

VIOLENT MODERNISTS

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*The Aesthetics of Destruction in
Twentieth-Century German Literature*

KAI EVERS



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ABBREVIATIONS

- A Elias Canetti. *Auto-da-Fé*. Translated by C. W. Wedgewood. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
- BF Franz Kafka. *Briefe an Felice*. Edited by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1967.
- BM Franz Kafka. *Briefe an Milena*. Expanded Edition. Edited by Jürgen Born and Michael Müller. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986.
- Br Robert Musil. *Briefe 1901–1942*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981.
- D Franz Kafka. *The Diaries 1910–1923*. Edited by Max Brod. Translated by Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg. New York: Schocken Books, 1988.
- ERK Robert Musil. *Essays und Reden, Kritik*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978.
- KKAS Franz Kafka. *Amtliche Schriften*. Edited by Klaus Hermsdorf and Benno Wagner. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004.
- KKBr I Franz Kafka. *Briefe 1900–1912*. Edited by Hans-Georg Koch. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999.
- KKBr II Franz Kafka. *Briefe 1900–1912*. Edited by Hans-Georg Koch. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001.
- KKDzL Franz Kafka. *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Edited by Wolf Kittler, Hans-Georg Koch, and Gergard Neumann. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999.
- KKNSF I Franz Kafka. *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*. Edited by Malcom Pasley. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993.
- KKNSF II Franz Kafka. *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*. Edited by Jost Schillemeit. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992.

- KKT Franz Kafka. *Tagebücher*. Edited by Hans-Georg Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcom Pasley. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990.
- L Franz Kafka. *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Schocken Books, 1977.
- LF Franz Kafka. *Letters to Felice*. Edited by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born. Translated by James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth. New York: Schocken Books, 1973.
- LM Franz Kafka. *Letters to Milena*. Edited by Willy Haas. Translated by Tania and James Stern. New York: Schocken Books, 1953.
- M Franz Kafka. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Translated with an introduction by Michael Hofmann. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.
- MoE Robert Musil. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. 2 vols. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981.
- MwQ Robert Musil. *The Man Without Qualities*. Translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike. 2 vols. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- PS Robert Musil. *Precision and Soul*. Translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- PuS Robert Musil. *Prosa und Stücke. Kleine Prosa, Aporismen, Autobiographisches*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1978.
- T Robert Musil. *Tagebücher*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. 2 vols. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983.
- VZ Robert Musil. *Prosa und Stücke. Kleine Prosa, Aporismen, Autobiographisches*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978.
- YT Robert Musil. *The Confusions of Young Törless*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. New York: Penguin, 2001.

INTRODUCTION

From Homer to Dante and Tolstoy to Cormac McCarthy, detailed descriptions of war, murder, and punishment are at the center of the most revered works of Western literature. Few topics could claim a literary tradition as long and continuous as the representation of physical violence. Few topics remain more controversial. Does the human capacity for violence and destruction pose a greater or smaller risk today than ever before? Two recent studies by renowned scholars in their respective fields take the long view of human history and come to diametrically opposed conclusions. The experimental psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) presents statistics and scientific evidence to support his thesis that human history is a history of the decline of violence. The sociologist Robert Bellah fails to see such progress in human evolution, and arrives at the following risk assessment:

Of course we may well blow each other up with atomic weapons before we wipe out all species of life, including our own, by more gradual means. [. . .] If there is one primary practical intent in a work like this that deals with the broadest sweep of biological and cultural evolution, it is that the hour is late: it is imperative that humans wake up to what is happening and take the necessarily dramatic steps that are so clearly needed but also at present so clearly ignored by the powers of this earth. (2011, 602)

Not surprisingly, the question of whether and how violence and destruction should be represented stands at the core of literary controversies as well. This is particularly true for German modernism, for the most demanding literary texts written at the time and place when and where much of the twentieth-century mass violence originated.¹ When W. G. Sebald questioned Döblin's standing as one of Europe's great modernists, he accused the author of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *Wallenstein* of exhibiting fascist tendencies in his recurrent depictions of violence (1980, 160). When Karl Heinz Bohrer sought to establish Ernst Jünger as one of the few truly modernist writers, he based his argument on Jünger's

portrayals of shock and terror (1978). Helmut Lethen applauds the authors of the militant avant-garde during the 1920s for their ability to confront directly the violent historical changes of their time. In the same breath, he mocks the supposedly more fragile modernist writers for their inability to bear a closer look at violence. Lethen mentions in particular Hofmannsthal, Mann, and Musil, and claims that German and Austrian modernists could “endure the process of historical acceleration only from a healthy distance” (2002, 6).

What then is the relationship between violence and modernism, except contentious? Two highly influential responses to this question have been given. Neither of them brings into focus the innovative quality and central importance of violence for writers like Kafka or Musil. The first response is offered by literary historians from Paul Fussell to Modris Eksteins. They claim that modernism, especially German modernism, is born out of the violence of World War I. The war is understood as *Urkatastrophe* that directed German modernism toward an aesthetics of destruction, a development that culminated in the fascist aesthetics of the Third Reich. In other words, they make the same reductionist teleological claim for German modernism that Siegfried Kracauer made for Weimar cinema in his tellingly titled study *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). In *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Eksteins insists that the “Great War was the psychological turning point, for Germany and for modernism as a whole. The urge to create and the urge to destroy changed places. The urge to destroy was intensified; the urge to create became increasingly abstract. In the end the abstraction turned to insanity and all that remained was destruction, *Götterdämmerung*” (1989, 328).

At first sight, it is imminently plausible that the war that caused in its first months numbers of casualties that are still shocking and introduced tanks, machine guns, trenches, aerial attacks, and chemical weapons into modern warfare should have left a deep impact on the literary representations of violence. But the relationship between the war and modernist literature is less linear and more complex. The construction of a causal relationship between the experience of the First World War, the rise of modernist literature, and its preoccupation with destruction as a harbinger of fascist politics and aesthetics does not hold up to scrutiny. Chronology contradicts Eksteins’s sequence of events. The supposed effect preceded its cause by at least one decade. Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Walser, Musil, and Döblin published paradigmatic modernist texts well before the war, and these novels, stories, and poems exhibit an intense interest in representing physical violence. Historical research on the war experi-

ence undermines further the popular assessment of the war as a modernist *Urkatastrophe*. This research fails to confirm Eksteins's narrative of a cultural breakdown caused by the war and detects far more continuity and even a strengthening of tradition in German postwar society and culture. An additional challenge has to be directed against the telos of Eksteins's narrative. Eksteins echoes the Lukácsian idea that German modernism leads up to a fascist aesthetics. Such narrative does not account for most German modernist writers: not for Rilke or Musil, Kafka or Mann, Canetti or Brecht. The suggestion of a causal relationship between historical violence and modernist literature provokes doubts instead of delivering answers.

The second main thesis on the relationship between German modernism and violence is less historically and more theoretically inspired. Even though it often aligns itself with the historical argument, usually invoking Benjamin's observation that the war generation underwent a fundamental crisis of experience that led to the demise of traditional storytelling, this second account does not require it. In recent years literary theorists and historians like Peter Bürger, Andreas Huysen, and Helmuth Lethen have expanded significantly Adorno's narrow canon of modernist literature. These new readings supplemented the notion of modernist literature with that of a fascist modernism and a militant avant-garde. But the attention paid to writers like Ernst Jünger or Gottfried Benn or to the avant-garde authors of the new sobriety creates an oversimplified, pacified account of modernism. As I argue in the first chapter, these innovative and influential rereadings of modernist literature presuppose distinctly different stances toward physical violence that reduce "proper" modernism's interest in violence almost exclusively to explorations of suffering and victimization.

The introduction of the fascist modernist, the modernist tempted by the promise of violence, and the daring avant-gardist, the author willing to embrace destruction to create the utopia of a new man and a new society, are accompanied by accounts of "proper" modernists like Kafka, Musil, or Rilke who either don't dare to come too close to violent phenomena, as Lethen suggested, or whose fascination with violence is supposed to be restricted to masochistic self-wounding but never by an endorsement of violence against others. The idea of an opposition between a high modernism on the side of nonaggression and a fascist modernism and a militant avant-garde on the side of destruction produces a convenient notion of modernism that fails to recognize some of the most challenging and innovative aspects of German modernism. Rather than debating whether Jünger should be considered a modernist, as Berman

(1989) and Huyssen (1995) do in their opposing arguments, or dismissing Döblin's representations of violence as guilty of fascist ideology, as Sebald proposed, this study analyzes the aggressive probing of violence by German modernists, in particular Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, and Elias Canetti.

The purpose of this study is not to collect and analyze the violent fantasies of German modernism and to produce a modernist version of Theweleit's inquiry into the (proto-)fascist imagination. Similarly, the following chapters do not pursue the echoes of Nietzsche's call for the "the barbarians of the twentieth century" that reverberate throughout the writings of the militant avant-garde of the Weimar Republic and are so audible in contemporary theory (Nietzsche 1988, 13:18).² The longing for the "new barbarian," as Benjamin called him, and this barbarian's work of destruction remains a powerful and terrifying concept. It recurs in many contemporary theoretical projects, including Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000, 212–18) or Žižek's defense of "the properly leftist project of emancipatory rage" (2008, 187). As important as it would be to retrace the German roots of Žižek's attempt to "rehabilitate the notion of resentment" (189) in which killing can become an act of mercy—and besides Brecht and Benjamin, Žižek refers to Sebald and Améry³—the present study is more interested in modernist reflections on violence that challenge the avant-garde's glorification of violence and catastrophe as necessary steps and stages toward a new man and a new society. While the avant-garde continues to demand that the "multitude, in its will to be-against and its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 218), the modernist writers in this study came to doubt that war and revolution could bring about fundamental sociopolitical change. They began to question their own initial assumption that violence functions as a means to reach this "other side."

These modernists cannot be distinguished from the militant avant-garde (or the fascist modernists) by their supposed distance from or rejection of violence. Their vast majority welcomed the First World War. The aggressive stance in favor of violent action was not limited to this critical moment in twentieth-century history. As I argue in my reading of Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless*, both the novel's narrator and its protagonist justify physical violence, rape, and the humiliation of others in their own search for the "other side." What distinguishes the authors discussed in this study from the militant avant-garde and from fascist modernists is something other than a clear-cut opposition to violent action. While the texts of the avant-garde and of fascist modernism

tend to conceptualize violence as a means to establish a new society, the modernist texts at the center of this study question such a reductionist approach to violence and reflect on the phenomenon of violence itself. They challenge the widely accepted premise that violence should be approached and understood as an instrument.

Representations of physical violence are not only at the center of German modernist writings, but these writings also belong among the most innovative investigations of violence undertaken in the twentieth century. Musil's, Kafka's, and Canetti's examinations of physical violence and its impact on our conceptions of the self, of language and communication, and of history and society deserve to be discovered as the sites of some of the most insightful and provocative reflections of the role of violence in modernity. To recognize the centrality and the complexity of these modernist responses to violence, it is necessary to perform close readings and to pay attention to the specific historical context of these literary texts. Only during such intense readings does one begin to recognize the full aesthetic and epistemological potential of these canonical modernist texts.

Since this approach sets strict limitations on the number of authors and texts that can be analyzed in a single volume, the choice of literary works becomes all the more important. Why two chapters on Robert Musil but none on Thomas Mann or Alfred Döblin? Why Franz Kafka and not Robert Walser or Hugo von Hofmannsthal? Why Elias Canetti and not Hans Henny Jahnn or Heimito von Doderer? And what about Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan George, Else Lasker-Schüler, Karl Kraus, Anna Seghers, Veza Canetti, and Hermann Broch? The presence of two chapters on Musil is not meant to suggest that Musil is twice as important as Kafka and infinitely more significant than the absent Thomas Mann. These two chapters do not argue for Mann's (or Broch's) irrelevance but for Robert Musil's unique contributions to an understanding of violent phenomena. The first chapter on *The Confusions of Young Törless* makes the second chapter on *The Man Without Qualities* necessary, because only after the First World War did Musil fully appreciate the challenge posed in his first novel by the figure of Basini and his experience of humiliation, rape, and torture. Musil recognized after the war that Basini's malleable self was no rare exception, as *The Confusions of Young Törless* suggested, but a widely observable phenomenon. Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* becomes a continuation *and* revision of his first literary exploration of the experience of violence, the self, and history. Once one reads these two novels as Musil's sustained attempt to rethink violence, the originality of Musil's antireductionist reflections on violence

emerges. While the choice of Franz Kafka and his story *In the Penal Colony* might be the least controversial—even though the actual reading goes against all prevalent interpretations of this central modernist text—this choice does not imply that a reading of Robert Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* or Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* could not provide different but similarly significant examinations of violence in German modernism. There is no single modernist response to violence, and only if the following chapters on Musil, Kafka, Benjamin, and Canetti demonstrate the range, depth, and innovations of these modernist reflections on violence, only if these readings offer new insights into these literary texts themselves, is the concentration on these particular writers justified.

The first chapter analyzes the relationships between theories of modernity, violence, and German modernism. I argue that the question of violence is at the center of German modernist literature. In contrast to the French, English, or Russian literary histories, this focus on physical violence distinguishes modernism from realism in the German tradition. In stark opposition to the German realist literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, the works of modernists like Rilke and Walser or Musil and Canetti are just as filled with images of violence as the films of Murnau, Lang, and Pabst, or the works of more popular writers like Zweig, Roth, and Kellermann. The emergence of modernism and a new fascination with previously marginalized violent and pathological acts occurred simultaneously in the German tradition. The significance of these representations of violence for German modernism has been obscured by predominant theories of modernity that preferred not to acknowledge the centrality of violence in modernity. The dominance of such theories enabled and supported equally pacified constructions of German modernism. I argue that literary-historical and theoretical reflections on the relationship between violence and modernity, in particular those regarding the influence of World War I on postwar literature and culture, continue to follow untenable assumptions. With the help of historical research on the war experience, I show that the widely accepted narrative of a breakdown of culture and a collapse of tradition during World War I and an ensuing crisis of experience underestimates the continuity of social institutions and traditions. This narrative as it has been introduced, expanded, and refined by theorists from Freud to Arendt and from Benjamin to Agamben is of limited descriptive value for an understanding of the war’s impact on its participants and the representation of violence in modernist literature. The other metanarrative on the relation between modernity and violence, a story that Norbert Elias developed in *The Civilizing Process* (1939) and that Pinker endorsed enthusiastically

in his recent study, calling Elias “the most important thinker you have never heard of” (Pinker 2011, 59), avoids the idea of catastrophe and collapse entirely and speaks instead of the decline of violence in modernity. These competing narratives of cultural breakdown and of a disappearance of violence in modernity share a disinterest in looking more closely at violent phenomena. As I argue in the chapters on Musil, Kafka, Benjamin, and Canetti, modernist literature investigates the complexities of violence and its effects on the self and society in such detail and with a reflective ingenuity that the metanarratives of modernity are lacking.

The argument of this study goes therefore much further than claiming that Musil, Kafka, and Canetti validate acts of violence and the harming of others in their fiction. Violent acts against others are at the center of their literary and aesthetic experiments, and these authors offer unique insights into our limited understanding of violence, the self, and the experience of modernity, and the challenges to perceive and to communicate new risk situations that threaten the continued existence of modern societies—insights that are rarely found in the surprisingly narrow scope of current theories of violence. The task of my readings of Musil, Kafka, and Canetti is therefore not only to demonstrate how provocative and often disturbing their different approaches to violence remain, but to discover their works as some of the most insightful reflections on violence the twentieth century produced.

Chapter 2 opens the argument for Robert Musil as the not-yet-acknowledged expert on violence in German modernism. Musil’s analyses of violence afford the reader the opportunity to perceive the full scope of modernist responses to violence. In contrast to previous readings of his first novel, I examine *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906) as a novel of violence. Musil’s early masterpiece of German modernism presents and confronts several traditional theories of violence, sacrifice, and suffering. Musil’s novel rationalizes the use of violence against others—gendered and constructed as the perverse other—as necessary acts to complete the main protagonist’s aesthetic education. As a representation of the perverse, *The Confusions of Young Törless* barely moves beyond conveying homophobic anxieties about the effeminate boy. Rather than analyzing the perverse—as the novel’s narrator, Törless, and Musil in his prewar essays repeatedly proclaim to do—the novel constructs Basini, the effeminate boy, as a legitimate target of physical violence and humiliation. Despite such validation of violence against the marginalized other, the novel moves eventually into uncharted territory in its reflections on violence and the self. In apparent agreement with recent theories on the effects of torture and humiliation on the self (Elaine

Scarry and Richard Rorty), Törless expects to gain insight into the mechanics of the individual's identity by breaking it. He anticipates that every victim holds certain core beliefs whose forced renunciation would render futile any future efforts to reconstruct his or her self-narrative as a coherent and plausible narrative. Against Törless's expectations and Rorty's and Scarry's predictions, Basini's experience of torture defies these assumptions. Violence subverts its use as an instrument and, more important, the self does not shatter into pieces when exposed to physical violence and humiliation. Nothing seems more absurd and frightening to Törless and the novel's narrator than the observation that the experience of physical violence might not produce lasting observable effects on the self. In Basini's response to the violence and humiliation he is forced to suffer, Musil approaches for the first time the notion of a malleable self. This malleable self does not follow the trajectory of the bildungsroman according to which "each soul has to perfect its own possibilities into reality," as Musil still expected while writing *The Confusions of Young Törless* (Musil 1983, 161). Instead, the malleable self lacks a stable core and adapts without apparent harm to the most extreme circumstances. Although the question of the malleable self is left unresolved in Musil's first novel, its challenge to our understanding of the effects of violence on the self is one of its major achievements and sets the stage for Musil's postwar reflection on war, violence, and society.

In contrast to his prewar writings, Musil, after Germany's defeat, no longer defends violent action and stops considering it as an effective means to an end. Musil continues, however, to acknowledge the omnipresent possibility that violent action will occur in modern society, and he took seriously its tempting promise to generate an experience of unity and clarity for its citizens. Reversing Lethen's distinction between modernists and members of the avant-garde vis-à-vis violence, I argue in the third chapter that Musil's continued interest in the malleability of the self, combined with his antireductionist approach to violence, allows him to reconsider the role of violence in modernity while the avant-garde's functionalist theories of the self (Brecht, Jünger, Benjamin) remain captive to more simplified views of violence. The malleable self is in Musil's postwar writings not anymore a notion too absurd and frightening to entertain but a ubiquitous phenomenon of wartime and postwar society. The malleable self's experiences of violence led Musil to rethink the function of causation and progress in history. Acts of violence can no longer be approached from their purported function as means to an end. By intending to explore the causes of World War I in a world that defied the idea of causation, Musil's revised analysis of violence moved

to the center of his postwar writings and their modernist aesthetics and can be best understood in comparison to the antireductionist theory of violence proposed by the sociologist Heinrich Popitz (1925–2002). Musil's engagement with war and violence structures his masterpiece of European modernism, *The Man Without Qualities*, and its theories of the self, emotion, and history and discloses Musil as one of the most original thinkers of war and violence in the twentieth century.

The fourth chapter offers a reading of the most renowned representation of violence in modernist literature, Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (written 1914, published 1919). As I argue, Kafka's position toward power, war, and violence is far more ambivalent than generally acknowledged. Focusing on these ambivalences leads to insights into Kafka's writings and to a more complex understanding of the relationship between German modernism and violence. Even though almost all readings of *In the Penal Colony* depend on it, the question of the reliability of the story's central source of information, the officer, judge, and executioner, is rarely raised and even less often answered. In contrast to previous readings of this story, I argue that the officer is a figure of ambivalence, belonging to both the new and the old orders, someone who defends and mistrusts the lethal workings of the apparatus. Because of the officer's position of radical ambivalence, the story's structure mirrors Kafka's most radical reflection on his poetics of the two-edged sword, what I call his *poetics of the knife*. Neither the expectation of finding truth and justice through the execution apparatus nor its frustration should be taken as the story's meaning. In models of direct and indirect communication, Kafka deconstructs in his story the equation of pain and truth, but at the same time he is unwilling to renounce the cutting, never abandoning the hope that torture and violence could force the right word to be uttered. We are left with the repetitions of gestures of radical ambivalence from one level of the story to the other. Correspondingly, Kafka refuses with this story to choose between the (misleading) alternative between realist storytelling and modernist description, as readers from Lukács to Scherpe have claimed. Never allowing for a decision between such alternatives, the story collapses and disintegrates like the apparatus at its center. With *In the Penal Colony* Kafka neither renounces the promise of violence nor adheres to it but exemplifies his poetics of indecision.

This study moves in its final chapter from a poetics of indecision to a poetics of destruction and concludes with two strange pairings: Walter Benjamin and Elias Canetti as well as satire and the new risks of chemical warfare. In response to the employment of poison gas during the war and in anticipation of ever more advanced technologies of mass

death, Benjamin and Canetti recognized that these new weapons posed radically different challenges to perception and imagination. They both searched for ways that would enable the public imagination to perceive the destructive potential of such triumphs of modernization. And they both turned to the genre of satire and developed new models of what I call *destructive satire*. Benjamin and Canetti reached, however, rather different conclusions regarding the destructive potential of modernist literature. In his essay on Karl Kraus, Benjamin proposes such a radical reconsideration of satire that it turns into an apologia for indiscriminate physical destruction. His theory of satire is tied to a politics of destruction that is at risk of losing sight of any limits to its advocacy of political violence.

Canetti's practice of satire, primarily in his novel *Auto-da-Fé* (completed 1931, published 1935), is more subversive, extremely focused, but also strangely aimless. In contrast to Benjamin, Canetti pronounces no end to communicable experience, storytelling, or the role of tradition per se but he develops a model of satire that communicates indirectly and harmfully with its audience. After the war and in anticipation of another man-made disaster, Canetti's satire presupposes no longer that the satirist and his audience share a common set of values, as theorists and practitioners of satire from Schiller and Hegel to Kästner and Tucholsky have assumed. The only common ground that Canetti's satire presupposes is the very ground it seeks to destroy: the reader's preconceived notions of reality, from misogynist and racist stereotypes to class and educational prejudices. Canetti's satire does not already suffocate on the poison gas of future chemical attacks, as he claimed for Broch and his novels. And it does not deal directly with the destructive potentials of modernization. The destructive force of Canetti's satire is aimed at the reader's preconceived notions of reality to prepare a catastrophic imagination that might not blind itself to new methods and technologies of destruction. The fifth chapter does not provide a comprehensive reading of Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* but seeks to understand the principles and structure of his destructive satire. Rather than providing an answer as to whether modernism's most daring experiment with a destructive aesthetics failed or succeeded, these readings of Benjamin and Canetti invite the reader to explore the outer limits of modernism's experiments with an aesthetic of violence.

Rather than using the interest in and the representation of violence as criteria to distinguish between the avant-garde, fascist, and proper modernists, this study demonstrates the significance of the phenomena of war, violence, and catastrophe for any understanding of German mod-

ernism in the first half of the twentieth century. The writings by Musil, Kafka, Benjamin, and Canetti offer vital insights into the recent history of violence. The focus on this central experience of modernity allows for new readings of some of the most familiar and canonical texts of German modernism. While these readings break with a prevalent pacified notion of German modernism and focus on sometimes deeply disturbing aspects of these writings, this study hopes to make productive the immense richness of modernism's exploration of acts of violence and terror for our own time.

VIOLENT MODERNISTS

CHAPTER 1

Modernity, Modernism, and Violence

Jack the Ripper murders Lulu in Wedekind's play *Pandora's Box* (1902). Elektra envisions blood gushing out of a hundred throats in Hofmannsthal's play *Elektra* (1903) and again in his libretto for Richard Strauss's opera of the same name (1909). The humble Jacob van Gunten, the titular protagonist of Robert Walser's novel (1909), trains to become the perfect manservant but dreams that Napoleon's war machine will transform him into a "firm and impenetrable, almost empty lump of body" that would destroy all life on the way to Moscow (Walser 1999, 147). Baby rats are found and drowned inside the opened corpses that Gottfried Benn revisits in *Morgue and other Poems* (1912). Murnau's *Nosferatu*, a vampire on a killing spree, spreads the plague in Wisborg (1922). Kafka's works are full of cutting knives and disgusting wounds. Jünger's *The Adventurous Heart* (1929) beats fast when it thinks of torture, executions, and the fall into the abyss. George Grosz photographs himself as the Ripper; Dix and Grosz paint one sexual murder after the other. The story of Franz Biberkopf—beating, raping, and killing his girlfriends—is framed as the story of spiritual rebirth in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). As newspapers and the narrator in Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1931) conscientiously report, Moosbrugger stabs his victim thirty-five times in the abdomen. The shock of the Bergen-Belsen photographs cripples the worlds of Serenus Zeitblom in *Doctor Faustus* (1947) and Gesine Cresspahl, the protagonist of Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries* (1970–83). Lone survivors of the next thermonuclear war fend off or kill the only other human they encounter in Arno Schmidt's *Dark Mirrors* (1951) and Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall* (1963). Visiting the former extermination camp for one day in 1964, moving relentlessly back and forth between the positions that perpetrators and victims took in Auschwitz, Peter Weiss recognizes the site of mass murder as *My Place* (1965), as the one fixed place in his life of transitions. Max Schulz, SS-man, mass murderer, and rape victim, shoots his childhood friend Itzig Finkelstein, takes his name, moves to Palestine, and becomes a celebrated Zionist militant in Edgar Hilsenrath's savagely funny novel *The Nazi and the Barber* (1977). Elfriede Jelinek's Erika Kohut slashes her genitalia, dreams of rape and bondage,

and thrusts a knife into her chest in the novel *The Pianist* (1983). Like Hans Henny Jahnn five decades earlier in *Richard III* (1917–20), Heiner Müller’s rewritings of Shakespeare’s plays zero in on the destruction of bodies, erecting for his *Macbeth* (1971) a throne made out of corpses. All the German violence of the twentieth century survives side by side in *Germania II*, the slaughterhouse into which a nameless protagonist strays in Wolfgang Hilbig’s *Knacker’s Yard* (1991).

This list of horrific violence in central texts of twentieth-century German literature, art, and film is anything but comprehensive. Any reader could add different but no less influential authors (or painters, or film directors) to it: Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) is a treasure trove of violent imagery and so are the poems of Heym or Trakl, as well as the plays and poems by Brecht, or Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé* (1936) or Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959), and so on. With the same ease one might replace any title mentioned above with another one by the same writer and further intensify the destruction and violence in the panorama of twentieth-century German literature—with Döblin’s *Wallenstein* (1920), Schmidt’s *Kaff* (1960), or Peter Weiss’s *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975–81).

Even if one accepts that the representation of physical violence is a central topic in German modernist writing, one hesitates at first to assign too much significance to this phenomenon. Representing violence is not a modernist innovation but reaches back to the *Iliad* and the beginning of Western literature. Even the mood and temperature of representations of violence are not easily linked to particular epochs. When Flaubert follows Frédéric Moreau through the streets of Paris during the 1848 revolution, his description of violence strikes us, as James Wood recently observed, as “decisively modern” (2008, 45).

There was firing from every window overlooking the square; bullets whistled through the air; the fountain had been pierced, and the water, mingling with blood, spread in puddles on the ground. People slipped in the mud on clothes, shakos, and weapons; Frédéric felt something soft under his foot; it was the hand of a sergeant in a grey overcoat who was lying face down in the gutter. Fresh groups of workers kept coming up, driving the combatants towards the guard-house. (Flaubert 2004, 311)

Avoiding sentimentality, Flaubert’s writing registers the horrifying detail of stepping on something soft with its sudden flash of recognition, a hand, and moves on, letting the reader experience the event’s terror

through the quickly observed detail. A century later, in October 1944, the thirteen-year-old Thomas Bernhard stepped “on a soft object,” right after the first air raid on Salzburg (1998, 28). Like his friends, he thought it was a doll’s hand. Thirty years later, writing the first volume of his autobiography, *Die Ursache* (1975), Bernhard remembers the next moment—and not the panoramic sights of bombed-out houses and churches—as the moment when his boyish desire for witnessing warfare turned into the experience of war and violence. The soft object under his foot was a child’s hand, torn off from its body. “Only at the sight of the child’s hand this first bombing raid of American planes on my hometown had transformed suddenly the sensation of a state of fever for the boy, who I had been, to a horrifying intervention of violence and catastrophe” (Bernhard 1998, 28).¹ These two scenes of stepping on hands bracket a century of literature, from the disquieting indifference of Flaubert’s prose in *Sentimental Education* (1869) to Bernhard’s unnerving attention to the shocking detail.

But as modern as these sudden sights of destruction feel, Horkheimer and Adorno detected such similar instances of quick zooming to extreme close-ups in representations of violence already in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Book 22 describes the slaughter of Penelope’s suitors and the mass execution of those of her maids who had not refused to have sex with the suitors. Homer reports how young Telemachus roped the girls like birds: “so the women’s heads were trapped in a line, nooses yanking their necks up, one by one so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . . they kicked up heels for a little—not for long” (Homer 1996, 453–54). Homer’s remarkable “impassibilité” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 61) with which he measured how long the dying women’s feet twitched bears a striking similarity to Ernst Jünger’s notion of “désinvolture,” his assumption of an unmoved and “godlike superiority” toward the described acts of violence (Jünger 1995, 124). Karl Heinz Bohrer identified this impassive posture as a central feature of Jünger’s modernist aesthetics (Bohrer 1978, 423–39). In their reading of the *Odyssey* Horkheimer and Adorno invoked not modernist representations of violence as a comparison for Homer’s cold attention to detail but European realism and the “unmoved composure [. . .] of the greatest narrative writers of the nineteenth century.” (2002, 61)

Such crisscrossing between European cultures and historical epochs suggests strong continuities in the literary representation of violence. A closer look at the German tradition necessitates, however, an important qualification of Horkheimer and Adorno’s claims. In contrast to their French and Russian contemporaries, the major German nineteenth-century novelists exhibited little to no interest in depicting physical destruction. If one

looks for disturbing descriptions of violence in German realism that rival the unmoved indifference of Flaubert's or Tolstoy's prose one cannot turn to the writings of Theodor Fontane, Adalbert Stifter, Wilhelm Raabe, or any other major German novelist. One would need to search the pages of German popular literature, of writers like Karl May, for similar scenes of violence in lesser prose. And May's widely read tales of rape, murder, and robbery tended to locate this violence outside of Germany's borders. As Rudolf Schenda and Eric Johnson have argued, the imagined violence of imperial Germany's *Trivialliteratur* occurs in Italy, Spain, Mexico, or the United States but not in civilized Germany (Schenda 1988, 398; Johnson 1995, 95–107).

Considering the impossibility of coming up with a comparable list of gruesome literary moments for the second half of nineteenth-century German literature, the claim for a specific significance of the representation of violence for German modernist writing suggests itself. German realism, emerging in the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1848, can be distinguished from its French, English, and Russian counterparts by its well-intentioned temperance, “das Pläsierliche,” as Benn dismisses it not entirely without sympathy (Benn 2003, 1728). In the programmatic announcements of German realists one finds the desire to represent the typical side by side with the refusal to include the scandalous, violent, and pathological.² According to Fontane, the extreme and extraordinary was the stuff newspapers were made from but not the modern novel: “It happens, anything happens. But it is not the task of the novel to describe things that take place, or that at least could take place any day. In my view, the task of the modern novel is to represent a life, a society, a circle of people that is an undistorted reflection of the life that we live” (cited in Thomé 1993, 38).³ For Erich Auerbach, Fontane practiced far too faithfully what he theorized. Even though he glimpsed in his last novels “rudiments of a genuine contemporary realism,” Germany's greatest realist nevertheless failed to measure up to international comparison. Like Benn, Auerbach notes that Fontane's “tone after all never goes beyond the half-seriousness of pleasant, partly optimistic, partly resigned conversation” (Auerbach 1974, 519).

With its refusal to view violence as a worthy phenomenon, German realism was anything but out of step with its own times. Even in a society in which the social Darwinist glorification of the “struggle for life” caught the public imagination, in which popular novels and memoirs kept the remembrance of the 1871 war alive, and the strategic military lessons drawn from this war furthered a “tendency toward extreme warfare” in German military culture, it would be unfair to

characterize the portrayal of German society in realist literature as naive and distorted (Hull 2005, 2). In international comparison, Germany had the reputation of being one of the safest and least violent societies. The observations of American tourists, contemporary scholars like Emile Durkheim, and the data of crime statistics tend to support this claim for a rather nonviolent Germany (Johnson 1995, 133–34). In 1897, when Fontane published his last novel, *Der Stechlin*, the European nations kept peace between each other, and the alliances of the future war would not align themselves until the next decade. The fictional, biographical, and historical war literature at the end of the nineteenth century shared Fontane's stance and shied away from looking too closely at the destruction caused by warfare. More important, the view that acts of violence should be considered as sensationalist distractions from essential historical developments was taken as well by the Social Democratic labor movement, Germany's fastest growing political movement.⁴

German realism and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), both critical voices in Wilhelminian society, anticipated noncatastrophic, nonrevolutionary, and nonviolent historical progress. The political victory of the Social Democrats in Germany appeared to them as a matter of historical necessity. Eduard Bernstein's reform proposal for the SPD demonstrated the same calm optimism in progress that saturates Fontane's last novel. In his debate-sparking book *The Preconditions of Socialism* (1899) Bernstein demanded that the SPD finally offer a realistic and undistorted portrayal of its political program, one that rids itself of the supposedly outmoded anticipation of violent revolutions. Nine years after the lifting of Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws (1878–90), the Social Democratic theoretician saw no need for radical political posturing anymore. It is high time for the SPD, Bernstein writes, to find "the courage to emancipate itself from phraseology that is, in fact, obsolete and to make up its mind to appear what it is in reality today: a democratic socialist party of reform" (Bernstein 1993, 186). Even though he had to suffer Rosa Luxemburg's ridicule in her *Reform or Revolution* (1899), Bernstein articulated the unrevolutionary mood of the SPD majority at the end of the nineteenth century.

Conceiving *The Stechlin* as a political novel, Fontane expressed similar sympathies for a moderate, nondisruptive social democracy. Political and social progresses are presented as continuous advancements that proceed at a measured but unstoppable pace by way of reform and not of rupture or revolution. Most famously, Fontane states his political philosophy through the character of the cautiously progressive Pastor Lo-

renzen (Zimmermann 2000, 130). “Rather with the old as far as it goes and with the new only as far as it is necessary” (Fontane 2001, 34). Pastor Lorenzen welcomes a new age “under the sign of a democratic world-view,” a society that pursues social justice and rejects visions of destruction and political revolution (324). Both Eduard Bernstein, the voice of the SPD’s majoritarian opinion, and Fontane, Germany’s greatest realist author, expected an orderly and lawful progress toward a better age in which everyone would be able to breathe freely.⁵ The same complaisance that Benn already noticed in Fontane’s writings characterized Bernstein’s political philosophy as well. “Fontane was calmed by history and history calmed everything in his view; whatever still quivered and suffered stood outside of his Prussified heart” (Benn 2003, 1729). Forty years after the publication of *The Stechlin*, Fontane and Bernstein would have been horrified to listen to a conversation among modernists that reversed the realist consensus. In a conversation with Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht turned Pastor Lorenzen’s maxim inside out and transformed the realist axiom into a modernist one: “A Brechtian Maxim: Don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones” (Benjamin 1991, 539).

The transition from realist to modernist literature was accompanied in the German tradition by a new and intense preoccupation with violent and transgressive acts. The shattering of Fontane’s and Bernstein’s calming views of history and the heightened interest in the representation of violence after a century of unprecedented man-made mass death during world wars, revolutions, and genocides provokes no surprise in twenty-first-century hindsight.⁶ If anything, this shift in modernist literature toward the representation of extremely violent and disturbing acts and events is in retrospect almost causally linked to the violent events that dominated twentieth-century history. It has become customary to refer with Hobsbawm to the last century as the “age of extremes,” and to suggest that the experience of twentieth-century mass violence is linked to the imagination of violence in literature, art, and film (Hobsbawm 1995).⁷ Under this calm surface of plausibility, however, swarms of unsubstantiated claims, undefined concepts, and contradictory theories continue to swim, lurk, and lure.

As I argue in this chapter, we can follow such seemingly plausible links between twentieth-century violence and German modernist literature only as long as we work with ill-defined concepts and theories like the “break of tradition,” “violence,” and “German modernist writing.” Excellent work has been done in recent years on the concept of violence as well as on German modernism. Rather than providing a widely accepted concept of violence, however, the research has led to a more precise un-

derstanding of the challenges acts of violence pose to theorization and understanding. Similarly, literary scholars have in the last twenty-five years significantly expanded and complicated our notion of German modernism. The concepts of physical violence and German modernist writings both gained in irreducible complexity and resisted ever more their use for any clear, straightforward, and generalized claims and statements. Nonetheless, when “violence” and “German modernism” are brought together a deceptive clarity continues to emerge in literary history and cultural theory. Conjoining these two concepts, the illusion of a stable constellation remains in sight. We are presented—to rephrase Benn’s judgment on Fontane’s view of history—with a pacified and pacifying view of German modernism.

Such a result is counterintuitive, to say the least, since the literary historical revision and expansion of German modernism began with the aggressive intention to “explode” any previous models of German modernism (Bathrick and Huyssen 1989, 4). The preceding models were rightly viewed as too restrictive—limiting the modernist canon to a select few masters, to Kafka, Rilke, Mann, and not many more. The most provocative aspect of this explosive revision of German modernism was the question of whether writers like Benn, Celine, or Jünger are “modernists.” The debates continue over whether (some of) Ernst Jünger’s writings are modernist responses to modernity,⁸ whether the concept *fascist modernism* will assist understanding of modernism.⁹ More important than these debates, however, is one of their side effects. They amplify a notion of German modernism as nonviolent and passive. With surprising consistency, the question of which text and author might or might not be considered as properly modernist has been decided with reference to the work’s approach to the representation of violence. In the course of these debates a domesticated understanding of “proper” German modernism emerged, one that looks away from the destructive potential of modernist aesthetics and politics.

The otherwise justified models of *fascist modernism* as well as that of the militant avant-garde invite unduly simplified accounts of the relationship between modernism and violence, filtering out the provocative but also destructive energy of modernist literature. The construct of the fascist modernist as the one tempted by the promise of violence obscures the widespread, intense, and positive fascination with physical violence in German modernist writings. A fascination that is not limited to either keeping a safe distance or restricting itself to masochistic self-wounding, as current theories of German modernism claim (i.e., Adorno, Bürger, Huyssen, Eksteins, Lethen et al.), but that, instead, does not hesitate to

lash out against the other. The facile constellation of high modernism in the middle and the militant avant-garde on its one side and fascist modernism on its other distorts our understanding of modernist responses to violence. One has to move away from any clear-cut models that place a seemingly nonaggressive modernism between the two other forms of modernism that are distinguished from it by their preoccupation with violence. I develop in the following chapters descriptive-analytical models of modernist responses to the promise of violence, of the different ways in which writers and theorists like Musil, Kafka, Benjamin, and Canetti understood phenomena of violence as challenges to representation and imagination but also sought to explore the epistemological potential of violence. In close readings the subsequent chapters develop new interpretations of these well-known writers and offer a clearer understanding of how their modernist aesthetics and politics searched for a catastrophic imagination, one capable of perceiving the destructive potential of contemporary man-made violence.

Before I develop these models, three preliminary steps have to be taken that retrace the difficulties that discussions of modernist responses to violence confront. First, I analyze different versions of the story of a breakdown of cultural traditions that lend at first sight plausibility to the idea that the modernist focus on violence should be directly related to twentieth-century man-made mass violence. Next, I address the problems of defining the concept of violence, and finally I turn to the role that representations of violence play in recent discussions and definitions of German modernism.

The assumption of a direct relationship between the last century's real and unprecedented mass violence and the suddenly increasing and shockingly explicit representations of violence in twentieth-century German literature is based on the belief that the intensity and scope of the mass violence caused a break in historical continuity and the collapse of cultural traditions. If indeed such a break occurred, a different, new, modern response to such violence was needed—not only in the form of literature.

As told by Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Arendt, the stories of the breakdown of tradition and the death of experience are well known. Read in sequence, these theories of discontinuity display an ever intensifying distrust of traditional modes of thinking, imagining, and representing. From trench warfare and poison gas attacks to concentration and extermination camps to the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these mass death events delivered blow after blow to the promise

of a continuous Western civilizing process (meaning the expectation of less aggressive, less cruel, less murderous behavior among individuals and between societies in modernity). What began with Freud's experience of disorientation during the First World War culminated in Arendt's sober assessment that after 1945 a complete and irreparable break with the past had occurred already and irrevocably.

For the purpose of this study, several aspects of these recurring breakdown narratives have to be emphasized. In contrast to recent repetitions of this story, I argue that these authors are less consistent in their assertions of an absolute break than previously suggested. All of these writers attest not only to the break itself but also to the persistent difficulty of accepting the consequences of their own conclusions. Their hesitations, qualifications, and later revisions in drafts, letters, and notes should caution against any hasty acceptance of a clear link between twentieth-century violence, a collapse of tradition, and new, modernist responses to this violence. By aligning these stories in chronological sequence, the assessment of a breakdown of tradition emerges as a more and more traditional approach to the intensifying challenges of understanding twentieth-century mass violence.

Sigmund Freud experienced the First World War as a profound disillusionment (*Enttäuschung*). In his *Timely Observations on War and Death* (written in March and April 1915), he explained his experience less with war's return to Europe than with the "brutality shown by individuals whom, as participants in the highest human civilization, one would not have thought capable of such behavior" (Freud 1957, 280). The war's ferocious destructiveness, the observation that this war "is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it" shattered his belief in a continuous advancement of European cultural development (278). As early as 1915 and before tanks, machine guns, airplanes, trench warfare, and poison gas attacks became emblematic for the new horrors of the war, Freud acknowledged that his expectation of an unstoppable civilizing process was founded on self-deception, on his overestimation of human *Kultureignung*. The deconstruction of the illusion of a sustained cultural advancement became the only positive *Ent-täuschung* that the war delivered to Freud. The majority of European citizens revealed themselves to Freud as "cultural hypocrites" [*Kulturheuchler*] (284). During peacetime, they lived within the socially accepted and expected norms; during wartime, however, it became obvious that they never truly internalized the norms of civilized human interaction. In times of war they simply relaxed or disregarded completely cultural norms as inappropriate and untimely codes of conduct. Distinguishing the civilized elite from a

hypocritical majority, Freud preserved the notion of the truly cultured individual who resists the desire to act brutally even during wartime.

At the end of Freud's essay even such a minoritarian concept of cultured progress emerges as untenable during wartime. Truly civilized men, Freud argued, have to perform a deliberate regression at times of war. They have to move voluntarily backward in their cultural development and join the vast majority of cultural hypocrites.

[War] compels us once more to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps strangers as enemies, whose death is to be brought about or desired; it tells us to disregard the death of those we love. But war cannot be abolished [. . .]. The question then arises: Is it not we who should give in, who should adapt ourselves to war? Should we not confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once again living psychologically beyond our means and should we not rather turn back and recognize the truth? [. . .] This hardly seems an advance to higher achievement, but rather in some respects a backward step—a regression; but it has at least the advantage of taking the truth more into account, and of making life more tolerable for us once again. (299)

Seeking in 1933 an answer to Einstein's open letter, *Why War?* Freud ended his letter to the physicist with a similar distinction between a majority of cultural hypocrites and a few truly civilized individuals. But Freud expressed also cautious hope that "the rest of mankind" might someday take the next steps in the civilizing process, reject war as a method of conflict resolution, and join pacifists like Einstein and Freud (Freud 1964, 215).

Freud's wartime advice for a deliberate regression and his cautious postwar reliance on the eventually transformative power of the civilizing process are significantly more hopeful than his initial reaction to the First World War. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from November 1914, he claimed the war as evidence for his suspicion that mankind is "organically unfitted" for civilization (Freud and Andreas-Salomé 1972, 21). A species other than humans might reach someday a truly civilized stage. Humanity, however, would have to "abdicate" (21).¹⁰ Compared to this private prediction of mankind's terminal collapse, Freud's published wartime essay expressed already a regained confidence in the civilizing process. Freud's wartime essay holds out the possibility that the "truly civilized man" might reappear after the war. During the first year of the war, Freud corrected his initial assessment of a complete and deserved collapse of

tradition and cultural progress and anticipated the possibility of further cultural advancements in postwar Europe. Immediately after the war, Freud foresaw no negative long-term effects for postwar societies. War neuroses would vanish with the war, and the cultural hypocrites would once more follow the norms of civilized society.¹¹

In the aftermath of the war, Walter Benjamin noticed, however, precisely such negative long-term effects for postwar society. Benjamin's observations focus not on the ideal of a truly civilized individual but on the seemingly widespread inability among veterans to talk about their war experiences. According to Benjamin, the returning soldiers failed to communicate the most fundamental experience of their generation. These veterans returned "not richer but poorer in communicable experience" (Benjamin 2002, 144). Benjamin draws wide-ranging and immensely influential conclusions from this observation (Jay 2005, 312–60). For him, and we will return to this in the fifth chapter more extensively, the impact of the veterans' silence went far beyond the ranks of the war generation. Their silence denoted nothing less than the destruction of the foundation of tradition. It indicated the fading faculty of communicating experience among contemporaries and across generations. The figure of the storyteller and the ability to tell stories threatened to vanish quickly into silence. The war experiences proved unfit for the time-honored forms of storytelling that were shaped by past expectations and traditional values. Previously, storytelling had been an integral part of the chain that linked generations. With this chain broken, the worlds before and after the war separated completely. Although this radical assessment of the death of experience and the collapse of tradition leads Benjamin to an apologia of a politics and aesthetics of destruction, he expressed—in unpublished drafts for his *Storyteller* essay—nonetheless the weak hope that the storyteller might return.

And just because "storytelling" seemed to occur among humans so constantly from eternity to eternity it is exceedingly endangered in these decades which vied so sharply and unrelentingly with eternal values. And the story [*Erzählung*] has to return, *for now*, into the abyss [*Abgrund*]. She is too empty of new wisdom and, above all, too full of old wisdom to be able to serve us. (Benjamin 1972–91, 2:1284)

Benjamin considered the demise of communicable experience not yet as an irrecoverable historical fact. In his published essays he welcomed the break with the past and outlined the project for a new barbarism that would rid

itself proactively from all remnants of tradition. In his notes and drafts survives nonetheless the anticipation that the end of storytelling, and thus of tradition, might be a temporary and not a final phenomenon.

The expectation that Western societies would develop toward more humane interaction persevered even among the most careful and sympathetic readers of Freud and Benjamin. After the rise of Stalinism and Nazism and during World War II, Adorno and Horkheimer singled out the persistence of old wisdom as an obstacle to their analysis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Freeing themselves from received expectations of “normal” cultural development proved to be a major hindrance to the completion of their project. “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. We underestimated the difficulty of dealing with the subject because we still placed too much trust in contemporary consciousness” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xiv).¹² Prepared, as readers of Freud and Benjamin, to reflect on the breakdown of cultural-historical continuity, they nonetheless experienced the difficulty of avoiding the preconceptions lodged in their own consciousness. Like Freud, they set out to free themselves from a self-deception that they recognized as caused by traditional expectations and cultural norms. The complete break with the past had not yet occurred since traditional modes of thinking continued to pervade even the thoughts of those who sought to analyze this “new kind of barbarism.”

Only a few years later—but after the end of the Second World War and in full awareness of the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt reaches an end point in these narratives of cultural breakdown. Arendt’s narrative differs from all previous ones by its lack of drama and its matter-of-fact style. Gone is Freud’s sense of disorientation or Benjamin’s surprised observation of postwar incommunicability and silence. Gone are the expectation of and the desire for a return to tradition. The break can neither be repaired during peacetime nor persist as a utopian project. Neither Freud’s suggestion of stepping back voluntarily on the ladder of cultural advancement nor Benjamin’s anticipation of the storyteller’s return survived the rise of totalitarianism. In her *Denktagebuch*, Arendt registered in 1953 the collapse of tradition almost as a nonevent, as an event that occurred without witnesses.

Break of tradition: properly, meaning in its Roman understanding, the interruption of succession (“successio”) of generations who received from each other the tradition [*das Überlieferte*] and passed it

on, quasi holding each other by the hand throughout the millennia in *chronological* sequence. The break was foreshadowed by the generational disruption after the First World War, but not completed since the awareness of a break still presupposed the remembrance of tradition; thus rendering, in principle, the break reversible. The break occurred only after the Second World War when the break was not even perceived anymore. (Arendt 2002, 300)

Remnants of traditional thinking no longer pose a time-consuming hindrance to reflection. The assumption of such a complete break is at the core of Arendt's political thought. Without the collapse of tradition, her famous notion of *thinking without banisters* would neither be possible nor necessary.¹³ Traditional thinking and storytelling have disappeared into the holes of oblivion, namely, the extermination camps created according to the destructive logic of totalitarian systems. The unprecedented destruction of totalitarianism necessitates according to Arendt's political theory a thinking that follows no precedence.

A few years later, however, Arendt dramatically changed her judgment on traditional storytelling. Between *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt moved from the Benjaminian assumption of the demise of traditional storytelling and returned the figure of the traditional storyteller to a crucial position in her reflections on tradition and storytelling in the age of totalitarian destruction. Like the accounts of her predecessors, Arendt's version of the collapse of tradition is anything but a stable and coherent narrative. Moving from the declaration of the most complete and irreversible break, she returns to a far more complex assessment of tradition and the communication of experience across generations.

Currently, the breakdown of tradition and, as its cause, the death of experience is either taken for granted or met with ridicule. In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben offers the most radical assertion of a disappearance of experience, claiming that "the question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us" (1993, 13). Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, mocks such alarmist reports.

Astonishingly, what is in peril on our planet is not only the environment, the victims of disease and political oppression, and those rash enough to resist corporate power, but experience itself. And this is a relatively new threat of extinction, one which would scarcely have been familiar to Chaucer or Samuel Johnson. (2007, 17)

Cultural theorists and writers throughout the twentieth century warned that the collapse of tradition was an imminent threat, or that the break with the past was taking place at the time of their writing, or that the break had irreversibly occurred.¹⁴

Despite their initial plausibility, each of these narratives of cultural breakdown reveals qualifications, hesitations, and revisions that invite contradictory readings. In each successive account, the previous version is revised as a premature report on the collapse of cultural traditions. The moment of the breakdown becomes a moving target and remains chronologically indeterminable. While these images of a series of violent ruptures—the First World War, the political violence of the Weimar Republic, the Second World War, and the Holocaust—remain powerful, it is unclear how the events influenced and shaped the cultural imagination. The occurrence of mass-death events does not cause predictable or even similar responses in literature, art, or film. If one compares the developments in the representation of violence in German literary history with the sequence of these narratives of cultural breakdown, then it quickly becomes obvious that these two chronologies are out of sync. When compared to the modernist experimentation before and after the First World War, German literature after the Second World War and the Holocaust is rather conventional and traditional with only a few exceptions like Arno Schmidt or Peter Weiss. After the supposed final blow to tradition had been delivered, influential writers like Andersch, Borchert, Richter, or Böll were far more entrenched in tradition than Kafka, Döblin, Mann, Musil, or Brecht were before and after the First World War.¹⁵ German literature between 1945 and 1959 produced only a few examples of a *writing without banisters*.

In recent years historians of World War I violence have challenged the long dominant narrative of the breakdown of tradition, questioning each of the core assumptions on which theorists like Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt based their arguments. These historians view the persistence of the breakdown narrative among theorists and literary scholars with growing frustration (Ziemann 2000, 52–53; Ziemann 2003; Schumann 2004). Their research on the war experience finds insufficient evidence for the *Fronterlebnis* as a representative generational experience. Benjamin Ziemann notes that encounters with the industrial war machinery were far less frequent and central experiences for soldiers than previously assumed. A considerable number of soldiers were never or only for a short time at the front. At the front, experiences of mass violence remained exceptional and rather infrequent (Ziemann 2000, 52–53).

Despite often repeated claims, the most common response to the experience of war violence was not the shattering of traditionally held values

that then was expected to lead to a general brutalization of the First World War generation. With his *Timely Observations on War and Death* (1915), Freud is among the first to propose this brutalization thesis. And reading Marianne Weber's "The Special Cultural Mission of Women" (1919), one encounters the very real fear by women that a generation of brutalized men would return home to their families. As Weber writes, women awaited their sons and husbands toward the end of the war "with tremendous longing and secret fears" (Weber 1995, 197). This fear stemmed from the expectation that in wartime "the form-giving of civilization is nullified" and that "the experience and commission of unspeakable things have stamped the souls of our compatriots" (197). Weber's fearful anticipation has been echoed loudly by historians like George Mosse (1990) and Eric Hobsbawm, who states in *The Age of Extremes*, "the First World War was a machine for brutalizing the world" (1995, 125).¹⁶

Recent historical studies on returning soldiers after the First World War dispute, however, that the war functioned as a brutalizing machine. They demonstrate instead, as Sace Elder summarizes, that "the demobilization of soldiers and the transition to peacetime went rather smoothly and that the vast majority of veterans were not, in fact, given to violence" (2010, 23). For example, farmers in southern Bavaria constitute a social group that for a long time has been suspected of being the prime example of a continuously intensifying history of violence and brutalization. Their response to the war supposedly created a direct line from the total mobilization of the First World War to the white terror against the leftist Munich Republic. A recent analysis of their postwar lives revised these assumptions dramatically:

Among Bavarian peasants the front experience, the experience of war's destructive power, did not lead to brutalization nor did it cause a deep caesura in an individual's personal history. The psychological strain, which enacting and suffering physical violence brought with it, was taken care of through recourse to old, traditional patterns of interpretation, patterns which offered stability, such as Catholic piety, the farming family and agrarian subsistence. (Ziemann 2003, 84)

As the historian Dirk Schumann concludes, the thesis that a significant majority of German veterans developed a lasting disposition toward violent action because of their war experiences is not tenable (Schumann 2004, 7–28).

The unprecedented forms of mass violence in World War I did not lead

in any direct way to the disintegration of cultural norms, institutions, and social relations among the participants of the war, their families, and their communities.¹⁷ Instead of substantiating the notion of clearly distinct experiential boundaries between the soldiers' lives at the front and civilian life at home, these soldiers felt far more connected with their lives at home than their fellow soldiers (Schumann 2004, 19). Under dispute is the central importance of the *Fronterlebnis*, the immediate experience of the new forms of man-made mass violence, as an experience that shaped a collective identity of the war generation. Rather than leaving a direct and deep imprint on postwar society, the social and political significance of the front experience results from its discursive construction after the fact in postwar Germany.

It cannot be disputed that the war experience has been represented continuously on the most different levels of public communication in Weimar as a deep caesura. However, it was not a caesura in the history of experience [*erfahrungsgeschichtliche Zäsur*]. Instead, it points to the ability of the "front experience" to serve varied political and cultural discourses of postwar society as a generator of meaning and argumentative point of reference. (Ziemann 2000, 80–81)

The majority of war veterans continued to find stability in traditional patterns of interpretation in postwar society.

Nonetheless, for a minority of young male war veterans, many of whom would continue to fight in the paramilitary *Freikorps* after 1918, the war remained a defining experience. But this group had no difficulty communicating its version of the war experiences to a second generation of young males, "disproportionately students, cadets, athletes, and young working class roughnecks," as the sociologist Michael Mann writes. "Without these young military veterans transmitting wartime values of comradeship, hierarchy, and violence into a peacetime political movement," fascism would not have become a mass movement (2004, 259). The success of the German and Austrian fascist movements depended on their socialization of the first *postwar* generation. Without this younger generation, a generation too young to have participated in the First World War, the National Socialist movement would not have come to power. The next events of German mass violence would be planned and executed primarily by those who did not participate in the First World War. Few participants of the Wannsee Conference and not one member of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) were veterans of the previous war.

They were born in the first decade of the twentieth century and therefore not old enough to serve during the First World War (Mann 2005, 244–48). Freudian assumptions of brutalization and primitive regression carry little explanatory power for the historical rise of fascist movements. As Michael Mann concludes:

In all my case studies the perpetrators formed social movements with their own institutions, ideologies, and socialization process. Perpetrators were not autonomous individuals liberated from their superegos. When hatred and violence erupted, they were not so much freed from traditional socialization pressures as encouraged by new ones. Primitive theories are not very helpful. (Mann 2005, 18)

The narrative of a breakdown and collapse of tradition and social institutions presents an overly simplifying grand narrative that obscures the complex ways in which modern events of man-made mass death impacted cultural traditions, patterns of interpretations, and modes of representation. Rather than a single break, or an *Urkatastrophe* that connects cause and effect, one has to follow processes of escalation and persistence that require dynamic models and multifactor explanations. While historians and sociologists invite us to find a more complex understanding of the role of twentieth-century violence in politics and culture, they join other disciplines' frustration in trying to produce a workable concept of violence.

What is violence? If we return for a moment to the catalog of literary representations of violence at the beginning of this chapter, one recognizes the immense heterogeneity of the phenomena linked to the word "violence": natural disasters, torture, rape, murder, genocide, war—a wide variety of extremely different deeds and events are called violent. How can one define, let alone theorize, "violence" if such disparate and heterogeneous acts are subsumed under one concept? This challenge to a rethinking of violence is so demanding that most theories addressing violence prefer to absorb concrete occurrences of physical violence into general theories of modernity (from Elias to Bauman), of trauma (from Freud to Carruth), or of sacrifice (from Bataille to Girard). Each of these theories provides important insights for different contexts, and I employ them in the analysis of the literary texts whenever useful. While these theories approach violence from a wide variety of perspectives, they rarely dwell on concrete acts of physical violence. They offer either large-

scale narratives of the disappearance or persistence of violent behavior in modernity (Elias versus Bauman), or they dwell on particular effects of the experience of violence among victims and, more rarely, perpetrators (Freud, Carruth), or they propose different sacrificial logics of certain acts of communal violence (Bataille, Girard). Slavoj Žižek's recent study *Violence* (2008) serves as a rather typical example of the prevalent disinclination to look directly at physical violence. Like most theorists of violence, Žižek considers the causes of violence more interesting than the act of violence itself and expects to find them below the surface of observable phenomena (Žižek 2008, 8). Concrete acts of violence, which he calls subjective violence, serve only as spectacular distractions for more important but invisible forms of objective violence. Žižek's definition of subjective violence reaches far beyond seemingly random acts of daily violence and far beyond the level of the single subject. His notion of subjective violence encompasses all forms of physical violence, from beatings, rape, and murder all the way to the Stalinist purges and the Holocaust. "Subjective violence," Žižek writes, is enacted "by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds" (Žižek 2008, 11). No matter how catastrophic the scale of such acts might be, Žižek perceives them as distractions from the more fundamental forms of objective violence. Instead of succumbing to the fascination with openly violent acts and events, Žižek wants to refocus our attention on the violence inherent in the capitalist system, especially the "more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation" (9). Žižek's concept of violence grows even more diffuse when he adds symbolic violence to the aspects of his theory of violence that deserve more attention than any instance of physical violence. Symbolic violence includes the ideological use of speech—from hate speech to the way habitual use of language reproduces social domination—but it encompasses as well "a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning" (2). Physical violence finds its place in Žižek's study mostly in his threats against those who fail to share his approach (39).

Since this study analyzes modernist explorations of the limits of imagination and representation vis-à-vis the phenomenon of violence, I am interested foremost in exploring theoretical approaches that do address violent phenomena as directly as possible. After confronting some of the obstacles in theorizing violence, this search will lead first to Arendt's reflections on violence and then to some of the most recent, antireductionist approaches in violence research, especially the work of Heinrich Popitz.

Definitions and theories of violence are in high demand but surprisingly short supply. In philosophy, history, sociology, political science, and critical theory, one encounters the same dilemma: the rising interest in violent phenomena is accompanied by the complaint that no clear definitions of the concept of violence are agreed upon.¹⁸ Despite attempts by authors as different as Arendt, Bauman, Canetti, Elias, Foucault, Girard, or Popitz, an “undertheorization” of violence persists when compared to its impact in structuring the social reality and shaping the collective memory of most nations and societies during the past century (Hüppauf 1997, 2). Comments on the dearth of theories of violence echo throughout the twentieth century. In 1970, Arendt wrote “what Sorel remarked sixty years ago, ‘The problems of violence still remain very obscure,’ is as true today as it was then” (Arendt 1972, 134). Almost thirty years later, the sociologist Trutz von Trotha renewed Arendt’s basic assessment in his survey of theories of violence for the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (Trotha 1997, 9). The current edition of the *International Handbook of Violence Research* (Heitmeyer and Hagen 2003) arrives at the same conclusion: “Violence is one of the most elusive and most difficult concepts in the social sciences” (Imbusch 2003, 13). As Peter Imbusch observes in the *Handbook*, the central questions “concerning an appropriate definition, substantive differentiation, sociopolitical assessment, and moral evaluation of violence” remain “unresolved” (13).

If one had hoped to identify a widely accepted concept of violence, one might as well abandon the engagement with theories of violence. This lacuna demands a different approach and offers an opportunity to bring into focus the challenges and possibilities that violent phenomena pose for theoretical reflection and literary representation. Rather than searching for a unified theory of violence, I discuss in this section the changes in the approach to violence from more traditional theories of violence that are, as I argue, inadequate theories of the disappearance of violence, to theories that approach acts of physical violence directly and concretely. To examine how political theorists and sociologists approach violence means to confront the limits of the representation of violence. The most significant shift in recent violence research is a move away from the traditional search for the causes of violence to the detailed description and analysis of concrete acts of violence and their social context. Such violence research encounters the challenge of how to represent acts of physical violence and destruction without succumbing to an aesthetization of violence.

To use Habermas’s term, theories of violence have long been plagued by the premise that violence is the problem that the project of modernity will

solve. Modernity is expected to bring an end to the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Such a premise transforms these theories of violence into theories of a disappearing phenomenon. Indeed, the most popular and powerful narrative regarding the relationship of violence and modernity follows what Franco Moretti calls the “rhetoric of innocence” (1996, 22). To approach physical violence as a means to solve conflicts has been designated as an indication of modernity’s other. The rhetoric of innocence regards violence always as being forced upon the modern social order, be it by a barbaric outside or by an atavistic inside. In either case, violence is not considered as an integral part of modernity. The use of violence by modern societies is justified as a means to abolish once and for all the use of physical violence by anyone else (Lindenberger and Lüdtkke 1995, 17). Because of this exclusionary narrative of violence and modernity, modernity can continue, as Bernd Hüppauf argues, to sustain its self-image as a principally nonviolent project, “Banishing violence to a contained sphere separated from one’s own is a prerequisite for maintaining the cherished image of modernity engaged in redeeming the pledge of its own origin” (Hüppauf 1997, 3).

The promise of modernity as the ultimate stage of the civilizing process lies in the expectation of a continual advance in the elimination of violence as a means to resolve private, social, national, and, finally, international conflicts. Such theories of modernity isolate physical violence as a relic, excess, and exception but not as an integral part of modernity. Modernity is supposed to move toward ever more rationally organized, nonviolent democratic societies. The increasingly closely woven web of social interaction leads individuals to ever more effective forms of self-discipline and affect control. As Norbert Elias, the most influential proponent of such a theory of modernity, proposes, the wars of the past should be understood as necessary steps toward the institutionalization of ever larger monopolies of force that curtail the use of physical violence in modern societies. In the conclusion to his magnum opus, *The Civilizing Process* (1939), Elias argued that the wars of the past should be understood as steps toward global peace: “wars between smaller units have been, in the course of history up to now, inevitable stages and instruments in the pacification of larger ones” (2000, 445). Extending these projected lines of necessity and inevitability from the past into the future, Elias predicts in 1939 that modernity will soon reach the stage of nonviolent and peaceful globalization:

One can see the first outlines of a worldwide system of tensions composed by alliances and supra-state units of various kinds, the

prelude of struggles embracing the whole globe, which are the precondition for a worldwide monopoly of physical force, for a single central political institution and thus for the pacification of the earth. (445–46)

In Elias's view, the internal logic of modern violence leads to its self-abolition, becoming yet another instance of Hegel's ruse of history. Still-occurring acts of violence in modern societies are tagged as atavistic throwbacks, bursting bubbles on the surface, mere events that hold little significance for the civilizing process in general.¹⁹ One might consider the date of publication of Elias's *The Civilizing Process* as deeply ironic. But as a look into the work of one of Elias's most recent disciples indicates, not even the Second World War, including the Holocaust and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is accepted as evidence to the contrary for such a long-term view of human history. As Steven Pinker suggests in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (2011), statistically the death toll of war and genocide during the twentieth century is nothing more than "an isolated peak in a declining sawtooth—the last gasp in a long slide of major war into historical obsolescence" (192). Zygmunt Bauman has argued that such accounts of the civilizing process are only more recent and influential proposals that follow the lead of Marx, Weber, and Freud. They consider the modern state as a "‘gardening’ state," a state increasingly capable of weeding out the violence of daily life (Bauman 2001, 13). Such theories of modernity perceive war, violence, and genocide as momentary failures, indicating that the civilizing process has not yet reached its ultimate goal. But the continuing progress in the civilizing process will prevent further "hiccups of barbarism" (13). Seen from such dominant perspective, Arendt's statement that "violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration" should have long lost any inflection of surprise (Arendt 1972, 110).

Elias's narrative exhibits a close family resemblance to the evolutionary models of progress proposed by the founders of modern sociology, Comte, Durkheim, and Spencer (Haselbach 1996, 331–51). To them, physical violence was a secondary phenomenon since industrial society's tendency toward decentralization, differentiation, and reliance on contractual relations had to lead to the disappearance of violence as an instrument for conflict resolution.²⁰ To make such a narrative of societal progress plausible, the origin of social organization is conceived as emerging from an extremely violent state of nature, while the present is portrayed as increasingly nonviolent, and the future anticipated as peaceful. Pinker's recent study follows this paradigm precisely with its "lurid

accounts of violence from medieval and early modern times, sometimes bordering on a sort of pornography,” as Jeremy Waldron observes (Waldron 2012). Be it the story of the murder of the father or the premise that in the state of nature man is a wolf to men, garish violence is associated with the origin of social order. In mythical narratives, as told by writers from Hobbes to Freud and Locke to Elias and Pinker, the social order is founded to prevent the recurrence of such primary violence. It makes no difference, as Heinrich Popitz pointed out, whether the origin of the social order is imagined as a community of potential victims seeking shelter and protection from violence (Hobbes) or whether it is imagined as a group of brothers who promise each other after the murder and communal consumption of their father never to do to each other what they just did to their father (Freud). Both theories share the same conception: “the birth of the idea of order from the experience of violence” (Popitz 1992, 62). They propose a linear notion of historical progress that equates cultural development with the increasing control and eventual elimination of violence.

Although in a very different mode and terminology, system theory—to switch to another influential sociogenetic account—tells a similar story about the soon to be expected disappearance of violence in modernity. Positing violence at the origin of social systems, system theory understands the past violence as crucial for cultural developments but concludes that in today’s society violence has lost its important but risky function for the autopoietic process of system differentiation.²¹ Perceiving the role of culture in the social order as an alarm system, Dirk Baecker assumes that “it is the function of culture to represent the improbability, the threatenedness, the precariousness, the uncertainty of a social order in such a way that the measures for safeguarding culture become probable and legitimate” (Baecker 2000, 37). Culture thematizes the promises of and threats to social order. Whenever culture failed to fulfill this function, the social order would thematize itself and would apply, to use system theory’s sober terminology, an extremely unattractive form of communication between the various system levels, namely, violence (38). To secure the integration of all three system levels that system theory differentiates (body, consciousness, and communication), violence is considered to have “the unbeatable advantage that violence fascinates and binds all three system-levels equally” (39). Violence’s aptitude for connecting these levels loses its attraction when it can be substituted with less dangerous and more attractive modes of communication. The connection between culture and violence dissolves; violence loses its cultural relevance. Should one system get caught up in violence, other systems are now ready to

safeguard society's autopoiesis (42). As in Elias's theory of the civilizing process, system theory casts the history of violence as a narrative of self-obliteration.

Elias's theory of the civilizing process corresponded in the 1960s and 1970s to the positive experiences of democratization, social welfare, and the domestication of violence in (West) Germany. The wide reception of Elias's ideas reinforced the exclusionary narrative of modernity and violence that considers violence as a fundamentally premodern phenomenon (Imbusch 2005, 450). These theories are driven by the hope that finding and exposing the origins and causes of violent interaction will allow modernity to rid itself of violence. Arendt's critique of previous theories of violence engages precisely this point. Rather than hoping that the identification of the causes of violence would lead to the discovery of a cure for the use of violence in modernity, Arendt analyzes violence strictly as a means to an end. In contrast to traditional approaches, Arendt does not adhere to the grand narrative of violence disappearing in the course of modern history (and she avoids as well the opposite narrative according to which all lines of modernity lead to Auschwitz). To extrapolate future developments from past and current political trends produces often seemingly plausible predictions but distorts, according to Arendt, how politics works. If one searches for the laws of history to make long-term predictions, Arendt argues, then one has to ignore the unpredictable impact of violent acts in politics.

Just as Arendt faults exclusionary theories of modernity for avoiding the phenomenon of violence, she criticizes opposing theories of war and violence, among them Clausewitz's idea of war as a continuation of politics and Engels's understanding of violence as an accelerator of economic development, for assuming a predictable postviolence continuity in political and economic processes. She questions the premise that social, political, and economical processes remain determined by the same circumstances that preceded the implementation of violence. Such exclusionary theories achieve "their inner consistency" and their "hypnotic effect" only because they close the eyes to the possibility of disruption by their own use of violence (Arendt 1972, 110). Arendt disputes the premise of these theories and argues that the use of violence alters future developments in unforeseen ways. "Predictions of the future are never anything but projections of present automatic processes and procedures, that is, of occurrences that are likely to come to pass if men do not act and if nothing unexpected happens; every action, for better or worse, and every accident necessarily destroys the whole pattern in whose frame the prediction moves and where it finds

its evidence” (109). Theorizing politics as an open-ended process, Arendt focuses on the inherent possibility of unintended consequences when violence is employed in social and political affairs. She does not dismiss violent events as negligible disturbances in the steady advance of historical progress. Instead, Arendt understands violent action as the prime example of the potential unpredictability of all political action. By reflecting on the significance of the unintended consequences of violent action, Arendt’s political theory marks a turning point in violence research. In contrast to her fully developed concepts of political action and power, however, she has surprisingly little to say about acts of violence themselves. She defines violence solely by its instrumental character: “Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it” (176). Unlike peace or power, violence cannot be understood as a political end, as a goal that stands on its own. No violent act ever has the legitimacy of a political end; it always requires the justification of being a means to an (political) end. As such a means, however, violence poses the risk of exceeding the limits of its instrumental purpose and of triggering unintended consequences. Every political action harbors elements of unpredictability since political action knows of no self-contained objects, like a table, that exist independently for themselves after their fabrication. Consequently, the logic of the political process never fits the narrow horizon of a means-end relation. Violent acts are never completely absorbed by their ends but influence their sociopolitical circumstances. While any action initiates unforeseen consequences, acts of violence are uniquely risky:

The danger of violence, even if it moves consciously within a non-extremist framework of short-term goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic. (177)

While Arendt perceives violence strictly as a political instrument, she concludes that the effects of the violent act will always be in excess of its intended purpose. Rather than following a linear and predictable sequence of cause and effect, violent acts always risk missing their objective by destroying their own end. In the nuclear age, as Arendt notes, the use of violence during global conflicts threatens to destroy all ends.

Her approach to violence as an unreliable means to an end led Arendt to two central insights: any instrumental use of violence produces results

in excess of its purpose, and violent action sets off self-dynamic processes that follow their own dynamics that might undermine, overwhelm, or undo the intended ends. Beyond these two important points, Arendt's political theory remains largely silent on the topic of violence. In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt explains this silence succinctly. Politics is defined by speech, and violence defies speech. In reference to concentration camps, places where "violence rules absolutely," Arendt writes:

Where violence rules absolutely [. . .] everything and everybody must fall silent. It is because of this silence that violence is a marginal phenomenon in the political realm; for man, to the extent that he is a political being, is endowed with the power of speech. [. . .] The point here is that violence is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence. Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians. (9)

Arendt's notion of violence as incapable of speech recalls classic characterizations of violence, from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* in which the stage character named Violence never utters a word to Karl Kraus's famous poem on Hitler's rise to power, "The word passed away [*entschlieff*] when that world awoke" (Kraus 1978, vol. 10, no. 888, 1). Consequently, most of Arendt's essay *On Violence* is dedicated to power, not violence.

To overcome such speechlessness of violence, recent research has attempted to let violence speak by approaching acts of violence more directly. Based on the works of Max Weber and Elias Canetti, the sociologist Heinrich Popitz laid the conceptual groundwork for the so-called innovators of violence research (Imbusch 2004). Such innovators include Wolfgang Sofsky, Trutz von Trotha, and researchers collaborating with the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung.²² Like Arendt and in contrast to Žižek, Popitz defined violence first and foremost as physical violence to avoid the creation of a dematerialized, structural notion of violence, a notion always at risk of losing conceptual precision (Nedelmann 1997, 61–62). Unlike Arendt who strictly separated violence from her theory of power, Popitz links his definition of violence directly to his theory of power.

Violence is defined as an act of power that leads to the intended bodily harm of others, no matter whether the purpose of this act is contained in itself (as mere actionable power) or, used as a threat, it

is intended to establish a permanent submission (as binding action-able power). (1992, 48)

Popitz's definition of violence distinguishes three purposes for violent action: violence as (1) an end in itself (*bloße Aktionsmacht*), (2) as a means to an end, and (3) as establishing and preserving power relations (*bindende Aktionsmacht*) (Trotha 2000, 31–32).

The assertion that violent action can be an end in itself stands at the core of Popitz's antireductionist theory of violence and power. It marks the radical turn from mainstream violence research and seeks to overcome the traditional silence on violence by observing acts of violence closely. Popitz insists against Arendt that acts of violence might have no purpose outside the act itself. This observation marks, as von Trotha points out, the explicit rejection of theoretical and methodological reductionism in violence research (Trotha 2000, 28–29). No cause, no motive, no hostile act, no risky situation leads necessarily to violence. Consequently, the success of theories seeking to explain aggression and violence will always be limited by their search for insufficient and nonnecessary causes.

While Popitz provides a narrow definition of violence, always related to the (threat of) hurting of the human body, he defines the possibility of violent action by its ubiquity.

Humans never have to but always are capable of acting violently; they never have to but always can kill—alone or collectively—together or collaboratively—in every situation, in battle or while celebrating—in different moods, in anger, without anger, with lust, without lust, screaming or mutely (in dead silence)—for all imaginable purposes—everyone. (1992, 50)

Anyone might act violently against anyone, anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances. The claim of every situation's potential openness to acts of violence should not be mistaken for paranoia. But acts of violence cannot be limited to their assumed instrumental character or be traced back to necessary and predictable causes. This is Popitz's first anthropological foundation of the delimitation of human violence. Rather than looking for causal models that explain the occurrence of violence and foster the expectation of an eventual abolition of violence in modernity, Popitz's approach asks for close observations and descriptions of acts of violence and their self-dynamic processes.²³

Popitz's second anthropological foundation of the delimitation of violence refers to our limitless ability to imagine acts of violence at

any moment. Since this imagined violence is not bound by reality, it tends to be rather successful. The fact that “representational violence can imagine everything” could either diminish or heighten the risk of actual violence (51). Imagined violence could compensate for actual violence, but especially if it is combined with human technological intelligence, it can lead to ever more innovative and effective technologies of destruction. The twofold delimitation of violence, one of will and one of imagination, opens up boundless potential for violent interaction. With its detailed representation of physical violence and its focus on the self-dynamic processes of violent situations, Popitz’s theory of violence promises to be a particularly productive theory for the analysis of literary representations of violence, equally productive as it has become already in historical research on violence.²⁴ But how does it change living in modernity once the expectation is gone that violence will decline and disappear from social and political interaction? And how would it change our concept of the self if every situation might but never has to reveal its violent potential? The analysis of Musil’s reflections on violence and the malleable self in chapters 2 and 3 of this study especially benefit from Popitz’s antireductionist examination of violence. As I argue, Musil interrogates the limits of any causal approach to violence with a thoroughness and sophistication that might not have an equal in sociological theories of violence.

For the moment, however, let me summarize major difficulties that violence poses to theorization and analysis. The first difficulty is to acknowledge acts of violence as relevant phenomena in modernity. Once this obstacle that metanarratives of modernity have put into place is removed, a second problem arises. How to speak about violence without reducing it to a search for its preventable causes thus reviving once more modernity’s self-image as the other of violence? How to disprove the assertions that violence defies speech and noncausal analysis? Even if one finds a way of letting violence speak by closely describing the dynamics of violent situations, how can one address the problem of the heterogeneity of violent phenomena? Even though Popitz’s antireductionist approach to violence offers an intriguing starting point for a new understanding of violent interaction, it should be clear that instances of physical violence are rarely easily decoded phenomena.

These intrinsic difficulties in approaching and understanding acts of violence make it all the more surprising that in discussions of German modernism, violence serves as a criterion to distinguish clearly between its various proponents. Indeed, the inherently heterogeneous and boundless phenomena of violence provide in debates on German modernism

an unexpected sense of stability. But this apparent stability comes at the price of oversimplified and pacified accounts of modernism.

In the last twenty-five years, numerous attempts have been made to broaden our understanding of German modernism. Even a theorist as closely aligned to Adorno's aesthetics as Peter Bürger began his survey of the *Prosa der Moderne* (1988) from the premise that Adorno defined the modernist canon too narrowly. Any expansion of a canon requires, however, new definitions. Currently accepted understandings of modernism were developed in the decades after World War II and have been frequently revised and reworked by scholars like Schorske, Willett, and Gay as well as Lethen, Anz, and Bürger. Once one looks at these attempts to reconceptualize modernism from the perspective of who is included or excluded from the label "modernism," one notices one of the debate's unacknowledged but decisive trench lines. Peter Bürger, for example, expands Adorno's canon—which is closely focused on Kafka and Beckett—with essays on Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Artaud, Faulkner, Musil, and Johnson (Bürger 1988). Just as important is the list of the authors that Bürger ignores. No such survey could be comprehensive, but when Pound, Lewis, Céline, d'Annunzio, Marinetti, Jünger, and Benn are absent, one has to assume that Bürger made a systematic decision not to include fascist and proto-fascist writers.

Modernity and the Text (1989), a groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, moves even farther away from postwar versions of modernism. Recontextualize, rehistoricize, repoliticize: this was the program of Huyssen and Bathrick's attempt to "explode" previous models of a homogenous modernism, "be they Lukácsian, new critical, Adornean, Derridean, or de Manean" (Bathrick and Huyssen 1989, 4). As the essays in the volume indicate, the heterogeneity of the German and Austrian modernists resists any desire to squeeze them into a single modernist mold. Peter Uwe Hohendahl discusses Benn's early prose, and Russell Berman delineates Ernst Jünger's fascist modernism. As his terminology indicates, Berman is far from praising Jünger as a great modernist, as has become popular recently (Berman 1989, 60–80). Nonetheless, Berman reads Jünger as a prototypical fascist modernist and interprets his writings as a modernist response to the experience of modernity.²⁵

This expansion of the modernist canon broadened our knowledge of the heterogeneity of German modernism, but its groupings obscure the complexity of modernist experiments with representing violence. In any account that separates fascist modernism and the militant avant-garde from other forms of modernism, the question of where to place the pro-

and the antiviolence tendencies hardly arises. The answer seems so obvious. Especially the mere existence of the otherwise justified model of fascist modernism provokes oversimplifications when it comes to determining the relationship between modernism and violence. It filters out the representational complexity and analytical acuity that continue to emanate from those modernist writings that can be aligned with neither the militant avant-garde nor fascist modernism.²⁶ Speaking of the impact of the First World War, Modris Eksteins, author of *Rites of Spring*, has little doubt that “people like Marinetti, d’Annunzio, Salomon, and especially Ernst Jünger, would aestheticize this experience of violent eruption” (Eksteins 2000, 342). On the other side, he places Eliot, Kafka, and Chaplin as descriptors of decay, despair, and victimized antiheroes (343). Eksteins constructs a deep division between the aesthetes of war, violence, and fascism and the supposed high priests of modernism who feel no attraction to violence but do represent the suffering and anxiety of their nonaggressive antiheroes. Fascist modernists glorify violence; proper modernists give voice to victims who are caught up, like Chaplin’s character in *Modern Times* (1936), in destructive machinery of industrialization and abstract law.

More instructive for the purpose of clarifying the fallacy of such binary thinking is Huyssen’s seminal study *Twilight Memories* (1995). Huyssen’s masterful analyses of the works of Rilke and Jünger as two opposing responses to the experience of modernity form the modernist center of his study. These two chapters set out to demonstrate what modernism is and what should no longer be considered modernist writing. Huyssen’s distinguishing criterion is again the representation of violence. In the introduction to *Modernity and the Text*, which also contained Huyssen’s essay on Rilke, Bathrick and Huyssen endorsed Berman’s reading of Jünger as a modernist. In *Twilight Memories* Huyssen still praises Berman’s essay as a “brilliant tour de force” but adds a rather important caveat: Berman failed to demonstrate persuasively that Jünger’s writings should be considered as modernist literature (Huyssen 1995, 272). The specter of Jünger haunts *Twilight Memories*. The “reinvention of German literature” in German debates after the unification has, as Huyssen rightly observes, “so far mainly catapulted the centenarian proto-fascist Ernst Jünger into the limelight” (92). The need to reclassify Jünger’s oeuvre arises yet again not simply because the political and cultural climate after 1989 changed so dramatically to transform Jünger’s image from a (fascist) modernist outsider to a towering figure of twentieth-century European literature. More important, the new approaches to modernist literature brought certain features to the fore that threaten to bring mod-

ernist writings by authors like Rilke and Kafka too close for comfort to those by Jünger, Salomon, or Bronnen.

In his essays on Rilke and Jünger, Huyssen discovers that celebrating the heterogeneity of modernist writings threatens to blur distinctions in a manner no longer welcome. Explorations into the heterogeneity of modernism threaten to highlight fascist characteristics in modernist writings, the moment one analyzes their representations of violence. Huyssen responds to this risk by reemphasizing the distinctions between fascist and nonfascist writings. In view of the recent Jünger renaissance, this insistence on clear distinctions might be a useful exercise but not if such a search for distinctions leads to untenable oversimplifications of modernist responses to the central experience of modernity, to the experience of violence.

As for earlier generations of scholars, Rilke embodies for Huyssen the “essence of high modernism” (1989, 106). But with his essay on Rilke Huyssen intends to change the meaning of this statement. He attempts to replace a Rilke who represents “a modernism of disembodied subjectivity, metaphysical negativity, and textual closure” with a Rilke of the fragmented body, suggesting connections “between aspects of early childhood experience and the disrupting, fragmenting experience of the modern city” (106, 108). Huyssen’s psychoanalytically adjusted focus on the fragmented body exposes disquieting features in Rilke’s writings that could have unsettling consequences for our understanding of modernism. It is part and parcel of the essay’s brilliance that Huyssen makes this discomfort explicit. Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge, whom Huyssen views as Rilke’s alter ego and as a paragon of the modernist response to the experience of modernity, bears a resemblance to another archetype of the twentieth century: “one is at first reluctant to admit it,” Huyssen writes, but “Malte shares quite a number of traits with the ‘fascist male’ as analyzed by Theweleit” (124). After quickly enumerating the shared traits in six lines (paranoia and delusions of omnipotence, the idealization of the mother figure, an incapacity for relationships, a fear of being flooded, disarticulated, engulfed, and reduced to nothingness), Huyssen calls his own analysis to order and invalidates its observations: “we must immediately backtrack” (124).

Huyssen’s argumentative U-turn becomes necessary because Malte Laurids Brigge, and therefore Rainer Maria Rilke, and therefore German-Austrian modernism, are supposed to lack the one crucial feature that the fascist male and a member of the militant avant-garde share: acts of violence hold no promise to him; he does not seek violence to find authenticity, truth, or the destruction of the alienated world; he does not fight

for a revolutionary reorganization of society; he does not seek to blast the continuum of history apart. According to Huyssen's readjusted reading, Brigge remains "non-aggressive" under all circumstances—"Malte actually identifies with the feminine," and even his dreams of violence threaten no one but himself: "his violent fantasies are invariably and masochistically directed against himself only" (1995, 124). Despite striking similarities to Theweleit's fascist male, the protagonist of Rilke's exemplary modernist text is being relocated onto the safe ground of nonaggression. Auto-aggressive fantasies can still be acceptable for the essence of high modernism; violent fantasies and actions against others are not.

Fascist males, on the other hand, cannot bear to conceive the body as fragmented and develop "an image of the male body as armored terror machine" (124). They direct their violent fantasies toward the other, and Jünger becomes in Huyssen's account the prototypical fascist male (and nonmodernist), as the essay's title in *Twilight Memories* indicates: "Fortifying the Heart—Totally: Ernst Jünger's Armored Texts."

At the risk of being repetitive: the goal of this study is not to locate fascist characteristics in "proper" modernist texts and authors or to claim that Jünger's literary oeuvre achieves a similar aesthetic complexity and quality as the writings of Rilke, Kafka, Musil, Canetti, Döblin, Mann, or Jahn.²⁷ The claim is a larger one: the opposition between high modernism on the side of nonaggression and fascist modernism and the militant avant-garde on the side of destruction reduces central modernist responses to violence to the status of auto-aggressive explorations of fragmentation and suffering. From this perspective it remains of little consequence whether one considers Jünger's writings as modernist, although fascist, as Berman does, or refuses to include him in the modernist canon, as Huyssen, Bürger, Eksteins, and many other influential literary scholars propose. The actual analytical damage is done by an unintended consequence of these debates on fascist modernism: its production and dissemination of a pacified notion of "proper" modernism, one that obscures from view the active and aggressive exploration of violence by authors like Musil, Kafka, or Canetti.

The problems accumulate if one follows Huyssen's argument to the point where he defines the fascist qualities of a fascist modernism through a particular stance toward war, death, and violence. His definition is complicated by the circumstance that neither Jünger nor Benn fantasized like Céline about biological notions like "pure blood" and an "Aryan" nation, or the mass murder of the European Jewry. It therefore makes strategic sense that Huyssen does not define fascism "in the narrow sense of close adherence to the racist and *völkisch* blood and soil doctrine" (1995, 130).

His definition of the fascist qualities of a fascist modernism leaves aside racial antisemitism and focuses on the sanction of aggression and violence. He characterizes fascism as a “broad anti-democratic post-World War I political culture that validated aggression, death, and violence as ultimate meaning” (130).

Jünger’s validation of aggressive, violent destruction and his glorification of the moment of death on the battlefield as a moment of ultimate meaning has long been established (Herf 1984, 70–108). As disturbing as Jünger’s glorification of violence and death remains, it does not represent a specifically fascist endorsement of violence and death. The idea that the moment of death authenticates the value of a life lived well is so central to Western thought, as can be witnessed in the violent deaths of Socrates and Jesus, that its designation as a specifically fascist characteristic seems questionable. As Edith Wyschogrod argues, the “authenticity Paradigm,” the assumption of a reciprocal relation between the profoundness of a thinker or a moral authority and the degree to which the acceptance of even violent death was integral to their life’s conduct, was a fundamental paradigm of Western thought, and remained of particular importance to Rainer Maria Rilke (1985, 1–34). Jünger’s aggressive advocacy of war, violence, and destruction is not specifically fascist either. As Herfried Münkler argues persuasively, Jünger’s existential conception of war and violence belongs to a much older tradition, one that could be traced back to Clausewitz’s later writings and that was certainly a dominant position among German intellectuals from Scheler to Simmel, who enthusiastically welcomed the war in 1914 (Münkler 2002, 111–12). War and violence were seen by these thinkers as more than the mere instruments to reach politically defined war goals. The existential conception of war anticipated the war as a generator of its own ultimate meaning; the war would create its own ultimate meaning and legitimate itself through its transformative power. Such a transformative conception of war and violence is not restricted to the German tradition, as Münkler notes, but present in the anticolonial writings of Frantz Fanon as well (Münkler 2002, 105–15). And one might add that, in the 1970s, Jean Améry fully endorsed Fanon’s (and Sartre’s) idea of a cleansing power of killing and destruction in his essay on “Die Geburt des Menschen aus dem Geist der *Violenz*” (Améry 1971, 147–63).²⁸

The validation of aggression, death, war, and violence as ultimate meaning is an important aspect of fascist ideology, but it is not unique to fascism. During the Weimar Republic, Jünger insisted even that his revolutionary nationalism should be clearly distinguished from Hitler and the National Socialist movement because of his more radical endorse-

ment of violence. Jünger rejected Hitler and the NSDAP because they were too populist and not radical and violent enough. He criticized Hitler for recoiling from a truly destructive politics. During the same year when he published *The Adventurous Heart* (1929), the text on which his claim as one of Germany's leading modernists rests, the very year that witnessed the events of Black Friday, mass unemployment, the rise of the NSDAP, and ever intensifying political violence on the streets of the Weimar Republic, Jünger published in the liberal journal *Tagebuch* his essay "'Nationalism' and Nationalism" (Jünger 2001, 501–9). He intended to explain to his political enemies, the liberal democrats, the logic behind the recent surge of right-wing violence. At this "ideal moment of epochal terror" (Bohrer 1978, 9), Jünger derided Hitler as the last bourgeois politician and not as the first national revolutionary as the *Tagebuch's* liberal readership might have expected. For Jünger, Hitler offered no answer in 1929 to the political crisis of the "democratic system" but was merely one of its many symptoms. Jünger argued that neither the communists nor the Nazis dared to truly break with the bourgeois past. Their antidemocratic organizations inside the democratic system were not signals for a new fascist or communist society but remained "constructive parts of the system" (Jünger 2001, 507). He demanded more violence, destruction, and enjoyment from the new nationalists than Hitler, the legalist, dared to offer: "In the current situation destruction is the only means that seems appropriate for nationalism. [. . .] Because we are the authentic, true, and relentless enemies of the bourgeois we enjoy his decomposition" (506–7). Jünger's emphatic validation of war, violence, and death inspired no doubt many of his young readers to join extremist national movements like the NSDAP. Since equally enthusiastic endorsements of pure destruction can be found in the writings of many nonfascist thinkers, including Walter Benjamin and his celebrated "The Destructive Character" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 541–42), the theorist of modernity and modernism upon whom Huyssen relies again and again, the validation of violence does not serve as a criterion to distinguish fascist modernism from other forms of modernism.

In a coda to his Jünger essay, Huyssen considers the possibility that the question of violence permeates modernist aesthetics and should therefore not be employed as the criterion to exclude Jünger's oeuvre from the modernist canon. But just as he argued in his chapter on Rilke, Huyssen tries to preempt such observation by stating that "everything depends not *if*, but rather *how* a text responds to the phenomena constituting the dark side of modernity" (143). Huyssen's attempt to preserve the treatment of violence as the distinguishing criterion between modernist writing and

(non-)modernist fascist writings relies here on the invocation of Kafka as the other exemplary high modernist. Of course Huyssen is right to say that Kafka's narratives present a more "compelling and complex treatment of horror" than those by Jünger (Huyssen 1995, 143). But the logic of such an argument would lead us back to Adorno's highly restrictive modernist canon. Compared to Kafka, who could be considered as a truly compelling modernist?²⁹

In German modernism one has to move away from opposing a figure like Jünger who is "comfortably installed in the Grand Hotel Horror at the abyss's edge" to a Kafka who writes "out of the abyss of modernity" (Huyssen 1995, 143). And one has to move away from an equally simplified opposition between the *Freikorps* man and Rilke's protagonist: "Where the Freikorps man forges his male identity out of a fear of the feminine and develops an image of the male body as armored terror machine, simultaneously longing and fearing to explode on the battlefield, Malte deals with the ambivalence between desire for fusion and the fear of it in a nonaggressive way" (Huyssen 1995, 124). Such comparisons produce an overly simplified understanding of the relation between modernism and violence. They obscure a widespread, intense, and positive fascination with the phenomenon of violence in modernist writings, a fascination with violence that is far from restricting itself to masochistic self-wounding. Violence against the other is not taboo in the writings of Musil, Kafka, Canetti, or Benjamin. Musil's first novel does not shy away from justifying violence against the other, Kafka's poetics of indecision does not claim the safe ground of nonaggression, and few novels are more destructive than Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé*. As tempting as it is to use Jünger's preoccupation with violence against others to deflect from other modernist explorations of violence, as Huyssen's readings were meant to indicate, such a move creates all too easily an inaccurate and pacified notion of German modernism. The "fascist male" and the figure of Jünger soothe all too conveniently our understanding of modernism that one would need to invent him (and Jünger is of course permanently reinvented) if his writings would not lend themselves so willingly to the purpose of constructing a nonaggressive notion of high modernism.

It is the central premise of *Violent Modernists* that we should not approach the writings of authors like Musil, Kafka, or Canetti as limited to descriptions of passive suffering. Like the writings of Brecht and Jünger (meaning the writings of a political-literary avant-garde and a fascist modernism), the writings of high modernists probed aggressively and actively

the phenomenon of violence. But there is a difference between Jünger's exploration of violence and the writings of Musil, Kafka, and Canetti. Quite often they might not have been less welcoming to violence, but these writers offer far more complex, compelling, and thought-provoking approaches to a rethinking of violence and aesthetics than a writer like Jünger. The following chapters will demonstrate that the central feature of these approaches to violence is not a nonaggressive exploration of the abyss of modernity.

If one would continue to distinguish modernist writers as nonaggressive explorers of the negative effects of violence, of suffering and of trauma, as has been done so consistently, then one would need to remove Musil, Kafka, and Canetti from the modernist canon. These writers belong among the violent modernists. But if one analyzes their representations of violence closely, a more important commonality in their understandings of violence emerges. Their reflections on violence question reductionist understandings of violence. In their accounts, acts of violence can never be fully traced back to a preventable set of causes. Consequently, the assumption that violence could be portrayed as a premodern or "foreign" concept is discredited in their modernist texts and their concepts of modernity. Just as importantly, these authors no longer conceive of physical violence as an instrument that can be employed to achieve predetermined ends and purposes. Violent situations and their effects on the individual self and on society are too complex to be grasped with reductionist models of violence. To approach violence from an antireductionist model of violence posed, however, fundamental challenges not only to the question of *how* to represent violence, but also forced these writers to reconceptualize their notions of subjectivity and history. The following chapters not only propose that phenomena of physical violence stand at the center of these particular modernist texts and German modernism in general but also that such a focus on violence leads to new understandings of modernist theories of the self, of narration, and of history.

The next two chapters on the works of Robert Musil trace the immense difficulties and challenges that such a modernist project has to face. In Musil's essays and novels, one encounters his ever more thorough questioning of an initial reliance on reductionist and instrumental understandings of violence. His ensuing antireductionist reflections on violence are deeply intertwined with his formulation of a new concept of the self, the malleable self. As the third chapter demonstrates, these reconsiderations of violence and of the self are of fundamental importance to understanding the innovative potential of Musil's interwoven theories of history and narrativity. German modernist writings are not

only obsessively preoccupied with acts of violence, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter. Analyzing the ways Musil, Kafka, and Canetti responded to violence as an integral part of modernity allows for a new assessment and awareness of the truly innovative achievements of German modernism.

CHAPTER 2

Causing Violence

Robert Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless* and the Path to an Antireductionist Theory of Violence

The question of violence stands at the core of Robert Musil's literary works, but his answers offer insights into the relationship between violence and the modernist imagination that have remained largely unexplored. The lack of interest in Musil's reflections on and representations of violence will not come as a surprise. Even though a case for the centrality of the phenomenon of violence in Musil's writings can easily be made, his responses to violence underwent dramatic shifts and, more important, his treatment of violence grows ever more disturbing and provocative the closer one looks. Much of the physical violence that fellow students unleash against Basini in *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906) is depicted as unproblematic and well-deserved punishment, and Musil's bellicose embrace of the First World War points to a deep attraction to violence. *The Man Without Qualities*, an account of Austrian society from August 1913 to August 1914, is widely regarded, however, as composed in such a way that it could never reach its telos, the war. Continuing to neglect the role of violence in Musil's oeuvre, often oscillating between embarrassing statements and strategies of avoidance, remains tempting but would be nothing less than overlooking one of modernism's most innovative investigations of violence in modernity.

Musil's groundbreaking approach to violence comes into focus if one does not shy away from those disconcerting moments in his works that have been previously discounted as immaterial for any deeper understanding of Musil's aesthetics and politics. With regard to physical violence, three instances in Musil's works cause deep embarrassment among his readers. To take these three moments as starting points for a new reading is not meant to diminish Musil's standing as one of the most significant European modernists but to chart the path that led him to a new, antireductionist approach to war and violence, and disclose one of Musil's great achievements.

As its youngest editor, Musil published "Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschland" in September 1914 in *Die Neue Rundschau*, the intellectual

flagship of the S. Fischer press. In this essay, Musil decried the existence of an international anti-German plot—"from all corners of the continent a conspiracy erupted in which our extermination [*Ausrottung*] had been decided"—that split the world into two blocs: "German and anti-German" (Musil 1978, 1021). All distinctions and differences among Germans melted away, leaving behind but one collective body "in which the individual is nothing again outside of its elementary effort to protect the tribe" (1022). Confronted with Musil's belligerent exuberance at the outset of the war, Karl Corino, his most substantial biographer, argues for separating the essay from the main body of his oeuvre. Corino discounts the essay as a "tribute to the *Zeitgeist*," and considers its content as a schizophrenic deviation from the *real* Musil (Corino 2003, 493). The lack of English translations for "Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum" supports the tacit consensus on this point. Musil's war enthusiasm seems irrelevant to the assessment of his literary achievements.¹

Quarantining Musil's war essay from his stories, novels, and essays is an unnecessarily protective gesture that only obscures the role of violence and war in Musil's works. No doubt the essay fits the zeitgeist of 1914 since most German and Austrian intellectuals glorified and justified the war all too readily. Thomas Mann would publish his equally belligerent reflections on war two months later in Musil's journal. Among his contemporaries, however, Musil stands out not for his initial war euphoria but for the time and effort he spent on the literary investigation of the path leading up to the war. Spanning the time between the summers of 1913 and 1914, *The Man Without Qualities* remains the most ambitious attempt of European literature to portray a society that became the "Herd des Weltkriegs," the "crucible of the World War" (MoE 1438; MwQ 1474). Rather than an aberration in his oeuvre, the war essay marks a decisive turning point in his literary career.

Musil's uncritical endorsement of the official German and Austrian war position, his fervently expressed belief that the Central Powers merely acted in self-defense, might darken Musil's image as the unfailingly ironic and cool observer of his age. His particular gullibility adds, however, just another detail to the well-known picture of the widespread war euphoria among German and Austrian intellectuals. Musil's contribution to the so-called Spirit of 1914 gains significance because he insisted in his essay on a correlation between the aggressive spirit of a modernist imagination and the war. He characterized the best prewar literature as "inspired by the same bellicose and conquering spirit which we feel today so joyously in and all around ourselves" (Musil 1978, 1021). "Europäertum, Krieg,

Deutschtum” extols the union between highly individualized literary experiments and the collective war enthusiasm.

Musil’s invocation of a conquering literary spirit was not an ad hoc adjustment to the war effort. Already in “The Obscene and Pathological in Art” (1911), his first essay on the task of literature, he claimed: “Where art has value it shows things that few have seen. It is conquering, not pacifying” (Musil 1978, 981). To understand the resemblance between Musil’s aggressive prewar aesthetics and his warmongering essay, I will read *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906) as an expression of this conquering spirit and as a novel on violence. Filled with beatings, torture, gang rapes, mob violence, a planned lynching, and other acts of human degradation, the book becomes a novel on violence less for its taboo-breaking depiction of homoerotic cruelty than for the investigation of conflicting theories justifying the uses of violence.

These acts of violence have been rarely considered relevant for an understanding of *The Confusions of Young Törless*. The novel’s rationalizations for Törless’s violent deeds, proposed by its narrator, have received almost as little attention as Musil’s war essay. The novel’s autobiographical character, its depiction of adolescence and emerging sexuality, its relation to Freud and psychoanalysis, its status as an early example of expressionism, its social criticism, its theory of education, and its aestheticism: all these topics have sparked far more interest among literary critics.² These readings offer little more than passing remarks on the novel’s dealings with violence.³ As Stanley Corngold argues, this lack of interest indicates Musil’s successful narrative strategy “to ward off moral criticism” (Corngold 1998, 103). More precisely, the novel wards off any moral critique of Törless and his narrator. Beineberg and Reiting, Törless’s companions and fellow torturers, as well as Basini, their victim, are judged so harshly for their respective brutality and submissiveness that a closer reading of the novel’s representation of violence seems irrelevant. As one influential reader put it, Beineberg and Reiting remain so far below the minimal standards of modernity that they are unfit for novelistic treatment. Caught up in endless repetitions of barbarism they are summarily dismissed as “nicht ‘romanfähig’” (Arntzen 1980, 99). Beineberg and Reiting are thought to produce nothing but barbaric violence, and a somewhat masochistic Basini is thought to complement his sadistic tormentors neatly. With the violence safely sequestered among the premoderns and the perverse, Törless emerges typically as the sole subject worthy of study as well as someone who should not be held responsible for Basini’s victimization.⁴

In addition to the war essay and the violence of his first novel, there

is a third embarrassing moment in which Musil linked violence and aesthetics so intimately that his readers prefer to look the other way. Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man Without Qualities*, insists on a close correlation between war and the other condition. In contrast to Karl Kraus and Ernst Jünger, Musil neither scathingly dismissed nor exuberantly glorified the August experience in his postwar writings. Instead, he acknowledged the war enthusiasm as a central event in need of investigation. Speaking in 1921 of the time of mobilization in August 1914 as the “so-called upbeat to a Great Age,” Musil hastened to add that “I do not at all mean this entirely ironically. On the contrary, what was stammered at the outset and later allowed to degenerate into a cliché—that the war was a strange, somehow religious experience—corresponds undoubtedly to a fact” (PS 102). Understanding the conditions of possibility for this quasi-religious experience of the general mobilization emerged after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire as Musil’s main challenge for any representation of a path to war. As Musil explained it in 1932, the task of *The Man Without Qualities* became the “description [*Schilderung*] of an age that had led to catastrophe” (MoE 1855). As a severe critic of nationalism and racism, Musil dedicated much of his postwar writing to the purpose of understanding how Austrian society could find such a shattering end, and how individuals not unlike him could have welcomed the beginning of this end with such relief and euphoria.

The succinct formulation of this challenge continues to scandalize even Musil’s most sympathetic readers: “War is the same as the other condition” (MoE 1932). Few eyebrows are raised when Jünger or Remarque categorize war as another condition. The statement would seem even a bit banal. To live in times of war means to live under other circumstances and conditions than during peace. Knowing the assertion refers to World War I, numerous similar statements and observations can be found, prominently among them Freud’s lucid *Reflections on War and Death* (1915). If one insists on a more literal reading—not times of war, as experienced by a civilian like Freud, but the military experience of war; not just another condition but *the* other condition—one would still stay on familiar territory. The consensus on the experiential impact of the First World War in literary studies continues to regard the war as the unprecedented, abysmal event, whose disparity from previous experiences and traditions can hardly be exaggerated. As we have already seen, Walter Benjamin even suggested it might no longer make sense to speak of the war as the *other* condition—since experience itself should be sought among the fallen of the war. The war generation that went to school in horse-drawn streetcars “now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the

same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin 1999, 732). War as the other condition shapes the modern condition in its own image.

Musil’s readers remain, however, shocked when Ulrich refers to the war as the other condition. In Musil’s writings, the other condition holds a central though elusive position. Readers expect the fleeting, almost redemptive moments of the other condition in the secluded garden and private chambers in which Ulrich and Agathe, his sister, explore intimacy, love, and possibly incest, but not in the public arena of modern warfare. Musil’s other condition, as Hartmut Böhme writes, is supposed to sublimate reason and its other, to achieve a union of rationality and the mystical: it should be nothing less than a sympathetic participation with *Being* itself (Böhme 1988, 324). The other condition should be the moment when time stops, space dissolves: the very opposite of and an alternative to war and violence. In a posthumously published chapter, Ulrich and Agathe start acting on their incestuous desire but halt at the last moment. They stop not out of compliance to social norms but because they feel the foretaste of a “more perfect, if still shadowy, union” (MwQ 1178; MoE 1083). Albrecht Schöne reads the siblings’ experience not as a passing moment but a decisive turning point, *die entscheidende Wendung*, for the novel’s concept and structure. To him this instance of the siblings’ other condition (or rather the foretaste thereof) implies no less, Schöne argues, than Musil’s renunciation of his often repeated plans to end the novel with Ulrich’s equation of the other condition with the war (Schöne 1961, 205). Their shared experience should render obsolete Musil’s long held intention to let the mobilization be for Ulrich an even more intense and lasting experience than the encounter with his sister.

In 1936 Musil evoked this moment in words clearly echoing his essay “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum.”

The will of the individual [*Einzelwille*] submerges, a new age of multipolar relation surfaces before the inner eye. Ulrich sees, what is a fascinating moment, one which never quite occurred between him and Agathe. Last resort sex and war: but sex lasts 1 night the war probably at least 1 month etc. (MoE 1903)

For readers comprehending the novel’s subjunctive mood as its utopian potential there is more at stake than a choice between the siblings’ intimate moment and a description of Ulrich’s mobilization experience. The other condition as a utopian alternative to the reification of social inter-

actions would disintegrate in Ulrich's war experience. If, however, the siblings' encounter is the decisive moment, as Schöne argues, the novel's subjunctive mood and its utopian promise would be preserved. The siblings' momentary hesitation would be "the decisive turning point, from where [the novel] does not have to lead anymore to *sex and war as last resort*" (Schöne 1961, 205; his emphasis).

Forty years later, in an equally brilliant but far more historically and politically interested reading, Stefan Jonsson finds himself nonetheless in the same blind spot, unable to dwell on the implication of Ulrich's equation. Stressing the social and political responsibility of a subject with a sense of possibility, Jonsson views Ulrich, like Schöne, as entrusted "with the magical gift of understanding reality in the mood of the conjunctivus potentialis" (Jonsson 2000, 144). Ulrich recognizes that no form of social reality and the self expresses an inherent necessity or follows a coherent and unifying narrative. Consequently, he has to shoulder the immense responsibility that accompanies such a gift: "The task of the hero is to reroute history and force human evolution in a new direction. Reality hence becomes a laboratory for experiments with a view to invent Utopia" (145). The charge of the novel and its hero is nothing less, Jonsson writes, than a "denunciation of existing reality and a prefiguration, in the realm of ideas, of a revolution leading to a new social order" (146). *The Man Without Qualities* turns into a past future, opening "the utopian possibility of a supranational and transcultural space" in which Ulrich, its model human subject, "cherished the absence of homogenizing ideologies of nation or culture and recognized the heterogeneity of all identities" (14). To accept the heterogeneity of identities, to perceive oneself and the world with a sense of possibility, and to let go of the (false) sense of security that comes with the belief in a necessary, coherent core of identity, proves, however, too difficult for most contemporaries. Their failure to live with the potential and uncertainty of a sense of possibility, with the self's limitless capacity to change, becomes in Jonsson's reading Musil's main lesson of the First World War: "most persons were unable to bear this insight" (255).

If, however, not only most people but Ulrich as well cannot bear this insight, namely, if he could fall for the nostalgia of clear distinctions and homogeneous identities, then the novel's utopian potential functions no longer as a utopian alternative to the historical catastrophe. Unlike Schöne, Jonsson does not speculate whether Musil renounced his plans for the novel's ending. When he comes across Ulrich's equation—"War is the same as the other condition"—Jonsson cannot bring himself to consider its implications for Musil's alleged project to reroute history:

“Indeed, it is difficult to think through these scandalous lines, in which mass violence somehow comes to equal love and collective solidarity” (Jonsson 2000, 261). How can one think through these lines? Ulrich’s identification of war and the *other condition* becomes even more provocative if quoted in full: “War is the same as the other Condition; but (viable) mixed with Evil” (MoE 1932). Considering Ulrich’s fascination with the murderer Moosbrugger and his exploits with Agathe, the acknowledgment that evil could be part of the other condition carries not that much additional insight. As the siblings’ incestuous desire already implied, the breaking of fundamental codes of behavior is part and parcel of the other condition. Ulrich provokes, however, with the claim that war makes the other condition viable, *lebensfähig*. The fictive Ulrich elevates the war to the status of a sustainable instance of the other condition at the very moment, late summer of 1914, when Robert Musil, his author, had published “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum.” At the end of *The Man Without Qualities*, Ulrich would have welcomed the coming war in a strikingly similar way to Musil’s actual response to the war.

Musil’s scandalized readers look for reprieve in the fact that he never completed his novel. The equation of war and the other condition can be found only among the drafts and outlines. And even diligent readers of this never-ending novel might feel justified in letting drafts be drafts.⁵ The popular move to ignore Musil’s war essay, as well as the centrality of violence in *The Confusions of Young Törless* and Ulrich’s reaction to the war, however, indicate a convenient incuriosity and, more important, such lack of inquisitiveness blurs one of the most fascinating aspects and challenges of Musil’s works from his first to his last novel: their thorough exploration of war and violence. In his last novel, Musil does not justify his or Ulrich’s August experience but analyzes a situation enabling such responses to the war. Exploring the analytical connection between the war and the novel leads into the center of Musil’s aesthetics where the relations between origins, causal thinking, and the narrativity of history are probed. It also leads to Musil’s unique postwar theory of violence.

Musil’s prewar aesthetics argued for modernist literature’s unique ability to aggressively explore pathological and perverse behavior for the sake of a healthier society. But in contrast to such an aesthetic and political program, *The Confusions of Young Törless* does not present a literary analysis of the perverse but rather a justification for its violent oppression. Rather than exploring supposedly pathological behavior, the novel reinforces homophobic stereotypes of the effeminate boy. To read Musil’s first novel as a novel on violence means to take a look at rather discomfiting aspects

of German modernism. The construction of the student Basini as a perverse subject worthy of destruction serves a specific purpose for Musil's aggressive aesthetics. Relegating Basini to the status of an irredeemable subject allows the novel to compare different legitimizations of violence without having to reject the use of violence as unethical. The novel creates a situation in which three clearly distinguishable strategies compete to justify the use of violence against a designated other. The student Beineberg develops a crude antecedent to Bataille's theory of sacrifice, Reiting probes the functionality of violent acts for his rational theory of power, and Törless employs violence to probe and examine the experience of modernity's ambiguity on the formation of subjectivity. Despite their differences in purpose, these three approaches to violence follow the basic outlines of instrumental reasoning. Acts of violence are justified as means to achieve particular ends. Even though Beineberg's and Törless's uses of violence fail, the novel's narrator avoids siding with Reiting's successful exercise of power. Instead, he offers a fourth justification for Basini's torture and rape: Törless's aesthetic education.

A closer analysis of Törless's experiment with violence and humiliation reveals an even more significant achievement than such a presentation of conflicting approaches to violence as well as Musil's apparent refusal to view violence as an atavistic phenomenon without relevance for the project of modernity. All four approaches to violence mentioned so far presuppose the instrumental character of acts of violence, the assumption that acts of violence are best understood as causes of intended effects, as means to particular ends. With Törless, however, the novel will move into uncharted territory in its exploration of violence. At a crucial moment, Törless is forced to consider the possibility that the cause-and-effect approach to violence might be insufficient to account for the complexity of violent phenomena. Törless's confrontation with unintended consequences of his use of violence offers more than an illustration of Arendt's critique of violence as a means always threatening to overwhelm its end (as discussed in the first chapter). Musil's novel subverts the validity of traditional understandings of violence as an instrument, and Törless faces the implications of a possibly noncausal relation between catastrophic events and the subject's sense of self. The sudden realization that the effects of his acts of violence against Basini defy instrumental logic provokes an experience of radical ambiguity. As a means to an end, violence was supposed to resolve Törless's experience of ambiguity. Instead, the acts of violence release an uncertainty that neither Törless nor his narrator can bear to contemplate. Rather than rethinking his concept of violence, Törless panics and takes refuge in the memory of a dangerous moment. Such

remembrance offers him the rush of an either-or decision during which all ambiguity disappears—not unlike Musil’s initial reaction to the First World War. Likewise, the narrator avoids analyzing Törless’s experience and justifies the use of violence as a means of Törless’s aesthetic education, thus shutting down the novel’s debate on violence.

The importance of this momentary uncertainty regarding the instrumental character of violence in *The Confusions of Young Törless* will become fully apparent in the third chapter and its analysis of Musil’s views on war and violence after Germany’s and Austria’s defeat in the First World War. As I argue, Musil returns in his postwar writings to the challenge of this very moment during which acts of violence turn incomprehensible and invisible to instrumental logic. In his postwar essays and especially in *The Man Without Qualities*, Musil develops a critique of reductionist theories of war and violence. His approach to violence as a complex situation that does not fit into a linear order of cause and effect will prove to be of central importance not only for his theory of violence but also for his concepts of narrative, subjectivity, and history.

Robert Musil and the Conquering Spirit in War and Aesthetics

Because of its explicit political content “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum” remains an exception among Musil’s early essays. His prewar notions of politics were vague, far more atmospheric than analytical. In “Political Confessions of a Young Man” (1913), Musil reflects on his budding sympathies for liberal and socialist parties but avoids a closer look at their programmatic declarations. His political reasoning oscillates inconclusively between desiring political change and fearing that the slightest political modifications might result in unforeseeable disaster. “But still it is quiet, and we sit as if in a glass cage and are afraid even to try to break out, because if we did the whole thing could immediately shatter to pieces” (PS 36). Except for the intense frustration with the inability to foresee any political change in the near future, little in Musil’s early political reflections prepares one for the brute celebration of destruction in “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum.” All uncertainty and ambiguity vanishes with the war. Not only glass cages shall be shattered but everything non-German. The clarity of the situation justifies every sacrifice and every death. The mobilization and anticipation of war issued forth the experience of “a primal power, of which even love itself is but a

tiny splinter” (Musil 1978, 1022). Musil celebrates the split of the world into two camps as a sudden release from the process of individuation.

While “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum” stands as a political text apart from Musil’s pre- and postwar essays, a more persistent picture emerges once one moves the focus from his political pronouncements to his claims for a relationship between aesthetics and violence. From this perspective, the essay loses its exceptional quality and becomes part of Musil’s continuous and emphatic validation of destruction in aesthetics. Alongside his glorification of war, Musil points to characteristics that war and literature share. Both partake in the aggressive pursuit of a stronger and healthier race: “Literature is at its core the battle for a higher human species” (1021). The eugenic slant of Musil’s phrasing is not a mere slip but programmatic. Even though modernist literature might represent marginal and abnormal behavior, such attention to the pathological, Musil contends, serves the objective of a “healthier” human race and society.

Our literature was a literature of the obverse, a literature of the exception to the rule, and often already of the exception to the exception. In its strongest representatives. And therefore it was inspired by the same bellicose and conquering spirit which we feel today so joyously in and all around ourselves. (Musil 1978, 1021)

In the summer of 1914 Musil perceived Germany as being under the threat of extermination by a hostile outside; in 1911 he analyzed the perverse as an inner threat to the social order. In both cases, Musil defended the use of violence as remedies, cloaking the aggressive spirit of his aesthetics as a response to existential risks for the individual and for society.

Musil aims this aggression beyond the realm of aesthetics and advocates the identification and elimination of the supposedly pathological in the name of a healthier society. In “The Obscene and Pathological in Art” (1911), he championed the literary representation of the supposedly sick and perverse as an intelligence operation expanding society’s knowledge of the human soul. “Art too seeks knowledge; it represents the obscene and pathological by means of their relation to the decent and healthy, which is to say: art expands its knowledge of the decent and the healthy” (Musil 1990, 6). In contrast to scientific investigations that search for general laws, rules, and causalities, Musil envisioned literature as better qualified to examine the intricate pathologies of individual cases. Only literature could dwell on the level of the individual and dissect supposedly perverse and abnormal behavior in all its complexity. Because of its attention to detail and irregularities, he considered literature better

equipped for such research than science. Musil's choice of words reveals the aggressive spirit of his proposed method. Artistic reflection penetrates its perverse object, and in "this way pathways are created and connections exploded, and consciousness drills new accesses for itself" (Musil 1990, 6). Looking at the remaining shards of the exploded pathological material, the writer looks for similarities to what he considers normal. In Musil's essay the pathological and the normal consist of related but not identical elements. The relation enables the literary reconstruction of the perverse. "Any perversity can be depicted; it can be depicted through its construction out of the normal elements, since otherwise the depiction would not be understood" (8).⁶ After the disarticulation of the pathological, the artist constructs an image of it from elements of the normal and acceptable. "What in reality remains fused together like a molten drop is here dissolved, untangled, interwoven—made divine, made human" (7). The artistic procedure destroys the perverse character of the pathological and transposes it onto a net of relations, associations, and comparisons with the normal. The pathological object and its representation have to be clearly distinguished. Purified and made human, the represented pathological is cleansed of any perverse qualities: "what is depicted—not the depiction itself but what is represented as obscene and pathological—is no longer either obscene or pathological" (Musil 1990, 5). Neither the representation of the perverse nor the represented perverse remain perverse. Because of its aesthetic reconstruction, the pathological becomes comprehensible to normal consciousness.

Musil's distinction between the pathological and its representation lies at the heart of modernist aesthetics. Analyzing Benjamin and Trakl, Rainer Nägele contends that the "radical separation of aesthetics and the pathological as well as identification of any trace of the empirical subject with the pathological are held up by their own pathos that constitutes the core of the aesthetics of modernity" (1998, 79). If one renames the perverse and pathological as the barbaric, then one encounters Musil's claim again in Adorno's analysis of Richard Wagner: "The barbaric ceases to be barbaric once it is reflected in great art; it becomes distanced and is even made the object of criticism" (Adorno 2003, 326). The artistic process transforms the perverse into an acceptable replica; its aesthetic reconstruction becomes in Musil's argument a useful instrument for society's fight against the actual pathological.

Writing to oppose state censorship and to defend literature's right to represent the pathological, Musil espouses aesthetics as a realm in which moral or legal claims have no place.⁷ Embedded in his claims of literature's unique ability to expand the knowledge of human behavior is an im-

mensely aggressive approach to the so-called pathological in modern society. The writer and state share the goal of isolating and eliminating the perceived perverse. The aesthetic process examines and obliterates its object of interest in the course of vivisection, or, in Musil's medical language, the artistic treatment sterilizes its contaminated object. Regarding the perverse, Musil speaks of the "desensualization of the depiction" (Musil 1990, 8). The artistic treatment prevents an infection of aesthetics with the perverse and promises society a vaccination against the pathological.

An aggressive spirit no doubt pervades Musil's early fiction and essays as well as his welcoming of the war. But its target is far more difficult to determine in his first novel than his essays suggest. *The Confusions of Young Törless* should be a prime example of Musil's aesthetic reconstruction of perverse acts and behaviors. Commenting on the novel shortly after its publication, Musil assured a potential reviewer in 1906 that he could represent "any abnormality"—not just those depicted in his first novel—without becoming affected by the aberrant desires of his protagonists (Musil 1981b, 24). Transgressive acts from thievery to rape and humiliation to torture abound in this novel, and they intensify and deepen the confusions of young Törless. The shocking discovery of Basini's thievery provokes Törless to doubt the very stability of society's normative order. Basini now embodied this challenge to order for Törless, and "all the strangeness was transferred to that one human being" (YT 67; VZ 61). Törless experiences Basini as a molten drop of the perverse (YT 102; VZ 91). But Musil's novel does not dissolve and untangle the supposedly perverse. As the reading of *The Confusions of Young Törless* will demonstrate, the novel justifies the attack against the perverse other. Its narrator supports the scapegoating of Basini because it enables a higher good, Törless's aesthetic education. Musil's war enthusiasm and the sacrificial logic of his first novel share a rhetoric of innocence that shields perpetrators and aggressors alike from responsibility for their acts of violence. While the war essay obscures its destructive agency in the name of a primal defense of the tribe, the novel argues, as we will see, for the destruction of the perverse for the sake of another individual's aesthetic maturity.

The Confusions of Young Törless: A Novel on Violence

The Confusions of Young Törless presents itself not as a novel on violence but as a late example of the bildungsroman. Through the novel's *Lehrjahre*, Törless becomes a respected member of Habsburg society, "a

young man with a very fine and sensitive mind” as the narrator points out (YT 126; VZ 111). The maturing Törless accomplishes a synthesis of self-determination and socialization, the genre’s telos (Moretti 2000, 15). All grown-up and adapted to the realities of his society, Törless fits Hegel’s sarcastic portrayal of a bildungsroman’s hero.

For the end of such apprenticeship [*Lehrjahre*] consists in this, that the subject sows his wild oats, builds himself with his wishes and opinions into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world, and acquires for himself an appropriate attitude to it. (Hegel 1975, 593; Hegel 1986, 220)

The adult Törless embodies the imaginary solution of the bildungsroman by reconciling the two realities in which modernity forces the subject to live simultaneously: the outside world, in which the subject has to objectify itself to find its place in the social order, and the inner world, seemingly free, in which the subject might play out its individuality.⁸

When his parents left Törless at the institute at the novel’s beginning, the outside world appeared to him as a dreary, monotonous, and uninhabitable place (YT 3; VZ 7). Only Božena, the prostitute, offered him a disreputable refuge for secret enjoyment (YT 30; VZ 29). At the novel’s end, the mother takes an almost grown-up Törless home. Božena’s house looks now “so insignificant and harmless,” while the world of his parents, the world of order and daylight, attracts Törless’s attention (YT 160; VZ 140). Rather than replacing one world with the other, the maturing Törless merges aspects of both worlds into one. He developed an aesthetic sense that no longer required the strict separation of desire from social order. Leaving Božena’s world behind, he detects the possibility of pleasure in regions that previously were either taboo or seemingly devoid of it. In its last sentence, the novel encourages the reader to recognize Törless’s sensibility as sufficiently sophisticated to experience aesthetic gratification anywhere in the world, even in the scent rising from his mother’s waist: “And he breathed in [*prüfte*] the faintly perfumed fragrance rising from his mother’s waist” (YT 160; VZ 140).⁹ He epitomizes the bildungsroman’s utopian objective for which “there is no conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification. One’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple part of a whole” (Moretti 2000, 16). Törless seems to achieve what Ulrich will denounce as the subject’s impossible task in modernity: to move and to perceive oneself as a whole in the world (MoE 744; MwQ 808).

The novel's narrator insists on the success of Törless's education and declares a "stage of development had reached its conclusion, the soul had begun a new ring like a young tree, and that silent, overwhelming feeling excused everything that had happened" (YT 150; VZ 131). And the adult Törless concurs wholeheartedly and assures the reader he "never felt any remorse for what had happened in those days" (YT 127; VZ 112). The demonstrative emphasis on Törless's exemplary aesthetic education justifying all the novel's events begs the question why one might require such reassurances. Several answers suggest themselves. A reader might be expected to object to the fact that every step of Törless's rational, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic learning process is marked by the infliction, observation, or experience of violence. One could recoil from the references to acts of homosexual violence, particularly the serial raping of the prepubescent Basini by Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless. Put this way one might be surprised that these scenes of humiliation, torture, and rape are generally accepted by readers as disreputable but beneficial steps toward Törless's education. By inducing a continued suspension of judgment, the narrative invites its reader to adhere to Ulrich's moral theory of the next step. In *The Man Without Qualities*, Ulrich explains: "It's never what one does that counts, but only what one does next!" (MwQ 798; MoE 735). When Agathe challenges him as to whether this theory could justify even murder, Ulrich is tempted to argue the murderer might write a poem that would "enrich the inner life of thousands of people" (MwQ 799). But he quickly corrects himself: "Only a lunatic could imagine it. Or an eighteen-year-old aesthete. God knows why, but those are ideas that contradict the laws of nature" (MwQ 799; MoE 735). In *The Confusions of Young Törless*, the narrator—neither a lunatic nor an eighteen-year-old aesthete, one hopes—still insists that Törless's successful aesthetic education absolves the protagonist of responsibility for its violent means. Even a rigorous reader like Jean Améry accepted Basini's abuse as less significant than Törless's learning process.¹⁰

Avoiding Analysis: Constructions of the Perverse in *The Confusions of Young Törless*

The novel's defenses against likely moral objections could allow for a detailed analysis of the perverse. Indeed, Törless tried to perform such a careful examination of human nature, choosing Basini as his specimen. Sitting in class behind Basini during free time, Törless started writing a philosophical treatise entitled *De naturam hominum*. Despite its all-encompassing title, Törless approached the topic from a strictly personal

angle. Recent experiences as varied as his introduction to concepts of imaginary and irrational numbers, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, his visits to Božena, and especially the Basini case have left Törless in a state of confusion. While his classmates find nothing extraordinary in occasional visits to prostitutes or the appearance of the imaginary in the rational world of mathematics, Törless observed without comprehension a strange and incongruous feeling about all these matters. Or, as the narrator fine-tunes Törless's phrasing: "it was not a feeling at all, more of an earthquake deep within the core of him, which caused no perceptible waves and which nonetheless made the whole of his soul tremble with such restrained power that the waves of even the stormiest feelings, seemed in comparison harmless ripples on the surface" (YT 101; VZ 90). The experience of such inner quakes and trembles convinced Törless of his own exceptionality. During their occurrence he senses a different reality lurking beneath the everyday world.

To his frustration, this "feverish physical feeling" indicates only the possibility of another reality but offers no entry into it (YT 99; VZ 88). During these quaking moments his superior perceptiveness "makes its presence felt, but doesn't work" (YT 100; VZ 89). He feels like someone "who is supposed to be able to lip-read a paralyzed man's words from the distortions of his mouth, and is unable to do it" (YT 100; VZ 89). Notwithstanding such disappointments, the experience is so intense that Törless views himself as a chosen one (*Auserwählter*), someone akin to "a saint who has heavenly visions," even though his undeveloped aesthetic sensibility is incapable of making much sense of these visions (YT 103; VZ 92). To develop his aptitude more fully, Törless sets out to investigate human nature by analyzing the boy sitting in front of him, the boy who becomes Törless's prime example for the perverse other.

Törless conceives of Basini as a concrete link to the other world. Confounded by Basini's normal appearance, he thinks about what a thief and victim of rape and humiliation like Basini should look like. Imagining an outer appearance that would be appropriate for the disgraced student, Törless senses a whirling, spinning motion "momentarily bending Basini's image into the most incredible contortions, then tearing it apart into the most unimaginably dislocated postures, so that he himself grew dizzy" (YT 101; VZ 90). This description of his vision is, however, only a retrospective construction of what he might have seen. Törless fails to perceive what he sees; he has only a "vision of a vision" of Basini's contorted body (YT 101–2; VZ 91). The mere presence of Basini is too powerful and causes Törless's inner core to quake and tremble. Basini is Törless's molten drop of the perverse that he hopes to penetrate and untangle. His

presence promises Törless access to another reality and a deeper understanding of human nature. He experiences Basini as a “hot, darkly glowing mass” emitting an undifferentiated vibration around him (YT 102; VZ 91). To keep his mind sharp and protected while he attempts to get in contact with the perverse other, Törless keeps a copy of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* at hand. He plans to observe Basini “with his eyes fixed on [Basini], boring through him” (YT 107; VZ 95). After such an ocular penetration of his research subject, Törless would read a page by Kant and then train his eyes again on the student, “immersing himself further in Basini after each page” of Kant’s *Critique* (YT 107; VZ 95). Not surprisingly, Törless’s literal attempt to execute Musil’s aesthetic program of penetrating the perverse fails miserably. And the annoyed Törless startles and scares the unsuspecting Basini by throwing Kant’s *Critique* on the ground. One should note, however, that Törless’s wrongheaded attempt to examine Basini and his supposedly perverse character is a rare exception in the novel that makes hardly any effort to understand Basini.

Instead of boldly exploring Basini, as Musil’s aesthetic prewar program suggested, the novel enacts the fear of any close contact with this figure of the perverse. Throughout *The Confusions of Young Törless* and from all of its narrative perspectives, Basini is denigrated and disparaged. This occurs with such consistency that the narrator’s occasional use of the epithet *Mensch* for Basini becomes very nearly a much needed reminder for the reader. Reiting likens Basini to a defenseless little animal (VZ 44; YT 47), to a caught criminal who had already “the face of a hanged man” (VZ 45; YT 48), a slave (VZ 45; YT 48), and a mere object (VZ 101; YT 114). For Beineberg, Basini is nothing but a swine, a dog, a worm, and a stone (VZ 56, 101, 102; YT 61, 114). Törless considers him as an unclean insect (VZ 51; YT 55), and either he or the narrator recognizes Basini’s body as belonging to a leper (VZ 124; YT 142). The narrator calls Basini a trained lackey, a stupid and vain liar, and a murderess (VZ 98, 51; YT 110, 55). Describing and denouncing Basini as inhuman and perverse, the narrator keeps the reader and himself at a far distance from the student. While Törless fears occasionally that he bears a resemblance to Basini, the narrator disputes the existence of any such similarities from beginning to end of the novel. The withering characterizations of Basini and the narrator’s need to rush to Törless’s defense are triggered by the threat that Basini could indeed become comprehensible through comparisons with Törless, his supposedly normal counterpart.

Rather than offering an analysis, the novel transforms Basini into an allegorical sign of vice, a figure of capture.¹¹ Basini’s supposed pathology is not dissolved and interwoven with the normal, not “made divine, made hu-

man” but condensed into a “molten drop,” too hot and too perverse to be redeemable (Musil 1990, 7). The narrative transforms him from a mediocre, nondescript student—Reiting never even notices him before his theft among the other students (YT 45–46; VZ 43)—into an effeminate, morally inferior, passive homosexual. Joining Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless in constructing Basini as an abject other, the narrator judges Basini’s features as “feminine” and comments on his “coquettish charm” (YT 54; VZ 50). Gazing at Basini’s naked body, Törless notes he is “almost entirely lacking in masculine forms”; Basini looks like a “young girl” (YT 110–11; VZ 98). No matter how often these male gazes sexualize his body, Basini has not yet developed sexual interest. As the narrator says in his typical tone of voice: “Given [Basini’s] retarded development, any real desire would still have been entirely alien to him” (YT 54; VZ 51). Such lack of desire distinguishes Basini from his classmates. Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless visit Božena regularly, and there is no reason to assume that they lack sexual desire. Starting from the novel’s first day, the reader learns that Törless, the youngest of the three, is haunted by sexual desire and sudden erections (YT 15, 20, 23–25, 78; VZ 17, 21, 24–25, 70). As Božena notes, Basini lacks virility when he visits her, and she ridicules him for merely playing the part of a man (YT 36, 54; VZ 35, 50–51). The narrator agrees with her conclusion and suggests to the reader that Basini’s efforts to appear masculine result from nothing but a “compulsion” to do what Basini assumes obligatory and appropriate for acting like a man (YT 5455; VZ 51). Always perceived by the judging other, Basini is forced into the effeminate stereotype.

Identified as an effeminate boy, Basini is perceived as a grave risk to any community, and the novel encourages its readers to accept even the most severe punishment as a justified response to his deviancy.¹² After his tormentors inform Basini that he lost his right to exist, the narrator pushes his Basini characterization quickly beyond misogynist stereotypes (weak, soft, inert, dumb, vain, “weibisch,” etc.) and equates Basini with the most cowardly and dangerous female he can imagine, the *Giftmischerin*. Impersonating an imaginary public prosecutor, the distinctly male narrator issues a harshly worded death sentence as the only sentence that fits the crimes of a female poisoner and of being Basini (YT 55; VZ 51). Rapidly transformed from a morally and intellectually slow boy into a latent submissive homosexual and from a mere thief into a poisoner, Basini becomes so overdetermined as a threat to society that the narrator has no need to spell out whether Basini should be sentenced for his passivity or his base activism as Törless’s alleged seducer.

The novel moves clearly and with great determination in the opposite direction of Musil’s programmatic declarations regarding literature’s

task of investigating and representing the obscene and the pathological. Pressed into the mold of the effeminate boy, Basini serves as the story's "haunting abject" (Sedgwick 1993, 157). Neither the narrator nor his classmates pay any compassionate attention to him, and the reader is invited to match their indifference.¹³ Marginalizing and stigmatizing Basini, the narrative offers the effeminate boy as scapegoat for widely differing experimental uses of violence. After constructing Basini as abject other, neither the narrator nor the narrative takes much further notice of his experience of violence and humiliation. The focus stays with the perpetrators and their competing social and epistemological expectations for their various experiments with violence. The supposedly daring exploration of abnormal behavior emerges as a justification of violence.

The novel's disparaging portrayal of Basini prompts the question whether *The Confusions of Young Törless* should indeed be read as a novel on violence. If homophobic sentiments cause the violence against Basini, then a focus on violence would be misplaced. The acts of violence could be simply noted, denounced, and regretted. But despite the novel's construction of Basini as an effeminate boy, Musil's novel is not a straightforward articulation of its homophobic zeitgeist. The violence against Basini is not motivated by homophobia. The novel employs its homophobic context to shield its disturbing enactment of conflicting theories of violence from ethical objections. As disturbing as this might sound, by constructing Basini as an effeminate boy the novel creates for its audience an ethically secure situation to explore and perceive freely conflicting theories of violence. By employing stereotypes of the effeminate boy, the novel circumvents ethical judgments on its enactments of violence.

Compared to its political and cultural context, one could even argue that the novel's representation of sexuality displays signs of relatively progressive interventions in contemporary German debates on homosexuality. The complexity of the novel's representation of homosexual experiences is rather daring for its time and contrasts sharply with its one-dimensional denunciation of the effeminate boy. The social climate toward the end of the nineteenth century was marked in Europe by homophobia *and* scientific curiosity about same-gender sexuality. Declaring 1870 as the birth year of homosexuality, Michel Foucault traced the classification of individuals as different species, homosexuals, to the taxonomic case studies of the psychiatric and judicial discourses of the late nineteenth century. Previously, homosexual acts had been condemned as irregular activities, but they did not determine necessarily the social and sexual identity of its practitioners. In the wake of rising scientific inter-

est, however, the homosexual act was recognized as the expression of “a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (Foucault 1978, 43). While the “sodomite” had been treated as a “temporary aberration,” the “homosexual” began to be considered a different “species” (43). This process of scientific classification went hand in hand with legal persecutions and public humiliations. The trials of Oscar Wilde caused an international scandal in 1895, and in 1902—while Musil worked on his novel—the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* stunned the public with its article “Krupp auf Capri,” denouncing one of Germany’s richest industrialists as a homosexual. Six years later, Maximilian Harden cast suspicion on advisors of the emperor Wilhelm II, the so-called *Liebenberger Tafelrunde*. Unable to attack the constitutionally protected emperor, he sought to expose Prince Philipp zu Eulenberg and Count Kuno von Moltke as threats to national security. Exploiting the era’s homophobic sentiment to undermine the current political order, Bismarck used Harden and his journal *Die Zukunft* to take revenge on the emperor who had forced him into retirement. In a society built on homosocial relationships, the homosexual taboo lingered as permanent threat in its shadows.¹⁴

Even though homosexual relations were nothing unprecedented at Törless’s boarding school, the topic remained taboo. When Beineberg tells Törless about Reiting’s sexual relations with Basini, he refers obliquely to comparable events that had already entered the school’s secret oral history. Simply reminding Törless of “that business” sufficed to let Törless understand what he was talking about (YT 59; VZ 54). Although unnamable and taboo, homosexual acts do not taint the social standing of every student in the same way. By raping Basini, Reiting discloses vulnerabilities in his struggle for a leadership position among the students. But he is at no risk of being ostracized from the community of students. Glad to know a compromising fact about his competitor for a leadership position, Beineberg has no intention of blackmailing him: “[Reiting is] too valuable to be allowed to come unstuck over something so stupid” (YT 62; VZ 57). Reiting’s sexual violence remains no more than a temporary aberration to his friends and rivals. Having intercourse with Basini might tarnish his reputation for a while, but it does not transform Reiting into a different species.

This distinction in the representations of Basini and Reiting (and soon after of Beineberg and Törless as well) bears more than a passing similarity to Benedict Friedländer’s separatist model of homosexuality. Friedländer, cofounder of the *Community of the Special* (1902), argued against the transitive view of homosexuality that theorists like Magnus Hirschfeld

and Otto Weininger proposed.¹⁵ Hirschfeld considered the homosexual, the *Urning*, as a third sex, exhibiting the physical characteristics of both genders.¹⁶ Correspondingly, Weininger imagined homosexuals as having both male and female characteristics. During the sexual act, a homosexual couple would complete itself as one man and one woman (Weininger 1980, 34). In Friedländer's separatist model, the homosexual man is the most virile of men. He exemplified to Friedländer "the highest, most perfect evolutionary stage of gender differentiation" (Mager 1985, 35–36). He distinguished strictly between the effeminate homosexual and the supervirile man. The latter was revered, as Steakely writes, "as the founder of the patriarchal society and ranked above the heterosexual in terms of his capacity for leadership and heroism" (Steakley 1975, 54). The effeminate man, however, was placed at the bottom of Friedländer's hierarchy of manliness.

No doubt Friedländer would be horrified to recognize his supervirile man in homosexual rapists like Reiting and Beineberg, but in Musil's novel they appear as violent prototypes of a superior masculinity. Refusing to admit their sexual attraction to other males, they enact the masculine hierarchy with physical and sexual violence. To prove his virility beyond reproach, Reiting beats Basini after each sexual encounter (YT 114; VZ 101). Beineberg and Reiting are portrayed as "wild and unruly," and Törless is attracted to their brutal virility, judging their behavior as "healthy, sturdy, life-embracing" (YT 9; VZ 12). Together the three students form a triumvirate with Törless playing the part of the "secret chief of staff" (YT 44; VZ 41). While the self-identification as virile leaders remains their ideal, they violently enact and deny their sexual attraction to the effeminate boy. As the least virile of the three aggressors, the narrator shields Törless repeatedly against the suspicion that he might be attracted to Basini. Insisting that Törless's desire for Basini was temporary and insubstantial, he dismisses it as "something like passion" and assures his audience that "love was certainly only an arbitrary, approximate name for it, and Basini the human being was no more than a substitute, a provisional object for that desire" (YT 123; VZ 109). As disconcerting as the novel's representation of homosexual acts and desires remains, especially its depiction of the effeminate boy, these varied representations of sexuality set the stage for the violence, but the novel very rarely employs them as causes for the represented violence.

The Confusions of Young Törless neither analyzes Basini as an embodiment of the perverse nor investigates the feelings of attraction and repulsion that Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless experience toward him. Instead, the reader encounters the consensus shared by his tormentors

and the novel's narrator that Basini has lost his right to exist. As Reiting argues, they can "drop the idea that anything connects us with Basini apart from the pleasure we get from the fact that he is vile" (YT 51; VZ 48). Once Basini is forced into the role of their slave, the students' violent imaginations know no ethical boundaries. Rather than exploring the wide spectrum of human sexuality, the novel's interest lies with the students' seemingly limitless ability to imagine acts of violence and their conflicting models for violent action. Beineberg fantasizes about exotic execution methods, suggesting they might "drive a pointed bamboo through his guts; at least that would be fun" (YT 52; VZ 48), and Törless indicates repeatedly that he has no interest in ending the violence (YT 43, 52; VZ 49, 41). The question of whether or not to use violence against Basini initiates no discussion among Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless. Nonetheless, the novel distinguishes sharply between the conflicting purposes that each of these three students pursues with their acts of violence. By transforming Basini into a mere sign of the perverse that deserves to suffer every imaginable form of violence, the novel creates an imaginary space necessary to explore and analyze the conflicting rationales that these perpetrators offer for Basini's destruction. Suffused with the imagery of sacrifice, alluding alternately to the myth of Dionysus and the crucifixion of Christ, the novel stages a debate among competing theories of sacrifice as justifications for violence. Each of Basini's abusers offers a different model to explain why Basini should be sacrificed to violent action.

Beineberg offers an antecedent to Bataille's theory of sacrifice for his rationale to torture and possibly kill Basini. Leaving behind the politics of retribution to uphold the social order, he seeks Basini's punishment as a means to access cosmic truth. Beineberg considers the law just as insignificant as Basini who is nothing but "an empty, accidental form" (YT 65; VZ 59). Compared to the intangible law, Basini holds one advantage: "Basini is, in the end, a human being as well." His residual humanity offers Beineberg the opportunity to feel injury; he calls it a "particular feeling," when he mistreats Basini. By sacrificing him, Beineberg would expose himself to empathic pain—"But that's exactly what this is all about! A sacrifice!" (YT 64; VZ 59). The experience of empathic pain during the sacrificial spectacle would afford him, Beineberg expects, with a sense of continuity that points beyond the finitude of his human existence. As in Bataille's account, Beineberg believes that the sacrificial spectacle confronts perpetrators and spectators alike with their own mortality but promises a transcendental experience of infinite existence as well.

The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the sacramental element. This sacramental element is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity: what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. (Bataille 1986, 82)

Beineberg expects to forge such a bond between himself and the universe, to become a cosmic being (*kosmischer Mensch*) by performing the sacrificial killing of Basini. Basini's death would access the truth of existence; it would offer Beineberg a thread "which runs to my soul, to innermost knowledge, and binds me to the cosmos" (YT 65; VZ 59). As the novel progresses, Beineberg's mystic quest for a cosmic union reveals itself as a farce. To his and Törless's disappointment, the attempt to separate Basini's soul from his body to gain a "moment of immortality" fails miserably. Afterward Reiting gets a good laugh, and Beineberg whips Basini with his leather belt until exhaustion stops him (YT 138; VZ 121).

Reiting's rationale for sacrificing Basini has nothing to do with ritual, spectacle, or aspirations for cosmic truth and metaphysical certainty. He takes a phenomenologist's approach to power, keeps detailed records about "the cause, staging and development of the many intrigues that he instigated among his classmates," and trains for a future in politics with a special emphasis on the art of coups d'état (YT 42; VZ 40). In hindsight Reiting's political acumen proves superior to Törless's and possibly even to the narrator's grasp of politics. To them, the "age of revolutions" at the end of the nineteenth century is consigned to a distant past while Reiting prepares for a new dawn of violent upheaval (YT 43; VZ 40).

Basini's situation presents Reiting with the opportunity to move his experiments with political manipulation far beyond intrigue and toward the use of violence as an instrument of power. As Beineberg observes early on in the story,

Reiting would sacrifice Basini and feel nothing but interest in the process. He would dissect him morally to discover what such undertaking would involve. And, as I have said, he would deal with you or me just as roundly as he would with Basini. (YT 64; VZ 59)

Reiting's approach to power and violence is sober, amoral, and analytic. With his mastery of the intrigue, Reiting isolated his rival Beineberg for a

leadership position even before he discovered Basini's theft. And he realized immediately the new possibilities for his research that Basini's transgression opens up to him. Systematically, he probes the different instrumental opportunities of physical violence on Basini.

In *Vertrauen und Gewalt* (2008) Jan Philipp Reemtsma distinguishes three forms of physical violence and introduces a new terminology: placing (*lozierend*) violence, raptive violence, and autotelic violence (2008, 104–24). To differentiate these forms of violence, he pays particular attention to their stance toward the other's body. *Placing* violence seeks spatial control over the other's body. The body is not a target of destruction but treated as a removable obstacle or as an instrument to reach a defined goal. The modern justice system practices placing violence by imprisoning criminals rather than inflicting mutilation and other traditional forms of physical punishment; the temporary removal of enemy combatants during a military conflict and their release after the end of hostilities offers another example of this form of violence. The point of placing violence is not to kill all enemy soldiers but to prevent them from interfering with one's objectives.

While placing violence has no interest in the body as such, *raptive* violence seeks possession of the other's body, generally for the purpose of sexual gratification. The other's body is neither obstacle nor instrument, but immediate target for exploitation. The other's physical destruction might occur during acts of placing and raptive violence, but such destruction is not their purpose. *Autotelic* violence aims at the destruction of the physical integrity of the body. Autotelic violence seeks no discernible purpose beyond the body's utter devastation. Occurrences of autotelic violence are generally dismissed as barbaric aberrations during the process of civilization (Norbert Elias). Even though modern society offers no place to legitimize such violence, Reemtsma insists that theories of modernity should never dismiss this phenomenon as insignificant.

Reiting understands Basini as his chance to investigate these three forms of physical violence. An aspiring tyrant who exerts his influence by creating constantly new majorities by switching alliances, Reiting is most interested in the instrumental use of placing violence (YT 43; VZ 40). For not reporting him as a thief, Reiting receives Basini's "blind obedience" and gets complete spatial control over his movements. He explores the limits of forced loyalty to the point of Basini's slavery (YT 45; VZ 43). Reiting is also the first to experiment with raptive violence. The moment he realizes, however, that the continued sexual abuse gives rise to Basini's fantasy that his abuser might become his friend and protector, Reiting ends his experiments with raptive violence. Its long-term

use diminishes the efficiency of placing violence (YT 59, 142; VZ 54, 114, 125). As mentioned previously, Beineberg fantasizes immediately about using autotelic violence against Basini (driving sharp bamboo through his guts). Reiting contemplates this terminal form of violence only during the final stages of the Basini case. At that point, the lessons in blind obedience have reached a dead end. Basini already eats his own excrement, and his body is covered with sores from the beatings to which he submits willingly (YT 142–43; VZ 124–25). Reiting creates a situation that ends almost with Basini’s lynching by a crowd of students, and the next night Basini shall be tied to his bed and whipped with the blades of foils by all of his classmates, a mutilation he was not expected to survive (YT 130, 148–49; VZ 114, 130). Although such communal beating could constitute an act of autotelic violence, one might argue that Reiting probes the possibility of whether he can incite his classmates to use autotelic violence. Reiting’s own interest would not be in the destruction of the victim’s body but remain within his instrumental theory of violence. In contrast to Beineberg, Reiting never loses control during his experiments with violence and power. Even when Basini gives himself up to the school authorities and thus prevents his execution, Reiting delivers one last example of his masterful ability to manipulate others. With the blame steered toward Basini, the administration expels the victim from the boarding school while the abusers survive the episode without a blemish on their reputation.

The novel’s narrator refuses to distinguish between Beineberg’s farcical search for a cosmic union and Reiting’s recklessly analytical experiments with physical violence. He endorses Törless’s eventual denunciation of both models: “what you two are doing now is nothing but thoughtless, dreary, disgusting torture” (YT 143; VZ 125). Törless’s qualifications are of critical importance to understanding his refusal to condemn torture *per se*. Basini’s continual degradation has lost its power to entertain and fascinate by the end of the novel. They are just as mechanical and lifeless as the world appeared to Törless during the novel’s first scene (YT 3; VZ 7). Törless rejects further violence against Basini not out of ethical considerations but because his rationale for torturing Basini has failed. More of the same violence serves no purpose anymore, as he tells Reiting. “You make me sick! Your nastiness is meaningless. That’s the repellent thing about you” (YT 145; VZ 127). His unsuccessful search for meaning causes his break with Reiting and Beineberg.

Suffering from what Zygmunt Bauman identifies as a central experience of modernity, Törless encounters objects, concepts, and people as distressingly *doppelsinnig* (VZ 90). In contrast to Bauman, Törless equates the experience of ambiguity with the threat of chaos, disorder, and loss of control but is fascinated by the predictability with which ambiguous concepts can be relied upon in calculations. To learn that a system as rational as mathematics contains imaginary numbers that engineers might apply to built objects as reliable and sturdy as bridges fascinates and disturbs Törless to the point of obsession.

In that kind of calculation you have very solid figures at the beginning, which can represent meters or weights or something similarly tangible, and which are at least real numbers. And there are real numbers at the end of the calculation as well. But they are connected to one another by something that doesn't exist. [. . .] But the really uncanny thing about it is the strength that exists in such a calculation, holding you so firmly that you land safely in the end. (YT 82; VZ 74)¹⁷

Törless's response to mathematics contrasts sharply with Heidegger's reading of the Greek origin of this word, μάθημα, as the always already known (*das Immer-schon-Bekannte*). In *The Age of the World Picture* Heidegger calls mathematics the ground plan of nature (*Grundriß der Natur*): "that which man knows in advance in his observation of whatever is and in his intercourse with things" (Heidegger 1994, 80; Heidegger 1977, 118). Relating the mathematics of infinity to the physical world, Törless senses that Heidegger's word could turn against itself: the *Grundriß* might become a *Riß im Grund*. Törless experiences such a possibility not as an existential risk but as the opportunity to take a glimpse at the force he expects to hold the world of appearances together. Obsessed with potential points of rupture in the logical structure of mathematics, Törless develops "a real mania," as his teacher comments, "for seeking out only things which seemed to signify—for [Törless] at least—a gap in the causality of our thinking" (YT 154; VZ 135).

Törless perceives such gaps in causality not solely in mathematics but in nature and the social world as well. A sunny opening between clouds turns into a terrifying encounter with nature's infinity, an abyss upside down. After numerous uses of infinity in equations, infinity had "suddenly been woken to life and grown terrible before him" thanks to one look into the sky (YT 69; VZ 63). Similarly disrupting experiences with imaginary numbers and Kant's *Critique of Reason* feed his desire to ac-

cess reality's underlying force, but these instances remain elusive and intangible. Only the Basini encounter offers a concrete physical presence as a link to this other dimension of existence: "Everything had now become real, embodied in a single human being" (YT 67). Basini's *Doppelsinnigkeit*—a normal appearance concealing a core of perversity—defies, as we have seen earlier, Törless's initial attempt to comprehend this molten drop of the perverse. Rather than practicing philosophical understanding and aesthetic reconstruction, Törless initiates a series of violent and humiliating acts to transform Basini into an access point to the other reality.

Törless's rationale for violence is not to understand the perverse but to examine his victim's experience of pain and degradation. Reiting investigates the extent to which another human being can be violated before the violator would lose control over his subject. Törless seeks the same shattering point for a different purpose. He wants to explode Basini's sense of self and observe if another self emerges from its ruins. Unlike Beineberg, Törless never fantasizes about inflicting autotelic violence, and he does not expect any communal experience from Basini's sufferings. He anticipates for Basini the opposite of a martyr's experience. A martyr is thought to suffer bodily destruction while "its core, the soul, remains all of one piece" (Brown 1981, 83). Such spiritual perseverance testifies to the truth of the martyr's belief and strengthens the coherence of the martyr's community.¹⁸ Since the abject Basini forfeited his right to remain part of their community, Törless expects the disintegration of Basini's core of identity and hopes for an eyewitness report of what happens when the surface of normality rips apart and its underlying force is revealed.

To study the shattering and replacement of a self-image Törless turns into Basini's cruelest and most imaginative torturer. Törless's expectations regarding the effects of torture mirror Richard Rorty's account of acts of torture with surprising precision. In a significant turnaround, however, Basini's experience will frustrate these expectations and challenge any instrumental theory of violence. Following Elaine Scarry's analysis of *The Body in Pain*, Rorty distinguishes the infliction of pain and the interrogation as the two primary acts of torture. As Scarry argues, physical torture transforms the victim's body into an instrument for the tormentor. The pain severs the victim's links to his or her former world. The torturer's first blow does away with the victim's faith in the written and unwritten rules of social interaction. It destroys the basic trust in the world (*Weltvertrauen*), as Améry writes (1977, 56). No subsequent social interaction will ever fully restore it again. The interrogation—consisting of "question" and "answer"—exacerbates a similar experience of alienation. The purpose of the "question" is not gaining information but supplying the

torturer with an air of justification. The victim's "answer" is framed as a betrayal, making "[the victim] rather than the torturer, his voice rather than his pain, the cause of his loss of self and world" (Scarry 1987, 35).

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) Rorty presents a detailed argument as to how the torturer thwarts with his interrogation the victim's future attempt to reconstitute his or her self. Since Basini's experience challenges precisely this account, we need to take a closer look at Rorty's determination of the relationship between violence, humiliation, and the victim's sense of self. Rorty distinguishes between human pain and animal pain. While humans and animals share the feeling of physical pain, only humans experience humiliation, a form of pain that affects the subject's language, self, and social reputation. Bodily pain is understood as a means to cause such humiliation: "the worst thing you can do to somebody is not to make her scream in agony but to use that agony in such a way that even when the agony is over, she cannot reconstitute herself" (Rorty 1989, 177). In the same way as Scarry describes how the torturer transforms the victim's body into an instrument of pain, Rorty stresses how the tormentor turns the victim's core beliefs into his instruments of humiliation. He searches for the victim's "key sentence" and forces him to deny its truth (179). Such a renunciation of core beliefs renders futile the victim's future efforts to reconstruct a self-image in a coherent narrative.

Now that I have believed or desired *this*, I can never be what I hoped to be, what I thought I was. The story I have been telling myself about myself—my picture of myself as honest, or loyal, or devout—no longer makes sense. I no longer have a self to make sense of. There is no world in which I can picture myself as living, because there is no vocabulary in which I can tell a coherent story about myself. (179)

Reading Orwell's *1984*, Rorty analyzes a torturer's use of such key sentences. O'Brien identifies the fear of rats and the love for Julia as Winston Smith's core beliefs. To break Smith he forges these two "sentences" together. Terrorized by the threat of physical pain, Smith desires briefly that rats should not chew on his but rather on Julia's face. The memory of this wish to let her be mutilated shatters Smith's sense of self. The victim is left with the shards of a self-image that will never again fit together. In *1984*, O'Brien reconfigures Smith's remaining shards according to the design of the totalitarian order.

Törless searches for Basini's "key sentence" during the first torture session and proves his talent for degrading another human being. After a

first flogging of Basini neither Reiting nor Beineberg knows what further harm they could inflict on their victim. Törless introduces the idea of humiliation: “Törless said quietly, almost kindly, ‘Say: I’m a thief’” (YT 80; VZ 72, 102). After the threat of more physical pain, Basini repeats these words, but Törless realizes his failure to identify Basini’s key sentence. When Beineberg and Reiting try to push the humiliation further—Basini has to denounce himself now as their swinish, thieving beast—the boy responds “without hesitation” (YT 80; VZ 72). Regretting to have shared his idea of humiliating Basini, Törless stops playing guessing games about key sentences and interrogates Basini henceforth alone. He heightens Basini’s sufferings by forcing him to describe in detail his feelings during torture and sexual abuse.

Törless shares Rorty’s expectations of the effect of Basini’s transgressions and abuse on his self-image. The longer he interrogates Basini, the more leading Törless’s questions become. When Basini begs not to have to talk about his experiences—“No, don’t make me tell you! Please don’t ask me to do that! I’ll do anything you like. But don’t make me tell. . . . Oh, you have such a special way of tormenting me . . . !” (YT 112; VZ 99)—Törless considers Basini’s despair as evidence that he has found a path to his (already shattered?) inner core. With Basini preferring to be raped and beaten rather than answer any more questions, Törless senses the opportunity to secure a detailed eyewitness report of the shattering of a self-image. In his questioning, Törless proceeds carefully in three phases, focusing on ever more devastating events. Expecting that the act of thievery should have ruined Basini’s self-image, Törless asks Basini about the psychological effects of this transgression. Instead of an existential crisis, Basini recalls simply his need for money and the lack of willing lenders. An exasperated Törless points him toward the anticipated answer. “That’s not what I mean. [. . .] I’m asking how come—how could you do that, how did you feel? What was going on inside you at that moment?” (YT 116; VZ 103). To his frustration, Basini claims not to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. “It was just a moment, I didn’t feel anything, I didn’t think about anything, and all of a sudden it had simply happened” (YT 116; VZ 103). The memory of his theft inflicts no irreversible harm to his self-narrative.

Undeterred, Törless proceeds to the second phase and commands Basini to remember the first time Reiting raped him. As if he had just finished reading Rorty’s theory of humiliation, Törless spells out the expected answer.

Look, all of a sudden someone asks you to perform a humiliating service like that, and the same moment you feel you're too cowardly to say no: didn't your whole being feel torn asunder [*ging da nicht durch dein ganzes Wesen ein Riß*]? Wasn't there some vague terror, as though something unspeakable had happened inside you? (YT 117; VZ 103)

Instead of pleasing Törless with a fitting response, Basini objects to Törless's underlying premise that singular events cause identifiable effects on the self. "God, I don't understand you; I don't know what you're after; I can't say anything to you, anything at all" (YT 117; VZ 103).

Understanding Basini's reaction as resistance, Törless moves the interrogation into the third phase. Rather than asking Basini to remember the physical pain and humiliation, Törless threatens to recreate these situations and force Basini to reexperience them. Törless pursues a similar goal as Claude Lanzmann during his interview with Avraham Bomba in *Shoah*. Placing Bomba in a barbershop, Lanzmann asks him to repeat the gestures and movements he used in Treblinka to cut the hair of those who would be gassed. As Lanzmann argues, "it is starting from this moment that the truth is incarnated and [Bomba] relives the scene, that suddenly knowledge becomes incarnated" (cited in LaCapra 1998, 123). For the same purpose, Törless plans to reenact Basini's abuse. He threatens to spit at Basini, choke him, prick him with needles, force him to masturbate while sighing "Oh, my dear mother," and so on (YT 117; VZ 103). This showing of the instruments forces Basini to the brink of despair. Claiming the legitimacy of a scientific researcher conducting a vital vivisection, Törless rejects Basini's plea and informs him in detail of what he expects to hear.

Yes, I'm tormenting you. But that's not the important thing for me; I just want to know one thing: if I push all that into you like knives, what is inside you? What is happening inside you? Does something explode in you? Tell me! Suddenly, like a piece of glass that suddenly explodes into a thousand splinters before it's shown so much as a crack? The image you've made of yourself, isn't it extinguished by a breath? Doesn't another one leap to appear in its place, as magic-lantern pictures leap out of the darkness? Do you not understand me at all? I can't explain it any better than that; you have to tell me yourself . . . ! (YT 117; VZ 104)

Törless mistakes Basini's collapse as an auspicious sign for the effectiveness of his questioning. But Basini does not offer the spectacle of a retraumatized victim who relives past humiliations. His breakdown signals the absence of trauma and not its truth incarnate. He does not plunge into Dionysian depths, and his identity does not shatter like a mirror. Neither haunted by traumata nor driven by appalling desires nor graced with epiphanies, Basini collapses just like a suspect who does not understand his interrogator's line of questioning.

I don't know what you want; I can't explain anything to you. It happens on the spur of the moment; it can't happen any other way; you would do exactly the same as I do. (YT 118; VZ 104)

By not revealing a self-shattering traumatic truth, Basini makes no claim for heroic resilience and exemplary fortitude. Likewise, he is not a soulless, postpsychological subject whose abilities to feel and experience are numbed beyond repair. He suffers the pain and humiliation. At the novel's end, the pain nearly immobilizes Basini's body, and the outward signs of his former personality almost completely disappear. As the narrator observes: "only in his eyes a remnant of [Basini's personality] huddled together, and seemed to cling, fearful and pleading, to Törless" (YT 141; VZ 124).

Nonetheless, Basini's experience does not fit into Rorty's framework. Instead of exhibiting the symptoms and impediments Törless (and theorists of pain and trauma) anticipate, Basini remembers and fears in all clarity what his three tormentors have done to him. No matter how many repulsive and humiliating acts he has to perform, they are linked as continuous steps toward his survival. Rather than revealing traumatic ruptures that defy any coherent narration of his experiences, Basini's narrative of the events "was presented as a simple necessity, peaceful and undistorted" (YT 118; VZ 104). Törless's experiments with violence end in disappointment just like Beineberg's experiments. But there is a crucial difference between these two failures. Beineberg's probing of Basini's soul anticlimaxed in ridicule. Törless's encounter with Basini ends with an epistemological shock so powerful that neither Törless nor his narrator can contemplate its implications. Törless's experience ends with a challenge to the novel's notion of subjectivity that Musil's first novel cannot accept but that moves after the war to the center of Musil's reflections on war and violence.

The Basini Challenge

“‘If you were in my situation, you’d do exactly the same,’ Basini had said” (YT 118; VZ 104). Basini’s challenge moves beyond the mere disappointment of a failed experiment. He exposes a particular precariousness of human identity to Törless. By forcing Basini to relive an unmasterable past, Törless intends to observe the disintegration of Basini’s former self-image as well as its replacement with one reflecting his monstrous deeds. The crumbling of Basini’s disturbingly normal appearance and the spectacle of his horrified self-recognition as a monster would split the inner core of his identity and expose to Törless the underlying force that holds together the world of appearances. The experiment’s unintended result leaves Törless with the alternative of rejecting Basini’s experience as unreliable and unrepresentative or of reconsidering the premise of his experiment. Convinced that he has “more character” than Basini and acts always out of a sense of “respectability,” Törless seeks to reassure himself initially that he would never have to face Basini’s situation and therefore never experience comparable humiliations (YT 118; VZ 104). Although he considers himself as a model product of *Bildung*—a strong character in harmony with society’s norms and conventions—Törless suffers from the nagging suspicion of missing Basini’s point.

Sensing a challenge to his notion of a self consistent and solid enough that it could shatter under extreme pressure, Törless glances at a possibility too horrifying to contemplate.

No, what matters isn’t how I would act, but the fact that if I really did act like Basini, I’d feel it was every bit as normal [*ebensowenig Außergewöhnliches*] as he does. That’s the important thing: my sense of myself would be just as straightforward [*einfach*], just as unambiguous [*von allem Fragwürdigen entfernt*] as his. (YT 118; VZ 105)

Törless dreads that Basini might state a fundamental fact about the relation between self-image and the experience of extreme situations: the possibility one might live through catastrophic events without being permanently marked and transformed by them. The self should not be imagined as a single solid core (or one coherent narrative) that might crack (or unravel) but as so malleable that it could adapt to any situation without losing its sense of continuity and normality. Törless could accept ambiguity as a source of disorientation and a challenge to his curiosity. His world consisted of two realities: the rationally ordered world

of appearances and an underlying reality—irrational, imaginary, and aconceptual—that despite its elusive otherness held the surface world together. Occasionally, Törless has confusing but never traumatizing glimpses of this second reality.

The implication of Basini's experiences that anyone's sense of self could pass through extreme situations and remain just as normal, straightforward, and unquestionable instills Törless with the horror of a very different notion of ambiguity. Rather than "experiencing objects, processes and people as things with ambiguous meanings [*als etwas Doppelsinniges*]" (YT 70; VZ 64), the sense of the self emerges as so flexible and adaptable that its very continuity becomes the locus of ambiguity. Neither respectability nor *Bildung* protects against the permanent malleability of the self. Instead of becoming and remaining a different species—an unclean insect, the perverse other, or a shattered self—Basini challenges any stable notion of identity in favor of the continuity of adaptations to the various situations he encounters. Horror is, as Stanley Cavell suggests, "the perception of the precariousness of human identity," the awareness that "we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for" (1999, 418–19). To Törless's horror, the debased Basini does not become inhuman, a monster, but merely adapts to the monstrous situation his abusers created. The malleability of the self allows him to return to his former personality, tell about his experiences in a calm undistorted narrative, and expect that Törless would adapt to similar circumstances in much the same way.

Törless did not expect that Basini's torture and abuse would challenge his preconception of a stable (but breakable) human identity. A thorough reconsideration of the effects of catastrophic experiences on the sense of the self will take a central place in Musil's postwar writings. *The Confusions of Young Törless* warns of the dangerous potential of the Basini challenge only indirectly in Törless's and the narrator's inability and avoidance to dwell on the implications for the constitution of the modern subject. The idea of the malleable self shocked Törless to such an extent that the narrator edits the scraps and fragments of his thoughts into a coherent form. More significantly, the narrator seeks to convert the horror Törless feels once he realizes the possibility of a malleable self into evidence for a fundamental difference between Törless and Basini.

This thought—coming to him in scraps of sentences, superimposed on one another and constantly going back to the beginning—added to his contempt for Basini a very intimate pain, one which was quiet

but which touched his innermost equilibrium more profoundly than any morality could do. (YT 118; VZ 105)

The narrator's interpretation morphs Törless's idea of the self's unending malleability into evidence for the claim that Törless's sense of self has been permanently affected by (almost) having had this thought. While the absence of lasting harm to Basini's self-image inspires Törless's new idea of the self, his higher sensibility originates supposedly from his own alleged experience of denigration. The narrator reduces Törless's horror to a minute amount of pain that passes imperceptibly below Törless's experiential threshold. By claiming this intimate experience for Törless's innermost equilibrium—too intimate for Törless to notice—the narrator lays the ground for his claim that Törless gains a superior sense of the self and the world. Törless's shock becomes another instance of the mere dizziness he felt when he set out to write his essay on human nature, another "earthquake deep within the core of [Törless], which caused no perceptible waves and which nonetheless made the whole of his soul tremble" (YT 101; VZ 90).

The adult Törless offers a similar response when asked if he felt degraded by the Basini episode. He concedes the denigration but claims it left behind only "a tiny quantity of poison" in his soul (YT 128; VZ 112). Its small dosage allowed him, Törless believes, "to rid the soul of its overly calm, complacent health, and instead to give it a kind of health that is more refined, acute and understanding" (YT 128; VZ 112). The three metaphors—imperceptible waves, slight pain, weak toxin—are meant to explain the unfolding of Törless's superior aesthetic sensibility. This metaphoric argument, however, offers only a rationale for Törless's use of violence and diverts attention away from the insight that he might act like Basini in a similar situation without experiencing anything out of the ordinary either. His research into the sense of the self culminates and ends abruptly because neither Törless nor his narrator can bear to contemplate the possibility of the self's unending malleability. Törless terminates his experiments the moment this possibility surfaces, simply declaring there was "nothing more to be hoped for from Basini" (YT 120; VZ 106).

Despite Törless's explicit disavowal of the Basini challenge, the conflict between the malleability of a person's subjectivity and the expectation of an irreparable shattering of one's self-image returns once more in Musil's novel. This time Törless, not Basini, acts upon a desire that he believes to be irreconcilable with his sense of self. The night after the interrogation Basini slips into Törless's bed, professes to love his abuser, and Törless sleeps with him after an initial bout of revulsion turns into desire. One

moment disrupts the ecstatic enjoyment and echoes precisely the Rortyan expectation of a shattering self-image during deepest humiliation: “Only at the moment when he was carried away did he awaken for a second and clutch desperately at a single thought: ‘This isn’t me! . . . isn’t me!’” (YT 122; VZ 108).

The consequences of Törless’s This-isn’t-me! moment bears, however, scant similarity to Winston Smith’s breakdown in Orwell’s *1984*. Törless immediately affirms Basini’s notion of the malleable self: “It won’t be me again until tomorrow! . . . Tomorrow . . .” (YT 122; VZ 108). The following day Törless appears indeed unchanged by the experience, and his intimate encounters with Basini preserve and reinforce his prevalent self-image as an individual of exceptional aesthetic sensibility. The narrator remains so preoccupied with his defense of Törless’s heterosexuality that he does not note the malleability of Törless’s self.¹⁹ The feeling of shame and denigration Törless experiences after his secret trysts with Basini—not because he acted on his homosexual desire but because he chose the “despised and humiliated” effeminate boy as his sexual partner (YT 123; VZ 108)—turns into new evidence for his aesthetic superiority over Reiting and Beineberg. Already during the first torture session he enjoyed the “malicious pleasure [. . .] that [. . .] he was absorbing these events more fully than his companions were” (YT 79; VZ 71). To denigrate himself by acting on his homosexual desire offers more such malicious pleasure since his friends would never fully experience the suffering of shame while pursuing their desires: “They seemed to lack the crown of thorns that his own pangs of conscience had placed upon his head” (YT 125; VZ 110). His reaction follows Basini’s pattern of an elastic subjectivity that returns to its shape after extreme experiences. Törless’s self-image did not shatter but reemerged, bolstering its profile.

As a novel on violence *The Confusions of Young Törless* offers a variety of contrasting positions on the justification and the effects of inflicting and suffering physical harm. The conflict of the effects of violence is left unresolved at the end of Musil’s first novel. This conflict, even as an unsettled one, remains one of its major achievements. As a representation of the perverse *The Confusions of Young Törless* moves barely beyond stereotypical homophobic anxieties against the effeminate boy. Rather than analyzing the perverse—as the narrator, Törless, and Musil in his prewar essays repeatedly set out to do—the novel participates in its construction as a legitimate target of violence. Beineberg, Reiting, and Törless shared the assumption that violence was an instrument that causes predictable effects. The novel exposed Beineberg’s mystic goals for a cosmic union as empty and reveals his continued beatings of Basini as an aimless

and senseless use of violence. Reiting's investigation of violence as an instrument of power is rejected as equally distasteful but represented nonetheless as the most skillful use of violence. Like Beineberg and in contrast to Reiting, Törless's experiment with violence failed to achieve its objective. Instead of the expected and desired result—the shattering of Basini's self-image—Törless was confronted with a sense of self far more durable and malleable than his concept of subjectivity predicted. Törless's experiment with violence shifted momentarily the perspective from a purely instrumental concept toward a situational analysis of violence. Rather than revealing Törless's pursuit of his ends as wrongheaded—as in Beineberg's case—the novel opens the possibility that the cause-and-effect approach to violence might be insufficient to account for the complexity of these phenomena. Törless himself underwent an episode of humiliation, and his sense of self proved as malleable as Basini's. But the narrator and Törless shied away from any further exploration of their observations.

To conclude the discussion of violence in *The Confusions of Young Törless*, one has to mention a moment in the novel that points in a different direction than its overly neat conclusion (and justification of violence), one that points already toward Musil's own initial embrace of the war in August 1914, and possibly even his postwar preoccupation with the malleable self. When frightened by the possibility that his self would not shatter but that he would feel “every bit as normal” in Basini's situation, Törless experienced not simply difficulties in formulating this idea. He reacted intuitively to this new unexpected ambiguity. Not feeling the intimate pain the narrator noted only afterward, Törless attempts to remember at this moment of crisis the effects of a feeling of real danger that he had once before experienced.

Simply terrified as though he had been ambushed, and without reflection he had rapidly sought a way of parrying the attack and covering himself. That had happened at a moment of real threat, and he was irritated by the sensation he had felt then. Those quick, thoughtless impulses. In vain he tried to unleash them once again. But he knew that they had within an instant taken away from the danger everything that was strange and ambiguous about it. (YT 118–19; VZ 105)

Rather than contemplating the implications of a possibly noncausal relation between catastrophic events and the subject's sense of self, implications that would render his notion of subjectivity deeply uncertain, Törless sought to relive a moment of danger. The fear of an attack delivered

in the past a sudden certainty and clarity as if everything could be seen by “eyes that had awoken from a hundred years of sleep” (YT 119; VZ 105). Fearing the possibility of the malleable self within himself, Törless hoped to find safety in the memory of a more primal moment of existential risks, a moment of clear oppositions, shapes, and borders.

Törless failed to access such a moment at will. But did Robert Musil find himself in August 1914 in precisely such a situation of sudden certainty and clarity? The moment when all distinctions and differences among Germans seemed to have melted away, leaving behind but one collective body “in which the individual is nothing again outside of its elementary effort to protect the tribe” (1022). Only after Musil lived through the experience of the mobilization, and after he recognized the catastrophe in which Europe had found itself subsequently, did he return to the notion of the malleable self. But now it was no longer a feared though rare possibility for certain individuals. After the war, as we will see in the next chapter, it became for Musil a central phenomenon of postwar society, a mass phenomenon, and a phenomenon in urgent need of literary analysis.

War, Violence, and the Malleable Self

Robert Musil's Postwar Critique of Violence in *The Man Without Qualities*

In his two novels, Musil investigated violence from fundamentally different directions. Acts of physical violence are at the core of *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906), but they are infrequent and peripheral to his great, unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities* (parts of which were published in 1930, 1932, and 1943). Törless participates in the systematic torture and abuse of another student. Ulrich, the protagonist of Musil's second novel, neither rapes others nor is he prone to violence in the published sections of the novel.¹ Except for the brief moment when Törless encounters the possibility of the malleable self, Musil's first novel is preoccupied with imagining, anticipating, and observing the lasting effects caused by violence and humiliation. Traumatic experiences should inflict irreparable harm on the victim's sense of self or result in an enduring refinement of at least one of Basini's tormentors. Törless would mature into a Nietzschean subject, capable of perceiving and justifying the destruction of another being as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Nothing seemed more absurd and frightening to Törless, his narrator, and their contemporaries than the idea that physical violence might not produce lasting effects on its victims (and perpetrators). To translate this from the level of the individual to society, from private biographies to historical developments: catastrophic events of mass violence like World War I should be turning points and transform forever the lives and societies of those who experienced its devastation. They should change the course of history. In "To the Planetarium," the final section of *One-Way Street* (1928), Walter Benjamin expressed this expectation with awe-inspiring grandiosity. For the first time "on a planetary scale" and "in spirit of technology" the world war became "an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic power" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 1, 486–87):

In the nights of annihilation of the last war, the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic.

And the revolts that followed it were the first attempt of mankind to bring the new body under its control. The power of the proletariat is the measure of its convalescence.

Whether “the frenzy of destruction” will be conquered in “the ecstasy of procreation” and mark a new beginning for mankind, as Benjamin hoped (487); or whether one expects that the first truly global war will eventually prove itself to be another step in the civilizing process toward the pacification of the earth, as Norbert Elias argued; or, more darkly, whether Freud recognized that his generation had to take a step back in this civilizing process because the majority of his contemporaries exposed themselves as cultural hypocrites; or whether Adorno and Horkheimer understood such catastrophic events as evidence for a dialectic of enlightenment, as instances of the “reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism in reality” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xix), all these critics agreed that the deep difference between prewar and postwar times required a fundamental reconsideration of the history of mankind. Robert Musil’s postwar reflections came, as we will see, to a very different conclusion.

Even mass violence on the scale of a world war does not cause necessarily traumatic breakdowns among its participants, collapse tradition, and break historical continuity. Such man-made disasters might not mark a new beginning of a new mankind or reveal the barbaric face of our true self, but their observable effects could be surprisingly inconclusive and volatile. As Musil noted in 1923 with equal parts of surprise and conviction: “no one will seriously believe that the German republican of 1923 is a different person from the submissive German subject of 1914” (PS 164; ERK 1369). The postwar evidence contradicted Musil’s initial expectation that the mass violence would prove to be devastating for the self-image of the modern subject. Musil was fascinated by the same war and postwar phenomena that Hermann Broch described later in his novel *The Sleepwalkers* (1931–32).

Fantasy has become logical reality, but reality evolves the most a-logical phantasmagoria. An age that is softer and more cowardly than any preceding age suffocates in waves of blood and poison-gas; nations of bank clerks and profiteers hurl themselves upon barbed wire; a well-organized humanitarianism avails to hinder nothing, but calls itself the Red Cross and prepares artificial limbs for the victims; towns starve and coin money out of their own hunger; spectacted school-teachers lead storm-troops; city dwellers live

in caves; [. . .] and in the end, once they are back in safety, apply their artificial limbs once more to the making of profits. (Broch 1947, 373)

Confronted with a surprising continuity in the lives of those who suffered and inflicted violence on an unprecedented scale, Broch considered this upside-down world as symptomatic of the decay of values in modernity. Musil was less interested in developing a theory of values. He focused instead on the bank clerks and schoolteachers who could become storm troopers, live in caves, launch poison gas attacks, and then return home and carry on with their lives as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Investigating the implications of this observation in his postwar writings, particularly in *The Man Without Qualities*, Musil reassessed his notions of the self and of history. Against his own initial expectations after Austria's defeat, Musil realized that the malleable self was no longer an idea too absurd and frightening to contemplate but a ubiquitous and central postwar phenomenon. The malleable self's experience of violence led Musil to rethink the function of causation and progress in history. By intending to explore the causes of the world war in a world that seemed to defy the idea of causation, Musil's antireductionist analysis of violence became central for his postwar writings and their modernist aesthetics. As I argue, Musil's engagement with war and violence structures not only this masterpiece of European modernism, *The Man Without Qualities*, and its theories of the self, of emotion, and of history, but Musil becomes one of the most original thinkers about war and violence in the twentieth century.

At first sight, Robert Musil's statements about the relationship between the war and *The Man Without Qualities* will strike readers of historical novels as surprisingly naive. Musil promised a causal analysis of the war. Five years before the publication of its first volume, he announced in a rare interview that his forthcoming novel—still titled *The Twin Sister* (*Die Zwillingsschwester*)—would end during general mobilization and reconstruct Austria's path to war: "That war came, had to come is the sum of all the conflicting developments and influences and movements which I show" (PuS 941). Beginning on a beautiful summer day in August 1913, *The Man Without Qualities* portrays "Austria's last year of life [*Lebensjahr*]," moving ever so slowly toward August 1914 (PuS 950). In one of many similar notes outlining the structure of the novel, Musil writes in 1932: "Basic idea: war. All lines lead to the war" (MoE 1851). The same

claim returns in notes from the late 1930s, after all authorized chapters of the novel had been published (MoE 1902). Musil's insistence on the centrality of the war and its origins for the novel runs like a red thread through the fabric of his comments on *The Man Without Qualities*.

Can a work of fiction succeed in the causal analysis of a historical event as multifaceted and historically important as war? The most celebrated predecessor to Musil's project of analyzing a major European war, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1868–69), predicts the futility of any such enterprise. The further this novel of the Franco-Russian War progresses, the more insistently its narrator interrupts the plot with reflections on history, necessity, and freedom. The tone of these essayistic intrusions turns ever more urgent because the narrator recognizes insurmountable challenges to this project. No aspect of the cultural, social, political, or economical situation appeared wholly relevant or irrelevant for revealing the roots of the war. The reductionist method of understanding war by isolating its origins and causes seems to miss the phenomenon the narrator sought to explain. Finding no alternative, Tolstoy's narrator explains the occurrence of the Franco-Russian War in the end with nothing more than the fact of its occurrence.

Therefore, all these causes—billions of causes—coincided so as to bring about what happened. And consequently none of them was the exclusive cause of the event, but the event had to take place simply because it had to take place. (Tolstoy 2007, 604–5)

Such tautological teleology reveals the limits of the narrator's war analysis. The reader is left with an alternative between one (nonexistent) sufficient cause for the war and the pseudo-Hegelian assumption that because the war happened, the war had to happen. Tolstoy's narrator terminates his search for the war's origins and proposes a Copernican paradigm shift in understanding the path of history. Copernicus proved the earth's movement around the sun even though no one could feel the earth moving. The laws governing the earth's orbit had to be accepted, Tolstoy observes, even though they seemed to contradict direct observations. Similarly, Tolstoy encourages his readers to abandon the search for concrete causes and motives steering the course of history. They must recognize that history is governed by laws even though these laws remain hidden from direct experience, even though no sequential path of history could be reconstructed. In the epilogue to *War and Peace*, Tolstoy accepts the existence of (unfelt) laws of history and abandons the idea of historical change based on human freedom. What was true for the course of the planets was true for the course of history, and "it is just as necessary to renounce a nonexistent

freedom [in history] and recognize a dependence we do not feel” (1215). Tolstoy rejects the idea that human actions are expressions of freedom that change history. Historical change occurs for far less visible reasons.

When Musil declared sixty years after *War and Peace* that his novel would succeed where Tolstoy’s had failed and retrace all the lines that led to the First World War, then it is rather tempting to ignore Musil’s announcement. Most readers of *The Man Without Qualities* have done just that and focused on the work’s other themes and obsessions: from its essayistic qualities to the exploration of Musil’s famed *other condition*. Readers who discuss the novel’s relationship to the war tend to reject the claim that *The Man Without Qualities* pursues the path to war. They find no trail leading from its pages to the catastrophic beginning of the twentieth century. Considering the novel’s incompleteness—the storyline of its published parts never reaches the moment of general mobilization—such a reaction is understandable. Only drafts and notes indicate how some of the novel’s characters might have acted during the summer of 1914. In early stages of his project, Musil toyed with the idea of writing war episodes, but none of these plans came to fruition. Considering the dearth of evidence, Alexander Honold concludes in *Die Stadt und der Krieg* (1995), his study of Musil’s novel, that no direct relation between the war and *The Man Without Qualities* exists.

Vienna and the world war are absent [*fehlen*] in this novel, from the start they remain out of fiction’s reach. By missing both the historical reality of the world war and the geographical reality of the capital Vienna—which can only be noted if the points of reference and intention have been constructed in advance—Musil created a model of chronographic and topographical self-will [*Eigensinn*], whose reality remains underdetermined and out of grasp. (1995, 23)

Instead of offering a sum total of the war’s causes, the novel lacks a direct relation to the war. Any claim to the contrary, Honold argues, is the deceptive superimposition of a historically informed reader.

Despite the wide-ranging consensus that Musil’s statements regarding the analytical purpose of the novel are misleading, no consensus exists about the indirect relationship between *The Man Without Qualities* and the war. The two most interesting proposals for the novel’s oblique response to the war are mutually exclusive. Both emphasize the significance of Musil’s concept of the *Möglichkeitssinn*, the sense of possibility, for representing history.² Both readings emphatically reject Musil’s claim that a

path leads from the novel to the war or from the war back to the novel. Nevertheless, these explorations of the war's impact on the novel's structure and content propose irreconcilable alternatives regarding the role of history, politics, and aesthetics in Musil's unfinished project.

According to Michael André Bernstein, the novel's pivotal quality is its "rejection of backshadowing in favor of sideshadowing" (1994, 103). Instead of seeing all of the novel's strands stretching toward war, Bernstein praises the novel's openness, its presentation of "conflicting voices and multiple, contradictory possibilities for the future" (103). The war remains only one of many possible outcomes to a specific historical situation; no necessity links the political and cultural developments from the summer of 1913 to the 1914 general mobilization: "It is as though *The Man Without Qualities* were all sideshadows, glimpses of diverse but equally credible futures, without any one of them being granted the aura of inevitability that is indispensable to foreshadowing" (99). Musil wrote a historical novel without falling prey to the idea of historical inevitability, and this singular achievement, according to Bernstein, secures Musil's key position in modernist literature. Consequently, the war had to remain absent from *The Man Without Qualities*. With the inclusion of mobilization and war, Musil would have privileged historical actuality, lending the war an air of historical necessity. Bernstein reaches the paradoxical conclusion that Musil's method of "sideshadowing" achieves far greater historical accuracy than the traditional historical novel because it never represents, and never could have represented, the historical event at its center. By rejecting any postfactum construction of historical necessity, Musil is thought to remain true to the fundamental openness of history. Compared to Bernstein's ingenious merging of the Musilian sense of possibility and the concept of history, Musil's own statements on the relation between the war and the novel appear to be a rather simple (mis)understanding of history.

Other readings emphasizing the sense of possibility in *The Man Without Qualities* insist that Musil used it for "backshadowing," not "sideshadowing" history. Rather than presenting a historically accurate prewar Austria, the novel is shaped by postwar experiences. The novel professes only to take place in the recent past. Rather than a historical novel, *The Man Without Qualities* is a utopian novel set in an imaginary past. As Honold suggests, the absence of war in the novel's published parts testifies to Musil's belief that the war harmed our very "sense of time," thus setting off a Benjaminian demise of traditional storytelling (Honold 1995, 19). Responding to the war as a catastrophe and a break in historical continuity, Musil's novel envisioned an alternate reality. Stefan Jonsson argues *The*

Man Without Qualities is as a postwar novel about a prewar Austria that steered clear of tracing the path to war.

[*The Man Without Qualities*] is the result of Musil's experience of the war and its aftermath. The novel's representation of the events in 1913 and 1914 refracts, through an act of backshadowing, the situation in postimperial Austria. With the wisdom of hindsight, Musil revisits the Dual Monarchy in order to sketch a world order that would have rendered the war and its aftermath unnecessary. (2000, 253)

Rather than analyzing the causes and origins of the war, as Musil assured, Jonsson reads the novel as the reverse of these authorial intentions.³ Instead of employing the sense of possibility to account for a wide range of past futures present in prewar Austria, as Bernstein suggested, *The Man Without Qualities* offers, Jonsson argues, one utopian alternative that would have avoided the past catastrophe.

Despite their fundamental differences, these readings agree the war could never have taken place in the novel. Musil's sense of possibility is irreconcilable to the idea of historical continuity because it rejects the notion of historical necessity (Bernstein) or because the war as catastrophic breakdown of tradition might not hinder the construction of an alternate past, but bars its access to the actual historical event (Honold, Jonsson). Contrary to these two approaches, Patricia McBride suggests that Musil perceived the war as a disaster that failed to break historical continuity. Musil's exceptionality among contemporary modernists consists precisely in his refusal to consider the war as an abyss separating the past from the present. McBride writes, "The very idea of the war as a radical rupture was for Musil a delusion that blinded many contemporaries to the fact that they were treading in the old paths of destruction" (2005, 76).

Writing a novel on prewar Austria remained an essential task since the patterns of thought and behavior leading to the war persisted in postwar society, as McBride agrees with Musil. *The Man Without Qualities* offers no (utopian) alternative to historical reality but confronts its readers with traditional ways of thinking and acting. McBride does not explore how the war shaped the novel or which old paths lead once again to destruction. Instead, she relies on statements by Musil like this diary entry from 1920: "The age: All that emerged in and after the war had been already present earlier" (TB 1, 353). No path seems to connect Musil's promise that the novel reveals the origins of the war with either his poetics of possibility or the completed sections of *The Man Without Qualities*.

In contrast to these readings, I approach *The Man Without Qualities* from Musil's analysis of the malleable self and the conclusion he draws from it for his concepts of violence, history, and aesthetics. Instead of representing history as a retraceable chain of events, Musil presents shifting social and political situations whose significance remains in conflict with the readings discussed above. Neither mobilization nor war remains out of the novel's reach, as Bernstein suggests, nor is *The Man Without Qualities*, as Jonsson argues, a utopian countermodel to the catastrophic past. Instead of searching for preventable causes of past and future wars, as McBride suggests, or celebrating the war as a higher union between the individual and the collective, between reason and mystical experiences, as Ulrich suggests in his equation of war and the other condition, Musil's novel offers instead a critique of any causal analysis of war, violence, and the self. While exploring the malleable self and the sense of possibility, Musil does not present these concepts as successful responses to the experience of modernity. Ulrich does not become the utopian model of a new man. From its position of radical ambivalence, Musil's novel argues for discarding linear models of reality construction and, at the same time, exposes the risks for the malleable self to live a life shaped by a sense of possibility.

The Confusions of Young Törless and *The Man Without Qualities* are linked as well as separated by Musil's preoccupation with violence and the malleable self—a notion that emerged initially as a threat to Törless's identity. Törless's panicked flight from the possibility of the malleable self and toward the memory of a dangerous moment, his use of this memory as a shield against the experience of ambiguity, points beyond Törless and Musil's first novel. Musil repeated Törless's escapist flight into violence during August 1914 and recorded his mobilization experience as a transformation of ambiguity into clarity. Musil abandoned the dangerous moment as a desirable alternative to ambiguity only after Austria's and Germany's defeat, after the collapse of the Wilhelmine and the Habsburg Empires, and amidst the social, political, and economical uncertainties of the postwar world. By probing the relationship between violence and the malleable self, Musil distanced himself from comparable contemporary projects.

Like the authors of the Weimar avant-garde that Lethen explores in his study *Cool Conduct*, Musil was fascinated by instances of "instantaneous transformation" that postwar Germans and Austrians performed (Lethen 2002, 2). With its prior reliance on ideas of development, continuity, and progress, the modern subject experienced, Lethen argues, a profound disorientation when confronted with the sudden instability of social and

political institutions and their demands and opportunities for immediate adaptation. With sudden changes of personae, individuals seemed to respond to a crisis of experience and thus fascinated the avant-garde, as Lethen demonstrates. While focusing on the same phenomenon of sudden transformations, Musil's approach separated him from the avant-garde. Reversing Lethen's distinction between modernists and members of the avant-garde vis-à-vis violence, I argue that Musil's antireductionist approach to violence enabled his reconsideration of the role of violence in modernity, while the avant-garde's functionalist theories of the self remained largely captive to their far more traditional views of the use of violence.

Lethen differentiates modernist from avant-garde writers according to their response to violence. According to his seminal study, modernists refused to engage with the phenomenon of physical violence while the more adventurous and danger-prone avant-garde confronted destruction and change unflinchingly. Modernists like Musil were not robust enough to tolerate war's challenge to modern subjectivity. Lethen commends the avant-garde for embracing a less sophisticated sense of self, one that welcomed the ability to change from one persona to another without dreading self-destruction. Freed from the bourgeois notion of an "inner-directed subject operating within the horizon of humanistic values," the militant avant-garde developed new rules of conduct for a new type of subject (Lethen 2002, 72). While the avant-garde (ranging from Brecht to Jünger and from Benjamin to Plessner and Schmitt) accepted the necessity of switching from one social role and function to another, the modernists evaded supposedly an immediate exposure to catastrophic experiences to preserve their more delicate notions of subjectivity.

In the decades separating the first futurist manifesto from Ernst Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* (1932), the avant-garde gives shape to a type displaying all the essential elements of a prebourgeois subjective constitution. This reach back to a "subcomplex" subject distinguishes the avant-garde from modernists like Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, or Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose intricately difficult subjects are able to endure the process of historical acceleration only from a healthy distance. The artistic figure of the prebourgeois subject was as if magnetically drawn to the military, less in pursuit of enlightenment than a kind of wake-up call. (6)

Lethen reproduces the by now familiar portrait of the modernist as either far removed from violence or as its passively suffering victim. The mili-

tant figure of the cool persona—Lethen constructs it from the writings of the new objectivity intelligentsia—might or might not heed any wake-up call (to arms?) (2002, 101–86). Either way, modernists like Musil kept no healthy distance from the war experience or its implications for a reconsideration of the self. Musil’s examination of violence and the self does away with the safe distance that the avant-garde established between violence and the self. Because Lethen’s avant-garde considered physical violence and the malleable self as a means to achieve predictable and desirable ends, they gained very little, as we will see, from taking a closer, analytical look at violent phenomena or the malleable self.

Lacking a clearly defined utopian project, Musil reassessed the modern subject after the war by dropping the pretense of a safe distance from historical change. Without the sense of certainty pervading Brecht’s anticipation of a “new human type,” Musil examines violence and subjectivity by staying with the phenomena and not by predicting the next battle for social progress (Brecht 1977, 236). Musil’s reflections on violence challenge the instrumentalist framework of a militant avant-garde that expected a new society to emerge from the ruins of the war. The terrifying but fleeting possibility of a self switching quickly from one persona to another, as it surfaced in Musil’s first novel, had become an omnipresent presence. Rather than distancing himself from the phenomenon, the modernist Musil demanded in 1922 an inclusive “we” as the starting point for its analysis.

I begin with a symptom. For the past ten years we have doubtless been making world history in the most strident fashion, but without actually being able to see [*wahrnehmen*] it. We haven’t really changed much [*sind nicht eigentlich geändert worden*]—a little presumptuous before, a little hung over afterwards. First we were bustling good citizens, then we became murderers, killers, thieves, arsonists, and the like, but without really experiencing [*erleben*] anything. [. . .] So we have been many things, but we haven’t changed; we have seen a lot and perceived nothing. (PS 116–17; ERK 1075–76)

What consequences could be drawn from this series of rapid and extreme transformations? Compared to Nobert Elias’s theory of the civilizing process, Musil’s observations undercut assumptions of long-term changes in affect control among citizens of Western modern societies. Like Musil, Elias participated in the war, but he saw the readiness of Western soldiers for cruelty and killing in a very different light. In con-

trast to “Abyssinian warriors” and other premodern soldiers, “the aggressiveness of even the most warlike nations of the civilized world [. . .] is confined and tamed by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints” (Elias 2000, 161). Similarly to Broch, Musil observed instead the sudden transformation of the spectacled schoolteacher into the murderous storm trooper. Elias’s theory of modernity considers such swift transformations nearly impossible in modern societies because affect control has become part of the modern subject’s identity. Even during war and revolution—Elias calls them “temporal or spatial enclaves within civilized society in which aggressiveness is allowed freer play”—a member of such a society would be unable to simply leave his civilian persona behind and become a murderer and arsonist. He writes, “The necessary restraint and transformation of aggression cultivated in the everyday life of civilized society cannot be simply reversed, even in these enclaves” (2000, 170). Unlike Freud and Elias, Musil spoke neither of cultural hypocrisy nor of “pathological outburst” when he noted the apparent instabilities in self-formations (Elias 2000, 162). Musil rejected the assumption of a civilizing process that had produced lasting changes in affect control. The malleable self never solidifies to a permanent self with an inner sense that could be impervious to sudden changes of its sociocultural situation.

Musil’s views on these behavioral alterations distinguish him as well from Brecht’s and Benjamin’s skepticism toward a continuous notion of historical and cultural progress. The comparison to Brecht and Benjamin suggests that it is not Lethen’s alternative between “robustness” and “fragility” that separated the modernist Musil from his avant-garde contemporaries but his open exploration of violent situations and their aftereffects. Musil let go of the avant-garde framework that subsumed the instantaneous transformations all too smoothly into the instrumental logic of their political and cultural aspirations.

With phrases like “without actually being able to see” and “without really experiencing anything,” Musil appeared to anticipate the Benjaminian thesis of the destruction of experience and tradition in World War I. Considering experience as “inseparable from the representation of a continuity, a sequence,” Benjamin would argue a few years after Musil that the war destroyed the very condition of possibility for the experience of continuity and the continuity of experience (Benjamin 1999, 802). In a move that Benjamin would not be willing to follow, Musil sets the lack of experience side by side with the observation of a continuous sense of self: “We haven’t really changed much.” In the course of his essay “Helpless Europe” (1922), Musil converted the description of the symptom into

a thesis that put him at a far distance from Benjamin's and Elias's approaches. The war, Musil writes, "demonstrated to all of us in one monstrous experiment how easily human beings can move to the most radical extremes and back again without experiencing any basic change [*ohne sich im Wesen zu ändern*]. They change—but what changes is not the self" (PS 121; ERK 1080). Musil does not align the radical changes in the Austrian and German political systems with a fundamental change in the way the pre- and the postwar subjects communicate experience. Musil neither postulates a vanishing of experience, nor calls for the arrival of a "new man." The malleable self became ubiquitous only with the war. Musil considered the emergence of the malleable self as the unveiling of preexisting potential but not as a clean break with the past. "Since 1914, humanity has revealed itself as a mass that is astonishingly more malleable than we have been accustomed to assume" (PS 120; ERK 1080). With the notion of the malleable self, Musil rejected postwar narratives of a radical break with previous forms of experience, communication, and social interaction.

A look at Brecht's play *A Man's a Man* (1926) clarifies Musil's challenge to the functionalist appropriation of the malleable self. In his play, Brecht staged the rapid transformation of a good citizen into a bloodthirsty warrior in a way that at first strikingly resembles Musil's and Broch's postwar observations. Even though the gentle family man Galy Gay believes that his desire to sink his teeth into an enemy's neck stems from a primal drive (*Urtrieb*), Brecht does not present Gay's transformation as an atavistic regression. Instead, Gay becomes a prototype of a "new human type" (Brecht 1977, 236). His loss of personal identity is fully compensated by the new functional identity Gay acquires when he joins a collective that carries out the "wish of a great mass of people" (237). Standing on stage next to Brecht's image, one of the play's characters explains what "Mr. Bertolt Brecht" intends to prove with Gay's reassembly:

Mr. Bertolt Brecht goes on to show
 That you can change a man from top to toe.
 You'll see a man remodeled [*ummontiert*] like a car
 Without incurring the slightest loss or scar. (35)

Like Musil, Brecht did not lament the loss of a stable notion of identity. Unlike Musil, Brecht stayed with his endorsement of the individual's subjugation to a collective securely installed in a functionalist framework. Brecht had no need to be interested in these transformations themselves

since he expected they would be controlled and channeled by political movements and institutions.

The project of shaping the new man offered Brecht the same clarity of purpose that Musil experienced during the mobilization but no longer trusted after the war. Brecht evaluated everything according to its usefulness in advancing toward a new society. Consequently, neither Gay's reassembly nor his violent acts posed a challenge to his functionalism. Brecht instructed the radio audience of *A Man's a Man* in 1927:

The guns that are to hand and the guns that are still manufactured are turned for [the new human type] or against him. The houses that exist and are being built are built to oppress him or shelter him. All live works created or applied in our time set out to discourage him or to put courage in him. And any work that has nothing to do with him is not alive and has nothing to do with anything. (236)

Brecht calculated the political potential of the malleable self as a “functionalist cynic,” as a means to serve the ideological purposes of a fundamentally new and just society (Sloterdijk 1987, 434–59). Fitting perfectly into the matrix of victory and defeat, Brecht presented Gay's transformation as a model of how to reassemble meek individuals into triumphant collectives.

A militant avant-gardist like Brecht regarded the malleable self from the safe distance of his ideological position. He saw raw materials to be shaped into powerful instruments that would secure social and political change.

This Galy Gay is by no means a weakling; on the contrary, he is the strongest of all. That is to say he becomes the strongest once he has ceased to be a private person; he only becomes strong in the mass [. . .]. No doubt you will go on to say that it's a pity that a man should be tricked like this and simply forced to surrender his precious ego, all he possesses (as it were); but it isn't. It's a jolly business. For this Galy Gay comes to no harm; he wins. And a man who adopts such an attitude is bound to win. (Brecht 1977, 237)

While the outcome of such transformations has never to be the same—the malleable self might be fitted to a marauding posse as in *A Man's a Man* or a militant collective fighting for a new human society—Brecht's “hard commitment to psychological functionalism” remained safely embedded in the paradigm of means and ends (Sloterdijk 1987, 442). Any means are

justified to establish a new and just society. Be it the remodeling of those who could be used for political struggle, or the elimination of those who stood in the way because they improved upon society's secondary failures (poverty, health care, education, etc.) but refused to attack its root problem, capitalism.⁴ Neither the malleable self nor violent action raised doubts in Brecht's adherence to the functionalist paradigm. Its psychological functionalism lends this approach the semblance of daring robustness. However, with the goal of a new society in sight, Brecht had no need or great interest in taking a closer look at the sudden transformations of the malleable self.

Without the benefit of the prospect of a new man, Musil questioned the functionalist paradigm once he began to rethink his concept of the self and developed his theory of the malleable self. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Musil continued to expect that the loss of war and the new political order would have affected the inner core of the Germans. His path to the notion of the malleable self was not a short one. He predicted that the unprecedented scale of destruction and the humiliation of defeat would have the same shattering effect on the Austrians' and the Germans' sense of identity that Törless foresaw for the tortured and raped Basini. The experience of war and defeat should have broken their inner trust in social conventions and institutions, destroyed the horizon of their social expectations, and exploded every self-image Germans might have cherished in the past. Any apparent return to preexisting norms and conventions, Musil suggested, was nothing more than a provisional mask to hide the generational trauma, a pretense of normality and continuity that would soon fall apart.

One must also not avoid the question of what this war actually was. One cannot simply go away as if one had simply shaken off some state of intoxication, in which millions of people had lost their nearest relatives or their livelihood. This must tear the people apart, it is one of those repressed experiences that take revenge in the form of hysteria. (Musil 1998, 270–71)

A few years later, Musil reconsidered his predictions on the impact of war violence. The absence of hysteria and the persistence of preexisting social customs prompted Musil to look at *The German as a Symptom* (1923). In response to the people's apparent ability to walk away from the war experience, Musil formulated his "theorem of human shapelessness," a theorem that finally broke with the assumption of a stable human nature,

a permanent self, or an innermost individuality that the subject could unfold and realize during the bildungsroman of his life (PS 167).

Instead of hoping for a new man to shape society in his own image, as Benjamin and Brecht did, Musil focused with his theorem on the seemingly inexhaustible human ability to adapt to ever changing social situations (Amman 2007, 22). The theorem of human shapelessness leaves little space for an individual psychology of inner motivation and self-directedness and questions any “new” man’s agency to create a new world among the ruins of the old. Whether someone will build a new world, write modernist poetry, or prepare a cannibalistic meal is not determined by retraceable inner motivations and decisions. It is dependent on, as Musil writes, but never fully explained by the historical situation.

I would argue that a cannibal transplanted to a European environment as an infant would probably become a good European, and the sensitive Rainer Maria Rilke would have become a good cannibal. (PS 167)

Rather than proposing an intricately difficult and inner-directed notion of subjectivity that requires shelter from exposure to historical catastrophes, as Lethen claims, Musil’s notion of the self emerges as difficult because of its bloblike indeterminacy and its lack of inner directedness (Lethen 2002, 6). As Stefan Jonsson convincingly argues, Musil broke after the war with “an expressivist notion of the human subject” (2000, 7). Musil came to reject the idea that every person has an inner core of identity and that its beliefs, actions, and social positions were the expressions of such centered and coherent identity.

Even Musil’s most intricately represented subject, Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man Without Qualities*, was projected to undergo an instantaneous transformation in August 1914. Ulrich’s metamorphosis into an elated bellicist should not be read as an indication of the failure of the Musilian subject when exposed to suddenly accelerating historical situations (MoE 1932). Just as *The Man Without Qualities* is not a utopian novel, Ulrich represents no utopian model of subjectivity.⁵ He is not a new man who could exist apart from his historical surroundings but remains part and parcel of Musil’s exploration of human shapelessness in a sociopolitical environment that let World War I become both a possibility and a reality.

Robert Musil and the First World War

Einheit! Einheit! Brust an Brust, ein Reigen des Volkes, Blut, nicht mehr eingesperrt im kärglichen Kreislauf des Körpers, sondern süß rollend und doch wiederkehrend durch das unendliche China.

—Kafka, NS 291

To appreciate how Musil arrived at the notion of the malleable self, a reading of his atypical analysis of the war experience might be the best approach. Musil is not set apart from his contemporaries by his initial war enthusiasm or his postwar disillusionment. He differs from them with his analysis of the war experience and his eventual break with the instrumental paradigm of violence. To determine Musil's unique achievement one can compare his reflections to those of Jünger and Benjamin. These two writers mark the outer limits of a wide-ranging consensus among Weimar intellectuals and their theories of war, experience, and violence.

Musil's initial glorification of war and its dissolution of the individual into a national collective displays important similarities to Jünger's war writings. A closer look reveals equally significant differences in the conclusions they drew from their war experiences. In 1914, Musil renounced individualism, and was exhilarated that all Germans formed just one collective with one purpose: the defense of the German tribe (Musil 1978, 1022). Mass death was no threat to the collective's existence but testified to its immortality. Jünger's war diaries speak of a similar "inner unity" [*innerliche Geschlossenheit*] among soldiers that reached an intimacy unattainable by verbal communication: "we don't seem to be separate human beings anymore but merged into one, guided by instinct and therefore superior, in this minute, to any imaginable intelligence" (Jünger 1926, 212–13). Death became the joyful homecoming to a primordial collective. "With the last quiver," Jünger claimed, the dying soldier returned "from a personality to a larger being that carries everything within itself" (Jünger 1922, 122). Musil and Jünger regarded the individual's dissolution into a sort of collective body as a death-defying event. Invoking the cliché that those who die defending their nation will live forever, Musil wrote, "today, this is no exaggeration but an experience" (Musil 1978, 1022). Compared to this glorious experience of transcending the boundaries of individuality and life, even love paled in significance. In September 1914, love was, in Musil's eyes, no more than "a tiny splinter" compared to what he felt during mobilization and expected from warfare (Musil 1978, 1022).

But the differences between Musil and Jünger are just as notable. Musil's

collective comprised all Germans; Jünger spoke only of soldiers. Jünger's war experiences united the front generation but separated soldiers from civilians: "Like a primeval forest, the war keeps us year for year more and more in its ban; we begin to doubt whether anything beyond its borders exists" (Jünger 1978–2003, vol. 1, 304). For Jünger, war violence engendered a new brotherhood, a new community, from which a new man could arise, but his war did not create a national collective. Insisting on such an abyss between those who faced war and those who stayed home became one of the most divisive founding myths of the Weimar Republic—be it as the *Dolchstoßlegende* in postwar politics or the idea of a collapse of tradition and the anticipation of a new man and new society.

Musil's reluctance to accept the idea of a fundamental break in historical continuity is based on his own war experience. His letters to his family offer a far more ordinary representation of the war than the one Jünger stylized and Benjamin theorized. Musil's diaries and correspondence indicate his continued close contact with family and friends throughout the war. His diary offers no evidence that he experienced any higher union with his fellow soldiers (Corino 2003, 497–592). Rather than suffering an irreparable rupture between home and front, past and present, Robert and Martha Musil visited each repeatedly at home and at his war stations. Such sustained dialogue on social matters and family affairs was typical for soldiers during the First World War. Instead of depicting soldiers as lost in war's primeval forest, the historical research of military mail concluded that front soldiers kept in regular contact with their families and stayed involved with the day-to-day activities at home. The rift between the civilian and military life appears far less significant than previous research had assumed (Schumann 2004, 19).

In contrast to popular postwar literature, death and destruction remained a rare exception in Musil's war experience. Musil experienced these rare moments of imminent danger not as becoming part of a new collective but as extremely personal experiences. Such a singular experience stands at the center of Musil's story *The Blackbird* (1936). From the early notes and sketches to its final form, the story reflects Musil's dissociation from the dominant war discourse in postwar German literature. In its final version, the close encounter with death forges no unbreakable bond among soldiers but separates the story's narrator from his comrades. An unnamed Austrian veteran recounts an Italian attack with "aerial darts" [*Fliegerpfeile*], sharp iron rods that pilots dropped on soldiers—a primitive, imprecise, but lethal weapon. After surviving a similar aerial attack near Tenna, Italy, Musil wrote an early sketch, en-

titled “A Soldier Narrates” (1915–16). In several aspects, Musil’s narrator adheres to standard accounts of front experience and depicts the war as a religious experience: “I received my baptism of fire and was admitted to the invisible church” (PuS 752). Nonetheless, this early draft introduced important deviations from the popularized images of war violence. The narrator describes the experience of lethal danger as a deeply personal and even egoistical event. He alone notices the airplane, hears the singing sound of the falling stick, and decides not to alert his comrades to the mortal danger of their situation.

I asked myself: should I warn the others? Should we scurry for cover like mice? I didn’t want to; I was caught up selfishly in my experience, should the others get hit, without getting anything from it. (PuS 753)

The dart hits the ground, throws him off his feet, and the narrator receives the rewards for his selfishness. His experience was nothing short of a “private consecration” (PuS 753). If this soldier entered the invisible church of war, then he left his fellow soldiers behind.

Rewriting the event for *The Blackbird*, Musil removed the religious references but kept the narrator’s atypical account of self-centeredness.

Cautiously I looked at the other faces, but no one else was aware of its approach. And at that moment when I became convinced that I alone heard that subtle singing [*feinen Gesang*], something rose up out of me to meet it, a ray of life, equally infinite to that death ray descending from above. (1988, 137; PuS 556)

Again, the other soldiers are merely bystanders, stunned by the spectacle of the narrator’s contorting body, but not transformed by any collective experience. While the narrator awakes from his trance, his whole body blushing, the others start simply looking for the aerial dart as a war souvenir (1988, 138; PuS 557).⁶

Contrary to Jünger’s or Remarque’s war literature, Musil did not depict war as a unique opportunity to access an otherwise unattainable experience, be it sublime or horrifying. When Musil’s narrator desires repetitions of such inner experience, he finds correspondences to the experiential impact of the aerial attack in far less dramatic circumstances. Associating the flying dart episode with two strange encounters involving blackbirds, one before and one after the war (i.e., these episodes are not traumatic flashbacks to war incidents), Musil’s story rejects the idea of

an experiential uniqueness to the war experience. These innocuous birds evoke experiences that seem just as exceptional and intimate to the narrator as the aerial attack (Musil 1988, 132–33, 143–44).

Rather than showing signs of war nostalgia or a longing for the camaraderie among soldiers, Musil rejected any substantive conception of social collectives in his postwar writings. The war did not split Germans into *Frontkameraden* standing on the one side, unable to speak, and on the other side civilians, unable to understand. In his essay “Nation as Ideal and as Reality” (1921), Musil maintained that claims to collectively shared national or racial traits were based on false premises:

“We Germans” is the fiction of a commonality among manual laborers and professors, gangsters and idealists, poets and film directors, a commonality that does not exist. The true “we” is: We are nothing to each other. (PS 111)

The disillusionment with his own nationalist euphoria led Musil to criticize concepts like “nation,” “race,” and “culture” severely in his postwar essays (Jonsson 2000, 254–55). Rather than accepting them as basic sociological elements, Musil appreciated these constructs as complex outcomes of specific situations.

It appears that the question of the European: What am I? really means: Where am I? It is not a matter of a phase in a process governed by laws, and no matter of a destiny, but simply of a situation. (PS 169)

Or, as the narrator in *The Man Without Qualities* confirmed, “for what is called ‘nation’ and ‘race’ is results and not causes” (MoE 1437; MwQ 1475).

What then is such a Musilian situation? A situation is characterized by its ultimate openness and indeterminacy; even as actual occurrences, they cannot be reduced to predictable outcomes of clearly identifiable chains of necessity. Musil’s concept of a situation is not the opposite of continuity itself, as Bohrer argued in his aesthetic theory of suddenness (Bohrer 1981, 189). The experience of an epiphany, the sudden disruption of stability, as described by Joyce, Hofmannsthal, and Musil as well, is not a necessary ingredient of the Musilian situation. The opposite of the Musilian situation is the lawful historical progression Tolstoy’s narrator attempted but failed to retrace in *War and Peace*. “People are not capable of changing laws,” Musil wrote, “but they certainly can change situations

in this sense, no matter how many imminent laws may have contributed to them” (PS 169). While acknowledging the continuity of causal relations, the Musilian notions of situation and of history remain open to unpredictable change.

Situations cannot be fully explained by their causes, but they can be compared to other situations. As in *The Blackbird*, Musil’s postwar reflections on war and violence are fueled by the desire to demonstrate that no situation is truly exceptional, no experience incomparable. Rather than treating the war as an unprecedented catastrophe, Musil used the war as a point of reference for the postwar situation. While his comparisons border on the unacceptable—and he never intended to publish these notes—they indicate his refusal to mystify the war as an incommunicable experience. Two years after the war, he complained, “All atrocities of the war are excusable when set against the indifference with which one has left the Central States in postwar misery” (T 359). Twenty years later, Musil remembered one of “the strongest old impressions from the war” (T 945). He does not refer to scenes of mass death but recalls a moment that revealed to him the nonexistence of a “We, the Germans” collective and the persistence of regular life during wartime. Observing his fellow soldiers, Musil noticed that hardly anyone did what he did: read books. Musil evoked this “unexpected and wide-ranging contact with average life!” as his most powerful war memory (T 945).

Regardless of his insistence on experiential continuity, Musil did not envision the circumstances of future wars as predetermined by previous war situations. The next war, Musil predicted in an article from 1925, would literally come out of the blue and be decided in a few days. Its path of destruction would not offer any contact with average life to any member of the military, nor would it follow Ludendorff and Hindenburg’s strategic blueprints. New technologies of mass death would revolutionize modern warfare, determine its planning and strategies, and decide its outcome. Musil imagined a swift victory for the first state to launch massive aerial poison gas attacks against enemy civilian populations, not a return to the trenches (PuS 674).

In Musil’s situational approach to history, learning lessons from the past neither prevents the next war nor does it have to be an entirely futile exercise. One way to approach Musil’s understanding of the influence of political actors, large-scale events, and long-term social developments for the course of history is to contrast it to other contemporary undertakings. Musil did not share Norbert Elias’s expectation that the conflicts of the past, moving from tribal fights to modern world wars, were necessary steps toward “the pacification of the earth” (2000, 446). No metanarra-

tive of a civilizing process connects past events to a final and global stage of peaceful conflict resolution. At the same time, Musil did not look at the past through the eyes of Benjamin's angel of history; he did not develop a catastrophic or messianic view of history (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 392). Events of the greatest magnitude might not produce lasting disruptions in the lives of their participants. If large-scale events are no more than ripples on the surface of history, then one could have expected that Musil treated the history of events as “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs,” like Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school did (cited in Trevor-Roper 1999, 26). But Musil insisted emphatically on staying focused on concrete situations and their surface. At a central moment in *The Man Without Qualities*, a rare moment that made its postwar perspective explicit, the narrator corrected the historical reflections of one of his characters.

Had Arnheim been able to see only a few years into the future, he would have seen that 1,920 years of Christian morality, millions of dead men in the wake of a shattering war, and a whole German forest of poetry rustling in homage to the modesty of Woman could not hold back the day when women's skirts and hair began to grow shorter and the young girls on Europe slipped off eons of taboos to emerge for a while naked, like peeled bananas. (MwQ 442–43; MoE 408)

Musil's narrator denies neither the importance of cultural traditions (Christianity, the traditional Western image of women) nor the singular destructive scope of the world war. But none of these developments and events sufficed to explain even comparatively banal developments in woman's fashion. Particular historical situations are influenced by long-term developments (or “imminent laws” as Musil called them earlier) and large-scale events, but considering the “creative energy [. . .] generated by the surface of things” (MwQ 443; MoE 408) they clearly do not determine them.

Consequently, the possibility of war can never be eliminated, but both sweeping and incremental steps in particular situations can make its actualization more or less probable. To minimize the risk of becoming a target for aerial poison gas attacks, Musil advocated in 1925 for Austria's unilateral disarmament. Too small to offer adequate protection, its army could only serve potential aggressors as a pretense for attack. Even the drastic step of abolishing one's military would afford merely a reduction of the risk, but it would not secure peace.

There is no radical means against war. Because there is no radical means against human stupidity, imagination, and bestiality. But there are a few dozen small means that should not remain untried. (PuS 674–75)

No particular political action delivers consistent and reliable war deterrence. As his disarmament proposal indicates, Musil's anthropological foundation of violence resulted in neither resignation nor passivity. Rather than concentrating on the identification, isolation, and elimination of ever more potential causes of social and political violence, Musil focused on the complexity of social situations so overdetermined that their ever-present violent potential eschewed predictability.

Current antireductionist violence research shares Musil's anthropological grounding of the ever-present possibility of violence and adopts a Musilian sense of possibility.⁷ Heinrich Popitz stated most concisely why the focus of traditional violence research on (preventable) causes of violence had to remain inconclusive. Avoiding the moralistic language of stupidity and bestiality, he agreed with Musil's central point on the ubiquitous possibility for violent action in human affairs. "Humans never have to but always are capable of acting violently; they never have to but always can kill [. . .] for all imaginable purposes—everyone" (Popitz 1992, 50). The occurrence of violent acts is not dependent on identifiable causes or motives that in turn could be controlled or prevented. Every situation is open to nonnecessary violence, and violence opens situations to never fully predictable outcomes. As we have seen in the first chapter on Musil, Popitz emphasized like Musil human imagination as a second anthropological foundation, further delimiting the potential for violent acts. The limitless human ability to imagine violence comprises more than observation and remembrance of actual violence. Musil's own imagination could leave the path of recent trench warfare and anticipate an aerial warfare of still not yet realized devastation. Imagined forms of violence expand the "horizon of possibility" for actual violence (Popitz 1992, 51). In conjunction with human technological intelligence, this twofold delimitation of violence—one of will and one of imagination—opened up the truly boundless capacity for violent interaction.

Taking for granted the omnipresent possibility of violence, Musil and the antireductionists consider the search for controllable or preventable causes and motivations of war and violence as a naive misconception of the interplay between anthropological foundations of human behavior, imagination, and intelligence. Both reject the hope for an eventual abolition or domestication of violence as a dangerous dream of modernity.

Antireductionist violence research substitutes the etiological why question with an interest in how violent situations unfold. As Wolfgang Sofsky suggested in his *Traktat über die Gewalt* (1996), “if one wants to understand the procedure and progression of a massacre, one has to pay attention to how it is carried out, and not for what reason it has been carried out” (Sofsky 1996, 178). With its new emphasis on violent situations and their dynamic character, antireductionist violence research seeks to open up the rather static and deterministic approach of traditional research (Trotha 1997, 22).

Musil’s fundamental disagreement with antireductionist violence research lies in this assessment of the analytical importance of acts of violence. Antireductionist violence research starts from the description of violent situations and continues with an examination of its self-dynamic processes. Sofsky, one of its most radical practitioners, moves barely beyond the thick description of violent events while researchers like Popitz and von Trotha place such descriptions in the context of larger power formations and new global violence markets.⁸ Musil, however, exhibited little interest in describing physical violence. Initially, he intended to include war scenes in his novel, but his enthusiasm for depicting such violence faded during the 1920s. Still planning to continue the plot of *The Man Without Qualities* beyond August 1914, he cautioned himself: “Don’t put so much weight on military aspects,” and he dismissed war episodes as “ornaments” in his outlines (T 586).

With all of the novel’s storylines leading up to the war and the scenes of destruction as mere ornaments, one might conclude that Musil’s novel—despite his antireductionist intentions—offers a reductionist analysis of the war. Rather than looking at war and violence directly, as the antireductionist research suggests, Musil would be preoccupied with a search for the war causes. But the novel pursues the opposite path. It offers not only a sustained critique of the reductionist search for the causes of war and violence but also an antireductionist critique of theories of the self, of emotion, and of narration. This antireductionism is, as the war itself, “the thought that is implicit in everything” depicted in *The Man Without Qualities* (MwQ 1748). The antireductionist impetus of Musil’s reflections on war and violence allowed him to focus on the one phenomenon that had remained too horrifying to contemplate in *The Confusions of Young Törless*. The possibility that violence and humiliation might not shatter the self, the idea that the effects and dynamics of violent action did not fit into the functionalist paradigm of cause and effect, action and result, moved to the center in Musil’s conception of *The Man Without Qualities*.

Ulrich, the novel's narrator, and Musil, the novel's author, search for responses to the challenge of the malleable self. While their interests and arguments are often overlapping, there is one crucial difference to note. Ulrich will not be able to sustain a life structured by the sense of possibility, and he responds at central moments with a longing for violent singularity and disruption. In the novel Ulrich develops a theory of emotion that blurs the boundaries between the "I" and the world of experience, between inside and outside, beginning and end. Ulrich argues against the assumption that emotions are retraceable to their moment of origin, against the idea that emotions are triggered mainly by outside stimuli. Ulrich's genealogy of emotion insists on their temporal undeterminedness.

The arousing stimulus does not actually strike an existing state, like the ball [*Kugel*] in the mechanical contraption that sets off a sequence of consequences like falling dominos, but continues in time, calling forth a fresh supply of inner forces that both work according to its sense and vary its effect. And just as little does the emotion, once present, dissipate immediately in its effects, nor does it itself remain the same even for an instant, resting, as it were, in the middle between the processes it assimilates and transmits; it is connected with a constant changing in everything to which it has connection internally and externally, and also receives reactions from both directions. (MwQ 1259–60; MoE 1157)

The model of the malleable self structured Ulrich's theory of emotion. Instead of establishing a linear sequence between cause and effect, between the outside stimulus and its interior experience, Ulrich observes an overlapping series of reactions and repercussions for which no precise moments of origin and dissolution can be identified.

Just as no unclouded origin of an emotion exists, no single emotion ever determines the subject's behavior. Emotions (and the actions they propel) remain in a Deleuzian state of becoming. As Ulrich writes, there is "never this or that specific emotion that is present at the beginning—say, in a weak state—together with its mode of action, but only something that is appropriate and has been destined to become such an emotion and action, which however, it never becomes in a pure state" (MwQ 1274; MoE 1170). Only in a pure state—Ulrich defines it as an "attitude entirely under the domination of a single emotion" (MwQ 1297; MoE 1190)—would the malleable self escape constant change and reach a state of unchanging rest. During the experience of ecstasy the self comes

closest to such a pure state. Ulrich acknowledges the desire for reaching such a pure state, for experiencing a timeless disruption of continuity, but he regards it as unattainable. Pure states are *Gedankenbilder*, “mental constructs,” since “true ecstasies—whether mystical, martial, or those of love groups or other transported communities—always presuppose a cluster of interrelated emotions and arise from a circle of ideas that reflects them” (MwQ 1298; MoE 1191). No experience reaches this notion of singularity to extract itself from its context; the Musilian subject can at no point in time break away from its actual situation. The pure state, as Ulrich quotes Swedenborg, belongs to angels and not humans (MwQ 1310; MoE 1202).⁹

Ulrich discovered a similarly impossible desire for linearity in the subject’s attempt to structure its life as a narrative. In the often discussed chapter “Going Home” (“Heimkehr”), Ulrich notes that “most people relate to themselves as storytellers” (MwQ 709; MoE 650). They compel the flurry of their biographical data into an “orderly sequence of facts,” link them with “because” or “in order that” to create a sense of coherence, purpose, and meaning (MwQ 709; MoE 650). To produce such a story of one’s life creates a calming, reassuring effect, the semblance of a self’s consistency. Rather than being an intersection of coincidences, intentions, and circumstances, one’s life gains the comforting structure of a narrative with a beginning and (eventually) an end. Each detail is supposed to correspond meaningfully to another so that one’s life story reveals one’s inner nature. Ulrich recognized such a narrative of order, purpose, and unity for the self as a popular self-deception and became aware that he “lost the elementary, narrative mode of thought [*das primitiv Epische*]” (MwQ 709; MoE 650). Aware of his own malleability, Ulrich accepts that his life unfolded not along the lines of a *bildungsroman* but developed like a rhizome into a multitude of changing directions. Knowing that no one is the author of one’s life does not seem to disturb Ulrich. Without any sign of shock or irritation he moves effortlessly from the traditional linear mode of self-narration to the metaphor of an “infinitely interwoven surface” for any life story (MwQ 709; MoE 650). As we will see, however, the ease with which he lets go of the idea of an inner core of identity is deceptive and becomes less and less tenable once Ulrich contemplates the role of the malleable self in the course of history. While Ulrich accepted the conclusion that no single red thread of meaning connects the events of one’s life, he could not bear the consequences that resulted from the notion of the malleable self for an understanding of the course of history. This inability resulted in a new form of self-deception for the man with a sense of possibilities.

The Path of History and the Causalities of War in *The Man Without Qualities*

The malleability that characterizes Musil's notion of the self reappears in his concept of history. Musil represented the structural similarity between the self and history not as a possibility for harmonious coexistence in *The Man Without Qualities* but as an increasingly untenable situation for its protagonist. Rather than becoming a model for a utopian new man, Ulrich, as the self-aware malleable self, desires the singularity of a pure state and fantasizes about becoming a man of brute coherence. Musil approached the writing of history in *The Man Without Qualities* not by establishing a genealogy of war but by representing a wide range of individual responses to changing situations. Like Tolstoy's narrator in *War and Peace*, he does not identify a sufficient cause for the war but neither does he denounce the possibility of human freedom even when considering the idea of (unfelt) laws of history. In Musil's perception, history takes on a malleable shape without a firm core, without a predictable path to follow. History moves for Musil and Ulrich like clouds and not billiard balls. This metaphor for historical development carries, however, different meanings when first the essayist Musil and later the protagonist of his novel associate the course of history and nephology, the science of clouds and its movements. Musil introduced the parallel between the historians' attempt to construct a causal progression of history with the rather futile attempts of meteorologists to trace and predict cloud movements in 1923 while working on his essay *The German as Symptom*.

The path of history is in fact not that of a billiard ball, which, once struck, follows a predictable course, but resembles rather the path of a cloud, which also follows the laws of physics but is equally influenced by something that can only be called a coinciding of facts.
(PS 169; ERK 1374)

Cloud movements escape traceable causality—nephology is no promising issue in meteorology—but they neither defy the laws of physics nor are they mere accidents. Musil's metaphor suggests that historical events are linked by intelligible causality but predicts that the reductionist approach to history will get lost quickly in imprecision and overgeneralizations when it sounds out the past or makes long-term predictions. Due to an inexhaustible multiplicity of causes and facts, Musil's concept of history fits on neither side of the alternative between representing historical continu-

ity or discontinuity. Too unstable to move along any straight or curved path, it deviates from the realist model of linear time, of neatly ordering events according to the logic of before and after, cause and effect. Musil's concepts of history and the malleable self do not fit the idea of a civilizing process that Benjamin ascribed to the German Social Democrats and his concepts are not in keeping with their premise of "an infinite perfectibility of humanity" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 394). In contrast to Benjamin's theses on history, however, Musil's path of clouds does not allow for a "tiger's leap into the past" or anticipate a historical materialist grasping the revolutionary moment and exploding "the continuum of history" (394). Just as the malleable self follows no trajectory according to which "each soul has to perfect its own possibilities into reality," as Musil still believed while writing *The Confusions of Young Törless*, so Musil's postwar notion of history does not anticipate a "redeemed mankind [that] is granted the fullness of its past" (T 161; Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 390).¹⁰ But Jonsson goes too far by claiming that "Musil's narrative effectively negates a continuous view of history" and "attempts to render discontinuity" (Jonsson 2000, 239). Neither the malleable self nor the sense of possibility nor the clouds of historical movement can be reconciled with the images of break, rupture, and discontinuity. Just as they do not fit any concept of linear teleology.

The Man Without Qualities follows situations that are partly structured by discernible sequences of cause and effect but that are also influenced, modified, and redirected by chance, choice, and reverberations. Rather than grasping "for a historical moment without intelligible causality" (Jonsson 2000, 239), Musil and his novel's narrator grasp for a historical moment with too many causalities. As cheerful as it might sound, this search for causalities will never be fruitless but always futile.

That I suddenly stand where I am is a fact, a result, and if one calls it necessary, because in the last analysis everything has its causes, then this bears the character of preserving something in the name of causality; but it is quite useless, since we will never be able to make good on it. (PS 169; ERK 1374–75)

Such a last analysis, as a full account of the causalities of a historical event, would be possible only on Judgment Day when for "a redeemed mankind [. . .] its past [has] become citable in all its moments" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 390). In contrast to Benjamin, however, Musil knows of no such standpoint of redemption, no end of history, but always expects that the next moment and a new circumstance might steer history

ever so slightly into an eventually momentous but unpredictable direction.

Consequently, the novel's search for the cause of war moves in a multitude of directions. Musil's announcement that all of its threads lead to war might very well be correct, but they cross and intersect so that no deterministic path to war emerges. War is an extreme but not a necessary outcome—just like Rilke, the cannibal, and Musil, the warmonger. Instead of a retraceable chain of events, the novel presents shifting situations that remain in conflict with all the readings discussed above. Neither mobilization nor war remains forever out of its reach, as Bernstein suggests, nor does *The Man Without Qualities* present a utopian countermodel to the catastrophic past, as Jonsson argues. Musil's novel offers its critique of the causes of war without expecting their identification might prevent another, already looming war, as McBride proposed. Nor does the novel validate Ulrich's equation of war with the other condition. Musil's insistence on the complexity of situations and his theorem of human shapelessness undermine Ulrich's equation of war and the other condition just as they oppose the postwar consensus from Benjamin to Jünger that interpreted the war as a break of continuity while raising the hope for new redemptive beginnings. As with his theory of emotions and his reflections on narrating the self, Musil argues in his analysis of war and violence against traditional linear models—and the notions of break and discontinuity remained dependent on these models—and in favor of the interwoven nets of complex situations.

With historical hindsight, any reader of the novel can detect signs and causes of the eventual war.¹¹ The failure of the Habsburg Empire to keep the multiethnic state together surfaces in the Hungarian distrust against German-Austrians and the intensifying desire of the Slavic minorities to leave the empire to join Russia or claim independence. The so-called Parallel Campaign—the search committee for a grand idea celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the emperor Franz Joseph's peaceful reign in 1918—becomes the target of anti-German demonstrations. The signing of mutual defense treaties in Europe sanctioning the swift escalation to open hostilities is brought up in discussion, but the treaties' implications are never taken seriously. The news of “the world famous Swedish actress Vogelsang's confession that she had never in all her life slept as well as on this, her first night in Kakania,” appears to be as of equal magnitude with an Austrian military action against Serbia (MwQ 488; MoE 449). The number of Parallel Campaign members who know of Arnheim's secret interests in the Galician oil reserves, crucial for any German-Austrian war games, increases continuously, but the participants respond with surprise

and delight at finding themselves among those in the know, rather than showing an awareness of a looming war (MwQ 1091, 1094, 1096, 1106; MoE 1005, 1008, 1009, 1019).

As they occur, none of the novel's characters linked these events to a chain of necessity. Among the earliest drafts, this one dating from 1920, Musil wrote that the war should come unexpectedly and as a surprise "especially to the more acute observer," and he planned to contrast such a seasoned political observer with a right-wing German nationalist who would not be surprised by the war (T 357). In *The Man Without Qualities* the well-connected but politically naive figure of Diotima is such a person of sometimes surprising prescience, especially with regard to the novel's sole representative of the Austrian military. Diotima goes, as she says, "into a panic every time [General Stumm von Bordwehr] comes up to me," and she characterizes the general as a figure of death and a "hyena," as the one member of the Parallel Campaign who just waits until its "best efforts come to nothing" (MwQ 507; MoE 466). When she offers her harsh judgment on General Stumm von Bordwehr's genteel personality, she seems patently unfair, and is completely unaware that General Stumm von Bordwehr is deeply infatuated with her. Ulrich and the narrator dismiss her fearful premonition outright. Half a year later, a few weeks before the war, Diotima's assessment appears in a different light when Stumm von Bordwehr tells Count Leinsdorf, "Give me the newspapers, the radio, the film industry, and maybe a few other avenues of cultural communication, and within a few years—as my friend Ulrich once said—I promise I'll turn people into cannibals!" (MwQ 1107; MoE 1020). At the same time, Musil takes care not to transform Diotima into a Viennese Cassandra. In contrast to Ulrich, she completely ignores and misreads the long-term interests and intentions of the Prussian industrialist von Arnheim as he seeks to secure the oil and fuel resources for the German industrial-military complex (MwQ 509; MoE 468).

Ulrich, the novel's brilliant protagonist, frequently taken to be Musil's "New Man" (Bartram and Payne 2004, 107), should be an acute political observer, but he is depicted as a rather careless analyst of the European crisis. The possibility of war at Austria's border is of no particular concern to him during the first weeks of 1914.

Was there a war actually going on in the Balkans or not? Some sort of intervention was undoubtedly going on, but whether it was war was hard to tell. So much was astir in the world. (MwQ 390; MoE 359)

So many events occur simultaneously—an earthquake in Japan, a new high-altitude aircraft record, Jack Johnson becoming world boxing champion, record fees for tenors, French-Russian negotiations—that a war in the Balkans might get lost in the mix (just as the news of Johnson's success reaches the surface of Ulrich's attention six years after the fact). The multiplicity of local, national, and international news overwhelms his capacity to filter and weigh their potential historical importance.

Because of his highly developed sense of possibility, Ulrich is best prepared to resist the reductionist urge to delve below the surface of historical circumstance and go fishing for origins and first causes. To understand, however, that he lives under sociopolitical conditions that defy complete causal analysis does not shield Ulrich from the frustrations resulting from the disjunction between cognitive appetite and an acknowledgment of the limits of reason. Lichtenberg defined the human as the "causal animal," the "Ursachen-Tier." While animals and humans share instincts for self-preservation and propagation, Lichtenberg identified the causal instinct as uniquely human. This instinct compels humans "to seek out relations that it entitles causes, and to concern itself with a multitude of things that appear not to affect it at all in God's wide world, as though perhaps because there are causes there for the causal animal to hunt, to which it is continually spurred on by a sort of spiritual hunger, by curiosity" (cited in Blumenberg 1985, 426). Ulrich is just as aware of the excessive quality of this causal instinct as his author. Like Musil and his narrator, Ulrich views causal explanations of historical events as reckless oversimplifications of multifaceted situations. Unlike his narrator, however, Ulrich exhibits signs of exasperation because of the weak notions of agency and purpose this view of history entails. Because of this difference between narrator and protagonist, the meaning of Ulrich's historical reflections differ greatly from theirs, even, and in particular when Ulrich cites almost verbatim Musil's comparison of the passage of clouds and the movement of history. To accept the absence of a red thread in anyone's self-narrative does not shield Ulrich from experiencing powerlessness in his own situation. Unlike the narrator, Ulrich longs repeatedly for historical situations that call for the straightforward linearity of cause and effect.

While Ulrich feels superior to those failing to recognize and accept the lack of authorship over their own lives, he is repulsed by his own "helpless contemporaneity," by the lethargic acceptance of changes and conditions to which he like everyone has to submit while traveling on the path of history (MwQ 391; MoE 360). The insight into the messiness of personal, social, and political events fits so well with Ulrich's theory of subjectivity that his insistence on a path of history comes as a surprise. If

no storyline runs like a red thread through the events of a single life, then no pathway should lead across the muddle of historical occurrences. To his distress and surprise, Ulrich notes, however, the very existence of such a path. Clearly, he perceives no easily discernible one-way street of historical progress, but even though history looks up close like a “morass” Ulrich is convinced that “there does seem to be a path across it, that very ‘path of history’ of which nobody knows the starting point” (MwQ 390–91; MoE 360). While Ulrich could adapt to the lack of authorial control on the level of his personal life, the same lack of agency nauseates Ulrich on the level of historical change.

Ulrich’s path of history bears no resemblance to a Hegelian unfolding of reason and lacks the tragedy of Benjamin’s angel of history to whom history appears as one single catastrophe. Sitting in a streetcar on his way home, Ulrich recognizes his present situation as a metaphor for being transported down the path of history.

The luminous, swaying box in which he was riding seemed to be a machine in which several hundred kilos of people were being rattled around, by way of being processed into “the future.” A hundred years earlier, they had sat in a mail coach with the same look on their faces, and a hundred years hence, whatever was going on, they would be sitting as new people in exactly the same way in their updated transport machines. (MwQ 391; MoE 360)

Forever stuck in history’s always changing streetcars, Ulrich experiences a “truly demeaning stringing along with the centuries” and is infuriated by having to serve as the “stuff of history” (MwQ 391; MoE 360). He is “revolted by this lethargic acceptance of changes and conditions,” by the idea that depending on the shape of the streetcar, he would be a cannibal, an ancient Greek, or some version of a future man (MwQ 391; MoE 360). Ulrich gets off the streetcar, decides to walk home, and on the way analyzes history as a flux of perpetually underdetermined situations. Ulrich’s walk and his reflections on history have to be understood as critically commenting on each other.

Ulrich’s theory of history focuses on repetition and difference, partly reiterating Musil’s ruminations in *The German as Symptom* (1923). He uses the Habsburg Empire as a metaphor for history itself. As an empire with a center and a wide periphery, Ulrich observes at the core of historical development an abundance of authors with no original ideas who plagiarize each other incessantly. Change originates at the margin but without authorial intent. While repetition regulates the center, difference,

in the form of small incidents at the periphery, propels unforeseen repercussions to the center. Transplanting a generation of modern-day children to ancient Egypt would not seem to change world history. If these children were exposed to Egyptian religion, culture, economy, politics, and social traditions then, Musil and Ulrich argue, world history would start repeating itself from 5000 BC onward (MwQ 392; PS 164; MoE 361; ERK 1368). After an initial period of repetition, however, history's trajectory would "for reasons nobody could fathom, gradually begin to deviate from its established course" (MwQ 392; MoE 361).

Shaped by his own historical circumstances, Ulrich identifies the "law of world history" as the "muddling through" that Musil recognized in 1923 as Austria's governing principle (MwQ 392; PS 169; MoE 361; ERK 1374). Such ambling movement anticipates neither radical turns (catastrophes) nor predictable steps (of an unfolding of reason) but turns to Musil's metaphor for the path of history: the movement of clouds. Ulrich's reiteration of Musil's theses on history and the self introduces small but far-reaching differences, and changes the direction and meaning of these clouds of history. Ulrich concludes his reflections on history:

The course of history was therefore not that of a billiard ball—which once it is hit, takes a definite line—but resembles the movement of clouds, or the path of a man sauntering through the streets, turned aside by a shadow here, a crowd there, an unusual architectural outcrop, until at last he arrives at a place he never knew or meant to go to. Inherent in the course of history is a certain going off course. (MwQ 392; MoE 361)

Ulrich's metaphorological reflections on history are brilliant to the point of self-deception; they afford him a similarly calming sense of security that the people around him get when they create their self-deceivingly linear life narratives.

Viewing history as a natural phenomenon, Ulrich transforms the path of history into something that is, at least theoretically, just as explainable as the movements of the visible mass of frozen crystals floating in the atmosphere above him. But by moving the comparison between clouds and history from the abstract context of an essay on history and the self to Ulrich's concrete situation in one of Vienna's streetcars, Musil changed the meaning of his metaphor. Ulrich gets off the frightening streetcar of history and observes from a safe distance and with both feet on the ground the path of history as a distant and rather harmless movement of clouds. By safely placing history into the sky, he recoups his earlier "feeling that

he was on his way somewhere” and regards himself again as “the instrument of a not unimportant purpose” (MwQ 160; MoE 151). Rather than staying passively stuck in history’s streetcar, on his walk Ulrich regains the semblance of agency, orientation, and safe distance from the process of history. Even though he veers slightly off course on the streets of Vienna—just as his cloudy notion of history—he recovers his bearing immediately, never losing sight of his intended destination. Even an excellent reader like Honold stops the moment when Ulrich “lost his way” and declares that Ulrich “confirms exactly” on his walk home his reflections on historical progression and digression (Honold 2004, 118). In contrast to history, however, Ulrich has no difficulty adjusting his direction. It takes him no more than “a moment to see where he was and find the best way home” (MwQ 392; MoE 362). While not refuting his reflections on history, the novel exposes simultaneously Ulrich’s need to feel temporary relief from the experience of helpless contemporaneity and his attempt to gain the semblance of control over his own path across time. Rather than affirming Ulrich’s sense of inner directedness, Musil discloses the modernist subject’s tendency to take flight to outmoded notions of the self when confronting its own unstable place in history.

The novel’s narrator is never at risk of losing his analytical sovereignty or his antireductionist stance. The perpetual inability to fixate origins, causes, and necessities does not challenge his self-understanding but offers opportunities to satirize those driven by their causal instinct to hunt for necessities everywhere. In the early 1930s, Musil drafted a chapter for the last part of the novel that addressed directly the question of the causes of war. Where could one track down the “Herd des Weltkriegs,” the “crucible of the World War” (MwQ 1474; MoE 1436)? As the narrator notes, depending on the observer’s age and education, the war’s origin moves with great agility from place to place. It had been found in Sarajevo, in the world capitals, in the armaments industry, or on the Galician oil fields. The search for the war’s cause arrived at the “extremely positive negative result that the cause was everywhere and in everyone” (MwQ 1476; MoE 1438). Like the narrator in *War and Peace*, Musil’s narrator finds a billion probable causes but no sufficient ones. Instead of experiencing a historian’s frustration, however, he depicts this situation with satirical exuberance and renders absurd this reductionist expectation with a startling example of genealogical logic:

For “origins” and “causes” are like a person who goes searching for his parents: in the first instance he has two, that is indisputable; but with grandparents it’s the square of two, with great-grandparents

two to the third, and so on in a powerfully unfolding series, which is totally unassailable but which yields the remarkable result that at the beginning of time there must have been an almost infinite number of people whose purpose was merely to produce a single of today's individuals. (MwQ 1474; MoE 1436)

Neither an individual's life nor the origin of war is explainable by traceable causalities. Both are results of specific situations, spread out on the "infinitely interwoven surface" (MwQ 709; MoE 650).

In contrast to the amused narrator, Ulrich is a hyperintelligent proponent of such antireductionist theories of war and subjectivity but also its appalled, frustrated, and resistant object. While the narrator sustains an ironic distance from the world, Ulrich experiences himself as a mere particle in the "stuff of history." The narrator exposes without signs of irritation the excessive quality of the causal instinct. Ulrich grows increasingly aggravated when his sister Agathe forces him to explicate the role of causality in human interaction. In their extensive conversation in one of the novel's last finished chapters, Agathe pushes Ulrich to clarify whether every human act can be justified and whether any act is ever caused by necessity. Rather than answering the first question directly, Ulrich proposes a theory of the next step. He argues that Agathe's inquiry—and with it the method of "backshadowing"—is based on a false presupposition: "It's never what one does that counts, but only what one does next!" (MwQ 798; MoE 735). No action can be judged on its immediate merits but only retrospectively, from the position of a subsequent action. Every action is, however, fraught with perpetual instability since no action escapes its place in the shadow of yet another action. Ulrich's theory of the next step presupposes a never-ending series and keeps the justification of any single action in a state of perpetual tentativeness.

When confronted with an act of ultimate violence and finality, Ulrich hesitates to answer Agathe's question about whether the state of perpetual tentativeness applies to the act of murder as well. In contrast to the narrator who takes events of extreme violence as his example for rejecting notions of beginning and end, Ulrich neither sustains nor renounces his moral theory of the next step when challenged by Agathe's hypothetical murder. Initially, he is tempted to defend his theory. The act of murder might allow new insights into the constitution of subjectivity; the perpetrator could develop his aesthetic talents and communicate his experiences in "a poem that would enrich the inner life of thousands of people" (MwQ 799; MoE 735). But Ulrich decides to keep such a justification for murder to himself since only a lunatic or "an eighteen-year-

old aesthete” would not see that such egregious justification for murder would “contradict the laws of nature” (MwQ 799; MoE 735). Uncertain about the existence of such laws of nature, Ulrich decides not to answer his sister at all.

While the narrator in *The Man Without Qualities* sustains his ironic distance from the ethical implications of the theory of the next step, Ulrich rejects Agathe’s assumption that this theory suggests a life of no remorse since every successive step might fundamentally change the meaning of the preceding action. For Ulrich, the theory of the next step exposes the risks of a life shaped by a sense of possibility. The constant possibility of reevaluating past deeds frustrates his desire of “achieving reality” (MwQ 799; MoE 735). “The truth is, we have no proper method of dealing with unending series. Dear Agathe,” he said abruptly, “I sometimes regret my entire life” (MwQ 799; MoE 735–36). Ulrich is caught in an alternative of all or nothing. With every act always fitted into an infinite series of possible reassessments, regretting a single act might erupt suddenly into regretting an entire life. To live one’s life with a keen sense of possibility is a dangerous proposition.

This risk of living with a sense of possibility surfaces even more prominently once the siblings’ conversation shifts from retrospective justification and “backshadowing” to the question whether any action can be qualified as necessary. Their conversation foreshadows Ulrich’s enthusiastic response to the general mobilization, as Musil sketched it in notes and drafts. Agathe demands to know from Ulrich “in which moments does something in life strike us as necessary?” (MwQ 801; MoE 737). Ulrich’s brusque answer combines his rejection of causality with an acknowledgment of a desire for necessity. The mundane activity of turning over in one’s bed serves as his example of how necessity occurs in a situation lacking a clear sequence of cause and effect:

You’re in an uncomfortable position [*Lage*]; you incessantly think of changing it and decide on one move and then another, without doing anything; finally you give up; and then all at once you’ve turned over! One really should say you’ve been turned over. That’s the pattern we act on, whether in a fit of passion or after long reflection. (MwQ 801; MoE 737)

Ulrich elaborates his theory of (passive) action when he and Agathe are neither in bed nor in a fit of passion but during an excursion to a hilltop, the so-called Swedish ramparts. Local legend associates the place with

a Swedish siege during the Thirty Years' War. Even though the narrator doubts that the huge mound ever was a Swedish fortification, Ulrich remembers the spell this hilltop held on him in his youth. While he discusses the logical impossibility of exempting any act from retrospective judgments and the failure to identify any decisive action as necessary and predictable, Ulrich longs for "something as end in itself, authentic," for a situation that releases him from all deliberations and determinations (MwQ 801; MoE 737). Ulrich anticipates the act of violence as a moment of certainty and authenticity. The Swedish soldiers, he imagines, were "involved in events valid, absolute, without the everlasting tentativeness they have when a person is superior to his experiences" (MwQ 801; MoE 737). Such happy loss of reflective control and the dissolution of uncertainty is, according to Ulrich, identical with the moment before an attack in war. Like Musil in August 1914, Ulrich desires this event as a release from the process of individuation, as a moment more primal than love or death, a moment during which the regret for one's entire life never enters the equation.

"What a glorious feeling it must have been for those Swedish adventurers to reach such a place after trotting relentlessly for weeks, and then from the saddles catch sight of their quarry," he said to his sister after telling her the story of the place. "It is only at such moments that the weight of life, the burden of our secret grievances—that we must all die, that it's all been so brief and probably for nothing—is ever really lifted from us." (MwQ 800; MoE 736)

With Ulrich as *The Man Without Qualities* but with a sense of possibility, Musil offers a sustained critique of causality in his theory of subjectivity, of emotion, and of history. Such an awareness of the nonnecessary sequence of events—which the traditional subject orders only in hindsight and the historian constructs as the path of history—does not, however, equal a utopian concept of subjectivity nor does it render war impossible. In Musil's noncausal, antireductionist concept of violence, the potential for violence remains always present even for the novel's protagonist who developed such trenchant critiques of historical causality. *The Man Without Qualities* traces neither a path leading with any necessity to war and violence, nor does the novel allow itself the utopian pretense of offering its readers a path that will circumvent the next war.

Even though no reader of the unfinished novel can be certain that Ulrich would indeed welcome war as a viable version of the other condition, such an equation clearly has precedence in Ulrich's life of perpetual

tentativeness and underdetermination. The episode at the Swedish ramparts is one example. Ulrich ascribes to these intense moments of joy and certainty such exceptional importance that no subsequent event of his life even approximated: “What single-minded and happy experiences have I had since then? None” (MwQ 800; MoE 737). A closer look at these imagined battle scenes at the Swedish rampart reveals that Ulrich’s fantasies were neither unique nor incomparable experiences in his life. Ulrich’s choice of simile connects the moments to other situations during which the possibility of battle and mass violence promised the mature Ulrich a sudden release from the moral tentativeness of his theoretical insights.

Standing with Agathe on the Swedish ramparts, he remembers that as a boy he imagined how the soldiers might have experienced the sight below. The town was still laying there, far below in the distance, anxiously huddled around a few churches that looked like hens herding their chicks, so that one suddenly felt like leaping into their midst with one bound and laying about one, or scooping them up in the grip of a giant hand. (MwQ 800; MoE 736)

A few weeks before this conversation with his sister, Ulrich anticipated the release and joy such “senseless moments” of violence and destruction could offer him (MwQ 800; MoE). Standing at a window of Count Leinsdorf’s Palais, he watched an agitated crowd of demonstrators outside. The Parallel Campaign stirred up antagonisms among the empire’s nationalities, and Count Leinsdorf, the campaign’s gray eminence, became the target of ever more aggressive pro-German protestors. Observing the crowd below him, Ulrich envisioned to lead once again a band of soldiers and to command them to scatter the people like another herd of hens.

It would take only one company to make a clean sweep of the square.” He could imagine all those gaping mouths turning into a single frothing maw suddenly succumbing to panic, growing slack and drooping at the edges, lips slowly sinking over teeth; his imagination transformed the menacing black crowd into a flock of hens scattering before a dog rushing into their midst. (MwQ 686; MoE 629)

In Ulrich’s detailed fantasy, violent domination and humiliation requires an absolute single-mindedness that places the perpetrator momentarily well outside the boundaries of Ulrich’s theory of the next step. This mo-

ment of violence promises to stand on its own, to remain unqualified by its aftermath.

Ulrich's imaginary violence ignores the notion of the malleable self, leaves behind his sense of possibility, and dreams up a return to a primordial identity that recalls Musil's celebration of a primal core of identity at the onset of World War I. Ulrich enjoys the certainty of the dangerous moment. As Ulrich describes it, he feels "the old satisfaction in watching moral man retreat before brute violent man" (MwQ 686; MoE 629). *The Man Without Qualities* imagines acts of violence as relief from the burdens of modern subjectivity. Ulrich relishes the idea of a brute core hidden inside modern man. This stepping forward of violent man is not just a figment of Ulrich's imagination but grounded in yet another of his memories. Standing at the window when "all his anger [*Böse*] had contracted again into a hard knot," Ulrich recalled recent military actions, not childhood fantasies. His reexperience of the old satisfaction derived from "his own days in the army" (MwQ 686; MoE 629).

With increasing frequency, Ulrich remembers during the months before the general mobilization both imagined and actual acts of violence as temporary relief from the perpetual tentativeness of human interaction. Even though these instances foreshadow his welcoming of the war and prepare his equation of war and the other condition, Ulrich's narrator never justifies these acts and fantasies. Unlike Musil's first novel, *The Man Without Qualities* is not structured in defense of its main protagonist. These moments of actual and imaginary violence are not portrayed as necessary steps for Ulrich's aesthetic or moral education. Indeed, Musil's drafts for the novel's climatic end during the general mobilization strongly indicate that Ulrich would have done more than just remember and imagine acts of violence. In a 1936 outline, Musil mentions a garden party during which several of the novel's characters would discuss the rapidly rising likelihood of war (MoE 1396). At the party's end, Ulrich is alone with his cousin Diotima, the hostess and guiding spirit of the Parallel Campaign. The talk of war and his sexual desire for her mix aggressively. Ulrich suddenly confesses to her that for months he could not think of anything else but "to beat you until you scream like a small child" (MoE 1620). He hits Diotima twice, and the scene ends in a sexual encounter that is placed on a very thin line between rough consensual intercourse and rape. Waking up naked, lying on her knees, with her cheeks covered with saliva, Diotima no longer remembers what happened after the beating, and Ulrich is nowhere to be seen (MoE 1621).

While General Stumm von Bordwehr believed that the actions of "highly cultivated individuals" are under all circumstances motivated

by rationality, neither Ulrich nor the novel shares his trust (MwQ 1107; MoE 1020). Ulrich's actions toward the end of the novel provide more and more evidence for Musil's argument that no one is exempt from his or her historical circumstances; no utopian position and perspective can be sustained. Even Ulrich, the self-aware malleable self who knows that "nation," "religion," and "race" are ideological constructs that express no essences, could march joyfully to war, filled with the satisfaction of feeling once again like a primitive man stepping forward.

Musil's narrator never endorses or celebrates this emergence of the primitive man. Musil does not rewrite his own initial enthusiasm for the war as the birth of a new man. Unlike Jünger, Musil's novel does not portray barbarism as "a necessary consequence of civilization" (cited in Lethen 2002, 211). The novel does not expose Ulrich as an example of Freud's "cultural hypocrites" whose adherence to cultural norms suddenly relaxes and vanishes in times of crisis (Freud 1957, 284). Unlike Benjamin's conclusion to *One-Way Street* (1928), Musil noticed no first glimpse of a true telos of history amidst total destruction. Rather than the necessity of barbarism, the return of the primitive self, or an anticipation of a utopian future, Musil's narrator observed the reawakening of almost forgotten cultural myths, like Ulrich's brute violent man. The phrases and clichés of the present are replaced by their outdated but reenergized predecessors.

Every day the newspapers casually write certain sentences that they habitually use to characterize habitual happenings, but if a revolution threatens or something new is about to happen, it suddenly appears that these words no longer suffice and that in order to ward off or welcome, one must reach back for the oldest hats in the store and the spooks in the closet. The mind enters every great general mobilization whether for peace or for war, unequipped and laden down with forgotten things. (MwQ 1662; MoE 1600)

Rather than signaling the breakdown of tradition or announcing the birth of a new future, such moments of crisis become instances when "life—bursting with conceit over its here-and-now but really a most uncertain, even downright unreal condition—pours itself headlong into the few dozen cake molds of which reality consists" (MwQ 645; MoE 591).

Unlike Ulrich and in contrast to Musil's own experience of August 1914, Musil's narrator rejects the myth of the "dangerous moment" and the aesthetics of terror as "cake molds." From Nietzsche to Jünger these moments of crisis and mobilization were celebrated as sudden experiences

that disrupt the laws of causality and break with the security, boredom, and rationality of daily life (Bohrer 1978, 138; Herf 1984, 98). Confronted with the sudden cancellation of the reality principle, Jünger celebrated the experience of shock and horror because it demanded a cold, impassioned, even cruel perspective that took the “radical consequence of a solely aesthetic form of attention” (Bohrer 1978, 57). In the opening section of *The Adventurous Heart* (1929), Jünger lays claim to a “second, finer, and impersonal consciousness,” one that controls and registers even the most dreadful experiences from a higher vantage point. This detached consciousness appreciates the moment of terror aesthetically and with “a mocking smile” (Jünger 1995, 9). As Lethen pointed out, Jünger’s (and Bohrer’s) aesthetization of the dangerous moment presupposed the gaze of a singular figure “still believing himself to be king of his castle” (2002, 7). Musil’s concept of the malleable self does away with Jünger’s securely positioned second consciousness that is thought to remain independent of its circumstances. Instead of providing a utopian break from stifling reality as Jünger suggested (Bohrer 1978, 342), Ulrich’s dangerous moment is a return to an outmoded cliché, a moment when Ulrich proves to be no longer the “king of his castle.”

Musil never questions the sincerity of those (like him) who experienced the general mobilization as a quasi-religious experience (Amann 2007, 8). But it is telling that the young Gerda Fischel and not Ulrich was supposed to describe the upheaval of August 1914 in almost the same nationalist language of love and death that Musil had used in his essay “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum.” Having seen the young men at the mobilization stations, she tells her skeptical father, the banker Leo Fischel, about the war euphoria on Vienna’s streets. She greets the mobilization as one “big wedding” (MwQ 1676; MoE 1621). Rather than being concerned for the loss of life or limb, she feels intense happiness.

You have no idea how much love and emotion of a sort we’ve never experienced before are (to be seen) in the streets today! We’ve been living like animals, brought down one day by death; it’s different now! It’s tremendous, I tell you: everyone is a brother; even death isn’t an enemy; a person loves his own death for the sake of others; today, for the first time, we understand life! (MwQ 1677; MoE 1622)

One could read Musil’s transference of his war enthusiasm onto a minor female character as a gesture of distancing. Considering his theory of the malleable self and Ulrich’s rediscovery of the act of violence as an

act of certainty, Musil's more radical and daring gesture emerges. After subordinating reality to the sense of possibility, after exposing the core of subjectivity as a shapeless self, after revealing the search for the causes of war and violence as a futile longing for origins and predictability, after likening the path of history to the path of clouds, Musil repeats his most daring gesture and affords no one a cross-situational stability for their acts and beliefs. Rather than finding any safe way home to peace, even *The Man Without Qualities* will pour his malleable self into one of reality's few "cake molds." Knowing that the certainty promised by violent action is just an old "spook in the closet" does not diminish its allure for the malleable self at the time of mobilization. In contrast to *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Musil no longer defends violent action, no longer conceives of it as an means to an end, but he acknowledges the omnipresent possibility of its occurrence and the powerful promise of unity and clarity it carries in modernity.

As we have seen in these last two chapters, Musil's persistent preoccupation with violence and war underwent dramatic shifts and developments. It moved from an understanding of violence as an instrument that could cause the achievement of particular goals to an antireductionist approach that focused instead on the variability of situations that could but did not have to erupt into violence. Musil's discovery and analysis of the malleable self is the turning point in his writings, connecting and distinguishing his radically different concepts of violence. While exploring the malleable self and the sense of possibility, Musil analyzed the inherently risky potential of these responses to the experience of modernity and its undetermined openness and uncertainty. From its position of radical ambivalence, Musil's final novel argued for discarding linear models of reality construction and, at the same time, exposed the risks for the malleable self of living a life shaped by a sense of possibility. Violence holds the promise of escaping briefly from the undecided openness of social and political situations as well as from the shapelessness of the malleable self. As Musil experienced it during the time of general mobilization, violence can promise to dissolve radical ambivalence in an experience so intense that love, death, and truth might be no more than tiny splinters from its block. And it provides the malleable self with choices from a variety of "cake molds," rigid patterns of perception and firm constructions of reality that promise well-defined shapes and contours to a self that experiences its malleability as a burden.

In the following two chapters, I argue that Franz Kafka and Elias Canetti deal in their explorations of violence precisely with the tasks of

finding different answers to these two promises of violence. The fourth chapter argues that Kafka's writings, in particular his story *In the Penal Colony*, offer one of the most radical interrogations of the relationship between ambivalence, truth, and violence in German modernism. His story exposes the ambivalences inherent in the discourses on violence and truth, silence and communication. As I argue, Kafka recognizes the search for truth with violence as futile, and the continuation of any such search as forms of self-deception, but at the same time he offers no escape, no alternative to this deceptive discourse on pain and truth. Kafka's story moves back and forth between the promise to reveal truth through violence and the renunciation of any such hope, and the story ends in gestures of radical ambivalence.

The fifth chapter turns to models of satire that aim their destructive force at seemingly outdated traditions and rigid patterns of perception, Musil's "few dozen cake molds of which reality consists" (MwQ 645). Anticipating the next war as a war won by the most modern weapons available, chemical weapons that defied perception, a wide range of authors and theorists feared that the ubiquitous popularity of such old "cake molds" would prevent societies from even perceiving the new threats of modern warfare. Looking at the writings of Kraus and Benjamin, this chapter will analyze especially the structure of Elias Canetti's satire and argue that it is intended to subvert or even destroy such inflexible patterns of perception that block the observation of the most urgent risks to modern society. At the center of his novel *Auto-da-Fé* stands Peter Kien, an embodiment of rigid tradition who fears the malleability of the self even more than Musil's young Törless. Canetti developed a form of satire that inflicts harm on its audience to shatter its rigid molds of perception and reality. Canetti's satire is, as I argue, a satire that seeks to prepare the ground for a positive concept of the malleable self, of a self that lives the passion of metamorphosis, and might become capable of perceiving and assessing the new threats of mass violence.

CHAPTER 4

Kafka's Poetics of the Knife

On Violence, Truth, and Ambivalence in *In the Penal Colony*

Few twentieth-century writers explored violence and power more passionately than Elias Canetti. No stranger to superlatives, he found even higher praise for Franz Kafka: "Of all writers, Kafka is the greatest expert on power. He experienced, and gave shape to, each of its aspects" (Canetti 1979, 111). A reading of Canetti's essay on Kafka, however, contradicts this claim, and the fault lies not with Kafka. The great value of Kafka's work as writings on power stems, Canetti writes, from their distinct and unyielding perspective. "There is something deeply exciting about this obstinate attempt of a powerless man to escape power in any form" (111). Kafka has become German modernism's icon of powerlessness—and not just for Canetti. Adorno assures us that Kafka "resists [the world] through nonviolence" (Adorno 2003, 237); his writings came directly, Huyssen claims, "out of the abyss of modernity" (Huyssen 1995, 143). Stanley Corngold borrows Canetti's dictum that "Kafka's work is dipped in the color of powerlessness" as an epigraph in his Kafka study (Corngold 2004, 13). Even when Kafka writes from the perspective of a perpetrator, his readers keep viewing him as a victim in disguise. Reading Kafka's most gruesome description of murder, seen and heard from the murderer's position, Winfried Menninghaus decodes the passage as one of Kafka's fantasies of self-immolation (Menninghaus 2003, 300).

Our perception of Kafka is particularly one-sided, so it seems, when it comes to his representations of violence. Canetti's study, *The Other Trial* (1969), offers a particularly instructive example. Canetti cites at length a passage from Kafka's unfinished story *Memoirs of the Kalda Railroad*.

For the rats, who sometimes attacked my food, my long knife was enough. During the early time, when I seized curiously upon everything, I once skewered such a rat and held it up on the wall at eye-level; if one bends down to the ground for them and looks at them there, one gets a false and incomplete idea of them. The most

conspicuous thing about these rats were the claws, big, slightly hollow, and yet sharp at the end, they were very suitable for digging in. In the final struggle in which the rat hung before me on the wall, it extended its claws stiffly, apparently against its living nature, they were like a small hand stretching out to someone. (Cited in Canetti 1979, 120; KKT 689–90)

The narrator's focus on the rat's stiffly extended claws might invoke the *impassibilité* of Homer's narrator when he pointed to the maids' feet after Telemachus strung them up like birds, observing that the girls "kicked up heels for a little—not for long" (Homer 1996, 454). But identifying Kafka with the story's narrator, Canetti does not notice the killer's cold attention to detail. Instead, he praises the passage as an example Kafka's respect for smallness.

One has to have smaller animals at eye-level to see them accurately: it is as though one were making them one's equal by raising them. Bending down to the ground, a kind of condescension, offers a false, incomplete idea of them. The raising of small animals to eye-level recalls Kafka's habit of magnifying such creatures: the bug in "Metamorphosis," the molelike creature in "The Burrow." (Canetti 1979, 120)

Missing in Canetti's reading is Kafka's fixation on skewering rats and on the sounds rats make when they are slit open. In a letter to Felice Bauer, he remembers a good meal of "juicy Jewish sausages" that were "plump as water rats" and tells his girlfriend that it does him a "great deal of good" to have "the sound of the taut sausage skin being cut [. . .] in my ears since childhood" (LF 163). The same sound can be heard in Kafka's story "A Fratricide" (1917). Schmar, the murderer, wields his knife against a man called Wese "and lets him have it, once in the throat, and twice in the throat and a third time low into the belly. Water-rats, slit open, emit similar sounds to Wese" (M 220).

Also missing from Canetti's reading of this passage is its historical context. Kafka wrote *Memoirs of the Kalda Railroad* a few months after the beginning of the First World War, around the same time he worked on "Theatre of Oklahoma," a chapter from *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*, which his translator, Michael Hofmann, considers as an eerie premonition of the Holocaust (Kafka 2002, xi). And Kafka wrote at that time his shocking masterpiece *In the Penal Colony*. Missing as well is any mention of the knife—and Kafka's poetics is, as I will argue, a poetics of

the knife—as well as the skewering of the rat, the casual cruelty of hanging a dying rat on the wall, and above all the close interest in every detail of the rat's last struggle, as if the narrator expected that the rat should reveal in its moment of death some essential meaning.

I do not want to portray Kafka as a sadistic modernist, but this chapter will take his claim seriously that his interests in torturing and being tortured are intimately linked to his poetics (LM 216; BM 291). Kafka's position toward power, war, and violence is far more ambivalent than generally accepted. By focusing on Kafka's ambivalences one gains new insights into his writings and a more complex understanding of the relationship between German modernism and violence. The attention to such ambivalences requires close readings that can bring about fundamentally different interpretations of even the most canonical texts.

This chapter analyzes Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* because it is the most obvious and, at the same time, the least likely choice to explore Kafka's ambivalent approach toward violence. As one of a few longer texts he deemed worth publishing, *In the Penal Colony* is without a doubt of central importance to Kafka's poetics. The story is also Kafka's principal text on violence, which, as Michael Löwy writes, of all of Kafka's writings "presents Authority with the most murderous and unjust face" (1992, 87). *In the Penal Colony* has been praised as a prescient document of the new orders of terror. Ernst Pawel identified the officer as an uncanny portrait of Adolf Eichmann, and readers from Adorno to Traverso considered it a prophetic anticipation of the processes of annihilation during the Holocaust (Traverso 2000, 69–81). Other readings consider the story, as we will see, as a clear indictment of colonial violence while readings that take the side of the officer and his apparatus find absolute certainty in its production of justice. Judging from secondary literature, *In the Penal Colony* should be the last story to search for evidence of ambivalence in Kafka's exploration of violence.

But one key to Kafka's story on violence is the recognition of the penal colony's officer as a figure of ambivalence. He belongs to the new *and* the old order; he defends *and* mistrusts the lethal workings of the apparatus. Moreover, the story's structure belongs among Kafka's most radical reflections on his *poetics of the knife*, or, considering that it always cuts both ways, his poetics of the two-edged sword. Neither the expectation of establishing truth and justice with the execution apparatus nor the frustration of such expectations should be taken as the story's meaning or "truth." Kafka leaves his readers alone with the repetitions of gestures of radical ambivalence, moving from one level of the story to the next. By the same token, *In the Penal Colony* refuses on the level of its form to

make a decision between realist storytelling and modernist description, as readers from Lukács to Scherpe have argued. With a strange storyteller at its center who extols and mistrusts his own descriptions of the apparatus, Kafka's story collapses under its own repetitious movements, never reaching a conclusion but disintegrating finally like the apparatus itself. With *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka neither renounces the promise of violence nor adheres to it. The story exemplifies Kafka's poetics of ambivalence and indecision.

To let this ambivalent image of Kafka emerge, an image that shares a few disquieting features with the penal colony's officer, a few steps have to be taken in preparation. First, one has to look at the political context in which Kafka wrote *In the Penal Colony*. Kafka worked on his story during the first months of World War I, and his stance toward the war offers a first correction to the popular identification of Kafka with non-violence and powerlessness. A look at Kafka's poetics will reveal its fascination with cutting and stabbing knives and point toward its aggressive aesthetics of an incisive and wounding literature. The reading of *In the Penal Colony* will focus on the officer's narration at its center and disclose the officer's deeply ambivalent position—a position that undermines the standard readings of this story—and demonstrate that Kafka's story is one of the most radical interrogations of the relationship between truth, ambivalence, and violence in German modernism.

Kafka Goes (Not) to War

Unlike Musil, Kafka felt no enthusiasm during general mobilization in August 1914. His all too dry diary entry on August 2—"Germany has declared war on Russia. Swimming in the afternoon" (T 543; D 301)—does not, however, provide evidence of his indifference or opposition to the war. But it points to the distance he kept from demonstrations of war euphoria on the streets of Prague. His diaries show him as a rather hostile observer of the world around him. On August 6, 1914, he watches with an "evil eye" the artillery's public send-off to the front, and he has no sympathies for the other patriotic demonstrations (KKT 546). "With a passion," he wishes these departing soldiers "everything evil" (KKT 546; D 302). The next night he hears loud choral singing from a restaurant across the street and hopes the police will soon end all late night manifestations of communal joy during wartime (KKT 547; D 303).

Kafka's hostility targets expressions of collective enthusiasm for the war—"one of the most disgusting accompaniments of the war" (KKT

547; D 302)—but not the war itself. While saddened by Austria's early defeats in September 1914, Kafka envies the soldiers who had been drafted to the front and hopes to join them soon. Unlike the majority of his literary contemporaries, Kafka never fell for or participated in propagandistic glorifications of danger, death, and war. He did not long for finding a primordial unity in battle. Kafka had other reasons for joining the war. As Kafka's biographer Peter-André Alt observes, Kafka told his former (and future) fiancée Felice Bauer repeatedly that life at the front would cure his headaches and other ailments (Alt 2005, 433). Musil's visit to Kafka in 1916 served as further evidence for his peculiar medicinal theory regarding the health benefits of warfare. While Kafka suffered once more from headaches, Musil looked rather well despite his current sick leave from the military service. Kafka concluded: "I would be better off at the front" (LF 465; KKBr II 156). When called up to the medical examiner in 1915, he expected Bauer to agree that it would be his "good fortune to become a soldier" (LF 454; KKBr II 133).

To his delight, Kafka passed the health exam but suffered the "misfortune" that his employer, the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, intervened at the war ministry, and declared his work essential and Kafka irreplaceable.¹ Kafka regretted the result of this intervention as the loss of a remedy, a "Heilmittel" (LF 458; KKBr II 141). Unable to go to war, Kafka invested a significant share of his annual income in war bonds. In November 1915 he enumerated at first feverishly and then rather calmly the monetary gains he might receive after Austria's victory. By signing the war bond, he achieved what he avoided otherwise: he became part of the war community (KKT 771; D 351).

Never, however, did Kafka consider the war as a remedy to anyone else's ailments. While he wished those who went to the front in 1914 everything evil, he was actively engaged in providing psychiatric help to those returning veterans who were traumatized by their experiences. Kafka wrote and published open letters to collect money for the establishment of a public veteran's psychiatric hospital. Kafka was so heavily involved in these matters that he was recommended to receive in 1918 a medal for his service for the Public Crownland Agency for Returning Veterans.²

Kafka's ambivalence toward the war collective was most pronounced during the general mobilization and in the first months of war. Throughout July 1914, Kafka's world oscillated between catastrophe and ambitious plans. On July 3, in a letter to Musil, he had to withdraw his story *Metamorphosis* from publication in *Die Neue Rundschau*. Musil's journal had asked him to cut a third of the story (Br II 97; L 109). The

disastrous dissolution of his first engagement to Felice Bauer happened ten days later. On July 21, he announced to his parents that he would terminate his employment at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, leave Prague, and move to Berlin or Munich to pursue for two years the career of a writer of fiction (Br 101–3). One week later, he noted his inability “to share an experience [*mitzuleben*],” his difficulty working at the office and participating in discussions (Tb 663; D 295). When the Austrian emperor ordered the mobilization on July 31, his brothers-in-law were drafted to the military. Kafka moved out of his parents' house, not to start a life as a writer but to make room for one of his sisters and her children. Feeling indifferent to the suffering around him, he complained about his lack of time to write. His inability to join the war collective caused a deep personal crisis, but Kafka was determined to make this crisis productive for his literary work. “But I will write in spite of everything, absolutely, it is my struggle for self-preservation” (Tb 543; D 300).

Kafka's battle for self-preservation—it is the only time he uses this term in his diaries—became “the second great period in his existence as a writer” (Canetti 1969, 82). Taking stock at the end of 1914, Kafka showed rare satisfaction with his accomplishments. During the first five months of the war, he started on a new novel, *The Trial*, he worked on several short stories including *Memoirs of the Kalda Railroad*, and he paid particular attention to two completed texts, the last chapter of *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared* and *In the Penal Colony* (Tb 714–15; D 324).

These texts written at the beginning of the war continue to shock readers with their violence. Particularly *In the Penal Colony* continues to disturb—so much so that few readers focus on its description of violence and instead prefer to debate the possible meanings of the apparatus. If one looks closely at its representations of violence, and expects the story to perform according to Kafka's iconic status as someone who sides with the powerless and who denounces brutality, then one is bound to repeat Ulrich Stadler's frustrating reading experience. Stadler chose *In the Penal Colony* for a comparative study of representations of violence in modernist and postmodernist literature. The safe modernist Kafka was supposed to contrast favorably to the representations of violence by postmodernist writers and theorists like Tabori, Schwab, Streeruwitz, and Lyotard that Stadler deemed irresponsible (Stadler 1995b, 77). To Stadler's surprise, *In the Penal Colony* presented a cold indifference to the impact of violence and a bleak prognosis for the coexistence of fundamentally different cultures and civilizations: because of intercultural communicative disjunction, Kafka's story allowed according to Stadler's reading only for an alternative between segregation of national communities and violent

conflicts (Stadler 1995a, 97–98). Facing this breathtaking choice, Stadler ended his analysis of *In the Penal Colony* abruptly (Stadler 1995a, 92).

An analysis of Kafka's poetics that does not identify Kafka and his writings with powerlessness will interpret and evaluate such stark alternatives differently. Distortion and disjunction are omnipresent in Kafka's reflections on communication. But instead of faulting language itself, as Stadler suggests, Kafka's poetics focuses on the violent ambivalence within individual acts of communication. This means that any reading of *In the Penal Colony* has to pay close attention to the officer's speech acts and analyze what they reveal about him and his belief in violence. The officer does not tell the truth, but Kafka's story tells its truth through the officer's narration. His lies and distortions reveal a meaning he avoids knowing, a meaning in accordance with Kafka's poetics of the knife. But what is Kafka's poetics of the knife?

Kafka's Knives

Kafka spoke of his desires, of his relationship to family and lovers, and of his understanding of language and literature in images of cutting knives.³ In his diary of 1911, he imagined the pleasure of a knife twisting in his heart (D 101; Tb 220), two years later, he told Felice Bauer about his fantasy of being

a large piece of wood, and to be pressed against her own body by the cook, who with both hands draws the knife toward her along the side of this stiff log (approximately in the region of my hip) and with all her might slices off shavings to light the fire. (BF 310; LF 201–2)

A bloodier, more carnal version of such a knife fantasy reappeared several months later (D 221; Tb 560). The use of this knife loses its masochistic inflection; Kafka describes himself as someone who brandishes knives before his family, simultaneously wounding and protecting them (LF 526; BF 731). Elizabeth Boa previously noted the sadistic aspect in Kafka's definition of love when he transformed his lover Milena Pollak into the knife he uses against himself. "Love is that you are the knife with which I dig inside me" (BM 263; Boa 1996, 95). The equation of reading and getting wounded is one of Kafka's earliest comments on literature: "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us" (KKBr I, 27; L 16). A few years later he expects the same from writing: "I'll jump

into my story though it should cut my face to pieces” (Tb 126; D 28). It is high praise when a book has the effect of a knife, a “Messerwirkung” (BF 659).

Why does Kafka connect literature with such violent experiences? Starting with his friend Max Brod, readers from Sokel to Pasley invest Kafka’s fascination with pain, wounds, and violence with a purifying and transcending notion of truth. Avoiding their religious undertones, Menninghaus detects in Kafka’s writings a similar equation of pain and truth:

In fully detached abstraction, Kafka reads torture, “according to tradition,” as a method of finding hidden layers of language: as with his own poetics, the true or, at least, the desired word is forced from a body by means of knife cuts. (Menninghaus 2003, 308)

Instead of forcing truth from pain, Norris argues that Kafka’s knives reveal the truth of pain in its meaninglessness. “Kafka restores physical, ‘animal’ pain to its real and incontestable ‘truth’ by de-moralizing, demythifying, and de-signifying it” (Norris 1985, 111).

This alternative between pain as a generator of a transcendent truth or (at least) the *mot juste* and the mute “animal” pain projects nonetheless a false clarity onto Kafka’s conceptualization of violence and language. Rather than stabbing in one of these two directions, Kafka’s poetic knives move constantly back and forth between these alternatives. Rather than resolving the relationship between violence and language, these poetic knives refuse the either/or decision. Kafka slashes the idea that torture could force the right word, but he refuses to renounce the cutting, and he proves unwilling to stop toying with the false equation of pain and truth.

The officer’s apparatus is not the only execution machine Kafka designed. After the publication of *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka discussed his view of pain and truth with Milena Pollak. He sent her a sketch of an apparatus that slowly splits the delinquent while its inventor observes the procedure with unmoved composure (LM 204; BM 271). In another letter to Pollak, Kafka explained his obsession with torture.

Yes, torturing is extremely important to me, I am preoccupied with nothing but being tortured and torturing. Why? For much the same reason as Perkins was and equally thoughtlessly, mechanically, and according to tradition—i.e., in order to learn the cursed word from the cursed mouth. The stupidity inherent in this (realization of stupidity doesn’t help) I once expressed as follows: “The animal wrenches the whip from the master and whips itself so as to become

master and doesn't realize that it's only a fantasy caused by a new knot in the master's thong." Of course torturing is pathetic, too. Alexander didn't torture the Gordian knot when it wouldn't come untied. (LM 216; BM 291)

Menninghaus extracts from this passage Kafka's "traditional" view of torture as a method to find the truth and the right word (Menninghaus 2003, 308). But Kafka stresses as well the fantastic futility of this traditional expectation, not its success.

The reference to Perkins leads to a representation of torture that combines the two opposing relations between pain and truth that Menninghaus and Norris argue for in Kafka's writings. Officer Perkins appears in Upton Sinclair's lengthy war story *Jimmie Higgins* (1919), a book Pollak translated in excerpts for a Czech newspaper. In Sinclair's story, torture testifies simultaneously to a transcending truth and reveals pain as meaningless "animal" pain. In the novel's final chapters, the bewildered American socialist worker Higgins no longer fights the Germans in the First World War. He is now stationed in Archangel and charged with suppressing the Russian Revolution. After being arrested for possessing antiwar propaganda, Higgins meets Officer Perkins. Tasked to uncover Bolshevik conspiracies among American soldiers, the officer tortures Higgins with a "primitive hand-process of torture," a process Sinclair describes in excruciating detail (Sinclair 1919, 267). Despite hours, days, and weeks of beatings and "water-cures," the officer never hears the cursed word from his victim's mouth. Jimmie Higgins's silence testifies in Sinclair's story to the power and truth of his socialist ideals; or as Sinclair's officer worries:

What the hell was this idea that could keep a little runt of a workman stronger than all in authority? And how was this idea to be kept from spreading and wrecking the comfortable, well-ordered world in which Perkins expected soon to receive an army commission? (278)

Incapable of breaking Higgins's silence, the officer kills his spirit. Rather than letting Higgins survive the torture as a socialist hero or heroically die a martyr's death, the officer breaks Higgins, transforming him into "some kind of furbearing animal" caught in the burrow of its own thoughts (281). Uncannily similar to Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, the prisoner in Sinclair's *Higgins* acts like a dog at the end. The tortured Higgins turns into a "good doggie" and crawls about on all fours; he

“eats his food out of a tin platter without using his gnawed-off fingers” (282). Higgins’s pain became pain without meaning, animal pain, as Sinclair writes: “being a beast, he suffers only the pain of the moment, he does not know that he is going to suffer to-morrow, nor worry about it” (282).

Kafka’s own position is deeply ambivalent. He considers the equation of pain and truth foolish, but he refuses just as well to accept the experience of pain as meaningless. He finds himself in Perkins’s position but knows about its stupidity even though, as he said, the “realization of stupidity doesn’t help” (LM 216; BM 291). Kafka recognizes the search for truth with violence as futile, and the continuation of this search turns thus into a form of self-deception, but at the same time Kafka offers no escape, no alternative to this deceptive discourse on pain and truth. Through his narrative technique, Kafka holds these impossible options in ambivalent abeyance. He presents no way out of self-deceptions and distortions—neither through violence nor through the denunciation of violence—and offers only a recognition of their necessity (although such recognition provides no help either).

To clarify Kafka’s poetics of violence one needs to look at his understanding of the relationship between language and its user. Acts of communication expose the lack of clarity and unity inside the speaker but not the limits of language. No longer wanting to jump into his own poetic knives, Kafka returns in one of his last notations on writing to the incisive capacity of language.

More and more fearful as I write. It is understandable. Every word, twisted in the hands of the spirits—this twist of the hand is their characteristic gesture—becomes a spear turned against the speaker. (Tb 926; D 423)

The communicative act discloses what its speaker would have preferred to conceal. It is a knife that cuts both ways, as Kafka wrote to Bauer: “It’s not a knife that stabs only forward but one that wheels around and stabs back as well” (BF 754; LF 544).

Even at moments when Kafka is most assured of writing literally what he hoped to express, the words reveal still more. They become involuntary metaphors and expose hidden aspects of the self. Language per se poses no obstacle to conveying what one intends to say:

I am not of the opinion that one can ever lack the power to express perfectly what one wants to write or say. Observations on the

weakness of language, and comparisons between the limitations of words and the infinity of feelings, are quite fallacious. The infinite feeling continues to be as infinite in words as it was in the heart. What is clear within is bound to become so in words as well. This is why one need never worry about language, but at sight of words may often worry about oneself. After all, who knows within himself how things really are with him? This tempestuous or floundering or morasslike inner self is what we really are, but by the secret process by which words are forced out of us our self-knowledge is brought to light, and though it may still be veiled, yet it is there before us, wonderful or terrible to behold. (BF 305–6; LF 198)

The subject, the morass-like inner self, but not language lacks inner clarity. Kafka finds himself amidst not a *Sprachkrise* but a crisis of the self. Instead of being short on mediative function, language conveys rather too much in communication. The inability to control language does not point to language's insufficiency but to the subject's failure to use language as a fortification against its inner morass.

With this relation between subject and language, Kafka assumes a special position in the context of the *Sprachkrise*, the moment when writers of the fin de siècle in Vienna, Berlin, and Prague questioned the representational capacity of language. In Hofmannsthal's *A Letter*, the renowned literary expression of *crisis of language*, one encounters the precise opposite of Kafka's assessment of self and language. Lord Chandos is a unified self who refuses to let his experiences be soiled by disintegrating words. For Lord Chandos, the crisis of language is not one of subjectivity and experience but one of the insufficient mediative capacity of language. Even the most banal object—a watering can, a harrow, a dog in the sun—can become “the vessel of my revelation” but not language (Hofmannsthal 2005, 123).

Any of these things and the thousand similar ones past which the eye ordinarily glides with natural indifference can at any moment—which I am completely unable to elicit—suddenly take on for me a sublime and moving aura which words seem too weak to describe. (123)

Objects, even absent ones, might serve as vessels for divine experiences, “filled to the brim with this smoothly but steeply rising tide of heavenly feeling” (123). Words hold nothing but putrefy like “rotten mushrooms” in his mouth (121). Lord Chandos reiterates Maeterlink's sentiment that

Musil used as an epigraph for *Young Törless*: “As soon as we put something into words, we devalue it in a strange way” (Musil 2001, 1). Words are denounced as incompetent servants that fail to serve their masters; they can’t carry the messages from a world of superior experiences. As a master, Lord Chandos finds no fault with himself, but withdraws into aristocratic silence, searching for an unknown language: “a language in which mute things speak to me” (Hofmannsthal 2005, 128). He searches for a language that would not diminish the invaluable treasure trove at the depth of experience and turn them “to false stones and shards of glass,” as the young Musil quoted Maeterlink (Musil 2001, 1).

An equally young Kafka started from a similar denunciation of language as a crude tool, incapable of communicating deep experiences and beautiful memories. In 1900, two years before Hofmannsthal’s *A Letter*, the eighteen-year-old Kafka sighed dramatically in a friend’s memory album:

How many words in this book. They are meant for remembrance. As though words could carry memories. For words are clumsy mountaineers and clumsy miners. Not for them to bring down treasures from the mountains’ peaks, or up from the mountains’ bowels. (L 1)

Words reach neither the depths nor the heights of experience; they are nothing but experience’s “ashes” (L 1). Even in this early notation, however, Kafka lacks Lord Chandos’s and Maeterlink’s preciousness. He does not assume the position of an aristocratic master but that of a dissatisfied bourgeois who complains because he does not get his money’s worth from the work of these mountaineers and miners. And Kafka blames himself as well; his “unskillfull hand” shares the blame together with language’s crudeness (L 1).

Two decades later, after the war, Kafka finds his most extreme expression for demarcating the limits of communication. And now the fault lies not with language but with its speaker. Summing up the total of human history, Kafka equates speaking with lying and claims that, on the one hand, “mankind has been overflowing with speech and, on the other hand, speech is possible only where one wants to lie” (WP 338; KKNSF II, 348). Without lying, speaking is impossible. Everyone (including Kafka) speaks and therefore lies. Unlike Lord Chandos, Kafka neither believes that truth can be experienced through the spectacle of pain—Chandos’s sublime vision of dying rats and their screams (Hofmannsthal 2005, 123–24)—nor does he dismiss language to withdraw into silence. Kafka rejects the elit-

ist disdain for the supposed commonness of language as one finds it even in Mauthner's philosophy of language. Sarcastically, Mauthner praised language as society's first and only socialist institution. Everyone uses it just like the water and sewage system: "Language is common property. Everything belongs to everyone—everyone bathes in it, everyone drinks it, and everyone excretes it" (Mauthner 1906, 27). As Menninghaus observes, Kafka feels no disgust for having to share language with everyone else. Kafka's disgust is provoked by individual speech acts, not by a commonness of language: "What is disgusting, in [Kafka's] mind, are not words per se, as they get chewed up and spat out by all and sundry, but always only specific, individual speech acts" (2003, 337). Menninghaus underestimates the scope of Kafka's critique—only particular speech acts were *not* disgusting to him—but he is right to emphasize that Kafka is not suspicious of language itself but of its users, especially if a speaker claims to confess his most intimate truth.

Kafka's poetics of the knife twists the relationship between the self and language one more time. Individual speech acts reveal the self's lack of unity. This lack of shape and coherence is, however, always already a protective mechanism, shielding the individual from the feared and ever-present possibility of self-awareness. The lack of inner clarity, unity, and coherence does not result from a lack of self-knowledge, but protects against its constant availability. In a letter to Bauer, Kafka wants to reach inside himself and clear up the inner chaos: "I wish I had a strong hand for the sole purpose of thrusting it into this incoherent construction that I am" (BF 306; LF 198). His peculiar choice of the word "construction" indicates something self-made rather than existentially given. But he has no control over it. This construction of his inner self remains too malleable to control; it does not control these constructions. When he envisions this construction, he finds it "obscure and still in flux" (BF 306; LF 198).

Five years later, 1918 in Zürau, during his most sustained theoretical reflections, Kafka returns to metaphor of inner constructions. Reinterpreting Genesis, he starts from the assumption of a human capacity to know good and evil. The difficulty for Kafka is not the knowledge of good and evil itself but the question of what to do with it.

Nobody can be content with knowledge alone, but must strive to act in accordance with it. But he is not endowed with the strength for this, hence he must destroy himself, even at the risk of in that way not acquiring the necessary strength, but there is nothing else he can do except make this last attempt. [. . .] Now this is an

attempt he is afraid to make; he prefers to undo the knowledge of Good and Evil. (Kafka 1991, 38; NSF II 74)

The Socratic goal of an examined life is not an elusive goal, no lifelong task, but a strategy to avoid the dire consequences of an already available self-knowledge. Knowing oneself and knowing what one should do, one shies away from such knowledge because of a lack of strength to live accordingly. Humans don't use reflection for self-examination, but to deconstruct and disarticulate the self and to build auxiliary constructions, "Hilfskonstruktionen" (NSF II 74).

These auxiliary constructions preserve for the individual a semblance of self and world by creating alternate realities.

But what has once happened cannot be undone, it can only be made turbid. It is for this purpose that auxiliary constructions arise. The whole world is full of them: indeed the whole visible world is perhaps nothing other than an auxiliary construction of man's wish to rest for a moment. A means to falsify the fact of knowledge, to try to turn the knowledge into the goal. (Kafka 1991, 38; NSF II 75)⁴

Truth is for Kafka no goal, as Gerhard Kurz already observed, but always already present and of deadly consequence (Kurz 1980, 194). Transforming such readily available self-knowledge into the seemingly impossible goal of a lifelong quest deflects its destructive potential into the safe space of imaginary narratives.

The fable "The Truth About Sancho Panza," written during the stay in Zürau and praised by Benjamin as Kafka's "most perfect creation," offers an example for a successful creation of a lifelong quest (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 815). Panza encounters his (destructive) self-knowledge as a devil and names it Don Quixote. As a reader of chivalrous tales, he sends Quixote off on one quest after the other, and this Quixote "performed the craziest deeds, which however, for lack of a predetermined object, which should of course, have been Sancho Panza, did nobody any harm" (Kafka 1991, 18). Rather than suffering instant death, Panza survives comfortably thanks to his auxiliary constructions and "perhaps out of a certain sense of responsibility, followed Don Quixote on his travels and had much and profitable entertainment from this to the end of his days" (Kafka 1991, 18). Panza's constructions prove stable enough to follow his Quixote in all tranquility on one quest after the other, never fearing Quixote should suddenly turn around and force Panza to face his own truth.

As I argue, the officer of *In the Penal Colony* is a precise counterexample to Panza's lifesaving use of auxiliary constructions. His inability to speak coherently points to his failure to use language as a fortification against his inner disunity. The officer's narration is a prime example of Kafka's poetics of the knife. The officer's words become knives that turn against him. And *In the Penal Colony* becomes an example of Kafka's poetics of the back-and-forth-moving knife. A close reading of the officer's narration reveals his self as a turbid mass of ambivalences and Kafka's story as a staging ground for a reconsideration of the relationship between subjectivity, truth, and violence at the moment of social and institutional crisis.

By now, it should be possible to recognize Kafka not solely as an author of powerlessness and suffering. Kafka is just as much a writer with an "evil eye" who has a keen (and Stadler might say cold) interest in observing an individual's fear of truth and death, someone who describes with unmoved composure the slow collapse of this individual's no longer lifesaving auxiliary constructions. What remains unclear is how the officer of the penal colony who is generally perceived as a straightforward representative of an authoritarian order could be the embodiment of such a conflicted self; and how *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka's alleged indictment of war, violence, and colonialism, never abandons the truth revealing promise of violence. The aggressive and self-destructive streak of Kafka's modernist story has still to be laid bare.

The Meanings of Violence in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*

One of the most astonishing features of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is the fact that so many of its readers seem to know what the story is about and understand it. After all, even the young officer who knows the execution apparatus at the story's center more intimately than any other living being calls it a "strange piece of equipment" (M 149; KKDzL 203). Every bit as peculiar but not as harmless as Odradek, the apparatus performs the most torturous carnage in Kafka's oeuvre, an oeuvre rich in killings, whippings, and oozing wounds (Menninghaus 1999, 333–484). Readers expect from such a violent procedure a clearly decipherable meaning. Reviewing the story in 1920 for *Die Weltbühne*, Kurt Tucholsky drew such a conclusion from his own reading experience:

And now this complicated machinery sets itself slowly in motion, the needles write, and out of small hollow needles water spurts the

blood away—when I’ve read this far I swallowed a faint taste of blood and searched for a justification and thought: Allegory . . . military justice. (Tucholsky 1979, 94)

As an allegory of a cruel military justice system, the story would be charged with meaning, point beyond its gruesome details, and protect the reader against the disconcerting impact of the violence described. Even though Tucholsky objected to any such flight into meaning, the majority of successive interpreters followed his first impulse, and discovered ever more meanings for the story’s supposed allegorical structure (Krusche 1974, 130–31).⁵

While Kafka’s enigmatic construction named Odradek might be left inscrutable, the penal colony’s peculiar apparatus has to mean something. Even though the story has been declared as translucent as the glass from which parts of the apparatus have been manufactured, no consensus about its meaning can be established. The story has been praised for anticipating the terror of the Holocaust; read in the context of deportation, colonialism, and postcolonial theory; or analyzed as Kafka’s central text on the acts of writing, reading, or listening.⁶ Other readings paid attention to its violent libidinal economy. Politzer considered Kafka a “mystic of masochism” (1965, 166), and Norris read him as a “pornologist,” who unmasks in his obsessional fantasies of cultural cruelty our enthrallment to them as “libidinal perversion” (1985, 101).

All of these readings share one basic assumption without which none of them can be sustained, the only consensus that is to be found in the multitude of this story’s readings. The officer’s narration is accepted as truthful, and in whatever direction *In the Penal Colony* is interpreted, these readings are based on the officer’s account of the colony’s past and present, his presentation of its legal procedures, and his description of the apparatus’s functioning. Once *In the Penal Colony* is approached with an awareness of Kafka’s poetics of the knife, such clarity has to be exchanged for a less satisfying but more complex and compelling account of Kafka’s modernist approach to representing violence.

Even though every allegorical and almost all literal readings of *In the Penal Colony* depend on it, the question of the officer’s reliability is rarely raised and even less often answered. His truthfulness is taken for granted, and readers move quickly to the all-important deciphering of the gruesome apparatus. Ingeborg Henel made the core argument for trusting the officer’s narration explicit. The reader can rely on the officer because the traveler never doubts him, even though the traveler rejects everything the officer represents.

If the Officer's boldest claim is taken to be true by someone who is more or less his opponent then the reader is allowed as well to believe the Officer and to take everything he says as objective truth. (Henel 1973, 484)

The traveler should be a particularly reliable and objective judge of the officer's claims since he has no intention to interfere in the penal colony's politics; after all, he came to the island only "to see things for himself" (M 162; KKDzL 222). Because of the traveler's acceptance of the officer's claims, Kafka's reader might be allowed to believe the officer but he or she would be wrong to do so.

Arguments like Henel's fail to appreciate the traveler's many faults as an observer. He is inattentive (M 151; KKDzL 206), gets lost in details (M 152; KKDzL 208), jumps to foregone conclusions—"Well, I suppose I know everything now," said the traveller" (M 158; KKDzL 217)—becomes impatient, casts merely a "glance" into the pit (M 150; KKDzL 205), is absentminded (M 152, 157, 163; KKDzL 213, 223), listens to the officer "with his eyes lowered" (M 163; KKDzL 224), or looks "aimlessly around" (M 166; KKDzL 227). To focus his attention, the officer grabs him once "to catch his eye" (M 166; KKDzL 227). During the officer's self-execution, the smooth run of the apparatus is blamed for the traveler's failure to observe: "By operating so silently, the machine seemed to make itself unnoticeable" (M 176; KKDzL 243). Rather than watching, the traveler merely stares, not registering what happens before him (M 176; KKDzL 242). Caught by one surprise after another—culminating in a "new, even more unpleasant surprise" (M 178; KKDzL 244)—he fails to notice much of the officer's gruesome end. Captivated by the spectacle of the disassembling apparatus—he gawks at it until "the last wheel had come out of the engraver" (M 178; KKDzL 244)—he misses the officer's brutal treatment inside of it. Only when it is too late the traveler notices that the apparatus "was not writing, it was merely stabbing" (M 178; KKDzL 244). As James Rolleston notes, in addition to his inattentiveness, the traveler increasingly loses his impartiality and becomes ever more sympathetic toward the apparatus.⁷ Instead of being an expert witness, the traveler reveals himself as a not particularly trustworthy observer.

Considering his impatience, inattentiveness, and confusion, the traveler's faith in the officer's stories as objective truth should not be accepted by readers. The traveler's questionable record as a witness proves, however, nothing on its own against the officer's truthfulness. Only recently, Richard Gray offered a reading recognizing the centrality of the officer's act of narration for any understanding of *In the Penal Colony*. He argues

persuasively that Kafka's story deals less with the acts of writing, reading, or listening as the readings by Koelb, Kittler, or Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, but the story explores instead "the act of *narration* as a fundamentally mediative event" (Gray 2002, 217). While this shift in reading *In the Penal Colony* remains important, Gray's approach is not fully persuasive. Like most readers of the story, he does not look closely enough at the officer's narration and trusts its claims; Gray stays on the same shaky hermeneutical ground on which most readings stake out their territory.

An analysis of the officer's narration reveals the shakiness of such a trust and dissolves any binary oppositions between the observing traveler and the narrating officer, between the old and the new commandant, between the society of the apparatus and the new commandant's modern politics of deliberation, binaries that have structured the standard readings of *In the Penal Colony*. As it has been noted before, *In the Penal Colony* stands out among Kafka's works for its dual narrative perspective. Unlike *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, or *The Castle*, *In the Penal Colony* is narrated from not one but two identifiable main perspectives, the traveler's and the officer's. As Axel Hecker suggests, most readers of the story become either officers or travelers (Hecker 1998, 115). This distinction is (not necessarily) tied to particular sympathies for either position but linked to the hermeneutical closure or openness of their readings. Gray defines such officers as identifying with a "specific, often narrow meaning for the story," while the travelers "are less definitive, refuse to take a clear side, and seek judiciously to weigh the evidence of the text" (2002, 214).

Despite his self-description as a traveler, Gray constructs a very specific, overly narrow meaning of *In the Penal Colony*, arguing that Kafka thematizes "nothing other than disjunction itself" (2002, 217). According to him, the story moves between two clearly distinct and incommensurable positions (236). The officer and the traveler share no common ground, "no semiotic mediation, no meeting of the minds, ever takes place" (220). They are dialectical opposites with no possibility for a synthesis; they move "on parallel tracks in a Euclidian world, so that they speak or even think past one another" (218). The story is structured by a fundamental conflict, "the conflict between myth of immediacy and transparency, predicated on ideological identity, and the reality that in a world defined by ideological difference, mediation is either imperfect or impossible and semiotic disjunction is the norm" (233).⁸ Like all of the allegorical readings he rejects, Gray describes the officer as the last unbending adherent of a particular ideology. The officer lives supposedly in the old commandant's sphere, and none of his communications register in the traveler's sphere; their separate worlds remain "almost entirely discontinuous" (217). Like

Stadler, Gray finds in Kafka's story a radical and absolute critique of intercultural understanding that leaves only the alternative between violent conflict and a politics of segregation. The officer's failure to persuade the traveler provides the evidence for a mediative disjunction between cultures; the prisoner and the soldier prove, on the other hand, that communication remains possible if one precondition is fulfilled. Only the soldier and prisoner, "who from the outset share a common ground, have any hope of shared understanding" (223). Not only do they communicate successfully, but the prisoner and soldier "discover almost nothing but intimate, immediate solidarity" (219). *In the Penal Colony* depicts—in Gray's reading—a stark contrast between these two couples and a clear argument against intercultural cooperation and communication.

But the story demands severe qualifications for both of these claims. Even though the officer's narration fails to convert the traveler, the traveler understands and approves of his most radical decision. After listening to the officer for no more than an hour, the traveler agrees with the officer's decision to commit suicide by apparatus.

If the justicial procedure to which the officer adhered was really so close to being abrogated—possibly in consequence of the intervention of the traveller, and which he felt obliged to make—then the officer was now behaving perfectly correctly; the traveller in his place would not have behaved any differently. (M 175; KKDzL 240–41)

The traveler never attempts to prevent the presumably slow and torturous self-execution because he is certain that he understands the officer's position. Whether a reader agrees with both of their decisions or not, the traveler and officer experience in the end an intimate moment of understanding and solidarity. The traveler's noninterference in the officer's suicide even compares favorably to the soldier's intimate solidarity with the prisoner since he never seemed to waver in his readiness to execute the newfound friend who never desired to die.⁹

While perfect mediation might always be out of reach, Kafka's story neither presupposes a mediative disjunction for those of different cultural and ideological backgrounds nor anticipates intimate solidarity among those of similar upbringings. Kafka deconstructs precisely the most basic assumption that Gray shares with the vast majority of Kafka's readers: the hypothesis that the officer can be predicated on a single ideological identity. As will be seen, Kafka uses precisely this apparently unbending figure of the officer to explore the ambivalences of modernity and to investigate the false utopia of clarity and coherence. *In the Penal Colony* demonstrates the dual

impossibility of adhering to either a visual regime of absolute immediacy (the officer's ideology) or a politics of deliberation (the new commandant's ideology). Kafka's story neither supports nor renounces the revelatory promise of violence. His poetics cannot replace the last but failing hope for the mediative function of violence with any other alternative to avoid the lie at the core of human self-representation. But the story makes the functioning of its auxiliary constructions visible. *In the Penal Colony* deconstructs binaries not only on the level of storyline but also in its form, presenting Kafka's refusal to side with traditional storytelling or the modernist liberation of description. Neither storytelling nor description, Kafka implies with his story from October 1914, can respond to the crisis of violence. But with their mutual disintegration, *In the Penal Colony* becomes one of modernism's most revealing reflections on the ambivalence of violence.

The officer speaks for the penal colony. Up to the moment of his death, the traveler and the reader receive almost all their information about the penal colony from his direct speech. As the island's superior judge, his version of the penal colony's history is accepted as authoritative by readers from Henel (1973) to Lyotard (1993) and Scherpe (2006). From the outset, however, the story provides details that subvert the officer's self-portrait as an unbending representative of the colony's old order, and another image of him emerges, one of ambivalence, hybridity, and disunity. Kurz (1980), Mladek (1994), Piper (1996), Hecker (1998), and also Gray (2002) have identified several inconsistencies in the officer's speech, but when noted, these discrepancies and contradictions are usually mentioned as curious facts and relegated to the footnotes.

Kurz offers so far the most complete account of the officer's inconsistencies (1980, 54–55). As far as I know, he is the only reader who calls the officer a “shady character” (66) and suspects something hidden behind the officer's speech. He undertakes, however, no systematic attempt to understand *In the Penal Colony* through these discrepancies (54). An excellent reader like Gray observes that the chronology in the officer's account of events is incorrect but places such evidence of the officer's unstable narration in a footnote; in the main text Gray suggests that such instances mean “nothing but ideologically motivated salesmanship” (Gray 2002, 229, 242). But if the officer would indeed engage in salesmanship, then he would no longer believe in the “myth of transparency.” Under such an assumption Gray could no longer argue that the officer and the traveler exist in two incommensurable spheres. At best, the officer would end up as an unsuccessful salesman who would have no reason to commit suicide just because he failed to close the deal with the traveler. Instead, these inconsistencies open up a direct pathway into the center of Kafka's

poetics. They are the moments when the officer's words turn against him like knives and reveal a truth he cannot accept knowing.

The traveler's first impression of the officer is one of incongruence. The uniform is "too heavy" and unsuitable for the island's tropic climate (M 150; KKDzL 204). Sweating and out of breath, the officer refuses to adapt his dress code to the penal colony's weather because of its nostalgic function: "to us they [the uniforms] signify home, and we don't want to lose touch with home" (M 150; KKDzL 204). While the uniform indicates his rank in the new commandant's colony, it reminds the officer of two different pasts, two additional homelands and loyalties. The uniform stands as well for the empire overseas and the past regime of the old commandant. The old commandant appointed the officer as judge despite his youth, conferring on him the dress uniform he wears so stubbornly in the tropical sun (M 151; KKDzL 212). Rather than representing one society, be it the one of the new or the old commandant, the officer is from the outset marked by disjunction and hybridity, belonging to and longing for at least two different communities. Rather than lending him a clearly defined identity, the uniform subverts his heroic self-portrayal as the last survivor of a past order as nothing but a wishful fantasy.

Uniforms are designed to signify with utmost precision and certainty the order to which its wearer belongs and what rank he or she holds in this particular order. A uniform replaces messy civilian identities with a prescribed functionality. Hundreds of thousands of draftees and volunteers expected to attain a definite identity when they put on their new uniforms while Kafka wrote *In the Penal Colony* in October 1914. In Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1931–32), another fictional officer of German modernism outlined his theory of the uniform. By wearing his uniform, Eduard von Bertrand found a powerful sanctuary amidst the seemingly ubiquitous uncertainty and ambiguity of prewar society. Amidst withering religious values, all stability threatened to slip away from him without the uniform. With its sharp lines and creases, the uniform offered a protective shell against the risks of inner and outer rot.

It is like a hard casing against which one's personality and the world beat sharply and distinctly and are differentiated from each other; for it is the uniform's true function to manifest and ordain order in the world, to arrest the confusion and flux of life, just as it conceals whatever in the human body is soft and flowing. (Broch 1947, 21)

Concealing the inconsistencies of body and mind, the order of the uniform provides an impersonal but solid life. As an exoskeleton makes the

soft body disappear, its carrier becomes part of the rigid and powerful mechanism of the social order. Gregor Samsa's father transformed into a hardened figure of authority only after he dressed up and put on his new, gold-buttoned bank uniform.

But for the penal colony's officer, the uniform does not represent such clear and unambiguous meanings. It denotes his rank in the new commandant's society (in which he lacks a sense of belonging) but links him to two absent homelands, spatially to the far away center of the empire and temporally to the past order of the old commandant. His only available *Heimat* remains the uniform itself. But a single uniform without a collective order is no uniform, and its wearer has no defined identity. Once the officer arrives at this conclusion, he sheds this uniform. Having failed to persuade the traveler, his last hope for the apparatus's future, he takes off his uniform, breaks his short sword, throws everything down the pit, and is once again nothing but a vulnerable body (KKDzL 240).

The uniform points to the officer's conflicting selves, but the way he wears it belies his claim to be "the sole defender [*Vertreter*] of the former commandant's legacy" (M 163–64; KKDzL 224). While the traveler accepts the officer's proud self-description, a small detail sticks out of the officer's collar, indicating his surrender to the temptations of the new commandant's regime. The officer denounces nothing more than the soothing influence women exert in the penal colony. Against official regulations, they feed prisoners candy and thus increase the volume of vomit that despoils the apparatus during executions (M 163; KKDzL 223); they distract men with their sexual advances (M 170; KKDzL 234); and, in one nightmarish vision, he foresees how a lady's hand covers the traveler's mouth at the very moment he stands up to defend the apparatus, a gesture that dooms once and for all the old commandant's work (M 167; KKDzL 230). Despite these denunciations of female influence, the officer wedges a "couple of ladies' cambric handkerchiefs" down his collar to soften the uniform's rigid edges (M 150; KKDzL 204). Rather than proving his resolve against the inner and outer vagaries of life, he submits to the softening pleasures of the new order and connects his sweaty body to the feminized new order.

A uniform stands for a disciplined collective. And the nameless officer describes himself initially as a member of a larger anonymous "we," the loyal friends and followers of the old commandant (M 151; KKDzL 206). Instead of speaking as the voice of the collective, however, the officer never stops saying "I" until the last pages of the story. The word "I" is uttered about 110 times in *In the Penal Colony*. The prisoner is said to have used the word once (M 156; KKDzL 213), the traveler says it

about twenty times, but the officer uses it close to ninety times. He also claims personal ownership of the colony's legal system and speaks of "my court" (M 155; KKDzL 212), "my judicial proceedings" (KKDzL 225), "my procedure" (M 167; KKDzL 228, 229), and "my plan" (M 169, 171; KKDzL 231, 232). If anyone in the story has adapted to the age of individualism and does not behave like a part of an impersonal collective, it is the officer (Kurz 1980, 54). Not only is the quantitative difference in the use of the first-person pronoun instructive, but the sequence in which the officer and the traveler utter the word mirrors closely the struggle between them. Initially, only the officer says "I" (KKDzL 203–16), and the traveler asserts himself only momentarily (KKDzL 217). For the following twelve pages, it is again just the officer who utters the pronoun (KKDzL 218–30). Once more the traveler interjects (KKDzL 231), but the officer reclaims again the sole use of the "I" (KKDzL 232–34). Only then does the power shift, and the traveler takes charge of the first-person pronoun (KKDzL 235–38). Ironically, the word "I" disappears from the story once the officer fully realizes that he belongs to no collective. The nameless but self-centered officer never says "I" again after he decides to take his life; and no one uses the first-person pronoun after his death (KKDzL 239–48).

The officer's seemingly strict distinction between the penal colony's old order and the new order proves so suggestive that readers take this distinction as a starting point for their interpretations, usually placing the old order into a timeless past. A stark opposition between these two regimes provides fertile ground for the story's religious and cultural-political meanings. The old and the new society have been linked to the differences between the Old and New Testament (Henel 1973; Heller 1975; Thiher 1990), between Eastern and Western European Judaism (Pan 1994), or between a forgotten aesthetics of cruelty and a modern aesthetics of representation (Lyotard 1993). Such readings ascribe to the regime of the old commandant an ahistorical timelessness for which Lukács already faulted Kafka's stories (Lukács 1957, 535). But the officer's own narration contradicts such clear distinctions.

The old commandant's order belongs to no traditional local culture but is a recent Western import. The famed reign of the apparatus has been a very brief one, almost as fleeting as the alleged semblance of justice on the face of the executed. When the officer explicates his position in the legal system, he expects the traveler to be surprised to hear that he was "appointed judge in the penal colony. In spite of my youth" (M 155; KKDzL 212). The young officer was involved in the development of the execution apparatus "from the very first trials, and worked on every

stage to its completion” (M 151; KKDzL 205). The new commandant has already governed the colony for several years when the traveler arrives, but the officer still looks too young to be the superior judge. The old commandant’s reign cannot have lasted for more than a few years, maybe a decade. His regime turns timeless only when the officer imagines its future. And even in the officer’s vision of never-changing existence, this future is comically foreshortened to a few years.

At the time of his death, we, his friends, already knew that the organization was so seamlessly efficient that his successor, even if he had a thousand new plans in his head, would be unable to change anything of the old design, at least not for several years. (M 151; KKDzL 206)¹⁰

During his visit to the commandant’s grave, the traveler learns, however, that the old commandant’s administration and system of government outlived him, even to the day of his funeral. Instead of receiving an officially sanctioned funeral, the old commandant’s body is buried rather indecorously in a teahouse.

The new commandant succeeds to all appearances in very quickly reforming the penal colony. His harbor projects connect the colony to the world, and end its hermetic self-containment. The public has lost interest in the silent observation of executions and watches public policy deliberations instead. The reform has even reached the apparatus. The new commandant banned the use of acid during executions (M 163). The apparatus’s funding is cut to the point of disrepair, making its proper functioning nearly impossible (M 162). Because of the widespread dislike for the machine, the officer is relieved that the traveler will be the sole witness of the execution. In a larger audience he would have been influenced by “the lying whispers and contemptuous demeanours of others” (M 168).

More significant for the actual role of the officer in Kafka’s story is his own abandonment of the previous order. The old order had been so fragile and short-lived that the penal colony’s priest could prevent the old commandant’s official burial. He had to be laid to rest in a run-down teahouse. Ashamed of this arrangement, the officer repeatedly “tried to dig him up overnight” (M 179; KKDzL 246–47). Always chased off, the officer failed to secure his commanding officer an honorable funeral. In other words, he committed the very crime for which he would later sentence the prisoner to death. Like the prisoner, the officer failed to honor the same command: “Respect your commanding officer” (M 179, 154; KKDzL 247, 210). As Kurz already noted, the officer shows more disre-

spect for the old commandant's order when he describes past executions. He does not hide his disgust when he says that hundreds of people gathered "like flies" around the old commandant during these events (Kurz 1980, 55; KKDzL 227).¹¹ Rather than alluding to the *parousia* of justice, the officer's metaphor invokes excrement and rotting corpses. His dismissive remembrance of the past and his already mentioned possessive attitude toward the practice of justice—"my court," "my procedure"—indicate that the relationship between him and the old commandant has been far more antagonistic than he dares to acknowledge.

The officer's conflicting loyalties, his identification with and rejection of the old commandant's order, are further exposed in his incoherent narration. His unreliability surpasses even the traveler's fallibility as an eyewitness. The irreconcilable inconsistencies of his narration cast doubt on every aspect of the colony's past and the supposed functioning of the apparatus. To uncover the conflict at the core of *In the Penal Colony* one has to focus, as Gray suggested, on the officer's act of narration. His speech reveals, however, no persistent mediative disjunction in intercultural communications. With its switching back and forth between (unreliable) storytelling and description, Kafka explores in the officer's speech modernism's difficulties with tarrying with the ambiguity of violence, cruelty, and humiliation, namely, the difficulty of not seeing a "good" versus "bad" violence.

What role do the officer's descriptions of the apparatus play in this story? What is the function of description in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* as one of the signature texts of German modernism? These questions are anything but new. With an awareness of the officer's precarious position between the old and the new order, however, a new answer can be offered. Georg Lukács criticized the preponderance of descriptions in Kafka's writing as a flight from reality. Presenting Thomas Mann and Kafka as the two extreme poles of bourgeois realism, Lukács conceives this alternative as one between storytelling and description. In contrast to the works of Mann, Lukács found no purpose for the extensive descriptions in Kafka's stories because they seemed to lack a sense of totality. Without a meaningful global horizon, Kafka's descriptive passages no longer served the task of storytelling. Instead of aiming at a unified system of meaning and narrative closure, Kafka's descriptions disrupted the narrational principles of chronology and causality, providing, as Lukács argued, merely an additive and correlative structure. The historical roots of the fear expressed in Kafka's writings, a fear Lukács traced to the alienated world of capitalist society, had been severed by their author. By abandoning the sequential logic of narrative, Kafka transformed this historically specific fear into a

“timeless fate of human existence” (Lukács 1957, 535). His protagonists lack a sense of purpose and a vision for historical change. Fragmenting reality into detailed descriptions, Kafka became “the classic of standstill” (534).

Lukács’s critique of Kafka has been rejected, but his observations on the disruptive power of description in modernist literature gained new significance in Scherpe’s inversion of Lukács’s assessment of Kafka’s works.¹² Offering an intriguing argument for the centrality of description in modernist literature, Scherpe defines modernism’s axiom in a lecture as “describe, don’t narrate!” (Scherpe 1995). In times of crisis and war, narrative loses its “uniting and binding strength,” and the binary structures of storytelling—the chronologies and causalities of beginning and end, of rise and fall, and of life and death—fray and dissolve (Scherpe 1995, 3). Without definite answers as to the causes and origins of the crisis, storytelling takes refuge in descriptions. In the modernist writings of Döblin, Musil, and Kafka as well as Peter Weiss and Claude Simon, Scherpe detects an “aesthetic militancy” and a “cultural fundamentalism” that repeal the traditional subordination of description to narration (3, 10). He uncovers

a will to unconditional representation [*Darstellung*], lodging itself precisely, so my thesis, where the narrative cannot move any further, has no advice but leaves room and offers space. What happens right there, not at the narrative’s end but right at its center, where the narrative comes suddenly to a standstill and description occupies the empty place. (Scherpe 1995, 10)

One will be tempted to identify the deep, sandy valley in which the apparatus stands and the officer’s endless explanations of its construction as the perfect example of modernism’s usage of description as standstill. And in his essay on “Kafka’s Poetics of Description” (2006), Scherpe provides a detailed case study for modernism’s proposed response to war and violence via description. *In the Penal Colony* serves as principal evidence for Scherpe’s theory of modernist representation.

Somewhat softening the stark alternative of his earlier lecture *Beschreiben, nicht Erzählen!* [*Describe, Don’t Narrate!*], Scherpe argues that Kafka’s stories are not reducible to descriptions. But the descriptive passages hold the key to the strange and particular way of Kafka’s storytelling. Description suspends the plot and “operates in the ‘time-out’ of storytelling,” but puts no end to storytelling (Scherpe 2006, 90). In his reading, nearly half of *In the Penal Colony* is taken up by the officer’s expert

instruction, but storytelling survives because of operational malfunctions: "The narratibility of Kafka's stories is often saved by the fact that in the highly objective experimental setting [*höchst sachlichen Versuchsanordnung*], established initially by description, a dysfunction occurs" (Scherpe 2006, 97). By focusing on the officer's actions rather than on what his words reveal, Scherpe mischaracterizes the officer's narration as a prime example of "a rhetoric of description reduced to a standstill," delivered by someone without self-interest (*selbstvergessen*) (98). The officer is characterized as driven by an immanent urge for ever more precise and perfect descriptions. His mistake, the dysfunction in the story's system, occurs only when the officer inexplicably straps himself onto the apparatus and the apparatus is "set in motion for the wrong object and collapses" (97). The officer's self-execution restarts the storytelling, Scherpe argues, and *In the Penal Colony* escapes the standstill of its descriptive center. Never regaining the formal unity and an inner sense of traditional storytelling, Kafka's modernist tale leaves the traveler and his readers behind without resolving their confusions. Very evocatively but without clear meaning, Scherpe describes Kafka's response to the representational crisis of modernity as fiction consumed by its descriptive procedure (102).

While the conflict between narration and description is indeed at the center of Kafka's modernist poetics, it does not follow such a neatly separated sequence but, as always, constantly blurs distinctions and produces ambivalence. Kafka's descriptions sustain no standstill, but they are always already infested by storytelling. Description in Kafka's writings offers no escapist flight from the realities of alienation, as Lukács suggests, nor a time-out from the near impossible task of narrating moments of crisis. *In the Penal Colony* posits a complex tension between storytelling and description. Description never shields the officer from the traps of narration, from establishing a before and after, a cause and effect. The officer might search for Scherpe's free zone of description, but he never finds such refuge. He incessantly interrupts his explanation of the apparatus with short stories of the colony's glorious past, its corrupted present, and its doomed future.

Let us look, then, at the officer's narration. Like Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*, the officer loses "the elementary, narrative mode of thought" without, however, finding refuge in description, or in replacing the red thread of linear narrative with an infinitely interwoven surface of essayistic reflections, as Musil's protagonist attempted (MwQ 709). A close look at the net of lies and inconsistencies in which the officer finds himself entangled directs us to the underlying problem that might have provoked his self-destruction. Kafka's officer cannot relate to himself as a

storyteller and fails repeatedly at the most fundamental task of establishing a coherent sequence of events. His narration contains irreconcilable chronological confusions—and it does not speak well for the traveler’s reliability as an observer that he never notices them.

The traveler arrived in the penal colony only one day before the reader encounters him in Kafka’s story. To honor the guest, the commandant organized a reception for the same evening and invited the traveler to witness an execution on the following day. As the officer reminds the traveler: “I happened to be near you yesterday when the commandant invited you to come. I heard the invitation” (M 166; KKDzL 227). Since both were present at the reception, and since the traveler listens to the officer without objections, the reader has no reason to question the officer’s statement. So far, so good, one might say. But the reader has to ask whose execution the traveler is supposed to witness. It cannot have been the prisoner who will be led the next day to the apparatus. That prisoner committed his offense, according to the officer, after the traveler had been invited to attend an execution. Outlining a precise timeline, the officer reports that the prisoner committed his crime at two in the morning, on the same day that would become the day of his execution. His captain found the soldier asleep even though he had been ordered to perform hourly salutes. The captain whipped the sleeping man, who then threatened to “gobble up” his superior (M 156; KKDzL 213). The following morning, “this morning” (M 156; KKDzL 212), the morning after the reception for the traveler, the captain reported the incident. The officer decreed the sentence immediately: “An hour ago, the captain came to me, I took down his report and wrote out the judgment. Then I had the man clapped in irons. It was all very simple” (M 156; KKDzL 213).

But during the reception in honor of the traveler’s arrival in the penal colony on the previous evening, the new commandant had known already crucial details about the case—“insubordination and insulting an officer” (M 149; KKDzL 203)—details that allow the reader to recognize that the new commandant spoke indeed about the same soldier that the officer claimed to have arrested and sentenced several hours after this reception. How could the new commandant have known that the execution would take place the next day if neither the crime nor the sentencing had already occurred as the officer claims in his version of the soldier’s transgressions? Any assumption of a conspiratorial cooperation between the new commandant and the officer against the traveler would render the story absurd. The officer must be confused, or he lies for some unknown reason to the traveler.

To add to the confusion, another of the officer’s stories indicates that

the sentencing might not have occurred just a few hours previously. Shortly after the prisoner is tied to the apparatus, he throws up and the annoyed and disgusted officer blames the new commandant and his ladies for this disturbance.

And haven't I spent hours trying to get the commandant to understand that prisoners shouldn't be fed on the eve of an execution [*einen Tag vor der Exekution*]. But no, with their new mild approach they do things differently. The commandant's ladies stuff the man full of sugary sweet things on the eve of his marching off. (M 163; KKDzL 223)

His complaint could make sense if a day has passed between the arrest and the execution. But the blamed ladies would hardly have had a chance to break this rule and feed the condemned man if the captain first reported the crime only an hour before.

The chronological incoherence of the officer's narrative is confusing enough. But it is even worse that these discrepancies lack any purpose. The officer's sped-up version of the legal proceedings is counterproductive to his plan of converting the traveler into a defender of the apparatus. He expects the traveler to be "caught up in European perspectives" (M 166; KKDzL 228), to oppose torture and capital punishment. His alternate account of the prisoner's arrest and sentencing puts his legal proceedings in an even harsher light, moving his system of justice ever closer to *Standrecht* and murder. While he gains nothing with his story of instant sentencing and capital punishment, he risks everything with these inconsistencies. If the traveler had noticed the officer's confusion of the most basic facts, he should have become suspicious of all of his claims. The officer would have severely harmed his chance of converting the visitor into an ally against the new commandant's regime.

No rational basis for the officer's lies seems to exist but various explanations remain for his peculiar storytelling. He could be a careless liar. But his suicide as a response to his failure to persuade the traveler is far too serious a consequence to make such a scenario probable. As a man of conflicting loyalties who faces the loss of power and influence, the anxious officer might have lost his ability to distinguish truth from lie. His inconsistent speech would be a symptom of his identity's rapid disintegration, ending in suicide. Yet this would be a rather unsatisfactory explanation as well, since the strange apparatus, his peculiar notion of justice, and the battle between description and narration would all become needless details in Kafka's story. Furthermore, such a reading cannot account

for the officer's sudden "bright eyes" and his mysterious smile once he decides to die (M 172). Interpreting *In the Penal Colony* as the story of a lying officer and a traveler who never becomes aware of these lies reduces this highly disturbing story to a rather simplistic core. Most importantly, such a reading fails to address the most fundamental inconsistency of the officer's speech: its very existence.

If the officer could be ideologically predicated on his faith in the apparatus and his loyalty to the old commandant's regime, as Gray argued, then he should let the execution machine speak for itself. Instead of trusting in its ability to make justice visible, the officer delivers, however, a protracted oral defense of the apparatus. His speech fits the new order of deliberation much better than the past order of silent observation. The task of persuasion was deferred to the apparatus, but with his speech the officer lacks such deference and relies instead on his way with words. Language entered the workings of the apparatus only in the form of designs that remain inscrutable to the uninitiated. Since the tortured bodies of the condemned were tasked with decoding them, judgments were not pronounced publicly. The old commandant's legal system rendered any form of narrative superfluous. The rules and regulations of law enforcement remained unknown to delinquents. The accused never heard the charge, was never asked to confess, never allowed to defend himself. Judgment was reached in his absence. Granting the accused the right to speak would have obstructed the quest for truth, as the officer told the traveler.

If I had called on the man first, and questioned him it would have produced nothing but confusion. He would have lied to me; if I'd managed to catch him lying, he would have told different lies, and so on. (M 156; KKDzL 213)

The impossibility of gaining a truthful verbal confession from a prisoner is self-evident to the officer.

With his distrust of the value of confessions, the officer-judge could have found himself in agreement with the legal theory of Kafka's time. To accept a confession as truthful was to Hans Gross, an international authority in the emergent science of criminal psychology and one of Kafka's law professors, a sign of the susceptible layman but not of a judge, well versed in new science. "The making of a confession, according to laymen, ends the matter, but really, the judge's work begins with it" (Gross 1911, 33). A judge had to distrust the sense perceptions of witnesses and the confessions of the accused. Only after careful psychological examina-

tion could he decide whether to believe their stories. Criminal psychology was a new science of evidence, “not of finding evidence but of rendering evidence evidential. This is particularly true with regard to confessions” (109). His method allowed Gross to identify entire social groups as particularly unlikely candidates for truth telling (and a writer like Kafka had to be counted among the unreliable witnesses). Gross found a widespread disregard for truth among those who did nothing worthwhile, and “to this class belong peddlers, street merchants, inn-keepers, certain shopkeepers, hack-drivers, artists, etc., and especially prostitutes” (17). The purpose of the apparatus in the penal colony was, as the officer describes it, to dispense entirely with the need to submit confessions to psychological scrutiny.

The officer's ideology distrusts direct communication as a dangerous impediment to truth. Truth, justice, and self-knowledge can be established through the medium of pain, but not in direct speech. Language, even on its most basic communicative level, undermines the finding of truth. The condemned prisoner is hardly a refined orator, whose eloquence might twist the events of the alleged crime into a mesmerizing narrative of innocence. Portrayed as a rather listless and subservient soldier of low rank, he appears to have few communicative skills. But entering into any dialogue with any defendant, the officer proclaims, would never lead to truth since every defendant lies. Unlike Gross, the officer as judge requires no criminal psychology to evaluate confessions or claims of innocence. To perform justice and to allow the condemned man to reach self-knowledge at last, the officer's course of action does away with all verbal communication.

The legal process and the apparatus were designed to erase the condemned man's ability to speak and to experience death as part of a narrative continuum. By keeping the accusation and the verdict secret, the proceedings sever the link between crime and punishment. The opportunities for narratives of crime and punishment, guilt and innocence, have either been excised from the penal colony's legal system (interrogation and trial) or occur without the prisoner's knowledge (sentencing). The legal procedure disorients the condemned man and the apparatus pursues during its first six hours the clearly defined task of undoing the main functions of the mouth: to speak, to express feelings, and to eat. The moment the apparatus begins to work its victim can only shriek in pain—but felt muffles his screams. Two hours later, the felt can be removed since “the man has no strength left with which to scream” (M 160; KKDzL 219). The desire and ability to eat lasts four more hours. Once the felt is removed, the officer claims, the condemned eats warm rice pudding. The interest

in food disappears around the sixth hour, and then the condemned man's reading of the sentence commences. He is meant to begin comprehending the verdict's justice at the very moment the apparatus succeeds in eliminating his ability and desire to speak or eat (M 160; KKDzL 219). Only then, the officer claims, does his appreciation of the judgment's righteousness become visible around his eyes (and not his mouth). His life ends in silent self-awareness, his audience is led to believe, just before the apparatus hurls his body into the pit.

The lack of narrative during the procedure is also notable to the audience. As the officer tells it, the violent spectacle entails no retelling of the crime, no public proclamation of the sentence, and no dramatic confession at the scaffold. All the audience hears are the victim's muffled screams, followed by silence. According to the officer, the audience never voiced interest in the particulars of the crime or questioned whether the crime fit the punishment. They came not to listen but to observe a fleeting expression on the face of the executed. To them this expression belonged to no particular crime and punishment story but was evidence for the most impersonal conviction: "all knew: justice is being enacted" (M 165; KKDzL 226). At the height of its popularity, the officer says, people did not even look at the apparatus or the victim's face. So great was the faith in the silent procedure that "some of the crowd didn't even bother to watch, they lay there in the sand with eyes shut" (M 166; KKDzL 226).

If the officer believes his version of past proceedings, then the great enigma at the center of *In the Penal Colony* comes into focus (and it is not the old commandant's indecipherable sentences). Any adherent of the old order would notice that the officer fails to persuade the traveler because the officer lacks confidence in the apparatus's ability to make justice visible. Rather than presenting the spectacle of justice, he never quits talking. The officer halts the execution only moments after the apparatus is set in motion. He never offers the traveler the opportunity to observe the signs of understanding justice on the face of the condemned man. Instead, the officer relies on the persuasive force of speech. His precarious position in between the orders of spectacle and rhetoric is apparent when he blames the procedure for the failure of his narration: "so the process has not convinced you" (KKDzL 236). Instead of relying on the old order's strategies of persuasion, the officer depends in his encounter with the traveler on descriptions, explanations, stories, petitions, lamentations, and gossip. The officer argues like a member of the despised order of the new commandant.

If the officer had been a consistent figure, a last representative of the old order to which he pledged allegiance, then he should have followed

the principle Scherpe detected at work in modernist writings during times of war and crisis. The officer should have sought the safe ground of description and abided by the old commandant's precedence and restricted his speech to mere descriptions of the apparatus (M 153; KKDzL 209). The officer once explained this model of "describe, don't narrate" to the traveler: "Allow me to explain the machine first, and then demonstrate its use to you. That way, you'll be better able to follow it" (M 152; KKDzL 207). When he compares and contrasts the traveler to the condemned man, the narrator suggests as well that one should understand the apparatus by first listening to descriptive explanations and then by observing the machine at work. The condemned man looks at the same parts of the machine as the traveler, but he does not understand the officer's French explanations. As the narrator says, "because he didn't have an explanation, he was unable to make sense of it" (M 158; KKDzL 216).

According to the detectable principles of the old order, the officer's task had been to provide descriptive explanations of the apparatus and the legal system that were not subordinated to storytelling. Repeatedly, he advises the traveler to focus his attention on the machine and to disregard everything else as distractions: "Now, have a look at this apparatus" (KKDzL 204).¹³ The officer's explanations begin with phrases like "you will see" (M 151, 152; KKDzL 206), "as you see" (M 156; KKDzL 213), "You see" (M 157; KKDzL 213, 215), and "I'll show you" (M 159; KKDzL 217), and he sets the apparatus into motion with an urgent "Take a look!" (M 159; KKDzL 218). The officer exudes confidence whenever he tarries with the intricacies of the not-yet-working machine and describes what is visible. Pointing to and naming one detail after the other—"the bed," "the engraver," "the harrow" (M 153; KKDzL 206)—he even sparks a first interest in the traveler. He expects the traveler to become a defender of the apparatus just by inspecting it. Should the traveler still have doubts, the spectacle of the execution would put them to rest: "If there are any little grey areas of indecision, the sight of the execution will clear them up" (M 168; KKDzL 231). Since the officer can never restrict himself to descriptive explanations, however, he keeps exposing his own gray areas of indecision. He is well aware of his inability to follow the old commandant's principle of mere description and demonstration. When the officer strayed for the first time from the present tense of description into the past tense of narration to praise the old commandant's accomplishments, the officer paused and chided himself: "'However,' the officer brought himself up short, 'here I am gabbling away, and his machine is in front of us'" (M 151; KKDzL 206). Incapable of solely describing and

never narrating, the officer is well aware of the risks that come with his departure from the safe ground of description.

In his adaptation of *In the Penal Colony* (1992), Heiner Müller demonstrates that Kafka embedded a version of the officer's speech in his story that would be entirely in accordance with Scherpe's poetics of description. But the differences between Kafka's and Müller's officers reveal the story's distance from such a poetics. Heiner Müller added not a single word to Kafka's story, and he kept the sequence of the officer's speech intact. But he cut Kafka's story radically. Müller retained only the officer's direct speech and excised all of his deviations from description. The officer no longer addresses the traveler. Neither the old nor the new commandant is mentioned anymore. The stories of the glorious executions of the past and the corrupting power of the ladies are gone, as are his predictions for a doomed future. The doubtless guilt of the accused disappears together with the officer's reports on the semblance of justice on the faces of the executed. Müller deleted every sentence in which the officer said "I," and thus de-individualized and subordinated the officer to the status of a servant of the apparatus. In his abbreviated version of Kafka's story, Müller removed all the inconsistencies, contradictions, and hallucinations from the officer's speech. Although he "only" edited Kafka's story, the difference between his and Kafka's officer could hardly be greater and more revealing.

Müller's officer speaks as the last true representative of the old order and remains throughout in the calm and safe standstill of description. By sealing every crack in the officer's speech, Müller's adaptation calls attention to the presence of these cracks in Kafka's own version of the story. To extract a version of the officer's speech that actually adheres to a poetics of description, Müller could keep no more than 20 percent of the officer's narration.¹⁴ The other 80 percent had been inextricably bound to the officer's storytelling, his lies, and his inconsistencies. The difference between Müller's and Kafka's two officers is not only between the possibility and the impossibility of a standstill of description but also one between life and death. At the end of Kafka's story, the officer's speech disintegrates and collapses: he kills himself. Müller's officer survives safely ensconced in his descriptions.

Kafka's story is a parable about the impossibility of seeking refuge in description even as it exposes the vagaries of storytelling. Description neither grants a time-out in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* nor is it undone by a single dysfunction, as Scherpe suggested. Kafka portrays description as dysfunctional and unsustainable in a crisis situation. Description might have provided a safe space during the old commandant's reign

when no one seems to have challenged society's faith in the apparatus (if one accepts the officer's stories of the magnificent past as true). The officer's speech, however, fails to sustain the standstill of description for any extended period of time. Instead of relying on the apparatus's power to persuade—a machine deserted by everyone else, convincing no one anymore—the officer disrupts his technical descriptions with even more digressions into the penal colony's history. Every time he digresses into stories about the past and the future of the apparatus and the penal colony, one hears the jarring sounds of inconsistencies, the same sound the actual apparatus makes when set in motion (M 159; KKDzL 218). The officer disintegrates in his stories just as the machine self-disassembles at the story's end.

Let us twist the knife of Kafka's poetics one more time. According to his words and deeds, the officer belongs to several different orders and proves unable to resolve the ambiguities that result from these conflicting loyalties. He speaks disrespectfully of a past he glorifies. He abhors the current regime but follows its politics of deliberation. He admires silence, distrusts direct communication, but talks constantly. He claims the apparatus makes justice visible but never demonstrates its functioning. The last question in this line of inquiry would be whether the officer knows that his loyalties are ambivalent, that his statements are unreliable and his actions self-contradictory. This question cannot be answered with certainty—and how should this be possible in a story that unfolds with cruel ambivalence? But there are indications that the answer might be yes—and such an affirmative answer would point to a disquieting proximity between the officer, the master of the torturous apparatus, and Kafka, his author.

Once the officer realizes that he failed to persuade the traveler, he smiles, and the narrator describes this smile as a rather peculiar smile. The officer "smiled in the way a grown-up might smile at a foolish child, keeping his own serious reflections to himself behind the smile" (M 172). Shortly before his death, the semblance of knowledge appears on the officer's face (not around his eyes but his mouth). We never learn the content of his reflections, but we know the conclusion he draws from them. The officer decides to die. From his decision to die, we infer another fact, casting yet another shadow of ambiguity across Kafka's story. We learn that the officer had made the traveler's decision about the apparatus into a decision about his own life and death.¹⁵ By putting himself and his narration at the risk of death the officer took, from the story's beginning, the position of a defendant accused of a capital crime. Either he succeeds in justifying his actions or he will be sentenced to

death. According to the officer's professed legal philosophy, the legal philosophy of the old order, his speech should become as unreliable as any defendant's confession.

The same distrust of confessions is at the core of Kafka's poetics. In law, religion, and personal life, confessions are supposed to be the moments of truth, the act of laying bare the most intimate details of one's self. In secular society, confessions bear, as Peter Brooks writes, this "special stamp of authenticity" (Brooks 2000, 9). Foucault noted the increased investment in confession as a central characteristic of Western societies when he summed up the changes in the Western production of the self in this way: "Western man has become a confessing animal" (Foucault 1978, 59). Günther Anders linked the increasing alienation and isolation of the individual in modernity to the ever-greater need for confession, self-expression, and self-exposure. But he found in Kafka a remarkable exception to this rule.

For if the desire for self-expression is intensified by isolation, then surely Kafka, the supremely isolated artist, might be expected to have developed some extreme mode of romantic expression. But the very opposite is the case: a less romantic, less subjective, less expressionistic style than Kafka's is scarcely conceivable. (Anders 1960, 64)

Kafka's increasing discomfort with the unintentionally revealing character of words, words that turn like knives against the self, accounts for his avoidance of self-expression, not just in works intended for publication. The knowledge of good and evil is always available but because of our inability to live in accordance with such knowledge Kafka sees us constructing one false facade after the other. Facing the truth of our inability to live in truth would have lethal consequences, as the officer and Kafka conclude. Kafka expected confessions to be false.

Confession and lie are one and the same. In order to be able to confess, one tells lies. One cannot express what one is, for that is precisely what one is; one can communicate only what one is not, that is, the lie. Only in the chorus there may be a certain truth. (WP 338; NSF II, 348)

Language never precludes truth from coming to the fore, but the individual's speech act has to be distrusted because of the self's morass-like lack of inner clarity and unity. A collective might speak the truth. Confes-

sion, the speech act defined as defining the individual, remains, however, a lie because one's own survival depends on the construction of false facades. Don't expect anything but betrayal from confessions, Kafka wrote to Milena Pollak. The moment he wrote "I confess" in a letter to her, he interrupted himself and warned her against the confessional mode (LM 176; BM 215).

You know, when I try to write down something like the following, the swords whose points surround me in a circle, begin slowly to approach the body, it's the most complete torture; when they begin to graze me, I don't mean pierce, when they merely begin to graze me it's already so terrible that I immediately, at the first scream, betray you, myself, everything. (LM 177; BM 215)

And rather than telling her anything directly, Kafka begins to speak in a "deliberately blind metaphor" (LM 177; BM 215).

The agreement between Kafka and his officer on confessions instills the latter's ambivalences, lies, and inconsistencies with yet another meaning. At the moment of crisis, the officer's faith wavered. He no longer believed in the perfection of the apparatus or the old commandant's design for a just society. Just as he fails to stay in the pure presence of description and explanation so the apparatus suffers from an inherent flaw and cannot sustain its procedure's transparency. Built of glass and constructed to wash away the victim's blood to preserve a clear view of the lethal spectacle, the apparatus lacks a mechanism to wipe away the vomit. To the great frustration of the officer, the old commandant's design cannot prevent the humans inside of it from spoiling and dirtying the apparatus during execution (M 163). Torn apart by his conflicting loyalties, doubts, and ambivalences, the officer no longer trusts the apparatus to deliver positive proof of its superiority, of its ability to make truth visible and avoid all direct verbal communication.

There is one explanation that could make sense of the officer's speech full of inconsistencies and apparent lies. Doubting the power of the spectacle, the officer's speech pursues a negative strategy of persuasion. Rather than relying on the workings of the apparatus, the officer demonstrates the individual's inability to speak its own truth. The officer informs the traveler of the basic tenets of his (and Kafka's) theory of communication—a subject cannot speak its own truth, confessions are lies, guilt is always doubtless. At the same time the officer submits himself and the future of the apparatus to the traveler's judgment, a judgment over the officer's life or death, over the future of the old commandment's legal system.

As the last defendant of a vanishing tradition, the officer forces himself into the situation of an accused during interrogation. While he describes and explains the apparatus with apparent conviction, his words and gestures turn against him, and reveal, just as he would have predicted, the inability of a confessor to stay with his truth. The officer would expect the traveler to notice his inconsistencies and conflicting loyalties. Not to expose him as a liar but to demonstrate the central point of his poetics. Anyone who is put on the defensive will lie; the individual is (or might be) his truth, but he cannot communicate this truth directly. Because of their inconsistencies, the officer's speech remains in accordance with his fundamental theses on communication. The officer's speech would become a symptom of his disintegration but also part of his strategy to reveal the limits of the communicative function of language, evidence against any individual's expectation to reveal truth in direct communication.

But the unsuspecting and unobservant traveler fails to appreciate the officer's enactment of this theory of language and communication. Just as he concentrates on the apparatus's engraver until its last wheel has fallen off instead of watching the officer during his self-execution, the traveler's attention stays out of focus. He never recognizes the self-revealing lies and inconsistencies of the officer's speech. The officer's attempts to communicate indirectly fail just as much as his performance of direct communication. Realizing his failures, the officer smiles, keeps his last reflections to himself, falls silent, and kills himself.

Kafka's story does not resolve but reveals the ambivalences between violence and truth, description and storytelling, and silence and communication. The reign of the apparatus ends in gestures of ambivalence. Kafka's story demonstrates the impossibility for individuals to communicate directly with each other *and* the failure of indirect communication. Consequently, the officer and the traveler are both last seen in positions of the in-between. Since the apparatus failed to expel his body, the officer dangles with his head pierced by an iron spike above the pit (M 179). Hanging dead in the air, his corpse exhibits a second in-between position: the expression on the dead man's face is still "that of the living man" (M 179). The traveler has left the ground of the colony but not yet reached the ship home. He is last seen standing on the rocking floor of a small boat (M 180). Panic stricken and speechless, he wards off the soldier and the prisoner with the story's last gesture of violence—the raising of the heavy knotted rope to prevent the soldier and the prisoner from entering his rocky boat.

Like the machine's last run, the story empties itself out without deciding on or ending anything. In Kafka's poetics one never hears "the damn

word out of the damn mouth," as Menninghaus suggested for Kafka. Neither the pain in the story nor the story's narration reveals a truth. But neither does any alternative to this equation of pain and truth emerge in Kafka's story. As the officer moves back and forth between description and storytelling, Kafka's story moves back and forth between the promise to reveal truth through violence and the renunciation of any such hope. This back-and-forth movement, the constant movement of radical ambivalence, never comes to an end, and the story disintegrates like the apparatus without renouncing the promise of violence and without fulfilling it. Kafka's poetics finds its limit in showing how words reveal more truth about their speakers than the speaker can accept if he wants to stay alive. But it never pretends to communicate truth itself and it ends in silence, just like the smiling but dead officer.

Chemical Warfare and Destructive Satires Canetti and Benjamin's Search for the Murderous Substance of Satire

This chapter explores the link between weapons of mass destruction and the satirical writings and writings on satire by Karl Kraus, Walter Benjamin, and in particular Elias Canetti. Among the many firsts of the First World War was the large-scale use of poison gases on battlefields. This equally innovative and shocking application of chemical engineering shaped not only, as we will see, the way the war was remembered but posed troubling questions for future postwar societies. A wide-ranging consensus existed that the next war would be decided with aerial gas attacks on Europe's capitals. Chemical warfare demanded a new catastrophic imagination and a nontraditional approach to represent the omnipresent risk of mass death events. Not the new mass media, however, but satire, one of the oldest and most traditional literary genres, responded most radically to this challenge to representation. As I argue in this chapter, it was Walter Benjamin's theory of satire (as he developed it in his readings of Karl Kraus [1874–1936]) and Elias Canetti's novel *Die Blendung* (written after Canetti went through Kraus's school of satire) that offer some of the most far-reaching responses to the acknowledged limits of traditional and contemporary literary and artistic representations of the new risk situation. To make visible the extent of Benjamin's and Canetti's achievements it becomes necessary to explore how other, more direct attempts at envisioning chemical warfare fell far short of finding an appropriate response to this challenge to representation and understanding. The innovative transformation of satire in Benjamin's theory and Canetti's praxis of destructive satire emerge fully only when seen in this context.

At 6 P.M. on April 22, 1915, German troops opened 5,730 cylinders filled with 150 tons of chlorine along a six-kilometer front near Ypres. Because of ever-changing wind conditions, the attack had been rescheduled seven times (Szöllösi-Janze 1998, 329). A vast greenish-gray wall, slowly turning yellow, drifted across the no-man's-land into the French trenches.

Twenty minutes later, German soldiers armed with bayonets followed the gas. The sight of the fleeing French troops terrified the eyewitnesses:

Then there staggered into our midst French soldiers, blinded, coughing, chests heaving, faces an ugly purple color—lips speechless with agony, and behind them, in the gas-choked trenches, we learned that they had left hundreds of dead and dying compadres. (Cited in Croddy and Wirtz 2005, 328–29)

In 2001, shortly after September 11, Peter Sloterdijk identified this moment as the primal scene of the twentieth century. As if one could pinpoint fundamental historical changes precisely in space and time, Sloterdijk sets both the actual beginning of the twentieth century and the arrival of modern terrorism onto the stage of global politics on this day in 1915 (Sloterdijk 2002, 7–45). The large-scale use of poison gas introduced a radically new approach to killing into warfare. Weapons from swords to guns to missiles are aimed directly at the opponent's body. Even the long-distance use of artillery could be still considered as a duel with both sides targeting each other's soldiers with the highest precision available. The use of poison gas follows a different principle. Chemical weapons are not aimed at individuals but poison a whole environment. Every living being will be affected in the target zone, and the poisoned area can remain lethal for days, weeks, or months. Chemical warfare threatened to render irrelevant the traditional distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, between war and peace, between warfare and terrorism.

Because of its potential to change the face of war, poison gas gained a far more prominent place in postwar memory than its actual use during the war could justify. Militarily, chemical warfare was of limited significance during the First World War. Chemical weapons were responsible for less than 4 percent of the total war casualties and provided neither side of the conflict lasting strategic advantage (Croddy and Wirtz 2005, 326).¹ Conventional arms like bullets, bombs, and shells posed throughout the war a far deadlier risk to the health and life of soldiers. But the terror of chemical weapons shaped the remembrance of the war. Wilfred Owen's *Dulce Et Decorum Est* (1918), still the most famous poem written about the First World War, centers on this new terror of a surprise gas attack:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (890)

The soldier wearing a gas mask became the symbol for all of the war's horrors. G. W. Pabst's film *Kameradschaft* (1931) provides just one example of Weimar cinema's remembrance of the war in a traumatic flashback to a gas attack. Far more ominously, Hitler connected in *Mein Kampf* (1925) his own suffering of a gas attack at the end of the First World War to his decision to enter politics as well as to his hatred of Jews, Marxists, and everyone else he held responsible for Germany's defeat in 1918.²

Just as gas warfare shaped the remembrance of the recent war so it shaped the expectations for the wars to come. Military theorists, chemists, journalists, and artists alike anticipated that the next war would be decided by aerial gas attacks. Through the use of chemical weapons, the leading postwar strategists intended to prevent a repetition of the disastrous stalemate of trench warfare (Förster 2002). The Italian military theorist Giulio Douhet (1869–1930), one of the first proponents of total warfare, proposed a strategy of surprise and shock through aero-chemical raids against the enemy's civilian centers. Sudden and relentless devastations of major cities should force the terrified opponent to declare defeat quickly and thus avoid the much higher casualty figures of trench warfare (Gat 2001, 561–98). In *The Command of the Air*, first published in 1921, Douhet argued that such unprecedented disregard for the conventions of modern warfare “may yet prove to be more humane than wars in the past in spite of all, because they may in the long run shed less blood” (Douhet 1972, 61). The combination of aerial bombing and poison gas would reintroduce the possibility of a quick and decisive victory into modern warfare. Thanks to the use of chemical weapons another costly war of attrition could be avoided.

In *The War of 19—* (1930), Douhet presented a detailed scenario of future warfare to the general reader (Douhet 1972, 293–394). According to his plans, even a post-Versailles Germany could defeat France and Belgium in just two days. Flying one air raid after the other, the German planes would asphyxiate dozens of cities. Terrorized by atrocities, French and Belgian morale would break quickly, and Germany would have undone its recent military defeat. Such enthusiastic assessment of the strategic potential of aero-chemical warfare was not limited to fascist generals like Douhet who had joined Mussolini in 1922 on his “March on Rome.” Military theorists across Europe took it almost for granted

that the next war would be decided by air power, poisonous gas, and incendiary bombs. In *Paris or the Future of War* (1925), Basil H. Liddell Hart, often regarded as the most influential liberal military theorist of the twentieth century, advocated the strategy of aerial gas attacks as well, hoping that “gas may well prove the salvation of civilization from the otherwise inevitable collapse in case of another world war” (Liddell Hart 25, 45).³ Because he expected that chemical weapons would radically shorten the length of future wars, he considered poison gas as the “least inhumane of modern weapons” (Liddell Hart 1930, 130).

These scenarios of fast and unremitting depopulation of cities, scenarios that would end and reverse all former prohibitions against attacking civilians, achieved their brilliant clarity because of their lack of political and military imagination. In a remarkable article to which we will return, Walter Benjamin, in “The Weapons of Tomorrow: Battles with Chlorazetophenol, Diphenylaminchlorasin and Dichloräthylsulfid” (1925), identified several flaws in such military scenarios.⁴ Most notable about the new military scenarios, Benjamin wrote, was “human imagination’s refusal to catch up with them, and the monstrosity of the looming fate turns into a pretext for laziness of thought [*Denkfaulheit*]” (Benjamin 1972–91, vol. 4, 475). The scenarios demonstrated laziness of thought when they ignored the possibility of worldwide responses and reactions to the gassing of cities. They failed to anticipate the opponent’s second- and third-strike capacity, a capacity that undermines Douhet’s anticipation of low casualty figures and a swift end to the war. Aero-chemical attacks would achieve victory quickly only if the location of all of the enemy’s airplanes would be known. But as Benjamin pointed out, “that is not the case” (475). An air force does not have to be stationed inside of a nation’s boundaries. Ready on aircraft carriers out on the ocean, Benjamin writes, planes could be launched from ships that “constantly change their position in international waters” (475). Already anticipating war scenarios that resemble those of the nuclear age, Benjamin imagined that both sides of the conflict could continue the war even after their own destruction. Unlike the military theorists of his age, he doubted that chemical weapons would achieve their military and political goals. They might kill their targets effectively, but the very existence of such weapons threatened to undermine the very distinction between war and peace. Instead of ending war quickly, allowing for a speedy return to peacetime, the targeted cities would remain death zones long after the war: “Even months after a region has been attacked with mustard gas every step on the ground and every touch of a doorknob or bread knife could prove lethal” (475). In Benjamin’s view, chemical warfare would no longer allow for fast and

clear transitions from war to peace. In “Theories of German Fascism” (1930), he warned once again that chemical weapons of mass destruction would transform the coming war into “an endless war” (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 314).⁵

As glaring as the gaps in the war scenarios of these military strategists might be, their authors failed to address an even more pressing question posed by the new potentials of chemical warfare. The possibility of sudden aerial gas attacks changed not just the future of warfare but life in peacetime society. What did it mean to enter an age in which cities and nations could be attacked at any moment with weapons of mass destruction? Europe’s mass media, from articles in the *Illustrated London News*, *Vu* in Paris, and the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* to popular science fiction novels, were filled with apocalyptic visions of aero-chemical warfare.⁶ Only in Weimar cinema one encounters almost no attempts to imagine future warfare as chemical warfare. The imagery of poison gas attacks was employed almost exclusively to recall the horrors of the past but not the next war. Heinz Pol, the influential film critic of the *Vossische Zeitung*, asked in 1925 in *Die Weltbühne*:

Where is the film director who makes a whole film about the future war, with bacterial bombs, poison gases, gas clouds? Nobody would need to pursue pacifist propaganda anymore if such a film, produced in a sober and matter-of-fact style would be shown in Europe’s cinema palaces. (Pol 1925, 812)

But Weimar cinema never produced such a film.⁷ Strangely enough, it is Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) that comes closest to showing the gassing of a city. At its beginning Mephisto appears suddenly above an unsuspecting medieval city, spreads his enormous wings, and releases a black cloud that wafts through the city. While the panicked crowds in the film identify the event as the outbreak of the plague, postwar audiences could recognize the scene as a truly devilish poison gas attack. Murnau’s allusion to chemical warfare makes the past terror of the black plague shockingly comprehensible.

Read as a visualization of a contemporary war scenario, however, Murnau’s catastrophic imagination would fall short. Already in 1915 chemists on both sides of the frontlines developed poison gases that defied perception and representation. They reacted with their new gases to the introduction of gas masks in 1915. Once soldiers detected gas clouds or noticed signs of irritation, they could now protect themselves and avoid panics. Fritz Haber, the preeminent chemist and so-called father

of gas warfare (Szöllösi-Janze 1998, 316), considered two responses to the diminished effectiveness of his chemical weapons: the development of chemicals that penetrate the protective gear or lethal gases that soldiers would not see, taste, or smell until it was too late to put on masks. As Haber writes in “Zur Geschichte des Gaskrieges,” both sides of the conflict pursued the second alternative. The newly developed dichloroethyl sulfide remained imperceptible to all human senses, and soldiers noticed the weapon only once it started to kill them. By spring 1916, both sides of the war launched imperceptible gases for the sole purpose of killing enemy troops: “The intention is no longer to drive the foe out of his position but to annihilate him with gas contained in the projectile” (Haber 1924, 90).

The imperceptibility, suddenness, and lethality of aero-chemical warfare demanded a new catastrophic imagination to understand what it meant to live in the presence of such weapons. Curiously, it is in the literary genre of satire where one finds the most innovative and ingenious responses to the new reality that imperceptible weapons could devastate whole cities at any moment. The writings of Kraus, Benjamin, and Canetti contain some of the most far-reaching responses to the acknowledged limits of traditional and contemporary literary and artistic representations of the new situation’s unprecedented destructive potential. Each of these writers addressed chemical warfare directly in their writings. But these explicit considerations are only starting points for their advances toward an aesthetics of imperceptibility, for their reconsiderations of more traditional forms of storytelling and representation in a situation in which the very triumphs of modernization pose an existential threat to modernity’s survival. To understand the achievements of Kraus, Benjamin, and Canetti, it becomes necessary to explore how other, more direct attempts of envisioning chemical warfare fell far short of finding an appropriate response to this challenge.

The earliest attempt in German modernism of imagining oneself suddenly in a poisoned environment can be found more than a decade before the First World War. With the hindsight of the war, one discovers a terrifying vision of gassing in Hofmannsthal’s “A Letter” (1902), the first and most important literary document of the language crisis in German-Austrian modernism (Kiesel 2004, 189–98). Riding across tilled farmland, Lord Chandos is suddenly overcome by vivid images of a rat pack dying in a milk cellar:

It was all there. The cool and musty cellar air, full of the sharp, sweetish smell of the poison, and the shrilling of the death cries echoing against mildewed walls. Those convulsed clumps of

powerlessness, those desperations colliding with one another in confusion. The frantic search for ways out. The cold glares of fury when two meet at a blocked crevice. (Hofmannsthal 2005, 123–24)

After the Second World War, Werner Kraft called this scene a “rationally inexplicable premonition of the gas chambers” (Kraft 1977, 22). Even if one prefers to avoid any claim for prophetic qualities for either world war, one can acknowledge that Hofmannsthal’s text attempts what the military strategists studiously avoided even after the first war. Lord Chandos imagines the lethal consequences of the “sweetish smell of the poison” from the *inside* of the cellar. By comparing the horrific cellar scene to catastrophic events in human history, from the destruction of Alba Longa to the erasure of Carthage, Lord Chandos blurs in his letter the boundaries between humans and animals. His vision communicates some of the horror of mass murder perpetrated on humans. Such empathetic blurring of boundaries between human and animal suffering coincides, however, with the establishment of another boundary that allows Lord Chandos to enjoy the experience of horror aesthetically. Even though he transports himself imaginatively into the midst of the catastrophe, he assumes the safe position of someone who cannot be affected by the poison. Lord Chandos ignores in his vision not only the fact that he had ordered the poisoning, but he transforms himself into an innocent and powerless witness whose life is never at risk. He writes that he observed the dying around him like the “slave standing near Niobe in helpless fright as she turned to stone” (Hofmannsthal 2005, 124). As Niobe’s slave he is right next to the mass murder but also exempted from the aim of Apollo’s and Artemis’s poisoned arrows. They point and shoot these arrows exclusively at Niobe’s children. With his mythological reference, Lord Chandos secures for himself the position of an unthreatened witness, not unlike the spectator who watches a shipwreck from the safety of the shore—the paradigmatic situation to experience a catastrophe as an instance of the sublime (Blumenberg 1997). As such a spectator, Lord Chandos experiences the mass death first and foremost aesthetically. Hofmannsthal’s fictive letter thus resists Kraft’s reading of it as a premonition of the horrors of the Holocaust and gassing. Instead of forcing him to confront the full extent of the human capacity to murder and destroy, the rats’ painful death afforded Lord Chandos the experience of “the present, the fullest, most sublime present” (Hofmannsthal 2005, 124). To make such aesthetic experience safe and possible, he transforms the indiscriminate lethal power of the sweet-smelling poison back to the linearity of bows and

arrows, the far more traditional weapons that Apollo and Artemis used to kill Niobe's children. The whole environment of the milk cellar is not affected by sweet smelling poison, only the rats. While Hofmannsthal's early imagination of mass killing bears some resemblance to gassing, its aesthetic representation depends entirely on ignoring the particular characteristics of poison gas.

After the First World War writers were less preoccupied with the aesthetic appreciation of mass death as sublime spectacle. And not many authors shared Douhet's and Liddell Hart's expectation that chemical weapons would make future warfare more humane. Exposing proponents of a "chlorreichen Offensive" (a wordplay describing the military attack as rich in glory and chlorine), the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus warned already in 1918 against having hopes for more humane warfare (Kraus 1978, vol. 7, no. 474–83, 41). Instead of considering the new weapons as a chance to limit the destructive impact of warfare on societies, Kraus read them as emblematic of the failure of a catastrophic imagination. "The mankind that exhausted its imagination in inventions can no longer imagine their effectiveness—otherwise it would use them to commit suicide out of remorse" (45).⁸ In the epilogue to his play *The Last Days of Mankind* (1918–19), Kraus exposed this exhausted imagination in the figure of a chemical engineer. Appropriately named Dr. Siegfried Abendrot, this modern engineer promises his audience to develop a gas that would achieve once and for all peace through victory (*Siegfried*). But only at the price of a red dawn (*Abendrot*) to mankind's existence.

To cook up a substitute death I'd be willing,
 And market it under my name—what a killing!
 The gases that we have deployed in the past
 affected our own men—that method can't last.
 From now on we'll slaughter whomever we please
 By means of our own substitute lung disease!
 No need any longer to make any sound,
 As we turn the whole earth to a burial ground.
 It's easy to strengthen our front if we try.
 Whole armies will perish without knowing why.
 One press on the button's enough to expunge
 hundreds of thousands of enemy lungs.
 We don't need to shout now, we just hold our breath,
 And our victims will silently go to their deaths. (Cited in Timms
 2005, 72)

The cheerful Dr. Abendrot exemplifies the challenge that the new possibilities of chemical warfare posed to a catastrophic imagination after the war. How could the technological ease with which the imperceptible threat of chemical warfare could suddenly suffocate whole cities be portrayed and registered in all of its horrors?

In his article “The Weapons of Tomorrow: Battles with Chlorazetophenol, Diphenylaminchlorasin and Dichloräthylsulfid,” Benjamin offered a first glimpse of the new challenge. While “weapons of tomorrow” conveys an ominous danger, the actual names of the poisonous gases, gases with varying degrees of lethality and very different demands for dispersion, are so technical and opaque to the nonspecialist that one receives little indication of their deadly powers. To the layman these names are as colorless as the gases themselves. Like Douhet and Liddell Hart, Benjamin expected that the next war had to be all attack and no defense. A surprise aerial attack against the civilian populations of Paris, London, or Berlin would decide the conflict almost instantaneously. Unlike the military experts (and Dr. Abendrot), however, Benjamin placed his readers not on the side of the victors but among the victims of such an aerial assault.

On a beautiful, radiant day in spring a scent as if of violets spreads throughout the streets of Berlin. This will last a few minutes. Then, the air becomes suffocating. Whoever fails to escape its reach will in a few more minutes fail to perceive, will momentarily lose his orientation [*Gesicht*]. Should he not succeed in fleeing . . . he will suffocate. All this could occur one day, without any airplane in the air visible or the buzz of any propeller audible. (Benjamin 1972–91, vol. 4, 474)

The poison gas would have the same faint sweet smell that already proved its lethal potential to the rats in Chandos’s milk cellar. But this time the gas would not be contained to a single basement, and it would spare no observer. These newly developed weapons created a situation to which the previous distinctions war and peace, air and poison, soldier and civilian no longer applied. From the perspective of a potential victim, the moment of attack looks no different than a peaceful summer day. From the perspective of a bomber pilot releasing his poisonous cargo above Berlin no distinction between combatant and noncombatant can be made. The weapons of tomorrow would be used along a “ghostly frontline” that might suddenly materialize on any street in Europe (473). How could one perceive, represent, and communicate what it meant to live in such a radically new risk situation?

With the exception of Weimar cinema, the desire to make the imperceptible but ubiquitous risk of mass death comprehensible began to preoccupy the mass media, literature, and arts after the war. Most of these attempts became, however, evidence for the inability to expand the limits of a catastrophic imagination. But analyzing these less successful attempts to imagine the next war—the last example leads to the genre of satire—allows a reader to notice to what high degree Benjamin's and Canetti's models of destructive satire respond to the challenge posed to a catastrophic imagination in the age of weapons of mass destruction.

Even war narratives that experimented with new representational strategies tended to fall back on traditional storylines of redemption and closure when they attempted to envision the consequences of the new technologies of mass death. In *(CHCl = CH)3As (Levisite), oder, Der einzig gerechte Krieg* (1926), Johannes R. Becher imagined the next war as a global civil war. Partially written in an overtly expressionist style and filled with revolutionary proclamations, Becher's novel regards the next war as no particular challenge to the imagination. Even though he anticipates the use of chemical weapons, his account of war and violence remains rather traditional in its promise of purification and rebirth for its (communist) participants. The poison gas remains in Becher's novel a means and metaphor for the self-destructive tendencies of capitalism. The "only just war" to which its title refers, the war between the working class and the military-industrial complex, finds its redemptive conclusion in the founding of a "Soviet-Europe." Safely embedded in a narrative of political progress, Becher can imagine chemical warfare in every gory detail but without a sense of fundamental risk and disorientation because such warfare is viewed as another step toward a better future. His revolutionary novel presents death and dying as just as meaningful and welcome as Musil had anticipated it for the German nation in August 1914: "Because one thing is incontestably true today: even if the individual dies, the whole, the proletarian class is victorious!" (Becher 1926, 255). Becher's utopian novel converts the dystopian potential of modern warfare into fuel for the revolutionary process.

Peter Martin Lampel's play *Giftgas über Berlin* (1929) provides an example of a politically ambitious dramatic text that undermines its progressive intention with its traditional aesthetics.⁹ Possibly following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Lamszus's controversial but now lost play *Giftgas* (1925), Lampel took an actual lethal poison gas accident in Hamburg as his starting point (Lamszus 2003, 31). His play depicts a right-wing conspiracy (the *Reichswehr's* plans to secretly acquire chemical weapons) against a proletarian uprising to foreshadow the devastations of future



Gas attacks as they have been imagined in widely distributed newspapers in Great Britain and Germany. (Left) *Illustrated London News*, February 1, 1930, and (right) *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, October 30, 1927

gas warfare. Lampel's play provoked a political *éclat*. But the scandal focused not on the dangers of chemical warfare but on the question of literary censorship.¹⁰ Aesthetically, even the sympathetic critic Herbert Jhering considered *Giftgas über Berlin* a failure:

[Lampel's] achievement: that he demonstrates the terrible mass effects of chemical agents. His error: that he attempts to portray the impact on the collective with traditional dramatic means. (1964, 8)

Lampel's traditional forms of representation proved inadequate for imagining the effects of weapons of mass destruction on the Weimar stage.

No less conventional were the images of future chemical warfare that the widely popular *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* published and the popular *Illustrated London News* reprinted in 1930 (figs. 1 and 2).

Willibald Krain's drawing (fig. 2) depicts the aftermath of an aerial attack as Benjamin had imagined it. The young woman has been surprised by the poison gas during her daily activities. With no survivors (or victors) visible, the image possesses an eerie stillness that stems from

the impossibility of any further action in this postapocalyptic landscape. With no signs of escapees, there are no civilians left who would pressure their government to surrender quickly, as in Douhet's scenario, or workers ready to revolt, as in Becher's novel and Lampel's play. These illustrations employ their wholly traditional drawing technique to convey a melancholic sense of futility regarding the military plans for future wars. Kurt Tucholsky's short prose text "Die brennende Lampe" conveys a similar sense of belatedness and pointlessness but adds in addition to cynicism and misogyny a sense of distance and invulnerability (for the part of the narrator) that echoes Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos. The story consists of a conversation between a narrator and a young man who suffocates after an aero-chemical attack. Lying on a street, the young man asks with his last breath the "why" question. With great calm the narrator answers and blames previous generations, including the young man's mother, because they never discredited the very idea of warfare. "What are you gasping there—? 'Mother?' Oh, no. Your mother was first a woman and then mother. And because she was a woman she loved the warrior and murderer for the state [*Staatsmörder*] and the flags and the music and the slim and tall lieutenant" (Tucholsky 1975, 9:219). Just like Lord Chandos, Tucholsky's narrator acknowledges no responsibility for the mass murder that he blames on everyone else, and he remains completely unharmed by the poison gas even though he sits right next to the dying man. The widely distributed images from the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* could have served as well as illustrations for Erich Kästner's poem *Das letzte Kapitel* (*The Last Chapter*). As a truly final chapter, Kästner placed his satirical poem on chemical warfare at the very end of *Ein Mann gibt Auskunft* (*A Man Explains Himself*) (1930). At first, Kästner seems to portray the destructive potential of these new weapons in the most drastic and urgent manner. The aero-chemical attacks in his poem annihilate not just London or Berlin but all life on earth. But then the reader realizes that just like Tucholsky's narrator none of Kästner's initial readers had to fear for their lives. Kästner moved the date of the gas attack far into the future, well beyond his life expectancy. The Weimar satirist diminished the risk potential of chemical warfare even further by excising any signs of hostility from this apocalyptic vision. No nation or terrorist group but the united world government dispatches one thousand bombers on July 13, 2003. Their mission is guided by a desire for eternal peace.

To finally bring peace to the world,
nothing else was possible,

the world government explained,
but to poison all humanity. (Kästner 1997, 76)

The poem's mood echoes the calmness of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* drawings. Everyone will suffocate in the far future of 2003, including those who ordered the global destruction: "Everyone thought he could escape death. / No one escaped death" (76). While Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind* was written by a human for a Martian theater since no human audience should be able to bear its truth, Kästner's final chapter to the history of mankind is written from an extraterrestrial perspective. The finally peaceful earth is observed from outer space: "But all earth was finally quiet and at peace. And continued steadily on its elliptical path" (77). With no Krausian Nörgler surviving long enough to comment on the human catastrophe, Kästner's satire positions itself in a truly secure posthuman existence.

Missing from these stories, poems, and images by Kästner, Tucholsky, Krain, and others, including almost all of Weimar cinema, is a sense of risk, urgency, and vulnerability. The horrors of chemical warfare are either placed in the past of the recent war or in the undetermined future of the next war. Actual representations of attacks focus on their aftermath, when it is too late, and are portrayed from a safe perspective that remains unaffected by the poison gas.¹¹ Missing from these representations is what Benjamin attempted in his first article on chemical weapons: to experience in today's scent of violets not just a beautiful spring day but also the immediate threat of gas warfare. How could one develop a catastrophic imagination capable of anticipating, sensing, and perceiving the destructive potential of these new, imperceptible weapons of mass destruction?

Benjamin's question was taken up, however, by a writer who was a trained chemist as well. In 1936, Elias Canetti delivered his first public speech, a speech in honor of Hermann Broch's fiftieth birthday. And in this speech he defined the task of a contemporary writer as imagining new forms of destruction. Canetti praised Broch for achieving what Benjamin attempted in his article: "sensing"—making available to the senses—the next catastrophe. In 1929 Canetti received his doctorate in chemistry from the University of Vienna. As he writes in his memoirs *Torch in My Ear* (1982), Canetti never intended to work professionally as a chemist but had expected at that time that chemistry would play an even more important part in future warfare (1982, 110). By the time of his speech in honor of Broch, Canetti had already completed central works of his literary oeuvre, the plays *The Wedding* (*Die Hochzeit*) (1932) and *Comedy*

of *Vanities* (*Komödie der Eitelkeiten*) (written in 1934, first published in 1950) as well as his novel *Auto-da-Fé* (*Die Blendung*).

As Canetti told his audience in 1936, Broch possessed a highly receptive “sense of breathing” (Canetti 1979, 9). This rather unique sense allowed Broch to perceive what others took for granted, air, and he experienced fully the “defenselessness of breathing” (13). Air, Canetti observed, was the last shared property that truly belonged to everyone.

To nothing is man so open as to air. He moves in it as Adam did in Paradise, pure and innocent and unaware of any evil beasts. [. . .] And this last thing, which has belonged to all of us collectively, shall poison all of us collectively. We know it, but we do not yet sense it, for breathing is not our art. (13)

As a master of the rare art of breathing, Broch suffocated on the destructive smells that his contemporaries continued to mistake for the scent of violets.

Hermann Broch’s work stands between war and war, gas war and gas war. It could be that he still somewhere feels the poisonous particles of the last war. But that is unlikely. What is certain, however, is that he, who knows how to breathe better than we do, is already choking on the gas that shall claim our breath—who knows when! (Canetti 1979, 13)¹²

Throughout his career, from this speech in 1936 to his Nobel Prize speech in 1981, Canetti defined the sensing of the next catastrophe as the most urgent task of literature. In another lecture delivered shortly after the devastations of the Second World War, Canetti had already turned his eyes toward the next catastrophe, insisting that “all destructions are of the future, as all relics are of the past” (Canetti 2005a, 12). Among modern writers it was now Franz Kafka and not Broch who served as his model for sensing future destructions. Kafka, Canetti declared in 1948, was “the only one who feels the *futures* if we could say so, in his shaking limbs” (12). Canetti’s literary idols were always writers who seemed to perceive and experience coming destructions.

Benjamin and Canetti were contemporaries who never met or commented on each other’s works. But a parallel reading of both writers is nonetheless instructive since they worked in the late 1920s and early 1930s on comparable projects. Starting from a similar diagnosis of a crisis of perception and imagination in postwar society, they searched

separately for ways to prepare the public imagination to recognize new possibilities of man-made catastrophes, first and foremost the imperceptible threat of chemical weapons. Each of them took an interest in the genre of satire, and particularly, in the same contemporary satirist: Karl Kraus. Both identified in Kraus's satirical writings elements that transformed the genre of satire. In his hands the deeply conservative genre of satire, a genre that relied on traditional values and decried their corrosion in contemporary society, became a medium capable of responding better than any other genre to the new risks of the postwar situation. The Krausian satire demonstrated to them unique possibilities of preparing a catastrophic imagination that would be up to the challenge of contemporary threats of man-made mass death.

Analyzing Kraus's writings, both Benjamin and Canetti question familiar understandings of satire from Aristotle to Schiller to Adorno. They no longer share Schiller's expectation that satire only had to rouse (*erwecken*) the higher reality of the ideal from its dormant state in the public's mind.¹³ They no longer presuppose the presence of such communal ideals. Instead of premising their concepts of satire on the critical force of widely accepted but sadly unrealized ideals, Benjamin and Canetti seek a new form of satire that originates from the destruction of the very foundation that satirist and audience still shared in Schiller's theory of satire. The solid ground on which most theories position the satirist to launch his or her attacks—the firm belief in socially shared but unfulfilled ideals—crumbles under the satirist's feet. As I argue, Benjamin and Canetti develop models of *destructive satire* to dismantle patterns of perception that render emerging threats and risks imperceptible. But they reach fundamentally different conclusions. Benjamin's revision of satire is more radical and political than Canetti's. His extremism comes, however, within reach of justifying indiscriminate physical destruction. Benjamin's theory of satire is tied to a politics of destruction that remains at risk of losing sight of any limits in its advocacy of political violence.¹⁴

Canetti's practice of satire is more subversive, extremely focused, but also strangely aimless. Although his diagnosis of a crisis of experience bears close resemblance to Benjamin's more detailed analysis, Canetti refused to proclaim an end to communicable experience, storytelling, and the role of tradition per se in the new age of weapons of mass destruction. Like Musil and in contrast to Benjamin, Canetti acknowledged the persistence and re-emergence of seemingly outdated traditions, the "few dozen cake molds of which reality consists" (MwQ 645). The only common ground Canetti presupposes for the destructive satirist and his audience is the very ground the satirist seeks to destroy: the reader's distorted constructions of reality. The

destructive substance of his satire is directed against those preconceived notions of the reader's reality that prevent him or her from perceiving the most urgent risks to modern society. After the war and anticipating another man-made disaster, Canetti's satire no longer presupposes that satirist and audience share a set of common values and ideals. His destructive satire anticipates only the common ground of preconceived notions of realities, from misogynist and racist stereotypes to class and educational prejudices, and focuses its destructive force against these traditional forms of understanding and imagination that preclude the formation of a catastrophic imagination on par with new risk potentials of modern society. Since Canetti's satire offers nothing beyond its extremely distorted forms of perception, the Canettian approach to satire risks being read as either a mere chorus of mad voices or as producing texts that share and reinforce these rigid views of the world. Its refusal to allow either its fictional characters or its readers to position themselves outside of its distorted universe is both the necessary precondition for this form of satire—otherwise it would re-establish the sense of perceptual and experiential safety and coherence it aims to subvert—and, as we will see, its limit.

Benjamin, the Postwar Crisis of Experience, and the Great Satirist

Benjamin's scenario of a poison gas attack reflects his oft-repeated claim that the catastrophic imagination was unprepared to confront the new technologies of mass death. Especially writers who experienced the war firsthand, Benjamin asserted, had no sense of what the next war might look like. Reviewing in "Theories of German Fascism" (1930) the accounts of a few such veterans, he noted their inability to comprehend the significance of their own experiences and speaks of "the utterly thoughtless obtuseness with which they view the idea of future wars without any conception of them" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 313). Benjamin found it revealing that the contributors to Ernst Jünger's anthology *Krieg und Krieger* (1930) demonstrated "conspicuously little interest" in gas warfare. Instead of analyzing how the new technologies would change the conduct of future warfare these veterans cultivated the idea of a never changing "'eternal' war" (314). They refused to acknowledge what seemed inevitable to Benjamin: When chemical weapons of mass destruction decide about victory or defeat, the ethos of heroic conduct will be substituted by record setting mass killings; "Gas warfare will rest upon annihilation records" (313). In the next war soldierly qualities would displace ath-

letic ones. The perceived inability of veterans to comprehend their own war experience intrigued Benjamin throughout the 1930s. While he dealt in “Theories of German Fascism” with specific authors who had been soldiers, Benjamin generalized soon thereafter his critique of Jünger and applied it to the war generation as a whole. Jünger’s apparent failure to anticipate future warfare as gas warfare came to stand for Benjamin’s much more far-reaching claims of a general inability to learn from the war experience, and his proclamation of the demise of experience itself.

In “Experience and Poverty” (1933) and “The Storyteller” (1936), Benjamin famously pronounced the war generation’s lack of communicable experience (*Erfahrung*).¹⁵ Returning from the trenches, the veterans seemed to stay silent; they returned “not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (1996–2003, vol. 2, 731; vol. 3, 144). Dismissing the widely popular war memoirs as inadequate, Benjamin explained the perceived silence of veterans with the vanishing of a common ground of tradition, a fount of shared experience that allowed stories to be understood by the entire community. Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826), Benjamin’s favorite storyteller and the author of *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* (*The Treasure Chest*) (1811), could still begin stories like “Der Wegweiser” und “Der kann Deutsch” with the word *bekanntlich* (meaning “as it is generally known”) and endow his stories with the authority of tradition. Hebel’s stories were based on the assumption of a mutual understanding between author and readership. For Benjamin, such presumptions of a common basis of knowledge and experience had lost all their power in times of unprecedented mass violence.¹⁶ The wisdom of tradition in the storyteller’s tales, passing from mouth to ear and from generation to generation, no longer offered insight for a radically changed postwar situation. Anyone relying on these stories of the past, Benjamin warned, would learn painfully that their value had expired. Listening to stories was replaced by the reading of novels. Unlike the storyteller, however, the novelist dispenses neither counsel nor wisdom.¹⁷ Rather than bemoaning the novel’s popularity or mourning the loss of social and cultural stability that led to his thesis of the disappearance of storytelling, Benjamin endorsed in his essays a new poverty of experience (*Erfahrungsarmut*). With an emphatic “yes,” he welcomed the perceived break in the chain of tradition, wishing to get rid of the ruins of tradition (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 734). The satirist became for Benjamin a model for an agent of destruction who could clear away the rubble and make way for a new mankind. At a time when the storyteller could no longer communicate experience, Benjamin did not turn to the genre of the novel but to satire.

But he made a clear distinction between the great satirist—a unique figure of destruction—and satirists whose seemingly radical critique of the changing conditions of modern society he considered as no more than a pretext for inaction. Benjamin made a clear distinction between Karl Kraus, his model for a great satirist, who alone gained firm ground in the moment of social and political crisis, and popular left-wing satirists, the representatives of a “new German satire” (Benjamin 1972–91, vol. 3, 172). Continuing prior attacks against satirists like Hermann Kesten and Walther Mehring,¹⁸ Benjamin used his essay “Left-Wing Melancholy” (1931), a review of Erich Kästner’s *Ein Mann gibt Auskunft*, to launch his most far-reaching attack against Germany’s most renowned living satirists (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 423–27). Rather than revisiting the question of whether the new German satirists had indeed been afflicted by leftist melancholy, I will read Benjamin’s polemic as his attempt to lay the groundwork for his alternative theory of satire, his theory of destructive satire. Even though this approach discloses some of Benjamin’s misrepresentations of these satirists—he transforms Kästner and Tucholsky into pseudo-revolutionary satirists, an assessment that fits neither their theory nor practice of satire—I am less interested in siding with either side of this controversy. Neither a (belated) defense of Kästner and Tucholsky nor an attack on Benjamin is intended. Instead, “Left-Wing Melancholy” will be read as one of Benjamin’s most intriguing realizations of his definition of a critic’s task. Three years earlier, he had posited in *One-Way Street* (1928), “The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle” (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 1, 460). In his battle to reshape a literary genre to expand the catastrophic imaginary, a battle in which he pitted Kraus and Brecht against Tucholsky and Kästner, Benjamin followed his own recipe and never hesitated to take sides or to sacrifice cumbersome concepts like objectivity and impartiality: “‘Objectivity’ must always be sacrificed to partisanship, if the cause fought for merits this” (460). The point of reading Benjamin’s attacks is therefore less to correct his misrepresentations of these new German satirists than to understand better the cause in whose name he made these misrepresentations. In other words, to better understand the principles and tasks of Benjamin’s great satirist and his destructive satire.

Looking at this controversy surrounding the genre of satire in the 1920s and 1930s reveals the originality of Benjamin’s (and Canetti’s) understanding of satire. Benjamin and Canetti stand out not only among their contemporaries, but their notions of satire break with traditional understandings that have linked theories of satire from Aristotle to Schiller to Adorno.

What justifies the term *destructive* satire for Benjamin's and Canetti's approaches to satirical writing? Is not all satire destructive? Consider one of the most famous programmatic statements on satire in German literature, Tucholsky's essay "Was darf die Satire?" ("What Is Satire Allowed to Do?") (Tucholsky 1975, 2:42–44). Starting with the observation that on hearing a political joke half of Germany will pout and sulk on the sofa, Tucholsky sought to defend satire's right to offend. And he answered in 1919 his own question as succinctly as possible, leaving no room for equivocations and second thoughts. What is satire allowed to do? "Everything" (44). If one adds to this proclamation of satirical limitlessness the title of another of Tucholsky's essays on satire, "We Negative Ones," published as well in 1919, then one might indeed assume that Tucholsky's satires were meant to be highly aggressive and not afraid to exude mere negativity. Such an impression of Tucholsky's writings would fit with Kästner's cold vision of global gassing at the end of *Ein Mann gibt Auskunft*. And it would fit with Kästner's notorious answer to a disgruntled audience that demanded a more positive and redemptive approach to its social and political realities—

Und immer wieder schickt ihr mir Briefe,
in denen ihr, dick unterstrichen, schreibt:
"Herr Kästner, wo bleibt das Positive?"
Ja, weiß der Teufel, wo das bleibt.

[And again and again you send letters to me / in which, heavily underlined, you write: / "Mr. Kästner where is the positive?" / Yes, the devil might know, where that is.] (Kästner 1998, 170)

The new German satirists appear as driven by highly destructive impulses. They seem to be so radical that, as Benjamin argues in "Left-Wing Melancholy," no political action could correspond anymore to such radicalism.

In short, this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action. It is not to the left of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is in general possible. (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 425).

By adopting a radical attitude that removes itself from all concrete politics—as far removed as Kästner's extraterrestrial position from which his poem details the future apocalypse—these new German satirists transform,

Benjamin argues, political resistance into articles of consumption. They feed their already overfed audience, a bourgeois audience they pretend to despise. As Benjamin protests, these satirists produce constipation instead of subversion:

The rumbling in these lines [of Kästner's poems] certainly has more to do with flatulence than with subversion. Constipation and melancholy have always gone together. But since the juices began to dry up in the body social, stuffiness meets us at every turn. Kästner's poems do not improve the atmosphere. (426)

But Benjamin's group portrait of Weimar satirists is hardly accurate. First, he creates a rather misleading impression of their political extremism and then accuses them in a second move of insincerity, of being complicit with the targets of their satirical attacks. The beat of their poems follows, as Benjamin claims, "the notes according to which poor rich folk play the blues" (426). Revealing such hidden complicity between satirists and bourgeois audience is meant to shatter their reputation. But Benjamin's critical assault on their left-wing melancholy is little more than a polemical rehashing of their elegiac self-characterizations. These satirists were well aware that they were not agents of radical political change. Their satires were not meant to destroy the current political order but to function as safety valves for civil society. In 1923 Tucholsky imagined, for example, his own funeral in *Die Weltbühne*, one of Weimar Germany's leading political journals in which Benjamin published as well. Tucholsky was such a frequent contributor, and since 1927 also one of its editors; he published his poems, reviews, and essays under five different pseudonyms, creating five distinct personae. In his "Requiem" for his own funeral, he united all five names to "Kaspar Theobald Peter Kurt Ignaz Wrobel" when he mourned their collective death. This Mr. Wrobel did not die the death of a political martyr but passed away peacefully in his sleep. Attending his own funeral, which he imagines not as a political rally but as a "sublime festivity," Tucholsky notes the symbiotic relationship that the deceased kept with the targets of their satirical attacks (Tucholsky 1975, 3:331). He admits freely to the numerous texts he wrote for those "he pretended to despise; with one hand he criticized them and with the other he siphoned off the champagne from them" (Tucholsky 1975, 3:332). And with a shrug of his shoulders he judges himself in his obituary a "problematic nature" instead of radical idealist (Tucholsky 1975, 3:332).

Tucholsky never quite took the revolutionary pose that Benjamin attributed to him. In a series of essays from 1919, he outlined the satirical

program that he would follow throughout the Weimar Republic. According to Tucholsky, satire is a nonviolent outlet for otherwise volatile social energies. He did not understand it as a weapon for radical political change, as Benjamin's portrait of Weimar satirists suggested. In "What Is Satire Allowed to Do?" Tucholsky defined the satirist as an "offended idealist: he wants the world to be good, it is bad, and now he runs up against the bad" (Tucholsky 1975, 2:42). But the satirist runs against the bad in the name of reform and not revolution. Repeatedly, Tucholsky pictured satire as society's lightning rod, as a safety valve that vents potentially explosive steam, or as a blood-cleansing procedure that promises its clients a healthier complexion (2:171, 93, 44). In the same spirit, Erich Kästner compared the satirist's work to that of a stern and exacting teacher (1966, 383).¹⁹ The ground, on which Tucholsky, the offended idealist, stood, his belief in the republican ideals, remained unshaken until the last days of the Weimar Republic. Such firm convictions allowed him to become, as Peter Jelavich writes, the most influential satirist of his generation: "Perhaps more consistently than any other person, he [Tucholsky] contrasted the ideal of the Weimar Republic with its social and political realities; thus he became the premier satirist of the age" (1993, 131).

Rather than focusing on signs of Tucholsky's feigned radicalism, Benjamin could have focused on his very traditional notion of satire, because Tucholsky's trust in the traditional role of the satirist as a defender of the unrealized ideals of a society contributed to the failure of his satirical project, an effective defense of a democratic Germany. And it is the outdatedness of his concept of satire and its battles that differs, as will be seen, most drastically from the notion of Benjamin's great satirist and his work of destruction. A look at the metaphorical combat zone into which Tucholsky drafted himself as a German satirist indicates Tucholsky's outmoded notions of war and conflict. His satirist and his weaponry are throwbacks to the middle ages. Tucholsky's battlefield of satire never witnessed the new weapons of mass destruction. Not tanks, airplanes, and chemical weapons, but clubs, bows, and arrows remain his weapons of choice:

[The satirist] protects the noble innocents with cudgel blows and bow and arrows. He is the lansquenet of the spirit. His position is prescribed: he can do no different, may the Lord help him. Amen. (Tucholsky 1975, 2:172)

His reliance upon the critical force of democratic ideals (as well as outmoded images of the satirist's position in the battle for democracy) might

have led Tucholsky first to success and popularity, as Jelavich points out, but it led him as well into resignation and silence once he had to realize that these ideals and satirical weapons proved inadequate. At the end of the Weimar Republic, Tucholsky realized that his satire with its expectation of an existing set of ideals that satirist and society shared had no weapons against the forces that threatened such society.

Satire has an upper limit: Buddha eludes it. Satire has a lower limit as well. The ruling fascist powers in Germany for example. It is not worth it—one cannot aim so low. (Tucholsky 1975, 10:49)

Rather than pretending to be an extremist, as Benjamin alleged, a new German satirist like Tucholsky placed the political and the spiritual extremes well beyond the reach of his satire. Tucholsky published this last comment on the limited reach of his satire one year before Hitler's chancellorship. After Auschwitz, Adorno generalized Tucholsky's assessment of satire's ineffectiveness in *Minima Moralia* (1951). In "Juvenal's Error," he observed that it became impossible to write satire since its medium, "the difference between ideology and reality," had disappeared (Adorno 1978, 211). From Adorno's point of view, satiric interjections against "the deadly seriousness [*den blutigen Ernst*] of total society" have become utterly ridiculous. They raise nothing but an "impotent objection" against totality (212). Following in the footsteps of Schiller and Hegel who defined satire as dealing with the "contradiction between actuality and the ideal" (Schiller 1966, 117) and who demanded that the satirist should have a "knowledge of the good and the virtuous and a will to achieve it" (Hegel 1975, 513), Adorno argued that such knowledge of the good had vanished in Auschwitz. The tension between ideal and reality that might propel satiric missiles from the realm of the ideal against the bad actuality no longer existed in a world that made the Holocaust possible. Once and for all satire could no longer presume that shared ideals lend it a solid position from which it could voice its objections effectively.

By calling the satirical effort itself ridiculous, Adorno sent out an inverted echo of Aristotle's definition of satire and comedy. In his *Poetics* Aristotle defined comedy as dealing solely with "the ridiculous" and insisted that it "causes no pain" (1449). He conceived of laughter and harming as mutually exclusive. And Tucholsky still followed such a traditional understanding of satire that sought to expose social and political deformations but never intended to harm or kill its targets. Even when he seemed to reject any limits to his satire in 1919, Tucholsky insisted that

no one should get seriously hurt in satirical exchanges. He challenged his opponents not to mortal combat but to a chivalrous joust.

It would be no real man or group of professionals that cannot bear to suffer a proper blow. The attacked might defend himself by the same means; he might strike back—but he shall not turn his head away in pain, fury, or offense [*aber er wende nicht verletzt, empört, gekränkt das Haupt*]. (Tucholsky 1975, 2:44)

Adorno's rejection of such satire as harmless and ridiculous is consequent. No worthwhile purpose should remain for such a feeble literary genre after Auschwitz. And since Adorno's notion of satire follows the long-standing tradition from Aristotle to Hegel and from Juvenal to Tucholsky, one might be tempted to assume that his dismissal comprises all versions of satire. But as I argue, Benjamin's and Canetti's alternative notions of satire broke well before the Holocaust and in anticipation of chemical warfare with an understanding of satire that depended on a community based on shared ideals and perceptions and with satirists unwilling to inflict pain on their audiences.

Benjamin's and Canetti's versions of destructive satire challenge central tenets of traditional theories and practices of satire. Their concepts of destructive satire are no longer conceived as openly pedagogical. Instead of grounding their understandings of satire on the continued existence and critical force of widely shared but not fully realized ideals, they searched for a satire that could thrive even when the very foundations on which satirist and society were supposed to stand together crumbled under their feet. If the difference between ideal and reality had ever truly been satire's medium, then it had disappeared well before the Second World War. Benjamin and Canetti drew on Karl Kraus, the satirist who probed the challenges of the new catastrophic possibilities for satiric representation more persistently than any of his contemporaries.²⁰ In Kraus, Benjamin discovered a truly destructive character, a satirist who had no intention of jousting with his audience but who excelled in the art of annihilatory criticism, an art Benjamin sought to practice in his literary criticism as well.²¹

In the first issue of his journal *Die Fackel* (1899–1938), Kraus announced not what he intended to publish (“Was wir bringen”) but what he intended to kill (“was wir umbringen”) (Kraus 1978, vol. 1, no. 1, 1). Rather than aligning laughter with harmless ridicule, he equated in 1915 “die Lache” (laughter) with “die Lache” as in “Blutlache,” the pool of blood (vol. 7, no. 405, 20). Playing the role of judge and executioner,

Kraus handed down his verdicts in articles and during public readings. The judgment, usually a death sentence, was never reversed but only reiterated. Whenever Kraus took another look at the tried and sentenced delinquents, he reported no survival or resurrection but described an unexpectedly drawn-out death and the slow decomposition of the executed bodies left behind to rot. The murderous intent of Kraus's satire is exemplified in the titles of articles he directed against Alfred Kerr (1867–1948), one of the most influential literary critics (and the discoverer of Robert Musil). Like Kraus, Kerr published his own journal, *Pan*. From March to July 1911, Kraus entitled his satirical attacks against Kerr as “The Little Pan Is dead” (vol. 5, no. 319–20, 1–6), “The Little Pan Is Still Gasp- ing” (no. 321–22, 57–64), “The Little Pan Already Stinks” (no. 324–25, 50–60), and finally “The Little Pan Still Stinks” (no. 326–328, 28–34). Kraus's satirical practice of dressing up his victims in their own blood, of destroying them with their own words, led to Benjamin's claim that the satirist is “the figure in whom the cannibal was received into civilization” (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 448).

In contrast to lesser figures like Tucholsky, Kästner, and the other new German satirists, Kraus represented to Benjamin “the great type” of the satirist (448). Only his satire seemed to correspond to a world armed with chemical weapons. In his essay “Karl Kraus” (1931), Benjamin wrote that

the great type of the satirist never had firmer ground under his feet than amid a generation about to mount tanks and put on gas masks, a mankind that has run out of tears but not of laughter. In him civilization prepares to survive, if it must, and communicates with him in the true mystery of satire, which consists in the devouring of the adversary. (448)

Traditional satire, with its reliance on shared ideals, would not survive the age of chemical warfare. Like Tucholsky or any other satirist, Kraus might have started out as an offended idealist but he made, as Benjamin argued, a decisive next step.

Kraus transformed into what Benjamin called the *Unmensch*, the inhuman or as the English translation prefers, the “monster” (447–57). As an inhuman, Kraus abandoned all expectation that satire should function as a societal safety valve. Rather than seeking to reform civil society, Benjamin's great satirist turned toward its relentless destruction:

All the martial energies of this man are innate civic virtues; only in the melee did they take on their combative aspect. But already no

one recognizes them any more; no one can grasp the necessity that compelled this great bourgeois character to become a comedian, this guardian of Goethian linguistic values a polemicist, or why this irreproachably honorable man went berserk. This, however, was bound to happen, since he thought fit to change the world by beginning with his own class, in his own home, in Vienna. And when, admitting to himself the futility of his enterprise, he abruptly broke it off, he placed the matter back in the hands of nature—this time destructive not creative nature. (455)

Benjamin's great satirist gains firm ground by executing a program of unrelenting destruction, and the ground remains firm as long as the satirist runs berserk on it.²² It is therefore significant that Benjamin declared he was staking out his own position in his analysis of Kraus's satire. Benjamin intended "to indicate the place where I stand and where I no longer collaborate" (Benjamin 1972–91, vol. 2, 1093).

Benjamin's appropriation of destructive satire as his own ground is central and fateful for his theory of satire as well as his understanding of Germany's political crises during the early 1930s. As conceived by Benjamin, destructive satire no longer legitimized its attacks as measures to realize ideals that the wide majority of contemporaries were assumed to share. He legitimized its relentless destruction with a far higher (but much more allusive) authority. Kraus, the inhuman, is illuminated by no less than the light of creation. From this divine light the great satirist emerges as the inhuman.

But the actual Kraus is not fully congruent with the inhuman, the figure of destruction. To Benjamin, Kraus is not just divinely inhuman but also dangerously ambiguous. Parts of him and his satire are caught in the twilight of a demonic *Vorwelt*.

The dark background from which Kraus's image detaches itself is not formed by his contemporaries, but is the primeval world [*Vorwelt*], or the world of the demon. The light of the day of Creation falls on him—thus he emerges from this darkness. But not in all parts; others remain that are more deeply immersed in it than one suspects. (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 441)

Because of this light from above, Kraus, the inhuman, could take his place on the throne of judgment and attack opponents from his position of superiority. The ties to the demonic world, however, rendered important aspects of the Krausian satire suspect to Benjamin. His sharp distinc-

tion between Kraus, the demon, and Kraus, the inhuman, will demarcate as well critical differences between Canetti's and Benjamin's versions of destructive satire. While Benjamin distanced himself from these demonic qualities of the Krausian satire but sided with the inhuman, Canetti would move away from the inhuman—as we will see below and if one accepts for the moment Benjamin's terminology—but adopt the demonic practices of Kraus's destructive satire.

With his separation of demonic and inhuman elements in Kraus's satire, Benjamin remains tied to traditional satire's presumption of a higher justification for its existence. Since no one, as Benjamin writes, could still recognize the formerly trusted ideals in Kraus's work of destruction (and who would dare to make the claim of perceiving the light of creation?), his assertion of divine legitimation provides anything but a stable foundation. Only because he postulates, however, the divine illumination of the great satirist can Benjamin be confident that the inhuman quality of destructive satire clears the way and leads "concrete humanity [*reales Menschentum*] to victory" (448). In Kraus, the inhuman, Benjamin meets "the messenger of a more real humanism" (456), of a humanism of destruction and not creation. Charting the destructive qualities of satire, Benjamin's theory transgresses the limits of traditional and Marxist humanism, the source of his terminology. By endorsing the model of a "humanity that proves itself by destruction" (456) and by dismissing those who fetishize creative existence, Benjamin inverts the traditional relationship between creativity and destruction. From Kraus's cannibalistic satire to Brecht's poetry, Benjamin searched for writers with an "iron jaw," strong enough to chew up everything that exists (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 230). In his "Commentary on Poems by Brecht" (1939), he applauded authors who took a perspective from which the "world is immensely simplified if it is tested less for the enjoyment it gives than for the destruction it deserves" (230). What remains for these destructive characters and for Benjamin is the discipline of destruction.²³

As Derrida argued in his analysis of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (1921), such advocacy of radical destruction approximates the celebration of violence by right-wing writers from Jünger to Schmitt (Derrida 1990). Benjamin's contemplation of destruction draws, of course, on a different tradition than these militant nationalists. But the position from where Benjamin believed that the destruction could be overseen and legitimized, the standpoint of redemption, had itself become "the utterly impossible thing," as Adorno said at the end of *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 1978, 247).²⁴ With regard to his advocacy of destruction, one could turn

Benjamin's argument against the new German satirists against him as well. Benjamin's conception of destruction lost contact with political reality and moved beyond all concrete politics. But this was Benjamin's own point: no other firm ground is available but the one of destruction.

The impasse of Benjamin's theory of satire and of his advocacy of political violence stems from his decision to sever entirely its ties to higher powers and ideals. This decision is reflected in his distinction between demonic and inhuman elements of Kraus's satire. In Kraus, the inhuman illuminated by divine light, Benjamin courted a potential ally on the political battlefield, a warrior clad in armor and equipped with weapons able to annihilate his political enemies. How much Benjamin set his hopes on the inhuman (and how much he feared the demon) became obvious when Kraus supported the authoritarian Dollfuß regime in 1934. Benjamin judged Kraus's exercise in realpolitik as an unexpected fall and a profound betrayal: "Who is actually left who can still give in? A bitter comfort; but there will be no other casualty on this front even worth mentioning in the same breath as this one" (1994, 458). At this moment, Benjamin's construction of the great satirist as the last man standing tall, as a monumental figure, a "Kriegerdenkmal," collapsed.²⁵ Not surprisingly, Benjamin blamed the betrayal on Kraus, the demon. In a letter to Werner Kraft he returned to the typology of his major essay on Kraus. "The demon has been stronger than the person [*Mensch*] or the nonperson [*Unmensch*]: he was unable to remain silent thus he discovered the downfall of the demon—in self-betrayal" (458).

What then are these qualities of the demon? In contrast to the inhuman, the demon required no firm ground of ideals; he belonged in Benjamin's account to the swamp of the *Vorwelt*. Rather than judging and destroying its targets from above and the outside as the inhuman did, Kraus, the demon, attacked from within. In the twilight of the demonic world, a world lacking the clarity of the day of creation, everything is dangerously in flux. Such flux includes the blurring of sharp distinctions between the satirist and his targets. This world of ambiguity is inhabited by Kraus, the mimetic genius, the impersonator of countless voices, who is being possessed by a demon. As a demonic actor, Kraus transformed himself into his satirical targets, or as Benjamin describes it, "the exposure of inauthenticity [. . .] is here performed behavioristically" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 443). Instead of fighting openly and in direct confrontation like the inhuman, the demonic Kraus crawled like a worm inside his opponents. Benjamin perceived this slithering and penetrating movement as the lowliest and most ambiguous aspect of Kraus, the demon: "'To creep'—this is the term used, not without cause, for the lowest

kind of flattery; and Kraus creeps into those he impersonates, in order to annihilate them” (442). Benjamin abhorred Kraus’s demonic way of destroying from the inside so passionately that he described these mimetic attacks sometimes as if they were performed not from the inside but the outside: “[Kraus] imitates his subjects in order to insert the crowbar of his hate into the finest joints of their posture. This quibbler [*Silbenstecher*], probing between syllables, *digs out* the larvae that nest there in clumps” (442, my emphasis). But the demon relinquishes the outside and the prospect of a stable locus of certainty—be it the seemingly universal ideals of the traditional satirists or the divine light that illuminated the inhuman. In his demonic satire Kraus nests inside the foe’s soft body: “in this zone, too, ambiguity, the demon, is manifest: self-expression and unmasking merge in it as self-unmasking” (441). The demon keeps full control of its malleable self and destroys its opponents only after having first become just like them.

Like Benjamin, Elias Canetti expected in the late 1920s and early 1930s that only a great satirist could prepare a catastrophic imagination for an age of weapons of mass destruction. And in further agreement with Benjamin, Canetti’s portrait of Kraus is just as split and divided. He praised Kraus as “the greatest satirist of the German language” (Canetti 2005a, 115) and denounced him as “the most sublime literary murderer” (Hartung 1992, 6). When Kraus sided in 1934 with a lesser evil, the authoritarian Dollfuß regime, to prevent a greater evil, Austria’s *Anschluß* to the Third Reich, Canetti was just as shocked and disappointed as Benjamin (Hanuschek 2005, 219–21). In a letter to George Canetti, his brother, he denounced Kraus the same year as “something like a Hitler for intellectuals” (Canetti 2009, 19). Just like the politician Hitler, Kraus, the satirist, had been able “to mold” his audience into “a mass of believers” (19). Although facetious and disproportionate the comparison expresses the depth of Canetti’s frustration with Kraus’s new politics.²⁶ But Kraus’s fall in 1934 did not change Canetti’s appreciation, for Kraus, *the* satirist, would remain his most important literary influence.

Canetti’s divided judgment on Kraus could be traced back to Benjamin’s figures of the inhuman and the demon. Only Canetti admired Kraus, the demonic impersonator, and came to reject Kraus, the inhuman executioner. But the relation between Benjamin’s and Canetti’s evaluations of Kraus and their concepts of satire is more complicated than a mere reversal of preference between the inhuman and the demon. To grasp Canetti’s concept of destructive satire one would have to add a third of Benjamin’s sharply distinguished figures, the storyteller. In Ben-

jamin's writings the storyteller and the great satirist are placed in strict chronological sequence. After the war the storyteller disappeared while the great satirist fully emerged. The storyteller was an integral part of tradition, communicating experience from one generation to the next. According to Benjamin's account, the war broke this chain of communication, and the great satirist was tasked with the destruction of its last remnants, the last remnants of tradition.

In Canetti's account, the relation between the great satirist and the storyteller is more complex and lacks Benjamin's neat chronological sequence. In 1936, the year of Benjamin's storyteller essay, Canetti addressed in his speech on Broch the question of war, experience, and tradition. Are traditional works of art and literature still up to the task of communicating experience in the age of man-made mass death? At first, Canetti seems to share Benjamin's doubts that past experiences could prepare anyone for the new risk situation.

The man in the street feels, all in all, more horror for the remote Middle Ages than for the World War, which he has experienced personally. One can sum up this insight in a single shattering sentence: Today it would be harder to condemn one man publicly to be burnt at the stake than to unleash a world war. (Canetti 1979, 12–13)

For centuries public burnings have been represented in art and literature. The horrors of such executions became a vivid part of the public imagination. And cinema, the new mass medium that demonstrated so little interest in anticipating future warfare, produced after the war a series of important films with public burnings at their center, from Murnau's *Faust* (1926) and Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and *Day of Wrath* (1943). As masterful as each of these films remains, these representations of early modern forms of violence offered little preparation for the risks and dangers of modern warfare. In his speech on Broch, Canetti urged that "people are defenseless only when they have no experience or memory. New dangers may loom as vast as they like, but people will be only poorly and at most outwardly prepared" (13). Art and literature had the task, Canetti insisted, of creating works of memory that communicate the threat of these new dangers. And in 1936 Canetti considered chemical weapons as "the greatest of all dangers ever to emerge in the history of mankind" because they exposed "the defenselessness of breathing" (13).

Unlike Benjamin, Canetti did not interpret such crises of experience and memory as evidence for tradition's complete breakdown. He steered

clear from declaring all prewar representations of violence as irrelevant to the task of imagining and experiencing the imminent risks of modern warfare. While writing *Auto-da-Fé* in 1930, Canetti surrounded himself with reproductions of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altar*, an artwork he considered as a "reminder of the dreadful things that people do to one another" (Canetti 1982, 230). Grünewald's gruesome depiction of Christ's dead body remained effective because of the recent war experience: "Back then . . . war and gassings were still close enough to make the painting credible" (230). And just as the experience of the world war could lend credibility to a sixteenth-century painting, so new works of art could create a memory of this world war that might help to deter the unleashing of another world war.

In contrast to Benjamin, Canetti never perceived a complete break in the history of experience, a break that would render the task of storytelling impossible. Like Benjamin, he noted the marginalization of traditional storytellers in modern society, but never drew the conclusion that therefore an end of communicable experience and of storytelling had to be assumed. Listening to the storytellers in Marrakesh's markets in 1954, Canetti acknowledged them as his "elder and better brothers" and not as remnants of an irretrievable past (Canetti 1995, 65). Their tales and stories of ancient times retain for him the potential of becoming once more critical for an understanding of the present. In *Crowds and Power* (1960), Canetti collected his own canon of stories and drew on them as indispensable sources to understand the destructions of the twentieth century. Most of these stories are distinctly premodern: myths from all continents; historical narratives by Thucydides, Plutarch, Burckhardt, and Lefebvre; medieval travelogues from Africa and Asia written by Arabian and European explorers. Quoting them frequently in their entirety, Canetti demonstrates reverence for these often astonishing stories.

But the way Canetti employs these stories in his work is different from traditional storytelling as Benjamin had described it. Ranging from narratives of the self-destruction of the Xosa to moments from the secret history of the Mongols, Canetti's selection of stories does not depend on Hebel's (and Benjamin's) *bekanntlich*. These stories and Canetti's audience were never embedded in the same cultural-historical tradition. No unbroken generational chain ever connected them. In *Crowds and Power*, Canetti replaces the familiarity of traditional lore with strange and unknown tales from all around the globe. One could argue that the opening paragraph of *Crowds and Power* formulates not only Canetti's anthropological premise but also a core principle of his poetics:

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange. In the dark, the fear of an unexpected touch can mount to panic. Even clothes give insufficient security: it is easy to tear them and pierce through to the naked, smooth, defenseless flesh of the victim. (1984, 15)

By touching his readers with the unknown and the unexpected of these strange stories, Canetti confronts his audience with common but usually hidden and unwelcome phenomena: particularly the human desire to survive others at all costs.

Several of these narratives are so outrageous, that one might prefer to read them as tales of the barbaric other and to refuse to recognize the similar in the unfamiliar. But as Canetti writes toward the end of *Crowds and Power*, even though stories of African kings seem

so strange and unfamiliar that one is at first tempted to dismiss them as exotic curiosities, or, if one lingers over accounts of them such as those which follow, to give way to a feeling of superiority. But one is well advised to show a little patience and humility and wait until one knows more about them. It is not for a European of the twentieth century to regard himself above savagery. His despots may use more effective means, but their ends often differ in nothing from those of these African Kings. (1984, 411)

Canetti analyzes twentieth-century mass violence indirectly through these most obscure, exotic, and extreme stories. He presents these stories neither as depictions of the barbaric other nor does *Crowds and Power* argue that the devastations of the two world wars and the Holocaust should be understood as modernity's atavistic aberrations. Instead of starting from the assumption of a shared tradition, Hebel's and Benjamin's *bekanntlich*, Canetti inverts the direction of recognition. He begins his analysis with sudden encounters of the strange and unknown and then demonstrates how uncomfortably familiar these stories become to their Western modern audience.

Just as Canetti posited no clear break between past storytelling and the understanding of modern violence so he discerned for modernist literature no single unified approach to experience, memory, and the representation of looming catastrophes. Shortly after the Second World War, Canetti discussed in a lecture three main proponents of European modernist

literature: Proust, Joyce, and Kafka. Instead of proposing a single rupture in the history of experience after the First World War, Canetti mapped out the variance of modernism's relations toward past, present, and future. Proust created, according to Canetti, a science of his own memory. Thanks to his practice of "subjective memory," Proust became an "intellectual master of the past," who discovered a unique way of "dealing with the past as a whole" (Canetti 2005a, 10). A different concept of time and experience is at work in Joyce's *Ulysses*. His novel displays less interest in the past or future but is preoccupied with the present, with "a simultaneity as though nothing before or afterwards mattered" (11). In Kafka's writings, Canetti discovered a third paradigmatic approach to time and experience in modernism, one focused on the future, on future destructions. In the same way that Proust's writings turned toward the past and Joyce's to the present, so Kafka's writings became to Canetti attempts to feel and imagine looming catastrophes.

With such divergent approaches to time, experience, and memory in modernist literature, Canetti did not doubt that works of memory could be created to communicate the threat that the new weapons of the last war came to pose from now on to anyone's survival. Canetti turned to Kraus and his destructive satire not to destroy the last remnants of tradition, as Benjamin had proposed, but because he found in Kraus's satire the most successful attempt to create a full memory of the war. From Canetti's point of view, the great satirist continued the work of the storyteller. Searching for a destructive force that would hold up to war, for "a hatred befitting even the world war," Canetti discovered Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind* (Canetti 1979, 217).

There was not one voice that he did not hear, he was possessed with every specific timbre of the war and rendered it compellingly. [...] The world war entered *The Last Days of Mankind* completely, unsparingly, uncomfortingly, without embellishment, without reduction, and above all and most important, without habituation [*Gewöhnung*]. Whatever was repeated in that play remained horrifying through every single repetition. (217)

The play succeeded for Canetti where other accounts had failed: it created the most accurate memory of the war and the new risk potentials this war had released. Kraus's satire afforded its readers the unique opportunity to encounter the unfamiliarity of the war's terrors. To read Kraus's play could provoke an experience of angst that Canetti deemed necessary for any attempt to prevent another war. The memory of the war gained

shape and constancy in Kraus's play. In his satire the war became and remained "unforgettable," and its readers might have become more perceptive and therefore less defenseless against the new threats of modern warfare (217).

Kraus proved to Canetti that satire could create representations that were befitting even a world war. But based on his experiences as one of Kraus's disciples, Canetti could not follow Kraus's model of satire. He had to separate, to use Benjamin's terminology, the inhuman elements from the demonic ones and to develop his own version of a destructive satire. After attending in April 1924 a first public reading, Canetti turned into a fervent Kraus admirer (Hanuschek 2005, 107). For five years he attended these spectacles of satirical mock trials and executions, and became part of Kraus's baiting crowd. Kraus acted as infallible judge and executioner and taught Canetti what it meant to be a great satirist. For Canetti, Kraus turned out to be "the greatest German satirist, the only one in the literature of this language whom one has the right to name next to Aristophanes, Juvenal, Quevedo, Swift, and Gogol" (Canetti 1979, 216). These exceptional satirists shared the one ingredient that lesser ones lacked: "a very definite kind of substance, which I would simply call 'murderous'" (216). This murderous substance enabled the lethal aspects that Benjamin detected in Kraus, the inhuman, who runs berserk and does the work of destruction, giving rise to Benjamin's hope that Kraus would be an irresistible and irreplaceable ally on the cultural and political battlefields. These great satirists, Canetti writes, "attack whole groups of people, but also individuals, with a hatred that would otherwise—i.e., if they were not capable of writing—lead to murder" (216). Throughout his life, Canetti kept Kraus in highest esteem as a satirist. In his address during the Nobel Prize awards ceremony, he named Kraus as one of three writers who influenced him and should have received the award if were they still alive. But as the only great satirist whom he observed firsthand, Kraus also taught Canetti how his destructive satire had to be different.

Benjamin rejected Kraus, the demon, who lives in the twilight of ambiguity, always ready to creep inside his opponents to destroy them by becoming their precise copies. This demonic Kraus, the malleable performer who could render every voice compellingly, remained, however, the central influence on Canetti's writings. Canetti came to reject Kraus, the inhuman, the satirist who gains firm ground as the last man standing, the judge and executioner who rules from a position of absolute certainty, after having lived for five years under his undisputed rule. His "experience with that

dictatorship,” Canetti writes in one of his essays on Kraus, “has forever ruined for me the deplorable custom of accusing others” (Canetti 1979, 38).

Canetti’s satire, as it is most pronounced in his plays and particularly in his novel *Auto-da-Fé* (written 1930–31, published 1935), transforms the murderous substance into a destructive one. It targets not public figures, as Kraus did, but rigid patterns of perception, from racist stereotypes to prejudices of class, gender, and education. In Canetti’s version, the figure of the satirist as infallible executioner no longer has a central position inside of the text. The distance to Kraus’s and Benjamin’s model of the great satirist could not be greater. Turning to satirical writing, Canetti eliminates the figure of the traditional satirist, who assumed the firm ground of his community’s shared ideals, and the great satirist, whose ground remained firm only as long as he ran berserk and issued his death sentences. Canetti’s response to the postwar crisis of experience and perception, a crisis for which the imperceptible threat of gas warfare became emblematic, was not a search for one last secure position from which to issue satirical missives against a disintegrating world or to offer direct representations of looming catastrophes. Instead, Canetti’s satire seeks a different form of storytelling, a different form of communicating experience, one that attempts to expose to its readers their own rigid forms of perception and, hopefully, destroy them.

To Canetti, no light of creation, no standpoint of redemption was accessible. Satire should not assume an extraterrestrial position, as in Kästner’s poem *The Last Chapter*, or dedicate itself to an imaginary Martian theater, like Kraus’s play. Canetti’s destructive satire stays inside the world, every breath exposed to the risk of a poison gas attack, a world without safety zones. Satire should no longer address the world from the perspective of a judging satirist or an all-seeing narrator.

The world should not be depicted as in earlier novels, from one writer’s standpoint as it were; the world had crumbled, and only if one had the courage to show it in its crumbled state could one possibly offer an authentic conception of it. (Canetti 1979, 210)

Starting on his novelistic project in fall 1929, Canetti realized that representing a disintegrating world required—to use Benjamin’s terminology one last time—a demon and not an inhuman, and a storytelling that finds new forms to communicate experience. The ability of Benjamin’s storyteller to share experiences in direct communication with others has no place in *Auto-da-Fé*. But stories are told nonetheless in ways that affect the novel’s reader.

Canetti's new structure of a destructive satire can be best understood if one first analyzes the protagonist of Canetti's novel, Peter Kien, as a satire on storytelling that seeks to communicate experience in direct communication. The narrative structure of *Auto-da-Fé* will be analyzed in a second step to demonstrate how especially its demonic aspects convey experience in indirect and violent communication to the reader. In 1929, Canetti set out to write eight novels, a *Human Comedy of Madmen* (206). Each novel would present the inner perspective of an extreme figure: a religious fanatic, a technological visionary, a bookman, an enemy of death, a collector, a cosmic man, a truth seeker, and a spendthrift.

A writer had to invent extreme individuals with the most rigorous consistency, like the individuals the world consisted of, and he had to place these extreme individuals next to one another in their separateness. (Canetti 1979, 210)

For a year, Canetti made notes for each of these radically different individual worlds, eight separate spotlights that were meant to shed light on a rapidly disintegrating world. After one year, Canetti focused solely on the bookman, Peter Kien, as the protagonist of *Auto-da-Fé* would eventually be called.

Canetti created Peter Kien through his stance toward tradition, as someone to whom his "connection to books was far more important than he himself" (Canetti 1979, 203). Spiritually and even physically, Kien lives inside the Western and Eastern traditions. He has rebuilt his apartment on the top floor of 24 Ehrlich Strasse into a library, the "most important library in the whole of this great city."²⁷ Having total recall of every book he ever read, Kien carries a precise replica, a "Kopfbibliothek," in his mind (A 20, B 18). Hebel's *bekanntlich* would be an accurate description for Kien's relation to major cultural traditions of world history. Equally well versed in Greek, Latin, French, German, and Japanese cultures, the forty-year-old Kien claims particular expertise in Chinese history, literature, and philosophy. When in need of advice in his private affairs, the world's foremost sinologist summons the spirits of wise masters of the past, and speaks face to face with Confucius, Gautama Buddha, or Immanuel Kant (A 46, 95). The knowledge of the past is anything but past for Kien.

But Kien's perfect recall of past wisdom is no help when it comes to making decisions in the present. His disastrous decision to marry his housekeeper, the event that sets his downfall in motion, was the re-

sult of a conversation with “Confucius, The Matchmaker,” (A 36–48). A ghostly Confucius appears in his library, answers Kien with several well-known quotes, and Kien applies them to his present quandary on how to deal with Therese Krumbholz. When Confucius quotes from *Analects*, “To err without making amendment is to err indeed. If you have erred, be not ashamed to make the fault good,” Kien knows exactly what Confucius had in mind 2,500 years ago (A 47). He has to marry the housekeeper.

It shall be made good, cried Kien. I will give her back her eight lost years! I will marry her! She is the heaven-sent instrument for preserving my library. If there is a fire I can trust in her. Had I constructed a human being according to my own designs, the result could not have been more apt for the purpose. (A 47)

Kien’s direct communication with tradition leads to disastrous advice. (And if Kien, whom Canetti named Kant in the novel’s manuscript, would have recognized the Kant reference in Therese’s family name, he might have remembered that the crooked timber of humanity was not the material to carry out impeccable designs and blueprints.)²⁸

Soon after the wedding Kien knows what a mistake he made and wants to marshal the forces of tradition—all the voices in his library—to defend his home against the wife and enemy Therese Krumbholz. But the moment he hopes to mobilize the voices of tradition with a rousing speech, Kien learns that they will not follow his command into battle. Pacifists like Buddha irritate him with “the pinprick of their silence” (A 95), the French section of his library mocks his absurd figure, the English are willing to go to war but object to his sympathies for the Chinese: “Why had he taken the word for the day from the speech of a coloured race?” (A 97). German philosophers have only a few objections for going to war but their internal strife renders them useless for his army.

Schopenhauer announced his will to live. Posthumously he lusted for this worst of all worlds. In any case he positively refused to fight shoulder to shoulder with Hegel. Schelling raked up his old accusations and asserted the identity of Hegel’s teachings with his own, which were the older. Fichte cried heroically, “I am I!” Immanuel Kant stood forth, more categorically than in his lifetime, for Eternal Peace. Nietzsche declaimed all his many personalities, Dionysus anti-Wagner, Antichrist and Savior. Others hurried into the breach

and made use of this moment, even of this critical moment, to proclaim how much they had been neglected. At long last Kien turned his back on the fantastic inferno of German philosophy. (A 96)

An exhausted Kien can marshal the voices of tradition only by silencing them and stripping them of all individuality. After he turned them all around on their shelves, spines to the wall, they finally have the uniformity of an army.

Even though Kien is deeply embedded in philosophical and literary traditions, *Auto-da-Fé* presents Kien as a precise opposite to Benjamin's storyteller. Although he is a comprehensive repository of stories and philosophies, he rarely understands their meaning. Unlike Benjamin's storyteller, Kien spurns any direct contact with his contemporaries. To house all of his twenty-five thousand books, he walled up the windows in his apartment. Thanks to this remodeling, Kien gained a fourth wall space in each room for his bookshelves and something even more important: "The temptation to watch what went on in the street—an immoral and time-wasting habit—disappeared with the side windows" (A 23). Just as he avoids as much as possible the distractions of city life so he shuns the social networking of professional gatherings. Always the first to be nominated as keynote speaker, Kien rejects regularly all invitations to conferences. Instead of communicating directly with people, he seeks the undisturbed solitude of work and silence: "The greatest danger which threatens a man of learning is to lose himself in talk. Kien preferred to express himself in the written rather than the spoken word" (A 17). Rather than meeting other scholars, he writes to a select few of them. In his letters and articles he disseminates irrefutable knowledge but not wisdom or advice. Besides replacing wisdom with information and the spoken with the written word, Kien goes to even greater length to live his life as an antithesis to Benjamin's storyteller. Carefully regulating his daily life, Kien seeks to avoid all personal experiences, the very source of a storyteller's stories (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 162). Early every morning, he takes his only walk, usually to look at the bookstore displays. Should anything happen by accident during these walks, Kien conceived of an ingenious method to forget such personal experiences immediately. He jots down any eventful experience in a special notebook, entitled *Stupidities*: "Everything he would have preferred to forget he put down in this book" (A 21). Once recorded the personal experience is forgotten. Kien's mastery at preventing or eliminating personal experiences is equaled only by his ability to reproduce scholarly information. Consequently, he is not praised as a genius

of *Erinnerung*, like the storyteller, but as a genius of *Gedächtnis*. Kien cites with unflinching accuracy from the library he carries in his head: “He could not remember any single occasion on which his memory had been found at fault” (A 20).

Ensnared in his library, Kien seeks protection from personal experiences because he fears they would threaten the unity and solidity of his self. He fears the malleability of the self even more than Musil’s young Törless. Any contact with the world bears the risk of dissolving the self’s precious unity. Even the confines of the library are not entirely safe. Although Kien acknowledges literary fiction as an integral part of mankind’s cultural heritage, its seductive pleasures exert corrosive powers on readers. He warns that novels “undermine the finest characters” (A 42):

[Novels] teach us to think ourselves into other men’s places. Thus we acquire a taste for change. The personality becomes dissolved in pleasing figments of imagination. The reader learns to understand every point of view. (A 42)

By identifying themselves with fictional characters, by learning to view reality from a variety of perspectives, readers transform themselves, as Kien fears, momentarily into others. Fiction teaches metamorphosis, and once a taste for variability is acquired the previously unified self discovers its malleability. Kien is horrified by malleable selves that welcome their transformative powers and change perspectives without fear.

As if echoing Benjamin’s warnings against the demonic Kraus, Kien fears that readers of fiction creep inside of these fictional identities. Even the metaphors Kien uses to describe the novelist’s method resemble those of Benjamin. The novelist’s wedge has the same function as the satirist’s crowbar.

Novels are so many wedges which the novelist, an actor with his pen, inserts into the closed personality of the reader. The better he calculates the size and the wedge and the strength of the resistance, so much the more completely does he crack open the personality of his victim. Novels should be prohibited by the State. (A 42)

While attacking the dangerous temptations offered by all fiction, Kien offers a first insight into the workings of Canetti’s destructive satire. But while all fiction invites the reader to perceive human relations from posi-

tions that are not his or her own, destructive satire follows its own methods to crack open the personality of its readers, to rephrase Kien.

Any reader of *Crowds and Power* is well aware how vital the concept of transformation is to Canetti's poetics and anthropology (Canetti 1984, 337–84). In his speech "The Writer's Profession" (1976), Canetti defined the writer famously as the "keeper of metamorphoses" [*Hüter der Verwandlungen*] (Canetti 1979, 241). He is such a keeper in a twofold sense. A writer makes mankind's literary heritage his own, a heritage rich in metamorphoses. With his knowledge of the literatures of the world, Peter Kien could be a keeper of metamorphoses. But the second sense of Canetti's definition stands in direct opposition to Kien's denunciation of novelists. The writer, Canetti demands,

should be able to become anybody and everybody, even the smallest, the most naïve, the most powerless person. His desire for experiencing others from the inside should never be determined by the goals of which our normal, virtually official life consists; that desire has to be totally free of any aim at success or prestige, it has to be passion in itself, the passion of metamorphosis. (Canetti 1979, 242)

As the titles of two influential scholarly collections of essays indicate, it has become customary to refer to Canetti as the *Hüter der Verwandlungen*, the keeper of metamorphoses (1985), and to read his oeuvre as an *Invitation to Transformation* (Krüger 1995). Most likely Canetti already had a positive concept of the malleable self, of a self that lives the passion of metamorphosis, while writing *Auto-da-Fé* in 1930–31. But reading *Auto-da-Fé* is a rather painful experience and nothing like accepting a benign invitation to transformation.

Canetti's destructive satire is linked to the concepts of transformation and the malleable self. But it forces its readers to undergo transformations that are meant to break open rigid patterns of perception in its audience. Canetti developed the structure of his destructive satire while drafting the volumes for his *Human Comedy of Madmen* but pushed it even further once he started focusing on his sole novel, *Auto-da-Fé*. While one extreme figure was supposed to stand at the center of each novel, the protagonist of *Auto-da-Fé* is now joined by a whole cast of excessive characters, all living in their own worlds. Among them are Therese Krumbholz, Kien's housekeeper in a blue starched skirt, his future wife and nemesis; the greedy humpbacked dwarf Siegfried Fischer, a grotesque embodiment of antisemitic stereotypes; the murderous care-

taker Benedikt Pfaff, who assaults beggars, killed his wife, and sexually abused his daughter; and Kien's brother, George, the famous Parisian psychiatrist who envies the rich worlds of his delusional patients. Even smaller parts are embodied by extreme figures like Jean, the former village blacksmith who forever searches for his wife Jeanne; or Johann Schwer, Siegfried Fischer's blind and brutal murderer; or even Mr. Gross, the frightfully insecure owner of a furniture store. All of them are "live one-man rockets," as Canetti once wrote, that either fly by or, more often, crash into each other with fatal consequences for everyone involved (Canetti 1982, 323). Such an accident-prone dynamic pushes the innovative radicalism of *Auto-da-Fé* far beyond the initial plans for Canetti's *Human Comedy of Madmen*. Its eight novels were conceived as "eight spotlights to illuminate the world from the outside" (Canetti 1979, 210). The figures in *Auto-da-Fé* lack the stability and perspective of such firmly positioned spotlights. Instead of viewing the world from a single position, Canetti's novel disorients its readers with its many characters who point their flashlights in as many directions.

Avoiding a single unified narrative perspective, the novel is told from a multitude of narrow perspectives. Without establishing a hierarchy of reliability among these voices, the author Canetti followed the demonic principle of his destructive satire and transformed himself while writing into each of these characters.

I had accustomed myself to moving simultaneously and leaping about in various worlds that had nothing in common, that were separated from one another down to their last details, down to their languages. This benefited the consistent separation of the characters in *Auto-da-Fé*. What was earlier the separation between novels now became the separations within a single book. (Canetti 1979, 211)

Leaping from figure to figure, Canetti stayed inside his characters, never leaving these strange inner worlds to assume a nonsubjective narrative position. Every character in Canetti's novel—and his plays *The Wedding* (1932) and *Comedy of Vanities* (1950, written 1933)—speaks and thinks in such unique ways that they can be known by their linguistic physiognomies. For each of them Canetti created an "acoustic mask" (Canetti 2005a, 138). These rigid patterns of speech and opinions allow the reader to recognize every figure of the novel's cast even when the narrative provides no direct identification.

This perpetual movement between never fully reliable and always extreme perspectives made *Auto-da-Fé* a severe book, "ruthless towards

both myself and the reader” (Canetti 1979, 211). In an essay on his novel, Canetti described the strain he felt while writing *Auto-da-Fé* (Canetti 1979, 203–13). But he does not explicate how the novel inflicts its particular cruelty on its readers. The descriptions of beatings, rape, and murder are certainly part of the novel’s cruelty toward the reader. But the novel’s particular destructive quality lies not in these representations of violence themselves but in the way Canetti’s novel communicates with its readers.

Auto-da-Fé does not offer its readers an invitation to transform but forces metamorphoses upon them. It is unlike any novel Peter Kien ever read and feared as a threat to the unified self. Kien hinted at a far-reaching difference that separates *Auto-da-Fé* from other novels when he said that a reader’s “personality becomes dissolved in pleasing figments of imagination” (A 42). In the German original, Kien is more specific when he says “man löst sich in die Figuren auf, die einem gefallen” (Canetti 1994, 42). One dissolves into figures one likes. *Auto-da-Fé*’s bizarre collection of extreme and often repulsive individuals does not seduce its readers to transform into likable characters. But because of the absence of a narrator and the constant leaping between extreme points of view, the novel’s reader is left with frustratingly few means of orientation. Reading *Auto-da-Fé* is a cruel experience because it forces its readers to move inside the paranoid Kien, the murderous Pfaff, the deluded Therese Krumbholz, and so on. One has to perceive the world through their strange minds. Since the novel moves quickly and often unannounced from perspective to perspective, the reader has to follow just as quickly into one world after the other. To recognize these voices the reader has to share and inhabit the misogynist, antisemitic, paranoid, or murderous distortions of Kien, Krumbholz, Pfaff, Fischer, and others.

In his essay on writing *Auto-da-Fé*, Canetti mentions but does not explain why his novel provides such an unpleasant reading experience. He came closest to an explanation in an interview with Friedrich Witz. In 1968 Canetti accounted for the novel’s apparent cruelty as follows:

Possibly, this is what seems so cruel about the book, that I leave every figure completely in its world, adding nothing from the outside—there is really never anything there that exists outside of these characters, the author is never there, he never speaks, he never thinks, he disappears completely, he is neither below the figures nor above the figures, one can say, he is a victim here because he divided himself completely among them. (Canetti 2005a, 209)

It might be somewhat disingenuous when an author declares himself a victim of his creation. For the reader, however, who is forced to repeat the author's self-dismemberment among these characters, Canetti offers a useful approach to the particular cruelty of *Auto-da-Fé*. Without such self-dismemberment the reader would be without orientation inside the novel's crumbling world. Only when the reader duplicates the author's transformations can he or she follow the novel's twists and turns.

The novel's first chapter provides an example of this added sense of disorientation. And typically for the novel's sense of humor, the episode deals with a question of directions. During his early morning walk, Kien hears a man asking for the way to the Mut Strasse. Tightly secluded in his world of selective perception, Kien, and with him the reader, does not notice that the man has addressed him. In his thoughts Kien applauds an imaginary pedestrian for staying silent and refusing to give directions to the lost man. Knowing no higher praise, Kien considers this silent pedestrian as a man of character. Only once the increasingly aggravated questioner begins to hit Kien, does he (and with him the reader) realize that Kien had been asked for directions to the Mut Strasse.

The episode gains wider significance when Kien decides to consign this personal experience to oblivion and enters it into his book *Stupidities*. This episode is the reader's first and only occasion to compare Kien's written observations with his inner experience of the event. Kien writes:

September 23rd, 7.45 A.M. In Mut Strasse a person crossed my path and asked me the way to Mut Strasse. In order not to put him to shame, I made no answer. He was not to be put off and asked again, several times; his bearing was courteous. Suddenly his eye fell upon the street sign. He became aware of his stupidity. Instead of withdrawing as fast as he could—as I should have done in his place—he gave way to the most unmeasured rage and abused me in the vulgarest fashion. Had I not spared him in the first place, I would have spared myself this painful scene. Which of us was the stupider? (A 21)

Kien views himself as an omniscient and empathetic observer. Instead of recording his initial failure to note that he had been asked for directions, Kien becomes in his written account a keen expert of human psychology, someone who considers the feelings of embarrassment, shame, and anger of his fellow citizens who lack Kien's superior intellectual and

observational competency. A comparison of the two versions of the Mut Strasse incident leaves the novel's reader in a state of uncertainty. Kien's written account could easily fit with everything the reader has learned in the novel about Kien, the superior mind of his generation. But the same reader knows firsthand that this account does not line up with Kien's initial inner experience of the event. Should the reader no longer trust all previous claims for Kien's unerring judgment? Is Kien really a world-renowned sinologist? The novel offers the reader no independent perspective to decide which of these irreconcilable versions bears greater similarity to the actual event. In a satirical novel with a clear authorial presence, a novel like Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrath*, the reader observes from a position of epistemological safety the downfall of an absentminded professor. Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* differs because it leaves the reader in a frustrating state of uncertainty and disorientation. Just like the lost man searching for the Mut Strasse, the reader receives no helpful answers to his questions.

The effect of such sliding between unreliable focalizers in *Auto-da-Fé* is one of "almost ubiquitous ambiguity" and, as David Darby notes, "undermines the authenticity of the information discoursed throughout the novel" (Darby 1992, 27). Voices seeming to have authorial authority are always in the process of becoming those of the novel's crazed cast. The novel withholds from the reader any stable and reliable source of information and satirizes the desire for achieving certainty in the work of interpretation. And Kien is supposed to be renowned for authenticating and establishing the true meaning of texts.

Meticulously cautious, he weighed up the alternatives month after month, was slow to the point of exasperation; applying the severest standards to his own conclusions, he took no decision, on a single letter, a word or an entire sentence, until he was convinced it was unassailable. (A 17–18)

Kien's colleagues accept his readings as "decisive and binding" (A 18). To do the same interpretative work for novel's voices is, however, an impossible task for any reader. The praise for Kien's infallible judgment could belong to a narrator, authenticating its truth, or belong to a delusional Kien, indicating his losing grasp on reality.

Every reader has to confront a series of such breakdowns of communication in *Auto-da-Fé* (Hanuschek 2005, 233). None of the novel's conversations lead to mutual understanding among its participants. Written shortly after the *Auto-da-Fé*'s publication in 1935, Canetti described in

a letter to his brother the inability to communicate as the novel's central premise:

perhaps the most important thing about the book for me is the way the characters talk past each other. It may seem exaggerated sometimes, but that is only because old, bad novels have gotten us used to people understanding each other. That, however, is one of our silliest illusions. In reality, no one understands anyone else. It amounts to a miracle if once in a great while it happens after all. The nonstop mutual understanding that goes on in old-fashioned novels is kitsch. (Canetti 2009, 45)

The miracle of this novel of miscommunications is, however, something entirely different and something that has rarely been addressed: the novel's lucidity. Despite the characters' constant failures to understand each other, despite its lack of an authorial presence, despite the constant leaping in-between narrative perspectives, *Auto-da-Fé* enables its readers nonetheless to follow its storyline without all too many difficulties. Anyone reading this analysis of *Auto-da-Fé* who never read the novel will be surprised the moment he or she opens the book.

After what has been said, one expects a chaotic novel, a book filled with ambiguities that leave its reader disoriented and caught in a whirl of strange voices. But *Auto-da-Fé* is an immensely readable and accessible novel (as long as one does not equate readability with joyful entertainment). The novel achieves this seeming paradox for three reasons: its careful structure, its brisk pacing, and because it found a replacement for traditional satire's firm foundation, the ideals shared by the community of its readers. *Auto-da-Fé* replaces the assumption of a presence of universal (even if slumbering) ideals in every individual with its near opposite, a presence of stereotypes and other rigid patterns of perception.

Auto-da-Fé is structured as a tripartite novel. The titles of its three parts indicate closely knit interconnections: "A Head Without a World," "Headless World," and "The World in the Head." The first part introduces Peter Kien and his library and tells the story of his disastrous decision to marry the housekeeper Therese Krumbholz, a misogynist's greedy, lusty, and almost illiterate nightmare. At the end of the first part Therese Krumbholz manages to take from Kien everything he valued: his silence, his apartment, his books, and the possibility of work. The novel's second part follows the suddenly homeless Kien's Odyssey through the city's underworld, with Kien accompanied by the grotesque figure of Siegfried Fischer, the delusional Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. Thanks to the

sudden arrival of his brother Georges, a famed psychiatrist, Peter Kien is restored to his apartment and library in the novel's third part. But despite Georges's certainty about having helped his brother, Kien's paranoid delusions have progressed too far. *Auto-da-Fé* ends with the burning its English title promises. Peter Kien sets fire to his library, and when "the flames reached him at last, he laughed out loud, louder than he had ever laughed in all his life" (A 464).

The novel's three-part structure and brisk plot, interrupted by equally fast-paced side stories, help to prevent a reading experience of chaotic disorientation. But it is the third, more intriguing reason for its lucidity that sets this novel apart. As mentioned before, the genre of satire relied traditionally on shared communal values and ideals. Even though the audience might no longer live up to these ideals—and Aristophanes characterized his age as the debased descendent of a better past—satirists were believed to rouse the dormant ideals in their readers. The satirist expected his audience to enjoy and sympathize with his attacks against corruption and depravity because he assumed that the ideals can always be called up in the minds of his audience. The *Nörgler*, "Kraus's spokesperson" in *The Last Days of Mankind*, an ever grumbling critic of the Austrian war effort, presents himself as a figure meant for identification (Timms 2005, 62). A reader is far more likely to side with him and his scathing judgments than with his counterpart, the *Optimist*, or any other of the play's characters.

The reader of *Auto-da-Fé* is no longer invited to sit with the satirist in judgment.²⁹ Instead of facilitating an alliance between reader and judge-satirist, *Auto-da-Fé* has excised such a superior position and any identifiable authorial presence from its pages. The novel compels its readers to transform momentarily into one of its extreme figures after the other. The former alliance between reader and satirist was based on shared ideals and values; the reader's forced identification with *Auto-da-Fé*'s characters is based on shared stereotypes, prejudices, and other rigid patterns of perception. *Auto-da-Fé* presupposes the existence of a strong and steady compass in all of its readers that will guide them through all of its rapid and disorienting shifts in perspective. Because the reader shares to some degree all of the clichés and stereotypes of the novel's figures, he or she never loses orientation completely. While former satirists roused the reader's ideals, Canetti's satire exposes the reader's perceptual, ethical, and intellectual limitations.

Canetti's destructive satire is insidious because the reader has to use these stereotypes as vital means to perceive and understand the novel's separate worlds. Without them the reader would often not recognize the

novel's voices. As William Donahue observed in his reading of *Auto-da-Fé*:

We must continually rehearse and deploy anti-Jewish, misogynistic, and other cliché and base conceptions just to read the novel. Perhaps in so doing, we are unpleasantly reminded of the fact that, as Sander Gilman argues, we routinely employ such stereotypes in our everyday thinking. (Donahue 2001, 40)

Donahue's insight into the novel's use of stereotype has to be pushed well beyond the status of an unpleasant reminder. The clarity *and* cruelty of the reading experience stems from the fact that the reader proves to be all too capable of employing a wide variety of such base concepts and thus encounters little difficulty in leaping from one monstrous figure to the next without ever really getting lost in the novel's storyline. The novel's lucidity is directly linked to the reader's capacity and readiness to employ a wide variety of elitist, anti-intellectual, misogynist, antisemitic conceptions and other stereotypes.

The aim of Canetti's satire is not to preserve but to destroy its bizarre epistemological foundation (or, at least, to expose its continued existence). In a world of imperceptible threats of mass destruction, Canetti's destructive satire seeks to destroy patterns of perception that make it even less likely that the new risk situation will be recognized in its full catastrophic potential. But how could one measure whether Canetti's satire fails or succeeds in its work of destruction? Close readings of the novel from Darby (1992) to Donahue (2001) have established the constant sliding between focalizers as well as the use of vicious stereotypes and clichés. The most fascinating demonstration of this sliding between focalizers, occurring sometimes even within a single sentence, is done by Canetti himself. Listening to his performances of excerpts from *Auto-da-Fé*, particularly his reading of the chapter "The Kind Father," one can hear the sudden shifts in narrative perspectives in his voice (Canetti 2005b). However, even if one would demonstrate that a reader could identify a particular figure by its use of prejudicial stereotypes, such a demonstration would not attest to a cruel and potentially destructive effect on the reader's own dependence on stereotypes. Answering the question of whether Canetti's destructive satire is effective seems to be beyond the limits of literary analysis. One can point to examples like François Bondy's response to *Auto-da-Fé*. He considered the novel an "extraordinarily unpleasant book; I think of it with great admiration and I never want to read it again" (cited in Hanuschek 2005, 229). Although Bondy is far

from alone in his reaction to *Auto-da-Fé*, even a large number of similar responses to the book would rise only to the level of anecdotal evidence.

The most persuasive strategy to test the novel's destructive quality is to analyze not only the novel but also some of its most accomplished scholarly readings as well—not to collect general assessments of the novel or the reading experience but to establish where these interpretations exhibit patterns of resistance against Canetti's destructive satire. Even among such expert readers two schemes can be detected for how readers shield themselves from the novel's cruelty and its potentially destructive impact. The first and foremost strategy is to identify a safe authorial position in Canetti's novel. Refusing to accept the absence of an authorial presence in *Auto-da-Fé*, one of the novel's characters is established as Canetti's reliable spokesperson. Once a safe and sane position of epistemological authority is found in the novel's universe, readers side with him or her and observe all the other figures from a seemingly secure distance. The second strategy concentrates on the role of pernicious clichés and base conceptions for understanding *Auto-da-Fé*. Such readings tend to deflect from the active presence of such stereotypes in the reader's mind and accuse Canetti of affirming, reinforcing, and disseminating hateful prejudices. As I argue, both strategies fail but provide indirect evidence for the novel's destructive impact on its readers.

Pathbreaking studies by Dieter Dissinger (1971), Dagmar Barnouw (1979, 1996), and David Roberts (1975) sought to identify which of the novel's characters spoke for the author and formulated core ideas of Canetti's later works. Is it Peter Kien, the renowned sinologist, who lives in a world of books, as Barnouw suggested?³⁰ Or did Canetti speak through Georges Kien, the psychiatrist who espouses theories of crowd psychology that bear striking similarities to what Ernst Fischer remembered as Canetti's initial ideas on these topics (Fischer 1994, 273–74, 305–8)? Ernst Waldinger, one of the novel's first reviewers, in 1936 named Georges Kien as the protagonist “who symbolically represents—as we easily guess—the writer himself with his interpretations and solutions” (Waldinger 1987, 299). Subsequent readers from Walter Sokel to Russell Berman and Kristie Foell ground their readings of *Auto-da-Fé* on this identification of Georges Kien as Canetti's voice in the novel.³¹ Being the most likeable character among the usually mad and violent cast, the equation of him with Canetti is tempting but misguided, as Dagmar Barnouw argued (1979, 28–29).

Rather than showing professional insight into the madness around him, Georges Kien, the acclaimed specialist of the human mind, is too impatient to withhold judgment and jumps persistently to the wrong con-

clusion. He enters the novel's storyline by receiving an unsigned telegram that calls on him to help his brother. Georges Kien immediately mistakes his brother as the author of a telegram that had been sent by the delusional Siegfried Fischer. Although he knows its wording sounds nothing like Peter Kien, Georges does not even consider the possibility that Peter might not be its author. Once he meets Peter, Georges misdiagnoses him with his own fear of blindness. His inability to read others continues until the novel's end. Georges Kien describes, for example, the murderous caretaker Pfaff as "crude, but refreshing" (A 422). A rare exception to his misjudgments concerns himself: "he had left his wits at home" (A 426). Most importantly, Georges Kien's attempts to understand and treat his brother Peter fail disastrously (Donahue 2001, 72–75). Canetti tempts the readers' craving for a positive figure only long enough to encourage them to question this very desire for identification and reliable information.

The second strategy to shield oneself from the novel's cruelty and destructive impact focuses on the role of rigid patterns of perception in *Auto-da-Fé*. One can distinguish here three different approaches: the occurrence and function of stereotypes in the novel is simply ignored, or its use is justified while their effects on the reader are downplayed, or the author Canetti is accused of affirming and disseminating prejudices and clichés. Strictly formal readings of *Auto-da-Fé* tend to follow the first approach. David Darby's masterful formal analysis disregards its racist and misogynist elements. Consequently, his analysis finds no convincing way to account for the novel's clarity and accessibility despite its immensely complex narrative model. In a recent study of *Auto-da-Fé*, Donahue argues persuasively against Darby that the narrative structure of *Auto-da-Fé* is "far from offering comforting structure" (Donahue 2001, 37). Exposed to the constant gliding of the narrative perspective, the reader is forced to draw on these stereotypes to recognize who is speaking: the greedy Jew Fischer, the randy but uptight Therese Krumbholz, the murderously subservient caretaker Pfaff, or the self-important intellectual Peter Kien. The reader has to use his or her knowledge of these stereotypes "to make sense of the voices which variously inhabit the narrator" (37).

But Donahue's reading then follows the second approach and downplays the effects these rigid patterns of perception might have on the reader. The moment Donahue focuses the attention on the novel's most disturbing aspects, he seeks to reestablish a safe position for the readers. While these stereotypes are supposed to provide the crucial link between the cultural climate in which *Auto-da-Fé* was written and the novel's cast, Donahue envisions the reader as remaining unaffected by them, simply laughing about the foolishness of the novel's protagonists: "the novel's

remarkable humor depends to a great extent on the reader's epistemic sovereignty over the distorted and limited worlds each character takes to be utterly real, natural, and universally valid" (45). Reading the novel, "we do not shudder in self-recognition"; no reader could ever be drawn into the novel or be tempted to share any of the hateful prejudices that pervade the novel: "the broad experience of readers indicates a continual 'falling out' of the story rather than the experience of being comfortably buckled in" (Donahue 2001, 188, 45). As in the most traditional satire, the reader is offered a chance to laugh at the exposed faults of others from the safety of his or her own superior position. Such reclaiming of the reader's safe distance from the novel's pernicious stereotypes is, however, self-contradictory. On the one hand, the reader uses the stereotypes to identify the novel's voices; on the other hand, the same reader is thought to be immune to them: "After all, overidentification, misidentification, and self-projection are the sins of the characters we recognize because we have as readers (at least until the introduction of Georg) been held at arm's length" (Donahue 2001, 188). Since the novel's narrator offers readers no clear distance from the novel's other voices, as Donahue agrees with Darby, and since Donahue rejects, correctly, Darby's solution of an implied author as supplementing a comforting structure to the audience, it remains unclear to whom this arm belongs that keeps a reader at a safe distance. But before I can show in Donahue's own reading experience that this arm exists only in a last defensive gesture against Canetti's destructive satire, against the experience of being pulled into the novel—and how can one speak of a "continual 'falling out' of the story" if there is not also the continual experience of being pulled into the novel?—it is necessary to take a look at a feminist reading of the novel, a reading that does not share the "broad experience" of laughing at the content of the novel from a safe distance.

Kristie Foell accuses Canetti of disseminating and affirming misogyny, of playing "into the myth that women deserve what they get, whether rape, poverty, or murder" (1994, 186). Such a reading depends to no small degree on the position that Donahue declares impossible: the identification with a character in the novel. While previous readings have identified with Peter or Georges Kien, Foell chooses Therese Krumbholz. Although her initial desire to recognize the housekeeper as an "emancipated or proto-feminist woman" is quickly thwarted, she preserves for her analysis "identification and solidarity" with the novel's main female character (Foell 1994, vi). From this perspective, she finds misogyny not only inside the novel but understands it as a pernicious message that the novel delivers to the reader (vii). One particular scene carries, according

to her, the “unfortunate message [. . .] that women want to be raped and make accusations of rape out of a sense of frustration” (186). Laying in bed, Therese Krumbholz, hears her husband, Peter Kien, undressing in the dark next to her:

When he suddenly fell on top of her, she made not a sound, she was afraid he might go away again. He lay on top of her for only a few moments; to her they felt like days. He did not move and was as light as a feather; she scarcely drew breath. Little by little her expectation gave way to bitterness. When he got up, she knew that he was escaping her. Like a creature possessed, she hit out at him, while she poured down upon him the foulest abuse. (A 151)

Because Kien fails in the act, Krumbholz beats him almost to death. This scene can be read, as Foell does, as a woman who desires to be raped—and at no point is the novel interested in explicitly rejecting such a view. At the same time, the whole scene of the incompetent husband being beaten by his disappointed wife is also a laughing matter. Taken together, however, this scene undermines both Foell’s and Donahue’s proposed readings.

Neither Foell’s nor Donahue’s approach to stereotypes can account for the complexity of these few sentences. How is one supposed to read the second sentence, “He lay on top of her for only a few moments; to her they felt like days”? If one is as sympathetic to Krumbholz as Foell, one might think that these few moments of sudden attack are so horrific that they seem like days. Her silence and her breathing noted in the next sentence lend credibility to this reading. In that case, one could, however, no longer claim that the novel simply portrays women as desiring rape. The second sentence allows for the kind of identification with a character that Donahue categorically denies but that also contradicts Foell’s larger point regarding the novel’s and especially this scene’s alleged misogyny.

On the other hand, the same sentence can be interpreted as originating from the perspective of a completely deranged Therese. The few moments become days for Therese because they are filled with the prospect of bliss. She hardly breathes because she does not want to scare her suddenly active husband away. Only slowly, seemingly after days of unrewarded hope, she turns in violent frustration against her husband. Angered because he fails miserably, she reveals herself as a woman obsessed with sex and violence.

The same scene can be read with pity or at least with understanding for Therese or with absolute ridicule for her irreparably unhinged mind. Although the stereotypes provide the reader with clarity as to which one

of the characters speaks at any given time, the same stereotypes do not offer the reader a safe distance from the madness of the novel. Again and again, the reader has to employ—and therefore witness—his or her own stereotypes to construct the meaning of the novel. Repeatedly, and even at its most vicious moments, the novel does not allow for the objective, distanced position of “epistemic sovereignty” that Donahue envisions for the reader.³² Instead, the novel grabs the reader by his or her expectations regarding the meaning of whole scenes, images, or words and pulls him or her into the novel to make sense of them. Rather than watching a spectacle from the outside, the reader has to come out of the novel through an examination of his or own preconceptions. The novel constantly questions the reader. Rather than skipping the impact of the insidious deployment of these stereotypes on the reader, one needs to recognize them as part of the destructive game that Canetti plays with his readership.

Let me return one last time to Kraus and Benjamin to emphasize this truly innovative feature of Canetti’s destructive satire. As devastating as *The Last Days of Mankind* remains, the play still allows its audience to identify with the views and opinions of the *Nörgler*, the embodiment of Kraus’s ethical positions. The murderous substance of his satire stems from his insistence on staying inside his texts and to issue right there the death sentences against his enemies. Kraus never wavered in his judgments. Be it because of a paradisiacal light that still shone on Kraus and to which Benjamin traced the Krausian certainty, or Kraus’s belief in the revelatory power of language, both versions allowed for a small parcel of firm ground amidst a disintegrating world. On this ground the audience might join the author in much the same way that Kraus’s audience joined him with murderous laughter when he exposed and disposed of another of his victims during the public readings in Vienna. From the first issue, *Die Fackel*, in which Kraus did not announce what he intended to publish but what he intended to kill, the audience could find shelter inside of the “we.”

Canetti did away with satire’s last shelter. His destructive satire eliminates the satirist as a moral instance. And he dispenses with the assumption that the reader could be relied upon as a moral authority, as someone who really knows better and whose slumbering ideals satire could always stir up once more to fight depravity and corruption. Although the novel’s narrative voice keeps joining the violent madness of its characters with great exuberance and offers no stable narrative perspective, Canetti’s satire provides its readers nonetheless a lifeboat to navigate safely through its universe. This lifeboat is built of the reader’s preconceived notions of reality, stereotypes, and clichés that are no longer contrasted to a Benja-

minian paradigm of pure, angelic communication. Canetti's novel relies on the reader's distorted views of reality. Without the reader's misogynist, antisemitic, classist, and educational prejudices, *Auto-da-Fé* would be incomprehensible, an odd assembly of mad voices, as Enzensberger once suggested (1963, 48–49).

The ease with which a reader recognizes the novel's voices stems from his or her ability to creep inside of these figures of hate and madness and adapt to their destructive views of the world. In this confrontation with the reader lies the destructive substance of Canetti's novel. As a destructive satire, *Auto-da-Fé* does not, as Canetti claimed for Broch's novels, smell the gas of future attacks. Its destructive force is aimed at rigid forms of perception while at the same time these encrusted views of the world are the only stable ground from which Canetti's reader can understand the novel.

Because of the radical reliance on preconceived notions of reality, such destructive satire opens itself up to readings that perceive the novel's hateful features as its intent. Consequently, *Auto-da-Fé* has been repeatedly criticized for its misogynistic characters and antisemitic imagery. The novel's long failure to find a wider audience—written in 1931, only its third edition in 1963 received wider notice in Germany—and the reader's continued search for the author's reliable voice in the novel point to the strength and weakness of *Auto-da-Fé* as a destructive satire. Even if one acknowledges the great significance of this radically different and destructive model in the history of satire, one has to acknowledge that unlike Edgar Hilsenrath's very similar but much more focused novel *The Nazi and the Barber* (1971), aimed almost exclusively at the reader's anti- and philo-Semitic stereotypes, Canetti's novel pursues such an abundance of targets that its insidious effects risk being discarded as bad writing (Enzensberger's view) or as a well-intentioned but harmless parody of outdated constructions of reality. In view of the novel's reception, the success of Canetti's version of destructive satire remains for the foreseeable future an open question. But that might not be the worst situation for a novel written to prepare the perception of looming threats of an uncertain future. Rather than being a remnant of past modernist experiments, Canetti's satire might still communicate the impending but never fully noticeable risks of a near future. "All destructions are of the future, as all relics are of the past," Canetti said in his lecture on Proust, Joyce, and Kafka, praising the latter as the "only one who feels the *futures* if we could say so, in his shaking limbs" (Canetti 2005a, 12). Canetti's satire might still help readers to feel such futures in their limbs.

Conclusion

The representation of violence is of central importance for any understanding of German modernism. Musil, Kafka, Benjamin, and Canetti achieved through their examinations of physical violence new conceptions of the self, of communication, of society, and of history. By focusing on their reflections on and representations of violence, this study presents new readings of central works of modernism.

Musil's discovery and analysis of the malleable self marks not only a turning point in his own writings, but also a turning point in our understanding of the works of Franz Kafka and Elias Canetti. The confrontation with this concept of the self could become of similar importance for new approaches to the works of authors as varied as Robert Walser and Hans Henny Jahnn or Alfred Döblin and Hermann Broch. The disorienting shock triggered by the mere possibility of a malleable self and its apparent lack of a response to the experience of physical violence reverberates deeply in Musil's first novel. Because of it, *The Confusions of Young Törless* became a novel on violence in more than one sense. On its most explicit level, the novel analyzes and propagates violence against the other, perceiving and constructing the effeminate boy Basini as the perverse other. It is a novel about violence but also a violent novel. With its construction of the perverse, the novel creates a situation in which three different instrumental uses of violence compete: violence as an element of a theory of sacrifice, as an integral instrument for a rational theory of power, and as Törless's blunt tool to examine the structure and consistency of the self. Acts of violence are justified as means to achieve particular ends, and the novel's narrator adds a fourth justification for Basini's torture and rape: Törless's aesthetic education. As a novel about violence, *The Confusions of Young Törless* is one of the more disquieting masterpieces of German modernism.

Exploring these four instrumental approaches and the novel's repressive advocacy of violence against the effeminate boy makes *The Confusions of Young Törless* equally disturbing and remarkable. Even though these pursuits dominate the plot of Musil's first novel, it is, as I have argued, another, almost transient, moment in the narrative that has a transformative impact not just on Musil's oeuvre. The failure of Törless's experiment in torturing and humiliating Basini until his sense of self shatters led to,

for Törless and his narrator, the unbearable possibility of a malleable self. This initial encounter with the malleable self connects and distinguishes Musil's radically different concepts of violence from before and after the world war. While perceiving the ubiquitous presence of the malleable self during the war and in postwar society and exploring its relation to a sense of possibility, Musil analyzes these phenomena as responses to the experience of modernity that carry inherently risky potentials for modern society. From a position of radical ambivalence, Musil's postwar essays and his unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, argue for discarding linear models of reality construction while exposing the risks to the malleable self of living a life shaped by a sense of possibility. Musil shifts from a concept of violence that presupposes its instrumental character to an antireductionist understanding of violence that no longer searches for violence's origins and causes, but that acknowledges the variability of situations that could but did not have to erupt in violence. A central aspect of *The Man Without Qualities* is its satirical demolition of our expectation of being able to identify the causes of war and violence in order to prevent their further occurrence in modernity.

Musil's critique of causal analyses of violence and his affirmation of the malleable self and the sense of possibility do not propose that the malleable self and the sense of possibility are necessarily successful responses to the experience of modernity. They are not causes of violence but bring their own particular attractions to violence. Violence holds the promise of escaping briefly from the undecided openness of social and political situations in modernity, as well as from the shapelessness of the malleable self. During the general mobilization in July 1914, Musil welcomed the prospect that war would undo the experience of ambivalence in modernity, and offer an all-too malleable self clearly defined shapes and destinations. The availability of such "cake molds"—rigid patterns of perception and firm constructions of reality—offers a self that experiences its malleability as a burden and not as a relief the chance of an escape from the experience of ambiguity and uncertainty in modernity.

Kafka's exploration of violence focuses precisely on the experience of ambiguity in modernity. With unparalleled intensity in modernism, Kafka's writings offer radical interrogations of the relationship between ambivalence, truth, and violence. His story *In the Penal Colony* exposes the ambivalences inherent in the discourses on violence and truth, language and communication. By recognizing the penal colony's officer as a figure of radical ambivalence, someone who belongs to the new *and* the old orders, someone who defends *and* mistrusts the workings of the apparatus, my reading argued for paying particular attention to the role of language

and communication in Kafka's poetics. Kafka's story represents the failure to communicate directly (the officer's failure to persuade the traveler that communication will not establish truth) and performs the failure to communicate indirectly (the traveler's inability to notice and understand the gaps, lies, and inconsistencies in the officer's direct speech). According to Kafka, language itself does not preclude truth from coming to the fore but rather, as he called it once, the self's "morass-like" lack of inner clarity and unity does. Using language, any speaker has to encounter the unintentionally revealing character of his or her words, words that turn like knives against the speaking self. Kafka recognized the search for truth in communication and in violence as equally futile, and the continuation of any such search as a form of self-deception, but at the same time he offered no escape, no alternative to such deceptive discourses on pain and truth. Kafka's story moves back and forth between the promise to reveal truth through communication and/or violence, and the renunciation of any hope for success.

Informed by Musil and Kafka, Canetti's model of satire combines a positive notion of the malleable self and a trust in specific modes of indirect communication to subvert, disrupt, or even destroy the "few dozen cake molds of which reality consists" for its own readership (MwQ 645). Traditional satire depends on direct communication, a communication that presupposes the existence of shared ideals in its audience that could be roused from its dormant state in the public's minds with satire's denunciations of moral depravity and decay. Canetti's destructive satire no longer assumes the presence of such shared ideals but the stubborn persistence of Musil's "cake molds" of reality. As I have argued, the destructive force of Canetti's satire is aimed at these rigid forms of perception while at the same time these encrusted views of the world are the only stable ground from which Canetti's reader can understand the novel. As in Kafka, words and patterns of perception are turned against the speaking self, but by going beyond Kafka's practice Canetti aims them against the reader as well. Canetti's satire communicates via an indirect and violent struggle with the reader. Anticipating the next war as chemical warfare won by weapons that defy perception, a wide range of authors and theorists, from Kraus to Benjamin, feared that the ubiquitous presence of outdated modes of perception would prevent societies from even noticing the new threats of modern warfare. Canetti's satire is meant to attack and destroy inflexible patterns of perception that block the view to modern societies' most urgent risks. By seeking to burst its audience's molds of perception from the inside, Canetti develops a satire that inflicts harm on its readers. With such a work of destruction, satire seeks to prepare the

ground for a sustainable concept of the malleable self, a self that lives the passion of metamorphosis, and might be capable of perceiving and assessing the new threats of mass violence.

This study has argued for the central role of war, violence, and catastrophe for any understanding of German modernism as well as for German modernism's role in transforming our understanding of the impact of war, violence, and the threat of future catastrophes on our conceptions of language and communication, the self and society, modernity and history. Such a break with prevalent pacified notions of German modernism offered at times deeply disturbing assessments of modernism's relation to and advocacy of violence. But it allowed, I hope, new and instructive readings of some of the most familiar and canonical texts of German and Austrian modernism as well as insights into the recent history of violence that warrant further investigations into the immense richness of modernism's provocative exploration of war, violence, and the anticipation of total destruction. Such investigations might still raise awareness about our inadequacies in perceiving the new risk potential of our own present situation.

NOTES

Introduction

1. W. G. Sebald's lecture "The Air War and Literature" initiated in 1997 the most significant recent controversy on the representation of physical destruction in German literature. Sebald claimed that in German postwar literature the bombardment of German cities "remained under a kind of taboo, like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged" (2004, 10). While German postwar literature acknowledged the German responsibility for the Holocaust, it failed in Sebald's view to account for the suffering inflicted on the Germans during the war. Robert Moeller (2005) and Gilad Margalit (2010) have analyzed the Sebald debate as an important moment in the resurgence of a German sense of suffering since the reunification.

2. Hanno Ehrlicher examined in *Die Kunst der Zerstörung: Gewaltfantasien und Manifestationspraktiken europäischer Avantgarden* (2001) the violent revolutionary fantasies of the avant-garde movements between the two world wars. In *Der Barbar* (1997), Manfred Schneider follows the cultural construct of the barbarian in literature, theory, and history.

3. Even though one finds indeed moments in Améry's writings when he was firmly convinced that anticolonial violence could have a transformative quality for its perpetrators, his temporary defense of anticolonial violence is a far cry from Žižek's demands for a truly emancipatory violence (Améry 1971). Even during his most radical phase Améry in his defense of revolutionary violence never went so far that he would subscribe to the provocation that concludes Žižek's treatise on violence: "If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then, crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough" (2008, 217).

Chapter 1

1. My translation. Except when otherwise indicated, the translations in this study will be mine.

2. After the failed bourgeois revolution of 1848, the dominance of political conservatism went hand in hand with a rejection of representing violent and pathological individuals in realist literature: "The interest in pathological behavior comes to an end in extra-medical discourses around 1850. The romantic dialogue between medicine and philosophy winds finally down.

Literary representations of organic and psychic illnesses became rare. The exclusion of psychopathology which programmatic realism implemented is all the more surprising since psychologism is inherent in the realist way of writing and the exploration of complex psychological cases of extreme behavior would seem to be therefore in the ‘logic’ of its approach” (Thomé 1993, 21). The realist exclusion of otherness and difference has been observed by critics like Russell Berman and Robert Holub. Not disputing the programmatic desire to exclude the exceptional and extreme from realist representation, Eric Downing offers nevertheless a more conflictual model of German realism. He reads realist texts also as “decisive and highly self-conscious failures of the realist projects,” emphasizing the “double exposure” of repetition of but also resistance to the dominant discourse in realist fiction (Downing 2000, 13, 261).

3. A different image emerges when one compares Fontane’s claim to the actual crime reporting in German newspapers. The newspapers of imperial Germany shared German realism’s disinterest in writing about crime and homicide. Across the political spectrum, murder and other forms of violent crime were not the stuff newspapers were made of while Fontane published his novels. Neither the socialist nor the conservative press devoted much attention to crime reporting. The liberal press demonstrated similar disinterest before 1900 and began to focus its attention on violent crime only in the last decade before the First World War. As Eric Johnson writes in *Urbanization and Crime: Germany 1871–1914*: “In the early years of the Reich, one could read a liberal paper for weeks and not find one article on a court case of homicide in the *Vossische Zeitung*. In November 1902, the ‘Court News’ section carried articles on seven cases, and in June 1908, it carried articles on fifteen ongoing or recently completed court cases of murder or manslaughter” (1995, 85). This increase in the reporting of murder cases was balanced by a decrease in the reporting of assault and battery charges. The total amount of articles dedicated to violent crime remained more or less the same and rather small. “Hence, it might be argued that liberal papers like the *Vossische Zeitung* may have reserved a certain portion of their crime news for news of violent criminality, and the form of that criminality may have changed but the volume was not all that different” (86). As in the German realist novel, extreme and pathological behavior was of little concern to German newspapers between 1870 and 1914. German realism and German newspapers treated crime as a “foreign” concept (Johnson 1995, 53–107).

4. For an assessment of the visions of war in Germany around 1900 that avoids seeing them through the prism of August 1914, see Schumann 2000.

5. Here I read again the figure of Pastor Lorenzen in *Der Stechlin* as one focalizer of Fontane’s views on history and politics: “Eine neue Zeit bricht an. Ich glaube, eine bessere und eine glücklichere. Aber wenn auch nicht eine glücklichere, so doch mindestens eine Zeit mit mehr Sauerstoff in der Luft, eine Zeit, in der wir besser atmen können. Und je freier man atmet, je mehr lebt man” (Fontane 2001, 324). For the possibility of such a reading, see Zimmermann (2000).

6. One of the more recent statements of this generally accepted assessment

of the impact of violence in the twentieth century is the starting point of Ferguson's last book: "Significantly larger percentages of the world's population were killed in the two world wars that dominated the century than had been killed in any conflict of comparable geopolitical magnitude" (Ferguson 2007, xxxiv).

7. Excellent examples of the invocation of twentieth-century mass violence when discussing the phenomenon of representations of violence in twentieth-century German literature are Hüppauf (1997) and Nieraad (2003). Anton Kaes's recent study on Weimar cinema makes this assumed causal link between the experience of war and a modernist film aesthetic explicit in the title of his study, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (2009).

8. See, for example, the debate on Jünger's modernism between Berman (1988) and Huyssen (1995).

9. Despite previous studies by Jameson (1981), Herf (1984), and more recently Breuer (1995), the notion of fascist modernism remains provocative and far from generally accepted. The idea that National Socialism was not solely a premodern and disastrous escape strategy from modernity, but also a response to modernity, perhaps even a force of modernization, a political movement that embraced central features of modernization as especially Herf and Breuer have demonstrated—such an acknowledgment still encounters among literary scholars more resistance than among historians, sociologists, and political scientists.

10. Freud told Andreas-Salomé that "I do not doubt that mankind will survive even this war, but I know for certain that for me and my contemporaries [*Altersgenossen*] the world will never again be a happy place. It is too hideous. And the saddest thing about it is that it is exactly the way we should have expected people to behave from our knowledge of psychoanalysis. [. . .] My secret conclusion has always been: since we can only regard the highest present civilization as burdened with an enormous hypocrisy, it follows that we are organically unfitted for it. We have to abdicate, and the great Unknown, He or It, lurking behind fate will someday repeat this experiment with another race" (Freud and Andreas-Salomé 1972, 21).

11. Such people could not resist the opportunity that presented itself during wartime "to withdraw for a while from the constant pressure of civilization and to grant a temporary satisfaction to the instincts which they had been holding in check. This probably involved no breach in their relative morality within their own nations" (Freud 1957, 284). In 1919, shortly after the war, Freud observed in his introduction to a volume on psychoanalytical approaches to war neuroses that "when war conditions ceased to operate, the greater number of the neurotic disturbances brought about by the war simultaneously vanished" (Freud 1955, 207). In February 1920, Freud concluded again in a memorandum submitted to the Austrian War Ministry that "with the end of the war the war neurotics, too, disappeared" (Freud 1955, 214).

12. For an analysis of this persistence of such "old wisdom" in Adorno and Horkheimer's study, see Reemtsma (2003, 202–19).

13. In her famous speech "On Humanity in Dark Times" (1959), Arendt

values the collapse of tradition as an “advantage, promoting a new kind of thinking that needs no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain” (Arendt 1968, 10).

14. For a comprehensive analysis of these debates, see Jay (2005).

15. Compare, for example, Braese (1998 and 1999) and for a more polemical account Briegleb (2002).

16. Hobsbawm himself qualifies the certainty and comprehensiveness of this statement when he contrasts in the next paragraph “the huge popular revulsion against the mass killing of the First World War” with the “emergence of a relatively small, but absolutely numerous, minority for whom the experience of fighting, even under the conditions of 1914–18, was central and inspirational” (1995, 125). Michael Mann demonstrates in his study *Fascist* that the majority of those who planned and enacted the mass violence of the Second World War were not brutalized by any direct war experiences between 1914 and 1918 but belonged to the postwar generation. “Thus, though first boosted by the wartime experience of a particular generation, fascism conquered (as it did Germany) by its ability to socialize a second generation in paramilitary nation-statism through the interwar period” (2004, 213).

17. One of the pathbreaking studies on the war experience is Ziemann (1997). See also Bourke (1996, 124–70) and Schumann (2004). For a recent review of the literature on the war experience and the legacy of the First World War, see Davis (2003, 111–31).

18. In his research report on social-historical approaches to violence—a report that intends to contribute to the inauguration of the new discipline: “Historische Gewaltforschung”—Dirk Schumann locates the main obstacle for such a new and necessary discipline in the difficulty of distinguishing the inherently heterogeneous phenomenon of violence from other forms of force and power (Schumann 1997, 366). The problem is exacerbated by the German language since in addition to the meaning of the English word “violence” the German word “Gewalt” refers to nonviolent notions of force and power as well. Although recent studies insist that violence should be understood more narrowly as physical violence—*Physische Gewalt* is also the title of one of the pioneering anthologies in violence research—such specification helps very little in answering the questions as to what one should understand as (physical) violence and how one might approach it in history and in literature (Lindenberger and Lüdtke 1995). Derrida offers a highly intriguing reading of the limits and possibilities of the German term “Gewalt” as compared to the French and English equivalents (1990, 927–29).

19. Elias argues, for example, in “Civilization and Violence” that one should not ask how terrorism is possible inside contemporary modern societies since this question puts already too much emphasis on the role of violence in modern societies. One should instead ask, “how is it possible that so many people can normally live together peacefully, without fear of being attacked or killed by people stronger than themselves, as is nowadays largely the case in the great state-societies of Europe, America, China or Russia?” (1996, 174). In the 1980s, Elias was confident that the European nations had once and for all abandoned

war and violence as means for conflict resolution. “Nobody threatens war in Europe anymore. We should consider this as an advantage. We have learned our lesson” (Elias 1988, 188). Even though the civilizing process is far from over Elias had no doubt about the direction of its progress. “We are in early modernity, or said differently: we are the late barbarians. In 300 or 400 years it will be completely incomprehensible to our descendants why we prepared for war with arsenals of nuclear weapons” (190).

20. As Hans Joas writes: “In fact, sociology developed with the certainty that military and war were irreconcilable with the advance of industrial societies; from an evolutionary perspective they were sentenced to extinction” (1989, 182–83). Herbert Spencer foresaw already the replacement of the “militant society” with a “industrial society.” Classic Marxism predicted as well a future society in which war and military were obsolete phenomena. The advance toward such a socialist-industrial society seemed to be in the 1890s within reach and inevitable.

21. Like Arendt, Niklas Luhmann (1975) sets the terms of power and violence in opposition to each other and offers an extremely subtle analysis of power while setting the phenomenon of violence onto the course of extinction—at least for the analysis of autopoietic processes.

22. For overviews of the recent debate, see Trotha (1997 and 2000) as well as Imbusch (2004).

23. Wolfgang Sofsky’s *Traktat über die Gewalt* (1996) has become the most influential and controversial example of the use of thick description in the analysis of acts of violence.

24. The already mentioned research by Ziemann and Schumann is directly influenced by Popitz. One encounters similar interests and approaches in historical works that make the case for the importance of physical violence and the act of killing in history. An early, influential study is Keegan (1976). Especially interesting in the German context are programmatic writings by the historian Michael Geyer who conceptualizes a history of war that acknowledges the centrality of violence and death for writing history (1992, 1995, 2000, and particularly 2006).

25. Berman defines teleology, identity, and fictionality as the three central features of the bourgeois aesthetics of autonomy, and every form of modernism proposes its own alternative to them. Modernists like Mann, Broch, and Musil favor seriality over teleological development, ambivalence over a clearly defined notion of identity, and “the objectivity afforded by essayism” over fictionality (Berman, 1989, 67). Fascist modernism offers its own clearly distinct set of alternatives. It emphasizes perpetual repetition of the same instead of development, the spectacle instead of identity, and a fascist modernist like Jünger dismisses bourgeois fictionality as escapism, claiming for his often autobiographically inspired texts “a curious pseudodocumentary status” (Berman, 1989, 67).

26. More recent studies that emphasize the propensity toward violence among writers who could be grouped under Berman’s term of epic leftism do not escape this fallacy. If one would replace the term “fascist modernism” with “totalitarian modernism” (and it seems to be only a matter of time before such

a proposal for renaming will be made) one would still continue to ignore the fascination with the infliction of violence onto others in modernist writings in general. Regarding the infatuation with violence and destruction in epic leftism, Walter Benjamin has become the target of choice for revaluations of structural similarities between left- and right-wing writers. See, for example, Bolz (1989), Derrida (1990), Werckmeister (1997), and Lange (1999).

27. Even Karl Heinz Bohrer, who made the best case for Jünger as a great modernist writer, based his argument almost exclusively on one particular text, *The Adventurous Heart* (1929), and only on its first edition and not the later one that Jünger considered the definitive text (Bohrer 1978).

28. In his response to Frantz Fanon, Améry argued not only that the formerly oppressed revolutionary transforms himself through his acts of violence again into a human being but also that the target of his violence, the former oppressor, is given the opportunity to become human again when he falls victim to this act of violent retribution (Améry 1971, 147–63).

29. Karl Heinz Bohrer has taken this approach recently. For his concept of “aesthetic negativity,” Franz Kafka alone survives Bohrer’s scrutiny of the writers and theorists of the twentieth century. Ernst Jünger is no longer mentioned, Benjamin is pushed aside, and Bohrer singles out Adorno for harsh criticism because his negative dialectics initially promised but finally undermined the aesthetic negativity that Bohrer advances as a truly modernist aesthetics (Bohrer 2002).

Chapter 2

1. Not only is the essay absent in the English edition of Musil’s essays but brilliant English studies of Musil’s writings offer rather euphemistic summaries of the text. David Luft presents “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschtum” in his influential study as an analysis of war enthusiasm and not as one of its expressions (Luft 1980, 122–23). Stefan Jonsson leaves in his references to the essay the impression that Musil voiced no more than a careless compliance to the zeitgeist (Jonsson 2000, 254).

2. For the autobiographical aspects of *Törless*, see Corino (1972, 2003). The autobiographical background of the story can be misleading since such readings tend to overemphasize the oppressive and militaristic atmosphere of Törless’s institute. As Berghahn noted, Törless’s education is feudal while Musil’s was “unteroffiziersmäßig.” Törless and his friend move freely in the institute while Musil and his classmates were held like “inmates” (Berghahn 1973, 29). Volker Schlöndorff’s adaptation of *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1964) offers a prominent example of a militaristic reading. Hanna Hickman argued that Musil’s book is “one of the first novels of adolescence in Western literature” (1984, 28–29). After pointing to Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* as a classic precursor for representing adolescence in German literature, Luserke classifies *Törless* instead as a late example of the popular genre of school and boarding school stories and novels (Luserke 1995, 16). Mattenklott (1982) analyzed the novel’s social criticism, and Goldgar claimed that *Törless* is “the earliest novel of any sort in any language to show specific Freudian influence” (Goldgar 1965, 118). More recent scholarship agrees, however, that Musil

probably lacked any specific knowledge of Freud's work while writing his first novel. The interest in questions of sexuality was rather ubiquitous in Vienna at the turn of the century—one thinks of authors like Bahr, Schnitzler, Wedekind, and Weininger—and are not necessarily dependent on Freud (Pott 1984, 11). Karl Otten praised Musil's novel as an important influence for German expressionist literature (1957), and Howald (1984) conducted a fascinating analysis of the novel's aestheticism.

3. Following the lead of one of Musil's later diary entries, several commentators declare the novel a critique of violence ahead of its times. Facing the rise of Stalinism, fascism, and National Socialism, Musil recognized Beineberg and Reiting in retrospect as prototypes of the dictators dominating Europe in the 1930s (Musil 1983, 834, 914). These comments do not move analytically, however, beyond pronouncements, and they never ask who Törless might be in such scenarios (Arntzen 1980, 99).

4. The success of such diversion tactics appears as well in an otherwise excellent article by Tim Mehigan. Törless's attacks against Basini are acknowledged, but he is not held responsible since his acts of violence furthered his intellectual development. As Mehigan writes, someone as self-reflective and sensitive as Törless should "not be measured by the standards of conventional morals" (Mehigan 1995, 234). At the same time the novel receives praise for exposing society's hidden fascination with violence.

5. As we will see, however, Ulrich's reaction to the war is already foreshadowed in published sections of the novel.

6. Translation modified. The German reads "Jede Perversität läßt sich darstellen. Sie läßt sich darstellen durch ihren Aufbau aus Normalem, da man die Darstellung sonst nicht verstünde" (Musil 1978, 982).

7. Such a defense of the aesthetic, its right to deal in its own area with otherwise socially marginalized behavior, was the initial purpose of Musil's essay. He published the essay in the journal *Pan*, whose previous issues had been confiscated by the government in Berlin because its content, excerpts from Flaubert's diaries, was deemed indecent. In his debut as an essayist, Musil supports not only artistic freedom but also his benefactor, Alfred Kerr, the journal's chief literary critic. Kerr's enthusiastic review of *The Confusions of Young Törless* proved critical for novel's positive reception in 1906 (Corino 1970).

8. As Cascardi observes, the modern state forces this division between inside and outside onto the subject: "Inevitably, the citizen-subjects come into conflict with an autonomous State that narrowly circumscribes the morality of conscience and the principles of virtue and that establishes an abstract understanding of the nature of legitimacy and law. The political subject is in turn divided against itself: outwardly, its actions must comply with a set of formally instituted rules, while inwardly its mind remains at liberty, 'in secret free'" (1992, 181–82).

9. Taking a look at Törless's nonfictional peer group one recognizes Törless's aesthetic development as no small achievement. In his encounters with the opposite sex, he starts with an absolutist division between prostitutes and

angels, between Božena and his mother, an opposition that fueled, as Theweleit has argued, the violent fantasies and actions of the prefascist *soldatischen Mann* (Theweleit 1977, 133–41). Thinking of Božena, Törless recognizes her as the opposite of his revered mother: “This woman is, for me, a tangle of everything that is sexually desirable, and my mother is a creature who has until now walked through my life at a cloudless distance, clear and without depth, like a star beyond all desire” (YT 34; VZ 33). While the members of Theweleit’s subgroup could not reconcile their mutually exclusive icons of femininity with reality, Törless overcomes his initial shock that there might be more depth to his mother’s sexual identity than to a cloudless sky.

10. In Améry’s continuation of Musil’s novel the torture leaves no lasting impact on its victim, Basini, but changes the life of the voyeuristic perpetrator, Törless (Améry 1971, 193). Améry’s story envisions that Herbert Törless joined the Austrian Nazi Party well before the *Anschluss*. The adult Törless became a failed writer of some genius who published mediocre and hateful articles in Nazi journals. But the story retains a more sympathetic version of Törless as well. He emerges as Ulrich’s less fortunate doppelgänger who searched for “moonbeams at day time” and never abandoned the ideal of the other condition (195).

11. In his reading of the *Inferno*’s fifth canto, Teskey characterizes the failed transformation of Francesca da Rimini into an allegory as an attempt to force meaning onto a being by emptying it of life. Conceived as an allegory of vice (adulterous love), Dante allows Francesca nevertheless to object to her harsh punishment in her own voice. Listening to her, Dante faints. “The tension in the canto is marked by these extremes of punishment and passion, where the former is in the service of a project of meaning that never succeeds in emptying Francesca to the point where she is nothing more than a sign of vice. In other words, Dante is revealing in this episode the failure of allegory to accomplish, to adapt Nietzsche’s phrase, a total expulsion of life” (Teskey 1996, 25). By incessantly heaping abuse and stereotypes onto him, *The Confusions of Young Törless* submits Basini to such a process of emptying. Unlike Dante, Basini’s narrator never faints. To him as well as to most critics, Basini requires no further explication as an allegory of perverse sexuality. He becomes nothing more than a sign of vice. Corino’s search for the “real” Basini in Musil’s life serves as an example of the power that Basini’s transformation into an allegory exerts on his readers. Despite the lack of any concrete evidence, Musil’s alleged model for Basini is identified as a homosexual as well. One of Musil’s classmates was named Fabini. To support his case beyond the evidence of an alliteration that connects the two names, Corino searches for documents that proved Fabini shared “the homosexual component of the figure Basini” (Corino 1986, 62). Corino relies on school records that describe Fabini as a lazy student whose conduct gave rise to serious complaints. Eventually, Fabini transferred to another school (Corino 1986, 62). Such evidence hardly suffices to prove homosexual acts or desires on Fabini’s part. Once linked to Basini, however, everything seems obvious and the unanswerable question of Fabini’s sexuality answered.

12. A young prince played the role of Basini’s predecessor, as another

effeminate boy who has to suffer from Törless's aggression. His classmates dismissed the prince's gestures and behavior as "affected" and "effeminate" and the narrator notes that he walked in "soft, lithe movements" (YT 7; VZ 10–11). The social distance between them allowed temporarily for an intimacy that otherwise would be forbidden. For a short while, the prince became "a source of refined psychological pleasure" to Törless (YT 8; VZ 11). Its enjoyment became permitted since he felt the prince's "essence [. . .] to be so dissimilar to his own as to be beyond comparison" (YT 8; VZ 11). The idyll ends soon because of Törless's "fear of excessively subtle sentiments" (YT 9; VZ 12), and Törless gathers reason and virility for a violent attack against the refined prince. The irreligious Törless finds himself one day in an argument with the devout prince, and his intellect erupts like a self-igniting mechanism that runs its destructive course. He assaults the prince with "the wooden ruler of rationalism," and "like a barbarian he smashed the filigree structure in which the boy's soul was housed" (YT 9, 8; VZ 12). Soon thereafter, the prince left the boarding school.

13. Finding "effeminophobia" not only prevalent in society at large but also in gay theory, Sedgwick warns against the continuation of the marginalization and stigmatization of the effeminate boy and man: "To begin to theorize gender and sexuality as distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis has been, indeed, a great advance of recent lesbian and gay thought. There is a danger, however, that that advance may leave the effeminate boy once more in the position of the haunting abject—this time the haunting abject of gay thought itself" (Sedgwick 1993, 157).

14. On the trials of Oscar Wilde, see Foldy (1997); on the newspaper *Vorwärts*, the SPD, and Krupp, see Stümke (1989) and zur Nieden (2005); on Bismarck, Harden, and the *Liebenberger Tafelrunde*, see Sombart (1991) and Bruns (2005). Rumors about Krupp's sexuality circulated previously and socialist papers in Italy published accounts of the events on his yacht, but no German newspaper had dared to connect the name of Germany's powerful industrial dynasty and the close friend of the emperor with homosexuality (Mayer 1975, 179). Although the *Vorwärts* newspaper claimed good intentions—exposing one of the most influential members of the German elite the paper hoped to embarrass into reforming Article 175 against homosexual behavior—the attempt failed completely. Friedrich Krupp died just one week after the newspaper's accusations, and the government could blame the Social Democrats for his death and leave the legislation unchanged (Stümke 1989, 40–41).

15. For a discussion of the transitive and separatist tropes of homosexuality and its dynamic impasse, see Sedgwick (1990, 87–90). For a recent account of the early debates in the German gay liberation movement, see Keilson-Lauritz (2005).

16. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–95) had coined the term *Urnig*. In his fight against the discrimination of male to male sexuality, he sought to replace contemporary terms like "Konträrsexueller" or "Homosexueller." "Urnige" and "Dionings," his terms for heterosexuals, were derived from Greek mythology and thus thought to provide a more dignified terminology (Steakley 1975, 3–5; Stümke 1989, 16–18).

17. The importance of this image for Törless and for his author Musil can be seen if one understands it as a metaphor for the structure of the novel itself. The novel's two piers, its opening and its end, are as solid as they are traditional. But between Törless's arrival at and his departure from the institute lay dizzying experiences, doubts, and a loss of orientation. The structure of Musil's novel reassures the reader that such centripetal force exists and that it will keep the traditional order together. Decades later, after World War I, Musil's next novel would abandon any such illusion.

18. In a world that believed in the strict separation between heaven and earth, the dead body of the saint was the only place where the two spheres joined. On judgment day, body (relic) and soul of the saint would reunite, and those buried in close proximity to the saint hoped that the saint would then speak out for them. By storing the bodily remains in the midst of it, the community acknowledges the saint's *praesentia* as a double presence—in the tomb in the midst of the community as well as in the presence of God. The saint's *praesentia* embodies the ultimate desires of oral communities as well as Western metaphysics: living in the presence of absolute truth. Not only does the saint remain present inside the community, not only does he or she still speak to them with the materiality and immediacy of the body—an immediacy that disappears in literate communication—but the community knows that the saint dwells at the same time in the presence of God. For the concept of *praesentia* in late Roman Christianity, see Brown (1981, 86–105).

19. The narrator insists that the sexual relationship with Basini should be understood as an aberration, reminding the reader that Törless “inherited from his parents a powerful, healthy and natural constitution” and assures that Basini stirred no true feelings or desire in Törless (YT 123; VZ 109). The narrator edits Törless's feelings until no trace of homosexual desire remains. Rather than sharing any “perverse” traits with Basini, Törless continued his sexual relationship with Basini only “because [Törless's] spiritual situation was temporarily aimless” (YT 129; VZ 114).

Chapter 3

1. As we will see toward the end of this chapter, the same claim cannot be made for the unpublished sections of Musil's novel.

2. At first the novel's narrator defines the sense of possibility as the ability to perceive reality without any notion of causality and necessity. “Whoever has [a sense of possibility] does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen: but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not” (MwQ 11; MoE 16). At the end of the last chapter that Musil prepared for publication, Ulrich rejects the idea that all possible realities should be considered of equal importance and validity. Working on his diary, he returns initially to the narrator's conclusion: “Many things are capable of reality and

the world that do not occur in a particular reality or world” (MwQ 1302; MoE 1195). But then Ulrich stops writing and paces back and forth in his study because “he did not want it to appear as if all these possibilities were equally justified” (MwQ 1303; MoE 1195). While no causal sequence can ever fully explain the occurrence of a historical situation, Ulrich refuses to substitute necessity with coincidence. One should be able to distinguish reality and its alternate possibilities according to probabilities. “Something was still missing, some kind of distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘full reality,’ or the distinction between ‘reality for someone’ and ‘real reality,’ or in other terms, an exposition of rank was missing between the claim to the validity of reality and world” (MwQ 1303; MoE 1195).

3. Jonsson presents this strong utopian thesis in the introduction and toward the conclusion of his study. In between the study’s bookends, he offers a more nuanced reading of the novel’s relationship toward World War I and speaks of the “double articulation” of Musil’s narrative. “All the situations anchored in the time and space of the story by means of indicative clauses will function within two registers at once. In the indicative universe of the story, they are inserted as links in a chain inevitably ending in war. But the same events and acts also provide material for an imagination working in the subjunctive mood [. . .], which subordinates the factual and referential world rendered in the indicative mood” (Jonsson 2000, 143–44). As I will argue, even on the level of the indicative there is no sense of inevitability, the novel becomes no “virtual time bomb, inexorably ticking away toward the war” (142). *The Man Without Qualities* presents neither on the indicative level a causal necessity for the war, nor does it render on the subjunctive level a world order that would have made the war unnecessary. Musil does not fall prey, as we will see, to modernity’s dream that a world order could be created, in which war would become a necessity of the past.

4. Žižek called the second group recently “liberal communists” and “the enemy of every progressive struggle.” He fully subscribes to Brecht’s recommendation in “The Interrogation of the Good” (1935) about what one should do with these “good” people:

Hear us then: we know
 You are our enemy. This is why we shall
 Now put you in front of a wall. But in consideration of your merits
 and good qualities
 We shall put you in front of a good wall and shoot you
 With a good bullet from a good gun and bury you
 With a good shovel in the good earth. (Quoted in Žižek 2008, 37–39)

5. Jonsson’s analysis of Musil’s representation of subjectivity in *The Man Without Qualities* remains groundbreaking and is persuasive in its critique of traditional readings of the novel that interpret it as Musil’s attempt to reconstruct a centered notion of identity amidst the modern condition of alienation. He demonstrates masterfully how Musil’s novel presents “an early instance of

the historical paradigm within which current discussions of subjectivity and identity are articulated, and, further, that the novel actualizes this paradigm in such uniquely variegated ways that present-day theory has only recently caught up with it” (2000, 3). Musil’s rejection of the expressivist paradigm and, as Jonsson demonstrates, Musil’s attempt to think the subject without an inner core of identity shows correspondences to contemporary theories of subjectivity, from Kristeva to Agamben and from Adorno to Ricoeur. While I fully agree with and rely upon this first crucial part of Jonsson’s argument, I fail to find the evidence for the equally important second, utopian part of his argument. Jonsson argues that Ulrich as the Musilian subject in *The Man Without Qualities* realizes that a person’s identity is not the expression of a human essence, not an expression of a timeless personal truth, but the result of particular historical and social configurations. Identity becomes therefore for Ulrich a “procession of masks” and not the unfolding of one true self (162). According to Jonsson, such knowledge of the social constructedness of identity allows the Musilian subject to break completely with its particular social and political situation. This subject becomes another version of the avant-garde’s new man: “Rejecting cultural roots and social roles, the Musilian subject liberates itself from all conditions of belonging” (9). As I will argue, Ulrich’s awareness that an individual’s identification with nation, class, or profession is never the expression of an inner human nature but always the result of particular situations does not imply that a person can therefore distance him- or herself completely from such conditions of belonging. Such awareness liberates from rigid prescriptions of tradition and it might open space for maneuver in the private and the public sphere, but it does not secure a position outside of its historical situation, it does not provide a radical break with the past and its resulting present. In his postwar essays as well as in his novel, Musil stresses always—on the level of emotion and experience, of the self, of narration, and of history—the irresolvable interaction between inside and outside. Embedded in particular historical situations, the subject can never fully free itself but remains interwoven (although never fully determined) by its social, political, and cultural circumstances. There is no indication that Ulrich would have resisted the national euphoria in August 1914; instead, Musil’s drafts and notes clearly indicate that Ulrich would have welcomed the war in defense of collective notion of “Germandom” even though he would be fully aware of its status as a social construct.

6. Only Musil’s choice of narrative perspective fits the literary postwar discourse that perceives the violence strictly from the point of view of potential victims, not perpetrators (Reimann 2004, 312). In Musil’s case, however, this perspective fashions no community of heroic (or traumatized) survivors bonded together by an incommunicable front experience but, like in *Young Törless* or *Tonka*, an individual with a heightened sensibility.

7. For an overview of the debate, see Imbusch 2004.

8. Popitz starts his discussion of violence by calling it the most direct form of power (Popitz 1992, 44). Von Trotha recently published an overview of new emerging structures of global violence (Trotha 2005).

9. Cacciari offers a fascinating analysis of the importance of this Swedenborg quote for Musil's explorations of emotion, mood, and essayism (1996, 196–206).

10. In July 1905, during the completion of *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Musil made a whole series of notes insisting with references to Leibniz, Spinoza, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, and Carlyle on the subject's duty to preserve one's "innermost individuality, the origin of personal life" [*die innerste Eigenart, das Ursprüngliche des persönlichen Lebens*] (T 155). Reading these notes after the war, Musil interjected questions like "Does this exist?" and he rejected the idea that each soul should and could perfect its own possibilities into reality as "another false definition" (T1, 155, 161).

11. For an interesting recent summary of Europe's slide toward World War I, see Michael Mann's chapter "Empirical Culmination—Over the Top: Geopolitics, Class Struggle, and World War I" (1993, 740–802). Not unlike Musil, Mann argues that neither the identification of sufficient causes nor the assumption of irrationality or the absence of causality can explain how Europe moved toward war in 1914. Rather than detecting a lack of causalities, he identifies a multiplicity of counteracting rationalities and motivations. "The problem was not a general irrationality of European society. Rather, two sets of rational calculations were interacting in two unpredictable ways. First, domestic and geopolitics entwined in all states, though in different, volatile fashion in each. Thus, second, it became difficult to predict the reactions of other Powers to one's own diplomacy. The problem was not irrational actors but plural actors with plural identities pursuing diverse strategies whose interactions were unpredictable and eventually devastating" (757).

Chapter 4

1. The documents of this intervention can be found on the supplementary CD-ROM for KKAS, pp. 860–63.

2. The recommendation is among the materials published on the supplementary CD-ROM for KKAS, p. 864.

3. Menninghaus's chapter "The Angel of Disgust: Kafka's Poetics of 'Innocent' Enjoyment of 'Suphuruous' Pleasures" offers the most exhaustive compilation of the use of knives in Kafka's writing, but he is less interested in their use as instruments of violence and more in the disgusting wounds and effects they produce in Kafka's texts (1999, 427–52).

4. Translation modified. Kaiser and Wilkins (Kafka 1991, 95) and Hofmann (Kafka 2006, 86) translate Kafka's peculiar term "Hilfskonstruktion" with a more elegant but less precise "motivation."

5. The heavy epistemological price Tucholsky paid for retracting his idea explains the popularity of allegorical interpretations. Tucholsky proposed to read the story without hermeneutic interest and expectations. "You don't have to ask what this is supposed to mean. This is supposed to be nothing. This means nothing" (Tucholsky 1979, 96).

6. Müller-Seidel (1986) still remains central for the first group of readings—followed by Gilman (1995), Piper (1996), Berman (1998), and most recently

Honold (2008). The media-oriented readings include Koelb (1982), Deleuze and Guattari (1986), Kittler (1990), Anderson (1992), Mladek, (1994), and Corngold (2004).

7. Analyzing the traveler's seduction by the apparatus, Rolleston argues for the performative quality of his assumed detachment from the procedure. Rolleston notes the paradox of the traveler's need to remind himself of his detachment, thus revealing his active detachment as nothing but involvement (Rolleston 1984, 90).

8. In his cultural history of Kafka's Prague, Scott Spector reaches a very different conclusion about Kafka's stance toward intercultural mediation and portrays Kafka as a mediator between conflicting languages, nationalities, and cultures. Analyzing the rising interest in translation among Prague Jewish authors—he looks at Brod, Kafka, Pick, and Rudolf Fuchs—Spector shows how these writers made the project of mediation their own. Unlike their Czech and German colleagues, they remained in-betweens, belonged to no national territory, but were “strange, uncomfortable, or unwelcome embodiments of unresolved issues below the surface of Central European life” (Spector 2000, 233). Rather than closing the ranks and sealing porous boundaries—the ideological projects of their nationalist counterparts—these Prague Jewish writers resisted the desire for territorialization and represented themselves “as the mobile, ungraspable tension between identity and otherness, as the non-space between self and other. As mediation” (233). Reading *In the Penal Colony*, Berman argues that the hope for interpretative mediation is the main point of Kafka's story. When the story ends with the traveler's flight from the colony, “the text itself” exposes his anticolonialism as one that seeks to maintain “global cultural segregation” (1998, 232, 233). While the story ends clearly with the traveler's gesture of separation, it remains unclear which cultures he seeks to segregate. The cult of the apparatus is undone, and the traveler always considered the new commandant as culturally like-minded. Which two cultures does the traveler keep apart in his final gesture?

9. Rather than noting the traveler's “absolute lack of receptivity for the Officer's ‘message’” (Gray 2002, 232), Rolleston traces the traveler's very real receptivity to the officer's rhetoric. Even though the traveler remains firm in his rejection of the execution apparatus, he exhibits over the course of the story ever more signs of sympathy for the officer (Rolleston 1984, 88–100).

10. Translation modified because Hofmann dropped the last clause of the German sentence.

11. In German the officer speaks of past audiences when he tells the traveler “wie damals, Hunderte wie Fliegen um die Grube sich versammeln” (DzL 227). In Hofmann's translation the humans seem to have become actual flies: “there were then, hundreds of flies collected round the pit” (M 166).

12. For such a dismissal, see Murphy 1998, 180–201. Mark Anderson ironically summarizes the current assessment of Lukács's critique of Kafka: “Despite its aesthetic and ethical misconceptions, however, Lukács' description of the ‘decadent’ features of Kafka's work is basically accurate” (Anderson 1992, 11).

13. Hofmann does not translate this expression (M 150).

14. To indulge in positivism: the officer's speech takes up 42 percent of Kafka's story. Of these 4,326 words spoken by the officer, Müller cuts 3,414, almost 80 percent. He reduces the officer's speech to a mere 912 words.

15. As a defender of the officer David Pan holds the traveler responsible for the officer's death: "The voyager's condemnation of the apparatus leads to the execution of the officer, but since this execution is not ordered by the officer but by the voyager, it does not proceed according to the justice of the former but of the latter" (Pan 1994, 24). But the traveler has neither the intention nor the power to execute the officer. He never knows what is at stake until the officer reaches his silent decision. The responsibility for the self-execution act resides solely with the officer.

Chapter 5

1. Already the first German attack on April 22, 1915, was far from successful. Even though the front ahead of them collapsed because of the surprise attack, the German soldiers followed the first gas cloud only hesitantly. Patches of gas on the ground further delayed their advance. Since the cylinders were opened late in the afternoon, the soon ensuing darkness allowed the French to regroup. The next day the German troops were ordered to advance, but they were met with strong resistance and gained no strategic advantage (Haber 1986, 22–40).

2. Blinded by the gas, Hitler heard the news of the German Revolution in November 1918 in a hospital in Pasewalk. Confronted with the collapse of everything he had believed in, Hitler described how his feelings of shame and disgrace turned into the hatred that would become the driving force of his political career. "What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery? [. . .] In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed." He reached the conclusion that there is "no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either-or," and he made a decision: "I, for my part, decided to go into politics" (cited in Kershaw 1999, 102–3).

3. On Liddell Hart's significance in military theory, see Gat (2001, 643–823). For a masterful account of the disturbing history of aerial bombing in history and fiction, see Lindqvist (2001).

4. In June 1925, immediately after the failure of his academic career, Benjamin set out to become one of the most important cultural critics in the Weimar Republic. The article "The Weapons of Tomorrow" (1925) is significant not only for its anticipation of the gas attack, but also because it marks Benjamin's transformation into a public intellectual. Sections of this lesser known—and so far untranslated—article reappeared in 1930 in his signature essay "Theories of German Fascism" (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 2, 312–21).

5. One encounters the possible end to such endless war in one of the strangest masterpieces of German modernism. A character in Hans Henny Jahnn's *Perrudja* (1929) anticipates the invention of a gas that would function as a catalytic agent able "to transform our atmospheric air into lethal poison gas" (Jahnn 1985, 453). Only total global destruction might end a war that would do away with the distinctions between combatants and civilians, between war

and peace. Even though such visions of global destruction never go beyond the stage of “confused and ice-cold speeches” in Jahnn’s novel, such speeches are held in the presence of a Mr. Grigg, the CEO of a multinational conglomerate (Jahnn 1985, 598). And in drafts for a third volume this Mr. Grigg takes action. His researchers experiment with invisible walls of poison gas. Mr. Grigg intends to use them to create a new man and establish a new world order. Couching his plans for mass murder in the language of utopia, Mr. Grigg plans “to run ahead only once in the course of history. To exterminate only one generation except for a sublime rest. To repeat what myth reports as god’s deed, the drowning of mankind and all animals” (Jahnn 1985, 805).

6. See especially the sections 103–76 in Lundqvist (2001) as well as the chapter on gas war in Encke (2006, 195–218).

7. Pol mentions in his article an exception, Martin Berger’s film *Freies Volk* (1925). He had just watched the film in Berlin’s Großen Schauspielhaus. In the film’s final moments Berger depicted future gas warfare: “At the end a few pictures from a future world war: airplanes that drop gas bombs, collapsing walls, fleeing people, suffocating people. Only a few seconds—but they were really enough. With one jolt these few seconds took the breath away from us 3,300 in the *Großen Schauspielhaus*” (Pol 1925, 812). No copy of Berger’s film seems to have survived the Third Reich and the Second World War.

8. In his essay, published before the end of the First World War, Kraus focused especially on the absurdity of leading twentieth-century chemical warfare with notions of war, power, and honor that belonged on horseback. His observation of such synchronicity of the nonsynchronous, of the simultaneity of premodern notions of honor and heraldry with the realities of twentieth-century warfare, would lead Kraus to an understanding of the apocalyptic potential of technology that Günther Anders would develop in *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1980), in the aftermath of the next use of (nuclear) weapons of mass destruction.

9. Although largely forgotten today, Lampel was renowned as a socially engaged writer who exposed in his most successful play, *Revolte im Erziehungshaus* (1929), the mistreatment of young adults in the welfare system. The same year Georg Asagaroff’s film adaptation of Lampel’s play was prohibited in Germany. For material on this affair, see the website of the German Institute for Film (<http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/filme/ff015211.htm>). Sergej Eisenstein’s collaborator Mikhail Dubson adapted *Giftgas über Berlin* in 1929 for the screen. Nowadays Lampel is best known for his work as screenwriter for G. W. Pabst’s *Westfront 1918* (1930) and *Kameradschaft* (1931).

10. Berlin’s police president Zörgiebel ordered that the premiere could take place only in a performance closed to the public; after attending the premiere at the Theater am Schifferbaurdamm, he promptly prohibited any further performances (Rinke 2000, 42–44, 154–60). The story of Lampel’s play echoes thus the one of Becher’s novel in the Weimar Republic. Partly because of his poison gas novel, Becher had been accused of literary high treason, an accusation that was dismissed only in 1928. A new edition of *Levisite* could be published only after the Second World War (Dwars 1998, 258–69).

11. The anxiety of living in a moment of history when imperceptible death might destroy everyone at any time is, however, represented in some paintings and drawings of the interwar period. Examples are Edgar Ende's *Die Gefahr (Die Posaunen)* (1931), Paul Klee's *Angst* (1934), Hannah Höch's *Angst* (1936), and especially Lea Grundig's cycle of ten drawings called *Krieg droht* (1936–37). But Grundig's images could only be distributed among friends during the Third Reich and reached no wider audience. For more information, see Heckmann and Ottomeyer 2008.

12. Canetti might have projected this sense of breathing onto Hermann Broch. To his disappointment, Broch never acknowledged having such a unique sense and never commented on Canetti's theory of breathing (Hanuschek 2005, 208). But Canetti's continued identification of Broch with the art of breathing—half a century later he portrayed Broch once again in *The Play of Eyes* (1986) through his art of breathing (18–30)—and the centrality he placed on new and otherwise imperceptible threats as urgent challenges to literary representation testify to Canetti's own understanding of the task of the writer. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, he invoked during the awards ceremony the “breath-shadow” that weighed heavily on Europe and declared once more his particular debt to Broch (Canetti 2005a, 115). In his short banquet speech, he named four writers who, if still alive, should have received the prize instead of him: Kraus, Kafka, Musil, and Broch. He identified the first three writers as important literary influences but not Broch. Instead, Canetti thanked Broch for inspiring his own lifelong reflections on breathing, of confronting him with the task of preparing an imagination for a seemingly imperceptible catastrophe (115).

13. As Schiller argued in *Naive und Sentimental Poetry* (1795–96): “In satire, actuality is contrasted with the highest reality as falling short of the ideal. It is, moreover, quite unnecessary that this be articulated, provided only that the poet is able to intimate this to the mind; but this he absolutely must do or it will not function poetically at all. Actuality is therefore a necessary object of antipathy; but—and this is all-important—this antipathy must itself necessarily arise out of the opposed ideal” (1966, 118).

14. For an analysis of Benjamin's deeply disturbing concept of a humanity that will realize itself in a politics of destruction, see especially Werckmeister (1997, 19–57) and Hanssen (1998, 114–26).

15. The influence of Benjamin's claim of a crisis of experience based on his observations of the returning soldiers of World War I can hardly be overestimated. From Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno to Giorgio Agamben and Hayden White, many theorists have taken Benjamin's claims as a starting point for their own reflections on the catastrophic events of the twentieth century. For a recent discussion of the debates on the notion of experience, see Jay (2005).

16. Benjamin published two essays on Hebel in 1926 that celebrated the popular but often underrated Hebel as one of the few master storytellers in German literature, “Johann Peter Hebel: On the Centenary of His Death” (1996, 428–31) and “Johann Peter Hebel: A Picture Puzzle for the Centenary

of His Death” (1996, 432–34). Alexander Honold offers an admirable reading of Hebel’s crucial role for Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling in his essay “The Voice of the Story-Teller: Johan Peter Hebel” (Honold 2000, 159–206).

17. In a comment that anticipates the darker sections of Canetti’s *Crowds and Power*, Benjamin explains the audience’s turn toward novels not with a desire to learn from the protagonist’s fate but with the expectation to observe someone’s death. Like a baiting crowd, the readers participate from the distance and safety of their homes in the protagonist’s all but certain demise. As Benjamin writes, “what draws the reader to a novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (1996–2003, vol. 3, 156).

18. In a 1929 review of a Kesten novel, Benjamin declared his intention to explain the “sudden upswing” and success of the genre of satire by identifying “the ideological position of the entirely new German satire” (Benjamin 1972–91, 3:172). To offer a first indication of what he thought of these new satirists he placed their names next to the one great one. “[The German satire] presents with such vastly different minds like Polgar, Kästner, Mehring, Peter Panter, Kesten a very specific stance of the intelligentsia and what is significant of it says the confrontation with the one and only Karl Kraus” (172). Benjamin offers one more hint of his critique when he repeats Tucholsky’s aphorism that German intellectuals stand always to the left of themselves. Only by adding Peter Panther, one of Tucholsky’s pseudonyms, to the targeted satirists, Benjamin included Tucholsky among these less than genuine German intellectuals. In his review of Mehring’s poetry, published as well in 1929, Benjamin continued his attack against the new German satire, an attack that would culminate two years later in his essay “Left-Wing Melancholy.” Comparing Mehring’s poems unfavorably to those of Brecht, Benjamin already made the point that he would make two years later again against Kästner’s and Tucholsky’s satires. “The things have no force to change anything; they will cause no regrouping. Because they are inspired by the masochism of its bourgeois audience and not its perfidy” (Benjamin 1972–91, vol. 3, 184).

19. After the Second World War, when he was in doubt that the Germans were in dire need of political reeducation, Kästner defined satirists first and foremost as pedagogues and not artists. “As I said, the satirist is only in his means something of an artist. He is something else entirely with regard to the purpose he pursues. [. . .] Judging from the point of view of its purpose, satire does not belong to literature but to pedagogy. Satirists are teachers” (Kästner 1966, 383).

20. Beginning with Benjamin’s first major book review, Alexander Honold outlines in an elegant and detailed essay Benjamin’s debt to Kraus (2000, 201–76). For Kraus’s influence on Benjamin, see also Reemtsma (1991, 104–15).

21. When he realized in 1925 that the *Trauerspielbuch* would not open the doors to an academic career to him, Benjamin turned to literary criticism, beginning with a very Krausian review of Fritz von Unruh’s *Flügel der Nike*. Benjamin dissected this popular travel account of a former soldier and war propagandist with two goals in mind. He set out to become one of the leading literary critics of the Weimar Republic, and he intended to resuscitate a form of

criticism that had fallen out of favor, a criticism that delighted in the destruction of the book *and* the author. In a letter to Siegfried Kracauer, Benjamin defined the intention behind his Unruh review programmatically. In contrast to the current “wilting of our customs of criticism” he wanted more than the “annihilation” of a single book; he wanted to destroy an “authorship” (Benjamin 1997, 169). As he explained to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the Unruh review constituted “the conscious attempt of an ‘annihilation,’ the destruction of a public person” (176). Three years later, in *One-Way-Street* (1928), Benjamin elaborated this approach to literary criticism in “The Critic’s Technique in Thirteen Propositions” (2009, 71–72). While posterity either celebrates or forgets, the critic judges in the face of the author, and as Benjamin writes, he “picks up a book as lovingly as a cannibal prepares a baby” (72).

22. In “Some Motifs on Baudelaire” (1939), written long after his break with Kraus, Benjamin continued to insist on a correspondence between the failure to experience and the destructive impulse. Benjamin avoids mentioning Kraus, but the reference to Archilochus, the father of lethal satire, and to Timon, one of Kraus’s favorite Shakespearean characters, remains so Krausian that the berserk-running Baudelaire appears in this passage as a placeholder for Kraus. “For someone who is past experiencing, there is no consolation. Yet it is this very inability to experience that explains the true nature of rage. An angry man ‘won’t listen.’ His prototype, Timon, rages against people indiscriminately; he is no longer capable of telling his proven friend from his mortal enemy. Barbey d’Aurevilly very perceptively recognized this habit of mind in Baudelaire, calling him ‘a Timon with the genius of Archilochus’” (Benjamin 1996–2003, vol. 4, 335).

23. Benjamin quotes himself almost verbatim in this commentary to Brecht’s poem “Vom armen B.B.” Eight years earlier, Benjamin wrote about the “The Destructive Character” (1931) that “only the insight into how radically the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction leads to such an Apollonian image of the destroyer. This is the great bond embracing and unifying all that exists. It is a sight that affords the destructive character a spectacle of deepest harmony” (1996–2003, vol. 2, 541).

24. Adorno insists that philosophy has no alternative to the perspective of redemption: “Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption” (1978, 247). To admit the necessity of this perspective does not imply for Adorno its possibility. To gain such a possibility “is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence” (247). Anyone who insists that this line to the redemptive beyond can be crossed plays a destructive game inside the existing world. “The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world” (247). Rather than claiming the paradisiacal light already, as Benjamin does for Kraus, Adorno refers to it only in the subjunctive of a distant future: “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (247).

25. Under the title “Monument to a Warrior” Benjamin offered an early snapshot of Kraus in *One-Way Street* (1928)—picturing him “in ancient armor, wrathfully grinning” (1996–2003, vol. 1, 469).

26. The Kraus-Hitler comparison was, however, more than a rash first response. More than thirty years later, Canetti described in 1965 his initial dependency from Kraus as living in a dictatorship. “Any foe of Karl Kraus’s was a corrupt, an immoral creature. And even though it never reached the point, as was customary in subsequent dictatorships, of exterminating the alleged vermin, I nevertheless had what I must confess, to my shame, I had what I cannot term any differently, I had my ‘Jews’—people whom I did not deign to look at, whose lives did not concern me, who were outlawed and banished for me, whose touch would have sullied me, whom I quite earnestly did not count as part of humanity: the victims and enemies of Karl Kraus” (Canetti 1979, 37–38).

27. The unnamed city of *Auto-da-Fé* bears the same striking similarity to Vienna as the equally nameless capital of Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*.

28. In *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784), Kant wrote “aus so krummen Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden” (Kant 1912–22, 4:158), and Kant found the metaphor so fitting that he used it a decade later again in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) (Kant 1912–22, 6:245). Isaiah Berlin used Kant’s metaphor as the title for one of his most influential collection of essays, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (1991), and translated the phrase as “out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made, nothing entirely straight can be carved” (Berlin 1991, xi). As Avishai Margalit writes with reference to Kant and Berlin: “The crooked timber, then, is a metaphor against the shaping of human society according to a blueprint” (Margalit 2001, 156). And Therese Krumbholz will not bend and reshape herself according to any of Kien’s designs.

29. Decades after completing *Auto-da-Fé*, Canetti analyzed the pleasure one gets from judging others in *Crowds and Power* and spoke of judgment as a “disease” (Canetti 1984, 297). In this chapter “Judgment and Condemnation” one easily recognizes once more the “murderous substance” of satire that Canetti found at the core of Kraus’s performances as judge and executioner. Behind the constant activity of arranging and rearranging the people one knows into different groups, Canetti detected not merely a passion for classification but for the creation of hostile tensions between these groups. “At the root of the process lies the urge to form hostile packs, which, in the end, leads inevitably to actual war packs” (297). The judge’s function is not to arrive at an impartial and objective decision. “For it is only in appearance that a judge stands between the two camps, on the borderline dividing good from evil. In fact, he invariably reckons himself among the good; his chief claim to his office is his unshakable allegiance to the kingdom of the good, as though he had been born a native of it” (297). In a more Benjaminian phrasing, one might say that the judge always acts as if the light of creation shines on him.

30. Barnouw writes that “Peter Kien is the informant with whose weak

help the author has to orient himself in the strange world he records in his book” (Barnouw 1979, 22). While such a judgment of Peter Kien seems rather questionable, as could be seen in the analysis of the incident on the Mut Strasse, Barnouw made already the observation that “there is in *Auto-da-Fé* not a single positive figure, but also, in contrast to [Heinrich Mann’s] *The Loyal Subject*, no figure whose weaknesses would be excusable” (Barnouw 1979, 22).

31. Compare Sokel (1974, 181–90), Berman (1986, 195–204), and Foell (1994).

32. Occasionally, Donahue notes the annoying uncertainty into which the reader is plunged when he tries to determine whether a hateful speech comes from the narrator or a protagonist of the novel. The notion of epistemic sovereignty does not capture this reading experience: “Reading, and rereading, is so annoying because just when we hope to pin some execrable assertion on the narrator, we discover that hiding in an apparently objective narrative voice is a focalized mind-set after all—or at least the distinct possibility of one” (Donahue 2000, 40).

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