup>37</sup> Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-1943) has been similarly received as a concrete critique of pre-war Viennese society whose search for a secure identity was constantly threatened by the "Eigenschaftlichkeit"<sup>38</sup> of its German counterpart.

The representational frameworks as well as sociopolitical outlooks of the authors appear greatly different. Fontane's narratives, despite their entertainment of ambivalence and ambiguity, continue to follow the realist pattern of linear progression. Thomas Mann's characterization of Fontane as *Der alte Fontane* who possesses "Bildung, Einsicht, Geschmack, und Fleiß"<sup>39</sup> has left an enduring impression that his works are not only aesthetically but also politically conservative. Although Erich Auerbach singles out Fontane in his book *Mimesis* (1946) as an exception to the "state of quiescence" in German bourgeois realism, he adds that he "still does not go very deep"<sup>40</sup> into the core of social reality.

Musil, in contrast, was anything but a "good old man." He shocked his readers with his expressionistic novella series *Vereinigungen* (1911) whose near incomprehensibility and pornographic representation of female sexuality obstructed commercial and critical success. Unlike Fontane, he was politically committed enough to speak at the 1935 Paris "Congress of

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Norbert Christian Wolf, "Kakanien," in *Robert-Musil-Handbuch*, ed. Birgit Nübel and Norbert Christian Wolf (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 599.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Mann, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Heinrich Detering (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), 14.1:257.

<sup>40</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 453.



Writers for the Defense of Culture” against the Nazis, and the radical openness of his prose, to which he has given the name of *essayism*, has even invited postmodern readings.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these differences, the two authors shared a deep interest in the disorienting experience of modernity. They recognized how the social norms that had structured the society they inhabited had become dysfunctional and sensed the urgent necessity to imagine new ways of thinking about oneself and living with others. Neither fell into the traps of pessimism, paranoia, and blind enthusiasm like many of their contemporaries, for they thought modernity was just as much about an opportunity as it is about a crisis.

This vision is reflected in their commitment to literary language as a tool to invent new forms of expression that can represent and enliven their reality. Most remarkably, both authors underscore the erotic—and thus pleasurable—nature of semiotic, moral, and identarian flexibility in their literary language, while also recognizing the high stakes as well as dangers in modern symbolic reorientations in their representation of disastrous sexual transgression.

The archival study on German homosexual magazines published around 1900 will highlight the astounding similarity between the textual logic of Fontane and Musil’s literary worldview and that of the discursive patterns of homosexual activism. In the same way that these writers negotiated between mimesis and poesis, the world’s first gay activists articulated the notion of sexual identity that is “natural” and “cultural” or determined and free at once. It was this entanglement of epistemological and moral concerns in the discussions around the topic of homosexuality that both enlivened and escalated the tension within the movement. My analysis

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<sup>41</sup> Mark M. Freed, *Robert Musil and the Nonmodern* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011); Patrizia McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (Evanston: University of Northwestern Press, 2006).

of this “queer” identity of male homosexuality will demonstrate why homosexuals came to represent the paradoxical experience of modernity and how such imagery motivated both homophile and homophobic discourses.

By staging this parallel, the dissertation seeks to contribute to the scholarship on the German history of (homo)sexuality, which has invested much energy into studying the role of sexuality in sociopolitical identity formation but paid little attention to a larger cultural historical significance. While works like Samuel Huneke’s article *Death Wish* (2019) and Scott Spector’s monograph *Violent Sensations* (2016) have pointed out the relationship between German literature and the social impact of its themes, a more extensive inquiry into the relationship between queer pleasure and literary form is still left to be desired.<sup>42</sup>

Besides filling these gaps in literary and historical scholarship, the biggest aspiration of the dissertation is to defend the notion of aesthetic and sexual pleasure that is not immediately reducible to political utility. In *Utopian Body* (1966), Michel Foucault attributes what we have identified as the modern “dialectic of independence and dependence” to the embodied nature of human subjectivity. Because the self is neither identical to nor non-identical to the body that occasions its existence, the human body does not render itself completely available to its subjectivity. This half-actualized autonomy, Foucault claims, is what gives birth to our endless utopian desire for completeness. He goes on to identify three types of pleasure that could soothe us:

Under the other’s fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Clowes Huneke, “Death Wish: Suicide and Stereotype in the Gay Discourses of Imperial and Weimar Germany,” *New German Critique* 46, no. 1 (2019): 127-166; Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyelids. Love also, like the mirror and like death—it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love the body is *here*.<sup>43</sup>

The fantasies of the mirror and death, or one might say of Freudian eros and thanatos or Lacanian desire and *jouissance*, are solipsistic and unreal. The former dreams of becoming God who possesses full access to his body; the latter desires to become a machine-like corpse where the tormenting human consciousness that strives for autonomy will be extinguished in the first instance. In contrast to these impossible imaginations of absolute identity and non-identity, pleasure in erotic contact is immanently actualized in the presence of the other's body, whereby the subject's incompleteness becomes the condition of possibility for the ecstasy of completeness.

This process, where neither independence nor dependence and neither heroic poiesis nor machinic mimesis takes precedence, exemplifies the “queer” logic of identity and difference I set out to explore in the study of modern German literature, homosexual activism around 1900, and contemporary queer theory. Once we reckon with this kind of critical pleasure that can orient us, we may be able to face modernity without fear and trepidation.

#### 4. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 launches the dissertation by examining the intricate entanglement of literary language, sociopolitical identity, and sexual normativity in the realist author Theodor Fontane's

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 233.

aesthetic theory as well as his later work *Effi Briest* (1895). In response to the threat of a complete demolition of subjectivity, Fontane's realism invites the modern subject to navigate identity and language not as static objects that guarantee the transparency of the world but as dialectical tools, with which it actively forms and reforms both social and individual realities. With an analysis of Fontane's unique definition of realism as "interestedness," the citational poetics of his mature novel, and his transformative notion of identity and morality, I will demonstrate how he offers a solution to the modern problem of disorientation with the notion of pleasurable ambiguity.

In *Effi Briest*, Fontane analyzes two opposing modes of orientation that came into place in reaction to the gradually disappearing symbolic coherence in modernity: the will to vigorously police identity as a symbolic building block of the social order and the drive to transgress its constitutive boundaries as arbitrary and restrictive conventions. Making the protagonist Effi's tragic destiny an exemplary case, Fontane's novel problematizes how the demands of such binarized worldviews paradoxically further disorient society and its individuals. While normative dogmatism breeds performative hypocrisy that guarantees nothing but the upkeep of mere appearances, transgressive cynicism results in a chaotic state of total meaninglessness.

On the formal level, *Effi Briest* deploys ambivalent language, be it in the form of literary citation or *double entendre*, to motivate its readers to be "interested" in semiotic and hermeneutic complexity. Establishing parallels between Fontane's staging of dialogues between Effi and the Polish Major Crampas and the sociologist Georg Simmel's theory on flirtation, also published around 1900, I will demonstrate how pleasure is produced in this sexual mode of signification that requires heightened affective and cognitive investment from its participants. On the thematic level, the novel highlights the ambivalent nature of such symbolic pleasures by aligning Effi's

transformative desire for social reorientation with her meaningless sexual transgression that paradoxically results in her death. Instead of determining a singular principle on which identity and language may be grounded, Fontane's work alerts us to the importance of remaining actively "interested" in shaping our symbolic lives without the fantasy of total escape.

Chapter 2 traces the Austrian modernist Robert Musil's intellectual and literary trajectory from his early reflections on morality and ethics to his unfinished novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* to demonstrate how his sustained engagement with the modern loss of identity went hand in hand with his occupation with the notion of aesthetic and erotic form. Similar to Fontane, Musil identifies two seemingly irreconcilable trends of thought in modernity: rationalism and irrationalism. The former was grounded on the belief in epistemological transparency of the objective world (yet without a transcendental meaning that grounds the subject in it), while the latter insisted on the supremacy of subjective intensities that could not be mimetically translated into logos.

In his theoretical writings and his literary works, Musil navigates between these two philosophical modes of orientation without subsuming them into a singular system. In his reflection on morality, he critiques the insufficiency of rationalist thinking as a tool for guiding the subject in the modern world, which requires constant interpretations and reinterpretations. At the same time, he condemns aesthetic theories of his time that valorize new media such as film and photography as producers of radical affects that can transcend rational thought. In lieu of these binary options, Musil offers his own thesis on art and ethics as experimental forms of "non-rationality," whereby their intelligibility does not strive for the universal validity of natural sciences but for the possibility of transforming reality that the subject inhabits.

I will demonstrate how Musil's philosophical reflections run parallel to his experimentation with various forms of literary language. In his earlier works like the expressionist novella *Die Vollendung der Liebe* (1911) and his scandalous debut novel *Die Verwirrung des Zöglings Törleß* (1906), Musil explores the ethical potential in irrationalism where the subject's abandonment of a stable identity serves as a radical departure from existing rules of determination. In contrast, his final novel directs attention to constructing a transformative notion of identity instead of entertaining the idea of a permanently unbounded self. This philosophical and thematic reorientation is also manifest in the formal principles of his works. While his earlier interest in the notion of the *Gleichnis* lingers on the local level of representing subjective intensities by creating disruptive semantic expansiveness, what he calls "constructive" irony in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* imaginatively articulates alternative forms of subjectivities as well as modes of social organization with a critical analysis of the status quo.

Chapter 3 historically contextualizes Fontane and Musil's metaphorization of sexual pleasure as a modern form of relationality by examining a highly contested notion that came to stand for a radical change in traditional forms of moral, social, and philosophical thought during this time: male homosexuality. With a comparative analysis of homophile and homophobic discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I will demonstrate how the competing theories of sexual identity produced the figure of the "queer" homosexual who existed on the boundaries of nature and culture, determination and freedom, and passivity and activity.

The review of archival materials will show how the arguments of the German homosexual movement, which was the first of its kind in world history, were highly self-contradictory in its response to the sodomy statute paragraph 175, which prohibited *die widernatürliche Unzucht* between men. The movement's central thesis that homosexuality is a

naturally occurring, and thereby involuntary, phenomenon yet is simultaneously the highest expression of free selfhood gradually became the metaphor for the dialectical paradox of modern humanity, where determination and freedom could no longer be thought of as neatly separate concepts. I will explain how political parties of the Weimar Republic exploited the figure of the “queer” homosexual to denounce their enemies as bad agents of modernity and how the desire to make free use of one’s sexual determination persists in our times despite—or perhaps because of—the continual association of the notion of sexual identity to the “problem” of modernity.

Chapter 4 turns to contemporary queer theory to interrogate the origins of its polemical staging of normativity and transgression as well as identity and non-identity. With a reading of the major concepts from its foundational thinkers including Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Judith Butler, I will historicize its deconstructionist method as a reaction to the structuralist understanding of identity and language as normative systems of binary structures. Queer theory’s advocacy of anti-identarian self-destruction and perpetual social disturbance via infinite multiplication of intersectional difference, I will contend, is rooted in its historical limit that could not readily conceive reconciliation and antagonism between sameness and difference as a continual process of negotiation rather than as a final state.

Taking a cue from Toril Moi’s Wittgensteinian theory of language, I will revisit the French theorists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to explore how their philosophies offer an alternative way of engaging with identity and language. Rather than deciding on a foundational principle, they conceived these two forms of thought as ambivalent objects that exist both as ideologically normative structures and as free activities of structuring material reality. By pointing out how these two thinkers identify pleasure as the essence of the process of negotiation and transformation between the two, I will establish a genealogical connection between the

notion of literary plasticity in German literary writers as well as the “queer” theories of homosexual identity around 1900 and the way in which we continue to think about identity and language in our post-postmodern age.



## Chapter I

### Theodor Fontane: Identity as Ambiguity

Having grown up in a French Huguenot family in Neuruppin, the realist writer Theodor Fontane was always aware of the intersecting nature of his national and religious identity.<sup>1</sup> So much so that he once attributed his characteristic literary style of lightheartedness to his “französische Abstammung.”<sup>2</sup> His ambiguously French last name, which became “Germanized” when his great grandfather dropped the “i”<sup>3</sup> from *Fontaine*, seems to have caused enough trouble for him in everyday life that he wrote an anecdote about it:

Und mein Name! Ja, wer es wüsste! Jeder spricht diesen Namen verschieden aus, und weil man abhängig ist, von dem, was man hört, so habe ich mich daran gewöhnt, je nach Situation ihn auch verschieden auszusprechen. Bin ich mit Leuten aus der Oberschicht der Gesellschaft zusammen, so lasse ich es an einem wundervollen Nasallaut nicht fehlen und bin wieder ganz Montpellier. Bin ich auf dem Lande, so lasse ich das “e” und den Nasen schneddrängdräng fallen und begnüge mich damit, aus Neuruppin zu sein.<sup>4</sup>

The awareness of his complex identity, however, was not always a pleasant experience. In the autobiographical text *Kriegsgefangen* (1871), Fontane looks back on his imprisonment in France under the suspicion of espionage during the Franco-Prussian War. Talking to other prisoners and prison guards from diverse backgrounds, he ponders on the social role of identity as well as the nature of identification as a process of its production. During his stay in Guéret, for example, Fontane reflects on his strong desire to meet a French Dominican prior in town who

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief history of “French Protestant identity in Brandenburg-Prussia” and its “symbiotic relationship with Prussian patriotism and German nationalism.” See Susanne Lachenicht, “Huguenot Immigrants and the Formation of National Identities, 1548-1787,” *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 2 (2007): 309-331.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1920), 5: 32.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Jolles, *Theodor Fontane* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1972), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Hüffmeier, “‘Was ist, ist durch Vorherbestimmen:’ Spuren Calvins bei Theodor Fontane Problematisierung des Themas und These,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 107, no. 2 (2010): 240.

supposedly left Berlin at the beginning of the war “um nicht das von *Konfessions* wegen bereits Erlebte von *Nationalitäts* wegen noch einmal zu erleben.”<sup>5</sup> What makes a Prussian Protestant of French origins identify with a French Catholic in Germany?

The sympathy between these two men illustrates a peculiar mode of identification, where their recognition of sameness arises not out of having the same qualities but out of their heterogeneous experiences of being different from others (and being persecuted for it). Identity can conjoin (“verbindet”<sup>6</sup>), disjoin (“trennt”), and conjoin the disjoined. This last type of non-identical identity, where the subject regards itself as a unit of sameness that contains difference, characterizes Fontane’s “ungebunden[er] und auf nichts eingeschworen[er] Geist[,]”<sup>7</sup> as Thomas Mann once put it.<sup>8</sup>

The following chapter will explore how ambiguity as a non-identically identical model of signification shapes Fontane’s understanding of realism and his literary works. Unlike many of his realist contemporaries of the nineteenth century and their *realidealistisch* worldview, Fontane insisted on neither the coincidence of reality and ideality nor their complete intelligibility. Instead, his ambiguous aesthetics makes use of both the copresence of congruence and incongruence between language and reality as well as between ideality and reality to motivate

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Kriegsgefangen: Erlebtes 1870* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Heinrich Detering (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), 14.1:265.

<sup>8</sup> His political identity, for example, underwent various changes: a one-time participant in the revolution of 1848, he worked as a correspondent of the ultraconservative newspaper *Neue Preußische Zeitung* and turned to social democracy at the end of his life. See Scott Tatchell, “The Mystery of Feilenhauer Torgelow: Fontane’s Elusive Social Democrat,” *German Life and Letters* 57, no. 3 (2004): 290-308; Wilhelm Hüffmeier, “Was ist, ist durch Vorherbestimmen:” Spuren Calvins bei Theodor Fontane, in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 107, no. 2 (2010): 239-260; Arthur L. Davis, “Fontane and the German Revolution of 1848,” *Modern Language Notes* 50, no. 1 (1935): 1-9.

the subject to attend to the dialectical nature of language *in* reality and vice versa. In this view, one's identity, which is ambiguously determined like language, becomes a tool with which the subject comprehends and transforms the world of the here and now with "interest."

I will also illustrate the centrality of sexuality in Fontane's reflection on the moral and ethical implications of ambiguity in his mature work *Effi Briest* (1894). Told as a love story gone awry, the novel observes the paradoxical desires of Prussian society to assert the integrity of its singular identity and to liberate itself from the oppressively normative demands of identification. As an indirect mode of signification that identifies the subject's sexual interest and dissimulates it simultaneously, flirtatiousness is valorized in the novel as a way of resisting the prescriptive regimentation of identities on the one hand and denounced as permissiveness that breeds cynical transgression on the other. By remaining ambiguous about its ambiguity, Fontane's literary thinking alerts us to the importance of maintaining "interest" in our symbolic and moral discernment in the face of modernity with its homogenizing ideologies and its pulsating movement that breaks down all boundaries.

### 1. Reality and Realisms: The Subject's Interest

Reflections on realism must answer two questions about the condition of its possibility. One is epistemological: what is reality? A clear definition of the term is required in order to establish a correct measure for minimizing the gap between the original and its copy. The other is teleological: why represent reality at all? Don't we already live in it? The act of representing things "as they are" must have its proper purpose. These basic questions demonstrate how the notion of realism is always intimately entangled with subjectivity despite its objective façade: it is, after all, the subject that determines the parameters of representation to make use of it.

Richard Brinkmann thus pointed out as early as in the 1950s that the reality that realist literature recreates is not simply a neutral one but “die Wirklichkeit, die der Einzelne ‘hat’ im existentiellen Sinne.”<sup>9</sup>

Theodor Fontane offers a curious definition of realism in the programmatic review essay *Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848* (1853):

Goethe [...] verdünnte den Realismus seiner Jugend zu der gepriesenen Objektivität seines Mannesalters. Diese Objektivität ist dem Realismus nahe verwandt, in gewissen Fällen ist sie dasselbe; sie unterscheiden sich nicht im Wie, sondern im Was, jene ist das Allgemeine, dieser das Besondere; die ‘Braut von Korinth’ hat Objektivität, das jede Herzensfaser erschütternde ‘Ach neige, du Schmerzreiche’ hat Realismus.

The term “objectivity” here designates neither the material quality nor being thereness of reality but the universal principle or “das Allgemeine” that holds the world together (put differently, the ideal). Peculiar is the claim that objectivity *possibly but not necessarily* coincides with realism. Why set up this binary? What kind of reality could there be that is not objective? To understand what Fontane means by the term “real,” one must turn to the texts he mentions.

Goethe’s ballad *Die Braut von Korinth* (1797) tells the story of a young Athenian man who travels to Corinth to find his promised bride. The conversion of the bride’s family to Christianity, however, prompts them to breach the agreement, and the daughter’s agony results in her death. Eventually, she returns from the underworld as a vampire to claim her husband’s life. The poem is often read as a depiction of the clash between paganism and Christianity and/or the desire for hybridity between the Occident and Orient.<sup>10</sup> Whatever one’s interpretation might be,

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Brinkmann, *Wirklichkeit und Illusion. Studien über Gehalt und Grenzen des Begriffs Realismus für die erzählende Dichtung des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1957), 318.

<sup>10</sup> Johannes Endres, “Vampires and the Orient in Goethe’s ‘Die Braut von Corinth,’” *The German Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (2020): 204-220.

the cultural and historical specificity as well as the fantastic plot elements within the poem must be transcended; only when one reads it *allegorically* and *reflectively* can one arrive at such an “objective” understanding.

The second example calls for a different kind of readerly engagement. The quote “Ach neige, du Schmerzreiche” comes from the first part of *Faust*, where Gretchen senses her looming demise and expresses her desire for salvation. The scene portrays an ordinary yet emotionally charged moment, where she prays to the image of Maria using the second-person address *du*.<sup>11</sup> The affective intensity of her lyrical address pierces through the diegetic framing and makes a direct appeal to the reader (“Was es zittert, was verlanget/ Weißt nur du, nur du allein!”): one is called not merely to reflect on Gretchen’s situation but sympathize with her.

Three criteria appear to be salient to Fontane’s understanding of realism: the register of imagination (the fantastic vs. the ordinary), cultural context (ancient vs. modern or Greek vs. German), and readerly engagement (reflective vs. affective). Ordinarity, contemporaneity, and affect are preferred not because they are the true source of the ideal but because this combination can better produce intense feelings in the reader. What should one make of Fontane’s emphasis on the subjective experience of a particular world?

The following section will demonstrate the uniqueness of Fontane’s definition of realism, which goes against dominant aesthetic theories of his time. While he valorizes the reality of the here and now like his realist and naturalist contemporaries, his poetics distinguishes itself in its epistemological and teleological claims. For Fontane, reality is neither the embodiment of the ideal nor of its absence. Rather, it is the experience of indeterminacy that evokes the subject’s

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<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that Fontane singles out a short passage, as *Faust* also contains a number of fantastic elements from its form-shifting Mephistopheles to the witches of the *Walpurgisnacht*.

curiosity and interest. The accurate mimesis of the ambivalence of reality serves the role of motivating the subject's life with an affective intensity that secures its being as a participant in its world. Such subjectivity is invested in playing with its specific identity in the present rather than romanticizing the bygone past or yearning for the shapeless future.

German realism of the nineteenth century, often referred to as bourgeois or poetic realism, has suffered from a bad reputation for its provincialism, political passivity, and its alignment with nationalism over the years.<sup>12</sup> The most fundamental critique of its poetic and philosophical foundation, however, would be that it dictated an ideological "notion of what reality is or ought to be."<sup>13</sup> A brief look into the writings of Julian Schmidt, Gustav Freytag, and Otto Ludwig, three programmatic realists, will reveal how the realist call for a return to reality was not merely motivated by a quasi-scientific interest as in their French counterparts but by a thoroughly idealistic one. Replacing the romantic notion of reality as a distressing absence or a lack, programmatic realists fashioned their aesthetic project as an empirical yet idealistic undertaking that uncovers the overlooked ideality embodied in the world of the here and now.

In a book review published in the national-liberal magazine *Die Grenzboten*, the literary historian Julian Schmidt argues that the telos of artistic activity should be "die Wirklichkeit zu idealisi[e]ren" rather than "das Ideal zu verwirklichen."<sup>14</sup> Art is a self-contained activity that idealizes reality by uncovering ideality within it; its major task is intensification and accentuation

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<sup>12</sup> Lynne Tatlock, "Realist Historiography and the Historiography of Realism: Gustav Freytag's *Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit*," *The German Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1990): 59-74. For a Bourdieusian critique of Julian Schmidt and Gustav Freytag, also see Philipp Böttcher, "Die Poesie des Prosaischen," in *Der Bildungsroman im Literarischen Feld: Neue Perspektive auf eine Gattung*, ed. Elisabeth Böhm and Kathrin Dennerlein (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 165-220.

<sup>13</sup> Robert C. Holub, *Reflections of Realism: Paradox, Norm and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century German Prose* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Schmidt, "Literaturgeschichte," *Die Grenzboten* 15, no. 2 (1856): 209.

rather than creation and invention. Most importantly, Schmidt insists that one can gain access to the authentic experience of reality only when one already stands in harmony “mit der allgemeinen sittlichen Substanz” of “der reale ... nationale Boden.”<sup>15</sup> The internal coherence of Schmidt’s worldview is spectacular: art, morality, nationality, and reality legitimize and reinforce each other.

The realist writer Gustav Freytag’s vision of German national literature puts the circular logic of realist thinking on full display, whereby the ideality of the German people is posited from the outset and artistic practice becomes equated with its empirical discovery:

Und wer ferner irgend einen Kreis des deutschen Lebens darstellen will, grade der soll die Verhältnisse und Charaktere dieser bestimmten Sphäre auch sehr genau und mit allen Einzelheiten studiert haben, bevor er sie idealisi[er]t ... Wir haben kein Salonleben, wir haben keine Salonsprache ... und wenn wir einmal zusammengedrängt werden, präsentieren wir uns nicht vortheilhaft. Wer uns schildern will, muß uns aufsuchen in unserer Arbeitsstube, in unserem Comptoir, unserem Feld, nicht nur in unserer Familie. Der Deutsche ist am größten und schönsten, wenn er arbeitet.<sup>16</sup>

The realist impulse to project a self-referential unity or “eine ganze, geschlossene [Welt], die alle ihre Bedingungen, alle ihre Folgen in sich selbst hat,”<sup>17</sup> as the realist Otto Ludwig put it, comes from its objection to romanticism and its affective mode of *Sehnsucht*. The latter’s dramatization of the gap between reality and ideality often indulged in a pathological fantasy of a magical bridge that would reunite the two, which was concurrently undercut by the ironic consciousness that considers real reconciliation impossible.

In this view, reality is nothing but an inescapable prison that makes one yearn for its outside—death is the only solution. To counteract such an understanding of literature as morbid

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<sup>15</sup> Julian Schmidt, “Literaturgeschichte,” 209.

<sup>16</sup> Gustav Freytag, “Neue deutsche Romane,” *Die Grenzboten* 12, no. 2 (1853): 127-128.

<sup>17</sup> Otto Ludwig, *Otto Ludwigs Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Adolf Stern (Leipzig: Grunow, 1891) 5: 458.

*Ersatzbefriedigung*, Ludwig argues that the “Aufgabe” of realism is to “den Idealen, die noch gestaltlos, als bloße Sehnsucht in den Herzen und Köpfen der neustrebenden Gegenwart zittern, die Gestalt zu geben, in der sogleich jeder Zeitgenosse Das erkennt, was er hegte, aber nicht gestalten, d.h. nicht anschauen konnte.”<sup>18</sup> In short, realism transforms the romantic notion of reality as absence into the presence of the ideal.

During this back-and-forth with the tradition, the realist program constructed highly selective criteria for what elements of reality should be represented, whereby the material must be real but not too real to threaten one’s sense of order. In his criticism of Georg Büchner’s portrayal of insanity, for instance, Schmidt emphasizes that the purpose of art is not to imitate reality for its own sake but to “erheben, erschüttern, [and] ergötzen” its reader.

The poetic device that made this possible was the concept of transfiguration or *Verklärung*, where quotidian objects gain ideal qualities through the intervention of art. It is through this process that the comforting affect of *Behagen* could be produced to replace the emotional extravagances of the preceding era, where the chaos of “magic-mongering late Romanticism, self-indulgent *Weltschmerz*, the politically radical clamourings of *Jünges Deutschland*, and the hollow-ringing language of sundry intellectual charlatans”<sup>19</sup> reigned supreme.

If German realism can be called “ideological,” it is because its idealistic orientation attempted to annul the tension between the “Ist-und Sollzustand”<sup>20</sup> that frustrated the literary movements that preceded it with a logic that collapses the difference between epistemology with

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<sup>18</sup> Otto Ludwig, *Shakespeare-Studien*, ed. Moritz Hendrich (Leipzig: Cnobloch, 1874), 2: 351.

<sup>19</sup> Peter James Bowman, “Fontane and the Programmatic Realists: Contrasting Theories of the Novel,” *The Modern Language Review* 103, no. 1 (2008): 131.

<sup>20</sup> Hugo Aust, *Literatur des Realismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), 22.



teleology. The normatively universalizing gesture of German realism is what makes scholars like Dania Hückmann conceive it as an act of “containment” reacting to the “crisis in a period of historical change and aesthetic innovation”<sup>21</sup> while making others like Lars Korten underscore its secretly “poietic” rather than mimetic nature.<sup>22</sup> As Lynne Tatlock notes, the realist desire for sober stability also cannot be thought separately from its sociopolitical context, for the normalizing capacity of its aesthetics was used as a justification for the validity of the German people’s political unity as a nation.<sup>23</sup>

At first glance, Fontane appears to agree with the basic tenet of programmatic realism in his essay *Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848* (1853). He asserts that realism rejects “das nackte Wiedergeben alltäglichen Lebens” and seeks to excavate “das Wahre” out of the raw materiality of “Marmorsteinbruch.”<sup>24</sup> Does reality mean ideality for Fontane as well? When one traces his heuristic use of the term real (“wirklich”) in the text, one finds out that it is difficult to pinpoint its exact meaning: it qualifies certain political needs (“wirkliche Bedürfnis”), human thought, and even sentiment.

While all uses connect *Wirklichkeit* to the subjective experience, it remains unclear whether he valorizes it for its coincidence with the ideal. When he argues that “der Realismus hält auch nichts von Dem, was unserm Interesse völlig fremd geworden ist,”<sup>25</sup> for instance, he is

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<sup>21</sup> Dania Hückmann, “Containment in Realism,” *The Germanic Review* 90, no. 3 (2015): 153.

<sup>22</sup> Lars Korten, *Poietischer Realismus: Zur Novelle der Jahre 1848–1888. Stifter, Keller, Meyer, Storm* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009), 70.

<sup>23</sup> Lynne Tatlock, “Realist Historiography and the Historiography of Realism: Gustav Freytag's Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit,” *The German Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1990): 67.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor Fontane, “Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848,” in *Deutsche Annalen zur Kenntniß der Gegenwart und Erinnerung an die Vergangenheit*, vol. 1, ed. Karl Biedermann (Leipzig: Avenarius and Mendelssohn, 1853), 357-358.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

claiming that the reality in question is pertinent in art *because its representation serves the interest of the subject*.<sup>26</sup> This emphasis on the subjective function of realism, rather than a pretense of empirical objectivity, is truly proper to Fontane. What is this “interest” at stake, and how may reality and its representation evoke it?

The essay offers a number of negative definitions of what reality is not and how it should not be represented. Fontane distances himself most clearly from “dogmatic negativity,”<sup>27</sup> be it the romantic fetishization of yearning or the naturalistic depictions of misery. Condemning literary tropes of the death wish like the “Blitz” and “Tränen,” Fontane asserts realism should valorize and affirm real life. This, however, does not mean that he saw reality as the manifestation of the ideal. In his review of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, one can clearly observe how he rejects the *realidealistisch*-oriented aesthetics that treats representation as an “embodiment.” For example, he claims that the male characters in the novel have “etwas Schemenhaftes” and act like “Begriffe, die Rock und Hose tragen.” The biggest issue with such aesthetics, he writes, is that “das Interesse leidet darunter.”<sup>28</sup>

The key to understanding the “interest” in his aesthetic thought can be found in his remarks on the importance of prioritizing ordinary life in German lands as the object of representation over “alles Fernen und Fremden.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike his realist colleagues, however, his

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<sup>26</sup> James Bowman and Andrew Cusack argue that dialogic polyvocality in his later novels is the manifest form of the notion of “Interessenvertretung.” See Peter James Bowman, “Fontane and the Programmatic Realists: Contrasting Theories of the Novel;” Andrew Cusack, “‘Civibus aevi futuri’: Panoramic Historiography in Fontane’s *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*,” *The Modern Language Review* 104, no. 3 (2009): 746-761.

<sup>27</sup> Peter James Bowman, “Fontane and the Programmatic Realists,” 141.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Josef Öttlinger (Berlin: F. Fontane und Co, 1908), 226.

<sup>29</sup> Fontane, “Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848,” 376.

preference for one's own culture stems neither from the nationalistic sentiment of one's supremacy nor from the desire to normatively define what one's identity should be. His goal is to overcome the attitude that either regards literary experience as escapist fantasies or turns reality into a mundaneness that one detests. To motivate the subject to participate in reality with "interest," one must find ways to discover pleasure in its immediate specificity. This, for Fontane, is the telos of realist literature.

When he asserts that "die Liebe zu dem Fleck, der uns geboren" makes us discover "hundert Kräfte" in the world, he is arguing that one's particular identity, be it social, religious, or national, can be fruitful for literature insofar as it serves as a tool to revive the subject's will to fully participate in its life.<sup>30</sup> It would be a great misstep to read this insistence on one's national, linguistic, and cultural specificity as a primary resource for representation as a call for reifying identities. Fontane claims that even so-called political particularism that hinders national unity (one may compare this term to the contemporary notion of "identity politics;" this essay was published half a decade before the *Kulturkampf*) is at its roots "eines an und für sich gesunden Baumes."<sup>31</sup> For Fontane, identity is a complex process that becomes "real" only when the subject is afforded a chance to creatively make use of its determination.

This is a major correction to the definition of reality in both the romantic and *realidealistisch* traditions. For the former, reality is fundamentally a lack that can never be filled; for the latter, a perfectly rational order that must be normatively maintained. Both kinds of

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<sup>30</sup> See Till van Rahden, "Germans of the Jewish Stamm Visions of Community between Nationalism and Particularism, 1850 to 1933," in *German History from the Margins*, ed. Neil Gregor, Neil H. Roemer, and Mark Roseman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 27-48. for the history of nineteenth-century particularism and the unified German state.

<sup>31</sup> Fontane, "Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848," 376.

idealism limit the extent to which the subject can participate in it meaningfully. When Fontane reimagines reality as an indeterminate (but not arbitrary) domain that contains both “das Schöne” and “das Häßliche,” he is envisioning a pluralistic space where the subject is surrendered neither to pessimistic yearnings nor optimistic conservatism.<sup>32</sup>

Most importantly, affirming the importance of the reality of the here and now reminds the writers of the post-classical age that it is imperative that one keeps writing. Fontane harshly criticizes those who believe that German literature had reached its pinnacle with Goethe and Schiller and those who “mit dem letzten Goethe'schen Papierschnitzel unsere Literatur *für geschlossen erklären* [emphasis added].” Fontane’s realist project is an attempt to bring life back to the literary enterprise of the “long” nineteenth century by directing attention to the overlooked space between the monumental past and unattainable utopia.

This notion of reality as an energetic space for the subject’s creative unfolding has a strong resonance with that of vitality in Nietzschean thought, notwithstanding the fact Fontane’s essay was published decades before his major works.<sup>33</sup> In Fontane’s proclamation that realism “liebt das Leben je frischer je besser, aber freilich weiß er auch, daß unter den Trümmern halbvergessener Jahrhunderte manche unsterbliche Blume blüht,” one can almost hear

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<sup>32</sup> Iwan-Michelangelo D’Aprile has thus made a connection between the term *Interessenvertretung* and political parliamentarism. See Iwan-Michelangelo D’Aprile, “Propaganda und Poetologie: Fontanes Korrespondenzen im Spannungsfeld von offiziösem Journalismus und literarischem Realismusprogramm,” in *Fontanes Medien*, ed. Peer Trilcke, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 25-40.

<sup>33</sup> For a comparative study of Nietzsche and Fontane, see Bo Earle, “Negotiating the ‘Weites Feld’: Realism and Discursive Performance in Nietzsche and Effi Briest,” *The Germanic Review* 77, no. 3 (2002): 233-253; Sean Ireton, “The Problem of Language in Nietzsche’s Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne and Fontane’s Der Stechlin,” *Colloquia Germanica* 35, no. 3/4 (2002): 239-261; Bruce Kieffer, “Fontane und Nietzsche: The Use and Abuse of History in Schach von Wuthenow,” *The Germanic Review* 61, no. 1 (1986): 29-35.

Nietzsche's voice in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874) that criticizes "[d]as Übermaß von Historie" that assaults "die plastische Kraft des Lebens" and the inability of scholars "sich der Vergangenheit wie einer kräftigen Nahrung zu bedienen."<sup>34</sup> While Fontane does not share Nietzsche's aggressive outlook on human nature, he understands that the subject's desire to be an active agent of one's life is one of the most powerful motivating forces and that the subject's historical specificity matters insofar as it serves as a tool of empowerment.

## 2. Pictures, Images, and Ghosts: Troubled Identities in *Effi Briest* (1894)

The plot of Fontane's *Effi Briest* verges on a cliché in its simplicity: a young aristocratic girl of seventeen years of age marries a successful but boring bureaucrat named Geert von Innstetten who is twice her age. She moves to his estate in the northeastern province of Prussia called Kessin, where she feels socially and physically isolated. A charming Polish officer named Major von Crampas, who has an affinity for adventure and romantic poetry, takes advantage of the situation to seduce her. The affair is discovered years later after the married couple relocates to Berlin. The husband unwillingly goes into a duel with the officer to protect his honor. The adulterous wife is shunned by society and becomes estranged from her parents and her daughter. She dies suffering but becomes reconciled with her fate.

On a second look, however, one notices how the novel brims with uncertainties, most prominently in its reflection on the notion of guilt. In the opening passage, the protagonist Effi's mother Luise von Briest observes her young daughter's overly passionate character and worries that she would end up as a circus rider. Effi the "Tochter der Luft"<sup>35</sup> responds with a biting

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<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1988), 1: 329.

<sup>35</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 7.

remark: “Vielleicht, Mama. Aber wenn es so wäre, wer wäre schuld? Von wem hab ich es?”<sup>36</sup> How could she be responsible for her nature, which she did not will it herself? In the novel’s final scene, the Briests wonder whether they are “doch vielleicht schuld”<sup>37</sup> for the tragic course of Effi’s life. Couldn’t have one better educated her to curb her wild desires? Did they let her get married too early? Recognizing the impossibility of finding one correct answer, Effi’s father satisfies himself with a vague statement that settling such matter would be “ein z u weites Feld.”<sup>38</sup>

The novel’s preoccupation with the notion of ascribable personality reflects the anxiety around the destabilized legibility of social and national identities in Imperial Germany. In contrast to the optimistic faith of German realism in the national identity as a secure ground for organizing individuals’ lives, the coherence in the notion of Germanness as well as the clarity of moral categories become questioned in the everyday life of late nineteenth century Prussia in Fontane’s text. The following section will demonstrate how *Effi Briest* problematizes the ambition of Prussian society to eliminate ambiguity in social signification with a normative regulation of identities. Instead of creating a more transparent and intelligible society, its moral and symbolic dogmatism paradoxically ends up producing hypocritical subjectivities that only care about their appearances without a sense of responsibility.

The incongruence between *Schein* and *Sein* in the novel becomes palpable first and foremost in the realm of the visual, where reality appears as a set of uncanny images rather than as a utopic landscape as realist theorists imagined. Such ghostly “apparitions” occur when the

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<sup>36</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

two competing modes of imagistic signification, *Bild* and *Vorstellung*, come into conflict. The first term, *Bild*, refers to images where the symbolic triad of the signifier, signified, and referent build a recognizable cultural identity. When Effi arrives in Kessin, for example, she compares the exotic decor of Innstetten's estate to an image from her *Bilderbuch*, which depicts a man in a turban sitting on the floor with crossed legs. This exotic image is non-threatening to Effi insofar as its elements are arranged in one coherent *tableau* to signify intelligible foreignness that exists distinct from her own culture.

*Vorstellung*, in contrast, denotes a more diffuse visual experience that is both sensorial and extra-sensorial in its ability to "see" what does not exist.<sup>39</sup> Effi's commentary on its mechanism underscores the arbitrariness of its combinatory logic that conflates the real, hearsay, and contingent knowledge: "mit den Vorstellungen ist es ein eigen Ding, man macht sie sich nicht bloß nach dem, was man persönlich erfahren hat, auch nach dem, was man irgendwo gehört oder ganz zufällig weiß."<sup>40</sup> Put differently, it overshoots the indexical and referential logic of the *Bild*. Liberated from the obligation to reality, it populates images with unclear meanings.

Effi's first encounter with an uncanny image, which Fontane called "der Drehpunkt für die ganze Geschichte,"<sup>41</sup> exemplifies the destabilizing experience of the clash of these two types of visualities. One night when Innstetten is visiting Bismarck in a nearby village, she wakes up from her sleep with a scream, feeling as though something has passed by her. The door to the

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<sup>39</sup> In the essay *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science*, W. J. T. Mitchell makes a similar distinction. He calls the former picture and the latter image. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 169.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Brinkmann, *Theodor Fontane. Der Dichter über sein Werk* (München: DTV, 1977), 2: 454.

hallway has flung open, and her dog Rollo has run into the room. Although no element of this event directly suggests so, Effi believes that this was the doing of the Chinese Man of Kessin, who is rumored to have fallen in love with the local sea captain Thompson's daughter and died shortly after she got married to another man.

At this point in the novel, Effi has learned about the Chinese Man through several different channels: she has seen his grave during her arrival in Kessin; she understands China as the cultural symbol for the unknowable other ("ein Chinese ist schon an und für sich eine Geschichte"<sup>42</sup>); most importantly, she has seen a picture that depicts a Chinese man, which the servants Johanna and Christel cut out of a *Fibel*. The threatening fantasy of the Chinese Man becomes amplified by the presence of this corresponding *Bild*, as it becomes a depository for all inexplicable phenomena. This displacement causes Effi's world of meaningful *Bilder* to disintegrate into spectral images, whereby the iconographic organization of her life becomes destabilized. What Effi ultimately fears is the sensuousness of images that do not have definite meaning yet assert their brute presence.

If the *Spuk* of the Chinese Man introduces the general logic behind the destabilization of visual reality in the novel, the discussion about the ghost or *Gespenst* between Effi and the singer Marietta Tripelli demonstrates how and why exactly the idea of ordinary reality is becoming undone in their society. At an evening party hosted by the pharmacist Alonzo Gieshübler, Tripelli performs a number of romantic songs that thematize death, including Heinrich Heine's *Ritter Olaf* (1839), Richard Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843), and Friedrich Hebbel's

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<sup>42</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 52.



*Ballade von Heideknaben* (1844).<sup>43</sup> The first two feature variations of the *Liebestod*, and Hebbel's poem tells the story of a young boy's mysterious murder. Stunned by Tripelli's authorial mastery of recounting such gruesome affairs, Effi inquires whether she feels similar anxiety to hers.

Tripelli makes a distinction between the two types of "ghosts" one can encounter: "ein Gespenst, das durch die Ballade geht, da graule ich mich gar nicht, aber ein Gespenst, das durch meine Stube geht, ist mir, gradeso wie andern, sehr unangenehm."<sup>44</sup> The peculiarity of romantic "ghosts" is that they only appear in exotic spaces that are severed from ordinary reality. Accordingly, their realm of influence is limited to specific forms of experience such as dreams, death, sexuality, and, most importantly, poetry. As a result, they are usually imagined as an alterity that threatens to intrude. In contrast, the ghostliness that haunts Tripelli has neither occult nor romantic origin but a real(istic) one: her observation of recent scientific progress, as well as her international travels, has convinced her that there exists nothing in the world that does not belong to the realm of possibility, no matter how incredible and "ghostly" it might be.

What Tripelli expresses as the affect of being "haunted" or being "links und rechts [, hinten und vorn] umlauert"<sup>45</sup> is the feeling that one is surrounded by the presence of something that cannot be immediately interpreted as communicable signs. Earlier in the novel, Innstetten makes a remark in a similar vein, comparing the *Spuk* of the Chinese Man to the existence of

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<sup>43</sup> Because Heine's poem was not turned into a musical piece, philological scholarship has noted this passage was Fontane's mistake. The ballad that exists in a musical form is Carl Loewe's *Herr Oluf*, which works with the same theme. Elisabeth Strowick, however, reads this ambivalence as an intentional poetic device that creates a palimpsest-like effect. See Elisabeth Strowick, *Gespenster des Realismus* (Paderborn: Brill, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 103-104.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

bacteria that are imperceptible to bare eyes. What the artist and the bureaucrat share here is the awareness of a new reality that can no longer be grasped as the totality of a closed system. How should one navigate the world when *das Wahre* no longer appears *wahrscheinlich*? Hans Blumenberg explains that such a notion of reality is a modern conception, which he also associates with Robert Musil's novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*:

Wirklichkeit ist ... das ganz und gar Unverfügbare, was sich nicht als bloßes Material der Manipulation und damit der ständig umsteuerbaren Erscheinung unterwerfen läßt, was vielmehr in der Technisierung nur scheinbar und zeitweise in Dienst genommen worden ist, um sich dann in seiner überwältigenden Eigengesetzlichkeit und einer seine Erzeuger tyrannisierenden Mächtigkeit zu enthüllen als ein "factum brutum," von dem nachträglich nur noch behauptet, aber nicht mehr vorgestellt werden kann, daß es aus einem freien und konstruktiven Prozeß des Erdachtwerdens einmal hervorgegangen sein könnte.<sup>46</sup>

In this definition, reality as resistance is not disorientation per se, but a kind of double vision that enters into consciousness indirectly through the limits of one's technological or intellectual horizon.

Indeed, it is Trippelli's savviness in symbolic affairs that makes her sensitive to the ghostliness of reality. As someone who delights in the playful game of signifiers, she has learned to take advantage of ambiguity in her self-presentation: she exoticizes her artistic persona by Italianizing her name (she is the daughter of the village pastor Trippel, and her real name is Marie Trippel); she boasts her "strongly masculine" appearance and calls Gieshübler her uncle, not because he is one but because he made her "zu dem gemacht haben, was sie jetzt ist;"<sup>47</sup> she even sends a telegram to Effi written in pompous French after she departs from Kessin, addressing her as "Madame la Baronne d'Innstetten, née de Briest."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hans Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans," in *Nachahmung und Illusion*, ed. Hans Robert Jauß (München: Fink, 1963), 14.

<sup>47</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

Despite her enjoyment of destabilized signifiers, she regards herself as the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada in the matter of national politics, where no ambiguity should be allowed. Innstetten exalts as he hears this, for he shares her opinion that reality has become undeniably precarious (and that there exists certain pleasure in this), yet this fact must be repressed for the sake of social order. The contradiction in Tripelli and Innstetten's aesthetic propensity and political rigidity, reminiscent of the Kantian maxim "argue as much as you like, and about what you like, but obey," can be elucidated by the historical atmosphere of the *Gründerzeit*, where the desire for a strong socio-cultural order coexisted with the fear of its impossibility.

The precarious political unity of the newly born German empire was seeking ways to legitimize its authority, whereby art and culture were recruited to help it overcome its symbolic instability. On the macro-level, the new empire championed rationalism, protestantism, and militarism as the core constituents of its identity. The implementation of these values with a top-down approach, however, was no simple matter. As Konrad Ehlich explains, Prussian history always contained multiplicity of cultures during its course of its expansion, and the undeniable "Präsenz des Unintegrierten" constantly frustrated "den Versuch, Wissen und Identität so zu entwickeln, daß sie das eigenartige mentale Konglomerat zusammenhalten konnten."<sup>49</sup>

Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* that targeted the Catholic church "als Gegner kulturellen, nationalen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Fortschritts," for example, received a fierce pushback that

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<sup>49</sup> Konrad Ehlich, "Preußische Alterität—statt einer Einleitung," in *Fontane und die Fremde*, ed. Konrad Ehlich (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002), 8. Also see James N. Bade *Fontane's Landscapes* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 154: "Let us not forget that in 1685 it was Prussia that took in 20,000 Huguenot refugees fleeing persecution in France; that after the Jesuits were expelled from Portugal, France, and Spain (1759-67), it was Prussia that offered them protection; that Prussia was the first German state and one of the first European countries to provide full civil rights for Jews (1812)."

forced the state to “die Verständigung auf ein verbindliches, wenn auch jeweils unterschiedlich besetztes Symbolsystem.”<sup>50</sup>

On the micro-level, the bourgeoisie and aristocracy sought to stabilize national unity by mutually supporting each other’s existence. The former sought to legitimize its newly gained power with the help of aristocracy and its symbolic richness, while the latter benefitted from the financial support from the former. Scholars such as Georg Jäger highlighted the political backwardness of this phenomenon of the “Feudalisierung des Bürgertums” and “Kapitalisierung des Adels,”<sup>51</sup> while others like Rüdiger vom Bruch underscores how the upper Wilhelmine society attempted to counteract its “nervöser Idealismus” with the “Aristokratisierung” of culture.

Although it does not oppose the idea of stable national identity, *Effi Briest* problematizes how the desire to transform society into a utopic *Bild* can produce the exact opposite outcome. In young Effi’s claim that her future husband must “von Adel sein und eine Stellung haben und gut aussehen,”<sup>52</sup> it is clear that the imagistic coherence between one’s social, occupational, and bodily identity does not naturally occur but must be produced by a continual symbolic intervention. Instead of reflecting on how to produce this order, however, the Prussian world in the novel takes an “aesthetic turn” by elevating the upkeep of appearance as the guarantor of a harmonious society. At the same time, it projects the anxiety about its symbolic performances onto the marginalized figures of society, who supposedly possess an exceptional ability to fake

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<sup>50</sup> Armin Heinen, “Umstrittene Moderne. Die Liberalen und der preußisch-deutsche Kulturkampf,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29, no. 1 (2003): 138-156.

<sup>51</sup> Georg Jäger, *Realismus und Gründerzeit I. Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1848-1880* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1975), 105.

<sup>52</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 20.

their “ghostly” appearance.

The protagonist Effi is characterized by her lack of discernment in correctly understanding and manipulating social signifiers. Imagining her new life with Innstetten, for instance, she expresses her desire to decorate her bedroom with a Japanese bed screen and a red lamp. Effi’s mother warns her that such objects carry unwanted connotative meanings: “und wenn man bloß lachte. Die, die dir ungewogen sind, und solche gibt es immer, sprechen von schlechter Erziehung, und manche sagen auch wohl noch Schlimmeres.”<sup>53</sup> On another occasion, Effi misses her cousin Dagobert’s joke based on the homonyms *widerfahren* (to befall) and *wieder fahren* (to ride again), which makes him have to explain the sameness of the sound and difference in meaning.

Effi’s symbolic innocence is contrasted with the dexterity of exotic figures who are adept at such performance. In particular, half-Polish figures in Kessin who “pass” as Germans (including Effi’s seducer Major von Crampas) are represented as a threat to the German majority due to their ambiguous appearance. Innstetten’s comment on the elegance of the owner of the inn “Zum Fürsten Bismarck” named Golchowski illustrates the logic behind such anxiety:

Ja, gut aussehen tut er. Gut aussehen tun die meisten hier. Ein hübscher Schlag Menschen. Aber das ist auch das Beste, was man von ihnen sagen kann. Eure märkischen Leute sehen unscheinbarer aus und verdrießlicher, und in ihrer Haltung sind sie weniger respektvoll, eigentlich gar nicht, aber ihr Ja ist Ja und Nein ist Nein, und man kann sich auf sie verlassen. *Hier ist alles unsicher* [emphasis added].<sup>54</sup>

Kristin Kopp has thus argued that *Effi Briest* reflects Germany’s colonial anxiety around Poland.

Like Bram Stoker’s Dracula who can “infiltrate into the imperial center unnoticed because he

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<sup>53</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

can pass as British,”<sup>55</sup> Polishness in its proximity to Germanness began to be regarded as an invisible threat of an “anti-civilizational, natural force, and [...] a primitive sexual virility.”

Although the moralists in the novel make dubious claims about the untrustworthiness of social minorities, the text suggests that the paranoid suspicion of false appearance originates from the behavior of the subset of the population that is supposedly the most “Prussian:” its aristocracy. The extreme policing of one’s appearance in the aristocratic milieu does not eradicate but multiplies pernicious forms of ambiguity in everyday life, as people develop various tactics of passive aggression that can circumvent the prescribed rules of conduct. As a result, one suffers from “das beständige Gefährdetsein”<sup>56</sup> whenever one enters the space of public speech, where the meaning of one’s utterance becomes meticulously surveilled.

The most employed strategy to express socially sanctioned aggression is that of connotative suggestion, whereby the listener is compelled to understand and repress the connoted message. Although it produces second-degree meaning like poetic language, the connotation of this kind distinguishes itself in one significant aspect. Literary language brings two distinct words into relation to establish a higher level of significance by bringing light to the sameness and difference between them, while passive aggression deliberately compels the listener to create a synthesis between the two layers of meaning only to dissolve it immediately. The former expands understanding; the latter hinders it.

One effective strategy of inserting connotative meaning that is specifically sonic is the use of the *Ton*, a specific type of emphasis or *Betonung* that carves an additional layer of

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<sup>55</sup> Kristin Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 100.

<sup>56</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 106.

meaning in the existing syntactic arrangement. Because this meaning is de facto absent from what is said, the speaker maintains an edge over the listener by evading the responsibility for the connoted meaning. For instance, Effi is offended not by the words themselves but by the tone of her chaperone Zwicker's remark that Innstetten would be "ganz gesund"<sup>57</sup> in her absence during her travels.

The omnipresence of such auditory "ghosts" in everyday conversation contradicts the popular imagination of the visual "ghost" as exotic alterity. While Christian Begemann has rightfully argued that the fantastic elements in German realism are the embodiment of what has been foreclosed from its normative definition of reality, *Effi Briest* demonstrates that true realist repression has never even taken place; what became repressed simply traveled to another discursive space.<sup>58</sup>

The unsettling experience of linguistic ambiguity spreads to speech that is not intentionally aggressive. Crampas, for example, feels threatened by Innstetten's ominous statement about moral decay ("Sie ... denken, der Himmel wird nicht gleich einstürzen. Nein, gleich nicht. Aber mal kommt es."<sup>59</sup>) because he hears it as a warning against his seduction of Effi. However, the narrator clarifies that Innstetten uttered these words without any specific context in mind. Similarly, Effi's father inadvertently creates phallic imagery when he compares Effi to ivy (*Efeu*) that surrounds a tree trunk, which compels Luise von Briest to warn him not to make such "poetische Bilder."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 280.

<sup>58</sup> Christian Begemann, "Realismus und Phantastik," in *Die Wirklichkeit des Realismus*, ed. Veronika Thanner, Joseph Vogl, and Dorothea Walzer (Paderborn: Fink, 2018), 97-114.

<sup>59</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 144.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

A social conversationalist must engage with four different tasks at all times. As a listener, one must be competent both in discriminating denotative/connotative/metaphoric meaning from one another and in identifying the intention behind a statement; as a speaker, one must either compose one's speech clearly without creating a surplus of unintended meaning or purposefully create ambiguity to attack others. When one lacks such semiotic/hermeneutic discernment, any conversation can quickly devolve into the experience of disorientation. Innstetten's recounting of the Chinese Man as an "Angstapparat aus Kalkül"<sup>61</sup> to control Effi demonstrates how easy it is to abuse connotative language.

The real *Gespens*t of the novel that delights in cruelty and viciousness is neither the Chinese Man nor half-Polish figures like Golchowski and Crampas: it is the everyday experience of the *Gesellschaft-etwas* that willingly circulates unreliable appearances for the sake of social dominance. It is no coincidence that the first "apparition" of the Chinese Man coincides with Effi's first interaction with the aristocrats of Kessin who only have "Sinn für Äußerliches und eine merkwürdige Verlegenheit und Unsicherheit bei Berührung großer Fragen."<sup>62</sup> The theatrical life of appearance in Prussian society obliges its subjects to disassociate themselves from themselves in their everyday conduct. What they feel and think is irrelevant as long as their performance of aristocratic identity respects the rules of "sich-in-Szene-setzen."<sup>63</sup>

*Effi Briest* demonstrates not only how this mode of selfhood leads to an absurdly catastrophic outcome when applied to building subjectivities but also how a bleak desire to become dead to oneself lurks behind this version of "morality." When Innstetten challenges

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<sup>61</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 150.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.



Major von Crampas to a duel seven years after the affair, for example, he is aware of both the antiquatedness of the practice and a lack of need for personal revenge. To his colleague Wüllersdorf's question whether he feels so dishonored that he feels the need for vendetta, however, Innstetten responds in a Kantian tone that his action must be based on the principle of universal rationality rather than personal inclination. Only the former can serve as the ground for social order: "man ist nicht bloß ein einzelner Mensch, man gehört einem Ganzen an, und auf das Ganze haben wir beständig Rücksicht zu nehmen, wir sind durchaus abhängig von ihm."<sup>64</sup>

In her essay *Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in Effi Briest*, Julia Annas directs attention to the blind spot in the universalist notion of morality in Kantian thought that compels Innstetten to make such a self-destructive decision:

When one reads Kant, one is struck by the insistent way he always opposes moral motivation to *self*-interest and love of *self*. The *only* danger to the uninstructed moral reason is presented as being "needs and inclinations" which present a "turbulent" opposition to dutifulness; reverence for the moral law "is properly awareness of a value which demolishes my self-love"; what is relative to universal human inclinations and needs has a market *price*, but not dignity... Most disturbing of all is the well-known passage where love cannot be commanded, residing "in the propensities of feelings" and "melting compassion" is labelled *pathological*; it is an "inclination" that one happens to have, like a disease.<sup>65</sup>

The Kantian regime of reason unjustly sets up a binary opposition between the self and ethical conduct so that whatever originates from the subject becomes morally suspect. This intense distrust of the self encourages the subject to engage in what Michel Foucault calls the "exercice de mortification,"<sup>66</sup> where the self's identity becomes a domain of surveillance that must be constantly objectified and externalized. It is only an external authority who possesses the

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<sup>64</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 264.

<sup>65</sup> Julia Annas, "Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in *Effi Briest*," *Philosophy and Literature* 8, no. 1 (1984): 24.

<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 145.

correct “rationality” that could take proper care of this surrendered self. In the novel, the *Ritterschaftsrätin* von Padden, whose sensual nature cannot be repressed with ease, practices this Kantian mortification of the self to an absurd degree: she tells Effi that it is only when “man sich dann so unter hat und beinah schreien möchte, weil's weh tut”<sup>67</sup> the angels would rejoice. Must all ethical conduct be motivated by this gruesome masochism?

Fontane suggests that something other than the desire to be a moral and ethical subject might be at play behind this *Schauspiel* of morality. In a fragmentary text called *Die preußische Idee*, drafted in 1894, Fontane narrates the life of a bureaucrat named Adolf Schulze, an “Alt-Romantiker” who worships “die preußische Idee” throughout his life. The ideological content of this “Idee,” however, goes through such a dazzling number of changes in the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century (including liberalism, militarism, Ghibellinism, and eventually social democracy) that to give it a name of “idea” would be absurd.

The real reason that Schulze holds onto various systems of thought is revealed to be less glamorous than expected: he vaguely senses that it is his “unselbständige Natur” that makes him desire the “Führung” of an ideology. The claim of universality that is asserted by political systems eliminates all necessity for ethical deliberation by turning it into a mechanical application of formulas provided by the authority. Schulze thus delights in how Kantian thought frees him “von allem Selbstischen:”<sup>68</sup> ethical behavior becomes “nothing personal,” and the “Pflichtgefühl” derived from the categorical imperative liberates the self from its feelings.

When Effi reflects on her sexual transgression, what becomes problematized is not the act of infidelity itself but the loss of identity that has eliminated all moral feelings in her:

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<sup>67</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 185.

<sup>68</sup> Theodor Fontane, “Die preußische idee,” *Fontane Blätter* 34 (1982): 123.

Ja, da hab ich sie [die Schuld]. Aber lastet sie auch auf meiner Seele? Nein. Und das ist es, warum ich vor mir selbst erschrecke ... Ja, Angst quält mich und dazu Scham über mein Lügenspiel. Aber Scham über meine Schuld, die hab ich nicht oder doch nicht so recht oder doch nicht genug, und das bringt mich um, daß ich sie nicht habe ... Und das hat mir der alte Niemeyer in seinen guten Tagen noch, als ich noch ein halbes Kind war, mal gesagt: auf ein richtiges Gefühl, darauf käme es an, und wenn man das habe, dann könne einem das Schlimmste nicht passieren, und wenn man es nicht habe, dann sei man in einer ewigen Gefahr, und das, was man den Teufel nenne, das habe dann eine sichere Macht über uns.<sup>69</sup>

Innstetten's *Prinzipienreiterei* and Crampas' *Prinzipienverachtung* are the two sides of the same coin of the *Interesselosigkeit*, where the subject can relate to its identity only in terms of disinterested regulation. This "disinterestedness," however, unbinds the subject from all rules so that it does not even feels the need to make a proper distinction between normativity and transgression. Rather than directly commenting on the validity of this or that social norm, Fontane's novel addresses the death of what Christoph Hubig calls "ethischer Absicht."<sup>70</sup> The most urgent social problem is not that people cheat on their spouses, but that they have become incapable of making any moral judgment at all, as both dogmatism and relativism dispense with the notion of responsible subjectivity.

### 3. The Poetics of Flirtation: Ambiguity and Intertextuality

When and why does sexuality become problematic for society? The following conversation between the moralist Sidonie von Grasenabb and the village pastor Lindequist on the appearance of the *Oberförster* Ring's daughter Cora offers a suggestive account of what

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<sup>69</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 245.

<sup>70</sup> Christoph Hubig, "Es ist soviel Unschuld in ihrer Schuld:" Theodor Fontanes Stellung zur "preußischen Moral" am Beispiel der "Effi Briest," in *Preußen - Dein Spree-Athen: Beiträge zu Literatur, Theater und Musik in Berlin*, ed. Helmut Kühn (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 117.

sexuality means for the Prussian world in *Effi Briest*:

“Da ist ja wieder dies unausstehliche Balg, diese Cora. Sehen Sie nur, Innstetten, wie sie die kleinen Weingläser präsentiert, ein wahres Kunststück, sie könnte jeden Augenblick Kellnerin werden. Ganz unerträglich ... Sagen Sie, Pastor, ist diese vierzehnjährige Kokette schon im Unterricht bei Ihnen?”

“Ja, mein gnädiges Fräulein.”

“Dann müssen Sie mir die Bemerkung verzeihen, daß Sie sie nicht in die richtige Schule genommen haben. Ich weiß wohl, es hält das heutzutage sehr schwer, aber ich weiß auch, daß die, denen die Fürsorge für junge Seelen obliegt, es vielfach an dem rechten Ernst fehlen lassen. Es bleibt dabei, die Hauptschuld tragen die Eltern und Erzieher.”

Lindequist ... antwortete, daß das alles sehr richtig, der Geist der Zeit aber zu mächtig sei.

“Geist der Zeit!” sagte Sidonie. “kommen Sie mir nicht damit ... Ich kenne das; nie scharf zufassen wollen, immer dem Unbequemen aus dem Wege gehen. Denn Pflicht ist unbequem. Und so wird nur allzuleicht vergessen, daß das uns anvertraute Gut auch mal von uns zurückgefordert wird. Eingreifen, lieber Pastor, Zucht. Das Fleisch ist schwach, gewiß, aber ...”

In diesem Augenblick kam ein englisches Roastbeef, von dem Sidonie ziemlich ausgiebig nahm, ohne Lindequists Lächeln dabei zu bemerken.<sup>71</sup>

Putting aside the fact that Sidonie accuses a fourteen-year-old girl of indecency, the problem of sexual conduct is presented here as the battle between the “Geist der Zeit” and the discipline over the social rules of self-presentation. What kind of person could be considered moral as a self-signifying subject? What is the nature of the “ghost” that evades intervention? What kind of “schooling” could grapple with it?

What aggravates Sidonie is Cora’s lack of earnestness or “Ernst” in the performance of her identity: she is “acting” like a waitress when she is not. Effi similarly attributes the unsettling nature of Cora to her overly heightened self-awareness as a self-signifying subject. Although the young girl’s poetic appearance, “ganz wie ein Märchen,” fascinates Effi, she is repulsed by the “Eitelkeit” that makes such “ein lebendes Bild”<sup>72</sup> possible. Put shortly, Cora’s “sexual” problem

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<sup>71</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 170-171.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

is that her being is incongruent with her appearance. She performs not what she is or “ist” but as what she could be or “werden können.” The “earnestness” that is at issue here, therefore, seems to be the subject’s attitude towards the gap between *Schein* and *Sein* that occurs in all signifying practices. In Sidonie’s vision, one can be a moral subject only when one’s conduct and one’s being are completely identical.

In the essay *Psychologie der Koketterie* (1909), the sociologist Georg Simmel theorized flirtation as an independent symbolic system, where erotic pleasure is derived from the destabilized relationship between a signifier and its signified. It is a kind of social play, where one expresses sexual interest indirectly in the form of either withdrawal or circumvention.<sup>73</sup> As Michel Foucault’s famous critique of the repression hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) reminds us, however, a repressive atmosphere does not mean the disappearance of expression. In fact, flirtation infinitely expands its discursive realm by rendering everything into potential signifiers for the erotic game, be it a slight turn of the head or a gentle gaze from the corner of the eye.

The dialogic logic of flirtation requires a particular model of semiosis and hermeneutics, where the connotative *Andeutung* prevails over the denotative *Bedeutung*. Its indirect quality, however, distinguishes itself from that of poetic signification, for its final goal is not the creation of symbols whose signifier and signified are brought into a transcendent harmony. Simmel’s

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<sup>73</sup> As Paul Fleming notes, flirtation requires a different power relation from that of seduction: “in the unspoken agreement constituting the full sociable flirt, one freely enters into a game and thus is not really an instrument, is not a “pawn in the game” but merely plays one— consciously, willfully, with pleasure.” See Paul Fleming, “The Art of Flirtation: Simmel’s Coquetry without End,” in *Flirtations: Rhetoric and Aesthetics This Side of Seduction*, ed. Daniel Hoffmann-Schwartz, Barbara Natalie Nagel, and Lauren Shizuko Stone (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 19-30.

example makes this point clear. When a coquette turns away from a man and redirects her attention to various objects such as flowers or animals, the choice of objects is arbitrary; there exists neither metonymical nor metaphorical meaning within the objects selected. Her “turning away” is also anything but synonymous with the intended meaning. One might, in fact, prefer to choose signifiers that cannot easily be attributed to their final signified (sexual interest), as the final goal of flirtation is not straightforward communication but its intensification through the active deferral of meaning.

As this semiotic and hermeneutic errancy produces pleasure of its own, Simmel associates coquetry with the Kantian notion of art where purposiveness takes precedence over purpose. Nonetheless, it can never be understood as a pure aesthetic play, for its pleasure is dependent on the possibility of real sexual consummation. Simmel thus emphasizes that reality or *Wirklichkeit* is at stake in flirtation unlike in art.<sup>74</sup> What it produces is a transient moment, where its participants experience reality not only as what already exists but as what could become real. As he notes, coquetry “ist die Form, in der *Unentschiedenheit des Lebens* zu einem ganz positiven Verhalten kristallisiert ist, und die aus dieser Not zwar keine Tugend, aber eine Lust macht [emphasis added].”<sup>75</sup>

As the textual logic of flirtation defies both the realist aesthetics that asserts a seamless unity between reality and ideality as well as the Prussian society in *Effi Briest* that carries out this

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<sup>74</sup> “Was das innere, man könnte sagen das transzendente Wesen der Koketterie freilich von dem der Kunst scheidet, ist dies, dass die Kunst sich von vornherein jenseits der Wirklichkeit stellt und durch die von ihr überhaupt abgewandte Blickrichtung von ihr erlöst, während die Koketterie zwar mit der Wirklichkeit auch nur spielt, aber doch mit der Wirklichkeit spielt.” Georg Simmel, “Die Koketterie,” in *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays von Georg Simmel* (Leipzig: Verlag von Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, 1911), 115.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 122.

vision socio-politically, it becomes imperative to regulate this “inappropriate” mode of signification. As the previous section has demonstrated, however, the repressive atmosphere created by aesthetic and social *Realidealismus* ironically exacerbated the “ghostliness” of reality by incentivizing people to fake their appearance.

The passage cited at the beginning of the section pokes fun at such hypocrisy of normative idealism by juxtaposing Sidonie’s rant against the sinful “flesh” with her gluttonous enjoyment of “roast beef.” The narrative voice’s ironic distancing from Prussian society, however, does not resolve the ethico-aesthetic conundrum at the heart of the novel: what should one do with one’s symbolic being? What would be an alternative way of living to the oppressively normative *Zucht*?

One can find answers to these questions by observing Effi’s symbolic awakening in the novel. Effi goes through a psychic transformation after her return to Kessin from her parental home in Hohen-Cremmen, where she spent time recovering from her childbirth. As the distance from her husband made her aware of the insincere nature of Innstetten’s virtuous appearance, she provokes him with a claim that he is nothing but “ein Zärtlichkeitsmensch”<sup>76</sup> who hides his real self for the sake of his career. Innstetten responds to Effi’s insult positively, as he realizes that Effi has grasped the foundational rules of social signification: the normative performance of one’s social identity requires a certain level of hypocritical disassociation of the self from itself.

The text indicates that Effi’s symbolic maturation is that of sexual nature by noting how her newly gained self-confidence has turned her into a “kleine Kokette” who possesses “etwas Verführerisches.”<sup>77</sup> As the reunited couple continues their chat on the veranda, they engage in a

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<sup>76</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 137.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

conversation that is “halb ernst-, halb scherzhaft”<sup>78</sup> with Major von Crampas, who is coming back from a swim in the sea. On the one hand, Innstetten reproaches him lightly for his recklessness, reminding him that someone has recently died during a swim. On the other, Effi greets him in a flirtatiously formal tone: “Entschuldigen Sie mich, Major, daß ich so schlecht die Honneurs des Hauses mache; aber die Veranda ist kein Haus, und zehn Uhr früh ist eigentlich gar keine Zeit. Da wird man formlos oder, wenn Sie wollen, intim. Und nun setzen Sie sich, und geben Sie Rechenschaft von Ihrem Tun.”<sup>79</sup>

The absurdity of Effi’s staging of politeness is highlighted by the fact that she gives such performance while casually seated on a swing. Crampas, for his part, responds in a similarly theatrical manner. He responds to Innstetten’s remark with the expression “wer für den Strick geboren ist, kann im Wasser nicht umkommen.”<sup>80</sup> When Effi protests against the crudeness of this expression, he answers that his words are “alles bloß Zitat oder noch richtiger façon de parler.”<sup>81</sup> At the same time, he admits that “doch ... etwas Aufrichtiggemeintes dahinter[steckt],”<sup>82</sup> for he wishes for an “ehrlichen Soldatentod”<sup>83</sup> for himself.

The pleasure in Effi and Crampas’ flirtation arises out of the interplay between the identity and non-identity of extravagant signifiers and the banal signified (“tell us what you are up to” and “I did not die in the sea” respectively). The significance of Crampas’ understanding of such speech as an act of citation or a “façon de parler,” cannot be overemphasized, for his interaction with Effi takes a distinctly literary turn as the novel progresses. In particular, he

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<sup>78</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 138.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.



carefully selects and “cites” romantic literature that shares certain elements of diegetic reality but is significantly different in all other aspects to seduce Effi.

For instance, Crampas recounts the plot of Heinrich Heine’s poem *Spanische Atriden* (1851) in *Romanzero* during his tête-à-tête with Effi at the dunes, where the speaker of the poem learns the story of Peter the Cruel who executed his brother Don Fredrego for having had an affair with his wife Donna Blanka von Bourbon. Although Crampas tells the story as a love triangle gone awry that mirrors their own situation, the citation should be called a creative adaptation at best and willful misinterpretation at worst.<sup>84</sup> The similarity between the stories is limited to the constellation of characters. The main theme of the poem is not romantic love but political cruelty; the speaker is even urged by his neighbor not to believe the popular claim that the murder was motivated by erotic jealousy, for Peter’s real concern was maintaining his reputation and power.

When Crampas orders the coachman Kruse to leave Effi’s drinking glass so that he could take it home, Effi demonstrates that she is capable of flirting back. She jokingly accuses him of taking himself to be the king from Goethe’s poem *Der König von Thule* (1774), where the old king cherishes the golden goblet from his dead beloved or “Buhle”<sup>85</sup> until the moment of his own death. She protests the role to which she is assigned (“zudiktier[t]”) and claims that she “mag

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<sup>84</sup> For more on Crampas’s misquotations of Heine, see Patricia Howe, “William Dean Howell’s Indian Summer and Theodor Fontane’s Effi Briest: Forms and Phases of the Realist Novel,” *The Modern Languages Review* 102, no. 1 (2007): 130-131.

<sup>85</sup> Unsurprisingly, Goethe scholarship has debated whether the fidelity of the king to the *Buhle* is of legitimate nature or not. See Werner Richter, “Der König von Thule und seine Buhle,” *Monatshefte für Deutschen Unterricht* 36, no. 3 (1944): 131-139; Arnd Bohm, “The Tell-tale Chalice: ‘Es war ein König von Thule’ and Orlando Furioso,” *Monatshefte* 92, no. 1 (2000): 20-34.

nicht als Reimwort auf Ihren König von Thule herumlaufen.”<sup>86</sup> Here, Effi is engaging in second-degree flirtation. By staging herself being staged, she accentuates her existence as an empty signifier (“Reimwort”). The couple’s literary play closely resembles the “hedonistic aesthetic” of Barthesian intertextuality where “the Text can be read without its father's guarantee.”<sup>87</sup>

Likewise, Fontane’s aesthetic paradigm follows the “sexual” logic of symbolic ambiguity with its numerous citations of literary tradition. The cited texts in *Effi Briest* function as a field of floating signifiers that are ready to be appropriated, whereby the tension between their identity and non-identity makes further *écriture* possible. For example, the novel’s citation of Goethe’s *Faust* predicts Effi’s sexual transgression and downfall; the senseless violence in Heine’s poem refers to the absurd duel between Innstetten and Crampas. At the same time, it will be clear to the careful reader that the nature of Faust’s sexual desire is radically different from that of the *Damenmann* Crampas and that the violence that Innstetten inflicts on Crampas is riddled with hesitation and uncertainty unlike that of Peter the Cruel. Eric Downing has thus rightfully pointed out Fontane’s style signifies *uncertainly* via omens and “divinatory structures.”<sup>88</sup>

Despite the presence of omniscient third-person narrators, Fontane’s novelistic works are also well-known for their scenes of dialogue whose content does not always have clear narratological significance. Such elements of indeterminate meaning in his works have been interpreted as polyvocality or *Redevielfalt* that transcends the opinions of the author himself as well as the Simmelian *Geselligkeit* that runs parallel to the Kantian notion of purposiveness

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<sup>86</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 158.

<sup>87</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 61.

<sup>88</sup> Eric Downing, *The Chain of Things: Divinatory Magic and the Practice of Reading in German Literature and Thought, 1850-1949* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 146.

without purpose.<sup>89</sup>

What does the “flirtatious” form of signification and the ambiguity it produces do for Fontane’s poetics that aims to rescue the modern subject from the symbolic confusion of its time? One can find the answer to this question by observing how the novel represents Crampas’s “citation” of romanticism. When Crampas explains Heine’s poem *Vitzliputzli* to Effi, he emphasizes how Heine’s ideal of “das Romantische” brings exotic representations of “Liebe” and extreme violence “aus ... gröberen Motiven”<sup>90</sup> together. For Fontane, whose experience of having written ballads as a young poet sensitized him to “the contradictions of romanticism” where “its energi[z]ing capacity to liberate” coexists with “the debilitating seductions of its sentimentality,”<sup>91</sup> such combination is a sign for what he calls the “falsche Romantik”<sup>92</sup> (or “aesthetic ideology” in more contemporary terms), where the “Glanz” of linguistic imagination obscures one’s connection to reality with its “Tendenzen zum Kranken und Manipulativen.”<sup>93</sup>

In contrast, the ambiguity in Fontane’s intertextuality “cites” the symbolic richness of

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<sup>89</sup> Wolfgang Preisendanz, “Zur Ästhetizität des Gesprächs bei Fontane,” in *Das Gespräch*, ed. Karlheinz Stierle and Rainer Warning (München: Fink, 1984), 473-487; Norbert Mecklenburg, *Theodor Fontane: Realismus, Redeviefalt, Ressentiment* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2018); Willi Götschel, “Causerie: Zur Funktion des Gesprächs in Fontanes *Der Stechlin*,” *The Germanic Review* 70, no. 3 (1995): 314-331.

<sup>90</sup> Although true on the level of description, Crampas’s account is a misreading that carefully leaves out the author’s intent. In his depiction of the cannibalistic battle between the Aztecs and Spanish conquistadores, Heine is pointing out how the ideals of a culture, be it money or religion, can serve as a license for violence towards others and how their romanticization might aesthetically legitimize it. By telling this story as a mythical poem, Heine ironizes romanticism in a romantic style—his self-aware romanticism is anything but cruel deception. Crampas’s distortion of Heine emphasizes his moral corruption, not Heine’s.

<sup>91</sup> Patricia Howe, “Heine and the Realists: Theodor Fontane and. Williams Dean Howells,” *Sprachkunst* 39, no. 1 (2009): 33.

<sup>92</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Causerien über Theater*, ed. Paul Schlenther (Berlin: F. Fontane, 1905), 435.

<sup>93</sup> Madleen Podewski, *Theodor Fontane Handbuch*, ed. Rolf Parr, Gabriele Radecke, Peer Trilcke und Julia Bertschik (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 169.

romantic literature without saturating the world with it. To experience something as ambiguous, rather than as intelligible or fantastic, one must become conscious of both the identity and non-identity between one's language and the world. Similarly, Fontane's literary citation, both in its production and consumption, requires a heightened level of discernment that can identify both the sameness and difference between the texts.

If Fontane's intertextuality differs from that of Barthes in *From Work to Text* (1971), it is because the former regards the absence of the "Father's guarantee" not as a symbolic vacuum that allows an infinitely promiscuous play of signifiers but as an openness that must be actively cultivated by individual subjects with earnestness. Once interpreted as an occasion for dialectical participation, the experience of incongruent meaning becomes an opportunity for the subject to reflect on and intervene in signifying processes. Like Simmel's flirtation that makes use of life's biggest adversity—its uncertainty—to produce sexual pleasure, Fontane's pluralistic text encourages the readers to be "interested" in their symbolic life.

Fontane resists the temptation to degrade all language as "bloß Zitat" and denounce all speech as arbitrary performances that have no basis in reality. Such pessimism would give a license to the non-sensical transgression that cynically exploits the symbolic potency of literary language—like Crampas's seduction of Effi. The novel thus ultimately condemns Crampas, who understands his moral cynicism as a kind of heroism against oppressively normative society, because he knows only how to abuse language but not use it.

In this view, the subject's identity as an object of signification is also something that must be continually rethought and rearticulated. This is why sympathetic figures in *Effi Briest* prove their moral integrity by daring to act "out of character." The only person that remains faithful to Effi throughout the novel is her servant Roswitha, whose Catholicism is associated with cultural

superstitions and backwardness. Effi's father with a fontanesque fondness for "Zweideutigkeiten"<sup>94</sup> gathers up the courage to summon his outcast daughter back home despite the possibility of his own social alienation. In Fontane's world, the Father asserts authority by *breaking* the law with a disciplined mind. Transgressing the boundaries of one's social identity is as legitimate as its normative upkeep, insofar as they both tend to the openness of reality in good faith with a capacity for discernment.

The modernity of Fontane's realism lies in its awareness that the social reality of the here and now can no longer be represented as a static object: what you see is often not what you get. When one ignores the demand of this spectral reality for a new way of interpretative engagement, even more vicious forms of subjectivities will thrive. The novel illustrates how such a culture breeds passive-aggressiveness, cynical and insincere morality, and the mortification of the self. To rescue the modern subject's inner life that continues to be hollowed out, Fontane offers a way of thinking of meaning and identity as a dialectical process that requires the participation of the subject. Due to its deviation from the indexical and referential use of language, Fontane's realist representation cannot be called mimetic in a strict sense. However, it may be said that it maintains *a fundamentally mimetic relationship* to the openness of reality.

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<sup>94</sup> Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 333.

## Chapter II

### Robert Musil: Identity as Non-rationality

Robert Musil's magnum opus *Man without Qualities* (1930-1943) begins with a scene of doubling, where its characteristically ironic narrative voice juxtaposes two different styles:

Über dem Atlantik befand sich ein barometrisches Minimum; es wanderte ostwärts, einem über Rußland lagernden Maximum zu, und verriet noch nicht die Neigung, diesem nördlich auszuweichen. Die Isothermen und Isotheren taten ihre Schuldigkeit. Die Lufttemperatur stand in einem ordnungsgemäßen Verhältnis zur mittleren Jahrestemperatur, zur Temperatur des kältesten wie des wärmsten Monats und zur aperiodischen monatlichen Temperaturschwankung. Der Auf- und Untergang der Sonne, des Mondes, der Lichtwechsel des Mondes, der Venus, des Saturnringes und viele andere bedeutsame Erscheinungen entsprachen ihrer Voraussage in den astronomischen Jahrbüchern. Der Wasserdampf in der Luft hatte seine höchste Spannkraft, und die Feuchtigkeit der Luft war gering. Mit einem Wort, das das Tatsächliche recht gut bezeichnet, wenn es auch etwas altmodisch ist: Es war ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres 1913.<sup>1</sup>

The pseudoscientific jargon that opens the book parodies the epistemological language of causality. To coordinate temperature and humidity, Russia, the Atlantic Ocean, and Venus observe the rules of astronomy as a collective in this atmospheric cosmos. What characterizes this normative parlance of the "Jahrbuch" is its stabilizing authority, which obliges the world to conduct itself or "entspricht" according to its system.

Literary language, condensed in a single phrase "a beautiful day in August," introduces a sense of indeterminacy into this organized sphere: what happened on this day? Does it matter that it is the year 1913? What does the adjective "beautiful" imply? One may argue that the form of poetic language, unlike that of science, cultivates contingency instead of containing it. By claiming that this ambiguous sentence portrays or "gut bezeichnen" the situation just as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2020), 9.

its epistemological counterpart, the text confronts the reader to reflect on what it means to represent something.

The tension between these two forms of perceiving and representing the world continues in the following pages of the novel, where an anonymous lady and her companion witness a man hit by a truck in the streets of Vienna. To soothe his upset partner, the gentleman demonstrates that nothing extraordinary has happened. He first explains that the braking system in bigger cars often makes it difficult for them to quickly come to a halt; he then goes on to cite the statistics on the average number of yearly car accidents (190,000 people die and another 450,000 are injured). Even though the lady does not fully comprehend the significance of such statements, it is sufficient for her that the gentleman's technical explanation gives a sense of "eine Ordnung" so that the situation would no longer concern her "*unmittelbar* [my emphasis]."<sup>2</sup>

These opening passages illustrate how the identifying logic in scientific rationality subdues intensive subjective emotion (be it curiosity, shock, or fear) by creating a critical distance between the subject and its object and by demonstrating the "naturalness" of the observed event. As the title of the chapter "Woraus bemerkenswerter Weise nichts hervorgeht" suggests, however, one enjoys the comfort of this "objective" form at the price of affective impoverishment. The world of knowledge is where nothing new happens and no new feelings are experienced. Subjectivity becomes degraded as a mundane function of *homo economicus*, for whom life becomes merely something to be managed according to a given manual.

The German title of the novel, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, crystallizes the problem of modern life that Musil's philosophical and literary oeuvre seeks to address. In the rationalist

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<sup>2</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 11.

worldview of modernity, the subject's identity or *Eigenschaft*—which once carried the wholistic meaning of a defining character and personality—no longer functions as an orienting principle. As Theodor Adorno demonstrated in his critique of identity thinking, the coherence it affords is experienced less as a totality that guarantees a fulfilling life and more as an externally enforced norm that can never become one's own or "eigen." Irrationalism, which gained purchase as an alternative *Weltanschauung* during this period, was a reaction to this dire vision of a reified and fragmented life. Be it Nietzschean vitalism or Ludwig Klage's mysticism (which becomes parodied in the novel), this modern version of romanticism asserted the supremacy of an esoteric life force that can liberate individuals from the rationalized form of identity.<sup>3</sup>

Would it be possible, however, to lead an unbounded life of "lack, negativity, and multiplicity"<sup>4</sup> without a sense of identity? And if the desire for identity cannot be eradicated for the human subject, how could one build one that does not devolve into an alienating imposition? Musil searches for an answer to these questions in the notion of form. As one can witness in his frequent use of formulations like *Form*, *Formel*, and *Gestalt* as a literary, psychological, and social logic of structuring, this term plays a key role in understanding his notion of identity as an organizing principle. While discussing the novel with an acquaintance, Musil even drew an explicit comparison between writing a narrative and building a life as the stylistic matter of form, of *giving the right form to something* to be exact. His own struggle to tell a compelling story, he

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<sup>3</sup> For Musil's paradoxical double disidentification from idealism and romanticism, see Bence Nanay, "Dethroning of Ideocracy: Robert Musil as a Philosopher," *The Monist* 97, no. 1 (2014): 3-11. Also see Steven E. Aschenheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 51-84.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Jonsson, *Subject without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 265.



claimed, runs parallel to the protagonist Ulrich's challenge to find himself an identity that could give a proper shape to his life.<sup>5</sup>

As the competing "forms" of language in the opening chapter of *The Man without Qualities* demonstrate, however, he could not help but entertain certain ambivalence in regard to the notion. On the one hand, he insists on its indispensability for human life, for the human being exists as "eine liquide Masse, die geformt werden muss."<sup>6</sup> In the essay *Literat und Literatur* (1931), he goes so far as to attribute the modern cultural malaise to the civilization's failure to build "lebenserleichternde[] Formen und Formeln."<sup>7</sup> At the same time, his aversion to the notion of the formulaic or the *Formelhaftigkeit* comes through in his claim that all arts strive and should strive to demolish inherited forms.<sup>8</sup> How does this paradox become resolved in his philosophy and literary works?

This chapter will demonstrate how Musil fashions a new framework of identity by bringing rationalism and irrationalism into balance. Instead of thinking of identity as a fixed category that needs to be either upheld or abolished, he conceives it as a functional form that maintains a balance with its environment by flexibly (but not arbitrarily) altering itself according to a given context. As so-called "non-rational" or "nicht-ratioïd"<sup>9</sup> domains of thought, art and ethics offer a privileged space where the subject can experiment with its identity by considering

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Musil, *Briefe: 1901-1942*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 498.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978), 2: 1348.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1220.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1137-1153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1028.

what it *has been* in the intelligible *Wirklichkeit* and what it *could be* in the not-yet-intelligible *Möglichkeit*.<sup>10</sup>

I will also illustrate the central place of eroticism in Musil's philosophical and literary works that makes this reconceptualization possible. As an experience where the boundaries between the self and the other become redrawn, the Musilian logic of erotic "love" conceives identity as a sameness that always already contains the possibility of a transformation into a different being. Once envisioned as a dynamic process, identity exists no longer as a "thing" that the subject either accepts or resists but as an orientation device that demands the subject's continual participation.

Musil's "critical realism"<sup>11</sup> diagnoses how the increasing calls for strict enforcement or transgressive destruction of identities during his time as well as the growing fantasies of boundary-demolishing violence such as war, rape, and murder originate from the impotence of his time to apprehend the radical transformability of identities, be it social, gender, or national. By imagining a malleable form of identity that moves between the realms of the real and the possible, Musil's non-rational formalism seeks to sensitize the subject to the "erotic" pleasure that plays with the ambivalence of the modern condition instead of overcoming it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth J. Boa, "Austrian Ironies in Musil's 'Drei Frauen,'" *The Modern Languages Review* 63, no. 1 (1968): 131.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 246.

## 1. N to N+1: Identity as Transformation

In his notebooks, Musil once expressed a desire to live according to “eine nicht von a bis z festgelegte Ordnung, sondern eine im Schritt von n auf n+1.”<sup>13</sup> What kind of identity and morality would be able to provide the subject with a sense of order that does not foreclose the possibility of change? Using the metaphor of equilibrium or the “Gleichgewicht,”<sup>14</sup> Musil conceives self-orienting subjectivity as a continual process of finding and readjusting the rules for conduct in a constantly changing world without the fantasy of transcendence. The subject’s identity, in this view, becomes a movement of creating and recreating an equilibrium rather than a thing that one possesses and manifests. As there exists no ideal point of reference for such enterprise, the task of artists and ethicists becomes that of an inductive invention rather than deductive reasoning.

The following section will trace two opposing lines of arguments in Musil’s philosophical engagement with moral and aesthetic theories of his time to illustrate how he imagines a form of subjectivity whose malleable identity is aligned with neither normative rationalism nor anti-normative irrationalism. In his critique of traditional morality, Musil problematizes how the assumed “objectivity” of moral categories cannot help but exacerbate the modern experience of alienation, whereby his commentary on contemporary aesthetic thought warns against the valorization of expressive feelings as the subject’s irrational praxis of freedom. By examining the antagonistic relationship between idealistic and romantic attitudes, Musil articulates a different way of conducting oneself. Instead of resorting to dogmatism or relativism,

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976), 653.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

Musil reflects on how art and ethics do not simply *conform* to different sets of norms but also *transform* them.

The peculiarity of Musil's conceptualization of morality and ethics is well known. *Robert-Musil-Handbuch* notes how his definition of ethics does not neatly fit into existing philosophical categories, and many scholars have commented on its non-foundational nature.<sup>15</sup> Patrizia McBride, for example, argues in *The Void of Ethics* (2006) that Musil searches for “an ethos that is paradoxically founded on the insight into the impossibility of articulating a permanent ethical foundation for the modern world;”<sup>16</sup> Hans Feger similarly claims that Musil articulated a morality that “sich ... machtvoll nach allen Seiten Handlungsspielräume offen hält (und dadurch auch erst legitimiert)” but lacks “insgesamt in Richtungsziel;”<sup>17</sup> Tim Mehigan underscores its dynamic nature where “das Leben ermahnt nicht mehr zur treuen Befolgung gewisser moralischer Gebote, die lebenslänglich auf jedem einzelnen Menschen lasten, sondern überführt ihn in eine Welt permanenter Bewegung.”<sup>18</sup>

In his diary entries as early as in the 1920s, Musil remarks how the study of morality has been conceived as an epistemological enterprise that analyzes prominent values of society and organizes them into a singular system. While its synthesizing gesture that brings “eine vorgefundene und übernommene Existenz sittlicher Sätze” into a “logische Ordnung”

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<sup>15</sup> *Robert-Musil-Handbuch*, ed. Birgit Nübel and Norbert Christian Wolf (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2016), 612.

<sup>16</sup> Patrizia McBride, *The Void of Ethics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Feger, “Terror und Erlösung,” in *Terror und Erlösung: Robert Musil und Der Gewaltdiskurs in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Hans Feger, Hans Georg-Pott, and Norbert Christian Wolf, München: Fink, 2009, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Mehigan, “Moral und Verbrechen,” *Wirkendes Wort* 45, no.2 (1995): 233.

demonstrates a certain intellectual rigor, he claims, its method is fundamentally redundant, for it “fügt den Werten keinen Wert, sondern ein System hinzu.”<sup>19</sup>

Further, its supposed objectivity is built on shaky ground. On the one hand, universality and replicability, which are essential to natural sciences, do not apply to the moral domain. Musil’s particularistic view contends that it is impossible to make a moral judgment based on fixed principles alone and that the claim of objectivity by moral scholars can never achieve the same validity as that of natural scientists.<sup>20</sup> In the fragmentary text *Die gesuchte Moral*, for example, he notes how one not only condones murder but valorizes it in a state of emergency like that of war. The duel as a social practice has required it, and one’s mental state, be it intoxication or disability, makes it difficult to hold the person accountable.<sup>21</sup> The pseudo-objectification of normative rules cannot help but reify and distort the moral world, for it makes abstractions exclusively from existing customs and practices under the false assumption that they are eternal truths.

On the other, the treatment of moral principles as objectivity leaves the problem of the participation of the subject unaddressed. As one can notice in the verbs Musil uses to designate morality (*hinzufügen, bringen, vorfinden, and übernehmen*), he views the traditional understanding of morality as fundamentally external, and thereby foreign to subjectivity. How could morality motivate the subject into action, if it is conceived as a purely rational system that requires all subjective emotions to be extinguished? Is truth per se capable of arousing the

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<sup>19</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 645.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Musil’s moral particularism, see René Brouwer, “Musil’s Search for Ethics,” *Monatshefte* 104, no. 4 (2012): 511-526.

<sup>21</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1305. One may remember from the earlier chapter how Fontane also thematizes the untimeliness of duel as a moral practice in Innstetten and Crampas’ resigned attitude in *Effi Briest*.

affective engagement of the subject? Or should acting morally be understood as a violent act of subjugation of the bestial self by the rational one as Sigmund Freud suggested with his concept of superego?

Similar to Friedrich Nietzsche in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), Musil intuits the existence of an underlying impulse within the subject that comes prior to morality. What various “Formen”<sup>22</sup> of moral categories like good, evil, and duty ultimately try to establish, he claims, is “ein Gefühlsgleichgewicht zwischen sich und der Welt” rather than a system of knowledge. In other words, the subjective need for orientation is what endows urgency to all moral inquiry. Therein lies the paradox of conventional morality: the rules for conduct that should serve as a guide for the subject inverses the hierarchy and demands absolute submission from the subject. What is of interest to Musil in his moral and ethical investigation is, therefore, not establishing an ideal “Typik” of various moral acts but sketching possible networks of relations that could create a right balance between the subject and its surroundings. In contrast to Nietzsche, who believes that the driving force of life can only materialize in the violent relationality of the “Aneignung, Verletzung, [and] Überwältigung des Fremden,”<sup>23</sup> Musil claims that forms of life that can orient the subject may be “unendlich” diverse.

Incorporating loosely defined “subjective[] Bindungen” and “anonyme[] Kräfte”<sup>24</sup> into his analysis, Musil deploys the framework of *Gefühl* to explore this experiential field. Emotion is a peculiar phenomenon that occurs at the boundaries of the subject and its object: it is neither something that arises purely out of the subject nor is it a foreign externality that intrudes on the

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<sup>22</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1004.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1984), 179.

<sup>24</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 645.

subject. As Sabine Döring explains, Musil highlights the evaluative nature of emotion as a specific type of mediation:

... to experience fear is, so to speak, to view the world fearsomely. Which is not to say that the subject's worldview is fearsome, but that his first-order thoughts, perceptions, etc. are organized into the Gestalt which is the second-order emotion, thereby shaping the subject's worldview in terms of the valences that things have for him; and that is: to focus the subject's view on the features that, taken together as a whole, make things appear fearsome, shameful, disgusting, etc. to him.<sup>25</sup>

Emotion metabolizes various objective impressions into an affective experience, which in turn influences the perception of the objective world. The dynamic nature of emotion both as a subjective state (“Zustand”) and an objective process (“Vorgang”<sup>26</sup>) helps the subject orient itself internally and determine its conduct externally, aligning the subject with the object with which it engages.

In contrast to the subject of knowledge that maintains a strict distance from its object, that of emotion blurs the line between them. Musil thus notes that one *is* one’s “Gefühle” while one only *has* “Vorstellungen.”<sup>27</sup> Ulrich, the protagonist of *Man without Qualities*, similarly describes emotion as a paradoxical experience where the “tiefster Zwang” and “höchster Freiheit”<sup>28</sup> become intimately combined in the experience of the self. The impossibility of locating the singular origin of emotion, however, does not mean that it is formless and unanalyzable. Although one cannot study it as a thing, one may approach it holistically as a *Gestalt* that consists of interactions between subjective and objective factors.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sabine Döring, “What is an Emotion? Musil’s Adverbial Theory,” *The Monist* 97, no. 1 (2013): 56.

<sup>26</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1302.

<sup>27</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 661.

<sup>28</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 1421.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Musil’s engagement with Gestalt theory, see “Gestalttheorie” in *Robert-Musil-Handbuch*, 534. “Anhand des gestalttheoretischen Ansatzes bezeichnet Musil den Menschen

Love becomes a privileged form of emotion in Musil's ethical reflection as a capacious experience that can structure both individual conduct and social relations. In his diary entry *zu-Liebe-tun* from the 1920s, he contrasts the experience of love to the logic of the "Rationalismus-Kapitalismus"<sup>30</sup> by pointing out how a lover "will ... die Geliebte nicht besitzen, sondern mit ihr gemeinsam in der neu entdeckten Welt leben." The affective shift from "habenwollen" to "schenkenwollen" suspends the common form of interpersonal relationality as a binary structure, where the self as the subject desires the other as an object of difference to be appropriated.

Love provides "eine komplette Weltorientierung" that is truly novel, for the binarism between the self and the other itself becomes undone. As the subject of love neither treats its love object "als Besitz" nor subsumes it "im Ich,"<sup>31</sup> it surrenders its privileged status as the sovereign originator of action and liberates the object from the passive position. Further, the destabilized relationality between the subject/self and the object/other opens up a space for a different mode of organization based on the buoyant principle of "sich Bewegenmüssen" to maintain the right "Gleichgewicht." During this process, the subject's identity becomes reformulated from something that is internally coherent to that which allows difference within itself.

Musil's conception of art as "ein geheimnisvoll schwellendes und ebbendes Zusammenfließen unseres Wesens mit dem der Dinge und anderen Menschen"<sup>32</sup> shares the concern of his ethical feelings, as it explores the subjective nature of aesthetic experience

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nicht als eine mit festen Eigenschaften ausgestattete Substanz, sondern als eine dynamische Gestalt, deren Erscheinungsformen, Wirkungen und Bedeutung sich erst in Bezug auf das Umfeld erschließen lassen. Als prägnante Gestalt hebt sich das Individuum vom Umfeld stark ab, als diffuse Gestalt geht es dagegen im Umfeld auf, wie das z. B. in einer Masse der Fall ist."

<sup>30</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 650.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Musil, *GW*, 2:1144.



whereby conventional relationalities between the subject and the objective world become challenged and rearticulated. Because it mirrors the tension between ethics and morality, art for Musil serves as a reflective process of endless transformations where the subject creates a new way of living “objectively” while establishing a new “subjective” identity.

As scholars have pointed out, the dynamic worldview of Musilian ethics and aesthetics does not promise a utopia that is free of all conflict. Musil’s repeated use of the adjective *anders* to describe the ethical experience suggests that it is merely different from the forms of life that exist right now.<sup>33</sup> What the “Versuch einer unstarren Moral”<sup>34</sup> instantiates, instead, is closer to what the philosopher Michel Foucault has called heterotopia, a “contre-espace” where “des lieux ... s’opposent à tous les autres, qui sont destinés en quelque sorte à les effacer, à les compenser, à les neutralizer ou à les purifier.”<sup>35</sup> This alternative space—be it textual or real—occasions a kind of spatiotemporal détente where the ordinary form of conduct and relationality simply becomes suspended.

It is also important to note that Musil does not seek to upend the logic of the so-called “objective” rationality per se like postmodern theories, which interrogate its blind spots and inconsistencies.<sup>36</sup> In an unpublished fragmentary text from the 1930s, he makes it clear that the truth of rationality “soll ja nicht relativ” and “den Stimmungen u Strebungen des Geistes entrückt

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<sup>33</sup> *Anders* was also the name that Musil gave to the figure who would eventually become Ulrich in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

<sup>34</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 660.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, “Les heterotopies,” in *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper: Zwei Radiovorträge* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), 40.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Freed thus calls Musil’s peculiar attitude “nonmodern.” See Mark M. Freed, “Robert Musil’s Other Postmodernism: Essayism, Textual Subjectivity, and the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 44, no. 3 (2007): 231-253; Mark Freed, *Robert Musil and the Nonmodern* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

(nicht subjektiv) sein.”<sup>37</sup> After all, the irony in the opening paragraph of *Man without Qualities* functions only because the two contrasting forms are assumed to have an equal footing. Instead, Musil’s critique of rationality aims to show that the modern problem of orientation cannot be solved exclusively by rational thinking.

What Musil aims to discover in his ethico-aesthetic experiment is also not absolute freedom where the autonomous subject liberates itself from all forms of binding. Rather, it seeks to invent new types of arrangement between the subject and its world. Conceived in this way, ethics and aesthetics become a hybrid enterprise, whereby their rational study of reality culminates in the invention of a not-yet-rational form of life. Identity is nothing but a provisional product of this perpetual self-renewing process of subjectivity: it is made only to be re-made.

In contrast to Musil’s critique of morality, his reflection on aesthetic theories of his time in the essay *Ansätze zu neuer Ästhetik* (1925) problematizes sociopolitical implications of irrationalism, which came into fashion as a reaction to the modern experience of alienation. In this review essay on Béla Baláz’s *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (1924), what becomes the object of Musil’s critique is Baláz’s media-theoretical thesis that locates the ethical potential of cinema to imagine a radically new “ungewohnte[s] Leben” in its sensuousness or “optische[r] Einsamkeit.”<sup>38</sup>

In the cinematic experience, Baláz argues, humans and objects become placed on the same representational plain as sensuous signifiers thanks to the technology of visual isolation (Baláz is writing only about the silent film). Because the immediacy of images allows them to be

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<sup>37</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1433.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1142.

experienced by the viewers before they become intelligible via abstract thinking, the identities of represented objects become liberated from the conventional chain of signification and the logical hierarchy between them radically destabilized. For Baláz, the value of cinema lies within this representational transgressiveness.

Musil responds to this theory of cinematic sensuousness in two steps. First, he argues that all arts strive to intervene in life by creating “ein anderes Verhalten zur Welt”<sup>39</sup> or what he famously calls the other condition or *der andere Zustand*. This creative disturbance or the “Gleichgewichtsströrung des Wirklichkeitsbewußtseins”<sup>40</sup> is not media-specific but a “Grundvermögen jeder Kunst.”<sup>41</sup> Even in classical aesthetics (by which he means the idealist tradition) that denied art a real social “purpose,” art has always signified a certain departure from ordinary reality.<sup>42</sup>

He proceeds to point out how “zeitgenössische[] Anstrengungen”<sup>43</sup> such as cinema, dance, and painting fantasize about transcending the rational attitude of modernity by creating a “unmittelbares Verhältnis zu Schöpfung.”<sup>44</sup> To create the feeling of immediacy, they deploy signifiers that remain on the level of a gesture without a clear indexical function. Characterized by their non-identity or “Gegenstandsfreiheit,” these expressive signifiers are regarded as sensuous resistance against the normative signifying system in their refusal to contain a

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<sup>39</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1141.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1140.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1145.

<sup>42</sup> Musil’s argument that Kantian aesthetics is responsible for the denigration of arts remains questionable. In any case, Musil interprets the negativity in the idea of purposiveness *without* purpose as a gesture of renunciation of participating in the life of reality.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

preexisting signified. From this perspective, literature is deemed an overly rational medium that cannot overcome its identity thinking as easily due to its abstract nature.

As a writer devoted to the art of literature, Musil condemns the “allzu optimistischer ‘Befreiungsversuch’”<sup>45</sup> of this new wave of aesthetic theorizing as “verworren und korrupt.”<sup>46</sup> Not only does it stage a pseudo-conflict between abstract intellect and aesthetic immediacy (signifiers, after all, are not reality) but also unnecessarily privileges everything that falls under the category of the latter. The belief that the performative play of signifiers can bring real change, in particular, becomes mocked as delusion: “[man wollte] diesen Satz [Kleider machen Leute] in dem viel gebrauchten Sinn wörtlich nehmen, daß man tanzend, filmend oder wie immer kunstgebärend und ‘expressiv’ ein von Grund aus anderer Mensch wird als durch die Druckerschwärze. Man wird es nicht.”<sup>47</sup> Unguided aesthetic expression that conducts itself “unabhängig vom Verstand”<sup>48</sup> fails to initiate a revolutionary change in the real world because it neglects the task of art that can actually transform reality, namely the expansion of the horizon of meaning.

In his defense of literature, Musil insists that reification should not be regarded as the essential quality of reason and language. More importantly, he emphasizes that the resistance against this process cannot be formless. The disturbance prompted by art is “niemals selbständig,”<sup>49</sup> for it does not destabilize meaning for the sake of destruction; it does so to produce an “andre[s] Seelengleichgewicht.” To do this, aesthetic production, like ethical

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<sup>45</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1147.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1145.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1148.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1147.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1140.

reflection, should aim for “aktive Wesensbestimmung” by trying out “eine besondere Begrenzung und Gruppierung des gewöhnlichen Lebensinhalts:”<sup>50</sup> one must experiment with identities and meanings, not abolish them.

In the fragmentary text *Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom* (1923), one can observe how the ethico-aesthetic problem of identity as the matter of “unser[em] geistige[n] Sein” is also directly relevant to the socio-political context:

Es hat sich ein Meer von Klagen über unsre Seelenlosigkeit ergossen, über unsre Mechanisierung, Rechenhaftigkeit, Religionslosigkeit ... [Die Heilung] wird ganz allgemein regressiv gesucht; in der Abkehr von der Gegenwart. Dem entbundenen Menschen wurden die alten Bindungen empfohlen: Glaube, Vorwissenschaftlichkeit, Einfachheit, Humanität, Altruismus, nationale Solidarität, staatsbürgerliche Unterordnung ...<sup>51</sup>

If the problem of the modern aesthetic movement of “reines Empfinden und Fühlen”<sup>52</sup> lay within its desire for sensuous *jouissance* that explodes all intelligible identities, that of socio-political movements was to be found in its tendency to find regressive attachments by either idealizing the past or valorizing empty abstractions. Neither option is satisfactory for art and ethics, as their essence lies within their capacity to imagine new forms of binding that do not exist in the present. An ethical and aesthetic subjectivity capable of “aktive Wesensbestimmung” does not refuse a positive identity for the sake of the fantasy of immediacy. It seeks to intervene in the world through a “unaufhörlicher Umformung und Erneuerung des Bildes der Welt und des Verhaltens.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1147.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1381-1382.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1140.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1152.

## 2. Transgressions: The Logic of Non-Identity in *Die Vollendung der Liebe*

Musil's early expressionist novella *Die Vollendung der Liebe* from the series *Vereinigungen* (1911) is a text where Musil's peculiar synthesis of ethics, aesthetics, and eroticism becomes manifest in the most bombastic (and thereby the clearest) manner. The following section will demonstrate how the transgressive logic of the *Gleichnis*, whereby the identity of a word—its meaning—becomes undone by encountering another word, structures the text's thematic, semantic, and narratological organization.

Four disintegrations run parallel to each other in the text: the female protagonist Claudine's identity, "rational" narrativity of causal progression, the moral categories of fidelity and infidelity, and indexical meaning of words. While these explosive experiences suggest the possibility of a self-driven life where the alienation in the rational world would be put into an end, the novella also self-reflexively comments on the limits of its negative form. I will illustrate how Musil associates the novella with "feminine" subjectivity, both of which are defined by the incapability to articulate an alternative identity to what they deconstruct. The ambivalence around this creatively destructive non-identity, I contend, motivates Musil's literary oeuvre from his very first novel all the way to his final work.

*Vereinigungen* has enjoyed notoriety for its anti-narrativity both at the time of its publication and over the years in the scholarship. Musil himself made a programmatic claim that the novellas originated from his "Ekel am Erzählen"<sup>54</sup> and lamented how they were still bound to

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<sup>54</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1314.

the form of a “Buch.”<sup>55</sup> In a sense, his anti-project was successful: it was met with a lukewarm to hostile reception that deemed it unreadable and incomprehensible.<sup>56</sup>

Musil’s rhetorical pretense of radical opposition to narrativity, however, conceals his bigger ambition. His interest did not lie in the abolishment of narration for its own sake. In the same manner that he separates ethics from morality, Musil goes through a reassessment of different components in narratives to bring attention to one essential element that has been overshadowed by the “objective” organization of events: subjective emotion.

Musil chooses the novella as a textual site for his narrative experimentation due to the nature of its form. In contrast to the unboundedness of novels, where “eine lange hin alles an sich saugende [Erregung]”<sup>57</sup> prevails, the compactness or “ein schicksalsgebener schmaler Raum”<sup>58</sup> of the novella allows the author to highlight the intensity of the represented experience, where “[die Welt] vertieft sich plötzlich ... oder seine Augen [des Dichters] kehren um.”<sup>59</sup> As Musil conceives the essence of the genre as the distillation of what he calls the other condition of aesthetic experience, his reflection on novellas addresses not only the technical problem of what and how something might become represented in a particular form but “das Problematische des Erzählens”<sup>60</sup> about what narratives can and should do.

According to Musil, the limited textual space in the genre exposes the internal conflict between “das bloße Hinstellen von Gestalten” and “die Darstellung des wenig gegliederten

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<sup>55</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 347.

<sup>56</sup> Andrea Erwig, *Waiting Plots* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 286.

<sup>57</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1465.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1323.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1465.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1323.

Gefühls”<sup>61</sup> that is present in all narratives. What he calls “das bloße Hinstellen” here are “external” elements like the plot, which is built on a series of outward actions, and figures, who embody an essence by being a homogenous character. If the traditional mode of narration produces affect by arranging such externalities into a sequentially “rational” order, Musil attempts to inverse the aesthetic hierarchy by exploring how “irrational” internal feelings might determine the course of events.

This programmatic reorientation, however, does not lead to a complete abandonment of narration based on the chronological flow of time. Musil, in fact, notes that building a robust temporal chain as an “Unterbau”<sup>62</sup> is always recommended. What he calls the realm of *Gefühl* merits exploration insofar as it can elucidate how subjective feelings may drive the plot and develop characters. Not only are feelings alone “an Qualitäten arm,” but also “die paar Unterschiede, die es in der Qualität und Dynamik der Gefühle gibt, sind unbedeutend.”<sup>63</sup> What interests him is the possibility of building a novel textual logic where an uncertain feeling can suddenly motivate the figures to throw themselves into an unforeseeable course of action.

It is important not to equate this Musilian synthesis with the monistic worldview of Hegelian philosophy, as Monika Schimdt-Emans explains in the essay *Das Doppelleben der Wörter* (1993). What is at its stake for Musil is not “die metaphysische Behauptung eines ontischen Zusammenhangs aller Dinge” but “Modalitäten menschlicher Erfahrung, denen

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<sup>61</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1326.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1311.

<sup>63</sup> This is why Musil rejects artistic movements like expressionism as well as schools of thought like the *Lebensphilosophie* that valorize irrationality and affects as a guiding principle.



zufolge die Wesenheiten als verbunden darstellen.”<sup>64</sup> His artistic ambition is in demonstrating how a certain affective state can condition us to see the world differently and how this experience can afford us “in dieser komplizierten wechselwirkenden Synthese eine überraschende Bedeutung.”<sup>65</sup> The wish to transcend the existing chain of causality and establish a fully motivated identity, as Marie Louise Roth notes, is fundamentally an ethical desire.<sup>66</sup> In Musil’s literary experimentation, both the thrilling pleasure of such transformative subjectivity and its tendency to fall into the traps of irrationality is thematized.

As Musil envisioned it in its preparation, conventional narrative elements are stripped to the bare minimum in the novella *Die Vollendung der Liebe*. The plot is straightforward: a woman named Claudine travels to a distant village to visit her daughter in a boarding school and commits adultery with a man whom she encounters during her travel. The characters show little to no development. Not only does the text refuse to identify Claudine’s love interest with a name, but the reason behind the sexual transgression itself appears insufficient: she finds the man, who is only addressed by his social title *Ministerialrat*, obnoxious and repulsive.

Textual orientation remains extremely difficult throughout the text despite the simplicity of the plot and characters, as the events give the impression that they happen out of nowhere. The sense of arbitrariness is palpable on the level of syntax, where the sentences that describe Claudine’s external action are reduced to the simplest structure of subject-verb-complement. (“Sie aß leicht zur Nacht.; sie legte sich nieder; sie saß dann im Speisezimmer.”) As these

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<sup>64</sup> Monika Schmidt-Emans, “Vom Doppelleben der Wörter: Zur Sprachreflexion in Robert Musils ‘Vereinigungen,’” in *Robert Musil - Dichter, Essayist, Wissenschaftler*, ed. Hans-Georg Pott (München: Fink, 1993), 104.

<sup>65</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1326.

<sup>66</sup> Marie Louise Roth, “Robert Musil zum Problem der Ethik,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 9, no. 3/4 (1976): 1-34.

accentuated sentences are strategically placed after thick descriptions of her incomprehensible inner experience, the reader becomes uncertain why and how any of the events occur.

Instead of locating the justification for the protagonist's action in the plot, characters, and the passage of time, the text displaces it to the complex nature of her sexual feelings.

At the first glance, Claudine's peculiar sexuality may appear to be what one might call masochism: she is excited by the dirty carpet in her hotel room that reeks of strangers' odors; she wonders if she should commit sodomy; she fantasizes about surrendering herself to the "gleichgültigen fremden Macht"<sup>67</sup> as she has done before. Claudine's account of her feelings at the beginning of the novella, however, indicates that the pleasure she experiences does not come from being a submissive sex object:

Erinnerst du dich ... als du mich vor einigen Abenden küßtest, wußtest du, daß da etwas zwischen uns war? Es war mir etwas eingefallen, im gleichen Augenblick, etwas ganz Gleichgültiges, aber es war nicht du und es tat mir plötzlich weh, daß es nicht du sein mußte ... Ich hätte dich nehmen mögen und in mich zurückreißen ... und dann wieder dich wegstoßen und mich auf die Erde werfen, weil es möglich gewesen war... Ja, das war damals, als ich dann plötzlich unter dir zu weinen begann; wie du glaubtest, aus Übermaß der Sehnsucht, mit meinem Fühlen noch tiefer in deines zu dringen. Sei mir nicht böß, ich mußte es dir sagen und weiß nicht warum, es ist ja nur eine Einbildung gewesen, aber sie schmerzte mich so ...<sup>68</sup>

What excites her is not debasement but the self-reflexive awareness of her destabilized existence, whereby one's plastic identity exists both as a passive object and an active agent in the *Gefühl* of love. By losing control over herself, she realizes that she can become something other than herself. This radical openness of Claudine's identity makes her particularly vulnerable to

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<sup>67</sup> Robert Musil, *Vereinigungen: Zwei Erzählungen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 38.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

committing infidelity, for she believes that she can be “für alle da ... und doch nur wie für einen.”<sup>69</sup>

The quoted passage balances the verbs of activity where she is the subject (*nehmen*, *zurückreißen*, *wegstoßen*, *werfen*, and *dringen*) and those of passivity that places her in the position of the object (*küssen*, *einfallen*, *wehtun*, *weinen*, *fühlen*, and *schmerzen*) to illustrate this experience. Claudine’s final ecstasy, which culminates in the divine “Vorstellung ihrer Liebe,”<sup>70</sup> is also triggered not by the kiss from the *Ministerialrat* (she says, in fact, she is disgusted) but by the realization that she has unconsciously yet voluntarily switched from the *Sie*-address to *du*-address in the heat of the moment.

The rapturous pleasure in the half-autonomous and half-submissive self leads to an unconventional state of consciousness, where not only the subject’s identity but also that of the object becomes undone. This double vision, where “es stehen ... alle Dinge plötzlich zweimal da,”<sup>71</sup> enacts what Musil calls “das Wesentliche am ethischen Erlebnis” where the possibility of a radically different life becomes palpable. The text deploys the *Gleichnis*, which includes both metaphors and similes, to represent this transformative state of active passivity and passive activity.

In the speech he gave for Rainer Maria Rilke’s memorial service in 1927, Musil notes that the unusual combination of words in the figurative language of the *Gleichnis* enacts the experience of the “Mystik,” as the expansion of meaning in poetic signification mirrors the subjective experience where one’s identity becomes transported and transformed in unexpected

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<sup>69</sup> Musil, *Vereinigungen*, 67.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 12.

ways. One can notice how he consistently conceives this peculiar pleasure in terms of eroticism in his claim that “die vom gewöhnlichen Denken getrennten Sphären der Wesensgattungen scheinen sich zu einer einigen Sphäre zu vereinen [my emphasis]”<sup>72</sup> in Rilke’s poetry.

The peculiar nature of the *Gleichnis* dictates that a union between words be sustained only as they remain separate. The semantic expansion in poetic language and the affective intensity it entails can be experienced only when both the sameness and difference between words are grasped. When such a union becomes a unity, it devolves into either insanity or tautology (A is B cannot mean A is literally B). In Musil’s metaphorization of the *Gleichnis* as a person who “umarmt das ernste Leben” but “denkt dabei zuweilen an eine andere,”<sup>73</sup> one can see that Claudine’s adultery is the literalization of the metaphorical workings of language. In her sexual ecstasy, one may argue, Claudine experiences herself as a language that connects to the world in unexpected ways. Because the transgression of meaning in metaphors complements rather than contradicts the normative (or indexical and referential) meaning, she can claim that her adultery is the “Vollendung” of her love for her partner.

One needs to examine no further than two examples of Musil’s figurative language to see how the other 335 saturate the novella with the dizzying effect.<sup>74</sup> When Claudine purposelessly walks around the village where her daughter’s school is located, for instance, she experiences how “in der lautlosen Stille schien für einen Augenblick alles Sichtbare in irgendeinem andern

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<sup>72</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 1237.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 1238.

<sup>74</sup> Dorrit Cohn, “Psyche and Space in Musil’s *Die Vollendung der Liebe*,” *The Germanic Review* 49 (1974): 157.

Sichtbaren sich wie ein Echo zu wiederholen.”<sup>75</sup> Linguistic vertigo in this extended comparison is induced by a metaphor, a simile, and a preposition.

First, the use of the preposition *in* makes the auditory stillness (*die lautlose Stille*) serve as a container for the ocular experience (*das Sichtbare*). The ocular, in turn, is converted back to the auditory through a simile (*wie das Echo*), which also stands in an oppositional relation to the initial state of silence. This double inversion becomes further reinforced by the metaphorical use of the verbs that signify the ocular and auditory experience (*scheinen* and *sich wiederholen*). This experience of fluctuating meanings makes Claudine experience the ocular (*das Sichtbare*) as an unfamiliar kind of visibility (*das andere Sichtbare*).

The term stillness (*die Stille*) reappears in a passage that describes Claudine’s train ride to her daughter’s village, where she suddenly feels surrounded by “das körperlose Schwanken der Stille.” This compact metaphor brings three words together, whereby the meaning of each modifies that of others: the silence is equated with the term vacillation (*das Schwanken*) by the use of genitive and alliteration, whereby the auditory and kinetic nature of the words becomes interchangeable. The adjective *körperlos* that qualifies the noun vacillation further complicates this already precarious binary relation, for movements can occur only in the presence of a body. What would the word stillness mean if it becomes a movement, specifically a movement that occurs without a body? As each word cancels out the meaning of the other two, one can no longer securely identify the essential meaning of each word.

Only from these two examples, one can not only “know” how the concept of *Stille* becomes altered but also “feel” the surreal experience where soundlessness becomes a corporeal

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<sup>75</sup> Musil, *Vereinigungen*, 39.

sound. Despite the potential in the erotically metaphorical experience of “ein zitterndes Auflösen aller scheinbaren Gegensätze”<sup>76</sup> to create new forms of language as well as new identities, one big question remains unanswered in the novella: are all ethical states bound to devolve into a pathological frenzy like that of Claudine?

While scholars like Burkhard Dohm have pointed to the radically androgenic nature of Claudine’s actively passive sexual identity, others like Stephanie Bird have criticized Musil’s representation of a masochistic woman in a non-ironic style.<sup>77</sup> Is Claudine’s sexual experience tied to her sex/gender? If so, what would be its significance? These questions merit further exploration as Musil’s ambivalent valorization of femininity as a deconstructive force is relevant not only to Musil’s understanding of the novella as a genre but also to his philosophical reflection on the notion of ethical identity in modernity.

Musil’s choice to represent the female protagonist’s sexual ecstasy as a paradigm for ethical and aesthetic experience—albeit a pathological one—is not a coincidence. The potential of femininity to liberate itself from the normative chain of signification as well as its inability to turn its insight into a sustainable praxis has been hinted already in Musil’s first novel *Die Verwirrung des Zöglings Törleß* (1906).

The precedent for the Claudine figure in Musil’s first novel is the homosexual boy Basini, whose scandalous subjectivity fascinates the protagonist Törleß. The *Institutionsroman* follows the story of Basini who gets caught in the act while stealing from other students by his

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<sup>76</sup> Musil, *Vereinigungen*, 63.

<sup>77</sup> Burkhard Dohm, “Gender und Gewalt in Robert Musils *Die Vollendung der Liebe*,” in “*Alle Welt ist medial geworden.*” *Literatur, Technik, Naturwissenschaft in der Klassischen Moderne*, ed. Matthias Luserke-Jaqui (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), 181-199; Stephanie Bird, “Masochism and Its Limits in Robert Musil’s ‘*Die Vollendung Der Liebe*,’” *The Modern Language Review* 100, no. 3 (2005): 709-722.

brutal classmates Reiting and Beineberg. These two figures, who represent masculine forms of identity thinking, self-declare themselves as Basini's juridical and moral authority and secretly take control over his experimental "education." Törleß remains a distant observer of this abuse, terrified by their sadistic degradation of Basini and perplexed by Basini's interiority that shows no sign of conventional moral consciousness—or consciousness *tout court*.

Despite Törleß's tireless interrogation, Basini fails to properly articulate what motivates his transgression. He neither feels any remorse for his action nor registers the sexual and non-sexual violence from his abusers as anything more than an inconvenience. He seems to enjoy the whole process, in fact, while insisting on the absolute necessity of his action, be it theft or sexual submission. Like that of Claudine, Basini's conduct is determined by the sudden appearance of a *Gefühl*, whereby his identity dissolves into non-identity. This experience of indeterminate subjectivity is what makes him believe that his action "geschieht im Augenblicke" and "es kann ... gar nicht anders geschehen."<sup>78</sup>

Basini's homosexual subjectivity is strongly associated with stereotypical femininity.<sup>79</sup> He speaks with "einer weibischen, buhlerischen Betonung," and his body "von einer keuschen, schlanken Magerkeit" lacks "fast jede Spur männlicher Formen."<sup>80</sup> In contrast, Reiting, Beineberg, and Törleß's "homosexual" attraction to Basini remains "heterosexual" insofar as they are drawn to Basini's strange, submissive femininity. Reiting goes so far as to punch Basini

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Musil, *Die Verwirrung des Zöglings Törleß* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2013), 161.

<sup>79</sup> Homosexuality as a phenomenon of gender inversion was a common trope at the beginning of the twentieth century when the novel was published. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's model of homosexual subjectivity as the female soul in a male body (*anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*) had already been developed in the nineteenth century and gained traction with Magnus Hirschfeld's notion of *das dritte Geschlecht*.

<sup>80</sup> Musil, *Törleß*, 152.

to turn him into a suffering “woman” as part of the abuse, believing that he cannot be sexually “weich und zärtlich” towards other men.

While Basini’s feminine sexuality makes him the victim of the masculine order, his lack of masculine consciousness turns him into a kind of superman who nonchalantly transgresses its moral boundaries. Could Basini, however, ever come to an understanding of himself as an ethical agent? Like Stephanie Bird, Scott Spector has raised skepticism against the viability of the homosexual subject in the Musilian framework, for its valorized status as the figure of the abject undercuts the possibility of any rehabilitation:

His [Törleß’s] ruminations about the imaginary number give way to the fantasy of projecting himself into the homosexual body; not to penetrate it, as the sadistic schoolmates are doing, but to be it, and at the same time not entirely to lose himself. Törless interrogates Basini mercilessly to get the latter to reveal the spectacular moment of crossing over, but the pitiful monster knows no such revelation. There is no membrane between self and loss of self where there was no self to begin with.<sup>81</sup>

While Musil’s view on gender and sexuality is indeed different from that of the popular discourses of the time that “were trying to decide whether it was male or female qualities that were valuable,”<sup>82</sup> the limits of feminine sexuality are marked by the narrative voice in *Die Vollendung der Liebe* as well. Despite the radically novel nature of Claudine’s ethico-sexual non-identity, the text explicitly states that her decision to commit adultery is based on “der tiefen Unsicherheit der seelischen Werte,”<sup>83</sup> and that her conduct is valid “nur in einer eigentümlich verkehrten Vernunft.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations*, 246.

<sup>82</sup> David Luft, *Eros and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil, Doderer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 132.

<sup>83</sup> Musil, *Vereinigungen*, 55.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



Feminine sexuality as a paradigm remains ambivalent for Musil because it cannot translate itself back to the *Normalzustand* and produce an alternative positive identity. After all, Basini and Claudine's ethical ecstasy results in petty criminality and banal infidelity that had already become a clichéd plot device in literary tradition. Considering that masculine sexuality is aligned with the sadistic orientation devoid of ethical imagination, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue that Musil prioritized one over the other.

The novella as a genre is condemned to a similar destiny. In Musil's gruesome metaphor of the novella as an aborted fetus, one can see how its anti-narrative potential to represent the intensity of the subjective ethical experience is undercut by the limited textual space that hinders its objective unfolding.<sup>85</sup> Because he associates femininity with the inability to create a fully developed alternative identity, it is no surprise that he populates his other novellas, including the series *Drei Frauen* (1924), with mysterious women who appear superior but remain silent.<sup>86</sup> Musil's criticism of "sensuous" arts as an impotent play of signifiers in the *Ansätze* essay, which was published a decade after *Vereinigungen* and half a decade before *Man without Qualities*, may thus be best read as a self-critique of his novellas in preparation for his final novel.

### 3. Incest and Irony: The Textual Identity of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*

Due to the vast spectrum of its philosophical themes and the social phenomena it represents, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* has often been referred to as a novel of ideas. Its open

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<sup>85</sup> "Die Novelle ist ein Roman zum Fötus entwickelt und dann abortiert." See *Robert-Musil-Handbuch*, 665.

<sup>86</sup> For a discussion of Musil's engagement with femininity in other novellas, see Sophie Salvo, *The Articulation of Difference: Imagining "Women's Language" between 1650 and the Present* (PhD Diss., Columbia University, 2017).

form where analytic prose, ironic commentary, and fictional narrative coexist has invited diverse interpretations ranging from the stylistic study of essayistic writing to poststructuralist readings.<sup>87</sup> When asked a similar question by the Austrian writer Oskar Maurus Fontana, Musil gave an ambivalent answer. While claiming that he planned to give an account of how the Great War came to happen, he insisted that what interested him was neither “die reale Erklärung des realen Geschehen” nor “die Tatsachen” but a possible “geistige[] Bewältigung der Welt.”<sup>88</sup>

The novel observes how the destructive thirst for murder, rape, and war during this time was triggered by the modern subject’s contradictory desire to possess a fully determined identity and to live an unalienated life without normative restrictions. Having been conceived as a static category, identity was considered an object that requires either normative reification or anti-normative annihilation during this period. The following section will demonstrate how Musil’s dual interest in “das geistig Typische” and its specific historical manifestation in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* aims to develop an alternative way of thinking of identity to counteract the violent fantasies of the modern subject.

The transformative malleability of Musilian identity, which takes the form of sameness that always already contains difference within itself, is represented in the text on two different levels. On the level of content, Ulrich and his sister Agathe’s incestual eroticism experiments with an interpersonal desire where the sameness within the other and the difference within the self are explored as a tool for mutual transformation. In contrast to the sexual passion of

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<sup>87</sup> Birgit Nübel, “Möglichkeitssinn und Essayismus” in *Robert-Musil Handbuch*, 719-724; Hartmut Böhme, *Natur und Subjekt* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1988); Walter Moser, “Diskursexperimente im Romantext zu Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*,” in *Robert Musil: Untersuchungen*, ed. Uwe Bauer and Elisabeth Castex (Athenäum Verlag: Königstein, 1980), 170-197.

<sup>88</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 942.

gendered subjectivities, the siblings' "hermaphroditic" union and their permeable identity dispense with destructive fantasies that can imagine the self's reaching out to the other only as a transgressive act of brutal appropriation.

On the level of form, what Musil calls "constructive" irony fosters a way of thinking where the subject both identifies with and disidentifies from the object by recognizing the sameness and difference between them. In the alternating experience of sympathy and contempt for the represented figures, the reader of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* is compelled to participate in the text's reflection on the existing forms of identities and those that are yet to be invented. In Musil's textual world, modern utopia is no longer imagined as a fantastic place of the subject's final redemption but as an experimental field where it may continually seek out the possible—and real—transformation of its identity.

Musil's unfinished novel is structured according to two seemingly heterogeneous logics. On the one hand, it is largely driven by the protagonist Ulrich's endlessly cynical observations of Viennese society and its desperate efforts to find a definitive Austrian identity that could compete with that of its Big Other, Germany. On the other, it tells a strange "love" story between Ulrich and his "forgotten" sister Agathe, whose private nature seems to stand in stark contrast with the public and political nature of the so-called *Parallelaktion* that is taking place in the outside world.

What should one make of this strange incestual eroticism? Is it "a normal heterosexual affair"<sup>89</sup> that searches for a new arrangement of masculine and feminine modes of existence once one moves past the provocative signifier? Should one be tempted to read it biographically as a

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<sup>89</sup> Philip Payne, *Robert Musil's 'The Man Without Qualities': A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 182.

fictionalized justification for Musil's relationship with his wife Martha Marcovaldi, which began as an illegitimate liaison? Or does this bond belong to the category of pathological desire like that of figures like Basini, Claudine, and Moosbrugger? The significance of the bond between Ulrich and Agathe may be best grasped when one analyzes it as a model of relationality that makes a different kind of identity possible.

Like their sociopolitical counterpart, the brother and sister try to build a life with an identity that is fitting for modern times. Unlike the nationalist participants of the *Parallektion*, however, they imagine identity not as a categorical sameness that can only be defined by excluding difference. This becomes the clearest in the novel's depiction of Ulrich and Agathe's gendered subjectivities.

At the first glance, the text seems to conceive Ulrich and Agathe as heterosexual representatives of masculinity and femininity respectively. Ulrich the mathematician is a hypermasculine figure who possesses the "Kampflust," "Sportsinn," and "Erfindungsgabe im Überwinden von Schwierigkeiten;"<sup>90</sup> Agathe, in contrast, is introduced as someone like Claudine who cannot give a proper shape to her life due to her feminine "Gesetzlosigkeit."<sup>91</sup> While both figures suffer from a lack of ethical orientation, their binary genders lead to two different kinds of unhappiness.

For Ulrich, the problem lies within the impossibility of a motivated life in the rational worldview. His attempts to affectively enrich his life by becoming "ein bedeutender Mann"<sup>92</sup> have miserably failed, and his aspiration to experience something as subjectively valid or

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<sup>90</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 681.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 746.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

“gültig”<sup>93</sup> makes him search for a possible solution no matter how criminal and absurd the required act might be. As Ulrich’s existential crisis forces him to accept that an unguided action will never satisfy him, however, he decides to retreat from life and suppress the “Tatkraft” in search of a proper “Tatsinn.”<sup>94</sup>

In contrast, Agathe experiences everything to be of “Gleichgültigkeit.”<sup>95</sup> Although she understands herself as a lazy woman, she is characterized by her vigorous nature. This is because, unlike Ulrich, she can commit to action even in the absence of a rationally articulated justification. Her ability to irrationally immerse herself in the present, nonetheless, is experienced as a compulsion that leaves her powerless. For example, her rushed marriage with professor Hagauer after her first husband’s death was prompted by neither sincere feeling nor serious reflection, resulting in a deep sense of dissatisfaction. Once she reunites with her brother Ulrich at their father’s funeral, she thus decides to leave her husband on the spur of the moment. This pattern of behavior repeats itself at the very end of the novel, where she abruptly abandons Ulrich to follow a moralizing schoolteacher named Lindner, whom she encounters by chance during her walk.

The rigid binary essentialism between the masculine order and feminine chaos, however, does not apply to the brother and sister under closer scrutiny.<sup>96</sup> In the sketches of the *Anders*

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<sup>93</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 738.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 741.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 744. Musil’s peculiar use of the term *gleichgültig* is consistent and significant. He combines its meaning as indifferent, apathetic, and unimportant with the meaning of *gleichgültig* (equally valid). Agathe’s action might be unreflected and meaningless, yet she feels completely united with it. This term also repeatedly appears in *Die Vollendung der Liebe* to describe Claudine’s inner state.

<sup>96</sup> *Man without Qualities* and its male protagonist have been nevertheless often praised for being “masculine” by critics. On the history of the reception of the novel, see Ulrich Boss, “Ein Autor

figure, who served as a model for Ulrich, Musil writes that he is “ein sehr männlicher Mann” and “ein Frauenoberer und Frauenjäger” who is “muskulös, kühn, abenteuerlustig, umsichtig.”<sup>97</sup> At the same time, Musil curiously adds that he desires women not as a man but as a “Frau”<sup>98</sup> and that his exaggerated heterosexuality is defined by its “Schwesterlichkeit.”<sup>99</sup> Ulrich’s gender inversion even becomes explicitly thematized in the novel, where young Ulrich sees Agathe dressed in a velvet dress and feels a sudden urge to become a girl.

Similarly, Agathe’s androgynous nature is highlighted throughout the novel. Ulrich senses that there is “etwas Hermaphroditisches”<sup>100</sup> in her so that he feels that she is “verkleidet” when he sees her “als Frau gekleidet”<sup>101</sup> for the first time after their reunion. Agathe’s mysterious aura is enhanced by her nonchalant attitude that fuses the masculine and feminine traits of being “eigensinnig” and “nachgiebig.”<sup>102</sup> Most importantly, she is distinguished from the pathological figures of feminine abjection like Claudine and Basini in her awareness that acting without meaning makes her only “unglücklich.”<sup>103</sup>

The similarity as well as the difference between the brother and sister may give the impression that Musil is following the footsteps of Sigmund Freud and Otto Weininger by arguing for the ideal of the couple as a consummated form of universal bisexuality. However, the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe is characterized not as a unity of two complementary

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von ‘Hypertropher Virilität,’” *Musil-Forum - Studien zur Literatur der klassischen Moderne* 33 (2014): 125-141.

<sup>97</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 612.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 686.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 694.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 678.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 737.

beings. When Ulrich reflects on how his sister is a “traumhafte Wiederholung und Veränderung seiner selbst,”<sup>104</sup> he is fascinated not by how she is his “other half” but by how her irreducible difference is experienced as his own identity.<sup>105</sup>

The following scene where Agathe finds herself changing with Ulrich’s help illustrates how the erotic tension between them originates from a relational logic that conceives the self and the other not as potentially hostile binary opposites that complete each other:

[Agathe] empfand, während er [Ulrich] in ihrem Rücken hantierte, ohne schwesterliche Eifersucht, ja mit einer Art Annehmlichkeit, daß er sich vorzüglich in Frauenkleidern zurechtfinde, und sie selbst rührte sich mit lebhaften, von der Natur des Vorgangs geforderten Gebärden.

Ulrich fühlte dabei, nahe an die bewegte zarte und doch satte Haut ihre Schultern gebeugt und aufmerksam dem ungewohnten Geschäft ergeben, bei dem sich ihm die Stirn rötete, von einer Empfindung umschmeichelt, die sich nicht recht in Worte fassen ließ, man hätte denn sagen müssen, daß sein Körper ebenso davon angegriffen wurde, daß er eine Frau, wie daß er keine Frau in nächste Nähe vor sich habe; aber man hätte ebensogut auch sagen können, daß er zwar ohne zu zweifeln in seinen eigenen Schuhen stand, sich aber dennoch aus sich hinübergezogen fühlte, als sei ihm da selbst ein zweiter, weit schönerer Körper zu eigen gegeben worden.<sup>106</sup>

The pleasure that Ulrich and Agathe experience is not “hetero-sexual” in that the other is not posited as that which signifies difference. Agathe feels intimate with Ulrich not despite but because of his graceful familiarity with women’s clothing (the German expression *sich zurechtfinden in* makes it further difficult to differentiate whether he feels at ease *in* women’s

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<sup>104</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 694.

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of Ulrich and Agathe as hermaphrodites, see Leon L. Titcher, Jr. “The Concept of the Hermaphrodite: Agathe and Ulrich in Musil’s Novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*,” *German Life and Letters* 23 (1970): 160-168; Carl E. Findley III, “Hermaphroditism, Liminal Eroticism, and the Classical Influence in Musil *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 44, no. 3/4 (2011): 33-53. For the history of androgyny in the German context, see Catriona MacLeod, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

<sup>106</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 898.

clothing or *in the matter of*), and Ulrich feels that he does not possess Agathe's body in his hands but becomes it himself.

In this "homo-sexual"<sup>107</sup> constellation, the status of the self as the agentic subject also becomes reformulated. One's freedom does not come from the assertion of the self over its object: Agathe finds herself touching herself in a manner that corresponds to the "Natur des Vorgangs" rather than to her own will. Similarly, Ulrich feels "ergeben" to the task of helping her, while noticing that he is "angegriffen" by the experience. In a posthumously published portion of the novel, a similar dynamic appears where Ulrich helps Agathe change for an "Abendunterhaltung" and suddenly feels the urge to lift her in his arms. The brother and sister become so enthralled by the moment that "trotz der Kraft, die alles erforderte, und des Zwangs, den Ulrich auf seine Schwester ausgeübt hatte, kam ihnen das, was sie taten, merkwürdig entlegen von Kraft und Zwang vor."<sup>108</sup>

Ulrich and Agathe's "homo-erotic" transformation also makes their gender difference loses its oppositional force. To borrow Ulrich's words, their diverging identities become "vielleicht so wie ein Pastell einem Holzschnitt."<sup>109</sup> As difference becomes articulated qualitatively rather than rationally, one no longer feels the need to establish a strict hierarchy or claim mutual exclusivity between them. Because Ulrich begins to experience the alternating

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<sup>107</sup> I am using the term "homo-sexual" and "homo-erotic" following Leo Bersani's concept of homo-ness. See chapter four for the discussion of queer theory. Also see Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Philip H. Beard has also noted the "homosexual" nature of the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe as early as in the 70s. See Philip H. Beard, "Clarisse und Moosbrugger vs. Ulrich und Agathe: Der 'andere Zustand' aus neuer Sicht," *Modern Austrian Literature* 9, no. 3/4 (1976): 114-130.

<sup>108</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 1082.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 745.



experience of identity and difference within himself as pleasure, he exclaims that his love for Agathe is nothing but the love for himself or his “Eigenliebe.”<sup>110</sup>

This homo-erotic form of relationality between Ulrich and Agathe runs parallel to the textual logic of the *Gleichnis* found in *Die Vollendung der Liebe*, whereby pleasure is produced by a radical blurring boundary between identities. In contrast to Claudine’s stunted ethical experience that remains on the solipsistic level of syntax and semantics, however, Ulrich and Agathe’s sibling love attempts to develop a sustainable praxis of living together based on mutual recognition with a non-binary identity that defies preexisting scripts of life based on gender. As one may realize from Agathe’s self-reflection that questions whether her relationship with Ulrich is nothing but a “Mondscheinromantik,”<sup>111</sup> however, the possibility of applying this contemplative form of life to the macroscopic level of social and political organization will remain a problem for the couple as well as for the novel.

As the title of the second volume *Ins Tausendjährige Reich (Die Verbrecher)* suggests, the novel stages Ulrich and Agathe’s utopic striving in a way that it is threatened to devolve into criminality. Unlike in the first book where only “Seinesgleichen geschieht,” one can observe significant ethical transformation and moral transgression of the couple. This transition is occasioned by the moral vacuum created by their father’s death, which forces the couple to decide on what to do with his parting words.

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<sup>110</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 899. This view on love is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s interpersonal ethics in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003). Individual differences between subjectivities may be overcome through the mutual acknowledgment of the traumatic identificatory process of subjectivation, which makes giving a full account of oneself impossible. If the recognition of the universal vulnerability of the subject is the ultimate ethical goal for Butler, Musil’s ethics is more invested in finding an alternative (or “another”) mode of life based on ongoing contemplation of identity and difference.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 1086.

Since Agathe is determined to leave her Hagauer to begin a new life with Ulrich, she forges the father's will so that her husband would not inherit anything. The text portrays

Agathe's criminal act with an emotional intensity that matches that of the *Geschwisterliebe*:

Es schwebte eine Gerechtigkeit mit Flammen statt mit Logik um sie ... aber das Unrecht, das in diesem Augenblick um sie selbst schwebte, war so, wie wenn die Welt im Licht eines Sonnenaufgangs ertrinkt. Es kam ihr vor, es wären Recht und Unrecht nicht mehr allgemeine Begriffe und ein für Millionen von Menschen angerichtetes Kompromiß, sondern zauberhafte Begegnung von Mir und Dir, Irrsinn erster, noch mit nichts vergleichlicher und an keinem Maß zu messender Schöpfung.<sup>112</sup>

Ulrich is both fascinated and terrified by Agathe's incomprehensible *tour de force* that suspends and transcends the binary logic of good and evil in order to actualize a not-yet-intelligible life with him. Nonetheless, Ulrich ultimately remains ambivalent about Agathe's action. As the figure of rationality, he cannot accept that "man etwas ganz Unbegründetes für recht hält" and "gar ein Entschluß wie aus dem Nichts entsteht," for the risk of falling into a "krankhaften oder schadhaften Anlage"<sup>113</sup> remains too high.

In a fragmentary text titled *Das Verbrecherische Liebespaar: Die Geschichte zweier Unglückliche Ehen*, Musil reflects on the potentials and limits of criminality by reflecting on a real case in Berlin, where a young woman named Elli Klein murdered her husband at her lover Margareta Nebbe's suggestion.<sup>114</sup> What fascinates him in this lesbian love story is how "sich der außen verbrecherische Gedanke innerlich ununterscheidbar als ein edles Gefühl der Liebe anfühlt."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 798.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 956-957.

<sup>114</sup> Similar to the case of Christian Voigt, who served as a model for Moosbrugger, mass media sensationalized this event. Alfred Döblin fictionalized this story in *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (1924).

<sup>115</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 671.

While Klein and Nebbe's desire for a different life may be indeed ethically motivated, it immediately devolved into a violent transgression of the norm when the freedom it seized failed to become properly mediated through thought and action.<sup>116</sup> Noticing this paradoxical destiny of unguided ethical feelings, Musil writes that "man sollte sich bei Verbrechen solcher Art mehr denn je fragen, welchen Teil der Schuld die Gesellschaft an ihnen trägt, indem sie es so weit kommen läßt. Ein energischer Verbrecher enthält zwar mehr Schlechtes als ein schwacher Guter, aber auch mehr Keime des Guten."<sup>117</sup>

Arno Höcker rightfully argues that Musil deploys the trope of criminality in *The Man without Qualities* to highlight the ethical nature of the other condition that escapes the capture of existing discursive practices. The figure of Moosbrugger, a so-called sex murderer who evokes the morbid curiosity of the Viennese society, points to the limits of "the order of discourse that aims to define and constitute the case as *Lustmord* without leaving any room for ambiguity, and the emblematic and unreasonable world of suddenly occurring events, which have their place in literature."<sup>118</sup>

At the same time, the novel unmistakably differentiates Moosbrugger's fanatic murder of a prostitute from the gentle love between Ulrich and Agathe. Ulrich's fascination with him dissipates when he realizes what fascinated him was not criminality itself but the similarities

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<sup>116</sup> This is why Musil conceives Ulrich and Agathe's homo-sexual relationship as a pseudo-lesbianism. As Karsten Uhl explains, it was feminine sexuality that was understood to be capable of a criminal action with ambiguous moral motivation due to the nature of feminine passion. The case of Elli Klein was considered an exemplary case. See Karsten Uhl, "Verbrechen als Liebe – Liebe als Verbrechen. Kriminologie, Literatur und die historischen Grenzen des Sagbaren," in *Bündnis und Begehren. Ein Symposium über die Liebe*, ed. Alexandra Tischel and Andreas Kraß (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2002), 229-244.

<sup>117</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 671.

<sup>118</sup> Arno Höcker, *The Case of Literature: Forensic Narratives from Goethe to Kafka* (Cornell University Press, 2020), 204.

between the emotions they experience, and the ironic narrative voice makes it clear that the enthusiasm of the Viennese society around Moosbrugger is also not of genuine nature; it is motivated mostly by boredom, which makes people want to hear “endlich einmal Interessantes.”<sup>119</sup> The only person who is sincerely interested in him is Ulrich’s Nietzschean friend Clarisse, whose compulsive obsession with him grows so extreme that she almost commits herself to a mental institution.

What fundamentally divides the pathological nature of Moosbrugger’s murderous ecstasy from what Musil calls love is the difference in the formal dynamics between the self and the other. The text states that the perverse transformation of Moosbrugger’s heterosexual attraction into hatred or “Abneigung”<sup>120</sup> of women began to take place during his childhood when he could not talk to the girls he desired. The distance from the other sex led him to fantasize about women not merely as the signifier of difference but as the absolute other. This in turn endowed him with a hermetically sealed identity, whereby he maintained a sense of superiority or “ein stärkeres und höheres Gefühl von seinem Ich.”<sup>121</sup>

The motive for his criminal act lies within his inability to register difference as anything other than a hostile opposition to the self. On the night of the murder, Moosbrugger experiences the prostitute who follows him on the street as an externality that is “unverwundbar”<sup>122</sup> and threatens to forcibly penetrate his subjectivity. As his version of identity does not allow any kind of difference to exist within himself, he reacts to what he perceives as a foreign element by

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<sup>119</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 69.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

blindly stabbing her “bis er sie ganz von sich getrennt hatte.”<sup>123</sup> This act of passion paradoxically triggers the ecstatic experience of the other condition, for the boundary between the self and other becomes collapsed through the annihilation of the other. The yearnings of Claudinian figures for a suicidal shattering of the self in Musil’s works may be interpreted as the negative version of Moosbrugger’s pathological subjectivity.

In contrast to Ulrich and Agathe’s erotic contemplation where sameness and difference become freely exchanged, the other condition materializing in reality remains vulnerable to the risk of becoming a violent struggle between the self and the other. This is because physical reality as a world of things easily reinstates the binary separation of the subject from its object. Similarly, the world of jurisdiction and morality demands an “objective” distinction between good and evil: the father’s will must be either obeyed or disobeyed. This danger is why, as Walter Fanta notes, the love between Ulrich and Agathe never becomes “real” in physical sexuality and remains on the level of dialogue.<sup>124</sup> In face of such threats, Musil’s aesthetic and ethical project seeks to create a third space, where the insights from the other condition might become actualized without the obligation to inherit violent forms shaped by the predetermined binary order.

While the novel remains uncertain about how to actualize a non-binary mode of life on the level of content (so much so that it was left unfinished), its formal style performs a possible mode of the “geistige Bewältigung” of the world that goes beyond identity and non-identity thinking. Scholars have often noted that the novel switches its tone between the first and second

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<sup>123</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 74.

<sup>124</sup> Walter Fanta, “Liebe als Narrativ: Über den Ausgang der ‘letzten Liebesgeschichte’ bei Robert Musil,” *Musil-Forum* 30 (2007/2008): 54.

volumes.<sup>125</sup> The sarcastic voice that makes biting observations about pre-war Vienna retreats, and narrative in its conventional sense begins to take its course with Agathe's introduction. The contrasting styles of relativizing distance and immersive earnestness in the two volumes, however, constitute the defining characteristic of Musil's so-called "constructive"<sup>126</sup> irony, where the narrative voice both distances itself from and sympathizes with the represented world. The reflection that this technique enacts is critical in its analysis of the status quo and utopian in its effort to make changes in the textual reality. With a formal logic that switches back and forth between identification and disidentification, the novel illustrates a way of conceiving identity as dialectical hovering.

While literary irony, as Gunther Martens notes, is often considered a "Form der Distanzierung"<sup>127</sup> whose evaluative function possesses a certain "Machtfaktor"<sup>128</sup> over its subject matter, Musil explicitly distinguishes his version from that of satirical derision. For him, irony is not a "Geste der Überlegenheit" but a "Form des Kampfes."<sup>129</sup> One must note two things here. First, the term *Kampf* implies that the author must be willing to implicate himself in the represented world so that his own being would also be at stake. This type of "battle," however, differs from that of war insofar as it requires the speaker to relinquish belligerence based on the

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<sup>125</sup> Philip H. Beard, "'Beginn einer Reihe wundersamer Erlebnisse': Prüfstein einer Umwandlung in Musils Gebrauch von Essayismus und Ironie," in *Robert Musil. Essayismus und Ironie*, ed. Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch (Tübingen: Francke, 1992), 105-114; Joseph P. Strelka, "Zu den Funktionen der Ironie in Robert Musils Roman *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*," in *Robert Musil: Essayismus und Ironie*, ed. Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch (Tübingen: Francke, 1992), 37-47; Imgard Honnef-Becker, "Ironie und Satire" in *Robert-Musil-Handbuch*, 741-745.

<sup>126</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 1939.

<sup>127</sup> Gunther Martens, *Beobachtungen der Moderne in Hermann Brochs Die Schlafwandler und Robert Musils Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: Rhetorische und narratologische Aspekte von Interdiskursivität* (Fink: München, 2006), 112.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>129</sup> Musil, *GW*, 2: 941.

assumption of one's superiority. Musil writes that it is only an author who regards an imbecile whom he represents and recognizes himself in him may be said to possess a proper sense of irony.<sup>130</sup> Second, this analytic mode cannot function as a vague gesture; it requires clarity to accurately identify similarities and differences between the speaker and the object of discourse.

Conceived as the opposite of the "Besserwisserei,"<sup>131</sup> Musilian irony becomes a simultaneous process of identification and disidentification. Its relativizing techniques observes similarities and differences among the minds of represented characters to imagine an alternative mode of life in modernity. One can see how this shares some of the concerns of Friedrich Schlegel's notion of romantic irony, which "shift[s] a term from one context to another in order to determine the limits of its applications, the measure of its particular truth"<sup>132</sup> while its negative function of "disrupting aesthetic illusion"<sup>133</sup> as a construct becomes deemphasized.

This is because the most urgent problem of modernity for Musil is not the contingency in the forms of life, thought, and history but the impotence of his time that cannot produce any. For "das menschliche Wesen" is just as capable of the "Menschenfresserei" as the "Kritik der reinen Vernunft,"<sup>134</sup> the failure to develop a proper form will have fatal consequences—after all, the novel tries to give a "formal" account of why the Great War happened. In response, *The Man without Qualities* takes on an ambitious dual project that satirizes the defunct moral world of contemporary society and imagines new forms of binding that may replace it.

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<sup>130</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 1939.

<sup>131</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 973.

<sup>132</sup> Gary Handwerk, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Marshall Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 213.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>134</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 361.

The ironic logic of the novel becomes best exemplified in a chapter titled *Heilige Gespräche*, where Ulrich reflects on cultural products that have afforded “divine” experiences of the Other Condition throughout history with Agathe. The story of Christian saints Hubert and Saint Eustace, for example, deployed a supernatural image of the crucifix surrounded by the antlers of a deer to signify the encounter with the sacred. In modern times, Vincent van Gogh’s paintings and Rainer Maria Rilke’s poems have achieved similar effects of otherworldliness.

Ulrich claims that these aesthetic forms are never absolute, their potency notwithstanding. They are doomed to become obsolete, or worse, commercialized; he sardonically notes how van Gogh’s works have become “eine ausgezeichnete Kapitalsanlage” for the women of noble society and mocks the outdatedness of the German sensibility of the *Waldeinsamkeit* as the “Edelochsentum des ungekochten Naturgenusses.”<sup>135</sup> When Agathe reproaches him for his merciless sarcasm, Ulrich responds that he mocks such works because he loves them himself. He says: “ich spotte nur weil ich es liebe.”<sup>136</sup>

Considering how Ulrich derides cultural fetishes that try to bring forth the other condition, it may be surprising to know that his (and the novel’s) irony follows the same logic as the works he ironizes. In the reflexive process of identification and disidentification in ironic signification, one experiences the pleasure of the boundaries between the self and the other becoming undone: I see myself in the object, and I see the object in me. Ulrich thus cannot help but identify with those who enjoy kitsch. Put simply, irony becomes self-reflexively ironized in *The Man without Qualities* as another iteration of the other condition.

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<sup>135</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 752.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*



Because the novel understands Ulrich and Agathe's reflective eroticism, the *Lustmord*, and even Austrian nationalism to be originating from the ethical desire for a malleable form of identity that all human beings share, the novel makes a bombastic comparison between humanity and the sex murderer Moosbrugger with a claim that if "die Menschheit als Ganzes träumen könnte, dann müsste so jemand wie Moosbrugger entstehen."<sup>137</sup> This is not to say that the sameness between these variations makes them completely equal. In contrast to the text's irony as well as Ulrich and Agathe's androgynous "homo-sexuality," the other conditions that are "hetero-sexualized"<sup>138</sup> become harshly satirized.

On the one hand, the masculine mode is represented as a rigid framework of identity thinking that works with a strictly binarized relationship, where the subject exerts total control over its object-qua-difference. If Moosbrugger is a criminal and pathological case of this tendency, the antisemitism of Count Leinsdorf, the mastermind of the patriotic project *Parallelaktion*, stands for its sociopolitical counterpart. Mirroring Richard Wagner's sentiment in *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850), Leinsdorf claims that Jewishness becomes the source of a social nuisance once it appears awkwardly too similar to Germanness. He goes on to argue that the *Judenfrage* would disappear if Jews would simply decide to speak Hebrew, adopt "ihre alten eigenen Namen," and wear "orientalische Kleidung."<sup>139</sup> Because difference is "direkt bezaubernd"<sup>140</sup> for masculinity, Leinsdorf tells Ulrich that he experiences immense pleasure

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<sup>137</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 76.

<sup>138</sup> My use of the term "masculine" and "feminine" in the following analysis should not be understood as reinscribing them as "natural." It is based on the novel's treatment of its female and male characters as well as Musil's understanding of sex/gender, which is consistent in his literary oeuvre as well as reflections in his private writings.

<sup>139</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 845.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

when he fantasizes about the Jewish banker whom he detests speaking Hebrew instead of German.

The feminine mode, in contrast, is marked by the incapacity to differentiate. Unlike masculine violence that absolutizes difference, feminine insanity takes pleasure in seeing correspondence when there is none. While observing an exhibitionist harassing women on the street, for example, Ulrich's friend Clarisse becomes so convinced that the event had an "auf sie gemünzte Bedeutung"<sup>141</sup> that she fantasizes that "sie eine Braut sei, der man ein Ständchen dargebracht habe." Similarly, the idealist Diotima's Jewish servant girl Rachel becomes infatuated with her master to the degree that she imagines Diotima's body to be her own. The text does not shy away from suggesting that Rachel's intense pleasure in treating Diotima's body "als wenn es wirklich bloß ihr eigener Körper gewesen wäre"<sup>142</sup> verges on erotic enjoyment.

The quote above appears to be directly taken out of Ulrich and Agathe's changing scene—wherein lies the difference? In contrast to the siblings' hermaphroditic subjectivity, the gendered articulations of the other condition turn pathological in their compulsion to act or "vorläufig irgend etwas Entscheidendes tun."<sup>143</sup> Because they cannot play with the malleable nature of sameness and difference between the subject and object as well as the self and the other, their petrified pattern of thought devolves into an aggressive drive to haphazardly draw and destroy boundaries. As Walter Fanta has shown in his comprehensive study of the novel's possible endings, however, even Ulrich and Agathe's experiment is not exempt from the threat of

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<sup>141</sup> Musil, *MoE*, 792.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

violent disintegration.<sup>144</sup> In one scenario, Ulrich would decide to join the war and Agathe to commit suicide—each following the codes of masculinity and femininity.

While various forms of the other condition represented in the novel fail to enact a real change on the intradiegetic level, Musil's novel actualizes the utopia of thought immanently: if the first volume performs a negative critique that relativizes, the second strives to imagine positive forms out of this contingent condition. Perceiving the difference as well as the sameness between the logical categories of masculinity, femininity, and hermaphroditism, we as readers become implicated to the conundrum of modern humanity and invited to collectively feel the urgency to experiment with different forms of subjectivity and the life they entail.

Instead of establishing a singular identity that would set the criteria for transcending modernity for good, Musil's critical realism opens up a space for reflection that would make room for a diversity of identities and the forms of life they would make possible. Reading *The Man without Qualities* cannot help but be pleasurable once one realizes how the text's irony facilitates the imagination of unforeseen modes of equilibriums. Literary pleasure is nothing but the utopic experience of exploring this "Prinzip der Teillösungen."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Walter Fanta, *Krieg. Wahn. Sex. Liebe.: Das Finale des Romans "Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften" von Robert Musil* (Klagenfurt: Drava Verlag, 2015).

<sup>145</sup> Musil, *GW*, 1: 1937.

### Chapter III

#### *Die widernatürliche Unzucht: The Modernity of Male Homosexual Identity*

Uebrigens haben die meisten Homosexuellen ein tiefes Gefühl dieser Sinn- und Zwecklosigkeit ihrer Empfindungsweise, dem sie oft einen traurigen und herzergreifenden Ausdruck geben. Gerade bei edlen, geistig bedeutenden Homosexuellen, wirklichen Kulturträgern, tritt dieses Gefühl der Inkongruenz von Homosexualität und Leben am meisten hervor.<sup>1</sup>

—Iwan Bloch, *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit in seinen Beziehungen zur modernen Kultur*

“Denn wie mir Melusine erzählt hat, sind die Weiberfeinde sogar stolz darauf, Weiberfeinde zu sein, und behandeln ihr Denken und Tun als eine höhere Lebensform. Kennen Sie solche Leute, Herr von Stechlin? Und wenn Sie solche Leute kennen, wie denken Sie darüber?”

“Ich betrachte sie zunächst als Unglückliche.”

“Das ist recht.”

“Und zum zweiten als Kranke. Der Prinz [Prinz Heinrich von Preußen], wie Comtesse schon ganz richtig ausgesprochen haben, war auch ein solcher Kranker.”

...

Nur Woldemar blieb ruhig und sagte: “Comtesse, Sie gehen vielleicht zu weit. Wissen Sie, was in der Seele des Prinzen vorgegangen ist? Es kann etwas Infernales gewesen sein, aber auch etwas ganz andres. Wir wissen es nicht. Und weil er nebenher unbedingt große Züge hatte, so bin ich dafür, ihm das in Rechnung zu stellen.”<sup>2</sup>

—Theodor Fontane, *Der Stechlin*

Homosexuality was no longer a love that does not dare speak its name in the German cultural sphere around 1900. In fact, everyone was talking about it. While sexologists like Iwan Bloch and Richard von Krafft-Ebing were speculating on its etiology, literary writers like Stefan Zweig, Robert Musil, and Thomas Mann thematized it as an experience that symbolizes the unsettling nature of the experience of modernity. One can infer the level of popularity of the topic from Theodor Fontane’s novel *Der Stechlin* (1898), where the subject is brought up in casual gossip about the alleged homosexuality of Prince Heinrich, the brother of Frederick the

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<sup>1</sup> Iwan Bloch, *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit in seinen Beziehungen zur modernen Kultur* (Berlin: Louis Marcus Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909), 592.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Der Stechlin* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2019), 144-145.

Great, between the protagonist Woldemar von Stechlin and his future wife, countess Armgard von Barby.

Despite the differences in their genres and contexts, the two texts cited above demonstrate a similar understanding of homosexual identity that synthesizes individual personality, sexual desire, and moral and ethical conduct: male homosexuals constitute a distinct class of people who are afflicted by a condition; they lead a barren lifestyle that is incompatible with the teleological nature of the humankind; they may nonetheless be capable of great achievements. It was the combination of these contradictory elements that predestined homosexuals to the unfortunate life of misery.

The historical scholarship on the German homosexual movement has invested much energy in making sense of the self-understanding of homosexuals in the latter half of the nineteenth century that attempted to counteract such externally imposed identity, often beginning with the story of the jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) and his theory of *Urnningtum*. Recent studies by the scholars like Martin Lücke and Laurie Marhoefer have expanded the realm of inquiry by critically analyzing how the self-identification of gay men emerged in conversation with the dominant hegemonic discourses around masculinity and male prostitution.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of art and literature in the movement has also been illuminated in this context. Scholars like Andreas Kraß and Marita Keilson-Lauritz have parsed out the complex interplay of sexology, canonical literature, and emancipatory movement by explaining how reading and writing have productively contributed to the self-understanding of male

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Lücke, *Männlichkeit in Unordnung: Homosexualität und männliche Prostitution in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2008); Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

homosexuals.<sup>4</sup> Birgit Lang and Katie Sutton have argued that aesthetic discourse was deployed as a tactical strategy to legitimize certain sexual identities, and Samuel Huneke has suggested that the interaction between the discursive practices and literary representation around homosexuality created a self-destructive identity that longed for its own death.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the diversity of such inquiries, recent critical studies often demonstrate a reifying attitude in their analysis of male homosexuals—often portraying them as a group with a singular identity that sided with the hegemonic forms of masculinity and bourgeois morality. The movement, however, was anything but homogenous. Its history is just as much about disidentification as it is about identification. Marita Keilson-Lauritz, in fact, argues that there were as many as six theoretical models.<sup>6</sup> From the passionate claim of Kurt Hiller, a Jewish writer and activist who served as the chairman of the Scientific-humanitarian Committee, that ideological disagreements are “ein Beweis von Gesundheit,” “ein *Symptom der Vitalität*,” and “*ein Merkmal frischer Lebensstärke der Bewegung*,”<sup>7</sup> modern readers can guess the scope of the plurality of discourses at the time.

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<sup>4</sup> Andreas Kraß, “*Meine erste Geliebte*.” *Magnus Hirschfeld und sein Verhältnis zur schönen Literatur* (Göttigen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2013); Marita Keilson-Lauritz, *Die Geschichte der eigenen Geschichte: Literatur und Literaturkritik in den Anfängen der Schwulenbewegung am Beispiel des Jahrbuch für sexuellen Zwischenstufen und der Zeitschrift Der Eigene* (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Birgit Lang and Katie Sutton, “The Aesthetics of Sexual Ethics: *Geschlecht und Gesellschaft* and Middle-Class Sexual Modernity in fin-de-siècle Germany,” *Oxford German Studies* 44, no. 2, (2015): 177-198; Samuel Clowes Huneke, “Death Wish: Suicide and Stereotype in the Gay Discourses of Imperial and Weimar Germany,” *New German Critique* 46, no. 1 (2019): 127-166.

<sup>6</sup> Marita Keilson-Lauritz, “Tanten, Kerle und Skandale,” in *Homosexualität und Staatsräson: Männlichkeit, Homophobie und Politik in Deutschland 1900-1945* (Campus Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Hiller, “Zur Politik der Bewegung,” *Freundschaft* 4, no. 25 (1922).

The origin of the discursive vitality around the subject can be paradoxically traced back to paragraph 175, the anti-sodomy law that prohibited unnatural fornication or *die widernatürliche Unzucht* between men. Despite its simplicity, this statute highlights the high stakes in discussing homosexuality. What makes a certain type of pleasure punishable? How could and should enjoyment be justified? How does one understand the relationship between pleasure and morality? And ultimately, can one's sexual identity serve as the measure of one's conduct?

The paragraph gives only an ambivalent answer to these questions. As the term nature is deployed as the antonym of culture, the adjective unnatural (*widernatürlich*) may be read as the condemnation of the overreaching intervention of human subjects into their determination by going against their "naturally" given identity. The noun fornication (*Unzucht*), in contrast, implies that the failure in the voluntary mastery of the self over itself is what makes one morally and legally reprehensible.

This double bind corresponds to the two major opposing streams in the homosexual movement that cleared the ground for the diversity of discourses to come. On the one side were the *Sanitätsrat* Magnus Hirschfeld and the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee*), which he founded in 1897. With the theory of "sexual intermediaries," they argued that homosexuality was a naturally occurring and biologically innate condition, over which individuals had no control. On the other side were the so-called masculinists, exemplified by the hot-tempered activist Adolf Brand, who insisted on

the universality of bisexuality and the superiority of the male homosexual object “choice” as a privileged act of masculine creativity.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of making this binary rigid, the following chapter sets out to dialectically expose the common ground that these diverging discursive practices created. What made the figure of male homosexuals particularly salient during this time was not merely their identity as “the unknown Other” or “queerness” that threatened the heterosexual majority. The heated debates around homosexuality disclosed the moral and ethical dilemma in the negative-dialectical notion of “sexual identity.” As Hirschfeld argued, one experiences sexual attraction as an overpowering force that defies the control of the individual. At the same time, it serves as one of the most powerful tools that one has at one’s disposal, as the masculinists passionately argued, with which one can build the most robust social relations.

What does it mean to make use of something that lies beyond one’s control? The following historical and theoretical analysis will trace how male homosexual identity, caught in the irresolvable tension between “biological determinism” and free expressions of “sexual personhood,”<sup>9</sup> became the metaphor for the dissonant condition of modernity and how this metaphorization served as a rallying point for both homophile and homophobic discourses.

The focus on male homosexuality in the chapter has less to do with a categorical difference between male and female sexuality and more with how they were theorized and politicized at the time. Scholarship has shown that female homosexuals exhibited a similar

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Glenn Ramsey, “The Rites of Artgenossen: Contesting Homosexual Political Culture in Weimar Germany,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 85-109.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), xiv.



understanding of themselves as their male counterparts, developing competing arguments about the identity of women loving women. The advocates of female masculinity like the journalist Anna Rüling, for example, asserted “their suitability for careers, freedom of judgment, and other privileges that they did not advocate for other, ‘normal’ women,”<sup>10</sup> while others like the feminist writer Johanna Elberskirchen saw a chance to dissociate themselves from men as well as the norms of heterosexuality in lesbian love.

In contrast to male homosexuality and paragraph 175, however, female homosexuality was never subject to the same kind of direct legal persecution in Germany, even in Nazi times, because lesbian sexuality was not considered as grave a political threat to the state as male homosexuality. This might be attributed to the fact that lesbian sex was not considered “real sex” in the absence of a phallus, as Laurie Marhoefer argues, or that they were still considered potential bearers of the population.

In any case, it was the fantasy figure of male homosexuals that the political left and right abused to discredit their enemies not only as pathologized individuals but as an existential threat to the nation. As a consequence of such stigmatization, the criminal statute became further expanded in Nazi Germany and even survived the Second World War. As the chapter sets out to explore the intermingling relationship between the homophile and homophobic theories of gay identity that resulted in legal and political persecution, it will focus on the history of male homosexuals.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marti M. Lybeck, *Desiring Emancipation: New Women and Homosexuality in Germany, 1890-1933* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 94.

<sup>11</sup> For a debate around the persecution of lesbians in the Nazi era, see Claudia Schoppmann, “Lesbische Frauen und weibliche Homosexualität im Dritten Reich,” in *Homosexuelle im Nationalsozialismus: Neue Forschungsperspektiven zu Lebenssituationen von lesbischen, schwulen, bi-, trans- und intersexuellen Menschen 1933 bis 1945*, ed. Michael Schwartz

What will come to light is the complex interplay of scientific, aesthetic, and political discourses that struggled with the ethical struggle in modernity to define a “good life.” The fact that sexual identity, even in its “queer” form, remains doggedly central to the notion of the self to the present day “even if we no longer claim to believe that there is any natural function of the sexual instinct”<sup>12</sup> points to how little the situation has changed.

### 1. Homosexuality as Nature

The motto of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee *per scientiam ad justitiam* as well as Magnus Hirschfeld’s frequent citation of the Goethean dictum “das eigentliche Studium der Menschheit ist der Mensch”<sup>13</sup> illustrate the intimate relationship between epistemological interest and political ambition in their conceptualization of homosexuality. Calling for the decriminalization of male homosexual acts with the notion of congenitally abnormal androgynous personality or *sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, the committee initiated a reorientation of thought on a massive scale that intervened in the understanding of nature, the constitution of individual identity, and the relationship between normality and abnormality.

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(München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014), 85-92; Jens Dobler, “Unzucht und Kuppelei: Lesbenverfolgung im Nationalsozialismus,” in *Homophobie und Devianz. Weibliche und männliche Homosexualität im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Insa Eschebach (Berlin: Metropol, 2002), 53-62; Samuel Clowes Huneke, “The Duplicity of Tolerance: Lesbian Experiences in Nazi Berlin,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 1 (2019): 30-59.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2001), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. med. Th. Ramien (Pseudonym of Magnus Hirschfeld), *Sappho und Sokrates*. Leipzig: Max Spohr Verlag, 1896. The quote comes from the novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften*. Hirschfeld also misquotes it in the first issue of the *Jahrbuch* as “das höchste Studium der Menschheit ist der Mensch.”

To assert the existential legitimacy of congenital aberration, sexological thought proposed three major theses about nature. First, not all that is present in nature is the embodiment of the ideal; nature produces unexpected variations that may initially be registered as negativity. Second, this deviation may serve a certain purpose that is not instantly recognizable. Third, everyone and everything that exist ultimately participate in the process of the self-improvement of nature; pathologized outcasts also belong to its inner workings, and it is the task of science to explicate their existence.

The first step towards the naturalization of homosexuality was made by asserting the “objectivity” of homosexual desire. In the inaugural issue of the sexological journal *Jahrbuch für sexuellen Zwischenstufen*, Hirschfeld sketches out the structural trinity of soma, psyche, and sexual desire as an introduction to his epistemological program. As the title of his article “Die objektive Diagnose der Homosexualität” suggests, he aims to demonstrate that the subjective experience of same-sex attraction is neither a free-floating feeling nor a voluntary decision but a fully determined phenomenon anchored in the objective category of the psychosomatic constitution of the individual. What should be studied is not homosexual desire in isolation, he claims, but the figure of the homosexual “in seiner gesamten Individualität,” for the sexual attraction itself is nothing but a “sekundäre Folge-Erscheinungen.”<sup>14</sup>

According to this theory, a number of distinct elements determine the sexual constitution of an individual. These include various sex organs such as gonads and genitals, secondary sex characteristics, gendered mental traits or “geistigen Unterschieden,” and sexual desire. Although they may be bimodally distributed, Hirschfeld argues, the absolutely “masculine” heterosexual

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<sup>14</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, “Die objektive Diagnose der Homosexualität,” *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* 1 (1899): 4.

man and “feminine” heterosexual woman, or *Vollmann* and *Vollweib*, exist more theoretically than empirically. The majority of people find themselves to be somewhere between the two extremes as the result of the complex process that combines such subcategories. Homosexuality is nothing but an extreme case of abnormal variation that occurs when one fully crosses the boundary of sex/gender.<sup>15</sup>

The insistence on constitutional gender inversion was in part a strategy to counteract the view that located the pathological nature of homosexuality in the incongruence between body and mind. Hirschfeld’s synthetic thinking always aimed to demonstrate the “natural” coherence of the inverts to refute such arguments, even when that so-called constitutive harmony sometimes contradicted the very definition of homosexuality. For example, Hirschfeld argues that same-sex desire would indeed be “etwas Disharmonisches” and even “Monströses,” if it were to be found in men who are “kraftvoll erobernd[.]” and “selbstbewußt berechend[.]” and women who are “gefühl- und stimmungsvoll[.],” “zurückhaltend[.],” and “von Kindessehnsucht und Mutterliebe erfüllt[.]”<sup>16</sup>

Hirschfeld’s determination to completely subsume homosexuality under the concept of nature produced arguments that appear curiously self-defeating if not downright denigrating. In

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<sup>15</sup> Although Hirschfeld explicitly praises and valorizes stereotypically feminine qualities, his view on women is by no means revolutionary. He argues that women are closer to children in their “Disposition zum Weinen, Lachen, Schmollen, Erröten, Zürnen, ihrem Hassen und Lieben, in ihren abergläubischen Instinken.” They were also regarded as “reproduktiver, anhaltender, treuer, praktischer, gemütvoller, reizbarer, kindlicher, äußerlicher, kleinlicher als der Mann.” Marita Keilson-Lauritz thus warns against the tendency that binarizes the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee as the feminist counterpart to the explicitly antifeminist *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*. See Magnus Hirschfeld, “Die objektive Diagnose der Homosexualität:” 13-14; Marita Keilson-Lauritz, “Tanten, Kerle und Skandale: Die Geburt des “modernen Homosexuellen” aus den Flügelkämpfen der Emazipation,” in *Homosexualität und Staatsräson*, ed. Susanne zur Nieden (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2005), 81-99.

<sup>16</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, “Ursachen und Wesen des Uranismus,” *JfS* 5 (1903): 67-68.

the article “Sind sexuelle Zwischenstufen zur Ehe geeignet,” for instance, Hirschfeld radicalizes his stance by suggesting that homosexuality may not be merely congenital but also hereditary. In order to demonstrate that it grows “auf dem Boden der neuropathischen Belastung,”<sup>17</sup> he gives an account of a certain homosexual named Graf R., whose family members and relatives have been “reich an Abnormalitäten.”<sup>18</sup> Meticulously examining individual cases of mental illnesses and bad temperaments in the family, he concludes that homosexuality might be the ruse of nature that tries to eliminate a family line that is not fit for reproduction.<sup>19</sup>

It may be impossible to find out the true intention behind such arguments. One may speculate that the real purpose of the article was to prevent homosexuals from accidentally committing themselves to unhappy marriages. One may also rightfully reproach Hirschfeld for having been uncritically immersed in the eugenic discourse and theories of degeneration of the time as the historian Rainer Herrn does.<sup>20</sup> In any case, even this extreme theory remains fully compatible with the political and ideological orientation of sexological activism. Positivistic naturalism effectively counteracts the legal argument that same-sex desire is a voluntarily chosen act of vice that seeks out excessive pleasure, while the dialectically negative position of homosexuals within the eugenic framework promises a theoretical place of abode to the so-called stepchildren of nature—albeit it being a depressingly minoritizing one.<sup>21</sup> In this worldview,

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<sup>17</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, “Sind sexuelle Zwischenstufen zur Ehe geeignet?,” *JfS* 3 (1901): 61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> This line of thinking travels even to the anti-Hirschfeldian magazine *Der Eigene*. See Adolf Brand, “Freudesliebe als Kulturfaktor,” *Der Eigene* 13, no. 1 (1930): 1-8.

<sup>20</sup> Rainer Herrn, “Magnus Hirschfelds Geschlechtkosmos: Die Zwischenstufentheorie im Kontext hegemonialer Männlichkeit,” in *Männlichkeit und Moderne: Geschlecht in den Wissenskulturen um 1900*, ed. Ulrike Brunotte and Rainer Herrn (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, for example, notes how sexology was not simply an exploitative instrument of the disciplinary institution in the Foucauldian sense, as it also provided an occasion for

homosexuals emerge as an abnormal variation of G.W.F Hegel's World-Historical Individuals, who blindly but effectively act as the instrument of the historical Spirit.

The Hirschfeldian portrayal of homosexual subjectivity as a passive marionette in the theater of "natural" history (who participates in it only through its death wish) infuriated the masculinist wing of the movement, for whom sexuality meant nothing else than the active energy that serves as the very engine for the sociocultural and political development of the nation. Despite the fierce accusation of their ideological competitors, the positivistic and scientific orientation of many of the contributors of the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* did not result in the complete abandonment of ethical and cultural aspirations.

Max Katte (pseudonym of the *Studienrat* Karl Friedrich Jordan), for instance, makes a passionate case for the emancipation of gay men, arguing that the morally and affectively impoverished lives of homosexuals were not due to their pathological nature but the fact that they are robbed of the freedom that their heterosexual counterparts enjoy:

Daher gebe man uns Freiheit! Freiheit, auf dass wir zeigen können, was an uns ist; was wir zu leisten vermögen, wenn wir des Druckes und Zwanges ledig sind und all' unsere Kräfte entfalten können! Gerade der Zwang—sei er gesetzlich, sozial oder gesellschaftlich—treibt uns von den besseren Elementen fort, da wir fürchten, von ihnen verachtet zu werden, und denjenigen oftmals in die Arme, die bereit sind, uns zu empfangen, aber auf niedriger geistiger oder sittlicher Stufe stehen und womöglich gewillt sind, uns auszubeuten oder sonst zu schädigen.<sup>22</sup>

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homosexuals to come to an understanding of themselves and articulate their experiences. See Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Also see Kate Fischer and Jana Funke, "'Let Us Leave the Hospital; Let Us Go on a Journey around the World:' British and German Sexual Science and the Global Search for Sexual Variation," in *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880-1960*, ed. Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes, and Ryan M. Jones (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 51-69.

<sup>22</sup> Max Katte, "Der Daseinszweck der Homosexuellen," *JfS* 4 (1902): 287.

Hirschfeld himself remained open to exploring the “ethische und kulturelle Bedeutung”<sup>23</sup> of homosexuality. He challenged the narrow-minded idea that restricts the teleology of an individual solely to the “natural” task of reproduction by asking whether Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Frederick the Great neglected their “Naturzweck” because they did not leave any descendants behind.<sup>24</sup> The co-presence of such naturalistic and cultural arguments may be part of the “Doppelstrategie”<sup>25</sup> of Hirschfeld’s sexual politics, where epistemological arguments are made concurrently with the ethical and moral insistence on the rights of free individuals.

Reflecting the scientific theory of sexual intermediaries, the ethical desire of homosexuals finds its expression most frequently in the valorization of androgyny in the *Jahrbuch*. In the article “Die virilen Homosexuellen,” for instance, Max Katte reflects on the meaning of the “masculine” male homosexuals. Theorizing on the idea of relative and absolute levels of gendered qualities, Katte claims that a gay man may contain more femininity within him than his heterosexual counterpart in terms of internal proportion but may possess a greater amount of masculinity in total. Such inner androgyny, which nonetheless remains masculine in the absolute sense, inspires male homosexuals to become sensitive “Dichter” and “Künstler” in contrast to heterosexual men, who are more apt to become “Feldherren” and “Staatsmänner.”<sup>26</sup>

The trope of male homosexuals as cultural leaders can be found in many articles in the *Jahrbuch* that explain and “prove” the homosexual nature of artists like Hans Christian Andersen, August von Platen, Michelangelo, and Walt Whitman. By arguing that only “ein

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<sup>23</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, *Von einst bis jetzt: Geschichte einer homosexuellen Bewegung 1897-1922*, ed. Manfred Herzer and James Steakley (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1986), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, “Ursachen und Wesen des Uranismus,” *JfS* 5 (1903), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Manfred Herzer, *Magnus Hirschfeld und seine Zeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Max Katte, “Die virilen Homosexuellen,” *JfS* 7 (1905): 99.

völlig klares Bild [der] ganzen Persönlichkeit” could provide “ein rechtes Verständnis [der] Dichtungen”<sup>27</sup> of gay artists, such articles expanded the trinity of soma, psyche, and sexual desire to include cultural production. In this specific mode of aesthetic criticism, intricate connections were made between the feminine characters of the authors, their personal histories with other men, and the ambiguity of their works that could be interpreted as a representation of either heterosexual or homosexual relationships.<sup>28</sup>

The cultural valorization of androgyny can be observed even in the masculinist gay magazine *Der Eigene*. Karl Giese, who was Hirschfeld’s life partner and secretary, notes in his essay on Andersen that he has attempted to demonstrate how “jemand, dessen Feminismus so hervortretend ist, dass er als typische Bestätigung der sogenannten ‘Betteltheorie vom dritten Geschlecht’ anzusehen ist, trotz seines auffälligen Wesens ein angenehmer Zeitgenosse zu sein und Werke zu schaffen versteht, die ihm noch weit über sein Leben hinaus Liebe, Achtung und Verehrung einbringen.”<sup>29</sup> While Giese’s awareness of the masculinist polemic against the third sex theory makes his reclamation of androgyny sound more apologetic than celebratory, the view that equates gender deviation with creativity had gained cultural purchase by the 1920s.

The popular gay magazine *Freundschaft*, the target audience of which was not limited to a small number of sexologists or literary elites, featured an article by Wilhelm Fliess that discusses the “asymmetry” in one’s character as one of the indicators of creative geniality. As gender nonconformity was a subtype of such “Linkigkeit,” male artists often possessed “*außer*

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<sup>27</sup> Numa Praetorius, “Michel Angelo’s Urningtum,” *JfS* 2 (1900): 256.

<sup>28</sup> The importance of aesthetic ambiguity in relation to homosexuality has remained of scholarly interest. See Heinrich Detering, *Das offene Geheimnis: Zur literarischen Produktivität eines Tabus von Winckelmann bis zu Thomas Mann* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Karl Giese, “Andersens Wesen und Werke,” *Der Eigene* 9, no. 3 (1921/1922): 78-83.



*seiner normalen Mischung* noch ein Stück Weiblichkeit, und die kunstbegabte Frau noch ein Stück Männlichkeit.”<sup>30</sup> People with professions that require creativity such as scientists, technicians, and social organizers supposedly exhibited a similar quality.

The association of male homosexuals with creative professions may have originated from a practical necessity in real life as well. Another article in *Freundschaft* written by an anonymous teacher, for example, advises younger gay men to devote themselves to the “freien Berufen in Kunst, Wissenschaft, Technik, Handel und Gewerbe”<sup>31</sup> and to avoid positions as a civil servant whose conduct is under constant surveillance, which made one more vulnerable to the threat of the criminal statute as well as blackmail.

Despite its fundamentally epistemological orientation, the synthetic ambition of the *Jahrbuch* expanded the definition of nature to a radical degree that simply denouncing the Hirschfeldian outlook as biological determinism would be an incorrect assessment. Its biggest achievement, in fact, may be having undone the narrowly defined notion of nature as the essential embodiment of normative ideals.<sup>32</sup> What it afforded homosexuals at a point in time where their sexual desire was an unmentionable vice was a dialectically negative position that nonetheless reminded them that they had a place in nature as a small group of eccentrics with an aesthetic taste.

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<sup>30</sup> Fliess, however, did not directly contribute to the magazine. It is noted in the article that it is a reprint of the article from *Münchener Neuste Nachrichten*. Wilhelm Fliess, “Rechts und Links,” *Freundschaft* 10, no. 6 (1928).

<sup>31</sup> “Berufswahl der Homoeroten von einem Lehrer,” *Freundschaft* 4, no. 20 (1922).

<sup>32</sup> The effort to rethink the concept of nature in relation to homosexuality and aesthetics continues to this day. Sam See, for example, argues that Darwin could be read as a queer theorist insofar as he did not shy away from addressing the “useless features” that constitute the “aesthetic diversity” in his theories of natural selection and variation. See Sam See, *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 22.

## 2. Homosexuality as Discipline

The masculinist branch of the homosexual movement called the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* has been often deemed a literary and philosophical counterpart to the Scientific-humanitarian Committee. Centered around Adolf Brand's magazine *Der Eigene*, which was the first of its kind in the world, this small group of aesthetes celebrated male-male relationship as the foundation of civilization and repudiated the naturalist understanding of homosexuality.<sup>33</sup> While the intensity of their frequent polemic against Hirschfeldian thought makes it seem like the masculinist movement repudiated all of sexological activism, a closer examination is necessary to understand the fundamental difference as well as crucial semblances between the two philosophical orientations.

In Brand's vitriolic attack on the Hirschfeldian theory in an article called "Afterkultur und Homosexualität" in *Der Eigene*, one can observe the major points of contention as well as continuity:

Nicht also darauf kommt es an, einer Handvoll Kranker und Unzurechnungsfähiger einen Freibrief für einen ungezügelter Sinnengenuß zu geben—und deshalb §175 abzuschaffen—sondern darauf: aus der Natürlichkeit und Gesundheit einer Lebenserscheinung, die, wir betonen das noch einmal, wach oder schlummernd in jedem Einzelnen vorhanden ist, Nutzen und Kraft zu schöpfen für den Einzelnen sowohl wie für den Staat!<sup>34</sup>

While insisting on the naturalness of homosexuality, Brand rejects the idea that it is a phenomenon that occurs only in a minority population. The term *der Unzurechnungsfähige* that Brand uses to describe the Hirschfeldian homosexual encapsulates how he understood the

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<sup>33</sup> Marita Keilson-Lauritz, *Die Geschichte der eigenen Geschichte: Literatur und Literaturkritik in den Anfängen der Schwulenbewegung am Beispiel des Jahrbuchs für sexuellen Zwischenstufen und der Zeitschrift Der Eigene* (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1997), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Adolf Brand, "Afterkultur und Homosexualität," *Der Eigene* 10, no. 9 (1925): 411.

sexological worldview: the gender invert was someone who suffers from hereditary abnormality and experiences his sexuality as a tragic destiny that nature has imposed on him.

What the masculinists fervently rejected in this picture was the implicit passivity of the homosexual subject, for they regarded homosexual desire as a potent instrument reserved only for male elites who participate in culture and politics. They argued that homosexual acts should be allowed not for their own sake but for the cultural and political development of the nation, which was essentially dependent on the intimate bond between men. Sexual acts meant nothing but the physical confirmation of masculine eros.

To understand how the masculinists came to such an understanding of homosexuality, or *Freundesliebe* as they liked to call it, one must examine the philosophy of the *Männerbund* in two influential thinkers, Benedict Friedländer and Hans Blüher. While the concept of the masculine community existed prior to their theories, they gave birth to the specifically homosexually inflected iteration that shaped the contours of masculinist discourse.

Benedict Friedländer was a zoologist of Jewish heritage who was initially a financial supporter of the Scientific-humanitarian Committee. While his essay even made it to the earlier issues of the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, he eventually formed a secession group in 1906 due to ideological differences. In his theory of “physiological friendship,” Friedländer argues that homosexuality is not a special case of abnormality but a natural variant of the universal biological-social force of attraction, which is activated by “*chemotaktische* Erscheinungen, oder subjektivistisch gesprochen, Duftwahrnehmungen.”<sup>35</sup> What distinguishes

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<sup>35</sup> Benedict Friedländer, “Die physiologische Freundschaft als normaler Grundtrieb des Menschen und als Grundlage der Sozialität,” *JfS* 6 (1904): 183. The editor writes in the preface to the article that despite the theoretical differences “diese Erörterungen über den

human beings from other creatures is their “physiological” sociability, which afforded the human society “die höhere Produktivkraft, die Beherrschung der Natur und die Steigerung der geistigen Kräfte”<sup>36</sup> to build culture and civilization.

With the tripartite model of the *Gattenliebe*, *Mutterliebe*, and *Freundesliebe*, Friedländer explains how the universal social instinct finds different modes of expression. By restricting the first two types to the domestic sphere, Friedländer elevates homosexual desire as the sole type of attraction that can serve as “die Grundlage der menschlichen Sozialität und somit der Kultur und auch der Moral.”<sup>37</sup> Inspired by the Greek model of pederasty, Friedländer regarded physical homosexual acts as the “physiological” affirmation of the natural social instinct between men of culture, especially between older men and younger men. In contrast, exclusive heterosexuality or *Weiberliebe* was denigrated as the symptom of arrested development that fails to reach the higher status of “eine echte, allumfassende *Menschenliebe*.”<sup>38</sup>

What is novel in Friedländer’s theory is that his understanding of homosexuality invests its attention not to the subjective constitution but to its social use. While the connection to nature still exists (for he believes that human sociality has a “physiological” basis), Friedländer’s methodology effectively shifts its emphasis to conceptualizing homosexuality as a specific type of cultural conduct or *Zucht* that must be actively cultivated. This universalizing view had a larger implication for masculinist thinking, as it often posits an adversarial figure (the clerical

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Soziabilitätstrieb des Menschen [enthalten] auch für die “Zwischenstufentheorie” sehr viele fruchtbare und anregende Gedanken.”

<sup>36</sup> Benedict Friedländer, “Die physiologische Freundschaft,” 186.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-187.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

class, women, and even Jews for Friedländer) who actively hinders the masculine desire for creativity.

Another influential thinker in the masculinist cultural sphere was the writer Hans Blüher. Renowned for his scandalous theory of the homoerotic structure of the *Wandervogel* movement, he maintained a somewhat erratic but non-negligible position in the socio-cultural milieu of the time. He corresponded with Sigmund Freud and Kaiser Wilhelm and was read by influential writers like Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, and Rainer Maria Rilke. He was also notorious for his antisemitism, betraying many Jewish literati and activists with whom he was acquainted.<sup>39</sup>

Influenced by the theory of Friedländer and Sigmund Freud, Blüher further developed the notion of universal bisexuality and the *Männerbund*. In “Die drei Grundformen der Homosexualität,” which was published in the *Jahrbuch* with a special note from the editor, Blüher undertakes a deconstruction of the Hirschfeldian unity of soma, psyche, and sexuality.<sup>40</sup> Similarly to the social construction theory of sexuality, he argues that there exists no congenital determination of homosexual subjectivity but only “tausendfache günstige Situationen, die gut zueinander passen und zu erwünschten Zuständen geworden sind.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Susanne Omran, “‘Sezessio Judaica’: Ausscheidung des Jüdischen aus dem Männerbund,” in *Frauenbewegung und "Judenfrage": Diskurse um Rasse und Geschlecht nach 1900* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2000), 68-75 and Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, “Hans Blüher’s Männerwelten. Fragmente, Widersprüche, Perspektiven,” *Invertito: Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Homosexualitäten* 2 (2000): 58-84 for more on Blüher’s antisemitism. For a discussion of Blüher’s friendship with Jewish cultural figures including Kurt Hiller and Gustav Landauer, see John Neubauer, “Between *Aufbruch* and *Secessio*: Images of Friendship among Germans, Jews, and Gays,” in *Literary Paternity, Literary Friendship*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 215-232.

<sup>40</sup> In the version published in the *Jahrbuch*, Hirschfeld edited out parts of the essay that denigrated the *Zwischenstufen* model at his discretion. See Katie Sutton, *Sex between Body and Mind*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Hans Blüher, “Drei Grundformen der Homosexualität,” *JfS* 13 (1912/1913): 334.

His tripartite division of homosexuals into the super-virile *Männerheld*, effeminate *Weibling*, and the latent homosexual (who either unconsciously or consciously repress their desire) asserts that androgyny as gendered subjectivity and bisexuality as object choice should be analyzed on separate levels. Turning the Hirschfeldian model on its head, Blüher claims that the gender inversion of effeminate gay men becomes “arrangiert” after they become aware of their homosexual desire. For Blüher, androgyny is nothing but a symptom that arises out of the complex interaction between the social norm, universal bisexuality, and the subject’s interpretation of the self. Their peculiar personality is acquired as they internalize and synthesize the norm of compulsory heterosexuality that dictates that anyone who desires men must be a woman.

This gender trouble can be attributed to neither “Triebrichtung” nor “Triebanlage,” for their subjectivity is “das Produkt eines vergeblichen Kampfes beider gegen eine stärkere Umgebungskultur.” While this type of homosexuals is often regarded as pathological, he belongs “zu den interessantesten Menschen” and could serve the social role of the mediator that conducts “die sexuelle Vermittlungsaktion zwischen den beiden Geschlechtern.”<sup>42</sup>

This theoretical restructuring makes room for the virile type of homosexual called the *Männerheld*, who is in no way feminine in his constitution and deviates from heterosexual masculinity merely in his object choice; the complete dissociation from the female sex, in fact, makes him more masculine. The change of the sex of the desired object appears to be almost incidental, as this type simply replaces his taste for younger women with that for younger men. What is significant in his different object choice is its social implication. Following Friedländer,

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<sup>42</sup> Hans Blüher, “Drei Grundformen der Homosexualität,” 423.

Blüher limits the use of heterosexuality strictly to the domestic sphere, arguing that “die Liebe zum andern Geschlecht führt nie über die Ehe hinaus, während gerade das Interesse des Mannes am Manne und an den Interessen des Mannes die eigentliche Sozialisierung herbeiführt.”<sup>43</sup>

As masculinist theories disentangled homosexuality from the deterministic view in the psychosomatic theory of inversion, their discourse increasingly stylized homoerotic desire as a privileged form of discipline that could be adopted exclusively by like-minded elites. To borrow Eve Sedgwick’s terminology, their “integrative” sexual definition that universalized homosexuality went hand in hand with the “gender separatism” that minoritized its socio-political position.<sup>44</sup> As the theory of universal bisexuality equalized all sexualities as natural variants, homosexuality was no longer regarded as inescapable determination that captures individuals but as one’s voluntary choice that carried immense ethical and political significance. This emphasis on the notion of free choice should not come as a surprise, since many masculinists including Friedländer, Blüher, and Brand were married to women.

What also steadily grew in their theories was the hostility towards the out-group. At its best, the rhetorical aggression was directed at social structures that pathologized gay men. At its worst, their disparagement of exclusive heterosexuality devolved into vulgar misogynistic rants about women. As Claudia Bruns notes, the normalization of “die virile Männlichkeit” as the “staatliche Sozialität”<sup>45</sup> occurred concurrently with the exclusion of women from the polity of the *Männerbund*. In their opposition to the women’s movement, the masculinists often advocated for limiting women’s social role to supporting the family and becoming mothers, ironically by

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Blüher, “Drei Grundformen der Homosexualität,” 423.

<sup>44</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 88.

<sup>45</sup> Claudia Bruns, “Der homosexuelle Staatsfreund,” in *Homosexualität und Staatsräson*.

pointing to the nature of women's constitution. The following passage from *Der Eigene* illustrates the typical attitude:

Wir unsererseits gestehen gerne, daß wir auch durch die "Brille" der Männerkultur sehen, d.h., daß wir überzeugt sind, daß die physische, psychische und geistige Struktur der Frau sie *nicht* zur gesellschaftlichen Gleichberechtigung mit dem Manne, d.h., zu gleichen beruflichen, politischen, sozialen Rechten und Pflichten befähigt. Und das ist im Interesse der Menschheit und ihrer Fortentwicklung gut so. Wir sind nicht Frauenfeinde, sondern wir fordern im Interesse der Frau *und* ihrer Nachkommenschaft, im Interesse der Menschheit als solche, daß sich die moderne Frau wieder auf ihren allein ihr gemäßen Rechten- und Pflichtenkreis besinnt, wo sie und *nur* sie Großes und ganz Großes zu leisten vermag.<sup>46</sup>

At times, such misogyny could take on an even more sinister tone. This was especially the case for Benedict Friedländer, who regarded women as collaborators to the clerical class that imposes arbitrary moral rules on men to maintain their power. In the preface that he wrote to Arthur Schopenhauer's *Über die Weiber*, which he edited and republished in 1908, one can observe just how far he was willing to go with his hatred. He argues that the so-called "Gynäkokratie" was not merely a social problem but an existential one for the state. "Die zunehmende Einmischung des zweiten Geschlechts in alles und jedes" was not to be understood as a mere nuisance to the "Gesellungsfreiheit der Männer" but as a "cancerous" threat to the "weißen Rasse" that must prepare for the impending "Entscheidungskampf mit der gelben Rasse."<sup>47</sup>

The flirtation with antisemitism in the masculinist milieu can be regarded as one of the consequences of the structural exclusivity that was built into their definition of masculine sociability. This, however, is not to claim that masculinist thinking can be directly equated with

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<sup>46</sup> Erich Kampff, "Maria Krise: Die geschlechtliche Belastung der Frau und ihre gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen," *Der Eigene* 11, no. 10 (1926): 348-349.

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Friedländer, introduction to *Über die Weiber* by Arthur Schopenhauer, Bernhard Zacks Verlag: Berlin, 1908.



the racialist fascism that was looming on the horizon. In *Der Eigene*, one can find articles that mock the “Rassehysteriker” for being nowhere close to the “Parsival-Natur”<sup>48</sup> they claimed to be. It also published a positive review of Michael Müller-Claudius’s *Deutsche Rassenangst* that gives an account of how Jewishness was no longer a property that the real Jewish people have but had become the “Symboltypenbild ... dem alles Schlechte in Staat und Volk als Schuld angerechnet wird”<sup>49</sup>—albeit from the nationalist perspective that regarded antisemitism as a pathological way of thinking that harms the mental health of the *Volk*.

It should be also noted that Adolf Brand expressed vehement objection to all kinds of militarism—sometimes with a bizarre claim that uncontrolled heterosexuality was creating children that would only end up being “Kanonen- und Maschinenfutter”<sup>50</sup> for the warmongers. In fact, his nationalistically oriented pacifism exemplifies the volatile character and the political incoherence of masculinist discourse that spewed aggression in unexpected directions that did not correspond to its vision of the ideal society of men.

In the article “Gegen die bewaffnete Bestie,” for example, Brand interprets the mass murder of the sailors of the *Volksmarinendivision* in 1919 by Otto Marloh’s *Freikorps* unit as the symptom of a militaristic time where the calls to violence were made everywhere in the name of the state. The persecution of homosexuals, including sensational mediatization like Alfred Krupp’s outing by the socialist newspaper *Vorwärts*, was regarded as the same kind of collective

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Heinz Roeber, “Freundesliebe oder Homosexualität: Eine Erwiderung,” *Der Eigene* 10, no. 11 (1925): 502.

<sup>49</sup> Erich Kampff, “1. Dr Richard Rudolf: Der Fluch unserer Geschlechtsmoral. Verlag Gesundes Leben, Rudolstadt. 2. Dr. Michael Müller-Claudius: Deutsche Rassenangst. Verlag C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, Berlin,” *Der Eigene* 11, no. 9 (1926): 311.

<sup>50</sup> Adolf Brand, “Freundesliebe als Kulturfaktor.”

insanity as capitalism, militarism, and the “Maulheldentum der Sozialdemokratie”<sup>51</sup> that threatened the self-determination of the *Volk*. Praising the women’s rights activist Helene Stöcker’s pacifist text *Menschlichkeit* for its “tapferen männlichen Gedanken,”<sup>52</sup> Brand insists that disobedience is a moral obligation in the face of violence of all kinds and that the *Vaterland* must remain that of Goethe and Nietzsche.

Despite these ambivalences, Brand also published a viciously antisemitic rant against Hirschfeld by the *völkisch* nationalist doctor Karl-Günther Heimsoth (who corresponded with the gay Nazi officer Ernst Röhm) with an excuse that its “objective” value lay within correcting the theory of *Zwischenstufen*.<sup>53</sup> Following the philosophy of Otto Weininger, Heimsoth attacks Hirschfeld with a claim that “dem Judentum jedes Gefühl für Eigenwert und Größe fehlt” and asserts the inferiority of “die jüdische Psyche und die Art seines Erkennens und Erklären-wollens ohne seelische Tiefe und ohne Idealsglauben.”<sup>54</sup>

What becomes identified with Jewishness is the “spiritually materialist” way of thinking that regards soma, psyche, and sexual desire as a tightly woven natural unity, an attitude that supposedly lacks the Germanic capacity to imagine the socio-political potential of homosexuality. Heimsoth remains blissfully blind to the fact that he is performing the very “materialism” that he despises by constructing his own essentializing trinity of the Jewish psyche, scientific positivism, and the lack of “deep” idealistic feelings.

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<sup>51</sup> Adolf Brand, “Gegen die bewaffnete Bestie: Für Antimilitarismus und Völkerbund,” *Der Eigene* 7, no. 4 (1919): 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> It was the revelation of Heimsoth’s correspondence with Ernst Röhm that led to the nationwide political scandal. For a further discussion of the Röhm affair, see Susanne zur Nieden, “Aufstieg und Fall des virile Männerhelden: Der Skandal um Ernst Röhm und seine Ermordung,” in *Homosexualität und Staatsräson*, 147-192.

<sup>54</sup> Dr. med. Heimsoth, “Freundesliebe oder Homosexualität,” *Der Eigene* 10, no. 9 (1925): 419.

The masculinist intervention that stylized homosexuality as a superior lifestyle as well as its denigration of heterosexuality as a mere tool for reproduction may be read as a reaction to the homophobic logic that insisted on the immorality of the non-teleological pleasure in homosexuality. The excessive idealization and universalization of same-sex eroticism in masculinist thinking, however, frequently resulted in the puzzling dissociation from and disavowal of real sex acts.<sup>55</sup>

This internal paradox of the masculinist worldview did not go unnoticed. In the review of *Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen* (1912) in the *Jahrbuch*, Numa Praetorius (pseudonym of the *Amtsrichter* Eugen Wilhelm) criticizes the conflation of friendship and sexuality as an unfounded projection from Blüher; homosexuals are well capable of distinguishing sexual attraction from non-sexual intimacy. The noble tendency to sublimate or “vergeistigen”<sup>56</sup> one’s eroticism is also not specific to homosexual desire. Heterosexuals can be just as chaste, and homosexuals do seek out sex.

Perhaps ironically, the stifling internal hostility caused by the incommensurable theses within the emancipatory movement was predestined by the term *die widernatürliche Unzucht* in paragraph 175. To justify their desire, masculinists claimed that homosexuality was the ultimate form of cultural discipline, while sexologists argued that gender inversion was the most natural manifestation of individual constitution. If the latter’s self-definition disqualified him from

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the recurring emphasis on the renunciation of the physical act, see Robert Tobin, “The Greek Model and its Masculinist Appropriation,” in *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex*.

<sup>56</sup> Numa Praetorius, “Die Bibliographie der Homosexualität aus dem Jahre 1913. Blüher, Hans: Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen. Ein Beitrag zur Erkenntnis der sexuellen Inversion. (Berlin-Tempelhof 1912, Berlinerstraße 15. Verlag Bernh. Weise, Buchhandl.),” *JfS* 14 (1913): 344.

becoming a responsible legal subject, the former's self-understanding technically did not require the abolishment of the statute. Like Eve Sedgwick's closet, the statute enforced a rigid double bind on gay men, from which they could not escape no matter what kinds of theoretical legitimization they provided.

This contradictory situation also produced a new figure of the male homosexual as a sexual intermediary, but not in the Hirschfeldian sense. Depending on the context, he could shift shapes between the binaries of autonomy and submission, nature and culture, femininity and masculinity, hedonism and discipline—in short, he became “queer.” Unfortunately, few predicted that this negative dialectically produced hybridity would serve as the perfect source of ammunition for the political parties that would mercilessly exploit this new potent rhetorical figure to their advantage.

### 3. Homosexuality as Homosexuality

What the discursive inundation around homosexuality most effectively demonstrated over the years was that there was no singular identity that bound them together. Except for the tautological fact that they desire the members of the same sex, they differed in the constitution, temperaments, social ambitions, political attitudes, aesthetic tastes, philosophical and academic orientation, class, and even the types of men that they desired.

Making various gestures of disidentification was thus not an uncommon practice beyond the usual assertion of ideological differences. For instance, an article in the magazine published by the Munich activist August Fleishmann argues that homosexuals should adopt the term *Freundling* to describe themselves in order to distance themselves from pedophiles, noting that

the Duden dictionary listed *Knabenschänder* as one of the definitions for the word *Urning*, a popular word for homosexuals.<sup>57</sup>

Klaus Mann, who published a portion of his novel *Der fromme Tanz* (1925) in *Der Eigene*, was one of the figures who were perceptive to the theoretical pitfalls and political dangers inherent in the identificatory gestures of the emancipatory movement.<sup>58</sup> Observing the political scandal around the Nazi officer Ernst Röhm's outing as well as the newly introduced criminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union in 1934, he demonstrates how homosexual identity has become nothing but a fantastic screen of projection for the left in a short text titled *Die Linke und die Laster* (1934).

While affirming the innateness of homosexuality, Mann laments the popularity of the Hirschfeldian notion of the third sex, a term that he calls a "nicht sehr glückliche Schlagwort," for the notion of constitutive personality contributed to the idea that homosexuality was a symptom that referred to "eine einheitlich[e] Menschenart."<sup>59</sup> This symbolic gesture falsely transformed homosexuality into a stable signifier, which was left vulnerable to becoming maliciously appropriated. In the leftist milieu, indeed, fascism became its signified.

At the looming threat of Adolf Hitler's murderous takeover of Germany, it was not uncommon to hear bewildering statements like "zur festen Gefolgschaft der Nationalsozialisten gehören alle Homosexuellen"<sup>60</sup> and "man rotte alle Homosexuellen aus—und der Fascismus

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<sup>57</sup> "Urning oder Freundling?," *Der Seelenforscher: Monats-Schrift für volksthümliche Seelenkunde* 4 (1902).

<sup>58</sup> Klaus Mann, "Abschnitt aus einem Entwicklungsroman," *Der Eigene* 10, no. 12 (1924): 532-534.

<sup>59</sup> Klaus Mann, "Homosexualität und Faschismus," in Klaus Mann and Kurt Tucholsky, *Homosexualität und Faschismus* (Kiel: Verlag Frühlings Erwachen, 1990), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Radszuweit, "Sie tagen...," *Freundschaftsblatt* 10, no. 4 (1932).

wird verschwunden sein!”<sup>61</sup> This trope survived the war and persisted until the middle of the twentieth century, as one can see in Theodor Adorno’s sweeping claim that “totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together.”<sup>62</sup> Mann thus correctly observes that the expression “Mörder und Päderasten” has become the leftist conjugation of the Nazi idiom “Völkerverräter und Juden.”<sup>63</sup>

In his attempt to break this signifying chain, Mann argues that there exists “alle Typen, vom dekadenten Ästheten bis zum Landsknecht” and “alle Arten der Aktivität und der Passivität, samt alle Nuancen zwischen diesen beiden Gefühlslagen.”<sup>64</sup> Mann asserts that the left must be “objective” by recognizing the diversity among homosexuals, unlike the hypocritical Nazis who try “teils homosexuelle Cliques zu bilden, teils die Homosexuellen einzusperren, zu kastrieren oder zu erschießen.”<sup>65</sup>

Most significant in the essay is Mann’s treatment of the *Männerbund* theory. Despite the stigmatizing association of the male homosexual community with “homoerotic” fascism, Mann does not completely disavow the idea. Instead, Mann asks why a “Bund” among men should be automatically presumed to possess “den fascistischen, den fortschrittsfeindlichen Charakter.” By contrasting the fascist-adjacent variations of the *Männerbund* to Walt Whitman’s “Bund der glühenden Kameradschaft” which was devoted to democracy and Stefan George’s literary group that was “im ernstesten, verbindlichsten Sinn aristokratisch[,]”<sup>66</sup> Mann points out that there is no singular telos that determines the destiny of a group of homosexual men. If Mann’s idea of

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<sup>61</sup> Mann, “Homosexualität und Fascismus,” 7.

<sup>62</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Mann, “Homosexualität und Fascismus,” 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

homosexuality as “eine Liebe wie eine andere ... nicht besser nicht schlechter”<sup>67</sup> de-essentialized it, his desire to re-imagine the *Männerbund* potentialized it.

Kurt Hiller, a Jewish writer and activist who survived multiple imprisonments in concentration camps, predicts Mann’s style of argumentation almost two decades earlier in the essay “Ethische Aufgaben der Homosexuellen,” which was published in the *Jahrbuch* in 1913. Calling homosexuality “ein *Spiel* der Natur,” Hiller asserts that homosexuals cannot outsource the urgent task of imagining how they should live completely to epistemological inquiry.

The methodologies are incompatible: ethics proposes values and finds means to achieve them, while psychology studies symptoms and searches for causes. What is particularly problematic in the sexological-psychological approach, he argues, is its tendency to attribute the “pathological” qualities of homosexuals to their essential “inneren Anlage.”<sup>68</sup> As a small group of people or “Rasse,” homosexuals find themselves in a situation similar to that of Jews:

Hier wie dort Minoritäten, die über alle Völker verstreut, jahrhundertlang, geknechtet werden; trotz allen Unterschieden sämtlich in mystischer Brüderschaft; stark in den Tugenden Unterdrückter; der Wirtrasse jedesmal verhaßt, unheimlich und interessant; ohne Stolz meist, aber eben (in begreiflicher Reaktion gegen die Brutalität der Verfolgungen) zu maßloser Überschätzung der eignen Gattung neigend.<sup>69</sup>

Hiller urges homosexuals (and Jews) not to succumb to the sense of inferiority (one may think of Otto Weininger’s suicidal antisemitism and antifeminism directed against himself) and not to indulge in the delusion of one’s superiority like Benedict Friedländer.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Mann, “Homosexualität und Fascismus,” 9.

<sup>68</sup> Kurt Hiller, “Ethische Aufgaben der Homosexuellen,” *JsZ* 12 (1913): 402.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>70</sup> See Jacques le Rider, *Der Fall Otto Weininger: Wurzeln des Antifeminismus und Antisemitismus* (Wien/München: Löcker Verlag, 1985).

What is fundamental for the flourishing of homosexuals, instead, is building an international community based on the healthy affirmation of the self. This would be made possible only when they come out of the closet, if not publicly then privately, and cultivate an identity based on the sense of solidarity that cuts across ideological differences. Like Mann, Hiller envisioned an ethical homosexual life that liberates itself from the idea of an essential identity and creatively probes “die Grenze des Möglichen.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. Homosexuality as the Problem of Modernity

Mann and Hiller’s call for imagining gay identity as a site of ethical invention, however, was more an exception than the norm. What gradually developed out of the fierce competition between the contradictory arguments within the gay movement was the essential identity of male homosexuals as a minority of natural affinity that shared a specific idealistic striving. Neither the sexologists nor masculinists would have been happy with the consequence of such sublation. Sexological activism tried to decouple homosexuality from other charged discursive practices by insisting on its naturalness, while the masculinists believed that their idealism was not a minoritizing but universal one. This hybrid figure had, nonetheless, a tremendous implication for their political persecution at the end of the Weimar years, where male homosexuality was regarded not only as the symptom of individual moral depravity and psychological malady but also as a grave sociopolitical threat.

Using the framework of pathological idealism as its basic point of reference, political homophobia developed in two interrelated directions. On the one hand, the fantasy of male

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<sup>71</sup> Kurt Hiller, “Ethische Aufgaben der Homosexuellen,” 410.



homosexuals as seductive liars was adopted by the left, whose attack on Nazism was focusing on disclosing it as a fascistic form of idealistic determinism.<sup>72</sup> On the other, the trope of gay men as untrustworthy traitors bloomed after the murder of the SA officer Ernst Röhm in the 1930s, whose open homosexuality was registered as the threat of an internal coup by the Nazis. Fueled by such potent imagery, the legal persecution of male homosexuals continued until the late twentieth century.<sup>73</sup>

While the idea of “homosexual” idealism has its origins in the nineteenth century, a closer examination of Theodor Adorno’s statement “Totalität und Homosexualität gehören zusammen” in *Minima Moralia* (1951) will serve as a helpful point of entry into understanding the general structure of the anti-idealist homophobic reasoning. In the short Sedgwickian reflection titled *Tough Baby*, Adorno attempts to reveal the “virtually” feminine, and thus homosexual, nature behind the sadistic hegemonic masculinity or the “Prinzip der Herrschaft.” The core argument behind the text is that the pleasure that masculine men take in inflicting violence on others is the expression of their repressed masochism. Their preferred objects of enjoyment such as whisky and cigars betray their true nature, for these sensuous symbols of aggressiveness are nothing but the physical pain that they register on themselves.

The totalitarian form of masculine sociality where “die Gegensätze des starken Mannes und des folgsamen Jünglings ... in einer Ordnung [verfließen]” under the principle of “auf rücksichtsvoller Rücksichtslosigkeit gegründeten Respekt[.]” also demonstrates its fundamentally

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<sup>72</sup> For a summary of the leftist interpretation of homosexuality as bourgeois decadence, see Detlef Grumbach, “Die Linke und das Laster: Arbeiterbewegung und Homosexualität zwischen 1870 und 1933,” in *Die Linke und das Laster: Schwule Emanzipation und linke Vorurteile*, ed. Detlef Grumbach (Hamburg: Männerschwarmskrip Verlag, 1995), 17-37.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Burgi and Daniel Wolff, *Rehabilitierung der nach § 175 StGB verurteilten homosexuellen Männer* (Berlin: Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2016).

effeminate nature. The ostensible difference between the members of such a society is nothing but an illusion that occludes the violent impulse within masculine idealism that mercilessly objectivizes, identifies, and orders everything into a singular hierarchy including the subject itself. Before the law of masculinity, everyone is effeminate. The so-called tough guys need their effete counterparts to repress this awareness.

The fact that Adorno addresses the problem of the “democratization” of sadistic masculinity through the dissemination of images (with cinematic figures like “the handsome dinner-jacketed” man who enjoys “his bachelor flat”) points to the significance of aesthetic media as a tool of mass deception, a line of thinking that he pursues in his critique of the culture industry. For male homosexuality as repressed effeminacy can express itself only through the “aesthetic” masquerade of machismo in Adorno’s constellation (the possibility of non-repressed and non-gender-inversed homosexuality is not considered), it becomes the perfect signifier for a malicious idealism that hides behind a false façade.

Adorno’s homophobic imagination is a grand synthesis of discourses that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. From the sexologists, he inherits the notion that homosexuality is a symptom of gender inversion that is congenitally determined. From masculinists, he takes the idea that it is a subtype of idealism that dreams of a male-centered society. Combining these two tropes with the help of the psychoanalytic theory of repression, Adorno conceives homosexuality as a totalitarian rejection of difference that denies its true nature.

The dialectical energy of this synthesis, which stems from the very tension that was present in the two opposing homophile movements, proved to be enormously productive in its politicization. Male homosexuals, whose essential mode of being was understood as deception

and repression, could be easily accused of being either active seducers or gullible supporters of political ideologies, depending on how one interpreted the co-presence of masculinity and femininity within them. This double bind can be best observed in the rhetorical strategy of the Social Democratic Party, which paradoxically supported the repeal of paragraph 175, in their attack on the Nazis during the 1930s.

On the one hand, the leftist parties took advantage of the tolerance of Ernst Röhm by the Nazi party by arguing that gay Nazis endangered “die moralische und körperliche Gesundheit der deutschen Jugend”<sup>74</sup> by seducing them into their homosexual ideology. On the other, they stigmatized effete homosexuals as the consumers of national socialism who cannot help but find enjoyment in its aesthetics. It was not only due to their “passives Unterordnungsbedürfnis” and “Kadavergehorsam,” but also their nature that delights “an allem was glänzt, an Prunk und Luxus” that make them drawn to the aestheticized politics of Nazism with its “bunte Uniform” and “glänzende Standarten.”<sup>75</sup>

While Adorno’s politico-aesthetic analysis of the effete *Männerbund* as a breeding ground for fascism is a specifically modern reading of homosexuality, the cultural trope of male homosexuals as decadent liars and seducers was already in place in the nineteenth century. In the so-called *Platen-Affäre* in the first half of the nineteenth century as well as Friedrich Nietzsche’s attack on Richard Wagner at its very end, one can trace the gradual development of this prejudice.

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<sup>74</sup> Burkhard Jellonek, *Homosexuelle unter dem Hakenkreuz: Die Verfolgung von Homosexuellen im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990), 63.

<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Radszuweit, “Sie tagen...”

The Platen affair was one of the most scandalous episodes in the history of German literature that had a lasting impact even in its scholarly reception.<sup>76</sup> All began with the dramatist Karl Immermann and Heinrich Heine's mockery of the popularized use of the oriental style by contemporary poets. August von Platen, a poet who often wrote in the ghazal form taken from Arabic poetry, took offense and attacked Heine in *Der romantischer Ödipus* (1829) with antisemitic tropes. Heine took his revenge in *Die Bäder von Lukka* from the series *Reisebilder* (1829), making a connection between Platen's homosexuality and his hypocritical aestheticism that is devoid of content. Heine's attack, which Theodor Fontane once called "das widerlichste was man lesen kann,"<sup>77</sup> was not well received by the public due to its ferocity, and the scandal resulted in Heine's and Platen's exile.

*Die Bäder von Lukka* is a ruthlessly satirical text that condemns all kinds of social pretenses of "aesthetic" nature, including the efforts of assimilated Jews to culturally "pass," as moral hypocrisy. Predicting Adorno's critique of the idealistic concept of nature, for example, Heine the intradiegetic narrator condemns the representation of nature as a reconciliatory "Ganzheit" as well as the religious worship of "zarten Naturgefühlen" as a form of deception that occludes the suffering of a fractured society. It is in this context of his crusade against the "Lüge, die jedes gesunde Auge durchschaut und die dem Hohne dann nicht entgeht"<sup>78</sup> that Heine situates his polemic against Platen's homosexuality with a claim that he "werde das Materielle,

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<sup>76</sup> Ruth Esterhammer, "Heine und die Folgen: Die Platen-Attacke als ein Skandal mit Langzeitwirkung," *Heinrich Heine Jahrbuch* 46 (2007): 1-25.

<sup>77</sup> Fontane nonetheless agreed with many facets of Heine's social criticism in *Reisebilder*. See Theodor Fontane, *Tage- und Reisetagebücher: Tagebücher 1852, 1855-1858* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995), 228.

<sup>78</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7/1, ed. Alfred Opatz (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1986), 95.

das sogenannt Persönliche, nur insoweit berühren, als sich geistige Erscheinungen dadurch erklären lassen.”<sup>79</sup>

In Heine’s view, Platen’s stylistic pompousness and moral vacuity go hand in hand with his sexuality. As pederastic homosexuality belongs to antiquity and is thus incompatible with modern life, Platen hides behind a poetic style that idealizes the past instead of directly expressing his desire. Associating such aesthetic hypocrisy with homosexual effeminacy, Heine mocks the “passiv pythagoreischen Charakter” of Platen’s works as male lesbianism or “männliche Tribade.”<sup>80</sup> The accusation of empty formalism is expanded to Platen’s entire personality as a “Mann von Steiß,”<sup>81</sup> where parallels are drawn between his aesthetic/sexual affinities and his exaggerated insistence on nobility as well as his self-claimed excellence as a poet. He even alludes that Platen’s conversion to Catholicism may have been prompted by financial difficulties and rumors about his homosexuality rather than by sincere religious conviction.

Robert Holub correctly notes that Heine’s attack on Platen’s homosexuality “is not employed for the purpose of moral condemnation as much as for its political, social, and aesthetic ramification.” His goal was to criticize the “superficiality and hollowness” of his society, and his strategic homophobia was “to reinforce the negative aspects of a ludicrously reactionary society on the level of its sexual behavior.”<sup>82</sup> What Heine could not foresee, however, was that his vitriolic use of the stereotype of male homosexuals as perverse liars who

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<sup>79</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, 135.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Robert Holub, “Heine’s Sexual Assaults,” *Monatshefte* 73, no. 4 (1981): 423.

exploit art only for their sexual pleasure would become strengthened over the course of the nineteenth century and prepare for their mass political persecution in the twentieth century.

One can observe the continued association of homosexuality with aesthetic dishonesty in Friedrich Nietzsche's attack on Richard Wagner in his essay *Der Fall Wagner* (1888). The stakes become higher in Nietzsche's polemic, for the accusation does not simply decry Wagner's sexual inclination as the symptom of individual decadence but conceives it as a transmissible pathology that endangers the youth. Although the term homosexual does not directly appear in the essay, there are sufficient contextual clues both internal and external to the text to make Nietzsche's homophobic argument legible.

By the time he distanced himself from his earlier mentor, Nietzsche was aware Wagner had spread malicious rumors about his deteriorating health, suggesting that it was of sexual nature (be it his small penis, excessive masturbation, and/or homosexuality).<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche returns the favor in the essay by developing a tight connection between the deceptively predatory, and implicitly homosexual, nature of Wagner's works and his "physiologischer Degenerescenz."<sup>84</sup>

In the same manner that Heine eviscerates Platen for his hypocritical style, Nietzsche condemns Wagner for the decadence of his art that produces nothing but beautiful lies. What is fundamentally repulsive to Nietzsche is Wagner's aesthetic orientation that conceives music as a useful instrument to deliver a metaphysical idea to the listener. As the telos of this enterprise does not lie in the music itself but in the theatrical production of a maximum impact or

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Holub, "Complexity and Ambivalence in Nietzsche's Relationship with Wagner," *Nietzsche-Studien* 47, no. 1 (2018): 422-441; Geoff Waite, "Nietzsche's Baudelaire, or the Sublime Proleptic Spin of His Politico-Economic Thought," *Representation* 50 (1995): 14-52.

<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Der Fall Wagner," in *Gesammelte Werke* 17, (München: Musarion Verlag, 1926), 21.

“Wirkung” on the passive listener, Nietzsche claims that Wagner cannot be called a musician. He is nothing but a “Schauspieler.”<sup>85</sup>

The homosexual undertone in Nietzsche’s critique is too prominent to be overlooked. Because he regards the aesthetic pleasure in Wagnerian idealism as “a feminine effect” that “propagate[es] passive affective states”<sup>86</sup> by paralyzing one’s “Besonnenheit,”<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche portrays Wagner as an emasculating *eraste* who recruits an entourage of vulnerable young men. Noting that Wagner’s coming of age took place when Hegel and Schelling were “seducing the spirits,” he asserts that Wagner “conquers,” “lures,” and “devours” the “beautiful” male youth (“Züge der schönsten ... Jünglinge”<sup>88</sup>) in his aesthetic labyrinth like a minotaur.

The genealogical continuity between Heine, Nietzsche, and Adorno’s anti-idealist homophobic discourses is clear: male homosexuals are idealistic liars whose preferred tool of seduction is aesthetic pleasure. The attack on “homosexual” deception, however, was not an essentialist critique for Heine, for the inclination to lie was not an inherent defect of homosexuality but the unfortunate consequence of its incompatibility with modern society. Similarly, the connection between the decadence of idealist philosophy and homosexuality in Nietzsche’s polemic appears more incidental than necessary. What was reprehensible was not homosexuality itself but idealism that “feminizes.”

What made the transition between these two nineteenth-century texts and Adorno’s essentializing critique possible was the explosion of the discourses around homosexuality in the

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<sup>85</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Der Fall Wagner,” 21.

<sup>86</sup> Katherine Fry, “Nietzsche’s Critique of Musical Decadence: The Case of Wagner in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 142, no. 1 (2017): 166.

<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Nietzsche Contra Wagner,” in *Gesammelte Werke* 17, 281.

<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Der Fall Wagner,” 41.

first half of the twentieth century, including that of the homosexual movement, that portrayed male homosexuals as a naturally formed group of people who automatically share a distinct aesthetic and political goal.

Based on this new understanding of male homosexuality, another distinctly political line of homophobic thinking was developing around 1900 in parallel to the critical tradition. In national scandals such as the Eulenburg affair and Röhm affair, various political movements began to deploy the sensational figure of male homosexuals as perverse rebels who form an unauthorized group within the existing power structure.<sup>89</sup> Their pleasure-seeking nature as well as their susceptibility to foreign influence were thought to pose a great threat to national security, as they were thought to be capable of clandestinely swaying the opinion of political elites.<sup>90</sup>

The trope of gay traitors provided a nuanced supplement to the anti-idealist homophobia that theorized on the seductiveness of “homosexual” mode of identification. In addition to their identification with the wrong kind of idealism, their disidentification from the legitimate authority, namely the state, turned them into a particularly dangerous political liability. The paranoia over sexually motivated rebels was prevalent especially in the Nazi milieu, for its association with the *Männerbund* theory, which had an undeniable theoretical link to homosexuality, meant a constant threat to their political legitimacy. The historian Harry Oosterhuis goes so far as to argue that homosexuality was first and foremost an internal problem for the Nazis and their homosocial structure.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Norman Domeier, “The Homosexual Scare and the Masculinization of German Politics before World War I,” *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 737-759.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Schwartz, *Homosexuelle, Seilschaften, Verrat* (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2019), 12.

<sup>91</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, “Reinheit und Verfolgung: Männerbünde, Homosexualität und Politik in Deutschland (1900-1945),” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 5, no. 3 (1994): 408.



The fact that the SA officer Ernst Röhm's homosexuality had long been an open secret (he was even a member of the publisher Friedrich Radszuweit's homosexual organization *Bund für Menschenrecht*) and that Adolf Hitler tolerated it as a matter of private life for a while attests to the initial ambivalence around homosexuality in the Nazi circle. Although homosexuality as a subcultural phenomenon with its own social spaces, practices, and publications had always been held under general suspicion as it "sich dem verordneten, einheitlichen Erleben in der Masse [entzog],"<sup>92</sup> it was after Röhm's murder on the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 and the following shift of power to the SS, which had been a subunit of the SA, that the Nazi persecution of male homosexuality began to become significantly intensified.

Central to this change was Heinrich Himmler, who had read Hans Blüher's *Die deutsche Wandervogel als erotisches Phänomen*. While agreeing with the notion of the supremacy of the masculine society, Himmler saw the "Irrung der degenerierten Individualität" in the "reine Päderastie,"<sup>93</sup> which constituted an integral part of the homosexual thesis of the *Männerbund* theory. The meddling of male same-sex eroticism in the masculine state was deemed a great disruption in Himmler's heterosexual vision of the *Männerstaat*, not only in the matter of the racialist and eugenic reproduction but also of the political *Gleichschaltung* that requires strict enforcement of gender roles. One can notice how Himmler saw homosexuality as an internal threat that is prone to develop in a homosocial environment in his advocacy for early heterosexual contact among youth as well as in his wish to implement the death penalty for the members of the SS who commit such acts of abomination.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Burkhard Jellonek, *Homosexuelle unter dem Hakenkreuz*, 26.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

It is important to note that it was not Himmler alone who held such an opinion. The jurist Graf von Gleispach, for example, advocated for the tightening of paragraph 175 in the 1930s with a claim that male homosexuals in official positions would cause the “Verfälschung des öffentlichen Lebens”<sup>95</sup> due to their untrustworthy und unpredictable nature. Citing Blüher’s *Männerbund* theory, the head of the Gestapo Rudolf Diels portrayed homosexuality as an internal danger in his report to Adolf Hitler, arguing that male homosexuals build “wirklich verschworene Gemeinschaften” and that “die widernatürliche Passion alsbald in den Staatsgeschäften dominiere, wenn man sie walten lasse.”<sup>96</sup>

By the 1940s, the tide had irrevocably shifted. The official newspaper of the SS *Das Schwarze Korps* spread the conspiracy theory that homosexuals “bilden einen Staat im Staate, eine geheime, den Interessen des Volkes zuwiderlaufende, also staatsfeindliche Organisation”<sup>97</sup> and Adolf Hitler began to compare homosexuality to a pest that contaminates the youth.<sup>98</sup> The homosexual movement found itself defunct by this time, and all hope for legal reform were crushed. In 1935, paragraph 175 was expanded so that it did not limit itself to the persecution of the “beischlafähnliche[] Handlung,”<sup>99</sup> which had previously excluded certain acts like mutual masturbation. Magnus Hirschfeld never returned to Germany after his world lecture tour in 1930 and died in France. The Institute of Sexual Science that he established was plundered and

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<sup>95</sup> Alexander Zinn, “*Aus dem Volkskörper entfernt?:*” *Homosexuelle Männer im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2018), 262.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander Zinn, “‘Gegen das Sittengesetz’: Staatliche Homosexuellenverfolgung in Deutschland 1933–1969,” in *Homosexuelle in Deutschland 1933–1969*, ed. Alexander Zinn (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 16.

<sup>98</sup> Florian Berg, *Die Bekämpfung des Verbrechers als Sicherung des Volkes* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 195.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Zinn, “*Aus dem Volkskörper entfernt?,*” 286.

annihilated during the Nazi book burnings. Adolf Brand died in obscurity during a bombing raid after his estate was ransacked by the Nazis five times.<sup>100</sup>

Independently from the scholarly debate about the extent of everyday persecution of homosexuality in comparison to the intensity of the rhetorical homophobia in politics, one must ask why the sexual proclivity of gay men could be so easily co-opted for opportunistic and polemical purposes in the first place. One may find suggestive answers to this question by throwing a glance back at Theodor Fontane and Robert Musil's reflections on the modern human condition in their representation of sexuality.

For these two writers working on either side of the year 1900, the potential of sexual experience was also a cause for great concern, for its inventive nature coincides with its destructiveness. Both identified the metaethical problem of modernity in the paradoxical experience of sexuality, where the subject feels pleasure both in its determination and freedom: neither strict adherence to moral orthodoxy nor complete abolishment of tradition seemed to promise a blueprint for a good life. In Fontane's portrayal of sexual transgression in *Effi Briest*, for instance, the force of Effi's sexual desire radically questions the legitimacy of "uns tyrannisierende Gesellschafts-Etwas"<sup>101</sup> in the Prussian society. Similarly, Musil understands the yearning of the modern subject for the Other Condition, where the existing norms of reason, order, and hierarchy may become suspended, as essentially erotic.

The valorization of erotic transgression is counterbalanced by their acute awareness of the possibly catastrophic outcomes of demolishing existing forms of life. Fontane's novel thus sympathizes with the female protagonist's tragic destiny but does not fully justify her behavior:

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 239-243.

<sup>101</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 265.

Effi's romantic dream of eloping with Major Crampas as well as her lack of self-discipline as a "Naturkind" are incapable of reforming the moral system that oppresses her. In Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the attempts to invent new relationality between the self and the other, exemplified by the incestual eroticism between Ulrich and Agathe, repeatedly degenerate into violence, crime, and war.

The literary use of language is a privileged model for thinking through the modern problem of orientation for Fontane and Musil, as its plasticity that negotiates between social and individual meanings offers insight into thinking beyond the binaries of normativity and transgression. Similarly, the male homosexual identity understood by the discursive practices in the first half of the twentieth century was a Faustian hovering between determination and freedom. For many, the impossibility of resolving this paradox meant a modern life of tragedy.

For politics that sought out collective solutions to the ills of modern life, the "homosexual" situation was a metaphor for the pathological modern condition that must be overcome. For the Nazis, the only licensed way of enjoyment was the total submission to the order of "natural" determination, which was dictated by the party in reality, and the elimination of those who do not belong. In contrast, enjoyment and freedom became experiences that are categorically suspect for the left, for they were regarded as a potent tool of deception deployed by decadent idealism that hinders true liberation.

By insisting on one's legal and moral freedom to enjoy both *what they are and what they wish to be*, male homosexuals accidentally stylized themselves as the ultimate embodiment of modern subjectivity that *enjoys* the terror of modernity: the naturalistic argument adopted by the Hirschfeldian thought asserted *the right to enjoy one's psychosexual determination*, while the masculinist thesis advocated for *the right to enjoy one's free use of sexual desire*. This is how

male homosexuals became a political liability. Their “queer” duality could leave a particularly visceral impact on people’s imagination because the “queerness” of their pleasure existed not only on the philosophical level but also on the most sensuously figurative: sex acts.

As long as we inhabit a time where the destabilizing experience of modernity persists, politics will never cease to recruit sexuality to its rhetorical program at every opportunity, either by imposing a singular way to enjoy or condemning pleasure wholesale. The notion of “sexual identity” perseveres despite such threats, for we still attempt to find pleasure in the inescapable situation of modern humankind, where one is determined yet free, vulnerable yet capable, dependent on yet independent from others.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> This is how the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder theorized language as human nature. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Frühe Schriften 1764-1772* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985).

## Chapter IV

### Queer Theory's Other: Identity and Language

Du langage, et non un langage.<sup>1</sup>  
—Roland Barthes

In *American Homo* (1998), the activist scholar Jeffrey Escoffier identifies two opposing streams of thought within the homosexual movement in the postwar United States. On the one side is traditional gay and lesbian identity politics, which insisted on the transhistorically authentic identity of same-sex attracted people as the basis for communitarian politics. On the other are academic social constructionists as well as the radical political movement *Queer Nation*, which asserted the contingency of all identities and advocated for “anyone who differed from the white heterosexual norm.”<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposing the queer faction’s Marcusian ideal of polymorphous perversity with the *realpolitikal* achievement of identity politics in issues like “AIDS education and funding, gay-positive school curricula, or civil rights,”<sup>3</sup> Escoffier remarks that the notion of identity cannot help but remain an object of “ambivalence”<sup>4</sup> for sexual minorities.

Within the boundaries of academia, the internal conflict around the matter of identity has little changed over the course of past decades. If anything, polemical gesturing and open hostility have become a standard code of conduct among queer theory scholars. A few pertinent examples would be José Esteban Muñoz’s infamous denouncement of Lee Edelman’s unrelenting critique

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1973), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 216.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

of identity as “the gay white man’s last stand”<sup>5</sup> and Jasbir Puar’s reading of the *It Gets Better* campaign as a “sanctimonious” Western identarian project produced by and marketed exclusively at “urban, neoliberal gay enclaves.”<sup>6</sup> What often becomes lost in such aggressive performances of political radicality, as Robyn Wiegman has noted, are the critical attention to the reason behind intellectual disputes and the willingness to explore possible solutions.

The most fundamental and persistent disagreement in queer theory is between psychoanalytically inspired theorists and intersectional cultural critics (who are often unjustly binarized as “white gay men” and “the rest of us” in a similar way August von Platen was pit against Heinrich Heine in nineteenth-century Germany). This divide is occasioned by their different interpretations of the relationship between identity and sexuality. The latter understands sexuality as one form of social identity that operates under the same logic as other “resonant social differences” like race, gender, and class. It thus devotes its energy to interpreting how the intersecting identities of various minority groups become constructed and persecuted. In contrast, the former highlights the notion of the sexual drive as a distinct psychic force that is uniquely capable of frustrating the process of normalization by resisting all hegemonic “practices that portend to socialize it.”<sup>7</sup> For psychoanalytic thinking, to conceive anti-normativity without sexuality is an impossibility.

At the end of the day, the only significant point of contestation between the two factions is the theoretical location of anti-identarian queer praxis. For cultural critics, identity serves first

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<sup>5</sup> Robyn Wiegman, “Sex and Negativity: Or, What Queer Theory Has for You,” *Cultural Critique* 95 (2017): 229.

<sup>6</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Right to Maim: Debility, Capability, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Wiegman, 234.

and foremost as an objective category in social signification; it can be “queered” via conscious sociopolitical intervention that redraws its boundaries. What they mean when they accuse psychoanalytic thinkers of not being “queer” enough is that the latter has not taken forms of social difference other than “sexual identity” into account in its analysis, by which they mean concrete categories like gays, lesbians, bisexuals, etc. In contrast, psychoanalytic theorists work with the notion of identity as a subjective form of constructing selfhood. In this view, queerness is not an identifiable thing but a psychic mechanism that disturbs the subject’s movement toward a coherent ego. In this view, even the subject’s identification with “queer” identity cannot help but become narcissistic and homogenizing unless it remains attentive to the unconscious experience of *jouissance*.

For both parties, the notion of gay and lesbian identity as a category of sameness that designates a sexual affinity group has become an outdated construct to be disavowed; the hegemonic logic of the discipline demands that one must either objectively “queer” existing identities or subjectively explore the identity-shattering experience of sexuality. One must ask, however, why one should take the political and social supremacy of queerness as heterogeneity for granted. An honest and open conversation can take place only when scholars admit that the fantasy of pure heterogeneity, be it in the form of sociopolitical intersectionality or the psychoanalytic drive, has thus far resulted in even stronger calls for political and intellectual homogenization that favors each party’s vision of queerness, while neglecting to devote attention to historical and material changes that gay and lesbian identity politics has brought forth.

The following chapter seeks to articulate an alternative understanding of queerness beyond the hostile dialectic of sameness and difference. First, I will trace the origin of current conflicts in queer theory back to the field’s critical habit of dramatizing the binary of



homogeneity and heterogeneity and contextualize it as a reaction to the theoretical assumptions of structuralism. I will then point to the possibility of thinking of identity and sexuality neither as formless heterogeneity nor oppressive homogeneity, taking a cue from Toril Moi's literary theoretical reflection on the Wittgensteinian model of language.

Finally, I will review the intellectual trajectories of the French thinkers Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to illustrate how the evolution of their scholarly oeuvre teaches us productive ways of conceiving identity, sexuality, and language. Instead of positing these units of intelligibility as unalterable systems of determination that are thrust upon the subject, these gay men reimagined them as a tool that could be put into use by the subject to create pleasurable forms of life. A serious consideration of their aesthetic reconfiguration of homogeneity and heterogeneity will afford queer theory an opportunity to reconsider its philosophical and political orientation.

### 1. Queerness and the Critique of Identity

In *The Trouble with Normal* (1999), Michael Warner makes a paradigmatic statement that the mainstream gay and lesbian movement of the time has “challenge[d] the stigma of identity without in the least challenging the shame of sexual acts.”<sup>8</sup> According to Warner, the activist strategy to portray homosexuals as dignified and respectable citizens who are no different from straight people has failed to critically engage with the affect of shame that continues to haunt the everyday life of gays and lesbians. The idealized identity of non-

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 29.

threatening and de-sexualized homosexuals has merely repressed further investigations of the political meaning behind non-conventional and non-normative sex.

As a response to traditional identity politics, queer theory has devoted much of its attention to analyzing heterosexuality as a normative process of identity formation that necessarily posits homosexuality as its stigmatized other. Thematising and often valorizing various forms of negativity that sexual minorities embody like subversion, abnormality, bad feelings, and failure, it explored the psychic and affective effects of social normalization on gay and lesbian subjectivities as figures of anti-normativity.

Queer theory's negative methodology can be best read as a reaction to structuralism that has understood identity, language, and sexuality as self-referential systems of signification, whose operational logic set up binary oppositions between what is included and excluded, valorized and stigmatized, and normalized and pathologized.<sup>9</sup> In this constellation, identity appears as a homogenizing tool to assign either the individual subject or a group of people to one of the binary terms for the sake of sociopolitical control. Consequently, the goal of poststructuralist queer critique has been exposing the arbitrariness of the binary opposition and uncovering the essence of identity as a product of normalizing power.

Among others, psychoanalytically informed theorists such as Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman have proffered the so-called "anti-social" thesis that located the revolutionary potential of queer sexuality in its negativity that interrupts the hegemonic standardization of subjectivity. From a more explicitly feminist angle, Judith Butler has argued that gay and lesbian

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<sup>9</sup> See Alan Dundes, "Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Lévi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect," *Western Folklore* 56, no.1 (1997): 39-50 and Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-330.

subjectivities subvert and resist heteronormativity by performatively undoing the compulsorily heterosexual models of gender identity. A closer examination of these three thinkers will reveal how identity has come to be the fundamental object of queer critique and how the field's particular understanding of this category has determined its political and intellectual commitments.

In *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (1987) and *Homos* (1995), the literary scholar Leo Bersani offers a gay alternative to the commonplace version of psychoanalytic theory that explicates the structure of sexual desire with a developmental narrative of heterosexual subjectivity. In the latter's paradigm, the unindividuated subject initially experiences moments of full enjoyment in its interaction with the figure of the Mother (who represents the primary caretaker). In this mode of pleasure called *jouissance*, there exists no difference between the self and the world as the subject has not yet experienced the mediation of language.

The castration by the Father, understood as the subject's assimilation into various forms of normative sociality (law, language, and the symbolic order), restructures this experience by prohibiting the immediate union with the Mother. To compensate for this separation, the subject begins to desire various objects that both signify and displace the original state of undifferentiation. Since *jouissance* is a pre-linguistic state that is "meaningless" in its pure intensity, however, all signifiers of desire as ersatz objects can never recreate the original experience with the lost love object. In the psychoanalytic view, the subject's desire is thus condemned to be perpetually disappointed; the moment the subject possesses its object of desire, it realizes it is not the real thing.

In this constellation, the dynamic of irreconcilable intersubjectivity becomes established. As all communication becomes mediated by language, the other and the other's desire appear

inaccessible and enigmatic to the subject. In its vain attempt to secure the other's affection, the subject fantasizes about the other's desire while building an identity around what it believes that the other lacks. Due to this structural lack in human subjectivity, our relations with others cannot help but be always fraught with the negative affect of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

What Bersani observes in this process is the hetero-sexualization of desire: the subject desires the other (or what the subject imagines to be missing in itself) and posits its identity against the backdrop of the fantasized other who also desires what it lacks (I desire to be/have what the other lacks). If the subject fails to recognize these illusionary workings of desire, it will strive to generate a perfect binary between the self and the other, whereby the difference between them will become absolutized as reciprocal complementarity.

This relational structure based on the fetishization of difference, Bersani argues, paradoxically results in the antagonization of the other, for the subject with a fully homogenized sense of identity actively repels and devalues all negativity, or any element that belongs to the fantasized other, that might threaten the coherence of its ego. The cause of hostile relations between the sexes, Bersani claims, can be traced back to this logic of hetero-sexuality:

If ... men are especially apt to "choose" this version of sexual pleasure [affirmation of the self and devaluation of difference], because their sexual equipment appears to invite by analogy, or at least to facilitate, the phallicizing of the ego ... neither sex has exclusive right to the practice of sex as self-hyperbole. For it is perhaps primarily the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship that condemns sexuality to becoming a struggle for power. As soon as persons are posited, the war begins. It is the self that swells with excitement at the idea of being on top, the self that makes of the inevitable play of thrusts and relinquishments in sex an argument for the natural authority of one sex over the other.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25.

Despite the self-defeating workings of desire, Bersani maintains that revolutionary potential exists within sex because it is ultimately a yearning to return to the state of *jouissance*, where all boundaries between the self and the other become collapsed. Taking a cue from Sigmund Freud's remark on repetition compulsion in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), which becomes theorized as the major concept of the drive in poststructuralist psychoanalysis, Bersani questions whether lack, difference, and identity are indispensable elements of sexual experience.

What Bersani calls the homo-ness of homosexuality is a mode of desire whose structure could disturb the subject's incessant movement towards a homogenous identity and the idealized couple form. Unlike hetero-sexuality, it remains faithful to *jouissance* by propelling the subject to repeatedly find the "sameness" between itself and various objects in the world—the weakened sense of the self makes intimate identification with the other possible. Because this mode of desire does not originate from lack, it also feels no need either to possess or to degrade the other. Difference exists only as a non-essential addition to the ontological sameness between the subject and its other. Bersani takes the passage in Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* (1948) as an emblematic example of "generous outpouring of the self,"<sup>11</sup> where two men have sex looking not at each other but gazing into the open darkness.

For Bersani, the fact that some gay men actively desire to have receptive anal sex, despite its cultural association with ego-shattering debasement and even death itself in the post-AIDS age, is not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to explore the gay-specific attitude towards identity and relationality. The homosexual "failure" to become and remain a coherent subject of

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<sup>11</sup> Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 33.

hetero-sexual desire is a blessing in disguise: it short-circuits the identity-based model of desire so that the self becomes liberated to enjoy finding oneself everywhere outside the boundaries of the ego; the world becomes a space of unlimited correspondences and extensions of the self. According to Bersani, difference might be rescued from the degraded status of compulsory complement when such a notion of non-mimetic sameness is affirmed.

The so-called anti-social thesis that Bersani advocates is not a rejection of all forms of living together.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is a skeptical questioning of the identity-based sociality imagined by the ideological model of heterosexuality. What becomes lost in the latter's pastoralizing view of sex as mutual recognition of difference is the subversive value of "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self"<sup>13</sup> that can undo the identity-inflating work of desire and make radical sympathy with the other possible.

In his now infamous book *No Future* (2004), Lee Edelman radicalizes Bersani's call for different modes of relationality with a claim that all future-oriented political optimism must be abandoned, as it cannot help but reproduce the hetero-sexual logic of desire. The allure in the idea of a future generation, Edelman argues, lies within its unique ruse that promises the subject omnipotence by making it imagine its own absence. This false guarantee has a more powerful hold on the subject than any other fantasy because it produces a sense of immortalized ego that "inhabit[s] the space of perception as such"<sup>14</sup> and bypasses the impossibility of witnessing one's own death.

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<sup>12</sup> Bersani himself sardonically contested the notion that his work was "anti-social." See Wiegman, 238.

<sup>13</sup> Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 34.

Futurity in Edelman should be understood as a hegemonic temporality that ideologically posits the natural continuity of linear progress that would affirm the validity of the system, cultural values, and modes of life as they exist now. In particular, the Child as a metaphorical image of future hope powerfully imbues the emptiness of sexual desire with rich meaning by connecting it to the material fact of reproduction in heterosexual sex. Once the sex-child-futurity triad becomes established, any forms of sex that do not participate in the logic of reproductive futurity are condemned as a threat by the virtue of being “meaningless.”

What lurks behind the clichéd claim that homosexuals are a threat to children is the fear that the coherence of the hetero-sexualized world *as one knows it* may not be “naturally” sustainable as it claims to be. To Edelman, all the affirming talks about the future are nothing but a stealthy operation of the narcissistic ego that resists any change that may threaten its internal stability. As the goal of the queer movement is to enact a difference in the homophobic world, Edelman advises queer subjects to reject any political impulse that orients itself around the notion of futurity. He polemically proclaims: “Fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital *l*s and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”<sup>15</sup>

As a counter-model to reproductive futurity, Edelman offers the concept of *sinthomosexuality*, which designates a mode of queer (homo)sexuality that refuses to reconcile with the symbolic order and its promise of futurity. *Sinthome* in Lacanian psychoanalysis is a term associated with ego-shattering *jouissance*, to which the subject’s illogical attachment

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<sup>15</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 29. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz advocates for Marxian utopianism as a form of queer political project in response to Edelman, but their definitions of futurity are so radically distinct that they cannot be reconciled. For Edelman, it is a continuity that restricts; for Muñoz, a disruption that liberates.

persists no matter what. The subject's binding to this peculiar signifier occurs not because of its meaning but of the nature of the drive that arbitrarily "sticks" to an object and surrenders the subject to the compulsion to repeat.

Because *sinthome*-as-signifier exists within the chain of signification of the symbolic order, it may often appear pathological whenever there is a misalignment between the subject's specific obsession over the signifier and its social meaning (one may ask: "why are you aroused by *that* body part?"). Edelman claims that by not letting go of one's seemingly irrational attachment, *sinthomosexuals* expose the lies of the symbolic order by offering a spectacle that "reduc[es] the assurance of meaning in fantasy's promise of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive."<sup>16</sup>

Both in Bersani and Edelman, the object of criticism is the homogenizing function of subject formation that tries to secure the stability of identity by expunging the ineffaceable queer heterogeneity of the Real. Their theoretical ingenuity lies within their framing of homosexuality, which continues to be portrayed as a rejection of difference in homophobic philosophies to this day, as a peculiar form of obstinate sameness that exposes the lies of "hetero-sexual" ideology that advocates for difference only to subsume it under a singular order. Because they oppose their notion of homo-sexual non-identity to the concept of hetero-sexual identity, however, the idea of homosexual identity remains an ambivalent object for both.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler further de-centers the notion of identity in the queer political sphere by explicating the self-referential logic of identity politics. For Butler, making the identarian category of woman the central tenet of

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<sup>16</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 39.



feminism is self-defeating, for it must interrogate how the ideology of heteronormativity justifies itself with a circular logic that defines what a woman is and makes moral and political claims based on this epistemological assertion. Unless one questions the notion of identity itself, Butler argues, “the culturally enmired subject” cannot help but futilely “negotiate[] its constructions” while remaining unaware of how those “constructions are the very predicates of its own identity.”<sup>17</sup>

Butler’s nonfoundational philosophy revolves around the notion that gender exists as a performance without the subject that grounds it. In this view, there is no such thing as gender that signifies the identity between the subject and a concept; there are only repeated acts and gestures that retrospectively posit the coherent gender identity of its performer. This definition of gender precludes any notion of gender as commonplaceness that *exists without intrinsic moral, ethical, and political value*, for every utterance and behavior must become interpreted by the normative power and assigned an identity in a hierarchy to appear intelligible at all.<sup>18</sup> There is simply no way out of gender. As a regulatory ideal without an original, gender can torment its subjects because it is immaterial fiction that asserts its “reality” even when its real actualization is, in fact, impossible. Following the psychoanalytic theory of desire, Butler thus notes that the experience of gender is fundamentally that of melancholia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 195.

<sup>18</sup> Butler further develops this thesis in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1996) by sharpening her skepticism that sex as a notion of pre-discursive materiality might not exist and should be understood as a retrospectively posited ground of meaning.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender: Refused Identification,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 5, no. 2 (1995): 165-180.

This, however, does not mean that there is no way of fighting back. Because Butler locates the cause of the oppression of women as well as compulsory heterosexuality in the normative congealment of the category of “woman,” what becomes necessary is creating as much dissonance as possible in the notion of coherent gender identity. For example, Butler’s analysis of drag culture emphasizes how it “dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity”<sup>20</sup> and uncovers the reified status of gender as a “stylized repetition of acts”<sup>21</sup> by disintegrating the triad of sex, gender identity, and gender performance.

The master concepts of hetero-sexuality, reproductive futurity, and gender performativity in these thinkers share the critical aim of demonstrating how the hegemonic form of political idealism homogenizes the world into a singular totality with a mechanism of foreclosure that violently oppresses identities that fall out of its paradigm. Their theoretical worldview operates on the premise that identity can signify only within a *closed system of binary oppositions*. As a fictional system of signification, the threat of the normative symbolic order lies within its self-generative and self-referential character, with which it perpetually extends its purview of influence. Bersani, Edelman, and Butler’s critique therefore analyzes how the normalizing systems successfully blackmail their subjects with a deadly threat of excommunication, should they appear “incomprehensible” by deviating from the limited set of approved signifiers (heterosexual love objects, correctly gendered behavior, etc.).

If there were no way out of the system of language and the identities it produces as long as humans are speaking animals, there would remain very few “choices” left for queer subjects:

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<sup>20</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

social abjection or normalization.<sup>22</sup> Bersani's desire of sameness, Edelman's *sinthomosexuality*, and Butler's iterative subversion thus portray political resistance as uncompromising acts of self-destruction and self-disintegration.<sup>23</sup> Is that all there is? Does this hold true for *all* forms of identity and language?

In *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017), Toril Moi criticizes the tendency in post-Saussurian thought to dramatize and escalate Ferdinand de Saussure's remark on the arbitrariness of signs into a totalizing theory of the "absence of meaning." To contest the kind of linguistic nihilism fostered by the school of deconstruction, she urges literary scholars to take Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Stanley Cavell's ordinary language philosophy into consideration that locates the meaning of language in its use:

[Culler (and Derrida)] assert the absence of a general theory of language. For them, only the presence of such a theory would provide the necessary "ground" of meaning ... Since there is no such ground, they draw the skeptical conclusion: because we can't theorize the infinity of possible speech acts, the meaning of our words is always infinitely open, unstable, ultimately undecidable ... Cavell and Wittgenstein, on the other hand, consider the assertion and denial to be equally meaningless ... To fetishize the absence of a theory of meaning ... is exactly as theory-ridden as to posit the presence of a theory of meaning.<sup>24</sup>

All the above-mentioned thinkers agree that the relationship between language and its world is not essentially fixed. The Wittgensteinian concepts of language-games and forms of life, however, do not take the "absence" of the ground of language as a reason to resort to bad-faith skepticism. Instead of dwelling in the negativity that insists on the impossibility of a non-self-

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<sup>22</sup> David Halperin argues in *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (2007) that one should not interpret gay men's engagement in unprotected sex during and after the AIDS crisis as a manifest death drive inherent in homosexual desire but as a social phenomenon of abjection.

<sup>23</sup> This political thesis culminates in Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 80.

referential language, Moi offers an active image of language, of which meaning becomes immanently instantiated by our use of it in reality. Language is not an abstract system of signification divorced from reality, but a shared tool that acquires meaning only within real contextual fields. To understand language and determine its meaning, one should tend to its particular context in the world and look at how it is used. She thus rejects the blackmailing of the binary choice between language as a representational, mimetic tool of Nature and language as an artificial prison house of Culture.

Moi gives her experience of reading Julio Cortázar's novel *A Certain Lucas* (1979) as an example, where she could not understand the meaning of the Spanish terms used to describe bullfighting by referring to dictionary definitions. The difficulty in comprehension did not arise from her inability to understand their indexical meaning but rather from her ignorance of how they function in the context of bullfighting. The word *naturales*, for instance, might signify *natural* in English, "but what good does it do me if I don't know that a *natural* is a pass carried out with the left hand? Or that because it exposes more of the bullfighter's body to the pull, a leg-handed pass is more dangerous than a right-handed one?"<sup>25</sup> It does not follow, however, that there is no meaning in the word *naturales*. Rather, its specific meaning can be determined only when one takes into account how it is used in concrete forms of life.

As Martin Jay has noted, deconstructive criticism and its unrelenting suspicion against language (and aesthetic language in particular) as a manipulative tool of producing homogeneity "fall[] prey to the same homogenizing, totalizing, covert violent tendencies it too rapidly

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<sup>25</sup> Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 81.

attributes to ‘the aesthetic’ itself.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the sober openness in the Wittgensteinian view of language does not fully discredit the insight of poststructuralist thought. Ideological language behaves very much like a system, essentializing all its elements and hierarchizing them according to their differences. What is thus required is the capacity to differentiate systematic language as one specific way of using (or abusing) language and to explore alternative modes of speech.

## 2. Desiring Queer Life: Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on Language and Identity

Perhaps nothing else embodies the sensitivity to various uses of language than the gay French semiotician Roland Barthes’s academic trajectory.<sup>27</sup> As Jonathan Culler notes, Barthes’s multiple intellectual personas as a structuralist semiotician, a poststructuralist literary critic, and eventually a “hedonist”<sup>28</sup> writer throughout his career were made possible by the changes in how he understood the relationship between language, reality, and its speaker.

Barthes’s grand declaration in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) that “the Novel is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time”<sup>29</sup> exemplifies the critical tendencies in his earlier semiotic works that conceive signification as an ideologically tinged process of normalization. In his structuralist work

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Jay, “‘The Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology: Or, What Does it Mean to Aestheticize Politics?,” *Cultural Critique* 21 (1992): 56.

<sup>27</sup> For the reason behind my explicit designation of Barthes as a gay man, see D.A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 39.

*Mythologies* (1957), for example, Barthes gives a detailed account of how the ideological or “mythical” use of language alienates and antagonizes its speakers.

Myths are signifying structures that produce a meaning of second order, as they take existing signifiers and re-signify them at their will. This type of appropriation is possible because there exists no natural connection between the signified and the signifier as Ferdinand de Saussure has demonstrated. When a reader becomes a “myth-consumer” by failing to correctly decode the second-degree level of signification, myths naturalize themselves and reverse the hierarchy between the orders of meaning. “Myth is speech justified in *excess*”<sup>30</sup> as it pretends “everything happens as if the picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier *gave a foundation* to the signified.”

What is especially troubling in this process is that myths often obfuscate how different layers of meaning are artificially created via the intentional use of language and how such uses often have sociopolitical motives. Barthes deems such semiotic and hermeneutic acts morally dubious because “the concept [or the newly assigned signified], literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates it.”<sup>31</sup> What myths obscure is not only the first order of meaning but also the material history of signifiers.

Once the ideological language reaches the status of a closed system, it engages in moral antagonism against other discourses to occupy the hegemonic position of Nature or the ultimate ground of meaning. As Barthes explains in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), “the only survivors are systems (fictions, jargons) inventive enough to produce a final figure, the one which brands the adversary with a half-scientific, half-ethical name, a kind of turnstile that permits us

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 129.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

simultaneously to describe, to explain, to condemn, to reject, to recuperate the enemy, in a word: to *make him pay*.”<sup>32</sup> No matter how well intended, no singular system is innocent enough to resist the temptation to become nature. By observing how the languages of Marxism and psychoanalysis also succumb to this process of ideologization, Barthes remarks that one often paradoxically resorts to ideologies in order to escape one.

For all his criticism of systematic language and naturalized signifiers, Barthes maintains that mythological speech does not encompass the entire spectrum of linguistic activities: “it is not *any* type: language needs special conditions to become myth.”<sup>33</sup> How could one overcome the language of ideology without merely replacing it with another? In his search for an alternative model, Barthes directs his attention to textual elements that appear less charged with meaning. In *The Reality Effect* (1968), for instance, Barthes discovers how ideological narratives, or what he calls readerly texts, can recuperate even the signifiers that seemingly have no structural function. Instead of denoting a concrete signified, insignificant details can connote the objects’ “having-been-there”<sup>34</sup> and suggest the authenticity of the narrative. Because they do not challenge the ideology but reinforce its faux naturalness, Barthes calls this functionalization of evacuated meaning referential illusion.

It is in *Empire of Signs* (1970) that Barthes discovers the possibility of what he calls the degree zero of writing.<sup>35</sup> Noting how the brevity of language in haiku makes it impossible for it

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<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 28.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth mentioning that Barthes himself is aware of the limits of his orientalist imagination. Japan discussed in the book is not the real Japan with its own symbolic order but Barthes’ particular reception of it as an anti-symbolic culture: “what can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom...; it is

to be structurally interpreted, he claims that every word in this poetic form immanently stands by itself. The refusal of metaphysical depth in haiku carries immense moral and ethical implications for Barthes, for it intervenes in the self-referential and self-naturalizing gestures of ideological language that is always “deciphering, normalizing, or tautological.”<sup>36</sup> This experience of non-violent interruption opens the writer/reader’s eyes to the degree zero of the material world, where the telos of one’s use of language is no longer the creation of a system:

You are entitled, says the haiku, to be trivial, short, ordinary; enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting; you yourself (and starting from yourself) are entitled to establish your own notability; your sentence, whatever it may be, will enunciate a moral, will liberate a symbol, you will be profound: at the least possible cost, your writing will be *filled*.<sup>37</sup>

It is three years after the publication of *Empire of Signs* that Barthes would finally overcome his raging suspicion of language and its referential illusion. In a slim volume titled *Pleasure of the Text* (1973), he develops a positive concept of textual pleasure as the experience of the co-existence of meaning and non-meaning. Without too much conceptual precision, Barthes subdivides pleasure into pleasure (*plaisir*) and bliss (*jouissance*) as two roughly contrasting elements: the former designates the experience of what he calls work or *oeuvre*, where an array of signifiers is organized according to the conventional codes of signification. In this mode, the reader occupies the position of a passive consumer. In contrast, the latter refers to a series of moments where the structural coherence of a text becomes disturbed.

Although Barthes works with psychoanalytic terminology, such textual “rupture” for Barthes differs significantly from that of the self-shattering *jouissance* of the death drive that one

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the possibility of a difference... of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems.” See *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.



can find in Bersani and Edelman. Barthes explains that the *jouissance* of a text may occur when one finds a minor detail in a novel interesting irrespective of its function in the narrative or when one might skip passages at a whim because of boredom. For Barthes, the gentle intractability of such “meaningless” moments in the experience of a text has political and ethical consequences, for they instruct readers how to resist ideological language without assuming an aggressive stance. Barthesian *jouissance* remains calm by remaining *indifferent*:

The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. Drifting occurs whenever I do not respect the whole, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss that binds me to the text (to the world).<sup>38</sup>

In the issue of *The Yale Journal of Criticism* dedicated to Barthes, Jonathan Culler claims that Barthes' notion of text in *From Work to Text* (1971) “create[s] a mystique of the text that prevents the term from serving as a coherent methodological concept”<sup>39</sup> and that scholars should instead turn to Barthes' earlier semiotic works that “[take] on problems, topics, elements in discourse that are usually passed over” with “a systematic theory.”<sup>40</sup> Culler's assessment is fundamentally correct yet misses the point.

In *Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes provides an almost direct response to Culler's complaint: “There is supposed to be a mystique of the text. On the contrary, the whole effort consists in materializing the pleasure of the text, in making the text *an object of pleasure like the others*.”<sup>41</sup> For Barthes, the object of literary criticism always remains the same, and one cannot draw a clear

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<sup>38</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Barthes, Theorist,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 2 (2001): 444.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 58.

line between work and text as an object. As Barthes explains, “even the most classical narrative (a novel by Zola or Balzac or Dickens or Tolstoy) bears within it a sort of diluted tmesis;”<sup>42</sup> all works contain a moment of incoherence. What really distinguishes the concepts of work and text is their ethics or *how they compel readers to engage with language*.

When one treats a text as a “work,” it demands to be read as a closed system, where all elements become subjected to a singular signified. What he calls “text” is a field of linguistic activity, where one can acknowledge the presence of meaning without elevating it to the systematic level of *doxa*; finding pleasure in a text is “a way of cutting, of perforating discourse without rendering it meaningless.”<sup>43</sup> With this concept, Barthes tries to articulate a mode of language that “is structured but off-centered, without closure.”<sup>44</sup>

Barthes’s intellectual journey may have begun with an intense skepticism towards language, but his later view overcomes the pessimism of ideology critique and comes close to Wittgenstein and Moi’s ordinary language philosophy, where the so-called “groundlessness” of language allows its speaker to produce alternative meanings through use.<sup>45</sup> If early Barthes demystified naturalized meanings by rendering them contingent, later Barthes urges the readers

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<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 59.

<sup>45</sup> One could also read *Pleasure of the Text* in a straightforwardly poststructuralist/psychoanalytic fashion, where textual *jouissance* produces a radical rupture in meaning with a plethora of empty signifiers that delay the arrival of the final signified: “Thus every writer’s motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am*” (*Pleasure of the Text*, 6). This reading would conceptually align text with Lacanian *sinthome*. My interpretive decision is based on 1. The fact that the affective register in Barthes’s characterization of *sinthome* that radically differs than that of Edelman 2. Barthes’ limited criticism of the relationship between signifiers and their signified; for Barthes, the signified becomes problematic only when it ideological demands systematic obedience from its signifiers. 3. Barthes’ valorization of individualized, localized meaning in *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

to creatively articulate new meanings.<sup>46</sup> The Barthesian hovering between textual pleasure to material reality and vice versa does not give rise to the Kleistian *Kant-Krise* or queer theoretical abjection because language is not imagined as an incarcerating system that blocks access to the unmediated world—language could serve a tool of imprisonment but is no prison itself.

By “reading” how others have created meaning and by “inscribing” new meanings, reader-writers joyfully work with the reality of degree zero; they realize that the meaning in the world of here and now does not follow a natural, metaphysical order and that no new meaning can monopolize the position of Nature. World-as-text and text-as-world offer historical meaning but promise nothing, and pleasure is the experience of this freedom. This referential world, not the theoretical world of metalanguage, is the only open space where the “false opposition of practical life and contemplative life”<sup>47</sup> might come to an end; language and reality are neither homogenous nor heterogeneous: they can only remain in touch each other.

The historian Michel Foucault demonstrates a strikingly similar intellectual trajectory to that of Barthes. In his earlier structuralist works like *The Order of Things* (1966), he offers a systematic critique of discursive knowledge as a form of power that conceals as much as it reveals in constituting the subject’s identity.<sup>48</sup> Similar to Barthes of post-*Empire of Signs*,

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<sup>46</sup> Barthes further explores the tension between structural and individual meaning in *Camera Lucida*, where he compares and contrast the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*; the former refers to the structural meaning intended by the photographer, and the latter to the element that affectively appeals to its viewers and invites them to make individual interpretations: “it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*” (*Camera Lucida*, 55). *Punctum* is a uniquely photographic experience because no matter how much a photographer might “intend” a meaning by arranging exposure, framing, etc., photography as a medium of mechanical reproduction always contains the non-intended referentiality of “having-been-there.”

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> His self-chosen title for his chair *professeur d’Histoire des systèmes de pensée* at *Collège de France* illustrates how much of his scholarly work was geared towards deconstructing

Foucault develops a positive concept of counter-conduct after a long silence of almost a decade between the first and second volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, published in 1976 and 1984 respectively, where he modifies the idea of discursivity as an all-encompassing mechanism that fully determines the subject's identity formation. In particular, he shifts his attention to analyzing specific "technologies" that structure the subject's relationship with itself as well as with hegemonic systems to imagine alternative practices that could create new forms of subjectivity.

As Annemarie Jagose has remarked, Foucault has never conceived normativity as the absolute condition of identity like Judith Butler.<sup>49</sup> This is because the subject's identity becomes determined not by the structure of language but by concrete material practices in Foucault's critical philosophy. In the lecture series *Security, Territory, Population*, for instance, Foucault differentiates norm from normal(ity) as well as from normalization in order to give an account of the unique logic of biopolitical power. He explains that pre-modern disciplinary power unilaterally regimented individual bodies to make them conform to a norm, understood as a regulatory notion of how the subjects' bodies ought to be in order to best meet the demands of specific objectives. For example, a soldier must train his/her body for the purpose of combat. The differentiation of the normal from abnormal in disciplinary power was an act of assessment of bodies in relation to the posited norm. In the case of the soldier, it was determining whether one is fit for service.

Biopolitical power, on the other hand, begins with an observation of normalities in a population, or statistical frequencies of events in certain identarian groups within a population

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epistemological systematicity. See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>49</sup> Annemarie Jagose, "The Trouble with Antinormativity," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 26-47.

(age, sex, “at-risk” group, etc.). Such normalities do not provide any moral values by themselves. Unlike that of disciplinary power, the regulatory norm here is *inferred* from the normal for the most efficient control of the population by “bring[ing] the most unfavorable in line with the more favorable.”<sup>50</sup> What Foucault calls normalization is the optimizing process of power where statistical outliers become forcibly morphed to fit into the norm for the sake of easier control.

What Foucault primarily problematizes in biopolitical power is not the subject’s existential condition where all identities are inevitably produced as effects of power but the material foreclosure of the subject’s inhabiting different normalities for the sake of regulation. What is particularly novel and problematic in biopolitical power in its neoliberal form is that it convinces its subjects to take care of themselves to embody the norm for their own benefit, making the normalizing subjugation insidiously voluntary.

In the latter volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault invests his energy in demonstrating how the sexual subject’s experience of identity gradually became transformed from that of aesthetic self-creation to epistemological jurisdiction, where the subject’s relation to itself became increasingly fraught. Foucault traces the origin of this great epistemological “turn” in the *dispositif* of sexuality in the posthumously published volume *The Confessions of the Flesh*.

According to Foucault, early Christian tradition did not greatly differ from its Greco-Roman counterpart in terms of the severity of the prohibition on sexual behaviors. What fundamentally changed was the rationality behind its mandates and its concrete practices, in which the subject was called to participate. Christian sexuality could become a favored venue of control by medical, juridical, and religious authorities because it was conceived as a form of

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College of France, 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 63.

foreign externality that is lodged within the subject's identity. This new "governmentality" opened up a field of epistemic analysis in the interiority of the subject:

Il ne s'agit pas du tout de l'intériorisation d'un catalogue d'interdits ... Il s'agit de l'ouverture d'un domaine... qui est celui de la pensée ... Ce qui es en jeu alors, ce n'est pas un code d'actes permis ou défendu, c'est toute une technique pour surveiller, analyser et diagnostiquer la pensée ... et toutes les forces obscures qui peuvent se cacher sous l'aspect qu'elle présente.<sup>51</sup> [It is not at all about the interiorization of a catalogue of prohibitions ... It is about the opening of a domain ... which is of the thought ... What is at play is not a code of permitted or forbidden acts, but a technique of surveilling, analyzing, and diagnosing thought ... and all the obscure forces that can hide behind the appearance that they present].

In his discussion of John Cassian's *Institutions* and *Conferences*, Foucault highlights how monastic philosophy prioritized the notions of purity and chastity as the condition for the comprehension of the Holy Scripture and the contemplation of God. In this value system, sexual desire was conceived as an impurity that may obstruct spiritual undertaking. Because Cassian claimed that the soul itself remains impenetrable, his theory created a split in the material body by creating an invincible core and its peripheries that demons try to contaminate. The difficulty in discerning various origins of thoughts demanded two interconnected practices of discernment. First, the monastic subject was called to diligently objectify and catalog the entirety of its behaviors and thoughts. Since its analysis can never fully distinguish which thought properly belongs to the soul and to the body, it was also required to consult a spiritual leader in the form of confession and obey the directions given. As these practices demand that one gradually dissociate oneself from its body and thoughts, Foucault calls it a "mortification radicale."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 244. All translations are mine.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

Foucault argues that Saint Augustine's notion of concupiscence further elevated the obscure nature of sexual desire to the ontological vulnerability of human subjectivity. In the Augustinian narrative, prelapsarian humans perfectly exerted their will over their body parts, so that sexual activity was "docile et raisonnable à la manière des doigts de la main"<sup>53</sup> [docile and reasonable in the manner of fingers and hands]. Sexual desire in the form of *libido*, or uncontrollable physical impulse, only came into existence during the fall: it was both the cause and effect of Adam's disobedience to God.<sup>54</sup>

The subject henceforth was condemned to experience split in its subjectivity, as it realizes that even its willed action does not properly belong to itself. Concupiscence is "la forme même de la volonté, c'est-à-dire de ce qui fait de l'âme un sujet. Elle n'est pas ... l'involontaire contre la volonté, mais l'involontaire de la volonté elle-même"<sup>55</sup> [the form of the will itself, that is to say that which constitutes the soul of the subject. It is not ... the unwilled against the will, but the unwilled of the will itself]. With its alienated will, the Augustinian subject has no choice but to instrumentalize and supervise its rebellious *libido* situated at the core of its identity.

Unlike the monks in Cassian's *Institutions*, one can no longer separate demonic alterity from oneself, as impurity and lack began to be conceived as the very essence of human subjectivity. The subject can only adjudicate how willingly it engages with the evil (*consensus*) and how it makes good use (*usus*) of it. Foucault claims that sex in marriage could become codified at this moment because the subject needed a rubric of licensed sexual conduct that qualified as its legitimate use (e.g. procreation). At the same time, direct spiritual guidance as

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair*., 332.

<sup>54</sup> As the involuntary bodily movement, to which Augustine is referring is erection specifically, Foucault notes that this is a phallic view of sexuality. See *Les aveux de la chair*, 337.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

well as the practice of confession lost their authority, for the measure of the subject's *consensus* and *usus of libido* lied only within the subject itself.<sup>56</sup>

The uniqueness in the Christian experience of sexuality lies within its treatment of desire not as an interpersonal and social function but as a scientific and juridical struggle, where the subject's own body and subjectivity become its ideological enemy. Monks practice absolute chastity in order to gain personal access to divine knowledge; married couples engage in reproductive sexual activity to each survive their ontological vulnerability. By sexually dramatizing the copresence of identity and non-identity within the subject, Christianity launched the subject's permanent schizophrenic identity crisis. More insidiously, Christian sexual metaphysics launches a set of concrete practices, including the examination of the self (*jurisdiction*) and confession (*véridiction*) that would further naturalize the self's alienation.

Foucault contends that the Christian experience of the flesh stands in stark contrast to the Greek mode of *aphrodisia*, where "the requirement of austerity that was implied by the constitution of [the] self-disciplined subject was not presented in the form of a universal law, which each and every individual would have to obey, but rather as a principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible."<sup>57</sup> The rationality behind restrictive measures on sexuality in ancient Greece was

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<sup>56</sup> One could argue that this state of minimal freedom of the pastoral subject leaves space for counter-conduct in contrast to what Foucault calls "a state of domination" where power relations have become completely reified and irreversible. See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 283.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, *Use of Pleasure* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 250-251; Bersani doubts the political and ethical feasibility of Foucault's return to the Greco-roman model, because it fails to address the psychic shortcomings in the ego-based idea of self-mastery and domination of the other. However, what Foucault finds valuable in the sexual ethics of antiquity is not the sovereignty of the ego, but the freedom of the self's will (*volonté*) that does not serve ideological metaphysics. The juridico-epistemological *dispositif* of sexuality in Christianity also



founded on the danger of excessive indulgence in sexual activity that would hinder the self's ability to conduct oneself, not on the metaphysical theory of sexual desire as the constitutive evil of human subjectivity.

What Foucault ultimately demonstrates in his long historical detour to antiquity and early Christianity is not an ideal model of “morally correct” or “liberated” models of sexual identity but the possibility of imagining different material practices around sexuality, which he gives the name of *pleasure*. If Greek life can serve as a model for us, it is only because Greeks neither theorized on the true nature of sexuality nor investigated the ontological and epistemological depth of desire. For Foucault, sexuality should not be elevated to an epistemological secret that determines the subject's identity and will provide all solutions to the difficulties it might encounter in life. Instead, the subject's sexual identity should be a starting point of a project that aims to increase the experience of pleasure.

With this theoretical reversal, Foucault redirects our attention to how one might make *use* of sexual identity to build new social relations, in the same way that Toril Moi emphasizes the use of language in real life. This emphasis on the “use” of sexuality is why Foucault deems any attempt to scientifically “know” the cause of homosexuality irrelevant as a political program. As he puts it, “the problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather to *use* one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships [my emphasis].”<sup>58</sup>

As Arnold Davidson explains in *In Praise of Counter-conduct*, Foucauldian counter-conduct cannot be conceived merely as negative resistance to power and its moral codes. What is

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demands its subjects to achieve “self-mastery” through mortification and submission. See Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 135.

at stake is neither one's external behavior nor one's agreement with this and that principle. What matters to Foucault is the subject's relation to itself and power, where it would no longer search for the ground for its conduct from authority and pre-given rules, be it medical, juridical, or theoretical, but only from itself. As such, counter-conduct contains both the refusal of the hegemonic status quo *and* the articulation of an alternative logic.<sup>59</sup>

Further, this relation cannot exist on the level of discursive abstraction but must become immanently manifest "in a physical environment, in a social configuration, in a pattern of behavior, in a bodily gesture, in a certain attitude, in a way of life."<sup>60</sup> Foucault's so-called ethical turn in the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality* should thus not be read as simple privileging of individuality and its "agency" over collective politics but as the subject's effort to overcome a self-defeating modus of subjective formation through creating different practices in the material world. It is clear that this enterprise of "materialization" does not exclude the domain of politics.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Because Butler absolutizes the sex/gender system as effects of power, she regards Foucault's valorization of bodily pleasure as a "pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity" a "constitutive contradiction," because for Foucault "sexuality is always situated within matrices of power." Butler's exclusive focus on Foucault's structuralist work makes her overlook 1. the possibility of "meaningless" sexual pleasure situated outside of the psychoanalytic framework of sexual *desire*. In *Les aveux de la chair*, Foucault makes it clear that sexuality as *libido* or structural lack is not a universal form but a Christian invention. 2. Foucault's understanding of sexuality as a counter-conduct that operates not simply *against* the logic of discourse (therefore *not* a subversion) but a *complete disregard* of it. This is only possible when one accepts that the discursive system does not determine the entirety of subjectivity. See *Gender Trouble*, 123-124.

<sup>60</sup> Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-conduct," *History of the Human Sciences* 24, no. 4 (2011): 29.

<sup>61</sup> The fact that Foucault's examples of counter-conduct are almost always that of alternative communities with "polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships" attests to this. See Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 139.

Barthes's and Foucault's interest in language and identity distinguishes itself from the theoretical tendencies of queer theory that posit the irreconcilable antagonism between meaning and non-meaning, social and anti-social, and system and alterity. By conceiving language and sexuality as a non-systematic, material activity, they point to the capaciousness of these forms that can be put into use to create *new* meanings and *new* social relations without a predetermined telos. More remarkably, they share the vision that such a revolution cannot happen in the domain of quasi-epistemological metalanguage of theory but only in the referential world of ordinary life. As Patrick Ffrench remarks, these two thinkers privilege everyday life as "the space of the potential emergence of 'new relations, new virtualities,' or of the utopic in the everyday, the space for potentially new kinds of pleasure outside the dispositive of desire and sex."<sup>62</sup>

If Barthes and Foucault were never "out and proud" homosexuals, their thinking was capaciously "queer" to play with the tension in language, identity, and sexuality as domains of signification that is at once a *structure* and a *structural activity*.<sup>63</sup> The former as a homogenizing element secures stability while the latter reminds us to remain sensitive to the heterogeneity of reality. Their philosophies of pleasure illustrate how the theoretical fetishization of language and sexuality as ontological meaninglessness makes them "go on holiday" by devoting its intellectual energy to the fantasy of violent destruction. As Toril Moi insists, "in a world in which so many powerful persons and institutions have a vested interest in making us lose faith in language's power to respond to and reveal reality, precise and attentive use of words is an act of

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<sup>62</sup> Patrick Ffrench, "Barthes, Foucault, and Everyday Life," *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2-3 (2004): 302.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas de Villiers argues how the refusal to identify oneself in Barthes and Foucault can be understood as a queer resistance in *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

resistance.”<sup>64</sup> Only when queer subjects reclaim their sexuality, language, and identity as forms of activity that can bring about change in the world of the here and now will they be able to stop treating them as a “form of desire” and value them as “something desirable.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 242.

<sup>65</sup> Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 136.

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