

Variations of virtuality in German modernism

Variation 1: Musil's PDUG

Although it remains unfinished, Robert Musil's novel fragment *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* appears to contain a halfway point. This point marks a temporal middle in what Paul Ricoeur would call the narrated time, rather than the narrative time (the latter of which remains incomplete, and thus asymmetrical). The historical frame of the novel is established in its notorious opening chapter, which takes place in August 1913, precisely a year before the *Augusterlebnis*, the beginning of the First World War. Its midway point, then, takes place in the passage from 1913 to 1914, in the novel's 83rd chapter. "Mit einem Wort, es geschah viel, es war eine bewegte Zeit, die um Ende 1913 und Anfang 1914" (359). The beginning of the year in which the Great War begins takes on a status suspended between a narratively constructed meaningfulness (as the halfway point) and a historical arbitrariness, as the mere passage from one numerical denotation of time to the next, the reiteration of an empty counting procedure for the sake of chronological record-keeping. (Walter Benjamin would call this the empty time of post-Enlightenment progress...) This iterative process of counting the days and years erodes the meaningfulness of the historical occasions that take place within its temporal order. "Aber auch die Zeit zwei oder fünf Jahre vorher war eine bewegte Zeit gewesen, jeder Tag hatte seine Erregungen gehabt, und trotzdem ließ sich nur noch schwach oder gar nicht erinnern, was damals eigentlich los gewesen war" (ibid.). There is no New Year's celebration, no pouring of iron to predict the future, in this novel dedicated to the preparation of a future event. It remains unclear if the halfway point is in any way narratively singular, or simply one moment in an historical process which takes place according to a logic different than the numerical and chronological.

The narrative voice, which in this chapter drifts quite close to the interior monologue of the novel's eponymous protagonist, Ulrich, makes this distinction between singular and commonplace moments into an object of reflection. Singular events make history and stand out from the mundane flow of time; but the source of this distinction, what makes an event stand out from the background of mere happening, lies only in an act of recording or writing-down, which itself has all the arbitrariness of a feuilleton.

Welche sonderbare Angelegenheit ist doch Geschichte! Es ließ sich mit Sicherheit von dem und jenem Geschehnis behaupten, daß es seinen Platz in ihr inzwischen schon gefunden hatte oder bestimmt noch finden werde; aber ob dieses Geschehnis überhaupt stattgefunden hatte, das war nicht sicher. Denn zum Stattfinden gehört doch auch, daß etwas in einem bestimmten Jahr und nicht in einem anderen oder gar nicht stattfindet; und es gehört dazu, daß es selbst stattfindet und nicht am Ende bloß etwas Ähnliches oder seinesgleichen. Gerade das ist es aber, was kein Mensch von der Geschichte behaupten kann, außer er hat es aufgeschrieben, wie es die Zeitungen tun[.] (359-360)

History, as both *res gestae* and *res narratae*, contains all of time and, simultaneously, consists of a finite archive of discretely recorded singularities. The process of finding a place in history is split or shared between the happening and the recording, so that yet unrecorded past events can or should still find their way into the record-keeping system. But any event which finds a place in historical record must take place historically, in a singular arrival of something new rather than a minor deviation from an established pattern or the self-reproduction of a past circumstance. In determining the novelty of an event, the year should indeed be important: 1913 or 1914? “Denn zum Stattfinden gehört doch auch, daß etwas in einem bestimmten Jahr und nicht in einem anderen oder gar nicht stattfindet.” But whether or not the event has taken place cannot be determined until it has already become legible, as in a newspaper article. A circle emerges, namely one which would seem to prevent the occurrence of historical events in the present: an event can only find its place in history on the basis of having already taken place, which can only be verified when it already has a place in history.

The subtitle of this chapter—Warum erfindet man nicht Geschichte?—enters the semantic chain of finding a place (Platz finden) and taking place (Stattfinden) into the sphere of fabulation and invention (erfinden).¹ Ulrich reflects on the question, which originates in an earlier conversation with Clarisse, during a tram ride back from her and Walter's house into the city which he finishes on foot. He reflects in a series of numbered answers and deviations.² The final remark in these reflections is both an answer and a deviation, concerning what he calls a few paragraphs earlier in the same chapter "jener «Weg der Geschichte», von dem niemand weiß, woher er gekommen ist." In "Abschweifung drei oder Antwort Nummer vier?," the zone of non-distinction between fabulation and recording overlaps with the inability to distinguish between purposive answer and drifting digression.

Abschweifung drei oder Antwort Nummer vier? Der Weg der Geschichte ist also nicht der eines Billardballs, der, einmal abgestoßen, eine bestimmte Bahn durchläuft, sondern er ähnelt dem Weg der Wolken, ähnelt dem Weg eines durch die Gassen Streichenden, der hier von einem Schatten, dort von einer Menschengruppe oder einer seltsamen Verschneidung von Häuserfronten abgelenkt wird und schließlich an eine Stelle gerät, die er weder gekannt hat, noch erreichen wollte. Es liegt im Verlauf der Weltgeschichte ein gewisses Sich-Verlaufen.

The spatial metaphor of the path of history goes through a series of transformations. The analogy with the mechanical-deterministic master trope of the 19th century, the movement of billiard balls, is rejected. Citations of meteorology and kinetic gas theory, familiar to readers since the novel's first paragraph, and the movement of urban pedestrians take its place. Historical time corresponds in form to the movement of Ulrich's reflection: firstly, in that it does not differentiate between answer and digression, and secondly because of its tendency to get lost in a labyrinthine urban space. "Die Gegenwart ist immer wie das letzte Haus einer Stadt, das

¹ Inka Mülder-Bach, *Robert Musil: Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Ein Versuch über den Roman*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München 2013, 248-263.

² On the bureaucratic operations deployed by Musil and his protagonist in this chapter, see the chapter commentary by Alexander Honold: *Teilweise Musil: Kapitelkommentare zum "Mann ohne Eigenschaften," Zweiten Band: Aktenzeichen MoE—Bürokratie*, ed. Wolf & Plener, Vorwerk 8, 2020, 58-59.

irgendwie nicht mehr ganz zu den Stadthäusern gehört. [...] Er war es selbst, der seinen Antworten und Abschweifungen bisher diese Nummern gegeben hatte, und er hatte dazu bald in ein vorübergehendes Gesicht gesehn, bald in eine Geschäftsauslage, um die Gedanken nicht ganz von sich fortlaufen zu lassen; aber nun hatte er sich trotzdem dabei ein wenig vergangen und mußte einen Augenblick anhalten, um zu begreifen, wo er war, und den nächsten Weg nach Hause zu finden.” The uncertain border of city and country, past and present, 1913 and 1914, answer and deviation, recording and inventing, historical singularity and “Seinesgleichen”—Ulrich gets lost in this dense crossing point of distinctions without locating a zero-point of reflection or narrativity.

Although he originally set out to demonstrate why Clarisse’s question should be answered negatively or dismissively, Ulrich returns to it affirmatively. “Die kleine verrückte Clarisse hatte also ganz recht, man sollte Geschichte machen, man müßte sie erfinden, wenn er es auch vor ihr bestritten hatte; aber warum tut man es nicht?” To continue his reflections, Ulrich imagines a conversation on this topic with his conservative friend Leo Fischel, in which many of the commonplaces of the circle involved in the parallel campaign are repeated. The reflections conclude when Ulrich arrives at home.

Reading Musil’s novel involves delicate decisions on the part of the reader regarding the distinction between events that truly take place and micro-deviations from normality. The final determination given of whether an event has taken place or not—“Gerade das ist es aber, was kein Mensch von der Geschichte behaupten kann, außer er hat es aufgeschrieben, wie es die Zeitungen tun”—characterizes the work of the writer of a novel just as much as the writer of a newspaper article. Musil’s prose contains its own measure of taking place: “Dann geschieht nicht

weniger, als wenn in einen krausen Linienzug auf einem Stück Papier der Sinn eines großen Worts hineinfährt” (526). Each word in the novel fluctuates between the kind of taking place which makes history and the kind which merely perpetuates “Seinesgleichen,” a “Fortwursteln” or forward crawling motion borrowing a poetic form from traditional literary tropes, but not a singular event. Inka Mülder-Bach associates this distinction with the differentiation of discourse-analytical (or media-archeological) kinds of reading from poetical interpretations of texts, and suggests a critical “micropoetics” as a response. The analysis of small events, for instance in the way diacritical marks change the syntactical form of sentences, produces, for Mülder-Bach, a different kind of knowledge than can be found in genealogical contextualizations of the novel. These qualitatively different varieties of knowledge can correspond with one another productively without reproducing a discursive-critical consensus.³

The argument below follows Mülder-Bach’s lead, insofar as it seeks to deviate from a purely discourse-archeological kind of reading without wholly divorcing itself from that frame of reference, but opts for a different alternative to the kind of taking-place which makes history. In place of the quantitative micro/macro distinction, a modal distinction will be made, namely between events which take place and those that do not. More specifically, a variety of events which proliferate consistently in Musil’s novel will be examined: those which can only take place on the condition that another event does not take place. The difficulties of making history form not just an impossibility, but a limitation of narrativity and ontology which makes another level of events possible. These events that do not take place do not record themselves in historical archives, but also do not remain entirely outside the novel. These non-events take place in a grey zone between what Michel Foucault refers to as discursive positivities and the presence of poetic language. A narratology of these impossibilities which make other events

³ Mülder-Bach, *Robert Musil*, 50-55.

possible—let’s call it the virtual, provisionally—introduces a distinction similar to the one Ulrich makes between an impossibility and an under-developed possibility, in a non-utopian register: “darin, daß eine Möglichkeit nicht Wirklichkeit ist, drückt sich nichts anderes aus, als daß die Umstände, mit denen sie gegenwärtig verflochten ist, sie daran hindern, denn andernfalls wäre sie ja nur eine Unmöglichkeit; löst man sie nun aus ihrer Bindung und gewährt ihr Entwicklung, so entsteht die Utopie” (246). On a narrative, rather than ontological level, one can identify moments when Musil meticulously constructs circumstances which prevent the actualization of a possibility, in order to actualize another one.

Musil is hardly the only German-language author of the 20th century to deploy this ontological variation in order to transform narrative causality. Franz Kafka’s narrative texts involve similar but otherwise differentiated modes of not-happening. In particular, Kafka often designs networks of characters, subjective ways of thinking or descriptions of circumstances in such a way that potentiality increases alongside narrative development rather than decreasing; potentiality is positively correlated with actuality in Kafka’s texts rather than negatively. This is particularly clear in his final unfinished novel, *Das Schloß*, but similar structures are also evident in many of his texts. The positive correlation of development and potentiality is also a twist on the central notion of education in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*. Thomas Mann’s *Zauberberg* mobilizes a different kind of not-happening and a different kind of potentiality; Mann’s protagonist is introduced into an institutional regime of sanatorium medicine on the basis of an uncertain medical diagnosis, and his experience is characterized by a “getting-used-to not getting used to it.”

In each of these novels, institutional dynamics motivate the plot. Rüdiger Campe has argued that the novels of Kafka, Musil and Robert Walser deviate from the narrative format of

the bildungsroman in that they replace the biographical perspective of the protagonist with institutional determinations of identity.⁴ I would like to add a narratological dimension to Campe's genre specification. Both the entrance of the protagonists of these novels into institutional systems and the plots they pursue within them are initiated by this peculiar kind of event which does not take place. K's entrance to the village may or may not be an entry into the territory of the castle; he may or may not be a land surveyor; and Klamm may or may not be aware of his service. Hans Castorp may have tuberculosis, but the technically generated signs of his infection may also be the result of the effects of altitude on a healthy immune system; the later diagnosis of streptococcus may be accurate, or it may be a reappearance of the uncertainty of the original diagnosis in a different form. And Ulrich only gains entry to the organizational elite of the parallel campaign as a result of an accidental remark made to Graf Leinsdorf about Moosbrugger, from which he immediately seeks to distance himself; the parallel campaign itself is the paradigmatic example of an event that cannot take place except in the forms of recording offered by newspaper articles speculating about its absent content and bureaucratic rumors, which themselves trigger political demonstrations and social and diplomatic intrigues.

This logic of triggering is a crucial narrative element of the structure of ontologically under-developed events in these novels. An event that does not take place causes another event to take place in a very peculiar manner. Musil provides a model for this kind of narrative linkage in the principle of insufficient reason (Prinzip des unzureichenden Grundes). Ulrich explains this principle in his first conversation with Leo Fischel.

«Das Prinzip des unzureichenden Grundes!» wiederholte Ulrich. «Sie sind doch Philosoph und werden wissen, was man unter dem Prinzip des zureichenden Grundes versteht. Nur bei sich selbst macht der Mensch davon eine Ausnahme; in unserem

⁴ See Rüdiger Campe, "Kafkas Institutionenroman. Der Proceß, Das Schloß," in: Campe, Niehaus, ed., *Gesetz. Ironie* (2004, 197-208) and *Die Institution im Roman: Robert Musil*, Zurich Distinguished Lectures, Taschenbuch, 2020.

wirklichen, ich meine damit unserem persönlichen Leben und in unserem öffentlich-geschichtlichen geschieht immer das, was eigentlich keinen rechten Grund hat.» (134)

Originally a term from classical rhetoric, the “PDUG” became a figure of early theories of probability in the 19th century.⁵ The first person to translate the Latin *principium rationis insufficientis* into the German was Johannes von Kries, a researcher in physiology and psychology, in his 1886 *Prinzipien der Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung: Eine logische Untersuchung*. Musil, himself a researcher into physiological psychology during his time as a student in Berlin, associates the term with the newly developed theory of catalytic chemical reactions.

«Gut; wissen Sie, was ein Enzym oder was ein Katalysator ist?» [...] «Das trägt materiell nichts bei, aber es setzt die Geschehnisse in Gang. Sie müssen aus der Geschichte wissen, daß es den wahren Glauben, die wahre Sittlichkeit und die wahre Philosophie niemals gegeben hat; dennoch haben die Kriege, Gemeinheiten und Gehässigkeiten, die ihretwegen entfesselt worden sind, die Welt fruchtbar umgestaltet.» (134)

Musil and his protagonist understand historical processes as chemical reactions which can be accelerated and intensified by the addition of enzyme-like elements. In this translation of chemical properties onto social systems, the narrative dynamic of Musil's novel comes very close to a theory offered by a leader in the theory of catalytic reactions, Robert Julius Mayer. In a short theoretical text titled “Über Auslösung,” published in 1876, Mayer demonstrates how catalytic reactions appear to introduce an asymmetry between small causes and large effects, a relationship he calls triggering.⁶ Mayer posits that various effects in bodily and social systems can be explained by the notion of triggering, i.e., of small movements achieving incommensurably large effects: the pleasures of horseback riding or of shooting a gun, as well as

⁵ Hans Blumenberg, “Anthropologische Annäherung an die Rhetorik,” in *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben*, Reclam 1981, 124-127.

⁶ Julius Robert Mayer, “Über Auslösung,” in: *Die Mechanik der Wärme. Sämtliche Schriften*, hrsg. von Hans Peter Münzenmayer, Heilbronn 1978, S. 416.

the social effects of political assassinations.⁷ Mayer does not translate the addition of the enzyme to these non-chemical processes; rather, he identifies the small cause/large effect model as an analogical principle between chemistry and larger systems.

The plot of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* is driven forward catalytically by a narrative sort of “enzymes.” These immaterial events do not take place (according to the logic detailed above of “Statffinden”), but they perpetuate chains of events in which their function becomes legible. The parallel campaign is a large-scale example of this, but the same structure extends to an overwhelming mass of the smaller narratives and constellations in the novel. A negative example is very illustrative here, i.e., an example of a constellation in which this catalytic addition is lacking. The characters involved are Ulrich and Gerda, the daughter of Leo Fischel. The description of their brief past intimate affair emphasizes the presence of all the conditions for a love connection or passionate liaison, but not the “small spark” of love that would be necessary to motivate the development of a clear entanglement or plot.

Die Sache war die, daß sie einander nicht liebten. Sie hatten früher oft gemeinsam Tennis gespielt oder sich in Gesellschaft getroffen, waren miteinander gegangen, hatten Anteil aneinander genommen und auf diese Weise unmerklich die Grenze überschritten, die einen vertrauten Menschen, dem man sich zeigt, wie man in seiner Gefühlsunordnung ist, von allen unterscheidet, vor denen man sich fein macht. Sie waren unversehens so vertraut geworden wie zwei, die sich schon lange lieben, ja fast schon nicht mehr lieben, aber hatten sich dabei die Liebe erlassen. Sie zankten einander aus, so daß man glauben konnte, sie möchten einander nicht, aber das war zugleich Hindernis und Verbindung. Sie wußten, daß nur ein kleiner Funke fehlte, um daraus ein Feuer anzurichten. Wäre der Altersunterschied zwischen ihnen geringer oder Gerda eine verheiratete Frau gewesen, so wäre wahrscheinlich aus der Gelegenheit der Dieb und aus dem Diebstahl wenigstens nachträglich eine Leidenschaft geworden, denn man redet sich in die Liebe hinein wie in den Zorn, wenn man ihre Gebärden macht. Aber gerade weil sie das wußten, taten sie es nicht. Gerda war Mädchen geblieben und ärgerte sich leidenschaftlich darüber. (310)

A peculiar variety of knowledge plays the role of a deterrent here; the understanding of the immaterial difference between their involvement and the gestures and tropes of romantic passion

⁷ On the social systems and scientific discourses in which triggering becomes a paradigmatic mode of describing processes of causation, see Joseph Vogl, “Beliebige Feindschaft. Zur Epoche des Amok,” in: Medardus Brehl/Kristin Platt, *Feindschaft*, München (Wilhelm Fink) 2003.

makes the passage to an affair either impossible or undesirable. Narrative tropes of romantic involvement abound, for instance of an adulterous affair in the style of Fontane or Flaubert, but only in the *conjunctivus potentialis* (as in Ch. 5), as possible factors that could have triggered a reaction before Gerda became involved, to her parents' chagrin, with the unemployed antisemitic student Hans Sepp.

Romantic relationships prove particularly instructive in demonstrating the functions of immaterial triggers in the novel's microstructures. In a complex chapter focused on Bonadea, Ulrich's spurned married second lover, a variation on the kind of narrative enzyme is provided, namely the model of credit economy. The chapter opens by comparing Bonadea's "system," in which her adulterous affairs maintain the peace of her marriage to Sektionschef Tuzzi, to the lack of a system for the peaceful coexistence of the "unerlöste Nationen" in Kakanien. Bonadea's system, however, has been disrupted. Her failure to regain Ulrich's affection and her conviction that he is in love with Diotima drive her to cultivate her appearance with great care in order to approach the beauty of her rival. The "good goddess," Bona-dea, attempts to recreate the sensuality of the Socratic lover. This focus on her hair and clothes replaces Bonadea's system of lovers: "seit Bonadea so geheimnisreiche Sorgfalt auf ihr Aussehen verwandte, lebte sie, was seit ihrem zwanzigsten Jahr nicht mehr geschehen war, den illegitimen Teil ihres Lebens als Witwe" (525). In her pursuit of Ulrich, she has unintentionally become a faithful wife. But this end of her extramarital sexual activity disrupts the peace of her marriage. "Ihr Gatte war nicht wenig erstaunt, wenn er sie mit dem Finger am Hals kitzelte und zur Antwort bekam: «Zerstöre doch nicht meine Frisur!» oder wenn er fragte: «Willst du mir denn nicht die Hand geben?!» und sie antwortete: «Unmöglich, ich habe mein neues Kleid an!»" (525). Her husband infers from this coldness inspired by clothes the presence of extramarital affairs which the clothes have brought

to an end: “Zum erstenmal, seit sie verheiratet waren, fragte sich ihr Ehemann mißtrauisch, ob nicht ein Dritter seinen häuslichen Frieden störe” (526).

This paradoxical domestic intrigue sets off an essayistic disquisition on what Musil calls the realm of life systems. Musil insists that clothes demonstrate a unique element of social and psychological life. This dimension of clothes can be viewed ethnographically, but Musil is particularly interested in the way clothes are used to grant their wearer particular qualities. “Kleider, aus dem Fluidum der Gegenwart herausgehoben und in ihrem ungeheuerlichen Dasein auf einer menschlichen Gestalt als Form an sich betrachtet, sind seltsame Röhren und Wucherungen, würdig der Gesellschaft eines Nasenpfeils und durch die Lippen gezogenen Rings; aber wie hinreißend werden sie, wenn man sie samt den Eigenschaften sieht, die sie ihrem Besitzer leihen!” (526). Like the halo in religious icons, the culture of garments possesses a specific force to make the invisible visible. “[U]nd solche Kraft, das Unsichtbare, ja sogar das gar nicht Vorhandene sichtbar zu machen, beweist ein gut gemachtes Kleidungsstück alle Tage!” (526).

Musil does not consider this accomplishment of fashion—making the invisible visible and the absent present—ritualistically; rather, he identifies an economic logic of borrowing and debt. Clothes borrow their immaterial effects from their owners and pay them back with interest. “Solche Gegenstände gleichen Schuldnern, die den Wert, den wir ihnen leihen, mit phantastischen Zinsen zurückzahlen[.]” Musil associates not only the manipulation of physical appearances but all varieties of communication into this investment economy.

[U]nd eigentlich gibt es nichts als Schuldnerdinge. Denn jene Eigenschaft der Kleidungsstücke besitzen auch Überzeugungen, Vorurteile, Theorien, Hoffnungen, der Glaube an irgendetwas, Gedanken, ja selbst die Gedankenlosigkeit besitzt sie, sofern sie nur kraft ihrer selbst von ihrer Richtigkeit durchdrungen ist. Sie alle dienen, indem sie uns das Vermögen leihen, das wir ihnen borgen, dem Zweck, die Welt in ein Licht zu

stellen, dessen Schein von uns ausgeht, und im Grunde ist nichts anderes als dies die Aufgabe, für die jeder sein besonderes System hat.

Credit economy makes the enzyme-like function of immaterial narrative surplus into a temporal order (while, in the case of Ulrich and Gerda, it insisted as an epistemic and emotional potentiality): investment in the present pays dividends with interest in the future. The entire play of subjectivity with its qualities takes place within this investment scheme.

The etymological relationship of belief (*credo*) and credit makes a thematic expansion of Musil's notion of economy into realms of psychology and social systems possible. He cites either Anselm of Canterbury or Augustine, and ironically translates the dictum relating faith and understanding into a German desire for credit. "Man könnte darauf am besten den Ausspruch eines berühmten Frühscholastikers anwenden, der lateinisch «Credo, ut intelligam» lautet und etwas frei sich etwa so ins zeitgenössische Deutsche übersetzen läßt: Herr, o mein Gott, gewähre meinem Geist einen Produktionskredit!" (527-528). Belief is a subset of a credit system which encapsulates not only religious life, but also love, political institutions and capitalistic business. All of these life systems have in common that they cannot function without the addition of an immaterial surplus, which they render temporally as a credit. "Denn wahrscheinlich ist jedes menschliche Credo nur ein Sonderfall des Kredits überhaupt. In der Liebe wie im Geschäft, in der Wissenschaft wie beim Weitsprung muß man glauben, ehe man gewinnen und erreichen kann, und wie sollte das nicht vom Leben im ganzen gelten?! (528).

What has happened to Bonadea and to Kakanien alike is the withdrawal of a line of credit.

[E]s stürzen Zeitalter und Reiche nicht anders zusammen wie Geschäfte, wenn ihnen der Kredit verlorenght. Und damit wäre diese grundsätzliche Betrachtung des seelischen Gleichgewichts von dem schönen Beispiel Bonadeas zu dem traurigen Kakaniens gelangt. Denn Kakanien war das erste Land im gegenwärtigen Entwicklungsabschnitt, dem Gott den Kredit, die Lebenslust, den Glauben an sich selbst und die Fähigkeit aller

Kulturstaaten entzog, die nützliche Einbildung zu verbreiten, daß sie eine Aufgabe hätten. (528)

Bonadea's surplus is lacking, just as did that of Gerda and Ulrich, but in a different way; and this mode of lacking an immaterial trigger makes her marriage into a microcosm of Kakanien. These systems face a crisis when the invisible, absent element that makes them function disappears. Their paradoxical and humorous narrative development results from this apparent contradiction—how can something which does not exist disappear? Musil makes the function of these immaterial logics of causation legible by withdrawing them from the systems they motivate. On a narrative level, the failure of the catalytic function of Bonadea's extramarital affairs itself triggers a chain of events which elucidate the relationship of the parallel campaign to the coming World War: Tuzzi becomes suspicious of Arnheim and learns through bureaucratic backchannels that Arnheim is in contact with Russian diplomats and intends to influence the parallel campaign pacifistically on their behalf (ch. 116, 588-589). On a formal level, the relationship between minor constellations and macrostructures in the novel becomes apparent here. Musil develops a diagnostic procedure for the identification of non-events in his smaller intrigues, which then become heuristic principles for the judgment of plot sequences which play out on the level of national political institutions.

Variation 2: Kafka's anti-development

In Musil's novel, the co-presence of the unactualized but insistently present virtual supplement within actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) forms a causal mechanism that motivates many disparate narrative sequences. This is not the only variety of this presence of virtuality in actuality in German modernist literature, nor is it the only way German modernist writers mobilize virtuality as a narrative dynamic. Another prominent variation on narrative virtuality is provided by Franz

Kafka. In many of his texts, Kafka deploys a counter-force against narrative development, specifically the kind of subjective education and narrative development characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*.

Kafka builds a parallelism into his stories between actualization and potentialization. Normally, actuality and potentiality are negatively correlated: as more events take place and more time passes, more can be known about the world and characters of the text and fewer narrative outcomes are plausible. In Kafka's stories, however, this negative correlation does not obtain. Instead, paradoxically, all actualizations carry with them even more highly differentiated possibilities. In a short prose text from the so-called "Konvolut 1920," this structure becomes uniquely clear.

Ich kann schwimmen wie die andern, nur habe ich ein besseres Gedächtnis als die andern, ich habe das einstige Nicht-schwimmen-können nicht vergessen. Da ich es aber nicht vergessen habe, hilft mir das Schwimmen-können nichts und ich kann doch nicht schwimmen.

The text begins with a statement of ability (Ich kann schwimmen) and ends with a negation of the same ability (ich kann doch nicht schwimmen). Learning does not constitute a linear, unidirectional movement from not knowing to knowing, or inability to ability. The reliable actualization of a possibility in the form of ability emerges as a process dependent on factors other than learning. Specifically, learning only takes place if another process, namely memory, fails. For the narrator of this peculiar text, memory interferes with learning and suspends ability in an unactualized state between possibility and impossibility. Why it is that the memory of a time before learning makes the actualization of the content of the learning experience impossible is not specified. A psychologistic and diagnostic way of reading may identify a neurotic mechanism in this apparent non sequitur; a narratologically formal reading however is capable of recognizing a revolution in the master trope of the literary tradition of education. Learning

becomes decoupled from actualization and reveals new kinds of potentiality, at the expense of subjective ability.

A brief comparison between Kafka's micro-experiment in narrative eventuality and formalist theories of plot can show how Kafka modifies traditional notions of development and event. Juri Lotman has provided the following definition of an event in an artistic text: "An event in a text is the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field."⁸ Learning is a paradigmatic narrative form of such an event; think of Wilhelm Meister's shift in and out of the theater, or Heinrich Drendorf's movement from science to art and back. Lotman is careful to note the unpredictable cultural valence of events: "But even this does not provide an ultimate resolution: within the same scheme of culture the same episode, when placed on various structural levels, may or may not become an event." But textual narratives produce their own conceptual orders which limit the polysemy of events. "But since the general semantic ordering of the text is supplemented in equal measure by local orderings, each with its own concept-border, an event may be realized as a hierarchy of events on more individual planes, as a chain of events, a plot." Kafka's swimmer either does not know this hierarchy of events on individual planes, or the swimmer experiences a reversal of the hierarchy of learning and memory which disrupts the notion of learning entirely. Perhaps the memory of the time before the event truly trumps the learning experience—but then why the insistence that the narrator can in fact swim? The text establishes a horizontal order of the two planes (learning and remembering). Instead of the persona moving across a temporal-semantic border, the event draws a distinction in the persona of the narrator. This concept border within the persona runs perpendicular, so to speak, to the concept-border of semantic fields.

⁸ Juri Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Vroon, Ann Arbor 1977, 233.

Events of border-crossing in Kafka's texts are consistently loaded with the multi-directionality of semantic distinctions constituting events. Joseph Vogl rightly insists that the entire plot of *Das Schloß* is characterized by such a "topographic insecurity,"⁹ not dissimilar to the notion of the historical present for Musil cited above: "Die Gegenwart ist immer wie das letzte Haus einer Stadt, das irgendwie nicht mehr ganz zu den Stadthäusern gehört." Kafka has a pet phrase he likes to employ to signal the ambiguity of border crossings, namely the German adverb "gewissermaßen." On the first page of *Das Schloß*, K is told: "Dieses Dorf ist Besitz des Schlosses, wer hier wohnt oder übernachtet, wohnt oder übernachtet gewissermaßen im Schloß." This "gewissermaßen" initiates a thorough-going ambiguity of the territorial order of the castle which persists throughout the novel. The interior borders constituted by the inns and chancelleries never result in clear spatial, bureaucratic or semantic demarcations; Barnabas can enter the first chancelleries and K can wander into the rooms of the gentlemen of the castle in the inn, but neither can be certain that what they observe and the people they encounter are legitimate. An identical deployment of "gewissermaßen" takes place at an even more paradoxical failure of border-crossing, namely in Kafka's "Der Jäger Gracchus." The barge bearing the body of the long-since deceased hunter arrives in an unnamed river town. His coffin is carried into a building near the port where the mayor of the town sits alone with the coffin, and the hunter awakens and rises from his coffin as if alive. They speak. „Sind Sie tot?“ „Ja“, sagte der Jäger, „wie Sie sehen. Vor vielen Jahren, es müssen aber ungemein viel Jahre sein, stürzte ich im Schwarzwald – das ist in Deutschland – von einem Felsen, als ich eine Gemse verfolgte. Seitdem bin ich tot.“ „Aber Sie leben doch auch“, sagte der Bürgermeister." Here a contradictory movement is apparent, as in the autobiography of the swimmer. Dying perhaps even more so

⁹ Joseph Vogl, "Am Schlossberg," in: »Schloss«-Topographien: Lektüren zu Kafkas Romanfragment, Malte Kleinwort & Joseph Vogl (Hg.), 25.

than learning is a paradigmatic event in Lotman's sense. Even in fantastic or mythological narratives involving ghosts and underworlds, in dying, a persona moves from the field of life to the field of death. Not so Kafka's Gracchus.

„Gewissermaßen“, sagte der Jäger, „gewissermaßen lebe ich auch. Mein Todeskahn verfehlte die Fahrt, eine falsche Drehung des Steuers, ein Augenblick der Unaufmerksamkeit des Führers, eine Ablenkung durch meine wunderschöne Heimat, ich weiß nicht, was es war, nur das weiß ich, daß ich auf der Erde blieb und daß mein Kahn seither die irdischen Gewässer befährt. So reise ich, der nur in seinen Bergen leben wollte, nach meinem Tode durch alle Länder der Erde.“

Similar to the entry into the castle-village in *Das Schloß*, the border-crossing of Gracchus's death does not constitute a passage of the character from one field to another, but rather establishes a nearly unrecognizable split within the character. Just as Gracchus is both alive and dead, K is both a recognized servant of the castle and a wandering charlatan posing as a land surveyor (Stanley Corngold has noted that Kafka refers, in his bureaucratic writings, to a surplus of people pretending to be land surveyors.¹⁰), whose postal communications with his direct superior, Klammer, can only be regarded as “halbamtlich.” The progression of narrative time does not organize these parallel, contradictory determinations of the persona hierarchically. Various circumstances actualize each of these sides of the distinction, but neither attains dominance, according to a function of maintaining maximum potentiality with which the eponymous castle (as well as other institutions in Kafka's novels) has been strongly associated in the secondary literature.¹¹

¹⁰ Stanley Corngold, “Ritardando in The Castle,” in: *Expeditions to Kafka*, Bloomsbury, New York 2023, 104.

¹¹ Vogl, “Schlossberg,” 31: “Denn er [the castle, DG] muss nun als jener Topos verstanden werden, von dem aus sich die erzählte Welt derealisiert. Er versammelt ein Potential, das Verwirklichungen hemmt, Konkretisierungen verzeichnet, Anschauungen verwirrt, Bestimmungen aussetzt.”; Campe, “Kafkas Institutionenroman,” 207: “Institutionenroman in seiner ganz literarischen Art ist die Geschichte und nichts als die vom systemisch Ganzen erzeugte Geschichte eines Fundaments oder Ermöglichungsgrundes.”

One enigmatic and highly peculiar narrative sequence in *Das Schloß* would appear to run counter to the understanding of the novel as an exercise in the production of narrative potentialities, though—namely the fate of the family of Barnabas. As a result of a perceived insult, the family has been banished from public life in the village. Amalia, Barnabas's younger sister, rejects an obscene request delivered postally by a castle messenger to become the lover (an apparently coveted position) of a gentleman of the castle, Sortini. This banishment is expressed by various characters as a vitriolic disgust towards the family and refusal to do business with them, and has been read allegorically as a representation of the fate of Jewish families in Kafka's world.¹² The development of the family's social position appears to be decisive and irreversible, and to suggest a normative punitive force wielded by the castle. This correlation of affective change on the level of the network of characters, social demonization on the level of the institution and narrative irreversibility would seem to designate the fate of the family of Barnabas as an instance of a traditional, unidirectional narrative causality.

But the development of the situation, as Barnabas's sister Olga tells it to K, betrays no punitive mechanisms of the castle and no emotional attachment of the villagers to the conduct of Amalia or to the dignity of the gentlemen of the castle. The story of the origin of the family's abject social status is narrated by Olga to K during a longer visit to Barnabas's family home after K has begun a standoff against the schoolmaster, his new superior. K notes that Olga and Barnabas are the only people who appear to have the same perspective on the castle as him; they do not consider K's ideas about life in the village as abhorrent or incomprehensible as the other villagers do. Olga's narrative tone glides between a neurotic self-abasement, paranoid speculation and seemingly precise observation of details. The combination of theoretical analysis

¹² Arnold Heidsieck, "Community, Delusion and Anti-Semitism in Kafka's *The Castle*," 1–15 [here](#)

of a non-intuitive and unpredictable world and first-person narration resembles the style of some of Borges's more experimental stories ("The Library of Babel," "The Lottery in Babylon," etc.).

Olga's narrative attempts to identify an offense without an offended party, a punishment without a punisher or institutional punitive apparatus, and a reconciliation without a social form. The family never receives any signal that the castle has noted or reacted to the incident between Amalia and Sortini. Their neighbors begin to distance themselves out of anticipation. "Während man aber den Rückzug der Leute natürlich merkte, war vom Schloß gar nichts zu merken. Wir hatten ja früher auch keine Fürsorge des Schlosses gemerkt, wie hätten wir jetzt einen Umschwung merken können." The family likewise does not notice an affective shift in their relationships with the other villagers. "Diese Ruhe war das Schlimmste. Bei weitem nicht der Rückzug der Leute, sie hatten es ja nicht aus irgendeiner Überzeugung getan, hatten vielleicht auch gar nichts Ernstliches gegen uns, die heutige Verachtung bestand noch gar nicht, nur aus Angst hatten sie es getan, und jetzt warteten sie, wie es weiter ausgehen werde." Olga likewise notes that the punishment consists in this preliminary waiting period caused by the anticipation of the family's friends and business associates, and that the family did not fear any further retribution. "Wir fürchteten nichts Kommendes, wir litten schon nur unter dem Gegenwärtigen, wir waren mitten in der Bestrafung darin." The punishment consists of the empty space created by the expectation of punishment. Those whose expectations doom the family to inactive waiting are themselves not even to be blamed, since they do not act out of knowledge. "Sie hatten ja auch nicht genau gewußt, worum es sich gehandelt hatte;" "Die Leute im Dorf warteten ja nur darauf, daß wir zu ihnen kamen, daß der Vater seine Werkstatt wieder aufmachte, daß Amalia, [...] wieder zu Bestellungen käme, es tat ja allen Leuten leid, was sie getan hatten." The breaking off

of connections to Barnabas's family is undertaken out of a nameless sense of duty and not meant punitively; the family's connections could have been reconstituted at any moment.

Und nun wäre den Leuten, wie ich schon sagte, eine glückliche Losung des Ganzen am willkommensten gewesen. Wenn wir plötzlich einmal gekommen wären mit der Nachricht, daß alles schon in Ordnung sei, daß es zum Beispiel nur ein inzwischen völlig aufgeklärtes Mißverständnis gewesen sei oder daß es zwar ein Vergehen gewesen sei, aber es sei schon durch die Tat gutgemacht oder—selbst das hätte den Leuten genügt—daß es uns durch unsere Verbindungen ins Schloß gelungen sei, die Sache niederzuschlagen; man hätte uns ganz gewiß wieder mit offenen Armen aufgenommen, Küsse, Umarmungen, Feste hätte es gegeben, ich habe Derartiges bei anderen einige Male erlebt. Aber nicht einmal eine solche Nachricht wäre nötig gewesen; wenn wir nur freigekommen wären und uns angeboten, die alten Verbindungen wieder aufgenommen hätten, ohne auch nur ein Wort über die Briefgeschichte zu verlieren, es hätte genügt, mit Freude hätten alle auf die Besprechung der Sache verzichtet.

The anticipation which initiates the punishment is indistinguishable from a readiness to

recommence normal relations, and is only separated from actuality by a minimal demarcation.

Not only did the other village residents not know the details of the case (apart from a few rumors possibly spread by Frieda), they actively avoid all knowledge of and communication regarding the situation. Olga considers the family's empty punishment to be a function of this desire not to know.

[E]s war ja, neben der Angst, vor allem die Peinlichkeit der Sache gewesen, weshalb man sich von uns getrennt hatte, einfach um nichts von der Sache zu hören, nicht von ihr sprechen, nicht an sie denken, in keiner Weise von ihr berührt werden zu müssen. Wenn Frieda die Sache verraten hatte, so hatte sie es nicht getan, um sich an ihr zu freuen, sondern um sich und alle vor ihr zu bewahren, um die Gemeinde darauf aufmerksam zu machen, daß hier etwas geschehen war, von dem man sich auf das sorgfältigste fernzuhalten hatte. Nicht wir kamen hier als Familie in Betracht, sondern nur die Sache und wir nur der Sache wegen, in die wir uns verflochten hatten.

Punishment, in this peculiar non-institutional system of justice without knowledge, consists in becoming the object of a nameless event, which inspires the anticipation of others to the same degree that it discourages their curiosity. The end of punishment is correspondingly ephemeral and immaterial; the smallest signal suffices to reestablish normalcy. "Statt dessen aber," says Olga, "saßen wir zu Hause."

The fate of the family of Barnabas resembles the fate of Josef K and his eponymous trial. The event of punishment, with all its institutional variations, is another paradigmatic narrative event, transferring a subject from a heterogeneous set of fields (innocence, freedom, belonging, etc.) to another (guilt, incarceration, banishment, etc.). But in Kafka's narratives of punishment, a different logic predominates. As in the mechanical apparatus in "The Penal Colony," punishment cuts into the persona, but does not move characters across concept-borders within the text. The ambiguity of Kafka's indistinct punishments results from the illegibility of the punishment as a determination of character.¹³ This ambiguity, however, results in a modal variability of plot: characters oscillate between different sides of incomplete borders within their personas, and this inconsistency results in other plot events corresponding to different character determinations. Kafka's characters are not entirely consistent and coherent; Josef is neither completely guilty nor completely innocent; K is neither in the service of the castle nor out of it; the family of Barnabas is not responsible for their shame nor free of responsibility for it. This incapacity of narrative time to develop distinct personas has effects on the structure of plot events. Events take place according to contradictory and indistinct logics in Kafka's texts because of the compossible but mutually exclusive consequences of events which fail or succeed—gewissermaßen—to designate a persona on one side of a textual concept-border.

Kafka encodes the indetermination of border-crossing events into his characters, and in so doing grants their ambiguous results interminable duration. Musil's immaterial catalyst events do not mark characters as deeply; Musil maintains certain characterological autonomy for the sake, apparently, of preserving the status of certain characters as types, and thus preserving their comic potential. This is perhaps not the case for his protagonist, but Ulrich marks the exception rather than the rule. That is not to say that Musil's enzyme-like events, whose function is only to

¹³ Frauke Berndt may be helpful here...

intensify and accelerate the reactions between other constellations, are necessarily fleeting in Musil's novel. The parallel campaign in particular retains its status as a central narrative factor throughout the novel. This remains paradoxical, though: the narrative is centrally determined by an event which, in its formal emptiness, functions as an immaterial surplus to an external state of affairs (or reaction, to borrow the chemical language once more from Mayer). The challenge of reading Musil's novel lies in this apparent inward-turning movement that the parallel campaign has on the apparently minor circumstances surrounding it, i.e., the novel's center constitutes a force field redirecting attention to its periphery. In Kafka's narratives, there is a kind of proliferation of internal peripheral zones which are constantly crossed and occasionally redrawn, and the movement toward interior spaces (of the castle, the law, etc.) only produces a greater level of differentiation of borders and a greater ambiguity of their distinctions.

[Thomas Mann parts will have to come later!] dg