

Forever Young: Youth, Modernism, and the Deferral of Maturity

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is about adolescents in European literature between 1900 and the First World War who shy away from maturity. The authors discussed are Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Robert Musil, Georg Büchner, J.M. Barrie, Robert Walser, Rudyard Kipling and Witold Gombrowicz. The main argument is that the remarkable proliferation around 1900 of novels whose protagonists, by some means or other, avoid growing up is not due to a somewhat twisted affiliation to the genre of the late and ultimately failed *Bildungsroman*, but rather to an underestimated branch of modernism. At first glance, their strategy of retreat looks like a flinching from societal responsibility, yet the opposite turns out to be true. Instead of representing an early instance of the prolonged adolescence that has nowadays become proverbial, their recoiling from maturity entails a critique of the totalizing tendencies inherent to the ideals of *Bildung* and Enlightenment.

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Renate, Gerd, Tim und Theresa,
die mich die ganze Zeit begleitet haben

Introduction: The Eternal Adolescent

Father: “How long a time you’ve taken to grow up!”
“So you’ve been lying in wait for me!”, cried Georg.”
Franz Kafka, “The Judgment”¹

Conventional wisdom has it that for most people the period of youth is rife with complications and contradictions. That is certainly true for the youths populating this dissertation. Since they are literary characters, however, their capriciousness, delusions of grandeur and occasional despair are mainly beneficial—if not for themselves, then for the reader. They offer, albeit tongue-in-cheek and indirectly, perspective in a no less complicated time, roughly the first decade of the twentieth century, epitome of modernity, whose name already suggests an obsession with anything that is not old—in those years, the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* is leaning toward one side.

Of course, the cliché of youth is wrong in supposing an internal, unchanging essence where there is in fact a mercurial thing shot through with historical transformation. The experiences of the children of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the century differed tremendously from those of their parents, let alone those of their grandparents. In a survey of the situation of German youth around 1900, the historian Thomas Nipperdey mentions the patriarchal and authoritarian imprint that limited children’s spontaneity and trust in their parents. In a climate of “emotional asceticism” sexuality was taboo.² School, as memorable

¹ Franz Kafka, *Selected Short Stories* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1993 [1936]) 17.

² Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918* (München: C.H. Beck, 1990) 117.

scenes from Joyce and Musil illustrate, was no less—in the arena of the classroom, presided over by the teacher—a space of rigid discipline and— behind drawn curtains, played out among alleged equals—of frequently cruel games of domination.

In a remarkable essay on rebellious youth in Hobsbawm’s long nineteenth century the Italian historian Sergio Luzzato points out that with the end of the *ancien régime* and the rise of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe the traditional role of youth—“a culturally recognizable role and a factor in social cohesion”³—underwent a tremendous change. It was no accident, he writes, that reformist groups as different as the Masonic lodges of the Carbonari sects, the Saint-Simonian church or the so-called Icariens, a group of early socialists determined to put into practice the idea of a communist society as described in the utopian novel *Voyage en Icarie* (1840) by Étienne Cabet, were united in their concerns “with finding an associative formula that could reconcile the egalitarian aspirations contained in the idea of fraternity with the hierarchical order guaranteed by the recognition of paternity” (175).

Throughout the century, this idea of fraternity at odds with paternity inspired protests of young workers and intellectuals—on the barricades in Paris in the July of 1830, immortalized by Delacroix, of the Russian Decemberists in the 1860s, whom Dostoevsky was associated with, of the artists and writers standing up for Alfred Dreyfus in the 1890s and of the German Wandervögel who, just after

³ Sergio Luzzato, “Young Rebels and Revolutionaries, 1789–1917,” in *A History of Young People in the West*, ed. by Giovanni Levi et al., vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 174.

1900, in Luzzato's words "attacked the tranquil Wilhelmine bourgeoisie and its labored certainties" (174). And they, in turn, inspired fear as well.

In order to deal with this fear—no matter how real or fantasized—the paternal authorities, first of all the representatives of the nation states, concocted what Luzzato calls "a kind of delaying tactic," designed to postpone "the moment when young men could assume political and social responsibilities" (175). These measures comprised raising the voting age, the prolongation of schooling and the invention of organizations that were either outright militant, such as the *Deutscher Wehrverein* (German Army Club), or only latently so such as the Pfadfinder in Germany and the Boy Scouts in England. They were designed to put the amorphous time between the end of mandatory education and the beginning of military service to disciplinary use. The activities ranged from so-called beer trips, visits to famous battle fields and patriotic tours to war memorials on one side to recreational outings and outdoor games on the other. The militant *Jungdeutschland-Bund* (Union of Young Germany), for example, was founded in 1911 by field marshal Wilhelm Leopold Colmar von der Goltz. As early as 1883, he had published the pamphlet *Das Volk in Waffen* (The Armed People), in which he emphasized the role of youth. It was the guarantor of national strength, Goltz said, and characterized by its readiness for action and willingness to take risks, because "it is only youth that easily parts with life."⁴ Even though these activities were not mandatory, sig-

⁴ Andreas Gestrich, "'Leicht trennt sich nur die Jugend vom Leben.' Jugendliche im Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Der Tod als Maschinist: Der industrialisierte Krieg, 1914-1918*, ed. by Rolf Spilker et al. (Bramsche: Rasch, 1998) 33.

nificant numbers of a generational cohort took part in them, greatly influencing the general atmosphere.⁵

In spite of the rigidity and hierarchies of the Scout movement, the regular outings—which along with rules of conduct, a downright code of honor, formed the center of the appeal to its members—were experienced as liberating and, particularly in Germany, even as potentially critical of the state, with its association of asphyxiating bureaucracy, necessarily an indoor activity. More than half a century earlier, Heinrich Heine’s contemporary Ludwig Börne had summed up the corresponding sentiment that now gave way to a putatively unpolitical cult of hardening one’s body in nature, poised with an unflinching morale, in a nutshell: “It is because every man is born a Roman that bourgeois society seeks to de-Romanize him.”⁶ The Boy Scouts saw themselves as the vanguard of re-Romanization.

⁵ By 1914, in only three years, the *Jungdeutschland-Bund* counted 680,000 members. See Wolfgang Benz, *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München: Saur, 2011) 345. In England, the first Scout rally, held in 1909 at The Crystal Palace in London, attracted 10,000 boys and a number of girls. By the time of the first census in 1910, the movement counted over 100,000 members. By 1918, its numbers had risen to 300,000, and had reached the million mark before the end of the twenties. The constitutive book by Boy Scouts founder Robert Baden-Powell, called *Scouting for Boys*, is now the fourth-best-selling title of all time. *Scouting History*. http://www.davenhamscouts.org.uk/scouting_history.htm. March 23, 2014.

⁶ Ludwig Börne, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1862) 63. Cited in Luzzato, 176.

It bespeaks the complicated politics of youth at the time that Börne's anger with the perceived quenching of youthful energy in the service of a liberal society⁷ through an anxious reactionary state, expressed by means of a martial metaphor, reverberated, two generations later, in an embrace of proto-military organizations for the sake of personal freedom. Luzzato writes, resolutely:

In the end, the pedagogical efforts of two generations of educators would have the desired effect: the youth rebellion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was different from what had preceded it, aiming to serve the interests of the nation rather than yearning for a revolutionary transformation of society. That is why it escaped the control of the socialist parties even more than that of bourgeois organizations.⁸

This is an attempt at explaining the astonishing⁹ enthusiasm of war that gripped the vast majority of young Europeans in the years before and at least for some time after 28 July 1914, one month after the Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip had assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo.¹⁰ A recent study by

⁷ Börne (1786–1837), a publicist and critic, was actively engaged in furthering democratic ideals in times of Restoration. He did not shy away from emphasizing the necessity for revolution.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁹ In his book on the year 1913, Jean-Michel Rabaté writes: “What has struck, and continues to strike, historians is the bellicist enthusiasm that took advanced countries like France, England, Italy, Austria, and Germany by storm in the summer of 1914. Sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and internationalist artists and writers like Cendrars, Gaudier-Brzeska, and Apollinaire expressed one wish—to go fight the enemy. All three could have easily avoided the draft, for reasons of nationality (Cendrars and Apollinaire only received French nationality after they had enlisted) or distance (Gaudier was living in London and could have avoided being drafted because of his family situation). Is it simply that Romanticism was not dead yet, or, more disturbingly, that modernism also contributed to the general unleashing of this passionate aggressivity?” Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007) 208.

¹⁰ Incidentally, Princip (1894–1918) had originally wanted to become poet. He read Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, owned books by the anarchists Bakunin and Kropotkin and could recitate poems by Nietzsche. See David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer* (New York: Vintage, 2009) 120.

the Dutch scholar Geert Buelens recounts by means of a sort of action panorama, a fast montage of contemporaneous scenes, the details of this bloodlust, particularly as expressed by young artists and intellectuals. The supposedly regenerative force of war was often emphasized. The German expressionist poet Georg Heym, for example, noted in his diary on 6 July 1910, after having attended an apparently disappointing cabaret: “Ah, it is terrible. It is all so boring, boring, boring. Nothing ever happens, nothing, nothing, nothing. If only once something would happen that did not leave this bland taste of banality.”¹¹ At least, Heym had a distinct idea of what it was that could potentially happen: “If barricades were built again. I would be the first one to stand upon them, I would like to feel, still with the bullet in my heart, the frenzy of rapture.”

Or consider what Marinetti, the Italian Futurist, said in an interview that was likely conducted in early 1909 because the interviewer mentions it took place during the rehearsals of Marinetti’s play *Le Roi Bombance*, which premiered that year, and shortly after the publication of “The Futurist Manifesto”¹²:

“—There is, however, a flagrant contradiction between your Futurist ideals and your glorification of war, which would constitute rather a return to a barbaric age.” “Yes, but it’s a question of health, which takes precedence over everything else. Is not the life of nations, when all’s said and done, just like that of the individual who only rids himself of his infections and excess of blood by having recourse to the bathtub and

¹¹ Cited in Geert Buelens, *Europas Dichter und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014) 36. My translation.

¹² It was originally published in the Italian newspaper *Gazzetta dell’Emilia* in Bologna on 5 February 1909, then in French as “Manifeste du futurisme” in the newspaper *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909.

the bloodletting?” Then Marinetti adds, smiling at the paradox: “I believe that a people has to pursue a continuous hygiene of heroism and every country take a glorious shower of blood.”¹³

Famously, the Futurist Manifesto, published that same year, demanded: “We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world.” The Second Futurist Proclamation, subtitled “Let’s Kill Off the Moonlight”, featured passages like this:

Yes, our very sinews insist on war and scorn for women, for we fear their supplicating arms being wrapped around our legs, the morning of our setting forth! ... What claim do women have on us, or for what matter, any of the stay-at-homes, the cripples, the sick, and all the caution-mongers? Rather than have their timid little lives torn apart by their dismal little anxieties, by their restless nights and fearful nightmares, we prefer a violent death; and we glorify it as the only one fitting for man, beast of prey that he is (ibid., 23).

Voices like these, often tilting to absurd pitches, resonated all over Europe, from the verses of the English war poets like Rupert Brooke,¹⁴ who was insulted by the idea of aging and hence fortunate enough to die young, although his death was lacking in grandiosity as he perished from an infection following a mosquito bite,¹⁵ to the German guru of his own variety of conservatism, avant-garde and mysticism, Stefan George, who proudly proclaimed that he never read the newspaper.¹⁶ During an exchange to Munich in 1911, unsurprisingly, Brooke had met and made friends with George, since the much-admired augur likewise longed for the rejuvenating energy a war would instill on the people of Europe. In January 1914,

¹³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Critical Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) 19.

¹⁴ During his time at King’s College, from 1906–1909, Brooke founded a debating club called “Carbonari”, reminiscent of the Italian secret society mentioned above by Luzzato. Its motto was “Iustum necare reges Italiae”—it is just to kill Italy’s kings.

¹⁵ More details are related in the chapter on J. M. Barrie.

¹⁶ See Uwe Schneider & Andreas Schumann, *Krieg der Geister: Erster Weltkrieg und literarische Moderne* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000) 111.

George penned these verses: “He laughs: too late for standstill or medicine! / Ten thousand must be struck by the holy madness / Ten thousand must be snatched by the holy pestilence / Ten thousands the holy war.”¹⁷

While this tableau of imaginary belligerence plays an important role as backdrop for the argument of this thesis, it only provides one vantage point for the wanderings of the young protagonists, narrowing the perspective to looming atrocities then still beyond imagination. Nipperdey’s take, while concentrating on the situation in Germany—and less on prominent writers and artists, but more on the atmosphere of their breeding grounds, school and family—, is more nuanced and almost tender in its empathy, aiming to reveal the inner life that gave way to such bursts of frustration, where a not yet experienced, only languorously conjured collective bloodshed served as a means of emotional discharge. He emphasizes how stifling and formalized daily routine felt for the bourgeois youth, how burdensome the primacy of order, the duty to grow into forms and norms predetermined by the adults.

The fact that practice in school had become trivial and a dull obligation did not, however, give way to an avoidance of the humanist ideal of *Bildung*, which had been a bourgeois beacon throughout the nineteenth century. On the contrary, there was a tendency to recuperate its original impulses. Abstract principles of con-

¹⁷ Cited in Robert Edward Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) 494. The original reads: “Der lacht: zu spät für stillstand und arznei! / Zehntausend muss der heilige wahnsinn schlagen / Zehntausend muss die heilige seuche rafften/ Zehntausende der heilige krieg.” Stefan George, *Der Stern des Bundes* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993) 31.

duct—refined and enhanced in the imagination, demanding to be internalized, rather than externalized—superseded real role models. The result was an unstable emotionality, lacking any object to cling to, except likeminded individuals, which often yielded lyrical friendship pairs.

“Experience,” Nipperdey writes, “taught the youths that they would become like the adults. Yet this experience was now resigned: It was not fair, but one must willy-nilly acquiesce. The adolescent aspiration to grow up was thus definitely stunted” (118). In a chapter of his *Introduction to Modernity*, “Renewal, Youth, Repetition,” Henri Lefebvre calls “the young man” a “creation of modern times.” During the reign of the bourgeoisie, he says, the figure was pushed “to extremes, with extreme consequences: the eternal adolescent.”¹⁸ The corresponding strategy, again according to Nipperdey: “In the light of abstract norms, everyday life is moved into the lurid light of banality, from which one tries to escape with an indefinite longing and an aimless enthusiasm.”¹⁹ The aimlessness accentuates the political abeyance; left and right are still undivorced. There is potential for either side, but for the time being everything is stirred. Marinetti’s sanguine contempt for women and old age manages to rely on the same metaphor of youth as the slender sylphs

¹⁸ If modernity, says Henri Lefebvre, “influences the technical control social man wields over nature, it also produces consequences for it. Transformations occur. The young man, as a stage in man’s youth, is a creation of modern times. The bourgeoisie has pushed it to extremes, with extreme consequences: the eternal adolescent.” Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959–May 1961* (London/New York: Verso, 1995) 158.

¹⁹ Nipperdey, 117.

of *Jugendstil*, the ornamental art nouveau, entwining around caryatids and frontispieces of intimist celebrations of life.²⁰

In the combination of such, at first glance, conflicting elements, the atmosphere of the books discussed in the subsequent chapters emerges in surprising detail. Their young protagonists are either just short of what biologists call puberty (conveniently shunning the problem of sexuality, at least on the surface) or, mostly, in the midst of it. One of them, Karl Rossmann, is known already to be a father himself. Hardly anyone is in what would approximate a relationship—except for the rather strange coupling of Peter Pan and Wendy and the arguably more healthy one of the forerunners Leonce and Lena. Still, and no matter if they embrace war and violence or if they do not, these adolescents are united in their implicit or explicit disregard for everyday life and in their aspiration for a utopia, typical in that its details and whereabouts are unclear. They are only sure of one thing: maturity it is not.

These books are discussed, and in this order: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1904–1914), Musil's *The Perplexities of Young Törleß* (1906), Büchner's *Leonce and Lena* (1863), Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), J. M. Barrie's *Peter*

²⁰ An early adherent's recollection shows how related the structures of Wandervogel and war-mongering were: "The essence of the Wandervogel was flight from the confines of school and city into the open world, away from academic duties and the discipline of everyday life into an atmosphere of adventure." Cited in Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007) 104. Arguably, this "atmosphere of adventure" was also what Marinetti and Heym were longing for. They were just not so easily pacified. Incidentally, the pyramidal structure of the Wandervogel featured an organizational level called the "Gau", then uncommon in the political language. The term goes back to Germanic times. The Nazis embraced its rebirth and used it to restructure the Reich.

Pan (the play 1904, the novel 1906), Kipling's *Kim* (1901), Kafka's *Amerika* (or *The Lost One*, 1911–1914) and finally Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937). There is no shortage of others that would have fit well but did not make the cut, for example Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902) and *The Counterfeiters* (1925), Alain-Fournier's *Meaulnes the Great* (1913), Hesse's *Unterm Rad* (1906) or Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910).

The first chapter—which hones the problem and the corresponding question, drawing on Joyce and Musil to discuss the fate of the *Bildungsroman* after 1900 as well as poetological questions of narration in ideologically clouded times—is followed by a retrospect: Büchner's play *Leonce and Lena* is presented as the foundation of a tradition. The withdrawal of youthful literary characters from the societal contract, their refusal to grow into roles perpetuating the status quo, their retreat into themselves, is read as a clandestine and cunning political ruse invoking from afar the movement of modernist art as described by the Frankfurt School—abstraction as a retraction from a world that has ceased to be homely. Rather than a suggestion to replace the current political system with another one, say aristocracy with democracy or capitalism with socialism, there is a deliberate hesitation or even flinching from it in favor of a proposal marked by playfulness and surrealism.

What is really the heart of the dissertation follows, two chapters that each line up two writers who could almost be said to compete against each other. Similar in some aspects and utterly different in others, Barrie and Walser as well as Kafka and Kipling concertedly shed light on facets that would not become as clear

individually. Deeply ambivalent characters, Peter Pan and Jakob von Gunten emerge as “imps of perversity” (Slavoj Žižek), tacitly articulating latent ideologies. Neverland, instinctively thought to be an escapist dream of puerile freedom, on the contrary appears as a site where discipline is yet enforced. In comparison, the servants’ school that provides the setting for Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten*, while retaining equivocal meanings, turns out as a place of crumbling hierarchies. Meanwhile, the interconnections of *Peter Pan* and the Scout movement are highlighted.

Beside Barrie, Kipling and his eponymous hero Kim were another important influence on Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts. Along with Kafka’s *Amerika*, where young Karl Rossmann has been expelled after impregnating a servant girl to a surreal and grotesque version of the United States, the corresponding chapter tells two mirror-inverted stories of far-flung youths, of their grasp of time and space, of disappointing fathers and of travel continuing beyond the last pages.

In the conclusion, the Polish emigré writer Witold Gombrowicz, who employed the tropes of youth and immaturity in his lifelong struggle against “form”—received ideas and social conventions, preferably expressed by solemn authority figures—, wraps it all up, offering a prospect on the use and usefulness of the concept in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Some questions suggest themselves: What distinguishes these particular literary youths that they warrant extended analysis? Were not those diverse groups in the nineteenth century enumerated above comparable in their problems, in their

fights and in their dreams? Does the cluster of books presented here constitute a genre or a tradition of its own or does it neatly fall in an overarching one, possibly originating long in the past and continuing into the future? In the attempt to answer these questions it is difficult to avoid a certain overlap with what is argued at greater length in the subsequent chapters. I will try to stick to the essential.

In a 1977 interview, called “The Confession of the Flesh”, Michel Foucault defined the term *dispositif* (translated as “apparatus”):

What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”²¹

In order to describe the apparatus of youth—understood particularly as an ideological, historical, psychological, political and metaphorical entity and less as a biological, medical or anthropological one—three aspects may be identified that, taken together (as they actually belong), make the proposed books stand out: 1. the *Bildungsroman* tradition, 2. modernism and 3. their authors’ personal dispositions.

1. Earlier times, apparently, had a greater patience for boredom, as Franco Moretti’s study on the *Bildungsroman*, *The Way of the World*, suggests. It was Goethe who activated “the bland rhythm of everyday reality” as a specific characteristic trait of the novel.²² Moretti adds: “And so, to paraphrase another great historian of

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage, 1980) 194.

²² Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000) vi.

the bourgeois temperament, the reading of novels becomes—for the first time in history—a ‘calm passion’” (vi). In other words, the content of the texts as well as their readers’ dispositions converged in a sort of systematic uneventfulness. In his seminal compendium of the history of the novel Moretti reiterates the argument that banality, even sheer nothingness, played a central role in the development of the European novel.²³ He goes so far as to call “fillers [...] the only narrative invention of the entire nineteenth century” (379). Fillers are detours, meanderings, idle promenades, reveries of solitary walkers. Rather than propellers of the plot, fillers are its deviations—to the point of its complete disappearance.

This ready embrace of the humdrum may not least have to do with the underlying conviction that time moved cyclically, as every watchmaker knew—an essential profession of an age fascinated by fine mechanics—and just as if Ecclesiastes were still very much around, sporting a bourgeois nightgown and cap, mumbling his famous verse from the *King James Bible*: “The sun also ariseth, and

²³ Franco Moretti, *The Novel: History, Geography, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 377ff. Incidentally, in Moretti’s latest book on the figure of the bourgeois, he once more spells out what he believes to be an essential connection between the bourgeois mentality and literary boredom. He writes: “In the early nineteenth century, the semantic field of everydayness—*alltäglich*, *everyday*, *quotidien*, *quotidiano*—drifts towards the colourless realm of the ‘habitual’, ‘ordinary’, ‘repeatable’, and ‘frequent’, in contrast to the older, more vivid opposition between the everyday and the sacred. To capture this elusive dimension of life was one of Auerbach’s aims in *Mimesis*, as is made clear by the book’s conceptual leitmotif of the ‘serious imitation of the everyday’ (*die ernste Nachahmung des alltäglichen*). Although the title eventually chosen by Auerbach foregrounds the aspect of ‘imitation’ (*Mimesis*), the book’s true originality lies in the other two terms— ‘serious’ and ‘everyday’— which had been even more central in the preparatory study ‘Über die ernste Nachahmung des alltäglichen’ (where Auerbach also considered ‘dialectic’ and ‘existential’ as possible alternatives to ‘everyday’). See *Travaux du séminaire de philologie romane*, Istanbul 1937, 272–3.” Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London/New York: Verso, 2013) 71f.

the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.” Mikhail Bakhtin, a great theorist of the genre, characterized the *Bildungsroman* thus:

Another type of cyclical emergence [...], traces a typically repeating path of man’s emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality. This path can be complicated in the end by varying degrees of skepticism and resignation. This kind of novel of emergence typically depicts the world and life as experience, as a school through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result: one becomes more sober, experiencing some degree of resignation.²⁴

To be sure, the metaphors of the circle and the line could never completely do without one another. Even while Hegel was cautiously looking forward to the end of history and Nietzsche was pronouncing God dead, thus enabling a sort of secular eschatology, in other words, while the path of the world into the future was suddenly conceived as a vector with a specific direction, human generations could still be described as traversing in merry-go-rounds, maybe as a last nostalgic remnant of easier, happier times.²⁵ Thus, just as a train that one is on seems motionless, the route taken by outside reality does not matter much for the infinitely

²⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism: Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1986) 22.

²⁵ About the same time, Henri Bergson thinks about the metaphorical relationship of circle and line. At the origin of life, he writes in *Creative Evolution* (1911), there is a consciousness that has impregnated matter and is now trying to break free. Animals thus move in circles; life, Bergson writes, leaves one automat only in order to get into another. Merely with man life has skipped this obstacle. Man moves in the form of a line. See the introduction to a recent German edition, by Rémi Brague, in Henri Bergson, *Schöpferische Evolution*, ed. by Margarete Drewsen (Hamburg: Meiner, 2013) xxvi. Brague comments: “It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this image. With it, Bergson breaks the centuries-old privilege of circular movement, which—already with Aristotle—was supposed to be the paragon of perfection, even of the divine. Linear movement seemed more like the sad fate of man. Bergson reverses the comparison: If mobility is primary, then circularity becomes the sign of a paralysis. For the Greeks, this movement had the advantage to approximate tranquility. Which is precisely what constitutes its disadvantage for Bergson.”

smaller individual. The world may as well stand still and can thus effectively function as a stern school of unchanging demands.

Around 1900, such views of the circularity and linearity of life could still be held simultaneously, as Marinetti's example illustrates. He wished for a rejuvenation, a sort of national rebirth, and at the same time he had no doubts this was but a metaphor for extreme upheaval and progress—if back into barbaric times. Partly instigated by the aggressively patriotic propaganda of the nation states, partly by the dreamy pupils who desired to bypass the sclerotic skeleton of *Bildung* and advance to its origins, the long sovereignty of the bourgeoisie was waning and with it, as the examples of Marinetti and Heym show, the acceptance of ennui, novelistic or otherwise.

Still, youth was the flavor of the month. But it must be a different youth than the one idolized, tormented and put to the test in the *Bildungsromane* of old. The first chapter discusses this in detail. It should be clear by now, at any rate, that the circumstances of life, its nuisances and banalities, were no longer accepted as a metaphorical school whose final report would be the student's resignation. Resignation was no longer a triumph, resignation had started to be very much a resignation. Hence all the attempts at escape. Youths like Jakob von Gunten or Karl Rossmann are hard-pressed on both sides and they know it. Once by the uninspiring, stultifying and paralyzing adult authority demanding from them to become just like themselves. And secondly by trigger-happy types like Heym and Marinetti

and their amassing minions queuing up for the trenches materializing on the horizon. This is why they choose retreat as their line of attack.

The following scene encapsulates this stance: in the winter of 1899/1900 Kafka joins the fraternity *Altstädter Kollegien-Tag*. His biographer Peter-André Alt suspects “lust for the subversive” as a rationale for his entry, “because such student organizations were officially banned in Austria-Hungary since the mid-nineteenth century.²⁶ “Sure enough”, Alt writes, “he is quick to realize that the nationalist ideology cultivated there, documented in vapid young men’s rituals, had a strange and repulsive effect on him” (ibid.). At a beer festival at the hotel *Platteis* on the occasion of the final secondary school examinations in July 1900, while everybody else gets up in order to sing the “Wacht am Rhein” (The Watch on the Rhine), one of Germany’s most famous patriotic anthems,²⁷ Kafka and his friend Hugo Bergmann choose to remain seated. Consequently, they are expelled for improper behavior. Bergmann recalls: “We quickly got over it, because our lives were filled with new thoughts, new ideas.²⁸ In his stories, Kafka tweaks and aggravates this experience by inventing protagonists who are crushed by such forces, who accept their os-

²⁶ Peter-André Alt, *Franz Kafka: Der ewige Sohn* (München: C.H. Beck, 2008) 96.

²⁷ When in the aftermath of the subsequent French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, prime minister Otto von Bismarck achieved the unification of Germany, and the German Empire including Alsace-Lorraine was established, “Die Wacht am Rhein” beside “Heil dir im Siegerkranz” was the—unofficial—second national anthem. In Lewis Milestone’s 1930 film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the song is played at the end of the first scene as schoolboys, whipped into a patriotic frenzy by their instructor, abandon their studies and head off to enlist in the military.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Koch (ed.), *Als Kafka mir entgegenkam ...: Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2013) 17.

tracism without hesitation, subjecting themselves to the erratic will of their oppressors. Their protest is veiled, even irre recognizable to themselves, only a tacit communication between author and reader. Also in his writing, in other words, Kafka protests by staying put.

2. This glimmer of hope arising from resignation is typical of modernist art as described by Adorno. It emerges as if after the fall of man, characterized by a negative mimesis, a cunning adaptation of what it in fact criticizes. The assault on the objective world it distrusts takes place in the form of a recoiling from it.²⁹

Such dialectical complication distinguishes the books discussed in the subsequent chapters from their *Bildungsroman* predecessors, whom they resemble in precisely this negative mimesis. They take the trope of youth and turn it around. It no longer stands for progress, but for regress. Instead of naive individuals slowly approximating their coming of age, and with it a greater wisdom or clear-sightedness as to the “true” machinations of mankind, we get protagonists whose social acumen and appetite for corruption defy their young age. Törleß, for example, agonized by his attraction for another boy, finds himself stripped of his “solid, bourgeois” certainties “in which everything happened in an ordered and rational

²⁹ The relevant passage in more detail: “The basic levels of experience that motivate [modernist] art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of the objective elements, defines the relation of art to society.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 6. The original reads: “Die Grundsichten der Erfahrung, welche die Kunst motivieren, sind der gegenständlichen Welt, vor der sie zurückzucken, verwandt.“ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997) 16.

way.”³⁰ Beneath the rational surface of modern life lurk terrifying demons: “From the bright diurnal world, which was all he had known hitherto, there was a door leading into another world, was muffled, seething, passionate, naked and destructive.”

In the pages to come we find the two versions of youth common around 1900—one institutionally fabricated in the service of nationalism and the escapist, dreamy, somewhat lost one, generally unpolitical, but with potential for either side—usually combined in a single character.

Jakob von Gunten fits the bill, Leonce and particularly Valerio just as much. The same goes for Joyce’s young artist and Musil’s Törleß, both of whom wrestle themselves free from outside expectations (and who are, ironically, in precisely this moment reluctant fully to let go of romanticism and to embrace modernism). Karl Rossmann veers more on the naive side, which Kafka is cunningly prone to, in order to torment him even more; as might be expected, Kafka’s tale is likely the grimmest of all. Georges Bataille once called *The Castle* “epic of the unemployed” or of “the persecuted Jew” and *The Trial* “epic of the defendant in the bureaucratic era.”³¹ With the same right one could call *Amerika* “epic of the youth attempting to escape adult authority.” Kim and Peter Pan are special cases, as the corresponding chapters will show.

For the argument of the thesis these youths figure as counterexamples. While on many levels very nuanced, generous and empathic, *Peter Pan* and *Kim* have not,

³⁰ Robert Musil, *Selected Writings* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1986) 50.

³¹ Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (London: M. Boyars, 1985) 136.

at least not fully, taken the turn toward modernism in the above sense. In their support of the imperial status quo, Barrie and Kipling do not perceive the world they are rendering in their literature as one whose negativity must be exposed by means of its repetition. And indeed, their treatment of the world as a cyclical one—as a school through which the individual passes in order to arrive at a sense of responsibility, of willful resignation in the social machine, of maturity—is still very much intact. No wonder that corresponding images are essential to them: the Wheel of Life in *Kim* and the constant merry-go-round of pirates, Indians, Lost Boys and the crocodile on the circular island of Neverland. Thus, they are truly, in Moretti's sense, late *Bildungsromane* in a time that has, imperceptibly to some, outgrown them as its proper symbolic form.³²

There is another book that looks at a similar cluster of novels and also employs the concepts of the *Bildungsroman* and modernism as means of analysis. It, too, starts with Moretti and goes on to criticize him, although pursuing a different

³² *Peter Pan*, as in many other respects, is a special case here as well. There is no central character in the book. Formally, this may have to do with its derivation from a play. Narratively, however, it is a striking choice to place near the center a figure who remains opaque, enigmatic and elusive till the very end—the eponymous boy who would not grow up. Everybody else will: Wendy as much as her brothers, who grow into boring (!) businessmen. Barrie: “All the boys were grown up and done for by this time; so it is scarcely worth while saying anything more about them. You may see the twins and Nibs and Curly any day going to an office, each carrying a little bag and an umbrella. Michael is an engine-driver.” J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Classics, 2005) 126. It is important to note that the real life counterparts of these minor characters, the Llewelyn Davies boys, Barrie's adopted sons, were the first audience of the story, told by their stepfather in the evenings, long before it made its way into print. So even while Peter Pan himself does not qualify for a *Bildungsroman* hero because he never changes and never gives in to the dull routine of everyday life, they very much do. *Peter Pan*, in other words, is the rare case of an indirect *Bildungsroman*.

line of argument: Jed Esty's *Unseasonable Youth* (2011). As Esty writes in the introduction, his project started with the same surprise that triggered my own, the surprise about what he, following Franco Moretti and especially Gregory Castle, calls the “modernist *Bildungsroman*”: that there was not much Bildung to be found in it. Thus, Esty proposes to reconceive the genre, taking into account a change that the *Bildungsroman* supposedly underwent on the threshold of modernity:

Where the classical novel of education was shaped by the eschatology of nineteenth-century industrialization and nation-building, the modernist version assimilates the temporality of an imperial era when the accelerating yet uneven pace of development seemed to have unsettled all narratives of progress, on the ground and in the mind.³³

Esty concentrates on two things: first, aspects of empire, questions of transnationality and postcolonialism, and second, on aspects of temporality, particularly the possibility of multiple modernities being propelled into the future at varying speeds. It is helpful for his enterprise that the texts he looks at—Kipling's *Kim*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, and Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, among others—originate from and belong to the Anglophone world exclusively. Esty concludes that in spite of their apparent break with the traditions of the *Bildungsroman*, these texts, characterized by the trope of youth hesitant to mature (which he calls, according to his emphasis on time and pace, “frozen” or “unseasonable” youth), very much “fulfill [its] original aesthetic function,” as assigned by Bakhtin: “the assimilation of ‘real historical time’” (38). What Esty thus identifies—a stock element of modernist writing—as “Anglophone modernism's

³³ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 38.

suspicion of linear time” is connected by those novels with “an anticolonial intellectual project that casts doubt on Western or Eurocentric models of development” (201f.).

In some way these observations, particularly the last one, are close to mine, even though both the focus and the findings differ. In my comparative study of primarily English and German novels of stunted, frozen, or arrested development there is a clear tendency observable that one could call Eurocentrifugal. Büchner’s young prince and princess aim, by means of a peaceful revolution, completely to overthrow the old order. Stephen Dedalus takes a three-step-approach to extricate himself from duties and expectations, first from his family, then from the church, and last from the intellectual order of the university; eventually, he leaves his home Ireland for Paris, for him a symbol of artistic freedom. Young Törleß, after witnessing and taking part in the abuse of a fellow student, decides, in agreement with his parents, to leave school and be educated privately. Jakob von Gunten joins a servants’ institute to unmake himself, obliterate his noble lineage, become nothing. This endeavor is so successful that the institute itself breaks apart and a new utopia of human community, without hierarchies, is projected to exist far from Europe. Kafka’s *Amerika* seems very much like the actualization of Jakob von Gunten’s planned trip, the headmaster having gotten lost on the way. Alas, once the far-away land turns into actual space, inhabited by real people, utopia is once more removed. Karl Rossmann’s trip ends on a railroad; the signposts along the

tracks give ambiguous information—the yearned-for utopia might well turn out to be another Auschwitz.

All these stories, with their endings that hover between hope and failure, are narratives of displacement. Yet I emphasize their anticolonial edge in a less literal sense than Esty, that is, as a critique of the ideologies thriving at home. I read them—following their tendency to anti-mimesis and abstraction—as anticolonial narratives of the mind, engaged in an emancipatory project from material as well as intellectual armament as it occurred in Europe at the time of their writing. I refrain from conceiving of them as modernist *Bildungsromane*—however they may assimilate historical time—because they are dissociated from the Hegelian agenda of maturity in the sense that after the individual has “sowed his wild oats” [sich die Hörner abläuft] during his *Lebrjahre* he willfully acquiesces in the “existing conditions and their reasonability” [die bestehenden Verhältnisse und ihre Vernünftigkeit].³⁴

Even in the not-quite *Bildungsromane* of the nineteenth century, *The Red and the Black* or *Sentimental Education*, this scheme forms the backdrop for the protagonists’ rebellion; in other words, even in their revolt against the system they adhere to its values. This is completely different in the set of novels examined here, with the exception of *Peter Pan* and *Kim*. They are problematized in part because they indeed carry traits of the old-fashioned *Bildungsroman*, refining and refurbishing

³⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1979) vol. II, 219f.

the genre, at a historical time when, following Franco Moretti, this symbolic form has ceased being useful.³⁵

Of course, the decision as to whether a symbolic form has outlived itself is itself based on a set of assumptions and beliefs that extend to the realm of politics. Convictions clash, the assessment of what is valid and what is corrupt may turn out differently. Treading on such moral territory is inevitable because it forms the foundation of Büchner, Joyce, Walser, and Kafka's projects. If, contrary to Hegel's intentions, the existing conditions themselves turn out to be corrupt, any acquiescing into them would be either cynical or naïve.

Clearly, Kipling and Barrie, who stand on the opposite side, are, if anything, the latter. They act on the assumption that the corruption can be controlled, that the existing system is healthy at its core. Therefore, they maintain the faith in the utility and appositeness of the *Bildungsroman* as an adequate symbolic form for describing their present. In this view, it does not need to be discarded, only readjusted. It is telling that both books feature in their centers what one could call neutralizing agents. Their role is to represent absolute danger to the system, thus relieving the other characters from this burden. Peter Pan concentrates these way-

³⁵ "In the course of the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* had performed three great symbolic tasks. It had contained the unpredictability of social change, representing it through the fiction of youth: a turbulent segment of life, no doubt, but with a clear beginning, and an unmistakable end. At a micro-narrative level, furthermore, the structure of the novelistic episode had established the flexible, anti-tragic modality of modern experience. Finally, the novel's many-sided, unheroic hero had embodied a new kind of subjectivity: everyday, worldly, pliant, 'normal'. A smaller, more peaceful history; within it, a fuller experience; and a weaker, but more versatile Ego: a perfect compound for the Great Socialization of the European middle classes. But problems change, and old solutions stop working." Moretti, 2000, 230.

ward energies, the definitive protest against the system, enabling everyone else after a sort of rebellious puberty to rejoin their places amid the cogs and wheels of the societal machine.³⁶ Which is also Kim's likely fate—he may be drawn to the Lama's all-encompassing spirituality, but the rational principle, the very opposite of the Lama's spirituality, is overwhelmingly strong in him. This smart, pragmatic ingenuity was the major motor of the plot and of his own and the Lama's success. Thus, Kipling may easily resist an interpretive closure at the end; he can nonetheless be sure the point is taken.

Taking the cue from Büchner's thwarted revolutionary ambitions and his headlong plunge into literature, the anti-*Bildungsromane* of the first decade of the twentieth century harbor revolutionary impulses. The first chapter spells out the significance of the failed 1848 revolution—essentially realizing and exacerbating Büchner's intuitions—for the growing distrust in the bourgeois utopia and thus the *Bildungsroman* model as its literary form. Since its effects were much more palpable in continental Europe than in Britain, it is not surprising that Kipling and Barrie were much less prone to incorporate the ramifications in their writings. In addition, the relationship between empire and colonies was an altogether different one in England and Germany. Around 1900, England was at its colonial peak, while Germany was still scrambling for its “place under the sun.”³⁷ In consequence, a ne-

³⁶ This is even true for James Hook who in death accepts their workings and obeys their rules.

³⁷ *Fürst Bülow's Reden nebst urkundlichen Beiträgen zu seiner Politik. Mit Erlaubnis des Reichskanzlers gesammelt und herausgegeben von Johannes Penzler*. Vol 1, 1897–1903 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1907) 6–8. The origins of the policy can be traced to a Reichstag debate on 6 December 1897

glect of nationalism, manifest in the rejection of maturity and thus responsible citizenship, had a very different meaning in both countries, respectively. The British viewpoint is naturally more outward, enabling Esty to write of “the historical specificity of the modernist era [...] at the dialectical switchpoint between residual nineteenth-century narratives of global development and emergent twentieth-century suspicion of such narratives as universalist and Eurocentric.”³⁸ If one regards Esty’s “colonial *Bildungsromane*”³⁹, for which his assessment is certainly true, beside their German counterparts, the balance is slightly shifted. Instead of the effort of assimilating into form “the dialectic of a developmental time-concept that is undoing itself” (196), the second aspect of Hegel’s definition of the *Bildungsroman*, the acquiescence in the status quo, or rather the protest against it, comes to the fore. It is only by way of this Anglo-German synopsis that the entire picture of the modernist problematization of the *Bildungsroman* form emerges.

While generally adhering to good citizenship as the desirable outcome of the individual’s development, both Kipling and Barrie rely on “imps of perversity” (Žižek) to articulate the inherent unease of their narrative structure. At the time of their writing, the “Committee on Physical Deterioration” developed strategies that

during which German Foreign Secretary Bernhard von Bulow stated, “[i]n one word: We wish to throw no one into the shade, but we demand our own place in the sun.” (“Mit einem Worte: wir wollen niemand in den Schatten stellen, aber wir verlangen auch unseren Platz an der Sonne.”)

³⁸ Esty, 196.

³⁹ A few years before *Unseasonable Youth*, Esty published its kernel under this title. See Joshua Esty, “The Colonial Bildungsroman: The Story of an African Farm and the Ghost of Goethe,” *Victorian Studies* 49:3 (2007).

would prevent the English youth from subsiding into drinks and drugs and instill them with a stronger sense of patriotism. The shock of the near lost Boer War in South Africa ran deep. The chapter on *Peter Pan* elaborates on the astonishing relationship between Robert Baden-Powell, one of the few and far between war heroes, and J. M. Barrie's novel and play.

Both *Kim* and *Peter Pan* are drawn back and forth between the old model and the new. Kipling in particular emphasizes time and again the individual's necessity for freedom from the institutions—while never straying too far from them. In *Stalky & Co.*, for example, the fictionalized account of Kipling's school years at the United Services College in Devon, which he attended as a boy, the youthful characters create "little lairs whittled out of the heart of the prickly bushes, full of stumps, odd root-ends, and spikes, but, since they were strictly forbidden, palaces of delight."⁴⁰ At the same time, these rebellious episodes are interwoven with a general narrative aiming toward responsible citizenship. The narrator overlooks decades to come; his tone is thus shrouded in nostalgia, which lends the stories their feel of warmth and benevolence. In her introduction to the Oxford's World Classics edition, Isabel Quigly writes: "However boyish and exuberant the mood of *Stalky & Co.*, the future looms over all its action. This or that boy, we are told now and then, quite casually as he enters the story, will die in action in such-and-such a place, within the next three or four years."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Stalky & Co.*, ed. by Isabel Quigly (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xvi. Incidentally, Lionel Dunsterville, the inspiration for *Stalky*, went on to become a

The discussed German authors, in comparison, tend to be much less in touch with the military and political sphere. On the breakout of the First World War, Kafka jots down a note in his diary about swimming school in the afternoon. He, as well as Walser, will become famous only posthumously, after lives in the margins of public attention. Büchner was only rediscovered around 1900 after decades of oblivion. Musil enjoyed some fame with *Törleß*, but was soon eclipsed from the literary limelight. Appropriately, their literature is stranger and more abstract than that by the English crowd-pleasers, who were greatly successful from their beginnings. Their characters as a rule seem unpolitical, with a much looser connection to society. Kim may be an orphan, yet he encounters a series of proxy fathers, the Lama, Mahbub Ali and Colonel Creighton, and is increasingly instrumental in the dodges of the Great Game. Likewise, Peter Pan may be the independent sovereign of his own life, yet Wendy and her brothers come from and eventually return to their family. Barrie makes sure to tell us of their afterlives as respectable British subjects.⁴² In contrast, Kafka's Karl is a pariah, expelled from his family for misdemeanors prior to the plot. Walser's Jakob has run away from his noble lineage in order to become "an utterly charming little zero." Only Musil's Törleß will head

general who led the so-called Dunsterforce across present-day Iraq and Iran towards Caucasus and Baku. He and Kipling remained friends all their lives.

⁴² "Wendy was a married woman, and Peter was no more to her than a little dust in the box in which she had kept her toys. Wendy was grown up. [...] You may see the twins and Nib and Curly any day going to an office, each carrying a little bag and an umbrella. Michael is an engine-driver. Slightly married a lady of title, and so he became a lord. You see that judge in a wig coming out at the iron door? That used to be Tootles. The bearded man who doesn't know any story to tell to his children was once John." Barrie, 2005, 134.

home, having discovered the boarding school to be a most cruel place, facing years of homeschooling that are but vaguely adumbrated. Still, even here there is never any sense of a larger hospitable home alias society, whose citizen one might aspire to be. Whereas the world opens for Barrie and Kipling's characters, it shrinks and shrivels on the continent.

As with any literary trend, the youths refusing to mature do not fall out of the sky. One could trace their preference at least to *Bartleby*, Melville's passive-aggressive scrivener from 1853. He is not necessarily young, or at any rate his age does not play an important role—in a story, by the way, which starts like this: “I am a rather elderly man.” It is however not *Bartleby*, but his employer, incidentally also the narrator, who says this. *Bartleby* seems to refuse if not maturity in the immediate sense, then at least any demands placed upon him by society. Initially, he will do some copying, but gradually, he altogether abandons his work. He even refuses to go home, so eventually the office must move. At the end he dies in prison, presumably because he even preferred not to eat. In the supposed undirectionality of his protest (which makes it even unclear if it is a protest at all, as long as a protest needs an object in the way a transitional verb needs one) seems to lie his kinship to the characters of this thesis. In 2000, the Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas produced a metafiction called *Bartleby & Co.*, where *Bartleby* becomes the emblem of all “artists of refusal,” including Kafka, Beckett, Musil and Rimbaud. Like most of their characters, he is a strikingly gentle proto-punk.

A similarly hopeless case, from the standpoint of society can be encountered in Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859), published just a few years after "Bartleby". The eponymous hero is a generous nobleman apparently incapable of making decisions or undertaking any significant actions. His languor goes so far that he hardly ever manages to leave his room; the first few dozen pages are devoted to his effort to get out of bed. At the time, the book was often read as a satire on the Russian aristocracy, which lingered on in spite of having become, with regard to its socio-economic function, all but superfluous. Oblomov does not even have to utter the phrase "I prefer not to" because nobody can force him anyway. Financially independent, he is a perpetual procrastinator without remorse.

In contrast to these supposed precursors the youths refusing to mature are surrounded by an atmosphere of sneaking despair. It is not even that they would generally prefer not to; after all, the desire to become an utterly charming zero is a desire, and not even mathematically a negative one. Jakob is rather eager to pick up what is required of a servant, who he can well imagine to become. Rather than nothing at all, he is chiefly interested in his own deterioration. He is ambitiously striving for downward mobility. Similarly, Karl is a typical Kafka figure in his assiduousness and industry. It is just that the outside world does not seem to have a place for him; *Amerika*, rather than the country of endless opportunity, tells Karl time and again that it prefers not to—employ or at least welcome him. The refusal that those books radiate is a more sinister, tricky one. Far from the glaring satire of *Oblomov*, it takes an indirect route. Or a rather direct, but almost solemn one, as

in Joyce's *Portrait*, which tells a story of liberation, with Paris as the symbol for artistic freedom from all strains of society.

Again, Adorno's description of modernist art as assaulting the distrusted "objective world" by way of flinching from it is key for understanding what is at stake here. For this objective world always remains the center of attention. It is very much the external object of protest that *Bartleby* and *Oblomov* are lacking. Even if warped by the narrative perspective, which concentrates on its other side, youth that hopes not to grow up, this objective world is clearly the (aptly named) vanishing point. Youth functions as a cipher for the protest against a political, pedagogical and military "maturity", read: the existing conditions in Hegel's sense. The books that partake in this tradition do seldom, if at all, arrive at positive results. The topic of youth defying maturity symbolizes the problem rather than the solution. It is suitable as an arena of a symbolic battle whose extreme positions could be called totalitarianism vs. anti-authoritarianism, technocracy and bureaucracy vs. individual freedom, or fate vs. choice. In this matrix, crude for the purpose of simplicity, youth represents possibility whereas maturity represents closure. Still, as particularly *Törleß*, *Portrait* and *Amerika* show, and in contrast to the implicit utopia of youth, the actual youths as narrative characters can assume any position in this struggle. That is why the novels are permeated by a deep ambivalence.

A central argument of this thesis proposes that youth—poetically devised and narrated in exactly this way, a deliberately stunted youth, an artistically arrested

development—embodies modernism just as much as the formal innovations usually associated with it, that is, stream of consciousness, fragmentation of experience, simultaneity of events and the like. Of all the writers assembled here it was Musil who thought about this the most explicitly, in the form of a self-interview. He asked himself a question, adopting the role of an impatient reader who could not understand his choice of topic, youth without the horizon of maturity. The fictitious allegation was that his *Törleß* would merely be about the “unauthoritative” or “lightweight” [*unmaßgeblich*] issue of a sixteen-year-old” and would “pay unintelligibly much honor to an era that has little to do with adults.” To this Musil answered: “The sixteen-year-old is a ruse.”⁴³

Already at the time he wrote *Törleß* the later author of *Man Without Qualities* was, as the first chapter will show, deeply wary of the premises of narration in an era fraught with conflicting ideologies. In order to narrate, Musil explains, there is the intimation that one knows not only the gist of the story, but also its background, the characters’ motivations etc. An earlier time had for the same reason rejected the omniscient narrator. Musil is more consequent; he realizes that an acceptance of any type of narrator with limited knowledge still presupposes some degree of “absolute” knowledge—absolute in the sense that it is not contested within the frame of the narrative. While this realization yielded the poetic construction of a character without qualities, because the author refrained from ascribing any, Musil saw one possible exception: the realm of youth, if conceived as a space of

⁴³ Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*, ed. by Adolf Frisé, vol. 8 (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) 996. My translation.

unstable identities. As long as playfulness, rather than seriousness, reigns supreme, as long as today you are the cowboy and I am the Indian and tomorrow it is the other way around, the problem of a fixed narrative stance does not arise. This fragile construct is shattered, of course, as soon as the horizon opens up to the possibility of maturity, effectively enchainning the narrative to an unequivocal meaning.

In her recent book *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* Sarah Cole has selected a set of books constructed around instances of friendship and thus around a coupling of characters, an aspect I do not look at specifically. It is nonetheless striking that the major writers of her study—E. M. Forster, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and the war poets—tend to have, as Cole writes, “a slightly equivocal status in modernism—canonical, yet a little off center, in the sense that their texts tend not to perform the kinds of radical experimentation often valorized in and as modernism.”⁴⁴

If the same is not true for the *writers* I discuss—particularly Joyce, Kafka and Musil can with respect to modernism hardly be called off center—, it is certainly true for the specific *texts* I will talk about. In relevant discussions the works foregrounded here are usually eclipsed by their more archetypical neighbors (and usually successors): In terms of sheer modernism *The Man Without Qualities* outperforms *Confusions of Young Törleß* as easily as *Ulysses* does with *Portrait of the Artist* or *The Trial* with *Amerika*. Potentially, the topic of male friendship assumes a similar

⁴⁴ Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 14.

place in the array of overlooked or at least underestimated topical modernisms as youth defying maturity does. Thus, Cole's writers would only be "threshold modernists", as she calls them, in the perspective of scholars holding the formal feats of modernist writing overly dear.

For her, a central quality of friendship is its power to consolidate, to prepare common ground in an ideologically cluttered time. Of the major texts of this thesis, *Kim* and *Peter Pan* have a comparable agenda. It is hence no surprise how much they fit the following description, which is vital to Cole's argument: "In the early twentieth century, both the power and the potential for bereavement associated with male friendship were typically intertwined with such major cultural narratives as imperialism and war" (3). Mind you, this is even true for *Kim* and *Peter Pan*, although both novels offer but rather weak and unconvincing candidates for friendship. Kim and the Lama get along on a more instinctive level; they understand each other in spite of their different ways to engage with the world—Kim utterly pragmatic, street-smart and rational, the Lama intuitive, spiritual, reflective. Rather than a friendship, this is a relation between tutor and pupil—even if time and again, depending on what is at stake, the respective roles may change. Peter, on the other hand, is much too selfish and oblivious to qualify as a real friend. Already one year after the adventure told in the book he is unable to remember either Captain Hook or Tinker Bell. The latter—his companion of years, in love with him and sharing his home under the ground—he brutally pigeonholes as just another fairy, who has somehow disappeared, but he cannot remember how:

“There are such a lot of them. [...] I expect she is no more.”⁴⁵ In this way, these books almost seem like parodies, cynical warpings, at any rate strange variations of the genre. And yet the narratives of imperialism and war are their underlying blueprints.

Between Germany and England there is a conspicuous difference in attitude toward such authority, at least as reflected in the discussed books. While the general atmosphere is certainly comparable, there are a few possible culprits to blame for this discrepancy. Jon Savage emphasizes the more “rigid nationalistic ideology of the German upper classes,” effectively limiting the freedoms of bourgeois children. Any hope for social upward mobility was “blocked by the glass ceiling of Prussian privilege. These tensions were compounded in all classes by the vexed relationship between fathers and sons.”⁴⁶ Savage goes on to point out the differences of the school systems: the German day-gymnasiums, with their emphasis on academic hothousing, strict discipline, and their “lack of the peer group support that marked British public schools” (ibid.) As a consequence, their students were less angst-ridden—and potentially more open to friendship in general and in particular to friendship of a type that was not merely a mostly defensive insurgency against the authoritarian surroundings, but, at least occasionally, their buttress.

⁴⁵ Barrie, 2005, 152.

⁴⁶ All Savage, 103. He also relates one especially bleak statistic: “In his study *Le suicide*, the sociologist Emile Durkheim compared rates in France, Italy, and Germany: the highest among the sixteen- to twenty-year-old age group were in Saxony and Prussia” (103).

There is, however, a cruelly ironic point to the putatively greater avoidance of adult guidance in Germany. In contrast to the Boy Scouts the popular Wandervogel movement—similar in its love of outdoors and the promise of peer bonding—was not as hierarchically structured, and especially not dominated by a single founding father. Yet over time, individual strands such as Hermann Popert’s group “der Vortrupp” (the Vanguard) became potent. They promoted racial hygiene and castigated decadence, alcohol and tobacco. Savage writes: “In the lack of any leadership imposed from above by adults, the youth of Germany chose to police themselves. Their attempts to live outside adult restrictions were subverted from within by the very authoritarianism they were attempting to reject” (108).

Other approaches to the difficulties of maturity in modernist literature such as Michael Kane’s *Modern Men* are predominantly interested in tracing psychological concepts. In his analyses of Wilde, Conrad, Stoker and Lawrence, among others, Kane encounters men attempting to define themselves against what they imagine as “femininity”, around themselves as well as within. At length, Kane describes how men sought to overcome or find a socially acceptable expression for their narcissistic, homosexual or even sadomasochist libido. Also, he hopes to reveal “some of the contradictions inherent in that point of view.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ “It is hoped that this book, by examining some of the cultural products of European men around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, will reveal some of the ways in which the myths of ‘phallo-narcissism’ were reproduced, questioned or modified as well as some of the contradictions inherent in that point of view.” Michael Kane, *Modern Men: Mapping Masculinity in English and German Literature, 1880–1930* (London/New York: Cassell, 1999) vi.

By contrast, I am not interested, or at any rate not chiefly, in literature as a means of self-analysis or of self-delusion—even though the idea is not at all beside the point regarding most of the authors discussed here, especially Kafka and Walsler, let alone J. M. Barrie. Even though for his theses Kane relies on works of literature, his thought clearly originates in historico-psychological studies of the (proto-)fascist character such as Klaus Theweleits influential *Male Fantasies* (1977/78).

And what about female fantasies? The reason that they hardly seem to figure in the literature of reluctant adolescents can be traced to the kernel of the very concept. In 1904 Stanley Hall publishes the first monograph on adolescence, eponymously titled. In two volumes he describes youth as a specific formative stage in the process of anybody's inner life. His method relies on a "biogenetic premise," thought up by Darwin and refined by Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919). The idea is that the individual repeats in his maturation the cultural development of mankind.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the child is mentally surrounded by the mythical creatures of antiquity and hence profits from an adventurous pedagogy. Afterwards adolescence approximates romanticism with a newly budding enthusiasm for love and life. The future comes to the center of attention; youth wants to fight, conquer, achieve. According to Hall, adolescence is a rather contradictory phase, simultaneously characterized by euphoria and depression, good conduct and misdemeanor, loneliness

⁴⁸ As Hall put it, "infancy, childhood and youth are the three bunches of keys to unlock the past history of the race." D. C. Phillips & Mavis E. Kelly, "Hierarchical Theories of Development in Education and Psychology," *Harvard Educational Review* 45:3 (1975): 354.

and communion, seriousness and silliness, etc. Hall's pioneering ideas would define the debate on youth for decades to come.⁴⁹ *Adolescence* marks the paradigm shift from youth as a merely biological and medical entity to an independent psychological stage of development. That Hall exclusively talks about male adolescence becomes apparent when one recalls his take on women:

Das Ewig-Weibliche is no iridescent fiction but a very definable reality, and means perennial youth. It means that woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as man does, but lingers in, magnifies and glorifies this culminating stage of life with its all-sided interests, its convertibility of emotions, its enthusiasm, and zest for all that is good, beautiful, true, and heroic.⁵⁰

At first sight this seems to make female characters the ideal exponents of this thesis, yet the opposite is the case. Essentially, Hall does not grant women the potential to mature. "Woman" in Hall's sense becomes tantamount to adolescence, which is merely a passing stage for men. Whoever ideally embodies adolescence from birth to death naturally knows none, being completely steeped in it. Hence, for women any refusal of maturity would be meaningless and absurd, like a protest against immortality or the ability to fly. It is only the deliberate decision not to mature, the willful avoidance of the signifiers of adulthood that make the relevant characters stand out.

Such a view of women is pervasive at the time; its proponents range from the sociologist Georg Simmel, for whom woman represents an unchanging essence

⁴⁹ For the reception of Hall's theory see John Demos & Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (1969).

⁵⁰ Granville Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904) 626. Full text online: <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Hall/Adolescence/chap17.htm>.

“das Seiende”), while man stands for constant development (“das Werdende”)⁵¹, to Otto Weininger—today primarily associated with antisemitism and misogyny—who codified similar beliefs in his 1903 book *Sex and Character*, which became hugely influential after his suicide at the age of 23.⁵² A typical passage reads: “*Woman* then is the *expression* of the fall of man, she is the objectified sexuality of Man and nothing else. Eve was never in Paradise.”⁵³

Birgit Dahlke points out that in this manner an “older pattern is updated” around 1900: “Whether *Wertber*, *Wilhelm Meister*, *Anton Reiser*, *Der blonde Eckbert* or *Zwerg Nase* – the critical heroes [‘Krisenhelden’] of the transitional period are predominantly male. This is long before the concept of ‘adolescence’ appears and would not change with the turn-of-the-century novels of adolescence.”⁵⁴ Those novels thus feature exclusively male protagonists. Dahlke:

⁵¹ Georg Simmel, *Schriften zur Philosophie und Soziologie der Geschlechter*, ed. by Klaus Christian Kohnke (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1985) 27.

⁵² He was famously adored by the likes of Ludwig Wittgenstein and August Strindberg, who wrote a glowing review of *Sex and Character*, saying that it “probably solved the hardest of all problems”, the “woman problem.” See Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 142. Sengoopta relates that in his obituary of Weininger, Strindberg declared that “only the mentally retarded would doubt the superiority of the male sex over the female. All of the spiritual riches of humanity had been created by males; woman was negative and passive, whereas man was positive and active. Woman’s love for man, Strindberg opined, was ‘50% animal heat and 50% hate’” (ibid.).

⁵³ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, ed. by Laura Marcus et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005) 414.

⁵⁴ Birgit Dahlke, *Jünglinge der Moderne: Jugenkult und Männlichkeit in der Literatur um 1900* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006) 37.

The sisters, mothers, maids and prostitutes seldom leave their subservient roles. Female adolescence is thematized in the texts of those authors primarily with respect to the male transitional phase. Psychological depth, inner conflicts and labyrinthine entanglements up to suicide are conceded merely to the figure of the male adolescent (78f.).

The recurring scenes of those conflicts are male boarding schools (Musil, Joyce, Walser, Kipling) or adventurous travels (Walser, Kafka, Barrie, Kipling)—where women are either utterly absent or appear, as in *Peter Pan*, merely as mother figures who alternately take care of the boys (in daily routine) or are taken care of (in moments of danger). In short: “The boys are subjects, whose future the authors are seeing to; the girl is portrayed as an object of the plot [...]. Any activity, including failure, is reserved for male characters” (79).

This instance of suppression dialectically emerges from an anxiety. Peter Sprengel begins his literary history from 1900 to 1918 with a “portrait of the epoch” whose first chapter is called “authority crisis” with the subsections “youth’s suicide” and “fathers and sons.”⁵⁵ The precarious situation of male youth, its attempt at self-assertion, is a topic that this thesis will often revisit—both on the level of the texts and of the author’s lives. The upcoming discussion of Kafka’s “The Judgment” may aptly serve as a foretaste.

3. The personal dispositions of virtually all the writers looming large here are too striking to overlook. Diaries, letters and contemporary witnesses attest how their private lives were not left untouched by the interrelations of the apparatus of youth around 1900. Rather than the strategies they employed in order to deal with

⁵⁵ Peter Sprengel, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur, 1900–1918: Von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004).

their specific issues, I hope to uncover the latter's literary potential. Kafka's relation to the idea of the child or the childlike, for example, may be the single most useful perspective to approach his literature.

His exceeding fascination with the topic cannot be missed. Two of his most famous stories, "The Metamorphosis" and "The Judgment", primarily deal with the topic. Max Brod notes that Kafka was content to subsume his entire oeuvre under the title "an attempt at escape from the father."⁵⁶ The conflicted relationship to his own father, culminating in the "Letter to the Father" comprising more than 100 pages and never sent, is well known. About himself Kafka said: "My life is hesitation before birth."⁵⁷ In his diary, the 36-year-old notes that as a child he was "not sure of a thing" and in continuous need of "a new confirmation of my existence." And without any prospect for development, he conceives of himself as "in truth a dispossessed son."⁵⁸

Alt, author of the recent extensive Kafka biography *The Eternal Child*, regards these statements as well-considered responses to an underlying need: "The psychological distance of the child will constitute a main element of the biographical self-conception."⁵⁹ Even though aware of his literary status, Kafka never put down the role of the later-born hesitant to grow up. The logic of such a model, Alt writes, is

⁵⁶ Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1960) 25.

⁵⁷ Entry in his diary from January 1922. Cited in Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 71. (Even though Blanchot wrongly dates it to January 1911.)

⁵⁸ Cited in Alt, 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 51. The original reads: "Die psychische Distanzhaltung des Kindes bildet später ein tragendes Element des biographischen Selbstentwurfs."

“observant to the principle of contrast according to which the father must be strong, so that the son may shine in the role of the weak outsider.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, his “love stories float into catastrophes, since the adoption of the role of husband or father would have destroyed his identity as son.”⁶¹ The decisive twist for Alt is that Kafka cultivates the fear of his father with an obsessive lust, “because for him it constitutes the condition of his existence.”⁶² While the corresponding chapter develops this idea in detail, a few more words may be appropriate here, particularly because Kafka’s extreme stance illustrates the symbolic conflict between fathers and sons that likewise haunts his fellow writers—even though they may at times, as in Kipling’s case, feel more comfortable in the role of the father.

To be sure, similarly devised narratives abound at the time among the fledgling German expressionists—for understandable reasons within the societal context outlined above. In a quick survey of the years between 1910 and 1920, Alt lists Reinhard Johann Sorges drama *Der Bettler* (The Beggar; 1912), Walter Hasenclever’s *Der Sohn* (The Son; 1914) and Franz Werfel’s *Nicht der Mörder, der Ermordete ist schuldig* (Not the Murderer, He Who Was Murdered Is Guilty; 1920). The notable difference to Kafka’s stories—and, by proxy, to virtually all the writers of the group I propose—is that these texts indulge in emancipatory fantasies of killing off senile

⁶⁰ Ibid., 21. “Die Logik eines solchen Modells gehorcht dem Prinzip des Kontrasts, nach dem der Vater stark sein muß, damit der Sohn die Rolle des lebensschwachen Außenseiters angemessen ausfüllen kann.”

⁶¹ Ibid., 15. “Seine Liebesgeschichten treiben in Katastrophen, da der Eintritt in die Rolle des Ehemanns oder Vaters seine Identität als Sohn zerstört hätte.”

⁶² Ibid., 15. “[...] der seine Furcht vor dem Vater mit obsessiver Lust kultiviert, weil sie für ihn die Bedingung seiner Existenz bildet.”

fathers or just stopping short of it because of this very senility, in other words, out of a pity that is itself born out of a feeling of grandiosity. Such moments exist in Kafka, too, most strikingly in “The Judgment”, rampant with gleeful death wishes, but nonetheless even this text ends with the son’s suicide. In line with the general strategy employed by the modernists of maturity-defying youth, Kafka, perfidiously, has the youthful protagonist Georg eventually accept the irrational guilt assigned by his father. Consequently, he leaps off a bridge.⁶³ Alt comments: “In this layout, no vote was allotted to the dithyrambic celebration of youth.”⁶⁴

As far as one can glean from the elusive “Judgment”, this is the situation: Since the death of his mother two years ago, Georg and his father have been sharing the household. The aging and heartbroken father has gradually withdrawn from the family business, with Georg succeeding him. In the meantime, commercial operations have soared. It is unclear whether this is due to fortunate contriving still on the father’s part, to Georg’s recent achievements, or to sheer luck. All three possibilities are suggested, alternatively. Yet Georg and his father are not alone, two more characters complete the personnel: a distant friend, reputedly poor, unhappy and alone in St. Petersburg, where he is “resigning himself to becoming a permanent bachelor,”⁶⁵ and Frieda Brandenfeld, Georg’s fiancée. The basic problem

⁶³ As Georg dies, Kafka writes that “at this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge.” Kafka, 1993, 17. The German word translated as “traffic” is “Verkehr”, with the double meaning of traffic and (sexual) intercourse. In the fall of 1912, Kafka told Brod that “when I wrote it, I had in mind a violent ejaculation.” Brod, 129.

⁶⁴ Alt, 328. “Für die dithyrambische Feier der Jugend war in dieser Ordnung keine Stimme vorgesehen.”

⁶⁵ Kafka, 1993, 4.

propelling the story is Georg's unease to tell his friend about the recent engagement: "All he desired was to leave undisturbed the idea of the home town which his friend must have built up to his own content during the long interval" (5). Yet Frieda complains: "'So he won't be coming to our wedding,' said she, 'and yet I have a right to get to know all your friends'" (6). So Georg puts his considerations aside and writes a letter, mentioning the impending marriage. Before posting it, however, he sees his father for council, a first in months, even though his room is just "across a small lobby" (8). "Oh yes. To your friend," says his father on hearing about the letter, but "with peculiar emphasis" (9).

This is the turning point of the story; all of a sudden, the friend's very existence is cast into doubt: "Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?" (11). Georg rises in embarrassment, supposedly ashamed of this confirmation of his father's failing memory. This reading is supported by Georg's evasive reaction. "Old age must be taken care of," he mumbles and states that if the business were going to undermine his father's health, he would be ready to close it down forever. Yet the father presses the issue. Desperately, Georg tries to remind him:

"Just think back a bit, Father," said Georg, lifting his father from the chair and slipping off his dressing gown as he stood feebly enough, "it'll soon be three years since my friend came to see us last. I remember that you used not to like him very much. At least twice I kept you from seeing him, although he was actually sitting with me in my room. I could quite well understand your dislike of him, my friend has his peculiarities" (12).

Meanwhile, silently, Georg reflects on his father's disheveled and untidy condition. Engaging in some rudimentary care, such as changing his socks, he determines that—apparently contrary to a previous tacit understanding between him and his

fiancée about his father's future—"he made a quick, firm decision to take him into his own future establishment" (13). Kafka adds slyly: "It almost looked, on closer inspection, as if the care he meant to lavish there on his father might come too late" (ibid.). Why, because of the dirty underwear? Because of his father's incipient madness? Or because the discord between them is already too unsurmountable? The text is deliberately vague in its insinuation.

Then, the father "springing erect" in bed, the scene erupts in a clash. In a confusing cascade of allegations involving his supposed supersession—"and even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you"—, Georg's father admits to the friend's existence:

"Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years. [...] And now that you thought you'd got him down, so far down that you could set your bottom on him and sit on him and he wouldn't move, then my fine son makes up his mind to get married!" Georg stared at the bogey conjured up by his father. His friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew too well, touched his imagination as never before. Lost in the vastness of Russia he saw him. At the door of an empty, plundered warehouse he saw him. Among the wreckage of his showcases, the slashed remnants of his wares, the falling gas brackets, he was just standing up. Why did he have to go so far away! (14).

The father, now in a frenzy, blames the fiancée for Georg's shortcomings and deviousness. "Because she lifted up her skirts [...], and mimicking her he lifted his shirt so high that one could see the scar on his thigh from his war wound" (13f.). It gets increasingly bizarre. His friend had been saved from betrayal, after all, the father triumphantly claims. He himself had "been representing him here on the spot" (15). To which Georg cannot but retort: "comedian!" His father takes up the cue—

“that’s a good expression”—, and he asks a rhetorical question—what else would have been left to him? Yet the question is not so much the point as the insertion introducing it: “and while you’re answering me be you still my living son” (ibid.).

This is the blow anticipating the ending, the eponymous judgment, a death sentence. “Now he’ll lean forward,” thinks Georg, “what if he topples and smashes himself! These words went hissing through his mind“ (16). However, the father does not fall. He announces that he will sweep Georg’s bride from his very side and that his Petersburg friend “knows it all”, that this has been his only concern. For proof, he throws Georg the newspaper he had been reading when his son entered the room: “An old newspaper, with a name entirely unknown to Georg.” And he cries: “How long a time you’ve taken to grow up!” To which Georg, exasperated, replies: “So you’ve been lying in wait for me!” (17).

His father said pityingly, in an offhand manner: “I suppose you wanted to say that sooner. But now it doesn’t matter.” And in a louder voice: “So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you’ve known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being! —And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!”

Georg rushes out of the room, the “crash with which his father fell on the bed behind him was still in his ears as he fled” (18). As he clutches to the railing, “as a starving man clutches food” and swings himself over “like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents’ pride,” he calls in a low voice: “‘Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same,’ and let himself drop” (ibid.).

Before I propose a reading of this narrative counterpart to the Möbius strip, with mutually intertwined identities—a reading, by the way, which is essentially Kafka’s own—here is the rather famous background on the story. In his diary on 23 September, 1912, Kafka notes:

This story, “The Judgement,” I wrote at one sitting during the night of the 22nd–23rd, from ten o’clock at night to six o’clock in the morning. I was hardly able to pull my legs out from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved my own weight on my back. How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up”⁶⁶

He adds: “Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul.” He explicitly mentions that while writing the story he had “thoughts about Freud, of course” (ibid.). On 11 February 1913 and also in his diary, Kafka adds some commentary, because “the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach to the body itself and the strength of desire to do so.”⁶⁷

How does such midwifery on his own behalf, the birth of his own “serious” authorship, as previous commentators have said,⁶⁸ go together with statements such as “my life is hesitation before birth”? In the same way, I would say, that the metaphors of birth and of initiation to authorial maturity coalesce, in the nuclear fusion of “a great fire,” that is the never known ecstasy of the real thing—“only in

⁶⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. by Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1948) 212f. Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Max Brod (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1946) vol. VII, 214.

⁶⁷ Kafka, 1948, 214.

⁶⁸ For example see Gerhard Neumann, *Franz Kafka, Das Urteil: Text, Materialien, Kommentar* (München: C. Hanser, 1981) 75.

this way can writing be done.” And in the same way that in “The Judgment” all identities constantly shift their shapes: Georg, his father, his friend, and Kafka himself—they are all bound together in an enormous instance of prosopopoeia, a speaking through masks, swirling like figurines on a carousel.

Kafka goes on to comment that Georg Bendemann “has as many letters as Kafka and the two vowels are in the same position, ‘Mann’ is presumably a compassionate attempt to strengthen this poor ‘Bende’ for his struggles.”⁶⁹ Also, Frieda Brandenfeld shares her initials with Felice Bauer. Kafka acknowledges this and suggests that the first part of “Brandenfeld” was inspired by Brandenburg, the area around Berlin, where Bauer lived. And on the suffix “Feld” (field) he remarked that he could have associated it with “Bauer” (farmer). He goes on saying that the friend “is the link between father and son, he is their strongest common bond” (ibid.). Rather than persons made of flesh and blood, the characters resemble functions in a Saussurian scheme, signifier and signified, with arrows pointing to one another. And while there may even be a referent (which Saussure famously banned from his theory because he regarded him as exceeding the linguist’s competence), namely Kafka, he never clearly emerges because the arrows point in all directions at the same time and the positions of signifier and signified are in continuous exchange.

Not only is the friend the link between father and son, Georg is also his own father. “Sitting alone at his window,” Kafka continues his commentary, “Georg

⁶⁹ Cited in the appended commentary on Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 141.

rummages voluptuously in this consciousness of what they have in common, *believes he has his father within him*, and would be at peace with everything if it were not for a fleeting, sad thoughtfulness” (my emphasis, *Diaries*, 215). Consequently, if Georg is Georg *and* his father, he must also incorporate the friend, since the latter is merely the link between them. But what if the most significant character is in fact neither Georg, nor his father, but exactly this (missing) link, the distant friend?

Significant in the sense that he approximates Kafka’s own (secret) stance. Sensed from afar, in the fall of 1911, the impending marriage with Felice already dangles as a sword of Damocles over the solitude Kafka conjures as the only possible atmosphere for his writing.⁷⁰ His engagement party in May 1914 left him feeling trapped, as he later confided in his diary: “Had they sat me down in a corner bound in real chains, placed policemen in front of me and let me look on simply like that, it could not have been worse.”⁷¹ The engagement was broken off soon afterwards. Kafka was uneasy to consummate in reality what, as many years of avid letter writing attest, he loved to play with as an idea, a weightless toy in the hands of a cunning child. This is, I believe, not too crass a remark. In his entry recording the confrontation with Felice’s parents when he made known things had to end, Kafka himself writes: “They agreed that I was right, there was nothing, or not much, that could be said against me. Devilish in my innocence.”⁷² Which is, of

⁷⁰ “I must be alone a great deal. What I accomplished was only the result of being alone.” Brod, 142.

⁷¹ Kafka, 1948, 275.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 293.

course, an almost verbatim quote from “The Judgement”: “An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being.”

This astonishing turnaround of attributions of significance is what I mean by the shapeshifting prosopopoeia of the story. Kafka spreads his anxieties like in a chamber of mirrors; the reflections are meant to confuse. The addressee of the “father’s” blame is really not Georg, but the bachelor in St. Petersburg—who is, this is important to keep in mind, merely a different version of one and the same character engaged in a long soliloquy. As a consequence, St. Petersburg is but a metaphor for inner retreat, a place far removed from the constraints and necessities of social life. This is the deeper meaning behind Georg’s initial statement that he desired to leave unchallenged the “idea of the home town which his friend must have built up to his own content during the long interval.” The would-be bachelor, the immature, undeveloped child, who blames his seldom visits on unconvincing circumstances,⁷³ has made up the persona of Georg for the purpose of a social façade, a cunningly jovial deputy in “reality,” who claims to fulfill his manly duties—carry on his father’s business and get married. Once, when Kafka was supposed to replace his sick father in his business he protested, threatened with suicide and eventually did not have to do it. The sick period was to last for two weeks.⁷⁴

⁷³ “It was more than three years since his last visit, and for this he offered the lame excuse that the political situation in Russia was too uncertain, which apparently would not permit even the briefest absence of a small business man while it allowed hundreds of thousands of Russians to travel peacefully abroad.” Kafka, 1993, 5.

⁷⁴ Dagmar Fischer, *Franz Kafka, der tyrannische Sohn: Andro-Sphinx-Ödipus-und Kastration*.

So the father in “The Judgment”—while this may be Freud at his most vulgar, one could also say at his rawest—assumes the role of the superego, asking Georg: “Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?”, meaning: “Do you really have this Georg at home?” Which is essentially the same thing, that is, its reflection in the mirror. The St. Petersburg bachelor is actually the comedian, and Georg is the comedy he plays. Publicly, the bachelor would suppress his alter ego—“at least twice I kept you from seeing him, although he was actually sitting with me in my room”—and so it was up to the father to “represent” him: precisely as the bachelor (after the mother’s death), preferring the solitude of his own room, not busying himself with any official affairs. This is the reason why the suppressed bachelor, with the same qualities, “would have been a son after my own heart.” The fiancée, of course, hardly figures in this scheme. And why should she, chimera that she is, poor creature of subterfuge? Once the inveterate bachelor has come out, as in the figure of the father, he will sweep her aside swiftly, because her only function is the threat she poses to the undisturbed bachelorhood—“I have the right to know all of your friends.” It is probably not surprising to learn that when Kafka wrote to Felice about “The Judgment”, nine months after his reflections on it, he puzzled over its meaning: “I can’t find any, nor can I explain anything in it.”⁷⁵

Two astonishing things remain: the father’s statement “how long a time you’ve taken to grow up!” and the suicide. The first one, I think, is nothing short of the culmination of the story that captivated its author so much. The moment

tionskomplex: Schlüssel zum Verständnis seiner Prosa (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010) 369.

⁷⁵ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice* (London: Vintage, 1992) 265.

Kafka acknowledges his immaturity as a social being corresponds to the moment he attains maturity as a writer. The twist is the clandestine character of this acknowledgment; like in a confessional, it is made publicly and privately at once. “So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself;” the father says. He speaks of the big picture, the social panorama finally unfolding in its brutal, but fascinating complexity. “An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being!” Which is tantamount to the intricate entanglement of unsuspecting inner illusion and furtive outer denial.

The dialectics of the suicide are even more interesting. My ideas about it are indebted to Georges Bataille, great thinker of the ensnarements of lust and death, who in this spirit devoted an essay on Kafka.⁷⁶ Its emphasis is on the *jouissance* of dying, the sovereignty of its liberation, yet Bataille equates death with what he calls Kafka’s “perfect puerility” (154) or, less formal, the “totally childish attitude” (153) revealed by his work.⁷⁷ By childishness Bataille means an originally surprising readjustment of significances. The world experienced by the thus conceived child “once intoxicated us with its innocence—a world where each thing temporarily rejected that which made it a thing within the adult system” (154). Bataille’s Kafka is essentially Alt’s eternal child who, out of an inner necessity to remain connected to this wondrous world of unfamiliar correspondences, adopts an “identity as son.”

⁷⁶ “Kafka,” in Bataille, 1985.

⁷⁷ As one of Bataille’s intermediary headings summarizes: “The child’s happy exuberance is recovered in death’s expression of sovereign liberty” (164).

Bataille's merit lies in extrapolating Alt's insight that Kafka's "fear of his father constitutes the condition of his existence." Contrary to what one might believe, this fear did not lead to an avoidance or inner break with the father, Bataille says. "The odd thing about Kafka is that he wanted his father to understand him and to comply with the childishness of what he read and, later, of what he wrote" (155). Brod's note that Kafka was willing to subsume his entire oeuvre under the title "attempt at an escape from the father" is re-emphasized here; rather than on the escape, the stress is on the attempt. What Kafka really wanted to do, Bataille says, was "to live within the paternal sphere—as an exile" (157, Bataille's emphasis).

He [...] never wanted to be an adult or a father. In his own way he struggled all his life, and with full exercise of all his rights to enter his father's society, but he would only have accepted admission on one condition—that of remaining *the irresponsible child he was*. He pursued this desperate struggle relentlessly. He never had any hope: his only way out was to enter his father's world through death, thereby abandoning all his peculiarities, his whims and his childishness (157f., Bataille's emphasis).

Hence the suicide at the end of "The Judgment." Bataille reads it as a removal of the previous anguish by "according the father a definite love, a definite respect. There was no other way of reconciling profound veneration with deliberate lack of veneration" (163). It might be added that nothing could be farther to Georg's mind than to stage a coup d'état against parental authority. Yes, there is the faint "crash with which his father fell on the bed," which is even stronger in the original because "Schlag" (crash) is synonymous with stroke, an allusion to a possible apoplexy. Yet at this moment Georg is already on the run. Any further aggression directed against his father is of a deeply passive nature. After all, how could he prove the judgment more wrong than by enforcing it?

This is a strategy you will encounter time and again in the subsequent chapters: the detection of an adverse authority is not met with any insurgence against it, but with a submission whose corrosive qualities stand out only at second glance. Yet the secret message they carry defies their seeming innocence. I believe that such anticipation of what history has in store for the likes of them, namely the role of the eternal adolescent, Kafka and his fellow writers are on to a special form of modernism that is necessarily political. In the ungrudging acceptance of his own death penalty that Georg displays in “The Judgment” lies something disarming, pivotal in a time gearing up for a Great War. Sometimes the playful, sly and teasing aspects natural to such a stance prevail, but in the deliberate eschewal of an assault on authority lies the desire to converge and to make peace. Contrary to its looks, the defiance of maturity is really an attempt at communication.

Beyond the *Bildungsroman*:

The Inward and Outward Trend of Literature

Youth's thirst for experience is simply that it wants to be everything, do everything and have everything that is presented to its imagination. Youth has suddenly become conscious of life. It has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Randolph Bourne, *Youth and Life*, 1913

Believing in the development, in a new generation of creators, we call all youth to gather, and as youth, bearing the future within it, we want to procure elbowroom and freedom of life against the esteemed older forces.⁷⁸

From the *Brücke* manifesto, 1906

Like many things German—say, the fairy tale forest where young Hansel and Gretel lose their way—the *Bildungsroman* is deep and dark. One of the buzz words of literary criticism, scholars are reluctant to agree on its Germanness, let alone the question of its existence. Some would like to use it all but synonymously with “the novel” per se—as long as it features someone who gets older. More nit-picky natures doubt the title should be granted to anything but Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. And as if the genre were not yet discriminating enough, the stingiest take even that away, making the *Bildungsroman* a genuine “phantom formation,” as

⁷⁸ My translation. So will all the following be, except when otherwise noted. The original reads: “Mit dem Glauben an die Entwicklung, an eine neue Generation der Schaffenden wie der Genießenden rufen wir alle Jugend zusammen, und als Jugend, die die Zukunft in sich trägt, wollen wir uns Arm- und Lebensfreiheit verschaffen gegenüber den wohlangesehenen älteren Kräf-ten.” The manifesto of Die Brücke is contained in Bernard S. Meyer, *Expressionism: A Generation in Revolt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1963, section 3, “Die Brücke,” chapter 12, “The Brücke Group and Followers.”

one study has it.⁷⁹ Usually, however, some borderline cases are included, mostly the canonical nineteenth century suspects: *Pere Goriot* and *Illusions perdues*, *Great Expectations* and *L'Education sentimentale*, etc. Maybe even the *Buddenbrooks*.⁸⁰ But here, on the fin-de-siècle threshold, the critical mainstream falters: Realism is over, right? Modernism reigns! Can there be something like a modernist *Bildungsroman*?

A few years ago, Gregory Castle of Arizona State University said, emphatically, yes, with his book *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*.⁸¹ It features Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* among the chief embodiments of the genre. Authoritatively, the *Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce* testifies: "*Portrait* belongs to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, and the *Künstlerroman*, or novel of artistic development, which typically involve a young man or woman in search of life experience and success."⁸² The Zurich-based Joycean Fritz Senn has called *Portrait* "a continuation of the *Bildungs- or Künstlerroman* with modernist means."⁸³

⁷⁹ See its preface for an intriguing description of the state of affairs: Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁸⁰ This reading is quite a stretch. Usually, the focus is on Tony Buddenbrook. See for example Jürgen Scharfschwerdt, *Thomas Mann und der deutsche Bildungsroman: Eine Untersuchung zu den Problemen einer literarischen Tradition* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1967).

⁸¹ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006).

⁸² Eric Bulson, *The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 49.

⁸³ "[E]ine Fortsetzung des Bildungs- oder Künstlerromans mit modernistischen Mitteln." Fritz Senn, "James Joyce," in *Die literarische Moderne in Europa*, ed. by Joachim Joachim Piechotta et Hans, vol. 1 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994) 254.

Franco Moretti, in an astonishing appendix, added in 2000 to his 1987 classic *The Way of the World*, probably the most influential study of the genre to date, generally agrees, although he sees *Portrait*—along with Th. Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* (1903), Musil’s *The Confusions of Young Törleß* (1906), Robert Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), Alain-Fournier’s *Le grand Meaulnes* (1913) and a couple of other texts written between 1900 and World War I—as a latecomer to the *Bildungsroman* party.

Adherents to a vanishing symbolic universe of narrative coherence, Moretti’s *late Bildungsromane* are unable to accommodate the new kids on the *Weltanschauung* block, who perceive the world no longer in unity, but as (unrelated) fragments. Walter Benjamin saw the direct consequence and spread the word on the modernist street: “The art of narration is leaning toward its end.”⁸⁴ Moretti, whose own development as a critic has—in Elif Batuman’s words—“veer[ed] away from Balzacian mediation toward Darwinian selection,”⁸⁵ is quick to recognize their dangling from a dead evolutionary branch of literary history: “the merit of *Portrait* lies in its being an unmistakable failure.”⁸⁶ His point: only after realizing this could Joyce go on to write the quintessentially modernist “erratic and unsteady structures” (243) of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Same holds for Musil, who had, according to this scheme, to fail with *Confusions of Young Törleß* (1906) in order to start (and never

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften 1* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1982) 385-410 [388].

⁸⁵ Elif Batuman, “Adventures of a Man of Science: Review of Franco Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees*,” *n+1*. <http://nplusonemag.com/adventures-man-science>. April, 2014.

⁸⁶ Moretti, 2000, 243.

finish) *The Man without Qualities*. “In fact one is tempted to claim”, Moretti sums up, “that the late *Bildungsroman*, far from preparing modernism, did, if anything delay it” (235).

I don't quite believe this. Or, in more cheerful words, I believe that it would be more helpful to adopt a different perspective on these books; they may have a more interesting story to tell, one that belongs to themselves, rather than to the revolutionary works they provoked. In this vein, I want to argue that they do belong less to the *Bildungsroman* tradition as they constitute a new symbolic form very much up to the demands of their own time. I propose to read them not as the last anemic descendants of a once effervescent family, but as the up-to-date embodiments of narration under the conditions of modernity (in its turn-of-the-century sense).

Thus framed, their protagonists' youth turns out to be a sort of a misleading coincidence, superficially associating them to the youth of the 19th century *Bildungsroman*—that Moretti took (and rightly so, I think) to be the symbolic form of the restlessness, the zeal for growth and development indicative of those industrious decades—,⁸⁷ while *in fact their respective functions could not differ more*. Marx's words—voiced in a letter to the German social democrat Louis Kugelmann—that “*every child knows* that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year” may never

⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.

have rang truer:⁸⁸ the *Bildungsroman* had lost its fertile formative soil and modernity's children knew it.

This is where what one might call the first instance of corruption comes into play. A passage in Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1835) is often read as a characterization of the *Bildungsroman* as representing the encounter between an excessively naïve and subjective individual who, having had his fling, settles down to an ordinary philistine bourgeois existence with wife and job, inevitably capitulating to the force of prosaic circumstance. In other words: the *Bildungsroman* trajectory starts with a sort of Lockian blank slate youth, gullible and impressionable, moving along the road of worldly experience until he realizes that adventure is dangerous and love an illusion; until, in other words, his youthful ideals have been successfully corrupted.⁸⁹ “Successfully” because this corruption is Hegel's ideal—only thus can man find freedom in the institutions, a central claim of his philosophy, precluding

⁸⁸ Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955), 209. Cited in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 2008). My emphasis.

⁸⁹ Hegel's contemporary, the Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi paraphrases the same idea in his *Zibaldone*: “The world is the reverse of what it should be, since the young man, who follows no other rule of judgment than nature, and this is a highly competent judge, is always taking the true for the false and the false for the true” (*Zibaldone*, August 2, 1821). Cited in Giovanni Romano, “Images of Youth in the Modern Period,” in *A History of Young People in the West*, ed. by Giovanni Levi et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997) 8p. See also Erasmo G. Gerato, “Reality of Illusion and Illusion of Reality in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 41:2 (1976): 117–25.

the possibility of another revolution.⁹⁰ He admits that all this is probably bad for the future of the novel—his famous *end of art* claim goes back to this very thought.

It turned out, however, that man wasn't that free in the institutions altogether and that neither art nor history were quite so over yet. Inadvertently and in spite of his theoretical ambitions, Hegel produced a pretty solid definition of the *Bildungsroman*.

Applying this scheme to our set of novels, we see the difference: there is hardly any development palpable, let alone maturation. Instead, we are left with stagnation, retreat, escape. The early twentieth-century heroes are as a rule younger than their predecessors. This is because, as Moretti acknowledges, "historically, the relevant process is no longer growth but regression. The adult world refuses to be a hospitable home for the subject? Then let childhood be it" (231).

Far and wide, there is no one to be seen who would acquiesce into Hegel's favored philistine corruption of adult society: at the end of the novels I have in mind

⁹⁰ See Stephan Goertz, "Konkrete Freiheit: Ein philosophisch-theologischer Umriss," in *Endliche Autonomie: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf ein theologisch-ethisches Programm*, ed. by Antonio, Stephan Goertz and Magnus Striet Autiero (Berlin/Hamburg/Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004) 79p. The relevant passage reads: "Hegels Intention ist es, die moderne Errungenschaft der Freiheit des Subjekts mit dem antiken Erbe der eingelebten Sittlichkeit zu verbinden, weil eine bloß negative Freiheit eine stete Bedrohung der existierenden Institutionen darstellt, die Hegel als Resultat des geschichtlichen Durchbruchs zur Freiheit in der Französischen Revolution betrachtet. *Nach* der Revolution darf nicht *vor* der Revolution sein. Von den konkreten Verwirklichungen der Freiheit in den Institutionen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und des modernen Staates dürfe nicht abstrahiert werden." For comments on Hegel's famous "Das Reich der Freiheit ist also schon mitten unter uns" see Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff, *Metaphysik und Freiheit* (München: E. Wewel, 1988) 348. This is rounded out by Hegel's own famous phrase from the preface of the *Rechtsphilosophie*: "Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig" (WW, 7, 24).

Hermann Hesse's Hans Giebenrath (*Unterm Rad*, 1906) drowns, hardly having emerged from his puberty (suicide? accident? we don't know), Kipling's Kim (1901) prefers trekking around India by himself to a solid education (and gets away with it), Kafka's Karl Rossmann (*Amerika*, 1911–14), repudiated by his parents to begin with, loses all touch with society on his utopian search for the much-rumored "Nature Theatre of Oklahoma." Musil's Törleß, devastated by mutual betrayal among his friends, leaves school for an uncertain future; eventually, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus leaves his family and country, which are stifling him, for artistic exile. Not exactly the philistine sedateness that people like Wilhelm Meister or Frédéric Moreau of *L'Education sentimentale* settle into.

Granted, some of the "positive" 19th century *Bildungsroman* specimens do not end with the protagonist embracing the establishment, either, but with a rejection of it. The most striking that comes to mind may be Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*. But, and this should be noted, until the very end, Julien has been striving to make headway in adult society, plotting and scheming for it, and when he dies, he dies out of pride—and thus for his ideals. His case may strain Hegel's scheme a bit, but it does not overturn it completely as do the modernist "heroes," who have never been blessed or cursed with ideals nor naïveté to begin with.

This is the second instance of corruption, the scandal of the ingenuous, as it were: the paragon of virtue turning out to be the villain. For once the purported innocence unmask itself, in an act of what one might call self-searching

muckraking, revealing the *a priori* moral corruption inherent to itself, to modernist youth.

Think of Stephen's frequenting Dublin's prostitutes long before he turns 16 (thus shocking his confessor months later, who asks him, alarmed, how old he is; that's the only instance, I think, where we learn his exact age) or his emotional indifference towards his family, particularly his mother, from the onset.⁹¹ Or think of the sadomasochistic game that makes for *Törleß's* entire plot. Three boys, among them the protagonist, abuse their classmate Basini in ever more severe ways, psychologically, physically, sexually—utterly disproportionate when one reminds oneself what got the whole thing started: Basini stole a few bills from one of the boys' drawer in order to pay back some debt.

Both novels' protagonists' subtle grasp and embrace of their degradation is striking. If convenient, they do not flinch from feigning what the *Bildungsroman* tradition has bestowed on them as a birthright: "He stooped to the evil of hypocrisy with others," we once hear Stephen think, "skeptical of their innocence which he could cajole so easily."⁹²

The same general mistrust, born from extrapolating one's own mischievous self onto others, the belief that everybody else is morally corrupt because oneself is, can be encountered at the beginning of *Törleß*. In a set of excruciating character-

⁹¹ See the following passage: He "had not gone one step nearer the lives he sought to approach nor bridged the restless shame and rancour that divided him from his mother and brother and sister." James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 98.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 88.

izations of one protagonist after the other, we get to know Reiting, who “did not know a greater pleasure than agitating, setting people on one another, to humiliate one with the help of another, to gloat over forced favors and flatteries, behind whose shell he could still feel the resentment of hate.”⁹³

He was a tyrant and unforgiving against whoever defied him. His entourage changed from day to day, but the majority was always on his side. This was his talent. —One or two years ago he had waged a great war against Beineberg, resulting in the latter’s defeat. Beineberg had eventually been rather isolated, although with respect to judging people, to cold-bloodedness and to the capacity of arousing antipathies against whomever he disliked he was hardly inferior to him. But he lacked the other one’s amiability and appeal. His sangfroid and philosophical uncton inspired everyone’s mistrust. Invidious excesses of some kind or other were thought to be at the bottom of his being. Yet he had caused great difficulty for Reiting, and the latter’s victory had been but an accidental one. Ever since, the two had been sticking together out of common interest.⁹⁴

So if adult modernity is not a hospitable home for the subject, the realm of youth is not exactly either. I mentioned the functional change in symbolic form that I believe has occurred between the earlier *Bildungsroman* youth and this one. Clearly, it

⁹³ Robert Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999) 50p. Reiting “kannte kein größeres Vergnügen, als die Menschen gegeneinander zu hetzen, den einen mit Hilfe des anderen unterzukriegen und sich an abgezwungenen Gefälligkeiten und Schmeicheleien zu weiden, hinter deren Hülle er noch das Widerstreben des Hasses fühlen konnte.”

⁹⁴ “Er war ein Tyrann und unnachsichtig gegen den, der sich ihm widersetzte. Sein Anhang wechselte von Tag zu Tag, aber immer war die Majorität auf seiner Seite. Darin bestand sein Talent. — Gegen Beineberg hatte er vor ein oder zwei Jaren einen großen Krieg geführt, der mit dessen Niederlage endete. Beineberg war zum Schluß ziemlich isoliert dagestanden, obwohl er in der Beurteilung der Personen, an Kaltblütigkeit und dem Vermögen, Antipathien gegen ihm Mißliebige zu erregen, kaum hinter seinem Gegner zurückstand. Aber ihm fehlte das Liebenswürdige und Gewinnende desselben. Seine Gelassenheit und seine philosophische Salbung flößten fast allen Mißtrauen ein. Man vermutete garstige Exzesse irgendwelcher Art am Grunde seines Wesens. Dennoch hatte er Reiting große Schierigkeiten bereitet, und dessen Sieg war fast nur ein zufälliger gewesen. Seit der Zeit hielten sie aus gemeinschaftlichem Interesse zusammen” (51f).

does no longer stand in for the brimming energy of the time, for trying one's luck and coming out on top (or for the hubris of the effort).

On the other hand it seems that the secluded realm of childhood and youth, which have never before been treated with this diligence and epic exclusivity, is not exactly designed as a utopian alternative to the threatening conditions of grown-up modernity either, in Moretti's sense of "... then let childhood be it." More often than not, the "heroes" utterly reject it as means of identification: "No life or youth stirred in him as it had stirred in them," Stephen once thinks to himself, after having listened to his father's companions' adages on aging—"Thanks be to God we lived so long and did so much good," a certain "little old man" called Johnny Cashman had said. Stephen's thought continues: "He had known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigor of rude male health nor filial piety. Nothing stirred within his soul but a cold and cruel and loveless lust. His childhood was dead or lost and with it his soul capable of simple joys, and he was drifting amid life like the barren shell of the moon."⁹⁵ Both Joyce and Musil's novels are overflowing with such scenes painting the companionship of peers in the gloomiest light.

The constant motif: whoever buys into or even merely behaves according to any age's ideology (what's expected of any age), is entrapped forever. In this sense, the seemingly discrete realm of youth—schools, private rooms, even the sites of afternoon play—comes to embody adult society in a nutshell, as a mere dwarfed

⁹⁵ Joyce, 80.

precursor, casting a long shadow that's easily mistaken for its successor: "each class in such an institute is a small state of its own," writes Musil about *Törleß's* boarding school (52). We have here a trace that seems worthwhile following, if we want to find out why youth did flourish in contemporary literature the way it did, even though so gloomily conceived.

Moretti offers an explanation, emphasizing the influence of the aggravating pressures of modern socialization and the fear of "being wounded," in both the figurative and the literal sense, which caused the subject "to try and make himself, so to speak, smaller and smaller. Under artillery fire, the favorite position of World War I infantryman was the fetal one" (234). Thus, Moretti harnesses the war for his argument, which is, after all, about the end of something: "If history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war did to the *Bildungsroman*" (229). A point I must engage with, because I want to tell a story that is just beginning, rather than ending.

Not coincidentally is this also a familiar argument for why narration per se no longer works in modernity. We recall Benjamin's dictum of the end of narration. In "The Narrator" he mentions the homecoming soldiers who have fallen silent.⁹⁶ Years later, Adorno picks up the notion: "One merely needs to imagine the

⁹⁶ "Hatte man nicht bei Kriegsende bemerkt, daß die Leute verstummt aus dem Felde kamen? Nicht reicher—ärmer an mittelbarer Erfahrung." And some lines down: "Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gefahren war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft, in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken und unter ihnen, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper." Benjamin, 1982, 410.

impossibility that someone who took part in the war narrated it, just like in former times one used to narrate one's adventures."⁹⁷

Thus framed, Stephen Dedalus and Young Törleß represent narration's last breath; their age and height match the dwindling short-windedness of a dying art, the last contraction before perpetual relaxation.

There is, however, at least another attempt at explaining the necessary end of narration around 1900. It plays on poetics, rather than psychology. Musil, in his *Notes on the Crisis of the Novel*:

Externally, the contemporary crisis of the novel has appeared like this: We do not want to be told [in the sense of narration] anything, regarding that as mere pastime. It is not "us" who attempt to give a form to what remains, but our experts. We learn the news from the newspaper; what everyone loves to hear we deem kitsch. —But this is not quite right. Communists and nationalists and catholics love to be told something. The need resurfaces at once where the ideology is firm. Where the subject is taken for granted.⁹⁸

This is the line of thought I would like to follow: narration falling prey to what good students of the Frankfurt School call "Totalitätsverdacht": the suspicion that he who narrates curries favor with the ruling ideology—an anxiety powerful

⁹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Standort des Erzählers im zeitgenössischen Roman," in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974) 42.

⁹⁸ "Äußerlich ist die gegenwärtige Krise des Romans so in Erscheinung getreten: Wir wollen uns nichts mehr erzählen lassen, betrachten das nur noch als Zeitvertreib. Für das, was bleibt, suchen nicht 'wir', aber unsere Fachleute eine neue Gestalt. Das Neue erzählt uns die Zeitung, das gern Gehörte betrachten wir als Kitsch. – Das ist aber nun nicht ganz richtig. Kommunisten und Nationalisten und Katholiken möchten sich sehr gern etwas erzählen lassen. Das Bedürfnis ist sofort wieder da, wo die Ideologie fest ist. Wo der Gegenstand gegeben ist." Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) 1412. Also in Eberhard Lämmert & Hartmut Eggert et al., *Romantheorie: Dokumentation ihrer Geschichte in Deutschland*, vol. 2 (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971) 161.

enough to transcend decades and inspire the postmodernist call for the end of the “grands récits” or meta-narratives.

In his description of what he calls “narrative knowledge” Jean-François Lyotard stresses the institutionalizing function of narratives, granting or taking social legitimacy, defining “criteria of competence” according to which is determined what “can be performed” within a given society:⁹⁹ “Our example clearly illustrates that a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence—“know-how,” “knowing how to speak,” and “knowing how to hear” [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*]*—through which the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond”* (21).

⁹⁹ “First, the popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships (*Bildungen*): in other words, the successes or failures greeting the hero’s undertakings. These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the function of myths), or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). Thus the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 19p. “Second, the narrative form, unlike the developed forms of the discourse of knowledge, lends itself to a great variety of language games. Denotative statements concerning, for example, the state of the sky and the flora and fauna easily slip in; so do deontic statements prescribing what should be done with respect to these same referents, or with respect to kinship, the difference between the sexes, children, neighbors, foreigners, etc. Interrogative statements are implied, for example, in episodes involving challenges (respond to a question, choose one from a number of things); evaluative statements also enter in, etc. The areas of competence whose criteria the narrative supplies or applies are thus tightly woven together in the web it forms, ordered by the unified viewpoint characteristic of this kind of knowledge.”

To Lukács' bitter complaint about the forgetfulness of modernist literature to render an all-encompassing view of society Adorno retorted that "the basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil."¹⁰⁰ This sentence is a key to Adorno's cherishing modernist literature of Beckett's type or *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.¹⁰¹ Even the most abstract pieces (these in particular!) tell us something about our world: they criticize totalizing ideology, the impossibility of freedom by means of recoiling from it.

What if, rather than getting stuck in the dead-end street *late Bildungsroman*, Musil and Joyce in *Young Törleß* and *Portrait* had found a different way of answering this problem, namely by means of exploring a space of unstable authorities? Only in such an environment could narration still thrive. If we read Musil's aesthetic musings carefully, we notice that the *Totalitätsverdacht* does not fall on narration as such, but on narration as stabilizing function of ideology, no matter what it might be—capitalism, communism, nationalism, catholicism, etc.

In ideologically cluttered times such as the *fin de siècle* the sensitive mind falters among contradictory standards. The fragmentation of narrative is akin to the

¹⁰⁰ "Die Grundschichten der Erfahrung, welche die Kunst motivieren, sind der gegenständlichen Welt, vor der sie zurückzucken, verwandt." Adorno, 1997, 16.

¹⁰¹ In a 1960 talk Adorno remarks with regard to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* that Joyce would blend "die Intention auf eine streng im Innenraum des Kunstwerks organisierte Sprache [...] mit der großen Epik, mit dem Drang, jenem der Kunst gegenüber transzendenten Gehalt, durch den sie erst Kunst wird, inmitten ihres dicht verschlossenen Immanenzzusammenhangs festzuhalten. Wie Joyce beides zum Einstand bringt, macht seinen außerordentlichen Rang aus, die erhobene Mitte zwischen zwei Unmöglichkeiten, der des Romans heute und der von Dichtung als reinem Laut." Theodor W. Adorno, "Voraussetzungen: Aus Anlaß einer Lesung von Hans G. Helms," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974) 436.

fragmentation of experience. This holds, as poetics, for *Ulysses* as well as for *The Man without Qualities*: Ulrich, the central character, realizes he has lost an ability he calls “the primitively epic,” the makeshift narrativization of everyday life as means of orientation. “And Ulrich noticed that he had lost hold of this primitive epic sense which we cling to in private life, although in the wider sphere of public life everything has already become impossible to count and no longer follows a thread, but spreads out in an infinitely interwoven surface.”¹⁰²

Thus, the attempt at narration derives from a mere nostalgic instinct, turning it into *kitsch* in Adorno’s sense of something foolishly consolatory. And even worse: as soon as one stoops to tell oneself any consolatory story, one cannot help simultaneously solidifying some ideological authority or other that is built upon a parallel causal construction. This is why the modernists reject it.

Now as far as the discrete space of youth goes, it is not so much that there are no ideology-imposing authorities as that they flicker; there is no “public realm” yet that would be so discrete from any “private realm.” The boundaries are blurry and if there is any rule set in stone, it says that no rule is set in stone.

At the beginning of *Portrait* Stephen is being bullied by his classmates at Clongowes:

“Tell us, Dedalus, do you kiss your mother before you go to bed?” ¶ Stephen answered: ¶ “I do.” ¶ Wells turned to the other fellows and said: ¶ “O, I say, here’s a fellow says he kisses his mother every night before he goes to bed.” ¶ The other fellows stopped their game and turned round, laughing. Stephen blushed under their

¹⁰² Musil, 1978, 650.

eyes and said: ¶ “I do not.” ¶ Wells said: ¶ “O, I say, here’s a fellow says he doesn’t kiss his mother before he goes to bed.” ¶ They all laughed again. Stephen tried to laugh with them. He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed. But Wells must know the right answer as he was third in grammar.¹⁰³

While brutal and unfair, the playful, flickering element can’t be dismissed. Clearly, authority is forged and abused, with ridicule as its violent blow. Still, it is but a game, and with unstable rules at that, even if one that Stephen has not yet learned to play. What contrast, however, to the abuse of authority by the Jesuits! Think of Stephen’s undeserved beating because he accidentally broke his glasses, while the priest alleges that he lied. What makes it so bad is the punisher’s conviction to be right, as opposed to the children’s game where this is never assumed. After this incident Stephen’s classmates are scandalized by the tort, convincing him to complain to the headmaster. While the latter appears understanding we later learn—the headmaster has told Stephen’s father, who in turn tells his son—that he never was, having called Stephen an “impudent thief:” *“I told them all at dinner about it and Father Dolan and I and all of us we all had a hearty laugh together over it. Ha! Ha! Ha!”*¹⁰⁴ The shock is enough to shut Stephen up; the headmaster’s recounted words, in (and in spite of) all their immediacy, denote the end of an episode—they are followed merely by speechlessness and its marker: three tumbling stars within a lot of blank space.

It is this twofold quality of the space of youth—unstable, playful ideologies even still in their violent executions within, and the utterly vulnerable exposure to

¹⁰³ Joyce, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Joyce, 61. Original emphasis.

the solid ideologies without—that makes it so enticing for the modernists. Within its flickering confines, where no authority will linger, narration is possible. It is not a utopia itself—the ideological violence is too palpable already, even if still “in training.” But its domains that are untainted with authority can and do serve as perpetual reminders of a utopia, of the possibility that things could be different. This is the new symbolic function of youth under the conditions of modernity.

Stephen Dedalus, almost on his way to Paris and thus to the adult world of *Ulysses*, where a different poetics will be needed, devises its theory: Asked by the priest to become one himself, he is flattered at first. Then the scales fall from his eyes: “What had come to the pride of his spirit which had always made him conceive himself as a being apart in every order?” (136) And some lines down: “The voice of the director urging upon him the proud claims of the church and the mystery and power of the priestly office repeated itself idly in his memory. His soul was not there to hear and greet it and he knew now that the exhortation he had listened to had already fallen into *an idle formal tale*” (136; my emphasis).

Finally, and this may be Stephen’s *Bildung*, he has learnt how to play and counter the narrative game. He rejects its imposing order, recoils, in Adorno’s phrase, from the demanding authority of adult narration, ideology in disguise. And only now, roaming free on the shore, does he embrace youth: “He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad light-

clad figures of *children* and *girls* and voices *childish* and *girlish* in the air” (144, my emphasis).

The history of the modernist phobia of ideology—which in turn inspired the fear of narration—may not have been more succinctly summarized than by Roland Barthes. Of course he was heavily borrowing from Lukács and Sartre when he identified the revolution of 1848 as the catalyst of the modernist project, providing the conditions of its possibility, but his merit was that he did not hold the same hardline Marxist grudge against those who turned their back on an aesthetics favoring the synoptic vision of society.

Tony Pinkney, in an introduction to Raymond Williams’s *Politics of Modernism*, sums up Lukács and Sartre’s stance:

[A]s the Paris proletariat headed militantly for the barricades in 1848, it took *out* the classicist or realist literary tradition before or as it took *on* the National Guard. [...] Whereas the realist novel shows the dialectical interaction of individuality and politics within the active historical self-making of the bourgeoisie’s ‘heroic’ period, in the cold climate after 1848 realist dialectics split apart into exacerbated subjectivity (Munch’s *The Scream*, say) and extreme objectivity (Zola, documentary, photo-realism).¹⁰⁵

In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes agrees, essentially, but is willing impartially to grant this split its epistemological (and thus aesthetical) imperative, rather than moaning about the hurdles it poses to any literary attempt to represent society as a whole. He takes the event at its historico-philosophical face value: As the bourgeoisie shows the savage grimace beneath its benevolent smile, hurling its minions upon the proletarian masses, its ideology of universal emancipation—effectively the

¹⁰⁵ Tony Pinkney, “Introduction,” in Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London/New York: Verso, 2007) 6.

Hegelian promise of eternal freedom in the institutions—crumbles at the barricades. Barthes: “[H]enceforth, this very ideology appears merely as one among many possible others; the universal escapes it, since transcending itself would mean condemning itself.”¹⁰⁶

Accordingly, Barthes attests in 1953 what Erich Kahler would, hardly two years later, call “the inward turn of narrative:”¹⁰⁷ an increasing awareness of and preoccupation with the mediality and materiality of literature, from Flaubert (“an artisanal consciousness of literary fabrication, refined to the point of painful scruple”) over Proust (“the hope of somehow eluding literary tautology by ceaselessly postponing literature, by declaring that one is going to write, and by making this declaration into literature itself”) to, eventually, Robbe-Grillet (“trying to achieve a *Dasein* of literary language, a neutrality [though not an innocence] of writing).”¹⁰⁸

Barthes does not bother to mention Joyce or Musil (or, for that matter, any of the other authors that I will discuss). They are, nonetheless, part of the scheme he

¹⁰⁶ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) 51.

¹⁰⁷ Erich Kahler, “The Transformation of Modern Fiction,” *Comparative Literature* 7:2 (1955): 121–28.

¹⁰⁸ The full quote reads: “These have been, *grosso modo*, the phases of the development: first an artisanal consciousness of literary fabrication, refined to the point of painful scruple (Flaubert); then, the heroic will to identify, in one and the same written matter, literature and the theory of literature (Mallarmé); then the hope of somehow eluding literary tautology by ceaselessly postponing literature, by declaring that one is going to write, and by making this declaration into literature itself (Proust); then, the testing of literary good faith by deliberately, systematicall, multiplying to infinity the meanings of a word without ever abiding by any one sense of what is signified (Surrealism); finally, and inversely, rarefying these meanings to the point of trying to achieve a *Dasein* of literary language, a neutrality (though not an innocence) of writing: I am thinking here of the work of Robbe-Grillet.” Cited in Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (London: Fontana, 1983) 29.

devises. Their ideologophobia has its roots in the same shock—a shell shock of sorts, dating back way before the Great War that would become World War I in the latter day history books¹⁰⁹—as Flaubert’s, who cunningly conceded the revolutionary events of 1848 merely the most cursory treatment in *L’Education sentimentale*.

We now recognize the degree to which the arguments against narration as I have tried to distinguish them—psychological/anthropological vs. aesthetic/poetic or, rather, war distress vs. political disturbance, respectively—are actually interlaced, albeit on another level than the one suggested by Benjamin and Adorno. Associating the end of narration with a traumatizing experience may not be altogether wrong; however, rather than being a literal trauma, effectively hushing the trembling, fragmented bodies left alone amid the trenches and beneath a steel sky, it is an intellectual, ideological, political trauma resulting from the loss of a utopia: that of the “heroic” bourgeoisie and its promise of freedom. Indeed violence must be identified as the trauma’s trigger, but not so much the World War I violence in its alleged intolerability for the *homo narrans*, but the violence of 1848 breaking the bourgeoisie’s implicit promise to create an ideological realm fit for all. Once its callous exclusivity was out of the bag, the Enlightenment project showed, possibly for the first time (at least for European citizens), its dark underside that Adorno and Horkheimer would set out to analyze. The *Bildungsroman* in the positive Hegelian, Goethean sense of eventually embracing philistine (bourgeois) society as the best of all possible worlds had become a deeply problematic form. This may be

¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that, according the *OED*, the word “Ideologue” was first recorded in 1815, in reference to the French Revolutionaries.

the reason why it is allegedly such a “phantom formation:” If its natural habitat was an undisturbed bourgeois utopia it had merely a few years to thrive; it could project its ideals as long as the bourgeois revolution was pending, i.e. before July 1830, and was reeled in by reality soon after.

After the rift, many stratagems were devised to cope with “realist dialectics having split apart.” Flaubert, the first on Barthes’ modernist list of adherents to the inward turn of narrative, does indeed stand for the “artisanal consciousness of literary fabrication, refined to the point of painful scruple,” but while this catchphrase rightly emphasizes the association between the inward turn of narrative and concentration on language (as literature’s “internal” reality), it embezzles the specific innovation that, self-purportedly, tormented Flaubert so much, namely the doctrine of the invisible author who should vanish behind his work—a technique that effectively doubled, in literature, the loss of synoptic vision that had occurred in society.¹¹⁰

At the same time and rather paradoxically, however, this very technique of the absent narrator insinuates a narrative immediacy conjuring up more wholesome times. Thus, with apt hindsight, a more interesting level may lie beneath the cliché of Flaubert’s writing style as sheer realist mania—what if he had been on to preserving the narrative long before most authors, let alone literary critics, had even become aware of the problem? Hegel may come in handy here, reminding us

¹¹⁰ Baudelaire’s 1865 prose poem “Loss of a Halo” (*Perte d’auréole*), where the poet literally loses his gloriolate on the street for good, may be another, self-mockingly melancholy, rendering of the same realization: the old promises do not hold anymore.

of good old epic times—whose *Weltanschauung* carried in its tow “natural” narrative conditions strikingly resembling the ones so painstakingly forged by Flaubert:

On account of the objectivity of the whole epic, the poet as subject must retire in the face of his *object* and lose himself in it. Only the product, not the poet, appears... Because the epic presents not the poet’s inner world but the objective events, the subjective side of the production must be put into the background precisely as the poet completely immerses himself in the world which he unfolds before our eyes. This is why the great epic style consists in the work’s seeming to be its own minstrel and appearing independently without having any author to conduct it or be as its head.¹¹¹

This passage is in turn taken up by Lukács, who in the *Theory of the Novel* emphasizes the conceptual value of “life” and “form” for understanding modernity. In the world of the epic, no such distinction could be made. The artistic self-consciousness of “form” only emerges with the problematization of “life.” Seen from this angle, it becomes clear that what Flaubert is really doing is to scrupulously conceive of a strategy to carry the epic narrative over the barricades of 1848 and into the contested zone of feuding ideologies where life can never be whole again—possibly the first runner in a sort of torch relay that would soon hit the streets of Dublin, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a modernist epic that pays full attention to the inward lives of its characters, behind whom its author vanishes (except for a few cameo appearances, as the man in the trench coat for example, who once only slightly escapes being run over by a bus and who also takes part in Paddy Dignam’s funeral).¹¹²

¹¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1048f.

¹¹² As is widely known, Joyce was a pretty explicit student of Flaubert in this regard. “The artist,” Stephen expounds his poetics in *Portrait*, “like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (181).

While the inward turn of narrative (in the German original the more precise *Verinnerung des Erzählens*) has over time wound itself into psychological worlds more and more detached from the epic clashes of outward reality's infinite surfaces, Joyce is clearly among the writers who refuse to give up all semblance of "realist" reality—as the Dadaists or Surrealists and other avant-gardes seem to aspire (even if in Adorno's dialectical gambit that sublates the presence in its absence). The mundane immediacies of, say, soap and potato as they accompany Leopold Bloom on his wanderings through the cityscape make this rather clear.

Ulysses thus constitutes a specific hybrid between the twin trends—after their dialectical split—toward *Verinnerung* and, simultaneously, toward *Veräußerung* noted by both Barthes and Kahler. Barthes had pointed out Zola and photo-realism. Kahler sums his own stance up in a short paragraph: "In literature, and in the arts in general, this disjunction of the coherent being—person or object—proceeds in two directions: *outward, socially*, through collectivization of phenomena and happenings; and *inward, psychically and spiritually*, through rampant analysis and dissection of the organic consistency of the personality and its surroundings."¹¹³ He goes on to include Zola as well, and sees the tradition otherwise continue in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* to, eventually, the "novelistic reportage" of Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, etc.

¹¹³ Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1987) 225. As noted above, the specific essay I am citing was originally published as "The Transformation of Modern Fiction," *Comparative Literature* 7.2 (1955): 121–28.

While both Barthes and Kahler note this second trend towards externalization, they neglect it in favor of the “inbound” one. Kahler, for example, concludes his brief discussion of the texts he takes as symptomatic of *Veräußerung* as follows: “But much more interesting, much more important artistically as well as humanly, is that other disjunctive process that moves *inward*, into the human psyche, and slowly decomposes the human personality and its sensory experience through an ever more refined analysis of surface reality” (Kahler, 227). This view has prevailed and, over the years, boiled down into the commonplace notion of “good” modernist literature being chiefly preoccupied with exploring psychic phenomena and linguistic intricacies in ways that deviate from “traditional” narratives.

Thus, it seems worthwhile emphasizing and analyzing the ramifications of the second trend that tends to impact even the books that are so directly associated with its sibling by whose long shadow it is almost eclipsed. Sure enough, this tendency to emulate the epic is too obvious to go unnoticed; *Ulysses* is usually called a modernist epic and Northrop Frye has described *Finnegans Wake* as the “chief ironic epic of our time” (while the “ironic” should not be overlooked).¹¹⁴ But nonetheless, the formal/linguist/inward oriented argument apparently exerts a gravitational pull too strong not to make these respective notions eventually veer back to it; a comprehensive study of *Ulysses*, whose second edition recently appeared, betrays this drift most conspicuously. The blurb provided by the publisher,

¹¹⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 323.

Cambridge University Press, has it in a nutshell: “Demonstrating how Joyce’s modernist epic redefines Homer’s *Odyssey*, [Vincent Sherry] examines Joyce’s extraordinary verbal experiments.”¹¹⁵ The sentence hardly makes any sense, of course: which is why it so unmistakably bespeaks the uncanny (and apparently often unconscious) oscillation between the inward and the outward that are distinct and yet one—after all, the cunningly epic that Flaubert devised by virtue of rendering the narrator invisible, thus forging an anti-psychological narrative space of impenetrable surfaces, dialectically marked the first instance of the inward turn towards language and psychological scrutiny. The best modernist works, I am tempted to conclude, rather than *merely* focusing on exploring the inner recesses, exhibit this dialectic in extremes that have—loosely following Barthes’ genealogical scheme—slowly but surely been drifting apart, until they reached almost perfectly incommensurable positions.

Thus we touch base with youth again. For I propose that the modernist youth narratives I am about to discuss display exactly this stretch between the inward and outward extremes, only in a different configuration than holds for *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*. And that this has hitherto been overlooked, I think, is due to the bigger neglect of the outward or *exoteric* (in its literal sense) trend that is, along with its limelight *esoteric* double, constitutive of modernism. In these novels the exoteric semblance of “traditional” narrative prevails, while the inward turn, here

¹¹⁵ Vincent B. Sherry, *Joyce: Ulysses* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The publisher’s praise can be read here: <http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521539760>. 12 Dec 2012.

figuring as youth's recoiling into itself, that has been taking place since the *Bildungsroman's* prime, has so far flown under the radar.

It is not so much marked by overtly visible linguistic play or focus, but by a narrative literalness that conceals its metaphoric quality. At heart, however, the youth narratives that flourished in the years around and after 1900 belong to the same family of trapeze artists specializing in the dialectical split(s) between the two poles of *Verinnerung* and *Veräußerung*; only the balance—a precarious one in either case—has been shifted to the other foot. Of *Madame Bovary* (1857) Flaubert said it was “all cunning and stylistic ruse,” pointing out his aesthetical trick to preserve the semblance—an uncannily scathing and caustic semblance, of course—of straight-forward narrative after its historico-philosophical problematization. Once the feat and its history is understood, it comes as no surprise that the cue is taken up by both Joyce and Musil: Toward the end of the *Portrait*, when Stephen tells his companion Cranly about his impending move to the continent, Cranly challenges him with a set of questions. Eventually, Stephen goes off:

Look here, Cranley... You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning (208).

To the fictitious allegation (produced by himself) that his *Törleß* were merely about the “unauthoritative/lightweight [*unmaßgeblich*] issue of a sixteen-year-old” and would “pay unintelligibly much honor to an era that has little to do with adults,” Musil himself answered: “The sixteen-year-old is a ruse. Comparably simple and

thus moldable material for the composition [*Gestaltung*] of psychic conjunctions that are complicated in the adult through too much else which stays switched off here.”¹¹⁶ Musil, the educated engineer, surely believes that he is arranging perfect conditions for the experiment he wants to undertake. At the same time the “simplification” argument may too easily slur over the essential *differentness*—which is more than simple simplicity—of the youthful space, as discussed above.

Fredric Jameson once remarked that the function of science fiction was “not to give us ‘images’ of the future—whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their ‘materialization’—but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present.”¹¹⁷ The same may hold for Musil’s science fiction, which however regards, if one follows his argument about the experimental setup in order to try adult society in a nutshell, the past. Jameson’s version is different in that it emphasizes defamiliarization and restructuring, or in broader terms the active aspect of the experiment: the observer’s inevitable influence on the observation. It is hard to overestimate it in the literary “experiment,” where it is almost everything: Back then, when Proust, say, had been a child, his life, like everybody else’s, was scattered in millions of tiny impressions,

¹¹⁶ Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*, edited by Adolf Frisé, vol. 8 (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) 996. My translation. The German phrases read as follows: “unmaßgebliche Frage eines Sechzehnjährigen”/“erweise einer Epoche unverständlich viel Ehre, die mit Erwachsenen wenig zu tun”/“Der Sechzehnjährige [...] ist eine List. Verhältnismäßig einfaches und darum bildsames Material für die Gestaltung von seelischen Zusammenhängen, die im Erwachsenen durch zuviel andres kompliziert sind, was hier ausgeschaltet bleibt.”

¹¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London/New York: Verso, 2005) 289.

and he did not live with the same intensity as at the moment where his entire childhood appeared in the “wonder frame of memory” (Antal Szerb) with everything that was essential to childhood.¹¹⁸

Proust dedicates the whole first volume of the *Recherche* to the task of exhausting the content of this one moment where he had dipped the madeleine into the tea. His narrative (re)construction is, and very self-consciously so (think of Proust’s place in Barthes’s list), a ruse—in order to keep a balance between the exploration of the psychic revelation that happened at the madeleine moment and the narrative (or the perpetual deferral thereof). In a way, the modernist meridian may lead through a soundproof apartment on the Boulevard Haussmann: Proust may hold the position of ultimate tension and balance between the two narrative trends. In a sense, his gargantuan gathering of time lost contains in it the poetic premises and literary design of the modernist youth narratives.

While in most nineteenth century fiction the characters’ earlier youth mainly serves as a foil on which the ensuing development takes place, the modernists focus on this period, a couple of years, sometimes even merely weeks, days, hours—thus unearthing darker layers that would have been glossed over in any more cursory treatment. A German author once wrote that facing the vast wall of literary intensity Proust had erected one could merely hope to be a little bird and, admiring it, fly by.

¹¹⁸ For further discussion see Antal Szerb, *Die Suche nach dem Wunder: Umschau und Problematik in der modernen Romanliteratur* (Amsterdam/Leipzig: Pantheon, 1938) 108.

Musil's *Törleß* flies on this side of the Proustian wall, in the poetic realm where narrative prevails over psychic exploration and linguistic self-consciousness, yet without falling prey to the crushing verdict of simply being "less interesting," as proclaimed by Kahler and Barthes. In the books I am concerned with the internalizing, esoteric trend is instead embodied by the many suicides, escapes, quests for identity.¹¹⁹ But not only by them. Youth figures as a sort of conceptual sponge that can retain, under the conditions of modernity, without condescending to kitsch, a biotope for outwardly "traditional" narration, while absorbing inward bound meanings and characters. Among them the revolutionary zeal of the nineteenth century, as will soon become clear. And since we have identified a revolution as the catalyst for this dialectical split that in turn led to Musil's "crisis of the novel," it may be apt to start by telling the story of a literary-minded revolutionary who embodies the union and subsequent split of individuality and politics, of linguistic play and social responsibility like no other: Georg Büchner.

¹¹⁹ "Turn-of-the-century fiction experimented with subtle modernist techniques by portraying the hidden recesses of fictional minds and employing multiple focalization. Novelists were attracted to the portrayal of adolescence because the subject demanded portrayals of inner lives and multi-perspectival representations. It was the ideal subject for portraying the loss of identity and the splitting of self that was Nietzsche's and Dostoevski's legacy to turn-of-the-century culture." John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-siècle Culture of Adolescence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 83f.

Georg Büchner: A Revolution in Disguise

*Kunst ist auch eine Art Jugend.*¹²⁰
*Ich bin so jung, und die Welt ist so alt.*¹²¹

The interlaced relationships between vice and virtue, acquiescence and recalcitrance pervade the borders of fiction and reality. Literature has often been identified as a perpetrator of anarchy, silently undermining the discourse of official law and order—Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque may be among the most prominent and conceptually refined analyses in this regard. The opposite view has also been held, possibly most stunningly in D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*, which explicitly challenges the notion that the novel is a subversive genre celebrating and promoting misconduct (as Bakhtin has it), going as far as rejecting even the possibility suggested by Edward Said that the novel emerges out of a dialectic of “authority and molestation.”¹²² Miller, conversely, emphasizes what he perceives to be a “radical entanglement between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police.”¹²³ In his view, the novel’s presumed promise of political license and moral

¹²⁰ Robert Walser, *Geschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 83.

¹²¹ Georg Büchner, *Büchner: Dichtungen & Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. by Henri Poschmann et al. (Frankfurt/M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2006) 114.

¹²² In the third chapter “The Novel as Beginning Intention” of his book *Beginnings*, Said talks about the conflicting forces of “authority and molestation.” He develops the idea that an aspiring novelist desires to be a beginning of an authoritative fictional world, while knowing that his authority is ‘molested’ twofold: by the tradition of the novel and its constricting poetic premises on the one hand and, on the other, by the authority of the outside world to which he tries to relate and appeal. See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

¹²³ D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 2.

debauchery is but a brilliant disguise: its apparent subversion is in fact a concealed enforcement of social discipline. Miller's arresting readings of Dickens, Trollope and Collins make his case very persuasively, but the question remains, if the suggested generalization of the title—"the novel"—should not remain restricted to the Victorian novel, that serves as the exclusive model for his analyses.¹²⁴

This sketch illustrates some of the intricacies sabotaging a settlement of the question whether literature is prone to support or rather to subvert the social order, whether it caresses the bourgeois soul or sells it to the devil. To assess the role of youth in the same matrix of rest and revolution is comparably difficult. For so-called reality is not untainted by the instabilities of fiction because more often than not it is exactly that: fictional. Highly attuned to its factual aspect, social historians have shown, for example, that the revolutionaries who climbed onto the Parisian barricades in July 1830 were not necessarily youngsters but mostly artisans of all ages and trades; they have pointed out as well that "youths served the cause of order far more than that of revolution."¹²⁵ Nonetheless, I want to emphasize with Sergio Luzzato: "The fact remains, however, that young people inspired fear throughout the nineteenth century" (*ibid.*). It is no coincidence that the painting

¹²⁴ Incidentally a genre of which the great Hungaro-Canadian novelist Stephen Vizinczey, in his *Truth and Lies in Literature* (1985) could only express the most callous caveats because he thought it was "riddled with hypocrisy": "Every writer will pick his own favorites from whom he thinks he can learn the most, but I strongly advise against reading Victorian novels, which are riddled with hypocrisy and bloated with redundant words. Even George Eliot wrote too much about too little." Stephen Vizinczey, *Truth and Lies in Literature: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 5.

¹²⁵ Luzzato, 175.

that is second to none in firing the imagination of nineteenth century revolutionary Europe, Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), features, besides workers, bourgeois, and the allegoric figure of liberty, in the most prominent place and in the most prominent pose a youth, wildly swaying two pistols and—in seeming contrast to his fellow *barricadeurs* who appear cautious and reticent—rushing forward over a heap of corpses towards the spectator, who is situated where, in the elongation of the imaginary space, the revolutionaries' beat opponent would stand or perhaps lie. Of the depicted figures the youth's dedicated glance is the only one that boldly meets the spectator's, who is forced into the reactionary army's perspective, as if challenging him. The painting was first exhibited at the official Salon of May 1831, the annual festival that was essentially an instrument of bourgeois disciplinary action: thus the *Académie de Beaux-Arts* controlled the profession. Half a year earlier, in a letter to his brother dated 12 October 1830, Delacroix had written: "My bad mood is vanishing thanks to hard work. I've embarked on a modern subject—a barricade. And if I haven't fought for my country, at least I'll paint for her." The painting deviates from the traditional academic style and its proclivity towards romanticism, yet Delacroix managed to get it displayed, which may have been not least due to its "patriotic" theme—after all, it idealized the alleged champions of the new order. At the same time, however, it preserved the revolutionary fervor, sublimated, transposed onto another discursive level, yet still directed against the bourgeois status quo. How controversial it was and how uneasy it made the authorities feel may be gauged if one knows that the new French government bought the

painting for 3,000 francs, intending to put it on display in the throne room of the Palais du Luxembourg as a reminder to the “citizen-king” Louis-Philippe of the July Revolution, through which he had come to power. This did not come to be, though, and the painting was hung in the Palace museum for a few months before being taken down for its inflammatory political message, whose central part was the figure of the revolutionary youth. It did not enter the Louvre until 1874, all the while having been safeguarded by Delacroix’s aunt, aptly named Felicité.

The *Zeitgeist*, only too conscious of the recent vast historical changes brought about by the French Revolution, tended scale up like under a loupe the promises and threats that hovered in the air, no matter how distinctly manifest they were at the time. One does not need to conjure Kant in order to see that there are many occasions where the conditions of possibilities outstrip their actualizations.

After the downfall of the *ancien régime* youth’s traditional roles, hitherto held in check by the immobile feudal system, had broken apart. Industrialization and, in its wake, urbanization separated young people from their families; not all the energies thus unleashed were welcome to the potentates. Also, there was the novel familial and social context that questioned primogeniture and lengthened the average period of bachelorhood: “Hence the urgency of instituting a kind of delaying tactic, of postponing the moment when young men could assume political and social responsibilities.”¹²⁶ The grim underside of the new youthful spaces of apprenticeship, school and leisure as they were progressively opened up by the dis-

¹²⁶ See Luzzatto, 175. He himself is explicitly referring to E. J. Erikson’s classics *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1963) and *Identity: The Youth Crisis* (New York, 1968).

trustful adult authorities was early sensed by Ludwig Börne. He was a prime representative of the cultural-political movement tellingly called *Young Germany* (Junges Deutschland) and an esteemed spokesman against philistine values: “‘It is because every man is born a Roman that bourgeois society seeks to de-Romanize him,’ said Börne. What was the point of gambling and society games, gazettes, novels, operas, casinos, tea salons, ‘the years of apprenticeship and novitiate,’ life in the garrisons, the changing of the guard, the ceremonies, the courtesy calls, the efforts to be fashionable, if not to deplete youth of its strengths and ambition?’”¹²⁷

Not two decades later, the revolution of 1848 proved to the European bourgeoisie the inadequateness and deficiency of such measures, prompting it to give the disciplinary screw additional—this time more effective—turns. However, for the moment, the spotlight is turned to Georg Büchner, Börne’s congenial contemporary, revolutionary, poet, scientist—not necessarily in that order. In fact, most likely not in *any* order, for his star expired as fast as it had appeared; at 23 he was dead of typhus in his Zurich exile, two weeks after coming down with the disease. Over the course of his career, he had produced one novella and three plays (only one of which he saw published in his lifetime, greatly distorted by the editor in anticipatory obedience to the vigilant censors), translations of two plays by Victor Hugo, had been awarded a doctorate for a medical dissertation on the nervous system of the barb, had had to flee his native Hesse because of revolutionary activities and had managed to obtain a position as associate professor at the University of Zurich,

¹²⁷ Ludwig Börne, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Hamburg, 1962) 63. Cited in Luzzato, 176.

where he taught a class named “zootomic demonstrations” on the comparative anatomy of fish and amphibians. For the following semester he was planning a course on the history of philosophy, for which he had painstakingly excerpted Spinoza and Descartes. Also, he had found the time to become engaged to the daughter of Protestant pastor, based in Strasbourg. All this happened virtually at the same time, between the summer of 1834 and the winter of 1836 (he died on 19 February 1837). Georg Herwegh, one of Büchner’s early supporters and a fellow writer, wrote in one of the three poems he dedicated to the friend: “Youth is missing a leader in the battle,/ the world has been mulct of a spring.”¹²⁸

In his condensed life and writing, Büchner is like a magnifier, in whose focus the energies of youth and revolution converge, in reality as well as in literature. Büchner scholarship has, for the sake of practicality, tended to keep his political activism and his literary efforts apart,¹²⁹ but I would like to emphasize their kinship as different manifestations of his single most pervasive interest: the question if and how revolution is possible. The characters he created in his writing and the

¹²⁸ “Der Jugend fehlt ein Führer in der Schlacht,/ Um einen Frühling ist die Welt gebracht” (Georg Herwegh [1817–1875], “Zum Andenken an Georg Büchner, den Verfasser von *Dantons Tod*”).

¹²⁹ This critical tradition goes back to Karl Viëtor’s “Die Tragödie des heldischen Pessimismus: Über Büchners Drama *Dantons Tod*,” in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 12 (1934): 173 – 209. According to Viëtor, Büchner’s writings are expressions of a “heroic resignation,” of a “hopeless pessimism.” *Danton’s Death* is seen not as a commentary and reaction to the social conditions at the time, but as “untendential, pure poetry,” “not challenging the contemporaries and not exploring any present,” but speak eternal “religious truths,” particularly one of nihilism “as counter-concept to that of life.” Notable exceptions are Maurice B. Benn, *The Drama of Revolt: A Critical Study of Georg Büchner* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976). and Henri Poschmann, *Georg Büchner: Dichtung der Revolution und Revolution der Dichtung* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1988).

character he created of himself in his life were different configurations of the same experiment—an experiment whose inventor he was and which grew to a large scale only more than half a century after his death, around 1900.

This life and work *avant la lettre* may well be the main reason why Büchner has given German literary histories such a hard time, for example: “Hardly a German writer of the last two hundred years, except for Hölderlin, defies classification in the development process of literary history to such a degree as Büchner.”¹³⁰ It took virtually until the turn of the century before Büchner became known to a wider audience, after a preliminary first critical edition had been prepared in 1879 and after his dramatic pieces premiered on stage between 1885 and 1913. As late as 1936 Walter Benjamin found it worthwhile emphasizing that “the rediscovery of Büchner on the eve of the World War belongs to the few literary-political events of the epoch that were not devalued with the year 1918.”¹³¹ A literary-historical coincidence, I believe, that is nothing less than coincidental: Büchner’s fruits were divulged only as the time had ripened—or rephrased with Elias Canetti and a more sinister undertone: “Some sentences don’t release their poison till years after.”

Interestingly, Büchner’s way of writing—that is, his stance towards writing, his poetics—was unheard of at the time and would resurface in other authors’ writ-

¹³⁰ Klaus Ehlert & Wolfgang Beutin, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte: von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001) 264.

¹³¹ “Die Wiederentdeckung Büchners am Vorabend des Weltkrieges gehört zu den wenigen literarpolitischen Vorgängen der Epoche, die mit dem Jahre 1918 nicht entwertet waren.” Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 213.

ings only much later, around 1900. In 1965 the writer Christa Wolf, living and working in the GDR, called *Lenz* the beginning” and early “peak of modern German Prose.”¹³² The young Arnold Zweig had gone even further in 1923, when he declared with utmost stamina, referring to a particular sentence from the novella *Lenz* (1835): “Modern European prose starts with this sentence.”¹³³

Trying to understand what this modernism consists of, one might start with Büchner’s technique to “have the characters emerge from themselves, without copying into them anything external,”¹³⁴ as the eponymous protagonist of *Lenz* puts it in a famous passage known as the *Kunstgespräch*, a conscious siding with an early realism, which Büchner more or less invented for himself, not having heard much of, say, the young Balzac, who had just then started writing.¹³⁵ Büchner’s writing was directed against the poetic ambitions of German idealism, embodied by Goethe, Schiller and the romantics in literature, Kant and especially Hegel in philosophy.¹³⁶ He wanted the dramatic situation to “speak for itself,” in contrast to

¹³² Christa Wolf, *Lesen und Schreiben: Aufsätze und Betrachtungen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1972) 204.

¹³³ Arnold Zweig, *Essays*, vol. 1: Literatur und Theater (Berlin: Aufbau, 1959) 188. The sentence Zweig refers to is from the beginning of the novella: “Müdigkeit spürte er keine, nur war es ihm manchmal unangenehm, dass er nicht auf dem Kopf gehn konnte” (he did not feel tired, it was only sometimes irksome to him that he could not walk upside down).

¹³⁴ “[...] die Gestalten aus sich heraustreten zu lassen, ohne etwas vom Äußern hineinzukopieren.” Büchner, 2006, vol. 1, 235.

¹³⁵ Besides, Büchner’s “realism” is much bleaker and blunter than Balzac’s romantically inspired version; many later naturalists have recognized Büchner as an important precursor; Gerhart Hauptmann, for instance, gave a talk on Büchner, who was then still largely forgotten.

¹³⁶ At one point, Büchner has Lenz call idealism “the most despicable disdain of human nature” (die schmäglichste Verachtung der menschlichen Natur; 234). Markus Kuhnigk begins an article on the topic: “That Büchner certainly was not a champion of Hegel, but assumes a place, if a less prominent one, in the long line of his opponents is a foregone conclusion among the specialists.” “Das Ende der Liebe zur Weisheit: Zur Philosophiekritik und

the custom of the idealist play, where the protagonist proclaimed the dramatic solution on stage, but also in contrast to the more pronouncedly political strategy of his fellow liberals, the *Young Germans* and later political poets. One could say that the subtlety with which Büchner handled political discourse, his technique of embedding it within the action instead of providing it with a mouthpiece of its own, is akin to and anticipatory of the modernist strategy discussed in the introduction. The seeming directness of his scenes disguises a ruse; their apparent identity with themselves conceals an irony—in the word’s original sense of dissimulation.¹³⁷ There is a message there that is not contained in the immediate action, but that needs to be reconstructed, even extrapolated by the reader or spectator: a silent and thus precarious communication between author and audience over the heads of the characters. By itself this was not new at the time—particularly comical pieces at least since *Don Quijote* have deliberately used it to a great effect. What was new was its strategic use for political ends, no matter, if it entailed an eventual call for action (in its typical indirect form, of course) or not. As will be seen, it was exactly the deeply problematical nature of *any* call for action that at least partially inspired the writings—essentially *sublations* of action—analyzed here.

Philosophenschelte bei Georg Büchner im Zusammenhang mit der zeitgenössischen Rezeption,” in Georg Büchner, *Georg Büchner: Revolutionär—Dichter—Wissenschaftler, 1813-1837* (Frankfurt/M.: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1987) 276.

¹³⁷ “Ca. 1500, from Latin *ironia*, from Greek *eironeia* ‘dissimulation, assumed ignorance,’ from *eiron* ‘dissembler,’ perhaps related to *eirein* ‘to speak.’” <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?searchmode=none&search=irony>. Retrieved 29 April 2014.

Before Büchner politics and literature were two incommensurable units in the German tradition. The reason was twofold (although one may argue that the apparent duality was in fact an illusion, or rather a delusion): on the most elementary and palpable level, there was a long tradition of feudal political repression and censorship that had hardly found an end under Napoleon's sway; in 1806, the Nuremberg bookseller Palm was executed for having allegedly spurred on German writers to revolutionary action. After the anti-revolutionary overthrow led by Prince Clemens Metternich, the spokesman of Austria, Europe's new preeminent power, things did not improve. In a study on "the origins of violence" Anatol Rapoport writes: "Metternich regarded the suppression of every stirring of 'liberalism' as the sacred duty of every European power dedicated to peace, decency, and prosperity. Indeed, for a few years after what was regarded as a 'world restoration,' actions were undertaken similar to what today is called 'counterinsurgency.'"¹³⁸ Two revolts in Naples and in Spain were crushed in 1820, the latter by the French, who thus "regained their prestige as a member in good standing of the 'law and order coalition'" (ibid.). In Germany after 1819, Metternich ordered the persecution of oppositional intellectuals as 'demagogues,' repressing them with aggravated censorship, occupational ban, and prison. Prussia's secretary of the Interior, von Rochow, decreed: "It does not befit the subjects to apply the standard of their limited insight to the actions of the head of state and to arrogate in conceited insolence

¹³⁸ Anatol Rapoport, *The Origins of Violence: Approaches to the Study of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995) 499.

a public judgment on the legitimacy of the same.”¹³⁹ As a consequence, between 1830 and 1848 the number of German emigrants increased in France from 30,000 to 170,000, in Switzerland from 20,000 to 40,000, in Belgium from 5,000 to 13,000. The persecution of oppositional writers seemed successful.

On another, and more insidious level, there was the ideological ostracism of political writing. Goethe—although he was by no means its inventor, only one of its main and most influential advocates—came to embody the trend like no other. He often expressed his conviction that “pure” literature could only be tainted, if it came into contact with “filthy” politics. “We newer ones [wir Neueren],” he repeated in March 1832, shortly before his death, “had better say with Napoleon: politics is fate. But we should beware of our newest writers’ slogan that politics is poetry, or a subject fit for poets. As soon as a poet wants to act politically, he needs to succumb to a party, and as soon as he does this, he is lost as a poet.”¹⁴⁰ This is, Goethe argues, because he then needs to let go of his “free spirit” and “wear the cap of bigotry” [die Kappe der Borniertheit]. This view remained influential for many years to come; in some ways it has never entirely left the popular reception of literature in Germany.

¹³⁹ “Dem Untertanen ziemt es nicht, an die Handlungen des Staatsoberhauptes den Maßstab seiner beschränkten Einsicht anzulegen und sich in dünkelfhaftem Übermuth ein öffentliches Urteil über die Rechtmäßigkeit derselben anzumaßen.” Cited in Wolfgang Beutin (ed.), *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte: von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001) 268.

¹⁴⁰ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1982) 439.

Five years after Büchner's death, in 1843, and a decade after Heinrich Heine had optimistically and precisely in the above sense proclaimed "the end of the art period" (*das Ende der Kunstperiode*), the publicist and literary critic Robert Eduard Prutz could safely note: "It is a well-known fact that with us Germans poetry and politics are being regarded as decisively and thoroughly unconciliatory subjects—or at least have been regarded thus until very recently: and that accordingly the majority of us reckons political poetry a thing which either does not exist because it is impossible or which should not exist because it is illegitimate."¹⁴¹

Heine was one of the most outspoken champions of a "realist" turn in literature, denouncing the "Goetheans" who "regard art as an independent second world, which they put on such a high pedestal that all human action [...] moves, shifting and alterable, underneath it."¹⁴² This politically inconsequential art form was, in Heine's opinion, doomed and bound to disappear because it had its roots in the old feudal times. Thus it stood in the most incisive contradiction with the new era that "will give birth to a new art, which will be in enthusiastic harmony with it,

¹⁴¹ "Es ist eine bekannte Tatsache, daß bei uns Deutschen Poesie und Politik als entschiedene und durchaus unversöhnliche Gegensätze betrachtet werden—oder doch wenigstens bis vor ganz Kurzem so betrachtet wurden: und daß demgemäß politische Poesie bei der Mehrzahl von uns für ein Ding gilt, welches entweder, als unmöglich nicht existiert, oder, als unberechtigt, doch nicht existieren sollte." Cited in Metzler, 269.

¹⁴² "Indem die Goetheaner von solcher Ansicht ausgehen, betrachten sie die Kunst als eine unabhängige zweite Welt, die sie so hoch stellen, daß alles Treiben der Menschen, ihre Religion und ihre Moral, wechselnd und wandelbar, unter ihr hin sich bewegt." Heinrich Heine, *Die romantische Schule* (Frankfurt/M.: Insel Verlag, 1987) 59.

which won't have to borrow its symbolism from the deceased past and which must even breed a new technique, different from the old one."¹⁴³

Possibly even more than Heine, who was older and never entirely escaped his romantic roots, Büchner developed a program for this new literature and carried it out as well. Youth came to play a central role in it.

The son of a surgeon in the service of the reactionary government, Büchner attended one of Germany's most prestigious *Gymnasien*¹⁴⁴, thus growing up among members of the privileged classes who often practiced family music and dabbled in poetry. Still, already the nineteen year old had only scorn for the "muses of the German art of poetry."¹⁴⁵ Hardly two years later he mocked his assiduously poetizing friends: "I am sick and tired of the aesthetical dabbling."¹⁴⁶ The main

¹⁴³ The complete passage reads: "Meine alte Prophezeiung von dem Ende der Kunstperiode, die bei der Wiege Goethes anfang und bei seinem Sarge aufhören wird, scheint ihrer Erfüllung nahe zu sein. Die jetzige Kunst muss zugrunde gehen, weil ihr Prinzip noch im abgelebten, alten Regime, in der heiligen römischen Reichsvergangeheit wurzelt. Deshalb, wie alle welken Überreste dieser Vergangeheit, steht sie im unerquicklichsten Widerspruch mit der Gegenwart. ... Indessen, die neue Zeit wird auch eine neue Kunst gebären, die mit ihr selbst in begeistertem Einklang stehen wird, die nicht aus der verblichenen Vergangeheit ihre Symbolik zu borgen braucht, und die sogar eine neue Technik, die von der seitherigen verschieden, hervorbringen muss." Heinrich Heine, "Gemäldeausstellung in Paris 1831," cited in Wolfgang Bunzel & Peter Stein et al., *Romantik und Vormärz: Zur Archäologie literarischer Kommunikation in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2003) 358.

¹⁴⁴ Dilthey, the school reformer, had been headmaster and Büchner's class teacher.

¹⁴⁵ Büchner to August (and Adolph) Stöber, August 25th, 1832. He wrote the deliberately old-fashioned "teutsch" instead of the usual "deutsch," making the irony very explicit.

¹⁴⁶ Büchner to August Stöber, December 9th, 1833. Still, one should not underestimate the influence that the education at the *Großberzöglisch-Hessische humanistische Gymnasium* had on the young Büchner. A friend from school days, L. W. Link, remembers their shared veneration of Shakespeare: "Diese gemeinsamen wahren Geistesgenüsse bei jugendlicher Empfänglichkeit bewahrten uns allerdings vor Trivialität und Roheit [sic] und brachten uns tiefere Offenbarungen und Aufschlüsse über unsere Jahre. Es erstarkte das Bedürfnis, in das Wesen der Dinge einzudringen, uns demgemäß auszubilden und zu handeln. Allerdings, für die

“muse” of an author whose first writerly project and publication was one of the most notorious and rousing pamphlets of German pre-communist propaganda, the *Hessische Landbote*, had been the “Darmstadt police.”¹⁴⁷

I do not want to retell in its entirety the story of Büchner’s gradual involvement in the revolutionary cell of the “society of human rights” (*Gesellschaft der Menschenrechte*), of the composition (masterminded by Büchner), self-censorship (by another, more cautious member of the human rights society) and eventual distribution of said leaflet, of Büchner’s being under suspicion and surveillance, of his drafting *Danton’s Death* (a process that was as fast as it was secret: allegedly the drama was completed within five weeks, while Büchner always had some huge medical atlas lying next to the manuscript for means of quick camouflage, lest his father, who supposedly disliked revolutionary literature, enter the room), and eventually of his head over heels flight to Zurich. The circumstantialia can be gleaned from pertinent biographies¹⁴⁸—a pastime I highly recommend because they are exceptionally intriguing, involving trust and friendship, deceit and betrayal, moments of masquerade and comedy, mock-romanticism and moonlight wanderings, house searches and imprisonment (even death by torture), fathers

Gewissenhaftigkeit der Gymnasiasten war dergleichen nicht förderlich und den Lehrern nichts weniger als angenehm...” Georg Büchner, *Werke und Briefe* (Frankfurt/M.: Haffmans Verlag bei Zweitausendeins, 2008) 644.

¹⁴⁷ Citation from a lost letter of Büchner to Karl Gutzkow, passed down in Gutzkow, “Ein Kind der neuen Zeit,” in *Frankfurter Telegraph, Neue Folge*, 44, June 1837: 345. Cited in Poschmann, 42.

¹⁴⁸ An extensive and detailed account can be found in Hans Mayer’s classic *Georg Büchner und seine Zeit* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972).

breaking tie, mothers clandestinely sticking by their sons, etc. For the sake of the argument, however, I would like to look only at a few moments, epiphanic *aperçus* at best, but prone to illustrate the specific configuration of youth, revolution and literature I am interested in.

First, one may note the decisive difference between Büchner and the majority of his comrades in the society of human rights: Whereas most, among them the ringleader Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, a school headmaster and protestant theologian, pursued a program designed to unite the proletariat and the liberal middle class against the members and adherents of monarchy, Büchner was very clear that this strategy was doomed to failure:

The entire revolution has already split up into liberals and absolutists and needs to be eaten by the uneducated and poor class; the relationship between rich and poor is the only revolutionary element in the world, hunger alone can become the goddess of liberty, and only a Moses who sets on us the seven Egyptian scourges could become a messiah. Feed up the farmer, and the revolution becomes apoplectic. A *chicken* in every farmer's pot kills the *Gallic rooster*.¹⁴⁹

In contrast to his fellow revolutionaries Büchner never counted on the bourgeoisie. His interest in the disenfranchised dated back to school days when he had expressed to his parents his loathing of the privileged, “who—in possession of a ludicrous formality called education, or of dead stuff called erudition—sacrifice the great mass of their brothers to their condescending egotism.”¹⁵⁰

Being too explicit about this was, in the mind of Weidig, not the way to go, if one wanted to keep the anti-royalist bourgeois in the boat. Therefore, the diligent

¹⁴⁹ Original emphasis. Büchner to Gutzkow (Strasbourg 1835).

¹⁵⁰ Büchner to his family, February 1834.

pedagogue painstakingly changed, in the last minute before the *Courier* went to press, all of Büchner's respective phrasings: the "rich," that Büchner had mostly used, became the "genteel" or the "aristocrats," etc. In addition, he cut the more inflammatory passages. How lucidly, however, the later author of *Woyzeck* foresaw the dangers of confusing the two classes, of glossing over the different interests of bourgeoisie and proletariat can be estimated from a friend's recollection: According to him Büchner "did not believe that by means of the constitutional rural opposition a truly free situation could come about. Should these people manage to overthrow the German governments, he often said, and to introduce a general monarchy or even a republic, then what we will get is a money aristocracy [*Geldaristokratie*] as in France, and it had better stay as it is now."¹⁵¹

One can imagine Büchner's shock and disappointment to learn that most farmers were quick not in getting ready to rumble, but in returning the spiteful specimens to the local authorities. His fellow revolutionaries were a disappointment as well. Georg's brother Wilhelm visited affiliated conspirators in Butzbach, the center of Weidig's revolutionary activity, shortly after his brother's escape. Wilhelm—three years younger than Georg and about to dedicate his revolutionary energies to chemistry rather than to politics (eventually, he would invent a simpler

¹⁵¹ Friedrich Noellner, "Actenmäßige Darlegung des wegen Hochverraths eingeleiteten Verfahrens gegen den Pfarrer D. Friedrich Ludwig Weidig. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die rechtlichen Grundsätze über Staatsverbrechen und deutsches Strafverfahren, sowie auf die öffentlichen Verhandlungen über die späteren Untersuchungen gegen die Brüder des D. Weidig" (Darmstadt: 1844) 425. Cited in Poschmann, 65.

procedure to fabricate the color ultramarine, getting rich in the process)—recalls the atmosphere:

As Georg's brother I was received with open arms. After they had gotten to know me, I was to be admitted to the secret society, which stirred my curiosity more than my excitement. One particular day, I was picked up and taken to a house where they had to make sure no gleam of light emerged from a single window. Then one "conspirator" went into the house, coming back with the news: "everything in order." Carefully we went up the dark stairs; a tallow candle was burning in the room. —Now everybody talked under their breath, drank beer and—talked about girls, but in a decent way. After this had been going on for a while, the conspirators left, separately and with utmost caution. That was the whole story.¹⁵²

If one regards Büchner's literary *œuvre* under this aspect, its vanishing point, the focus of all his works, is revealed: the class-conscious understanding of social injustice and the frustrating impossibility of its amendment. Virtually all his protagonists suffer from this dilemma and try to find ways of doing anything about it. Naturally, the issue is not always addressed as directly as in his first literary play, *Danton's Death*, which explicitly negotiates the situation of an active demolitionist finding himself ensnared in the specious snares of revolutionary action.

If I propose to read Büchner's writings as a first embodiment of the "youth literature"—that is, literature featuring youths in this specific way—to come, it is because he is the first writer to associate revolution (the mourning of its impossibility as well as the defiant call to keep its spirit alive) and youth.

If Danton, as a desperate revolutionary, represents the problem's immediate political vesture, then Leonce and Lena, as youths refusing to mature, figure as its first and most important metaphoric transposition. Büchner's account of Lenz's

¹⁵² Cited in Mayer, 159.

malady has often been recognized by psychologists as an ideal case study of schizophrenia.¹⁵³ Woyzeck, in turn, functions as a fourth manifestation in the same complex: the criminal (although he also exhibits features of the youth, the invalid and the madman). The resigned revolutionary, the youth, the madman, and the criminal: they are all disdained and humiliated figures in the face of disciplinary authority.

Foucault, unaware of Büchner, recognizes time and again exactly these types as preeminent objects of the state's disciplinary apparatus, which subjects them to the painful process of individualization:

In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and the non-delinquent. In each case, it is towards the first of these pairs that all the individualizing mechanisms are turned in our civilization; and when one wishes to individualize the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ See for example Gerhard Irle, "Lenz: eine frühe Schizophrenie," in *Der psychiatrische Roman*, Schriftenreihe zur Theorie und Praxis der Psychotherapie (Stuttgart: Hippokrates-Verlag, 1965) 73–83. And Walter Hinderer, "Pathos oder Passion: Die Leiddarstellung in Büchners Lenz," in *ibid.*, *Über deutsche Literatur und Rede: Historische Interpretationen* (München: W. Fink, 1981).

¹⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 193. Foucault often comes back to the same objects of disciplinary surveillance, for example in a passage on the panopticon: "If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents." *Discipline & Punish*, 200f. At another point he writes: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228).

Among his peers in discipline the child attains prominence in that he is the most inconspicuous delinquent: while the criminal is an obviously abject and the madman an obviously aberrant adult, the child/youth is being disciplined *preemptively*. He is merely *suspected* to nourish in himself the *seed* of abject or aberrant behavior. (And even the deviant adult is suspected of clandestinely nourishing his perpetual adolescence: “how much of the child he has in him.”) The child, at the same time, is allowed his pockets of abjection and aberrance, provided they are insignificant enough. Also, he is hardly ever permanently expelled from adult community because *he can still develop* (the key tenet of the *Bildungsroman*). Unlike the delinquent, the invalid or the madman, who have either decided on where they stand (the delinquent, opposed to the state’s panoptical power) or who are unable to decide where they stand and who are simply ostracized (the invalid and the madman), the child or youth’s place is not yet determined—among the possible motives of the panopticon’s operators, Foucault does not forget to mention “the malice of a child” (202).

This deep ambivalence makes the child or youth the most interesting figure representing the social charge from which the revolutionary project originates. Like Foucault, Büchner does not want any glorification of “madness, children, delinquency, sex”¹⁵⁵ per se, but just as Foucault intends to show with his genealogical analysis how these social complexes were dealt with at a specific period and

¹⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988) 26. The citation is from an interview led by Bernhard-Henri Levy.

place and to which power practices they were subjected—thus opening an abyss of time from whose bottom a wind blows back to the present—so too does Büchner strive to sublimate within their literary portrayal, which outlasts the crushing of his own seditious hopes, the trigger of revolution.

In the conclusion of *Madness & Civilization*, Foucault paraphrases this political implication of art: “By the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.”¹⁵⁶ This madness can certainly be the rather reasonable poetic voice merely decried as “madness” by the unamused officials.

It is in this field of tension that we must understand Danton’s early uttering, indicative of his progressive weariness: “This is too much hassle, life is not worth the work one does in order to sustain it.”¹⁵⁷ A denial of work means a denial of the ethic of bourgeois adulthood; Danton coins the early slogan, endlessly repeated throughout Büchner’s work, of the inward trend in literature to come. But in its very weariness, its appeal to withdrawal and decline of responsibility, it opens up a new and hitherto unexplored space.

Danton, Lenz, Leonce and Woyzeck’s “I’d rather not” is only the exterior demarcation of an inward scope with continuing influence—if not on the characters,

¹⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 288.

¹⁵⁷ “Das ist mir der Mühe zuviel, das Leben ist nicht die Arbeit werth, die man sich macht, es zu erhalten.” Georg Büchner, *The Complete Plays*, ed. by Michael Patterson (London/New York, NY: Methuen, 1987) 35.

then certainly on the minds of their readers. The discrepancy between the characters' sinking mood—they let go of all ambition and tend to fatigue, ennui, even nihilism instead—and Büchner's heightened activity during the few weeks of the text's composition, as he was preparing for his flight and exile, have stimulated the curiosity of many critics.

As mentioned above, an important trend in Büchner studies, since Karl Viëtor's early assessment of his writings as "untendentious, pure poetry," that was allegedly "not challenging the contemporaries and not exploring any present,"¹⁵⁸ has been simply to separate the "two stages" of Büchner's life, the revolutionary and the poet's. Henri Poschmann, the initiator of the "International Georg Büchner Conference", hosted by the "Akademie der Wissenschaften" for the first time in 1988, may be the prime representative of the opposite view. He writes:

The chronology of facts [Poschmann is thinking of the simultaneity of Büchner's drafting *Danton* and of preparing his escape] disproves the common legend that the founder of the revolutionary secret society with the then most progressive social concept would have, after the failed enterprise of the *Hessischer Landbote*, withdrawn from political practice as a disappointed revolutionary in order to find his actual vocation as a "poet."¹⁵⁹

For my part, I doubt whether these narratives are really as conflicting and contradictory as they have been pointed out to be. The aesthetic indulgence in retreat, desperation, and pervasive loss, a sort of personal as well as political masochism to

¹⁵⁸ See 8.

¹⁵⁹ "Die Chronologie der Tatsachen entkräftet die verbreitete Legende, der Gründer der revolutionären Geheimorganisation mit dem seinerzeit fortgeschrittensten Gesellschaftskonzept habe sich nach dem Fehlschlag der Unternehmung des 'Hessischen Landboten' als enttäuschter Revolutionär aus der politischen Praxis zurückgezogen, um als 'Dichter' seine eigentliche Bestimmung zu finden." Poschmann, 32f.

the point of nihilism (that is characteristic of all of Büchner's works) may be part of the ruse we will encounter in the subsequent chapters: a sort of parallax view, squinting at something other than what the cursory observer would suspect.

As has possibly become clear already, my own position in this critical debate may thus be approximated as an attempt at reconciliation: After the frustration of his revolutionary energies in "reality," Büchner sublimated or sublated them in "literature," and in a figurative disguise that would at times render their impetus almost unrecognizable. It is here that we find the intricate affinity and kinship of Büchner's writings with the modernist works analyzed in the subsequent chapters.

Throughout the play we encounter Danton's melancholy. Already the very first scene is shot through with it: while some people dedicate themselves to a card game, Danton's fellow revolutionary Camille Desmoulins revels in anticipation of the success of their cause. The eponymous protagonist is notably less excited; dreamily aloof, he merely bothers every now and then to chip in a caustic quip. He is the first to speak, joking about women/queens [both "Dame" in German], who "show their heart[s] to their husbands and to other people the diamonds," and ironically suggests that women could make one fall in love with "the lie." Julie, his mistress, asks: "Do you believe in me?" He replies: "What do I know? We know little of each other? We are thick-skinned, we stretch out our fingers at one another, but it is in vain, we merely rub off the coarse leather, —we are very lonely." Then he talks about graves and death knells tolling. Camille theorizes about how to

organize the insurgency, ending: “You, Danton, will lead the assault on the convent.”

Danton: “I will, you will, he will. If we are still alive by then, say the old skirts. One hour later, 60 minutes will have gone by. Right, old sport?” Camille: “What is this all about? Of course!” Danton: “Oh, everything is of course. But who is to do all these great things?” Camille: “We and the honest people.” Danton: “The ‘and’ in-between is a long word, it keeps us a bit too much apart, the way is long, honesty loses its breath before we meet.”

A couple of months before Büchner wrote down these weary words, he had written to his parents from Strasbourg, referring to the violent (and violently crushed) assault on the Frankfurt police post:

If anything is going to help in our time, it is violence. [...] One reproaches the young people for their use of violence. However, aren’t we in a perpetual state of violence? As we were born and raised in jail we don’t realize anymore that we are locked up, with hands and feet in cuffs and our mouths gagged.”¹⁶⁰

One “reproaches the young people for violence”—the pervasive bourgeois fear of this suspicious age unbound by “mature” constraints and responsibilities shines through once more. How the same realization of the mutual entanglement of young age and revolution was reciprocated—even though in the opposite, affirmative vein as an expression of hope, rather than fear—can be seen in the important “German Youth’s Cry for Help” [*Hilferuf der deutschen Jugend*] (1841), published by

¹⁶⁰ Büchner, 2006, 366. “Wenn in unserer Zeit etwas helfen soll, so ist es Gewalt. Man wirft den jungen Leuten den Gebrauch der Gewalt vor. Sind wir denn aber nicht in einem ewigen Gewaltzustand? Weil wir im Kerker geboren und großgezogen sind, merken wir nicht mehr, daß wir im Loch stecken mit angeschmiedeten Händen und Füßen und einem Knebel im Munde. [...] Wenn ich an dem, was geschehen, keinen Teil genommen habe und an dem, was vielleicht geschieht, keinen Teil nehmen werde, so geschieht es weder aus Mißbilligung, noch aus Furcht, sondern nur weil ich im gegenwärtigen Zeitpunkt jede revolutionäre Bewegung als eine vergebliche Unternehmung betrachte und nicht die Verblendung Derer teile, welche in den Deutschen ein zum Kampf bereites Volk sehen.”

the pre-Marxist socialist Wilhelm Weitling in the magazine of the “Union of the Just” [*Bund der Gerechten*]:

We too want to have a voice in the public debates about the weal and woe of mankind; because we, the people in blouses, jackets, coats, and caps, we are the most numerous, most useful, and strongest people on God’s green earth... We too want to have a voice for this is the nineteenth century and we have never had one... Within living memory others have always advocated our or rather their interests, that is why it is about time that we become mature and rid ourselves of this invidious boring tutelage.¹⁶¹

The dream of breaking free from the wardship of adult authority associates the young and the disenfranchised in a way I will return to. For now, however, I would like to get back to Büchner’s letter and its equally striking ending:

If I haven’t taken part in what has happened,” Büchner writes, “and won’t take part in what may happen, it is neither because of disapproval, nor because of fear, but because at the current moment I regard every revolutionary movement as a futile undertaking and do not share the dazzlement of those that take the Germans for a people ready to fight (Büchner, 2006, 367).

But rather than giving in, he stresses his readiness “to fight with *mouth* and *hand* against it [the official law that he despises as ‘perpetual, raw violence’] where I can” (ibid.).¹⁶² In such close company to the mouth that talks we can be sure that Büchner is talking of the hand that writes, rather than fights, or rather: that fights through writing. His turn to literature represents a change of medium, not of

¹⁶¹ “Aufruf an alle, welche der deutschen Sprache angehören,” in *Hilferuf der deutschen Jugend*, edited by some German workers, Geneva, 1841, 1st delivery. Cited in Werner Kowalski, *Vom kleinbürgerlichen Demokratismus zum Kommunismus: Zeitschriften aus der Frühzeit der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, 1834–1847* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1967) 126.

¹⁶² This passage has been the object of critical attention. Some have doubted Büchner’s honesty, or if he may have tried to avert his parents’ suspicion he might be involved in revolutionary activities. The unequivocal determination of the passage seems to me to counter this reading. In a commentary the editor Poschmann writes: “Such an open confession as here—probably even provoked by his parents’ exhortations—is nowhere again to be found. Appeasement and playing down his commitment become the rule.” Büchner, 2006, 1082.

heart. His revolutionary impetus remains, but is sublated—while preparing the flight and subsequently while trying to secure a living for himself and his fiancée—in the literature he writes at night. A literature that out of necessity needs to overcome tradition (even the youngest tradition of romanticism) and invent something new, something modern.

“Whereas the *Bildungsroman* explores the transition from late adolescence into adulthood,” John Neubauer writes in an overview of adolescence in literature, “romantic literature focuses on the antecedent of adolescence, childhood. Romanticism sets the child as a symbol against adult corruption. In Blake’s and Wordsworth’s poetry, in Novalis’s *Die Lebrlinge zu Sais* and other romantic works, children represent paradise and the golden age.”¹⁶³

Even the few glimpses we have caught of Büchner’s struggle and convictions should hint at how absurd it would be to imagine Büchner—who had just escaped Hesse, warranted for his arrest—stylizing children to representatives of paradise and the golden age. Likewise, finding youth’s objective in saturated adulthood, having made an agreement with the injustices of the world, is unlikely to become the underlying ideologeme of his literary projects. In this impasse the necessity to find a third artistic way out emerges. And as Büchner was in the inferior position, pressed from all sides, by reactionary politics as well as by the poetic status quo prohibiting overtly political writing, it must be found with craft and cunning.

¹⁶³ Neubauer, 77.

To be sure, Büchner knew how to use the tradition to distract from his real purposes. In the midst of the commotion accompanying the preparations for the distribution of the *Courier*, Büchner and his comrades were detected, at least strictly suspected to be involved in seditious doings. He had to leave Gießen, his place of study, in order to warn a fellow conspirator in Offenbach near Frankfurt. In a sly double move, he procured an alibi for himself and calmed his parents about his sudden disappearance, lest they unexpectedly came to see him at his Gießen home. “I use every pretext to break away from my chain”, he writes to them on August 3, 1834. “On Friday night I left Gießen; I chose the night because of the great heat, and thus I wandered in the most lovely chill beneath a bright starry sky, on whose farthest horizon a persistent twinkle was gleaming.”¹⁶⁴

This is mock-romanticism at its best, reminiscent of the innocent wanderings of bachelors through the wonders of mother nature, Eichendorff saluting from afar. Büchner stylizes himself as an apolitical wanderer in search of the blue flower in order to mask his actual, highly political and unsentimental undertaking. If the sublime has its place anywhere in this passage, it is as sublime irony.

Similarly, *Leonce and Lena*, the play I want to concentrate my analysis on, has been underestimated as “romantic-ironic interlude” (in Hans Mayer’s classic interpretation):¹⁶⁵ “Everything one ever perceived as ‘romantic’ in sound and world

¹⁶⁴ Büchner, 2006, 387.

¹⁶⁵ Note that Mayer calls it romantic-ironic, rather than ironically romantic, thus emphasizing its ‘genuine’ tinge. His assessment goes back all the way to the first editor Karl Gutzkow’s view, who had a few selected scenes published posthumously. In a letter to Büchner’s surviving fiancée Wilhelmine Jaeglé, who kept the literary remains, he wrote: “I could not disclose the

view, finds its place and part in Büchner's comedy."¹⁶⁶ Mayer, a Marxist at the time of writing and a great champion of Büchner, is conspicuously uncomfortable with the play that to him essentially appears as an extended montage of romantic commonplaces; to a great extent the characters' words are slightly altered citations mostly from authors like Ludwig Tieck, Alfred de Musset, Jean Paul, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Eichendorff, Friedrich Schlegel, Brentano (whose early comedy *Ponce de Leon* [1804] served as quarry for a particularly large number of plot details), the young Goethe (especially *Werther*), Shakespeare and so on. Friedrich Gundolf, an early commentator, saw "a relapse into the mere literary comedy in the manner of Shakespeare."¹⁶⁷

Eventually, Mayer explains it as a synthetic operation of naivité and sentimentality (in Schiller's conceptual framework), as a playing together of "sentimental disposition and realist design," a certain "aloofness," a "free play of the spirit, detached from reality," as it is also found among the romantics (315). The fact that Büchner composed the play on the occasion of a public competition for a comic drama, run by the influential Cotta publishing house, has not helped to alter this assessment: "It is scarcely wise to overestimate, to charge and strain with inter-

entire comedy because Büchner indeed threw it out a little too fast and as a *whole* [original emphasis] it would not even have satisfied his friends. [...] We should not use the fragments of *Lenz* and the really but hastily composed comedy (it hurts me that I need to speak like this and I ask that one does not take my judgment for unkind) as a cause for a special publication." Charles Andler, "Briefe Gutzkows an Georg Büchner und dessen Braut," *Euphorion*, supplementary issue no.3 [1897]: 192f. Cited in Büchner, 2006, 590.

¹⁶⁶ Mayer, 311.

¹⁶⁷ Friedrich Gundolf, "Georg Büchner," in *ibid.*, *Romantiker* (Berlin: 1930) 390. Cited in Büchner, 2006, 609.

pretations and secrets a product of an occasional whim, of a temporary conformism that seeks to win a prize for monetary or career reasons” (316).

Occasional whim? Temporary conformism keen on fast cash? Unlikely. Possible, but unlikely. Büchner worked so hard at it for five months (remember: he had written *Danton* in five weeks) that he missed the deadline (although it had been extended from 15 May to 1 July 1836); the manuscript was sent back unopened. Of course, quite a few scenes and particularly the happy ending that sees Leonce and Lena marrying play into the conciliatory romantic cliché. But the fact that Büchner may have suspected which jurors he would have to impress—it was later revealed that among them was Stuttgart’s critic Wolfgang Menzel, whose authority was rivaled only by his reactionism—does not necessarily imply that the play is conformist.

This problem could also be solved—and I believe it was—by an intricate codification on numerous levels cloaking the more inflammatory content beneath a texture of ostensive harmlessness, thus turning the play into an anti-romanticist, anti-classicist torpedo in the vein of the letter to his parents cited above, while by far exceeding it. Even Danton’s sly remarks had worked to a high degree only by means of actively reconstructing their suggestive connotations on the part of the reader or the spectator.

It was, for example, revealed rather late that Valerio’s favorite nursery rhyme “Hei, da sitzt e Fleig’ an der Wand” [Hooray, a fly is sitting on the wall], that he sings time and again and that had hitherto been regarded as an inconspicuous and

unproblematic detail, was sung among Frankfurt revolutionaries as soon as a police informer entered the room.¹⁶⁸ As Burghard Dedner rightly notes, this is likely but one of innumerable secret allusions that escape our understanding today.¹⁶⁹ I am not so much concerned with the hermeneutic quest of recovering them all, since a central dislocation or deferral of inflammatory meaning can indeed be reconstructed and analyzed: Büchner's jumping on the bandwagon of youth.

With my reading of the text I will try to support my conviction—notwithstanding the uneasiness most critics experienced in the face of the play—that we touch here no less on the heart of Büchner's work than with *Danton's Death* or *Woyzeck*; *Danton's Death* was fast, promising, and its author's means of processing the failure of his own revolutionary efforts. *Lenz*, Büchner's brief excursion to novella terrain, remained fragment just as *Woyzeck*—the first voluntarily, the latter interrupted by his death. If we look closely, *Leonce and Lena* is the most complete mature piece of writing we have of his.¹⁷⁰ Except it is not, or does not want to be: mature. This elevates it above the status of a romantic-ironic interlude between the putatively more socially conscious pieces preceding and succeeding it.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ See E. Theodor Voss, "Arkadien in *Leonce und Lena*," in Burghard Dedner (ed.), *Georg Büchner: Leonce und Lena* (Frankfurt/M.: Athenäum, 1987).

¹⁶⁹ See Burghard Dedner, "Büchner's Lachen: *Vorüberlegungen zu Leonce und Lena*," in *Leonce und Lena*, 301.

¹⁷⁰ Still, Büchner never saw the text published. It only survives in two unauthorized posthumous printings and a few manuscript fragments. Thomas Michael Mayer, contributor to a critical edition of Büchner's works, recommends "utmost scepticism on all levels towards the exact wording of Büchner's comedy passed down through the close meshed sieve of two editors" (*Vorläufige Bemerkungen*, 152; cited in Büchner, 2006, 586). For details, see Poschmann's essay "Leonce und Lena: Textgrundlage und Textgestaltung" in Büchner, 2006.

¹⁷¹ A second feature consists in the protagonists' early being "well provided for and preoccu-

Patricia Spacks, in a chapter on adolescence in British eighteenth-century fiction, admits that the ambitions and energies of the young protagonists often clash with the oppressive social authorities, which advances them to Büchner's heroes as well as to their modern descendants. But whereas the earlier English novelists "glorify maturity, as the social mythology of the age glorified it, yet try to imagine a mature mode that neutralizes the threat, without sacrificing the energies, of the dangerous age,"¹⁷² Büchner's characters Leonce and Lena represent a new coinage of literary youths featuring for the first time the very characteristic that Neubauer, focusing on the *fin de siècle*, has paraphrased thus: "Turn-of-the-century novelists may be said to participate in a new 'social mythology,' in which maturity is no longer the standard and adolescence is often the subject of glorification" (76p.). Put more directly: immaturity, reassessed and repositioned in a positive, affirmative vein, becomes the new battle cry and regression, at least stasis, the new ideal. Avoidance of aging, that is, of adopting its associated comforts—"the lie," as Danton calls it—is the drooping rebel's last resort. Powerless before the repressions of the political as well as poetic ideologies holding sway, the only way out is the way *inside*, the way *backwards*. The withdrawal from the sphere of adult ambition into, at first glance, a pre-political one (school, leisure, play) is retraced in Adorno's later

ped mostly with internal problems and their peers," as Neubauer writes with the modernist characters in mind (76). Earlier adolescent characters, the picaros, were usually "without financial support, formal education, and a 'moratorium': they learn[ed] their lessons amidst war, poverty, and social unrest" (ibid.). This feature must not be underestimated.

¹⁷² Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks, *Adolescent Idea: Myths of Young and the Adult Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 107.

recognition that the “basic levels of experience that motivate [modernist] art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil.”¹⁷³ The artistic repression from two sides has triggered the move towards formal abstraction, the “jerking back” from the world, that Adorno is talking about.

What has long been overlooked, though, is that this reaction was paralleled by another one, acting out its revolutionary energies through the *content structure*, on the level of themes, motives and, most importantly, on the level of characters. With Foucault we have identified four types who exist in order to be systematically repressed within the disciplinary discourse: the madman, the invalid, the criminal and the child.¹⁷⁴ Their being and particularly their being witnessed (through their literary portrayal) is already by itself a mute charge against the status quo. Herein lies the inextricably political implication; it is *always already* political.

For the reasons outlined above the child/youth has the greatest potential for depth of character, for a moral and political ambivalence that comprises in itself the whole system of longing for freedom on the one hand and its perpetual suppression on the other (we are reminded of Musil’s characterization of Törleß’s school: “each class in such an institute is a small state of its own”)—and that is thus the most promising figure for a poetic rendering in this vein. Büchner consciously

¹⁷³ Adorno, 2004, 6. “Die Grundschichten der Erfahrung, welche die Kunst motivieren, sind der gegenständlichen Welt, vor der sie zurückzucken, verwandt.“ Adorno, 1997, 16.

¹⁷⁴ At another occasion in *Discipline & Punish* Foucault reiterates his list of the panopticon’s victims: “It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work” (205).

wrote about all four types, dedicating one work to each. His piece on youth, highly anticipatory of the modernist literature to come, should not be dismissed too easily.¹⁷⁵

The moral ambiguity of the child/youth, who is simultaneously subject to the panopticon of official authority and at times its operator is touched upon rather early in *Leonce and Lena*, in the third scene of the first act. “How basely I have behaved towards the poor devils!” Prince Leonce says to himself. “Still, there is a certain pleasure in a certain baseness.”¹⁷⁶ The scene immediately follows an utterly uneasy appearance of a privy counselor cursorily called ‘president’—apparently a high functionary of the state—whose embarrassed attempts to retain his dignity in face of the prince, who is after all his superior, only reveal his ridiculousness. He pulls papers out of his pockets, takes bows and does all sorts of things prescribed by etiquette, getting enmeshed in polite forms (“May His majesty excuse...”) that do not lead anywhere, but rather evaporate in the hot summer air.

All the while Leonce is sitting on the grass, talking about dreams and forebodings, measuring his royal clemency with the help of his legs and joking with

¹⁷⁵ In the most recent critical edition reissued in 2006, Poschmann can still write: “The comedy [*Leonce und Lena*] remained excepted from the late awakened und often the more exuberant admiration of *Danton’s Death* and *Woyzeck* as well as *Lenz* as works of an equally ingenious and modern poet” (Büchner, 2006, 610). Its quality is routinely overlooked; Günther Petzoldt is a notable exception: “A play that, disclosing all its bitter ingredients at closer analysis, approaches the philosophy of *Danton* and noticeably prepares *Woyzeck*.” Günther Penzoldt, *Georg Büchner* (Munich: dtv, 1977) 32f.

¹⁷⁶ “Wie gemein ich mich zum Ritter an den armen Teufeln gemacht habe! Es steckt nun aber doch einmal ein gewisser Genuß in einer gewissen Gemeinheit.” Büchner, 2006, 107.

his pal Valerio about putting a cowbell around the president's neck (a pun on the German "Geleite" [escort] and "Geläute" [ringing], respectively); in short, he behaves *like a child*. His silly behavior however exposes the even sillier behavior of the president, who struggles not to fall out of his role, which turns out to be equally, or rather even more nonsensical than Valerio and Leonce's; within the operetta monarchy Popo [a children's term for "bottom"], headed by the laughing stock King Peter (who in his discourses desperately clings to abstract formulas and categories in order to evade bitter reality and requires a knot in his handkerchief to remember his people), the constitutional parliament is merely meant to shove sinecures off to the corrupt bourgeoisie and possibly to distract the starving farmers by means of the comedy perpetually performed in festive costumes.¹⁷⁷ It is exactly the privy counselor's helplessness in the face of the childish prince's mockery that reveals the phantasmagoric nature of his authority: the promises of the pomp are never kept.

Leonce, who embodies the rebellious spirit of the child in the body of the future sovereign and can thus act out the malice of his inner child to the utmost degree, denounces the particular game that the president came to offer and that Valerio would be happy to play; Leonce is to marry Lena, princess of the kingdom

¹⁷⁷ Research has shown that in many details and allusions the constitutional monarchy of Büchner's native Darmstadt was satirically reproduced. See Poschmann's respective comments in his essay on "the historical and literary background" of *Leonce und Lena*, Büchner, 2006, 607f. Most emphatically, the name of Leonce's kingdom, "Popo" (bottom) seems extrapolated from the word "Darmhessen," indicating the area of Hesse around the local capital Darmstadt, while "Darm" by itself means "intestine" in German—thus, calling a kingdom "Bottom" only seems like a funny relocation.

Pipi (a children's term for urine, approximately "wee-wee"), who is announced to arrive on the following day. To be king would be a lot of fun, the easily satisfied Valerio imagines; one cruises around for days on end, peeves everybody by making them take their hats off, and by "orderly subjects into well-ordered soldiers" [literally: "cutting proper soldiers out of proper people"], one "turns black coats and white cravats into civil servants. And when you die their polished buttons will tarnish, and the bell-ropes will snap like threads from all the tolling. Won't that be entertaining?" (Büchner, 1987, 125.). "Valerio, Valerio," Leonce sullenly says, "we must try something else" (ibid.). Which prompts Valerio to sift enthusiastically through a list of stereotypical adult roles, albeit somewhat idealized ones, wherein the old feudal world of glorious adventure and the new bourgeois world of enlightenment rationality clash. Each proposal is accompanied by a miniature cliché, that Leonce goes on to decline: They could be "scientists," Valerio recommends, ("a priori or a posteriori?") or "heroes" ("he marches up and down, trumpeting") or "geniuses" (which Leonce derides by suggesting to rip off the feathers of the "nightingale of poetry" and to dip them in ink). Valerio seems to give up on these idealistic role models of adult social mythology, taking a back seat: "So let us become useful members of human society." Valerio is a good Hegelian after all. But Leonce is not amused: "I'd rather tender my resignation as a human being." Eventually, with Valerio at his wits' end, the prince himself starts reveling in a child's dream of light and air and marble, of sleeping satyrs and old charms; then he says: "We are going to Italy" (all 108).

Without a doubt the excitement to challenge Cotta, the Stuttgart publishing house of Goethe and Schiller that also supported the reactionary critic Menzel,¹⁷⁸ must have prodded the fervent anti-classicist that Büchner was. He interlaced so many allusions to and citations of contemporary romantics and classicists as well as references to the history of philosophy (Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Descartes, La Mettrie) that the assumption has been made: “theoretically it would not be astonishing if some day there were a reference for every sentence of the comedy.”¹⁷⁹ While most benevolent reception of the play has concentrated on this level of linguistic play and literary allusion, some scholars recognized the explosive forces that Büchner insidiously braided into his mock-romanticism.

Unsurprisingly, the line of demarcation between the two camps often re-traces the ideological border between the East and the West. The new critical and structuralist trends dominating literary criticism in the West during a great part of the last century have thus left its traces as well as the more fervent, socially conscious criticism practiced particularly in the GDR.

¹⁷⁸ Menzel was likely exerting an influence on the jury, if he was not a member himself.

¹⁷⁹ Jürgen Schröder, *Georg Büchners Leonce und Lena: Eine verkebrte Komödie* (Munich: W. Fink, 1966) 195. See also Hans H. Hiebel, “Allusion und Elision: Die intertextuellen Beziehungen zwischen Büchners Lustspiel und Stücken von Shakespeare, Musset und Brentano,” in *Zweites Internationales Georg Büchner Symposium 1987*, ed. by Burghard Dedner and Günter Oesterle (Frankfurt/M.: Hain, 1989) 353–78.

The most interesting adherent of the latter, Henri Poschmann, in his late GDR publication *Georg Büchner: Dichtung der Revolution und Revolution der Dichtung* (1983, reissued in 1988) dedicated a lengthy chapter to *Leonce and Lena*. He zealously defends the play, astutely and eloquently pointing out Büchner's scathing critique of the German feudal sectionalism, in the sense of Marx's later conviction uttered in the introduction of *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843–44): "The modern *ancien régime* is merely the *comedian* of a world order whose *real heroes* have died."¹⁸⁰ In this vein Poschman can summarize:

The condition becoming its own caricature, as analyzed by Marx, is perfected in Büchner's comedy to the ne plus ultra. It is most completely expressed in the configuration Peter-Leonce, situating itself from the relation of an overstrained regent, weary of governance, and an heir to the throne called to duty against his wishes and convictions (208).

In this view Leonce, in spite of his attempt at escaping the "prose of this philistine world" (201), appears as mere baby-sized scoundrel, growing up to become the replication of his repellent father: In the first scene of the play, already sitting on the grass, the passing clouds are making the prince melancholic; "the bees sit so torpid on the flowers and the sunshine lies so languid on the earth. There is an epidemic of ghastly idleness" (Büchner, 1978, 114)—an indolence that Poschmann dismisses as the ideology of a "epicurean upper class" suppressing "the thought of its downside, of the drudgery that is the people's way of life. Within the world of the theater prince this topic is a general taboo as it concerns the secret of their existence" (Poschmann, 194).

¹⁸⁰ Karl and Friedrich Engels Marx, *Werke*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976) 382. Original emphases.

In other words, Leonce appears as a scoundrel whose cultivated ennui merely touches upon what is inside the narrow confines of his privileged life. This view is at times encouraged by Büchner, who at the beginning of the second act when Leonce and Valerio are already underway, attempting to escape, has the latter “gasp”: “‘On my honor, Prince, the world is, after all, a monstrous rambling edifice.’ Leonce: ‘Not so, no! [literally: “Never! Never!”] I hardly dare to stretch out my hands for fear of colliding with the beautiful images in this narrow hall of mirrors, leaving them in fragments on the ground, and us standing before bleak, bare walls’” (*Complete Plays*, 128)

Still, a reduction of Leonce’s revolt to a temporary and eventually philistine rebellion—never transgresses the feel-good space he is indulgently granted by royal routine, that never breaks the beautiful, but hollow figures in the mirror room where the *ancien régime*, although long dead, perpetually keeps reflecting and admiring itself—would ultimately be fallacious. For it silently takes a respective maturation process for granted that will automatically turn Prince Leonce’s youthful rebellion into a reassertion of King Peter’s unjustified authority, whose physical carrier, the King, is simply exchanged, rejuvenated in order to remain as old as it ever was. This satire of *Bildungsroman* ideology is clearly present in Büchner’s play, but it is by no means its natural or exclusive consequence.

Before close-reading *Leonce und Lena*’s ending that so evocatively conjures the possibility a different interpretation, a look at two passages from unlikely sources—Büchner’s youthful essay “On Suicide” and his Zurich inaugural lecture “On Cra-

nial Nerves”—may be worthwhile. They concern the concept of a fundamental *dynamism*, a sort of secular theory that emphasizes constant development as an end in itself, that is at the heart of Büchner’s thought and underlying his literary efforts.

This world view seems to have taken shape early in his life. Büchner’s first editor Karl Emil Franzos cites a school day friend, who remembered the young Büchner saying: “I don’t like Christianity—it is too gentle for me, it makes us meek as lambs [*lammfromm*, literally: pious as a lamb].”¹⁸¹ Christianity’s tendency to make people “meek” is of course to a extent deal due to its teleological creed that regards life on earth as a mere ordeal of pain before attaining transcendence in heaven.

It was precisely this way of thinking, which compulsively looked for the rationale of one thing in another, that Büchner was so opposed to. He hardly ever explains the view he adopted in its stead, a sort of phenomenology of evanescence—except in these sentences from his inaugural lecture on cranial nerves, delivered in Zurich not a year before his death:

Nature does not act according to ends, it does not lose itself in an infinite progression of ends, of which one brings about the next; but in all its manifestations it is self-sufficient. Everything that exists exists for its own sake. To search for the law of this being is the goal of a view, which opposed to the teleological view, which I would call the *philosophical* view. Everything which is an end for the *former* becomes a *means* for the latter.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Cited in Benn, 46.

¹⁸² Büchner, 2006, 158. Original emphases.

The same conviction of life's curious self-sufficiency is expressed in his essay "On Suicide," a lengthy homework, probably assigned by the headmaster and Büchner's Latin teacher Carl Dilthey, where a sentence by a third author, lost today, serves as a spring board for this train of thought: "This idea has always seemed very offensive to me, because according to it life is merely regarded as a *means*; whereas I believe that life is an *end itself*, because: the end of life is *development*, *life itself* is development, so life is an *end* in itself."¹⁸³

At first glance it may seem paradoxical to relate a philosopheme emphasizing the importance of perpetual development to a *Weltanschauung* cast in a poetics that seems to defy exactly that, cherishing stasis instead: youth that refuses to mature, that is, one might think, to *develop*. As is often the case with such intricacies, they become permeable only if one clarifies the concepts.

There is a great deal of hope in one of Adorno's more culturally pessimistic reflections. In a section from *Minima Moralia* entitled "Grassy seat"¹⁸⁴ he expresses his contempt for "one of the Nazis' symbolic outrages," their "killing of the very old":

Our relationship to parents is beginning to undergo a sad, shadowy transformation. Through their economic impotence they have lost their awesomeness [ihre Schrecken]. Once we rebelled against their insistence on the reality principle, the sobriety forever prone to become wrath against those less ready to renounce. But today we

¹⁸³ "Dieser Gedanke war mir immer sehr anstößig, denn ihm gemäß wird das Leben nur als *Mittel* betrachtet; ich glaube aber, daß das Leben *selbst Zweck* sei, denn: *Entwicklung* ist der Zweck des Lebens, das *Leben selbst* ist Entwicklung, also ist das Leben selbst *Zweck*" (ibid, 41). Original emphases.

¹⁸⁴ The title alludes to a German song that allegedly used to be well-known (I have never heard of it): "Der liebste Platz, den ich auf Erden hab',/das ist die Rasenbank am Elterngrab" (*The dearest spot I have on earth/is the grassy seat by my parents' grave*).

are faced with a generation purporting to be young yet in all its reactions insufferably more grown-up than its parents ever were; which, having renounced before any conflict, draws from this its grimly authoritarian, unshakable power.¹⁸⁵

As usual, Adorno crams a lot of thinking into little space. Let me try to extrapolate the dialectic of youth and rebellion he devises here. The Nazis' self-stylization of perpetual youth, their wholesale claiming of it while rejecting any authority of old age effectively struggles to elevate itself above and beyond the old generational dialectic, youth's recalcitrance against their parents. Adorno recognizes that the roots of the older struggle's intensity lie in the fundamental rapport between youth and the parental generation. The Nazis are trying to sever this bond.

All of a sudden the dark underside of Wilhelm Weitling's "German Youth's Cry for Help" shines through: The dream of youth's final maturation while still being young, its escape for good from adult authority's tutelage, entails at least the possibility to implicitly enforce a new, "grimly authoritarian, unshakable power," untested and unbothered by any regulatory meter, as abhorrent as it may be. Adorno admits a "late, lucid understanding with our parents, as between the condemned":

¹⁸⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005) 22. The title of this translation is flawed. All earlier translations were more to the point with "Reflections from Damaged Life" (*Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*). The original reads: "Rasenbank. Das Verhältnis zu den Eltern beginnt traurig, schattenhaft sich zu verwandeln. Durch ihre ökonomische Ohnmacht haben sie ihre Schrecken verloren. Einmal rebellierten wir gegen ihre Insistenz auf dem Realitätsprinzip, die Nüchternheit, die stets bereit war, in Wut gegen den Nicht-Entsagenden umzuschlagen. Heute aber finden wir uns einer angeblich jungen Generation gegenüber, die in jeder ihrer Regungen unerträglich viel erwachsener ist, als je die Eltern es waren; die entsagt hat, schon ehe es zum Konflikt überhaupt kam, und daraus ihre Macht zieht, verbissen autoritär und unerschütterlich." Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951) 21.

Even their rationalizations, the once-hated lies with which they sought to justify their particular interest as a general one [almost verbatim Weiting's complaint; J.K.], reveal in them an inkling of the truth, an urge to resolve a conflict whose existence their children, proof against all uncertainty, cheerfully deny" (22).

These children are the Nazis who have stopped being children, succumbing to the Promethean hubris of self-creation and self-empowerment. A grim thought: would this in reverse mean that the disenfranchised, the proletariat that Weiting associates and short-circuits with youth can or rather *should* never hope for an escape from the protective or rather repressive tutelage of the capital? The mere idea seems outrageous.

The metonymy of youth and the disenfranchised may have exceeded its potential here. Youth, after all, retains a biological earthiness that naturally installs it as ward of the elders, before it leads it into old age, if not into maturity and experience—"[e]ven the neurotic oddities and deformities of our elders stand for character, for something humanly achieved, in comparison to pathic [sic!] health, infantilism raised to the norm," Adorno writes (*ibid.*).

We have here a natural development whose ideological renunciation, as proclaimed and cruelly acted upon by the Nazis, may indeed mean an essential wrong. On the other hand, it does not seem reasonable that the emancipation of the working class would need to be built upon comparable incongruities. Still, the historical curiosity remains that not a single "successful" political attempt to free the proletariat has escaped becoming entrapped within a downward spiral driven and nurtured by the same "grimly authoritarian, unshakable power" of totalitarianism,

unwilling, even secretly, to respect an authority beside itself, that Adorno is so afraid of. He concludes his thought:

With the family there passes away, while the system lasts, not only the most effective agency of the bourgeoisie, but also the resistance which, though repressing the individual, also strengthened, perhaps even produced him. The end of the family paralyzes the forces of opposition. The rising collectivist order is a mockery of a classless one: together with the bourgeoisie it liquidates the Utopia that once drew sustenance from motherly love (23).

Clearly, he has another “individualization” in mind than Foucault had when speaking of the panopticon. Or rather, Adorno is regarding the same individualization under another aspect, casting a friendlier, or rather more *familiar*, light on the process. The suppression of youth exerted in the name of motherly love cultivates in its residues the seed of resistance, intuitively fathoming and admitting its inherent right.

The question, of course, remains what the “Utopia” that Adorno so evocatively employs—product of a perpetuation of the youth-parent dialectic, a constant rejuvenation of the struggle—actually entails or aims at. Most importantly, it seems to fulfill a regulatory function, keeping authority at bay, inhibiting its total usurpation of power. If one is willing to recognize with Adorno in the parents’ lies, in their rationalizations for claiming their partial interest to be a general one, a clandestine acknowledgment of their abuse of power, it cannot be denied that a successful communication is indeed taking place, based on a mutual, albeit secret agreement on a specific reality shared by both conflicting parties. This is a system with a built-in system of checks and balances. Secondly, one must emphasize that the conflict is insofar an *actual* one as the demands of its weaker party are not

without effects. Even though they may not be *realized*, they do not fizzle out without leaving a trace. While there is some hope that, due to what one could call its authority pass issued by parental love, they manage to plant the seed of their needs in the adult authority's consciousness, leaving it to grow, Adorno rightly points out the *inward* effect that is taking place simultaneously: the pocket of recalcitrance granted and even actively supported by the "enemy" is prone to "strengthen[...], perhaps even produce" the individual.

This is an unexpected link to another thought from *Minima Moralia*: "Whatever the intellectual does is wrong. He experiences drastically and vitally the ignominious choice that late capitalism secretly presents to all its dependants: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child" (133). If the *dynamism* of constant generational struggle is foreclosed, one might paraphrase, the individual is bereft of his possibilities for development and effectively of his individuality. Once the bond between young and old is ideologically severed, they both lose the subtle tension that constituted them in the first place.

Now we are able to see how Büchner's youth could come to embody the idea of dynamic development. It is of all things in youth's refusal to develop towards so-called maturity where the idea of dynamism is cradled. The perpetual energetic oscillation between different roles and agencies, youth or maturity, opens up a space that is at the same time surreptitiously political, an alternative draft of the status quo, a play whose manifest harmlessness disguises its danger, a legal escape into pockets of aberrance.

Understood in this way, it is obvious why sheer “maturity,” or the ideological applause of any development toward it, has less to do with actual development and more with regression. On the other hand the new literary youth, in its apparent regression, delineates the space of developmental potential, directed against any totalizing ideology. And in this general sense, transgressing the literal one, Büchner can invent the stubborn dialectician Leonce who is determined to claim youth until and beyond senile decay: “I will surely still find a child’s rattle that will only fall out of my hands when I am in a state of delirious grasping, fidgeting with my blanket.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Büchner had introduced Lena into the play with a nursery rhyme springing from the same short-circuiting of youth and old age—“Now in my grave might I lie deep, / And like a child in its cradle sleep”¹⁸⁷—, an image which the modernists will gratefully draw upon.

Thus, at any rate, I would like not to follow Poschmann’s bleak reading of *Leonce and Lena*’s ending as the epitome of aristocratic irresponsibility—the careless king who is relieved to bequeath his kingdom to an even more careless son.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ “Ich werde doch noch eine Kinderrassel finden, die mir erst aus der Hand fällt, wenn ich Flocken lese und an der Decke zupfe” (Büchner, 2006, 114). In a commentary Poschman writes: “Gebärden, die nach dem *Prognostikon* von Hippokrates kennzeichnend für Sterbende sind. Einen Beleg für die Gebräuchlichkeit des Ausdrucks enthält Ludwig Achim von Arnims Vorwort zu seinem Roman *Hollin’s Liebesleben* (1802), den er als das nachgelassene Werk eines Freundes ausgibt, dem er die Herausgabe am Sterbebett versprochen habe, ‘da das Flockenlesen und andere Zeichen den nahestehenden Tod verrieten’” (637).

¹⁸⁷ Büchner, 1987, 126. In the original: “Auf dem Kirchhof will ich liegen,/ wie ein Kindlein in der Wiegen” (109).

¹⁸⁸ See 219: “Leonce übernimmt die Alleinverantwortung und erklärt sie zugleich für absolut unverbindlich. Tatsächlich enthüllt er damit nur das Wesen des Absolutismus, das in Wirklichkeit darin besteht, niemandem verantwortlich zu sein, als das System der Unverantwortlichkeit.”

Sure enough, the charade that the unexpected return of the king's children sets off is rather dazzling. Still, an alternative reading, almost diametrically opposed to Poschmann's, seems feasible.

The second act described Leonce and Valerio's escape during which they coincidentally and unknowingly ran (on some meadow in front of some tavern) into Princess Lena and her chaperone, congenially trying to escape from the prospects of marriage. As it happens in romantic and hence also in mock-romantic plots, Leonce and Lena fall—over idealist musings and concerted admirations of starry skies and the like—in love. Now the whole party is back to Château Popo, if in disguise; for apparently Leonce plans to marry Lena anyway, princess or not (presumably, he still thinks she is a mere country wench). They appear in masks, Valerio even in quite a few, which he successively peels off like the layers of an onion, driving King Peter rather mad in the process. The self-purported jester assumes the role of a master of ceremony, advertising his two “world-famous automata,” which he complements as a third, who happens to be highly aware of his impossible position—Valerio knows that he, as a mere machine, cannot *possibly* know anything—, prompting him to lose himself in a babble about this dilemma. Throughout the whole play the young protagonists have displayed their unwillingness to talk or act *in earnest*. Irony has been their preferred mode of expression. Valerio's follies adumbrate how this trend is now heading for its culmination.

King Peter, who had resolved upon “being glad” for the day in honor of the originally planned marriage, has the ingenious idea to have Valerio’s two automata marry “in effigy.” Understandably he is quite irritated when, after the ceremony, Leonce takes off his mask. “I will annul everything!” Peter exclaims, perplexed. A sort of Shakespearean denouement follows, i.e. various identities are disclosed, various degrees of astonishment expressed. Peter, rejoicing in his narrow escape (the female “automaton” having turned out as Princess Lena) and longing for retirement and undisturbed “contemplation,” takes his leave and the whole privy council with him—however not before swiftly conferring the state affairs to his son. Now, in the last paragraphs of the text, *exeunt omnes bar Leonce, Lena (plus tacit chaperone) and Valerio.*

Leonce: Well, Lena, now do you see, our pockets are full of puppets and playthings. What shall we do with them? Shall we give them moustaches and hang sabres on them? Or shall we dress them in tail coats and have them engage in infusorial politics and diplomacy, while we sit beside them with a microscope? Or do you long for a barrel organ, with milk-white mice scampering about aesthetically on top? Shall we build a theatre? (Lena leans against him and shakes her head.) But I know better what you would like: we will have all clocks destroyed, all calendars proscribed, and we will count the hours and the months by the flowers’ clock, by blossom-time and harvest. Then we shall surround our little country with burning glasses, so that there will be no more winter, and in summer we shall distill ourselves off to Capri and Ischia, and spend the whole year surrounded by roses and ciolets, oranges and laurels.

Valerio: And I will become Prime Minister, and I shall issue a decree that he who has callouses on his hands shall be taken into custody, that working yourself sick shall be punishable by law, that any one who boasts of earning his bread by the sweat of his brow shall be declared a lunatic and a danger to society. And then we shall lie in the shade and pray to God for macaroni, melons and figs, for musical voices and classical bodies, and an accommodating religion.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Büchner, 1987, 146. The original reads: “*Leonce:* Nun, Lena, siehst du jetzt, wie wir die Taschen voll haben, voll Puppen und Spielzeug? Was wollen wir damit anfangen? Wollen wir

If one turns a deaf ear to the sympathetic mockery in these lines and decides to take them “seriously” instead, one may put the book down with the gloomy glee of having just witnessed Büchner driving a stake into the heart of a revenant royalism. This is what Poschmann proposes, who derides Valerio and Leonce’s design as the sad comedy of a past era, a comedy whose determination to ignore the contemporary needs has just been affirmed with the youngest succession to the throne. This would, however, mean to dismiss the poisonous potential of Leonce and Valerio’s escalating social phantasy. As we learned a few pages before, when the still clueless lovers were approaching the castle, in the State of Popo the panopticon is complete—three watchmen could easily oversee the circular borders of its sovereignty. In other words, with Leonce’s ascension to the throne Foucault’s inkling has come true: an innocent as well as malicious child soars toward the control room. This is the worst dream of the panopticon’s originators: their instrument of

ihnen Schnurrbärte machen und ihnen Säbel anhängen? Oder wollen wir ihnen Fräcke anziehen und sie infusorische Politik und Diplomatie treiben lassen und uns mit dem Mikroskop daneben setzen? Oder hast du Verlangen nach einer Drehorgel, auf der die milchweißen ästhetischen Spitzmäuse herumhuschen? Wollen wir ein Theater bauen? Lena lehnt sich an ihn und schüttelt den Kopf. Aber ich weiß besser, was du willst: wir lassen alle Uhren zerschlagen, alle Kalender verbieten und zählen Stunden und Monden nur nach der Blumenuhr, nur nach Blüte und Frucht. Und dann umstellen wir das Ländchen mit Brennspiegeln, daß es keinen Winter mehr gibt und wir uns im Sommer bis Ischia und Capri hinaufdestillieren, und das ganze Jahr zwischen Rosen und Veilchen, zwischen Orangen und Lorbeer stecken.

Valerio: Und ich werde Staatsminister, und es wird ein Dekret erlassen, daß, wer sich Schwierigkeiten in die Hände schafft, unter Kuratel gestellt; daß, wer sich krank arbeitet, kriminalistisch strafbar ist; daß jeder, der sich rühmt, sein Brot im Schweiß seines Angesichts zu essen, für verrückt und der menschlichen Gesellschaft gefährlich erklärt wird; und dann legen wir uns in den Schatten und bitten Gott um Makkaroni, Melonen und Feigen, um musikalische Kehlen, klassische Leiber und eine kommode Religion!” (128f.)

rational, *mature* discipline in the hands a child. The underside of the dialectics of Enlightenment surfaces, disclosing an impenetrable prank. The ridiculousness of Leonce's decrees exposes the systematic arbitrariness of *any* decree just like Leonce's initial puns exposed the hollowness of the privy counselor's phrases—and thus their being contingent, ultimately, on nothing but stark violence. It exposes, in a clairvoyant Adornian moment, the brutal basis of rationality. It really is a child's game—everything is “puppets and playthings” that can be painted and played with—, especially in that fancies of destruction and tyranny (“we will have all clocks destroyed, all calendars proscribed”) are never far off. It revels in a positivist trance of mastery over nature (“Then we shall surround our little country with burning glasses”) and at the same time in a total surrender of all human intervention to the processes of Creation (“and then we shall lie in the shade and pray to God for macaroni, melons and figs”). And can it be a coincidence that in the last lines we once again meet the figures that Foucault identified, beside the officially immature child/youth, as the panopticon's prime victims, albeit now from the opposite perspective and in the inverse way: Whoever works calluses into his hands is now *criminalized*. Likewise, he who prides himself of eating his bread by the sweat of his brow is declared *mad*. In reverse the sneaking suspicion is not ruled out that the formerly mad and the formerly criminal are awaiting their rehabilitation, to walk freely among congenial people; even in the first scene of the first act Valerio had been advertising theft as one of the three “human” ways to make money (the other two being winning the lottery or finding it on the street). Leonce

found this quite right, adding the rationale: “Because who works is a subtle suicide, and a suicide is a criminal and a criminal is a scoundrel, so, who works is a scoundrel.” Apparently, under Leonce’s authority the tables have been turned. His putatively apolitical cockaigne turns out to be a prison camp and an asylum for the usual beneficiaries of these very instruments of social discipline, for the “mature” citizen.

Of course, this child’s dream of another world is utterly “unrealistic.” However, “if satire does not help anymore, nothing will,” as Erich Kästner once wrote in a preface to his early poetry, banned, then burned by the Nazis. If one is desperate, as Büchner was, about the status quo and at the same time convinced that any immediate recourse to violence is futile, satire may be the most realistic blade to swing. The ending of *Leonce and Lena* bears some uncanny traces of an attitude famously to be embraced by the *Spontis*, a German group of radical leftist activists in the wake of the extra-parliamentary opposition and of the ’68 movement. Most influential during the 1970s, they rejected any rigid organization of the left, championing “spontaneity of the masses” (hence their name) instead. Surreal interventions similar to the Situationists’ were supposed to lure the people out of their inertia and provoke them to participate in what was essentially an anti-authoritarian stance. To this end they coined famous slogans such as “Freedom for Greenland! Down with the pack ice!” Writing about ’68, the political scientist and cultural critic Claus Leggewie has made a similar, if indirect allusion, calling ’68 “a surreal shock, a contingent moment and a breach in the ‘dreadful fatalism of histo-

ry’”—the last a veiled Büchner quotation.¹⁹⁰ A few lines down, Leggewie calls ’68 “a happily failed revolution” (while admitting that it gave way to an unfettered capitalism). This notion of surreal shock and happy failure seems to resonate with the ending of *Leonce and Lena* and Büchner’s discovery of the literary potential of youth.

The astonishing degree to which authors at the turn of the century and all over Europe pounce on the topic of youth in ways one can trace back to Büchner, who was simultaneously rediscovered with a vengeance, may betray the urgency for a society on the verge of forgetting about it, or rather, of actively denying it, to remember the necessity of a dialectical clash between young and old..

In the face of splintering family ties, of the vertiginous impositions of an ever accelerating technological and media revolution, and of a waking political totalitarianism usurping the myth of perpetual and exclusive youth, whose most prominent feature self-purportedly consisted in its invincible strength, the utopian writing that took place in a pocket of an adverse and simultaneously loving adult authority and thus devised another type of youth may have been the last resort of a dissident generation of young writers who refused to be annihilated in, as Adorno put it, the “ignominious choice to become one more grown-up or to remain a child.”

¹⁹⁰ Claus Leggewie, “1968 ist Geschichte,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 22–23 (2001): 5. Admittedly, Leggewie marks the origin of the citation in a footnote; by “veiled” I mean that Büchner is not mentioned in the body text. At any rate, the quote is from a letter to his fiancée Wilhelmine Jaegle, November 1833.

Just as Büchner had positioned the forces of youth in his own specific way in order to counter the twofold authoritarian repression exerted by a totalizing politics on the one hand and by a totalizing literary discourse on the other hand, the authors of 1900 would rediscover the potential of youth in order to devise a utopia in the face of authorities wielding greater power than ever before.

Disquieting Imps:

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*

Man interposes a network of words between
the world and himself and thereby becomes master of the world.

Georges Gusdorf¹⁹¹

Boyish Men

A year or so before his own youth cruelly caught up with him,¹⁹² Czech novelist Milan Kundera sketched a little scheme: “I have long seen youth as the lyrical age—that is, the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him. If we start with that hypothesis (necessarily schematic, but which, as a schema, I find accurate), then to pass from immaturity to maturity is to move beyond the lyrical attitude.”¹⁹³ And since “the novelist is born out of the ruins of his lyrical world” (ibid.), he who gets stuck in the lyrical age of youth must at best be a lesser novelist, if one at all: he is a child version of Tom Hank’s Viktor Navorski in the movie

¹⁹¹ Georges Gusdorf, *Speaking (La parole)* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965) 7.

¹⁹² On 13 October 2008, the Czech weekly *Respekt* publicized an investigation carried out by the Czech Institute for Studies of Totalitarian Regimes, which alleged that Kundera had denounced a young Czech pilot, Miroslav Dvořáček, to the police in 1950. A long controversy followed. To this day the details remain unclear. Prague literary scholar Jakub Češka has produced a Barthean analysis of “the process which turned Milan Kundera into an informer.” See <http://blisty.cz/art/47276.html>. Retrieved in April 2014.

¹⁹³ Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) 88.

Terminal—a puerile pariah condemned by the authorities to perennial immobility, to sustained suspension in a sort of literary limbo.

Of course such an attitude may only develop with maturity itself since, according to it, the lyrical poet (and with him youth as such) is denied the faculty to recognize, to tell one thing from the next. He is rendered speechless by his own latter-day self that has presumably overcome him.

Incidentally, while it may be all well and true, this stance is reminiscent of parental or teacherly patronizing in that it does not leave the accused the slightest chance to talk back. The gesture is rendered especially tricky by its subliminal implication of the *been there, done that*, in other words of the coincidence of retrospective identification and exclusion (the judging voice speaks from a different position now, while it still holds, theoretically, the position which its addressee allegedly assumes.)

Take the Swiss author Robert Walser's case. From his first wobbly steps into authorhood during his teenage years until his last walk in the snow where his dead body was eventually discovered by a group of children on Christmas 1956, he was accompanied by associations of the childlike. When he sat down to write, as a contemporary put it, he "played the instrument of his fancies... like a musician on the piano."¹⁹⁴ His compatriot Peter Utz recently dedicated an entire book to the supposedly "dancing" quality of Walser's texts.¹⁹⁵ His unrelated namesake Martin

¹⁹⁴ Mark Harman, "Robert Walser: Writing on the Periphery," *Sewanee Review* 1 (2008): 140.

¹⁹⁵ Its first sentence says: "Under Robert Walser's glance the marginal starts dancing." Peter

Walser characterized him as “peculiar, dreamy, always a kind of youth.”¹⁹⁶ In an analysis of Robert Walser’s style Viktor Zmegac, author of an influential history of German literature, states his impression “that one might be dealing with a child’s creation, enriched by linguistic stereotypes;”¹⁹⁷ Zmegac even goes so far as to characterize Walser’s poetic mode as “aesthetic infantilism” (ibid.). And long after Walser himself groaned about the “shepherd-boyishness” of his being,¹⁹⁸ Benjamin Kunkel, in a 2007 essay for the *New Yorker*, writes about the motto adopted by Walser’s most famous character from the eponymous novel *Jakob von Gunten* (1909): “‘To be small and to stay small.’ The words apply just as well to Walser himself, whose life and work played out as a relentless diminuendo”—eventually, even his handwriting tended to disappear: the late “Mikrogramme” (microscripts)—an idiosyncratic shorthand merely one millimeter high and crammed onto cocktail napkins, menus, rejection letters and calendars—were long illegible and suspected to be but the scribble of a schizophrenic.¹⁹⁹

What may at times be meant in a purely descriptive or even complimentary manner is likely to topple over into the offensive, if only one pushes it a bit.

Utz, *Tanz auf den Rändern: Robert Walsers “Jetztzeitstil”* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1998)..

¹⁹⁶ Martin Walser, *Erfahrungen und Leseerfahrungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965) 149.

¹⁹⁷ Viktor Zmegac, “Robert Walsers Poetik in der literarischen Konstellation der Jahrhundertwende,” in Dieter Borchmeyer, *Robert Walser und die moderne Poetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999) 23.

¹⁹⁸ See, for example, “The Last Prose Piece,” Robert Walser, *Masquerade and Other Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).. “This is likely to be my last prose piece. All sorts of considerations make me believe it’s high time this shepherd boy stopped writing and sending off prose pieces and retired from a pursuit apparently beyond his abilities.”

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin Kunkel, “Still Small Voice: The Fiction of Robert Walser,” *New Yorker* (August 8, 2007). The microscript was first deciphered in 1972, 16 years after Walser’s death.

Thomas Mann, for instance, commented on the last book published under the author's own egis, *Die Rose* (1925): "smart like a very, very fine, genteel, well-behaved and naughty child, thus maybe clever and stupid, i.e. awkward and unawkward all at the same time."²⁰⁰ No doubt Mann had the best intentions, already by merely devoting his attention to a writer who was—Kunkel hinted at it above—gradually sinking into oblivion (Walser was then in his late forties and thought himself "bottomlessly unsuccessful"²⁰¹).

Still, the patronizing tang of Mann's praise surreptitiously secures the position of the benevolent critic as it casts into ambiguity the quality of the criticized. Decades later, at lunch with his friend and sponsor Carl Seelig, who went with him for long walks in the Swiss countryside (not least in order to relieve him a bit of the monotonous life in the mental asylum Herisau, his last sanctuary, where he was entitled to welfare support), Walser still complained about the letter.²⁰² Had he not, much earlier, admonished his readers: "nobody is entitled to treat me as if he knew me"?²⁰³

Take, on the other hand, the case of J. M. Barrie, an author who bequeathed the future royalties of his most famous creation, *Peter Pan*, to an asylum, the Great Or-

²⁰⁰ Cited in Walter Keutel, *Röbu, Robertchen, das Walser: zweiter Tod und literarische Wiedergeburt von Robert Walser* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1989) 70.

²⁰¹ Martin Walser, "Unrelenting style," in Mark Harman (ed.), *Robert Walser Rediscovered: Stories, Fairy-Tale Plays, and Critical Responses* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985) 154.

²⁰² See Carl Seelig, *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990) 21.

²⁰³ Robert Walser, "The Child," *Comparative Criticism* (1984): 262.

mond street Hospital for Children, rather than spending his old age in one. As far as personal riches are concerned, Barrie, having written one of the most successful children's books of all time, may be said to have been Walser's antipode. He would eventually be created a baronet and was highly esteemed by contemporaries as distinct as Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and Robert Louis Stevenson. When Charlie Chaplin, traveling to London in 1921, was asked whom he wanted to meet the most, the answer was J. M. Barrie. Walser's death in 1956, by contrast, caught even the German literary scene by surprise; everybody had assumed that he was long gone. This dichotomy holds for almost all aspects of the two men's lives—except, notably, the association with children, where Barrie is easily Walser's equal.

The son of the Scottish weaver David Barrie and, more importantly, the housewife Margarete Ogilvy, James Matthew was the the ninth child of ten (two of whom died before he was born), a little brother also in the most immediate sense: he only grew to five feet one.²⁰⁴ Many biographers have, and with good cause, asserted that he never quite stepped out of the shadow of his next-older brother, David, despite Barrie's literary career. The tragedy that would soon occur and its ramifications were the main mine from which he quarried his deeply ambivalent and highly lucrative oeuvre: David died shortly before his fourteenth birthday in an ice-skating accident.²⁰⁵ Andrew Birkin gives the most exhaustive account of

²⁰⁴ About his height, the most ostensible marker of his infinitely prolonged boyhood, Barrie would later write: "Six foot three inches... If only I had grown to this. I would not have bothered turning out reels of printed matter... Read that with a bitter cry." Cited in Andrew Birkin & Sharon Goode, *J. M. Barrie and the Lost Boys* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 21.

²⁰⁵ A lot has been written about the uncannily close relation between David's death and Peter

how this event gravely affected Barrie's early development. Trying to cheer up his inconsolable mother, he strove to assume the role of his dead brother, wearing his cloths and going so far as to practice his walk and idiosyncratic whistle.²⁰⁶

In many ways, Barrie would, later in life, remain as "cyrogenically frozen in childhood" (Jon Savage) as Peter Pan; not only would he stop growing soon,²⁰⁷

but, as Peter Hollindale, in the introduction to 1999 Oxford edition of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and Peter and Wendy* writes,

the psychological strangeness of his childhood was accompanied in his case by certain physical oddities: he was slow to mature, and only in his late teens began to shave [...] and for most of his life retained unusually boyish and useful features; his hair remained black throughout his life, and Cynthia Asquith records in her memoir that in old age this distressed him, for fear that people might think he used dye.²⁰⁸

At Dumfries, where he went to school, engaging in all sorts of games and publishing his first articles, this delayed, almost arrested physical development was hardly noticeable yet, but as soon as he went on to Edinburgh University it began to cause

Pan. Here is what is in this regard likely the most relevant passage from Barrie's idealizing memoir dedicated to his mother, Margaret Ogilvy: "She lived twenty-nine years after his death, but I had not made her forget the bit of her that was dead. [...] In those nine-and-twenty years he [Barrie's dead brother] was not removed one day farther from her. Many a time she fell asleep speaking to him, and even while she slept her lips moved and she smiled as if he had come back to her, and when she woke he might vanish so suddenly that she started up bewildered and looked about her, and then said slowly 'My David's dead!' or perhaps he remained long enough to whisper why he must leave her now, and then she lay silent with filmy eyes. When I became a man... he was still a boy of thirteen." Cited in *ibid.*, 5. Roger Lancelyn Green summed it up thus: "All Barrie's life led up to the creation of Peter Pan, and everything that he had written so far contained hints or foreshadowings of what was to come." Roger Lancelyn Green, *J. M. Barrie* (London: Bodley Head, 1960) 34.

²⁰⁶ See *ibid.*, 5.

²⁰⁷ It is widely rumored that his growth came to a halt at precisely the time of his brother's death. See, for example John Lahr *The New Yorker*. October 2, 2009.

²⁰⁸ J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and Peter and Wendy*, ed. by Peter Hollindale (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) xiii-xiv.

distress: “For him there was no continuum from child to adult,” Hollindale summarizes, “nor yet the usual transition from conventional boys’ make-belief to conventional male adult life, but rather perhaps a no man’s land between the two” (xiii-xiv).

Much like Walser, who at one point—already an inmate of the asylum—“confessed to a psychiatrist that he had never had an intimate sexual relationship,”²⁰⁹ Barrie is said never to have consummated his first and only marriage, which was soon divorced. His wife Mary wrote at the time of their divorce: “J. M.’s tragedy was that he knew that as a *man* he was a failure, and that love in its fullest sense could never be felt by him or experienced. One could almost hear him, like Peter Pan, crowing triumphantly, but his heart was sick all the time.”²¹⁰ Birkin also cites a confidant, interpreting the circumstances of Mary having left her husband for another man:

She loves the man, as a young woman loves a man—& still loves Barrie as a mother loves a helpless child. Barrie urged her to return to him & give up the other—she, having at length after long battling against it, given in to the longing of her heart after a virile man, & no doubt the secret woman’s longing for the birth of a child, would not.²¹¹

Ultimately a subject of speculation, his impotence was much rumored in his lifetime, some jokester calling him “the boy who couldn’t go up.”²¹²

The addressee of Mary’s note was Peter Llewelyn Davies, one of the five brothers whom Barrie met at one of his his habitual walks in Kensington Gardens

²⁰⁹ Harman, 1985, 8.

²¹⁰ Birkin & Goode, 177.

²¹¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 180.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 180.

and whom, a couple of years later, after the death of their parents, he adopted. Hollindale has captured the ambivalence of Barrie's relation to the Davies boys, calling his apparent "lasting need for an exceptionally close and equal companionship with children" an "innocent but harmful trespass" on their lives.²¹³ I don't think this needs to be, as some critics have tended to,²¹⁴ understood in an explicitly sexual way, but Michael's likely and, in 1960, Peter's certain suicide certainly bespeaks their conflicted minds.²¹⁵

In the years preceding his voluntary death, Peter, himself an influential publisher, had started to compile a family history, evocatively called the *Morgue*, and abandoned as the project increasingly devastated him. In it he referred to *Peter Pan* as "the terrible masterpiece."²¹⁶ In his recent authoritative history of the teenager,

²¹³ Barrie, 1999, xiii.

²¹⁴ Birkin cites them as well, himself expressing his respective disbelief: "Of course Barrie was a lover of childhood, but was not in any sexual sense the paedophile that some claim him to have been." Birkin & Goode, from the unpaginated introduction. When interviewed for his BBC TV show *The Lost Boys* he emphasized it once more: "Barrie was impotent, it's fairly clear. That was the tragedy of his life. Had he not been impotent, I think he would have been a womanizer—he was always falling in love with his leading ladies over the stage lights. The suggestion that he was somehow pedophilic with these boys doesn't really stand up to close examination." Still, there is a peculiar letter that Barrie wrote to George just before he was killed in combat: "I do seem to be sadder today than ever, and more and more wishing you were a girl of 21 instead of a boy, so that I could say the things to you that are now always in my heart. For four years I have been waiting for you to become 21 & a little more, so that we could get closer & closer to each other, without any words needed." Cited in Birkin & Goode, 228.

²¹⁵ Peter jumped beneath a subway train in London a day after he had been interviewed once more about Peter Pan: "Please forget about that," he had said, wearily. The newspapers did not oblige and titled, the next day: "Peter Pan Commits Suicide." See Daniel M. Ogilvie, *Fantasies of Flight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 90. Birkin is convinced that the media's habit of referring to him as Peter Pan was a factor in "disturbing the balance of his mind." See Birkin & Goode, 1.

²¹⁶ See Janet Dunbar, *J. M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image* (London: Collins, 1970) 165.

taking this peculiar family tragedy into account, Jon Savage concludes: “With the brothers’ childhood thus subtly contaminated, it’s hard to disagree with Peter Llewelyn Davies’s belief that Barrie stole their souls.”²¹⁷

Even in his literary production, again much like Walser, Barrie was likened to a child. After the opening night of *Peter Pan*, the play, to a rapt audience and rave reviews, one critic, Max Beerbohm, the half-brother of a powerful London producer who had refused to stage the play, noted the conflation of young and old: “Mr Barrie has never grown up. He is still a child absolutely.”²¹⁸ In his article for the *Saturday Review* the same assessment loses any trace of a possibly denigrating flavor and becomes decidedly conciliatory, even unequivocally complimentary: “Mr. Barrie is not that rare creature, a man of genius. He is something even more rare—a child who, by some divine grace, can express through an artistic medium the childishness that is in him.”²¹⁹

Phrased so positively, Barrie would not need to mind, let alone fear, the patronizing and condescension that is implicit in Kundera’s scheme, nor the dark undersides that were so advantageously suppressed in *Peter Pan*. Savage puts his finger on the wound, emphasizing the stark difference in reception of the play compared to Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*: “Both exploited autobiographical elements to present youth as an abstract principle and to expose its explosive unconscious. Yet

²¹⁷ Savage, 83.

²¹⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, 80.

²¹⁹ Birkin & Goode, 117f.

Wilde was ostracized, while Barrie became the toast of London.”²²⁰ Savage’s next comment is even more revealing:

Wilde aimed his book at adults, set it in a recognizable present, and was happy, as a leading decadent, for people to think the worst of him. As a children’s author, Barrie’s overt fantasy exempted him from criticism, while his personal life was untouched by any hint of scandal.

Every word can be seconded with regard to Walser—even, with merely a little stretch, including the decadence (because Walser’s ostensibly displayed anti-bourgeois attitude, complete with a denial to work, an almost unlimited desire of personal freedom, and an eventual retreat into “madness” was perceived in early 1900 Germany and particularly Switzerland as decadent enough).

The highly charged, dangerous, “devillish” underside permeates his life and work. His constant open confession of the ongoing conflict, his declared *Wilde-ness*, was the deal breaker. Being aware of and upfront about it, it is no surprise that he loathed being treated “as if one knew” him. Even though the medical diagnosis of schizophrenia—guarantor of the destitute author’s prolonged stay in the mental asylum—has eventually been dismissed by recent Walser scholarship, it may be useful enough to yield some insight when taken as a *poetic* diagnosis. This is a passage from his last novel *The Robber* (1925; published posthumously in 1972); the protagonist tells a doctor:

And to achieve a moment of human happiness, I must always first think up a story containing an encounter between myself and another person, whereby I am always the subordinate, obedient, sacrificing, scrutinized and chaperoned party. There’s more to it, of course, quite a lot, but still this sheds light on a few things. Many conclude it must be terribly easy to carry out a course of treatment, or training, as it

²²⁰ Savage, 81.

were, upon my person, but they're all gravely mistaken. For, the moment anyone seems ready to start lording and lecturing it over me, something within me begins to laugh, to jeer, and then, of course, respect is out of the question, and within the apparently worthless individual arises a superior one whom I never expel when he appears in me. My childish side wants desperately not to be slighted, but now and then it longs all the same for a little schoolmasterish treatment. So now I've acquainted you with a contradiction, and the boy in me is quite often naughty, which of course gives me pleasure.²²¹

Thomas Mann, after all, does not seem to have been far off in his assessment; yet his “lording and lecturing” attitude Walser despised and made him antagonize the correspondent, a “superior” individual with no sense for respect, only for mockery, suddenly arising within the “apparently worthless” one.

The Plague of Fantasies

Resistance to authorities and arrested (or even reversed) development as they played out around 1900—in the reality of Europe as well as in its bureaucratic and artistic imagination—will be the subject matter of this chapter as well as the institutions summoned to suppress these conditions (and precisely thus, as we have just

²²¹ Robert Walser, *The Robber* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) 106. The original reads: “Um zu einem menschlichen Glück zu kommen, muß ich mir erst irgendeine Geschichte ausspinnen, worin die oder die Person mit mir zu tun bekommt, wobei ich der unterliegende, gehorchende, opfernde, bewachte, bevormundete Teil bin [...] Viele Leute glauben, es sei demnach also furchtbar leicht, mich in Behandlung, gleichsam in Dressur zu nehmen, aber diese Leute irren sich alle sehr. Denn sobald jemand Miene macht, mir gegenüber sich zum Meisterlein zu erheben, fängt etwas in mir an zu lachen, zu spotten, und dann ist es natürlich mit dem Respekt vorbei, und im anscheinend Minderwertigen entsteht der Überlegene, den ich nicht aus mir ausstoße, wenn er sich in mir meldet. Das Kindliche in mir will absolut nicht mißachtet und möchte dann zu Zeiten doch wieder ganz gern ein bißchen geschulmeister werden. Ich hätte Sie also hier mit einem Widerspruch bekannt gemacht, und der Knabe in mir benimmt sich sehr oft ungezogen, was für mich natürlich ein Vergnügen ist.” Elio Fröhlich & Peter Hamm, *Robert Walser: Leben und Werk in Daten und Bildern* (Frankfurt/M.: Insel, 1980) 15.

seen with Walser, often furthering them)—hospitals, asylums, youth organizations, schools and, arguably most importantly in our context: books. Yet while trying to suppress some tendencies, these same institutions simultaneously meant to enhance (or even produce) others such as physical strength, patriotism, esprit de corps, etc. at a time when they were deemed particularly crucial.

The grim struggle over interpretive sovereignty—even though the winner was never really in question—is exemplified on the basis of the two writers we have just gotten to know: Robert Walser in Switzerland/Germany (in his most prolific years he lived in Berlin, which was also where his literary career largely took place) and J.M. Barrie in England. Around the time these two wrote the texts I will be looking at the countries were gradually gearing up for war; France, beaten in 1870/71, an event that had propelled the victor’s unification under Prussia’s command, had just given way to Germany’s rise to the status of England’s new primary rival and enemy.²²²

Barrie and Walser: two extreme types in whose life and work Kundera’s scheme played out in diametrically opposed ways. The patronizing and condescen-

²²² In order to give an idea of the atmosphere of the time here is a comment by the brother of Willie Elmhirst, an undergraduate at Wocester College who died in 1916 on the Somme, on the latter’s biographical sketch *A Freshman’s Diary 1911–1912*, which was published in 1969: “Enthusiasm for arms and the conscientious preparation for war may puzzle the contemporary reader. But at almost every public school the Officer Training Corps before 1914 was compulsory unless the exceptional parent opted out for his son. Sixth form masters were in the habit of reminding their pupils of the Germans would have to be ‘fought some day soon.’” Willie Elmhirst, *A Freshman’s Diary, 1911–1912* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1969) 121. Cited in Thomas Weber, *Our Friend “The Enemy”: Elite Education in Britain and Germany before World War I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 120.

sion that is implicit in it hit Walser—who literally asked for it and endured it stoically—with a broadside. Barrie, on the other hand, was no less aware of his precarious situation in it, but faught it all his life and was very successful in coming out on top, suppressing its dark underside. I believe that the adversarial energies of the era, in particular the contrasting ways in which youth was conceived, drawn upon and ultimately exploited, are perfectly captured and mirrored in their respective books—I will mainly be looking at the already mentioned *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), widely reckoned Walser’s masterpiece,²²³ and of course Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (premiered on stage in December 1904 and published as a novel in 1911). Their young protagonists deploy greatly different techniques to achieve or prevent maturity; and the ideological contexts set up just like traps alongside the narratives make for an interpretive quarry that that is as rich as it is cunning and clandestine.

To an English reader *Jakob von Gunten* is doubtless less known than *Peter Pan*, or rather *even less* so than to a German one; Dieter Borchmeyer, organizer of the first German symposium dedicated to Walser, which took place only in late 1995, repen- tantly calls him a “stepchild” of *Germanistik* (German literary criticism), and Siegfried Unseld, one of the paramount editors of twentieth century Germany, in his preliminary remarks to the conference, mentions the “dishonorable and igno-

²²³ J. M. Coetzee calls it “the best known of the three” surviving Berlin novels by Walser, “and deservedly so.” J. M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Literary Essays, 2000–2005* (New York: Viking, 2007) 17.

minious” treatment of Walser in his lifetime by “almost all big publishers.”²²⁴ The reading public, particularly of his late *feuilletons*, treated him no better. His editor at the *Berliner Tagblatt* even reported having received letters from angry readers threatening to cancel their subscriptions if the “nonsense” did not stop. Susan Bernofsky, in the foreword to her translation of *The Robber* (2000), speculates: “Walser’s work had become too perplexing, his sentences too playfully convoluted, for the tastes of a reading public schooled on naturalism and the Literature of Ideas à la Thomas Mann.”²²⁵ Whatever the reasons for the ignorance his work suffered until rather recently, when he started to be rediscovered also in the United states²²⁶—a short summary of *Jakob von Gunten* seems appropriate.

Beneath the title of the book we find the genre designation “a diary”; however, Jakob’s individual entries (there are 79 total) are not dated—they even seem to be averse to the very concept of temporal development, thus defying the conventions of their type. The majority are “timeless” in that we cannot tell if they precede or succeed one another. And even though the “plot” takes place in an unnamed metropolis (bearing strong resemblance to Berlin), it provides no clues about histori-

²²⁴ Borchmeyer, 7 and 12, respectively.

²²⁵ Walser, 2000, vi-vii.

²²⁶ Christopher Middleton’s early and Bernofsky’s recent translations have successfully established him as an author who had not coincidentally enjoyed the admiration of the likes of Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Franz Hessel and Walter Benjamin. Beside the Kunkel essay for the *New Yorker* cited above, J.M. Coetzee, the author of books such as *Boyhood* and *Youth*, dedicated the second chapter of his collection of “literary essays,” *Inner Workings* (2007) to Walser, which makes the latter come to lie between Italo Svevo and Musil; a fitting spot. More importantly, the essay is a great introduction to Walser’s life and work.

cal events that might enable us to make respective estimations. More than that, while Jakob's narrative stance is generally distanced, describing the events as though from far away, the individual utterances often seem hesitant as to which position in time they should assume; Nagi Naguib remarks that his "language moves—often within one sentence—among two positions and two levels of time."²²⁷ More importantly, it seems to me, the same is true for Jakob's value judgments, or more simply, his opinions: "We wear uniforms. Now, the wearing of uniforms simultaneously humiliates and exalts us. We look like unfree people, and that is possibly a disgrace, but we also look nice in our uniforms, and that sets us apart from the deep disgrace of those people who walk around in their very own clothes but in torn and dirty ones"²²⁸—a disingenuously genuine naïveté that is, in the polyvalence of its allusions and corollaries, reminiscent of Leonce's and particularly Valerio's cunning sophistry.

Jakob, the descendant of a noble and wealthy family, has enrolled himself at the Benjamenta Institute, a school for servants,²²⁹ in order to learn (or rather indulge in?) humility: "Among other things, I said that my father was an alderman, and that I had run away from him because I was afraid of being suffocated by his excellence" (27). Just like Hanno, the youngest descendant of the Buddenbrooks,

²²⁷ Nagi Naguib, *Robert Walser: Entwurf einer Bewusstseinsstruktur* (München: W. Fink, 1970) 62.

²²⁸ Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969) 24.

²²⁹ Notwithstanding the ever increasing fantastical twists of the plot, the setting of the book was very familiar to Walser who had himself enrolled in such an institution and even worked briefly as a butler in a Silesian château, where he was referred to as "Monsieur Robert".

we may imagine Jakob drawing a final stroke under his own name on the last page of the family chronicle—“Ich glaubte... ich glaubte... es käme nichts mehr!”²³⁰ Yet the young von Gunten (whose family name scarcely conceals the way Jakob aspires to see the world: “von unten,” from below) does not know Hanno’s desperation. He revels in his newly attained lowliness: “How fortunate I am,” he writes, “not to be able to see in myself anything worth respecting and watching! To be small and to stay small” (138). Consequently, it is only in his best interest that “one learns very little here” (the first sentence of the novel!). All the teachers seem to be asleep, at any rate oblivious of their obligations, and so Jakob and his fellow servant candidates are taught by Fräulein Lisa Benjamenta, the headmaster’s sister.

At his first meeting with the “imperious” Herr Benjamenta Jakob feels as if about to be “slowly strangled” (27), but pledges to find out their mystery—which he suspects to have its spatial equivalent in the secluded private rooms of the Benjamentas inside the school building: “I know it, somewhere here there are marvelous things” (34).

Unwittingly or not, Jakob’s charmingly recalcitrant obedience does not miss the mark. While soft Lisa Benjamenta is soon ready to admit she has grown fond of him, it takes his resumé, whose composition Jakob has postponed time and

²³⁰ Thomas Mann, *Die Buddenbrooks* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2008) 524. A passage from Jakob’s resumé emphasizes this connection: “The von Guntens are an old family. In earlier times they were warriors, but their pugnacity has diminished and today they are aldermen and tradesmen, and the youngest of the house, subject of this report, has resolved to lapse from every proud tradition.” Walser, 1969, 59.

again, before the previously strict and scrupulous Herr Benjamenta starts to fall for him, too. A representative passage from the resumé, penned in the third person:

His modesty knows no limits, as long as one flatters his spirit, and his zeal to serve is like his ambition, which commands him to disdain obstructive and harmful feelings of honor. [...] Today he longs to be allowed to shatter his arrogance and conceit, which perhaps still animate him in part, against the merciless rock of hard work (60).

May it have been the paradoxical style, impossible to unravel—an unlimited modesty that needs to be flattered, a grand ambition to disdain feelings of honor (which is even more pointed in German, where “ambition” is “Ehrgeiz” and “honor” is “Ehrgefühle”;²³¹ thus bringing them even closer together, while firmly attesting their dichotomy)—at any rate, reading these pages makes “the shimmering ghost of a smile” cross the Principal’s lips (60).

Events are rushing now: After what approximates a declaration of love, Jakob refuses to reply but evasively to Lisa Benjamenta. “Thwarted,” Coetzee succinctly comments in his recent essay on Walser, she “pines away and dies” (see Coetzee, 18). Virtually at the same time, Herr Benjamenta’s shift becomes complete; he begs Jakob to be his friend, to abandon the school and wander the world with him, his last pupil who has “bound me with such peculiar and happy chains. [...] Together with you, one can venture either something courageous or something very delicate” (160). Jakob is not yet quite won over; he insists that the hierarchy be maintained, albeit in an imperative tone that defies the inferiority he demands

²³¹ See Walser, 1985, 52. Unless otherwise stated, all future references to *Jakob von Gunten* will allude to the English translation.

for himself: “‘Principal,’ I said, ‘don’t flatter me, that is horrid and suspicious’” (ibid.).

Eventually, after experiencing a dream where he sees Benjamenta on a high horse riding through a desert—“It looked as if we had both escaped forever, or at least for a very long time, from what people call European culture” (174)—he lets down his guard and acquiesces, agreeing to go anywhere with his former Principal: “We shook hands, and that meant a great deal” (175).

On the other hand, after a century of constant theater productions,²³² several film versions ranging from Disney to Spielberg and even a Barrie biopic starring the disproportionately more handsome Johnny Depp, a certain familiarity with the plot and characters of *Peter Pan* can be taken for granted—even though this familiarity may turn out to be problematic, prone to obfuscate rather than reveal.

At first glance the two books are likely to look as though they have little in common in order to justify a close analysis. Yet this impression holds as little here as with respect to their authors. Of course the differences are striking, but this is precisely the point. One might say that Barrie and Walser are, unwittingly, involved in a debate on the same subject, while they disagree on the arguments. Of

²³² Alison Lurie writes: “Peter Pan was received with overwhelming enthusiasm and [...] has become the most famous children’s play ever written, as well as the greatest success in recent British stage history: it was performed more than ten thousand times in England alone between 1904 and 1954, according to Roger Lancelyn Green’s entertaining record of the success, *Fifty Years of Peter Pan*.” Alison Lurie, *Don’t Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children’s Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990) 131.

course one may object that one book is decidedly fantastical, while the other is largely realistic, or that one pertains—particularly with hindsight—to the great modernist masterpieces, while the other (even though great in its way) happily resides within the limitations of children’s literature. Such distinctions, however, have the obvious disadvantage of being sweepingly abstract. This is not enough to discard them right away, but it makes them prone to analytical shortsightedness. Just consider, for example, the parallel structures of young male protagonist and old male antagonist (Jakob von Gunten vs. Herr Benjamenta; Peter Pan vs. Captain Hook) and the double contrast of “safe” reality and “adventurous” fantasy (the servant school vs. the unknown deserts, lieu of escape “from what people call European culture”; the nursery vs. Neverland). Mark Harman’s comment on Walsler, perfectly oblivious of *Peter Pan*—“His figures often seem like abandoned orphans, imprisoned in fairy tales that are no substitute for home”—betrays the almost uncanny relationship between the two books.²³³ It may be invisible on the surface, but it cannot help showing through on a metaphorical level. The parallel pattern resembles the proverbial wood that cannot be seen for the trees.

Yet within this common structure, which far exceeds these basic elements, it is precisely the differences shedding light on the ideological struggle that interest me. I am little tempted to engage in vulgar psychologizing, which is why I propose to read the following account from Barrie’s memoir on his mother’s youth as the act of self-narrativization that it obviously is; the point is not to strip it for psycho-

²³³ Harman, 1985, 9.

logical “truth” but rather to accept Barrie’s offer to make himself readable, to get to know the literary character J.M. Barrie that may or may not be congruous with his author, even though this congruity is necessarily implied. In other words it is about listening for the reverberations between two fictions, one immediate, the other mediate. When I assume that the differences of plot and politics in Barrie and Walser are deeply grounded in psychology, this is what I will turn to for enlightenment.

So much for the methodology, here is Barrie’s early childhood memory about his mother, that strikes me as in our context particularly revealing:

I see her frocks lengthening... and the games given reluctantly up. The horror of my boyhood was that I knew a time would come when I also must give up the games, and how it was to be done I saw not (this agony still returns to me in dreams, when I catch myself playing marbles, and look on with cold displeasure); I felt that I must continue playing in secret, and I took this shadow to her, when she told me her own experience, which convinced us both that we were very like each other inside. She discovered that work is the best fun after all, and I learned it in time, but have my lapses, and so had she.²³⁴

Except for the last bit—the almost hastily added assertion of work being “the best fun after all” whose (in comparison with the breathless ingenuity and furtive confessionality of the preceding passage) trite conventionality makes it suspicious—Barrie’s fear almost verbatim echoes that of Blumfeld, the protagonist of Kafka’s story “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor.”

Blumfeld, a senior executive, is anxious to be perceived as an authoritative adult, plagued by sensations of disrespect on the part of both his superiors and his subordinates. One night, coming home, he is surprised to find “two small white celluloid balls with blue stripes jumping up and down side by side on the parquet;

²³⁴ Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy*, cited in Birkin & Goode, 7f.

when one of them touches the floor the other is in the air, a game they continue ceaselessly to play.” A few lines down, Kafka comments:

A pity Blumfeld isn't a small child, two balls like these would have been a happy surprise for him, whereas now the whole thing gives him rather an unpleasant feeling. It's not quite pointless after all to live in secret as an unnoticed bachelor, now someone, no matter who, has penetrated this secret and sent him these two strange balls.²³⁵

Kafka takes pains not to have Blumfeld's reaction come across as blunt as Barrie's allusion, but the “secret” of living the “unnoticed” life of a bachelor is clearly conflated with the desire to be, to have never outgrown, the child. Blumfeld struggles to keep up the outward illusion of the serious adult, so he must get rid of the treacherous toys that threaten to give away his *true* nature (at least as far he himself is concerned). He ends up giving the balls to a couple of kids.

Barrie, like Kafka's protagonist, takes resort to keeping up appearances, fair semblances, games of charade and hide-and-seek to a similar end. I said it above: the slightly affected conclusion of the passage—“work is the best fun after all”—with which Barrie seems to try to get his act together, assuring his reader that he is the respectable bourgeois after all—functions all the same as a confession to the more skeptical and sensitive-minded: the discrepancy in tone, betraying a discrepancy in sincerity, must not escape his attention. Barrie goes so far as to mention the “lapses,” but remains tacit about what they consist of. At any rate, this half-baked acknowledgment cannot counterbalance the agony apparently “still” returning in his dreams, nor the fact that he “must continue playing in secret.” Of course the fo-

²³⁵ Franz Kafka, *Shorter Works*, ed. by Malcolm Pasley, vol. 1 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973) 21.

calization of the latter is deliberately unclear: did this continuation of playing in secret stop at some point in the past when it was obliterated by the recognition that work is the best play after all or is it still effective? Barrie, to be sure, pulls out all the stops.

This tactic is reminiscent of the ingenious beginning of Slavoj Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies* where he states that "focusing on material externality proves very fruitful in the analysis of how fantasy relates to the inherent antagonisms of an ideological edifice."²³⁶ In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, Žižek reminds us, colossal statues "of the idealized New Man" (2) were erected on top of multistory office buildings; soon the dominance of the proletarian paragons was ever increasing at the expense of the office buildings, "the actual workplace for living people," which were so to speak trimmed down to mere pedestals for the overpowering statues. If anybody had now stated in public "that the vision of the Socialist New Man was an ideological monster squashing actual people, they would have been arrested immediately" (ibid.). Yet, to make the same point slightly more surreptitiously qua architectural design, was not merely allowed but even encouraged. The most interesting aspect, however, is yet to come: "What we are thus arguing is not simply that ideology also permeates the alleged extra-ideological strata of everyday inherent antagonisms which the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge: it is as if an ideological edifice, if it is to function 'normally', must

²³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 1f.

obey a kind of ‘imp of perversity’, and articulate its inherent antagonism in the externality of its material existence” (2).

Quite literally, two “imps of perversity” are the driving agents of our stories, albeit in diametrically opposed ways that consequently must, according to Žižek’s argument, articulate their hidden inherent antagonisms.

To begin with, Barrie’s imp of perversity is obviously Peter Pan himself;²³⁷ he is forever suspended between the realms of the human and the inhuman: in his first incarnation in Barrie’s story *The Little White Bird*, which preceded the play by two years, he is, allegedly just like all babies, part bird, but he is the only one to perpetuate this chimeric existence.²³⁸ His natural realm is the limbo, literally, as a dead children’s charon: when children died, Mrs Darling remembers at the beginning of the book, “he went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened”;²³⁹ and figuratively, as the child whose development into maturity is deferred infinitely: “All children, except one, grow up,” as the famous first sentence has it.

Also, he possesses the imp’s devilish features, being “gay and innocent and heartless”—the closing words of the book, preceded by the generalizing phrase “as

²³⁷ Interestingly, Jon Savage puts his finger on the same phenomenon: “It was no accident that Peter Pan was first played by an actress in her thirties: desire sublimated into an acceptable form” (Savage, 82.).

²³⁸ Barrie initially used this feature to explain Peter Pan’s ability to fly. In later versions, it is explained by a combination of “happy thoughts” and fairy dust. Interestingly, again, fairies are supposed to be the pieces of the first baby’s shattered smile. I won’t even start to try unraveling the intricate metaphorical meaning of this.

²³⁹ Barrie, 2005@12

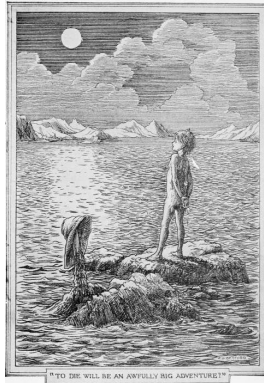
long as children are,” but clearly Peter Pan is the enhanced version, the distillate, in which the heartless note prevails: one of his “peculiarities”, after all, is that “in the middle of a fight he would suddenly change sides” (73). And his obliviousness, emphasized time and again, is tantamount to negligence; on their initial flight to the island, for example, Wendy and her brothers become aware and hence justly afraid of it: “If he forgets them so quickly [fleeting adventures such as talking to a star or to a mermaid as they occur along the way],’ Wendy argued, ‘how can we expect that he will go on remembering us?’” (40). His promise “‘I say, Wendy [...], always if you see me forgetting you, just keep on saying ‘I’m Wendy,’ and then I’ll remember’” is answered by the narrator’s laconic comment, representative of Wendy’s thoughts: “Of course this was rather unsatisfactory” (ibid.).

Peter’s authoritarian selfishness shows abundantly, too, for example in the same scene (since it is one where the children, inexperienced in flying and naturally unaware of the directions, lacking all orientation, are completely dependent on him): “Indeed they would have slept longer, but Peter tired quickly of sleeping, and soon he would cry in *his captain voice*, ‘We get off here’” (ibid., my emphasis). In the end, Wendy and her brothers having returned home safely, he promises to come once every year in order to take her back to Never Land for “spring cleaning”: The first year he does indeed show up but already betrays forgetfulness to a disturbing degree—disturbing not only for Wendy, but also for the readers who, like her, have been following this *particular* adventure—as he is unable to remember either Captain Hook or Tinker Bell. The latter—his companion of years, in

love with him and sharing his home under the ground—he brutally pigeonholes as a fairy among fairies, saying: ““There are such a lot of them. [...] I expect she is no more”” (152). “I expect he was right,” the narrator conciliatorily comments, “for fairies don’t live long, but they are so little that a short time seems a good while to them” (ibid.).

This instance of trivializing youthful death, by the way, is part of a recurring theme of the book. Its most famous occasion is probably Peter’s dictum in the face of his presumed death by drowning after he has been wounded by Hook: “To die will be an awfully big adventure.” Those cannot but have rung acutely sardonic in 1928 when Barrie extensively revised the play for publication—the first World War and the hundreds of thousands of dead young men, among them his oldest adopted son, George, who died on the front in Flanders in March 1915, as well as, even more starkly, the 1921 drowning of his favorite adopted son Michael, aged 21 and an undergrad at Oxford, in what was probably a suicide, having occurred in-between.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ See Birkin & Goode, 293. Peter had come home from the war with what was diagnosed as “severe shell shock.”



Peter Pan on the Rock, an illustration by F. D. Bedford, 1911. The caption reads: “To die will be an awfully big adventure.”

The sharp irony did not go unnoticed at the time. Most London newspapers ran the story of Michael’s death on their front pages. The *Evening Standard* titled “The Tragedy of Peter Pan: Sir J.M. Barrie’s Loss of an Adopted Son” and noted in the article, after reminding their readers of George’s fate in the war: “Now both boys closely associated with the fashioning of *Peter Pan* are dead. One recalls the words of Peter himself: ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure.’”²⁴¹

This is just one instance of the reverberations as they frequently occur wherever *Peter Pan*, the literary text, and its real life context clash;²⁴² the uneasiness they invoke is an indicator of Žižek’s “inherent antagonisms.” Just like the Slovenian cultural psychoanalyst Barrie, too, seems to have expected architecture, or even more precisely, sculpture implicitly to disclose the underside of the official narra-

²⁴¹ Ibid., 292f.

²⁴² Barrie’s explanation how he originally conceived of the figure Peter Pan seems noteworthy here: “I made Peter by rubbing the five of you [the five Davies boys] *violently* together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame” (ibid., 2).

tive; when a Peter Pan statue was revealed in Kensington Gardens (where it still stands today), Barrie was reportedly disappointed: “It doesn’t show the Devil in Peter.”²⁴³

On the other hand, Jakob von Gunten’s impishness and devilry hardly runs the risk of being overlooked. It is however striking that, other than the aimless and unstable Peter, Jakob’s recalcitrance essentially mirrors the Robber’s (the character) and Robert’s (the author) as described above in that it is directed against whoever wants to lord and lecture: “Curious, the pleasure it gives me to annoy practicers of force. Do I actually want this Herr Benjamenta to punish me? Do I have reckless instincts?”²⁴⁴ Yet then again there *are* times when this disobedience seems to follow merely its capricious instincts—in pursuit of a *l’art pour l’art* among mutinies. Jakob’s friend Kraus, a paragon of integrity—which is why the friendship is largely one-sided—takes issue with these erratic activities:

You’re a fine one,” Kraus said to me, actually quite without reason, “you’re one of those worthless fellows who think they’re above the rules. I know. You needn’t say anything. You think I’m a grumpy pedagogue and dogmatist. Well, I’m not. And what do you and your sort, big mouths, what do you suppose it really means to be serious and attentive? You imagine you’re king, just because you can leap and dance around, definitely and quite rightfully, without a doubt, don’t you? Oh, I can see through you, you dancer. Always laughing at what’s right and proper, you can do that well enough, yes, yes, you’re quite the master in that, you and your lot.”²⁴⁵

The late passage where Benjamenta reveals himself, telling Jakob that he sent all the other pupils away in order to be together with him, provides an excellent example of this behavior. Jakob is apparently indignant and replies that this was not

²⁴³ See *ibid.*, 202.

²⁴⁴ Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 1999) 42.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

the proper way to go; instead he insists on getting a job just like the others. “Ah, he shuddered,” Jakob continues, describing Benjamenta’s immediate reaction—and only now do we realize his gleeful act, merely designed to tantalize poor Benjamenta for a moment. “He jumped. How I giggled, inside. Devilment is the nicest thing in life” (172).

In such situations the imp shines through impeccably; we almost seem to recognize heartless Peter Pan as the object of another of Kraus’s tirades, except his tone is much more bitter than Wendy would ever have dared use vis-à-vis Peter (even though she might have wished so at times): “And who knows, perhaps things in this world are so foolish that they’ll haul you up to the heights. Then you can quietly and cheekily carry on with your shameless ways, your defiance, your arrogance and smiling indolence, with your mockery and all kinds of mischief, and keep yourself carefree, as you are” (146). And even Benjamenta, once he has revealed himself to Jakob, fears to fall victim to this indolent, carefree mischief-maker: “I have begun to feel a strange, a quite peculiar and now no longer repressible preference for you. You’ll be cheeky with me now, won’t you, Jakob? You will, won’t you?” (99).

Coetzee calls a spade a spade: “He [Jakob] mixes effrontery with patently insincere self-abasement, giggling at his own insincerity, confident that candor will disarm all criticism, and not really caring if it does not. The word he would like to apply to himself, the word he would like the world to apply to him, is *impish*. An imp is a mischievous sprite; but an imp is also a lesser devil” (Coetzee, 2007a, 18.).

In Jakob's case effrontery and self-abasement vacillate, as opposed to caring leadership and evasive oblivion in Peter's. In both, one might point out, a great part of the danger they exude (particularly vis-à-vis adults or people assuming their roles such as Wendy) traces back to the uncertainty in the face of such fickleness: where do they stand, what can we count on? This, even more than the question of intentionality, is what constitutes the imp. Jakob and Peter are the antipodes of the responsible adult, while at the same time—as they effectively defy the latter's natural right, acquired precisely not by birth, but by “growing up,” namely “having the say”—they close ranks, coming to stand next to or even, his worst nightmare, on top of him.

Walter Jens was early to sense the pervasiveness of this phenomenon around 1900 in his essay “Adult Children.” As the title suggests the author traces a gradual leveling of the generational gap; the children, as represented in literature, assimilate their parents in increasingly insidious ways. In this scheme, Jens's overarching thesis, the youthful insurgence begins with the likes of Wedekind and Werfel, who plot out resentful characters that first suffer from suppressive adult authority and then rebel against it—this conception can and should be extended to Törleß and particularly Joyce. According to Jens this mutiny of the juniors against their seniors takes another step quite some time later, with Gide's *Faux-monnayeurs*:

Written 34 years after Wedekind, 10 years after Werfel, this novel conjures a world, in which the relations between adults and youths are turned topsy-turvey. What a change! The difference of generations may still hold... it is a difference of years, not of power. One faces each other as equals; apparently, the youths do not have, as the

adults say ‘a sense of how dreadful their deeds are’... they blackmail and steal, they loot and drive one of themselves into suicide... and in all this only copy the adults—even though much more consequentially and with a more decided rigor.²⁴⁶

This analysis enables us to lay the finger on yet another commonality of Barrie and Walser that is at the same time a difference. Long before Gide, both *Jakob von Gunten* and *Peter Pan* display the same curious usurpation of the adult stance; they tacitly take it for granted as the necessary basis of their protagonists’ every move. The stealing, looting and killing part, however, is a signature feature of *Peter Pan*, while it is almost absent from *Jakob von Gunten*, where, on the other hand, the leveling of the gap between commanding adult and submissive child could not be more pronounced. Yet the first became an instant classic of children’s literature,²⁴⁷ while the other one aroused suspicion where it did not simply go unnoticed.

When the authorities applaud it is safe to assume that they see their interests furthered, stabilized or at least unchallenged. This is particularly true at a time characterized as much by unrest and insecurity as the Edwardian era—despite popular nostalgia reminiscing otherwise. The recent Boer War, having ended in 1902, in which 300,000 British soldiers had had trouble vanquishing 30,000 Afrikaners)²⁴⁸ had scandalized the public sphere—hardly a surprise, given that 22,000 troops were killed in battle, died of disease or were taken as prisoners of war. As

²⁴⁶ Walter Jens, “Erwachsene Kinder: Das Bild des Jugendlichen in der modernen Literatur,” in *Statt einer Literaturgeschichte* (Munich: dtv, 1990) 147.

²⁴⁷ Even though R. D. S. Jack, after studying the long-lost manuscript, raises the question whether it was originally intended for children at all. See R. D. S. Jack, “The Manuscript of Peter Pan,” *Children’s Literature* 18 (1990): 107.

²⁴⁸ See Patrick McGowan & Scarlett Cornelissen et al., *Power, Wealth and Global Equity: An International Relations Textbook for Africa* (Lansdowne: UCT Press, 2007) 210.

W.D. Rubinstein writes in his 2003 history of 20th century Britain: “The physical un-fitness of many would-be recruits, the incompetence of Britain’s military leadership in the war’s early stages and the undue length of time required for the world’s mightiest empire to defeat a community of impoverished farmers on horse-back, all gave rise to searching nation debates.”²⁴⁹

There are two interconnected discursive spheres running through our novels that are worth an analysis in this context: the notion of children’s literature and the notion of schooling. The first—usually conceived as a genre—is very visible in *Peter Pan* and almost invisible in *Jakob von Gunten*, even though it clearly responds to it in many ways. The second—usually conceived as a moral and societal impetus, a *sine qua non* of public rhetoric no matter what substance it may drag along in its wake—is almost invisible in *Peter Pan* (the whole point of the children’s escape to Neverland is to avoid schooling), whereas it is ubiquitous in *Jakob von Gunten*, whose almost every scene is set in a school, one for servants no less, the most obedient among obedient pupils.

Children’s Literature, or Subtle Contaminations

“The little child is supposed to be pure and innocent... The children alone take no part in this convention: they assert their animal nature naively enough and demonstrate persistently that they have yet to learn their ‘purity.’”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ W. D. Rubinstein, *Twentieth-Century Britain: A Political History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 9.

²⁵⁰ Cited in G. H. Bantock, “Freud and Education,” *Educational Review* 12:1 (1959): 5.

The apparent absence of school and classroom from many works of children’s literature—and from *Peter Pan* in particular—conceals one of its central characteristics that, once acknowledged, instead betrays the genre’s close relation to schooling: it is, in the words of Perry Nodelman, renowned expert in the field, always “somehow didactic.”²⁵¹

In a way, we may conceive of the children’s book at least up to Edwardian times as a younger sibling of the *Bildungsroman*: as a novel of *primary* education. And while the protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* proper already tend to be subject to a sort of Kunderian suppression—with an adult author overlooking the arch of their maturation just as his inner-literary alter ego, the omniscient narrator, benignly smiles at their boyish blunders—this uneven power dynamic is only exacerbated when it comes to the toddler or the young schoolchild. And while at the time, as I claim, the *Bildungsroman* (as a piece of literature deliberately directed to an adult readership, in other words toward one that supposedly meets its author at eye level, rather than simply “being narrated something”) was being reinvented or rather re-appropriated, almost hijacked, by means of retaining some of its central features and putting them to a different use, namely, defying the ideology of “maturity”, this was not true for children’s literature—quite possibly because its conventions were a less extricable part of its nature.

²⁵¹ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) 27.

Jacqueline Rose reminds us that children's literature appeared at a time when "conceptualization of childhood was dominated by the philosophical writings of Locke and Rousseau," i.e. it emerged from an imagination of a developmental arc writ large, slowly stretching from moral and epistemological innocence to educated maturity. "It is assumed," Rose continues,

that children's fiction has grown away from this moment, whereas in fact children's fiction has constantly returned to this moment, repeated it, and reproduced its fundamental conception of the child. Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state.²⁵²

It is however important to note that in this relation the alleged purity is a one-directional vector: the stance of the latter trio—language, sexuality and the state—to the body and mind of the child, can safely be called the opposite of pure, that would be: *adulterated*. It is precisely this countermovement, identical with the actual interest behind the ostensibly displayed disinterestedness ("it's great, but it's only a children's book after all!"), that the official discourse tends to neglect and obscure. The individual literary text in question is wont to keep just as quiet about its more sinister ideological underpinnings, not least because it seems seldom aware of them. *Peter Pan*—however much this may go against its grain—is no exception.

Only once, in the first chapter of *Peter Pan*, does Barrie seem rather upfront about it when he conjures up doctors drawing maps of their youthful patients' minds. These maps feature all characteristics of Neverland, complete with gnomes and savages and lonely lairs. But Barrie acknowledges that it would be too easy if

²⁵² Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 8.

this were all there was to it because “there is also first day at school, religion, fathers [...], and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through” (11). In the particular map that constitutes the novel *Peter Pan* they are merely “showing through”—which is, naturally, a euphemism. On the surface of the text they never show; they remain hidden in the offing, clandestinely extending their spiky edges toward he who sails all too gaily across.

In this sense it should be taken with a grain of salt when, for example, Alison Lurie argues that “Peter Pan is much more than a conventional pantomime. Its Never-Never Land is the world of childhood imagination; it is also a refuge from the adult universe of rules and duties.”²⁵³ In fact it is quite the contrary. Even after the children “escape” to Neverland they never stray too far from proper family conduct, with all hierarchical roles and their respective comportment firmly intact, actually more intact than usually. Rather than a “refuge” from adult rules and duties, Neverland is their escalation. If the patient does not realize the bitterness of his medicine, it is because it is served with an extra spoonful of sugar.

Doesn't it, for example, sound like great fun not to enter your house through the door, not even through the window, as the more venturesome child might aspire to? In Neverland you enter your subterranean apartment through a hollow tree. The downside is you have to be made fit. If you are unlucky, “Peter does some things to you, and after that you fit” (69). And “once you fit, great care must be taken to go on fitting, and this, as Wendy was to discover to her delight, keeps a whole

²⁵³ Lurie, 128.

family in perfect condition” (ibid.). Once you are inside, stern standards of hygiene must routinely be applied that you are unlikely to deviate from once you make it back into the alleged “adult universe.” A rather sassy trunk, for instance, with apparently no sense for its proper place “tried hard to grown in the center of the room, but every morning they sawed the trunk through, level with the floor” (69f.).

The chapter “The Home under the Ground” minutely records and describes these routine activities:

The bed was tilted against the wall by day, and let down at 6:30, when it filled nearly half the room; and all the boys slept in it, except Michael, lying like sardines in a tin. There was a strict rule against turning round until one gave the signal, when all turned at once. Michael should have used it also, but Wendy would have a baby, and he was the littlest, and you know what women are, and the short and long of it is that he was hung up in a basket (70).

As we can see it did not take Wendy very long to become a “woman” just like those who you know what they are, and it goes without protesting that Michael must acquiesce to being reduced to a baby and henceforth lounge in a basket. That way, at least, he does not have to endure the soldierly discipline that haunts the others even in their sleep, which I cannot imagine to be very restorative as they must be ever ready to turn around by command. Everyone takes on their proper roles, even Tinker Bell, who dwells in her jaded arrogance as in her embellished private quarters like a *nolens volens* tolerated distant aunt, whose humble fortune one cannot await to inherit, even though one is perpetually anxious she may out of spite bequeath it to, say, a children’s hospital.

Soon, Wendy is completely absorbed in her new-found role as Neverland's *über*mother, tidying, washing, cooking and scolding: "Really there were whole weeks when, except perhaps with a stocking in the evening, she was never above ground" (71). Then, in her moments of tranquil sewing she is a prime embodiment of Barrie's favorite mode of humor, false nostalgia: "When she sat down to a basketful of their stockings, every heel with a hole in it, she would fling up her arms and exclaim, 'Oh dear, I am sure I sometimes think spinsters are to be envied!' Her face beamed when she exclaimed this" (*ibid.*). How very much she hates her new maternal mission—except she doesn't. (Incidentally, she really must conceive of herself as a spouse, as opposed to a spinster.)

Soon her brothers become quite convinced that she is really their mother, but Wendy, traditionalist if there ever was one and firm believer in proven pedagogical methods, is resourceful here, too, while her supposed fellow refugees from the adult universe turn out to be most ardent learners:

Nobly anxious to do her duty, she tried to fix the old life in their minds by setting them examination papers on it, as like as possible to the ones she used to do at school. The other boys thought this awfully interesting, and insisted on joining, and they made slates for themselves, and sat round the table, writing and thinking hard about the questions she had written on another slate and passed round (72).

To be sure, Neverland is nothing altogether special here, aloof from the world of school and nursery, but merely a continuation, a more direct and intense variation of what is very much grounded in "reality": Wendy and Peter's rather serious charade of assuming the roles of father and mother has begun as early as at their very first meeting, where their figurative marriage is closed and consummated with the

act of Wendy fixing Peter's lost shadow: "I will sew it on for you, my little man' [...] and she got out her housewife" (26). Sexual innuendo squats between many lines of this chapter that does not for nothing take place in a bedroom, even if safely called "nursery": there is for example the famous scene on the bed, with Wendy insisting on giving Peter a kiss, who, ignorantly, holds out his hand. His ignorance must surely be coquetry for just seconds before he had talked "in a voice that no woman had ever yet been able to resist" (27)—in other words, he must be rather experienced, unless, which is likely, his habitual forgetfulness gently veils those past escapades to his momentary mind.

At any rate this technique is exemplary for Barrie: he makes statements whose cuteness is only rivaled by their bluntness just after he has surreptitiously sprinkled a handful of hints to the opposite effect. Once again we are reminded of Kafka's bachelor Blumfeld. Both Blumfeld and Barrie (or rather, his narrator) are overly keen on masking their underlying desires; the former quickly gets rid of the little balls that he would love to play with, while the latter instantly denies any act of "real" sexuality or violence while he is clearly preoccupied with it. And as far as the reader's experience is concerned, I cannot help sensing a certain kinship to those famous subliminal messages—images of ice cream or of a glistening glass of beer in an overheated movie theater for example, which in one Columbo episode or other brings about the victim's exitus because the killer already awaits him on the way out.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ In the early versions of the play, Barrie would be more explicit about the existence of sexuality in Neverland.

Incidentally, it seems interesting to note that Kafka elicits the tragic, whereas Barrie emphasizes the comic. And most of the time Barrie is hilarious indeed. I would love not to be a killjoy if only the humor of the text did not betray such dishonesty about its ideological provenience.

Take the scene on the pirate ship, before the final fight. Wendy is tied to the mast, while the boys stare, terrified, at the plank they are expected to walk. Hook even stokes discord among the group by offering two boys, not more, a second career as pirates on his ship; the others will be left as fodder to the sharks. While this situation is likely to look rather gruesome to the illiterate observer, the narrator thwarts the terror by disclosing unexpected psychological events as they invisibly occur alongside the physiological ones. At the opening of the chapter, for example, Smee (one of Hook's pirates) is seen or rather spied upon as "hemming placidly, under the conviction that all children feared him" (122). Yet even though he "had said horrid things to them and hit them" we learn that "there was not a child on board the brig that night who did not already love him" (*ibid.*). A community is created among offender and victim, a community that creates warmth and tears of emotion (Michael has even "tried on his spectacles"), albeit out of nothing, but what does this matter to the touched reader? This "nothing" is a true vanishing mediator here, ultimately bereft of sense and merely meant to account for the ensuing decisions; it is no exaggeration to claim that it is the heart of this chapter and close to the heart of the book, which would leave it: empty.

The bizarre community soon assimilates Captain Hook, whose thoughts merge with those of the narrator. We are amazed to learn that the evil pirate is just like a little boy (brutal and heartbreaking) who, envious of the children's love for Smee, is tempted to tear apart the sleeping scoundrel (who in his present slumbering state likewise resembles a baby, innocent and all). But Hook holds back, not out of compassion but—the next surprise!—lest he show “bad form.” The narrator traces his thoughts: “‘To claw a man because he has good form, what would that be?’ ‘Bad form!’” (123) To be sure, Smee's good form does not immediately consist in the children loving him. Here is Hook's amusing deduction: Smee is unaware that the children love him, and they have no reason to love him other than “good form,” which tautologically proves that he has it, and since the best good form is displayed by him who has no idea he has it, Smee must indeed have very good form. You may be suspecting it already: “good form” is the vanishing mediator that guides this chapter (as well as the next) because it guides Hook: “Good form!” Barrie has his narrator exclaim, “However much he may have degenerated, he still knew that this is all that really matters” (121). The reader notes the narrator's assent: Hook is, for a change, dead-on.

Barrie accomplishes two astonishing things here: he defuses the inherent and undeniable violence by sweetening it with sentimentality and comedy, thus concocting a sort of humor-humus from which rather unamusing ramifications are sprouting. It is enticing to paraphrase the narrator's rumination on the prerequisite of Smee's good form (before the introduction of the concept) that opens the chap-

ter: “I know not why he was so infinitely pathetic, unless it were because he was so pathetically unaware of it.” I for my share know not why the violence is so funny, unless it were because it is so funnily unaware of its consequences, or maybe rather: because it so funnily insinuates its unawareness.²⁵⁵

Going back to Kafka for one last thought, we realize that his and Barrie’s results oppose each other: Kafka *enlightens* the reader (we realize Blumfeld’s tragedy), whereas Barrie *confuses* him (we are willing to trade our realization of the ostensive brutality for the good fun of the counter-intuitive psychology that drives the action). It is true that this is essentially a description of how comedy works as opposed to tragedy, but I want to stress the ideological danger that it represents in the particular case of Barrie’s novel (as a prime example of its genre).

This may become clearer by looking more closely at the concept of the vanishing mediator. I am thinking here of Slavoj Žižek’s version, which he develops in *For They Know Not What They Do*, drawing on an essay by Fredric Jameson.²⁵⁶ According to Žižek a vanishing mediator negotiates and reconciles two conflicting concepts and subsequently disappears. The interesting point in Žižek’s emphasis is that in this process form tends to lag behind content, in the sense that content—just like a parasitic insect—is transformed within an existing form to the point where the inner logic of that content will have completely absorbed its host form,

²⁵⁵ I am not necessarily implying here that the agent of this insinuation was Barrie; the text, however, knows.

²⁵⁶ See Fredric Jameson, “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller,” *The Ideologies of Theory* 2 (1988).

killing it off and revealing a new form in its place. His example is the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Feudalism could, according to its inner logic, only give way to the vanishing mediator Protestantism that preserved, or even strengthened, its religious form. Surreptitiously, however, “the crucial shift—the assertion of the ascetic-acquisitive stance in economic activity as the domain of the manifestation of Grace—takes place,” and thus it is only a formality, in the most literal sense, fully to realize bourgeois capitalism and get rid of the religious justification (which conditioned its possibility) altogether.²⁵⁷

In *Peter Pan*, however, the opposite is true: content lags behind form. As opposed to Žižek or Jameson’s example, it is merely the *form* here that changes, the medium and meaning of a content that remains the same. This is very palpably true with respect to Hook’s “good form” and it is surreptitiously true with respect to *Peter Pan* as an embodiment of the genre “children’s literature.”

The vanishing (and essentially empty) mediator “good form” serves to propel the plot, to render Hook—the naughty child who deep inside longs for nothing but acceptance into the community that has expelled him—understandable and likeable, and to set up his demise: the final fight finds him standing on the bulwark of his ship, with the crocodile lurking beneath. He does not mind his death, as long as he gets the better of Peter, whom he invited “with a gesture to use his foot. It made Peter kick instead of stab. At last Hook got the boon for which he craved. ‘Bad form,’ he cried jeeringly, and went content to the crocodile. Thus perished

²⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London/New York: Verso, 1996) 185.

James Hook.” (137). Hook’s atrocities have changed their meaning in the judgment of both the narrator and, following him, the reader. Not coincidentally are the pages leading up to his death filled with more or less overt rapprochements; “he had one last triumph,” the narrator comments just before describing the above scene, “which I think we need not grudge him” (ibid.). And in death, showing good form, he wins back his properly English first name.

On the level of the narrative as such, even though the (child-)reader is dished up and expected to swallow conservative etiquette, imperialist fantasy, misogyny and the like, the writing never acknowledges its pamphletic nature, but continues to thrive and to be appreciated as an essentially harmless adventure story. The formal hull it will eventually drop is precisely this harmlessness, which was never there to begin with. The original content of violence and imperialist arrogance was only permissible to the child when packaged as “children’s literature,” the vanishing mediator. The final product will be a change in form, not in content: the violence will have left the safe realm of literature and have ventured out into the world, with World War I approaching fast.

This does not seem like an over-emphasis if one considers the following scene, possibly the epitome of “good form” as displayed by Wendy and her boys, which is why the pirates, Hook’s disciples after all, are so awed and the captain himself almost faints out of spite, envy and self-hatred:

“Are they to die?” asked Wendy, with a look of such frightful contempt that he [Hook] nearly fainted.

“They are,” he snarled. “Silence all,” he called gloatingly, “for a mother’s last words to her children.”

At this moment Wendy was grand. “These are my last words, dear boys,” she said firmly. “I feel that I have a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this: ‘We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen.’”

Even the pirates were awed, and Tootles cried out hysterically, “I am going to do what my mother hopes. What are you to do, Nibs?”

“What my mother hopes. What are you to do, Twin?”

“What my mother hopes. John, what are—.”²⁵⁸

One does not need to bother with monocausal explanations to find it remarkable—and he is merely the most pressing example, an archetype of his generation—that Rupert Brooke, the famous child poet of idealistic war sonnets, saw the play on opening night, and like most of his fellow attendees, ten years later would enlist. Incidentally, his death, prompted by an infection resulting from a mosquito bite on the way to combat, seems like a cynical joke of a well-read God since Brooke died and was buried in what could not have been closer to Neverland, even though it was known to the authorities as the Cycladic island of Skyros. His friend William Denis Browne wrote: “I sat with Rupert. At 4 o’clock he became weaker, and at 4.46 he died, with the sun shining all round his cabin, and the cool sea-breeze blowing through the door and the shaded windows. No one could have wished for a quieter or a calmer end than in that lovely bay, shielded by the mountains and fragrant with sage and thyme.”²⁵⁹

“Peter’s Never-Land is not a simple escape from the real,” Craigs Cairns very fittingly writes at an altogether different occasion, in a study on the modern Scottish novel, in what amounts to a direct opposition to Lurie’s assessment cited

²⁵⁸ Barrie, 2005, 125.

²⁵⁹ From a letter to his friend Edward Marsh, 25 April 1915. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) 682-8.

above. “In *Peter Pan* the imagination escapes reality only to reveal the ways in which imagination conceals reality from us.”²⁶⁰ And all the same, one might add, attempts to condition us as agents of this reality we do not dare admit.

It seems as if this act of conditioning—inconspicuous and undeliberate as it might have been on the parts of author and reader—has been a central reason for the sweeping success of the book.²⁶¹ Underneath the gory adventure story on a pirate ship we are reading a prep school manual of manners for the obedient child and servile subject. Consider the following dialog that concludes the scene where Hook suggests that two boys become pirates: “‘Shall we be respectful subjects of the King?’ John inquired. Through Hook’s teeth came the answer: ‘You would have to swear, ‘Down with the King’” (124). Which prompts John and Michael instantly to refuse. Curly, one of Peter’s Lost Boys, squeaks “Rule Britannia!” All the while Wendy is not too impressed; she is busy writing “dirty pig” on the portholes.

²⁶⁰ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999) 229.

²⁶¹ In order to understand the same phenomenon, which he thinks is a far-reaching one (he does not single out Barrie), Troy Boone refers to Foucault: “A wide range of middle-class writers desired to institute a disciplinary, class-based society operating through, as Foucault puts it, ‘a mechanism that coerces by means of observation’ and ‘an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible.’ Similarly, for these writers, the desired effect of such disciplinary observation is a ‘policy of the body, a certain way of rendering the group of men docile and useful’ such that the working-class ‘body is reduced as a “political” force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force.’” Troy Boone, *Youth of Darkest England: Working-Class Children at the Heart of Victorian Empire* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005) 14f.

Captain Hook emerges here as the misguided schoolboy he has never ceased being. Whole passages in this chapter are devoted to this aspect of his past that completely determines his present actions. Barrie makes sure nobody misses it:

Hook was not his true name. To reveal who he really was would even at this date set the country in a blaze; but as those who read between the lines must already have guessed, he had been at a famous public school; and its traditions still clung to him like garments, with which indeed they are largely concerned. Thus it was offensive to him even now to board a ship in the same dress in which he grappled her, and he still adhered in his walk to the school's distinguished slouch. But above all he retained the passion for good form (121).

In the play, where these lengthy explanations by the narrator cannot be given, Barrie has Hook, as he falls prey to the crocodile, exclaim: “Floreat Etona!” (Long live Eton!) Hook, just like Peter Pan, is a boy who never grew up, never left school.²⁶²

He apparently yearns so much for his long-lost Eton that he does not hesitate to assume, if need be, the role of a teacher—in a sort of psychological compulsion that acts out again and again the central trauma of his personality. The sweet terror of public school inter-house competition, whose primary currency is “good form,” turns out to be the motor behind his actions in Neverland. In this sense, taking up the role of the schoolmaster himself constitutes the attempt to embody him who he fears the most, all the while he desperately strives to please him, in other words, the authoritative father figure *par excellence*.²⁶³

²⁶² This also explains why he so instantly takes up Smee’s proposition to kidnap Wendy and make her their, the pirates’, mother: “‘It is a princely scheme,’ cried Hook, and at once it took practical shape in his great brain. ‘We will seize the children and carry them to the boat: the boys we will make walk the plank, and Wendy shall be our mother.’” Barrie, 2005, 81.

²⁶³ Chapter 14 lets us in on Hook’s recurring thoughts that cause his constant sweat (“Ofttimes he drew his sleeve across his face, but there was no damming that trickle” [122]); in the best psychoanalytic fashion they manifest themselves as a role play, with a menacing voice haunt-

Hence, it does not seem very far-fetched at all to imagine the *Jolly Roger* as a classroom and Hook's men as his students—while at the same time he is in constant fear to be challenged by them. In fact Lester D. Friedman emphasizes that the earliest film adaptation—Henry Brenon's 1924 *Peter Pan*—featured a Hook who was far from the sentimentality of his later screen incarnations, notably Dustin Hoffman's, but very much conveyed the feeling how much “even his own men fear him.”²⁶⁴ Friedman describes Hook's first entry in the film, with his motely crew shrinking back fearfully: “Hook strides into the frame, hands behind his back like an angry schoolmaster” (ibid.). The corresponding title card reads: “Everyone shudders at the approach of Captain Hook!” This context reveals that a passing thought—rendered by the omniscient narrator in free indirect discourse—such as that Hook “never felt more alone than when surrounded by his dogs. They were socially so inferior to him” (121) contains a dimension of desperate fantasy pervaded with fear, of an ardent wish that it may be true, which would otherwise go unnoticed.

ing Hook, himself in the role of an Eton schoolboy, from the abyss of the ego: “From far within him he heard a creaking as of rusty portals, and through them came a stern tap-tap-tap, like hammering in the night when one cannot sleep. ‘Have you been good form to-day?’ was their eternal question. ‘Fame, fame, that glittering bauble, it is mine,’ he cried. ‘Is it quite good form to be distinguished at anything?’ the tap-tap from his school replied. ‘I am the only man whom Barbecue feared,’ he urged; ‘and Flint himself feared Barbecue.’ ‘Barbecue, Flint—what house?’ came the cutting retort” (122).

²⁶⁴ Allison Kavey & Lester D. Friedman, *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2009) 206.

It is also telling that one of the two great differences in the earliest known version of the play (which is likely to be the original manuscript) from the later ones of either the play or the novel consists in an alternative ending that has Hook dodge the crocodile and make ends meet as an actual schoolmaster!

Hook: That's why I'm a schoolmaster—to revenge myself on boys! I hook them so, Starkey (indicating how he lifts them by the waist) and then I lay on like this! When it was found out what a useful hook I had every school in Merry England clamoured for my services.²⁶⁵

Thus Hook fully appears as the reincarnation of a character called Pilkerton from Barrie's earlier novel *The Little White Bird, or, Adventures in Kensington Gardens*, a schoolmaster who is characterized as “bearded and blackavised, and of a lean tortuous habit of body that moves ever with a swish”²⁶⁶—to the most minute detail a description of Hook's prominent features.

The big difference, however, is that *The Little White Bird* was not intended for children at all. In it the tragic aspects prevail and the close relation to “reality” is stressed: rather than in a mythical Neverland the story is set in Barrie's contemporaneous London. The core of what would become *Peter Pan*, the play and the novel, was extrapolated from the earlier book—just as one's memory tends to focus on the pleasant things that happened and blanks out the bad. Yet the tragic and all-too “realistic” dimension cannot altogether be banned. It is carried along all the more

²⁶⁵ Cited after Jack, 104. According to Denis Mackail, Barrie's first biographer, “a harlequin and columbine flitted across the stage in the first acted version—who take part in a kind of ballet with a corps of assistant [school]masters.” Denis George Mackail, *The Story of J. M. B.* (London: P. Davies, 1941) 352.

²⁶⁶ J. M. Barrie, *The Little White Bird, or, Adventures in Kensington Gardens* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902) 237. Cited after Jack, 104..

powerful for its invisibility, resembling here the dilutions of homeopathic medicine that become the stronger the more the active ingredient is thinned out. I cannot vouch for the efficiency of homeopathy; in literature, however, it seems to work. Even though Barrie immediately abandoned the scene he could not really disentangle the schoolmaster and the captain anymore; the first was already too much engrained in the latter's psyche.²⁶⁷

Suddenly, Hook's evil ways are psychologically fathomable, which makes them forgivable, even though there is no hope for redemption. Barrie has prepared his reader to repeat now with respect to Hook Wendy's initial reaction to Peter: she "felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy." Still, Hook dies a good Etonian at last, evoking the Victorian ideals of public school life. This is the legacy of an initially vile character whom Barrie has made sure his readers can relate to and learn from eventually.

²⁶⁷ It may be worthwhile pointing out that Barrie's writing is always profoundly psychological. A few examples have already been given. Seth Lerer provides another very interesting one when he points to the opening stage direction of the following monologue (in the play, obviously): "Hook: *communing with his ego*) 'How still the night is, nothing sounds alive. Now is the hour when children in their homes are abed; their lips bright-browed with the goodnight chocolate, and their tongues drowsily searching for belated crumbs housed insecurely on their shining cheeks. Compare with them the children on this boat about to walk the plank. Split my infinitives, but 'tis my hour of triumph!'" Lerer comments: "The opening stage direction, 'communing with his ego,' could not have been conjured up in English much before the opening of the twentieth century (the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers 1894 citation for 'ego' as the first use in this sense, the first specifically Freudian use in English came only in 1910)." Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 262.

Incidentally—this is a point in our context again—Hook's "split my infinitives!," a malapropism of "shiver me timbers!," shows the schoolmaster in the pirate's costume once more.

What should be clear by now is that the ideas of schooling, hygiene, proper conduct, passion for learning according to the ways practiced in contemporaneous schools, utter nationalism if need be to one's death, etc. are not only present, but central and ubiquitous in the novel that is still famous for providing an "escape" from the "adult universe of duties and hierarchies" and for the celebration of eternal youth as opposed to growing up. Instead, the idea of schooling is the very matrix of *Peter Pan*, the constant white noise that aims to entrench itself into the minds of readers and audiences alike.

Seth Lerer, the author of a "reader's history" of children's literature, also draws the connection between Hook's lesson and a war like the one that Barrie's readers would not escape for much longer:

It is as if Hook's Etonianism stands as a riposte to Tom Brown's Rugby: the great rival school and, as much as Eton, the source of the ideals of good sportsmanship and civic responsibility. "The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton": this famous quotation, attributed to the Duke of Wellington but first attested only in the 1850s, takes us back to the adventurism of the age of the boys' book.²⁶⁸

Waterloo and the First World War, or rather the nostalgic reminiscences of the first and the cloudy forebodings of latter, were of course not quite the same thing at all. That is precisely why an implicit short-circuiting of them, a mapping of Victorian strategies onto the Edwardian era was so tempting for readers and spectators, young and old. It painted the rather gloomy present situation in a rosier light and simultaneously affected (or at least, strove to affect) its witness in a way that was welcomed by the ruling white upper-middle-classes.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 263.

Why gloomy? Mainly because of the Second Boer War, which had occurred during the time of the writing of *Peter Pan* and had prompted the “searching nation debates” mentioned above. Yet the Boer War disaster was in many ways only a symptom for the decline of the Empire in the most physical way. In 1898 the so-called hooligan panic had directed public attention to a largely secluded working class youth that drank, smoked and devoted itself to other cheap urban entertainments. When they enlisted to fight in the Boer War, the first major conflict in thirty years, “they were found to be physically substandard,” as Savage summarizes in an excellent survey of the situation.²⁶⁹ “When it took a British army of 450,000 to quell a rebellion of 40,000 Dutch farmers, it became clear that the great mass of late Victorian masculinity had fallen far short of the muscular Christian ideal” (85).

Intellectually led by ideas of so-called social-imperialists, among them Disraeli and Rhodes, who aimed at instilling the spirit of imperialism in the English working class in order to kill two birds with one stone—making amends to the pressing social question of an ever growing class of the poor as well as better controlling the behemoth that the Empire had become²⁷⁰—the governmental

²⁶⁹ Savage, 84.

²⁷⁰ By 1900, Britain was a country of 40 million ruling over a population of 345 million. Five years earlier Cecil Rhodes, millionaire and one of the instigators of the Boer War, thought about English class relations and imperialism, prompted by a first-hand experience as follows: “I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for ‘bread,’ ‘bread,’ ‘bread,’ and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, *i.e.*, in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and

“Committee on Physical Deterioration” was formed in 1903. It likewise focused on the poor urban youth that customarily “slipped through the net of church, school, or voluntary organization” (86) and eventually suggested “a more concerted period of training, with prominent place given to ‘drill and physical exercises,’ so that ‘the male adolescent’ could ‘bear arms with very little supplementary discipline’” (ibid.).

One has to imagine Barrie’s book as part of a comprehensive effort to ameliorate this issue. Again, I am not insinuating deliberateness or a single great conspiracy to which Barrie would have been invited as to a club; corresponding ideologemes were, however, pervasive all over Europe at the time. *Peter Pan* just picks them up and affirms them in a way that is singularly ingenious in its seeming defiance of precisely what it affirms.

This very strategy could also be conceived as the amplification or augmentation of another, related one, identified by Nodelman as a common feature of children’s literature:

In terms of not acknowledging what children and adults actually do know about childhood, these texts work to silence child readers on the subject of any uncertainty or pain they might feel in being children or on the wisdom of allowing adults to have power over them. They have the effect of teaching children what not to say to adults about the realities of their lives as children” (Nodelman, 79).

butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.” Cited in Richard H. Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (London: Allyn & Bacon, 2001) 93-4.

By constituting the coordinates for what it means to be a child (the plots of Nodelman's children's books unfold within these coordinates) an ideology of childhood is created (by adult authors, of course) that the individual child has scarcely a chance to resist. As we have seen *Peter Pan* takes decidedly part in this and even gives the screw another turn by indulging its audience/readers in fantasy that seems to work against this very ideology with its adult coordinates, while it could not be more effectively buttressing it.

The similarly ingenious way of accruing and/or stabilizing power by *pretending* to possess it could be called the Emperor's New Clothes principle. In fact, a great deal of initial power *is* necessary in order to suppress any rival ideologies. But once this feat has been accomplished the power of ideology is suddenly *exponentiated*; if there are no rival ideologies to be seen far and wide, the ruling ideology must be inherently powerful after all, even if its initial or momentary power has waned or become hollow. The continuing illusion of inherent and unsurmountable power marks the triumph—not coincidentally does a literal triumphal procession frame Hans Christian Andersen's story—of hypocrisy; it is a case study in its efficiency and persuasiveness. So the didactic lesson for the young readers surreptitiously also addresses a subject that could never have been acknowledged openly.

How essential this strategy was to the authorities may exemplarily be glimpsed from the protocol of the German Privy Council, 30 April 1889, when the imple-

mentation of a more convenient school policy, which would (and did) greatly effect the situation around 1900, was up for debate. The professed occasion was “a more effective combat of the social-democratic tendencies.”²⁷¹

According to the protocol, laws and regulations were seen as mere “palliatives”; in order to grasp the root of the ill and to “nip it in the bud,” however, “one needs to affect the youth. Hence the main arena is the school.” The focus of the education should be patriotism and obeisance to the monarchy, for instance by means of concentrating the history lessons on the newest history until 1871. This request, which came directly from His Majesty, was seconded by the Secretary of the State and the Secretary of Education, who claimed to have implemented parts of it even prior to the request. Everybody concurred in bemoaning the considerable gap between the end of mandatory schooling and the beginning of military service: “The most dangerous time for the male youth would be that from leaving school at the age of 14 and the enlistment in the army” (*ibid.*, 272). The Secretary of War added his opinion that “a radical reform” would be apposite here.

Youth on a Leash: Robert Baden-Powell

“There suddenly appeared in my world—I saw them first, I think, in 1908—a new sort of little boy, a most agreeable development of the slouching, cunning, cigarette-smoking, town-bred youngster. I liked the Boy Scout, and I find it difficult to express how much it mattered to me, with my growing bias in favour of deliberate national training, that Liberalism hadn’t been able to produce anything of this kind.”²⁷²

²⁷¹ Michael Stürmer, *Bismarck und die preußisch-deutsche Politik: 1871–1890* (Munich: dtv, 1970) 270.

²⁷² H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (San Diego: Icon, 2008) 273.

In England, even though the problems—the almost lost Boer war and the sheer vastness of the Empire—were foremost international rather than national, similar measures were taken; it seemed that whatever the identified historic threat, tightened control, physically and ideologically, of particularly the lower-class youth was deemed the apposite answer.

The 1902 Education Act inaugurated state support for secondary education. Still, the effort failed to reach many teenagers. Jon Savage cites the youth worker Charles Russell who concluded that “no one who has come into contact with the average boy of the working classes in Manchester can fail to be struck with the almost total lack of *esprit de corps* such as exists amongst boys brought up at the great public schools.”²⁷³ In order to extend the means of control to the fledgling members of the “rougher classes” (ibid.) one of the few and far between Boer war heroes was enlisted: Robert Baden-Powell, who had held the strategically important town of Mafeking for more than two hundred days. In his history of the teenager Savage has an excellent passage on the entanglements between Baden-Powell and, curiously, J.M. Barrie (or rather, *Peter Pan*). My quick summary of the situation is indebted to him.

In April 1904, Baden-Powell attended the drill inspection of the Boys' Brigade in Glasgow. His diary records that William A. Smith, founder of the Brigade, boasted about the healthy membership, over “54,000 altogether. I suggest-

²⁷³ Savage, 85.

ed that if the work really appealed to the boys they should have ten times that number. He asked how it could be made to appeal. I suggested scouting, which had proved so popular with recruits in the army. He asked me if I would not rewrite the army scouting book to suit boys.”²⁷⁴

And so Baden-Powell did, with the Mafeking Cadet Corps as his primary source of inspiration. Because of the shortage of manpower during the siege of Mafeking, boys aged nine to eighteen had supported the troops, carried messages (often on bike, passing through heavy fire) and helped in the hospital. To further their proto-soldierly sense they were given “khaki uniforms with forage caps.”²⁷⁵ As Baden-Powell wrote in *Scouting for Boys*, the boys “didn’t seem to mind the bullets one bit; they were always ready to carry out orders, though it meant risking their lives every time.”²⁷⁶

The narrative tone of the book, published in 1908, is often reminiscent of J. M. Barrie’s. Just before the above praise of the Mafeking boys’ courage, for instance, Baden-Powell inserts a direct speech, as if conjured from memory: “You’ll get hit one of these days riding about like that when shells are flying.” “I pedal so quick, sir,” the boy replied, “they’ll never catch me.”²⁷⁷ Suddenly, the image of this anonymous, even emblematic boy becomes very vivid; his lips curl with what is

²⁷⁴ Michael Rosenthal, “Knights and Retainers: The Earliest Version of Baden-Powell’s Boy Scout Scheme,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 15:4 (1980): 603.

²⁷⁵ J. Lee Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot: A Life of Alfred, Viscount Milner of St. James’s and Cape Town, 1854–1925* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007) 162.

²⁷⁶ Robert Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 12.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

unmistakably Peter Pan's mildly conceited smile. The aim of the new organization, Baden-Powell wrote in 1906, "is to develop among boys a power of sympathizing with others, and a spirit of self-sacrifice and patriotism."²⁷⁸ If prompted to conceive of a motto for *Peter Pan*, one would have a hard time coming up with a more succinct statement.

Just five days before the premiere of *Peter Pan*, the play, Baden-Powell put his project in the public eye—publishing an article anticipating his project in, of all places, Captain Hook's old school paper, the Eton College *Chronicle*. It began with an allusion to the vulnerability of national security: "In England we are a small country surrounded by nations far stronger in arms, who may at any time attempt to crush us. The question is how can we prevent them?" Baden-Powell decided to form a series of local groups, primed by the reading of adventure stories, who would then be taught "how to shoot with miniature rifles," "how to drill and skirmish," and how to scout. These "corps" would be explicitly charged with a litany of knightly duties: "1. to fear God 2. honor the king 3. help the weak and distressed 4. reverence women and be kind to children 5. train themselves to the use of arms for defence of their country 6. sacrifice themselves, their amusements, their property, and, if necessary, their lives for the good of the their fellow countryman."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Cited in Tim Jeal, *The Boy-Man: The Life of Lord Baden-Powell* (New York: Morrow, 1990) 374.

²⁷⁹ Cited in Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 56.

Barrie seldom bothers to spell out the ethos that drives his characters' actions. Still, this list could very well have graced the living-room wall in the home beneath the ground, a constant reminder for the boys. Wendy, to be sure, is in no need of such advice to begin with. As for Peter, in spite of his moments of fickleness, whenever Wendy, her brothers or his Lost Boys are in peril, he is the paragon of Baden-Powell's desired virtues. His capriciousness must be a mere hull around his gentlemanly kernel, for he is utterly incapable of lying, even when he tries. In the middle of the book there is a scene where Peter rescues Wendy from the pirates by pretending to be Captain Hook (yelling orders from the dark, which the pirates obediently follow). Still, he won't let himself get away so easily. Hook, returning and understandably suspicious, inquires—in a set of questions formally resembling a quiz game—to know the true identity of the impostor. When Hook despairs, about to give up, Peter insists, triumphantly, on disclosing his identity anyway. It is, as it were, a matter of honor (or good form).

Thus, he provokes a confrontation with Hook, on a slippery rock. Peter manages to snatch a knife from Hooks' belt and is "about to drive it home, when he saw that he was higher up the rock than his foe. It would not have been fighting fair. He gave the pirate a hand to help him up. It was then that Hook bit him."²⁸⁰ An apt place for an intervention of Barrie's narrator, who sounds just like a puppet manipulated by Baden-Powell, the ventriloquist: "Not the pain of this but its un-

²⁸⁰ Barrie, 2005, 84.

fairness was what dazed Peter. It made him quite helpless. He could only stare, horrified. Every child is affected thus the first time he is treated unfairly” (84).

It should not come as a surprise that Baden-Powell was attracted by such chivalry at the heart of an adventurous box-office hit with young audiences. He was there at the premier and immediately became obsessed with the play: He returned the next day to see it again, eulogized it on all occasions, revisited it many times and even went so far as to start an affair with the actress who played Mrs Darling, Dorothea Beard. Later, he would name one of his three sons after Peter Pan. Baden-Powell’s biographer Piers Brendon explains this rather odd behavior for a career soldier and a national hero with an all too familiar scheme; just like J. M. Barrie Baden-Powell had throughout his life been a “singing school boy, a permanent whistling adolescent, a case of arrested development *con brio*. He was unabashedly a ‘boy-man.’”²⁸¹

There is not much evidence that the two, Baden-Powell and Barrie, knew each other personally. The major influence of the play *Peter Pan* on *Scouting for Boys*, which came out three years later, is however undeniable. Elleke Boehmer, in her preface to her edition of Baden-Powell’s book, writes: “The Boy Scout, who, even as the generations pass, remains eternally young, was in this sense Baden-Powell’s Peter Pan.”²⁸²

²⁸¹ Piers Brendon, *Eminent Edwardians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 201f.

²⁸² The whole passage Boehmer devotes on the relation between Baden-Powell and *Peter Pan* is worthwhile reading: “In the Neverland of the Play, Peter’s boys, the pirates, and the Indians relentlessly track after one another in a literal vicious circle that, though it is on one level all burlesque, an excessive late imperial pastiche of the commonplaces of children’s fiction, is also

A reviewer of Boehmer's edition of *Scouting for Boys* for the *New York Sun*, John Derbyshire, comes to the puzzling conclusion: "I doubt there is even one who did as much good in the world as the author of *Scouting for Boys*."²⁸³ Of course it depends on what one deems good or bad; but under any circumstances this statement seems like a long shot. Troy Boone, author of *Youth of Darkest England*, is more convincing here: In founding the Boy Scouts, Boone writes, Baden-Powell "certainly seeks to institutionalize a power relation in which all working-class boys (not a few here and there) would be subject to the bodily regulation that constitutes Scouting, under the observation of middle-class Scout leaders."²⁸⁴ And he goes on: "Moreover, the larger goal of Baden-Powell [...] is to 'discipline' or 'coerce' by ideological means—put simply, to render working-class young people not only useful to, but also supporters of the British Empire." As should have become clear by now, the same could be said about *Peter Pan*.

Consuming the Monster: Bergbahn & Foucault

deadly serious—as the final carnage on Captain Hook's ship vividly dramatizes. For Baden-Powell, the boy learns to rule both himself and the Empire not only by deciphering, but by participating in such irrationality and unruliness. This conjunction in *Scouting for Boys* of colonial disorder and play, so characteristic of late-Victorian children's literature, invites a further reading of the book *as* children's literature, which also sheds interesting light on the implied 'boy-man' reader that such texts invoke." Baden-Powell, 2005, xxx.

²⁸³ John Derbyshire, "Ya bo! Invooboo," (April 27, 2004). <http://bit.ly/gzeBYq>. November 10, 2010.

²⁸⁴ Boone, 15.

In his major achievement *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars* the historian Volker Berghahn points out that the industrialization and militarization of the European states in the years before World War I were tied together through a Janus-faced process: consumption. Berghahn sums up what he calls “a strange contradiction”: “In essence, a majority of citizens led civilian lives and consumed the nonmilitary goods that rising incomes afforded them. But this idea and its practice were permanently threatened by the production and stockpiling of armaments that, if used in a major war, would consume millions of soldiers and civilians.”²⁸⁵ This observation provides us with an excellent lens better to understand the world-views (as well as their implications) propagated by Barrie’s and Walser’s texts.

From this perspective, *Peter Pan* tries to make us believe that war is a commodity that can be consumed just like any other. The famous and already cited “to die will be an awfully big adventure” is the most marked example (“adventure” being the key word for the type of commodity). This “ideologeme” ties in with two others, all operating on at first glance disparate levels, but insidiously working toward the same end. One of them is the typical plot pattern of children’s literature, as suggested by Anita Moss and Jon Stott, where the central character is “displaced from the home environment”, only to return to it.²⁸⁶ In a similar vein Margery Hourihan argues that children’s literature continually retells Joseph

²⁸⁵ Volker Rolf Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars: From Militarism and Genocide to Civil Society, 1900-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) 12.

²⁸⁶ Anita Moss & Jon C. Stott, *The Family of Stories: An Anthology of Children’s Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986) 18.

Campbell's archetypal story of "the hero with the thousand faces," a story that "has been with us since the emergence of Western culture."²⁸⁷ In this story someone "leaves the civilized order of home to venture into the wilderness in pursuit of a goal" and, eventually, "returns home" (9f.), presumably enriched by either wealth or experience. Incidentally, the same scheme underlies the social-imperialist creed that the colonies were profitable for the national economies of Europe as a whole; the European hero ventures out into the wilderness, makes—so to speak—a killing and returns a rich man. Of course research has long shown that this was only true for, as Berghahn writes, "a minority of businessmen who actually reaped the benefits" (14).

Jakob von Gunten, on the other hand, lends itself to being read as a fundamental satire of the same belief. Jakob's desire *not* to make any profits in life, to be an utterly charming little zero thwarts any such idea from the outset. Moreover, one could say that the entire Institute Benjamenta is conceived as a gigantic machine churning out ideal objects, rather than subjects, of consumption—and this, mind you, not in times of war, but in the middle of what even Berghahn rather optimistically regards as an ever improving "civil society". Relevant passages from the book: "As an old man I shall have to serve young and confident and badly educated ruffians, or I shall be a beggar, or I shall perish" (5). Or: "There is only a single class, and that is always repeated: 'How Should a Boy Behave?' Basically, all our instruction is centered on this question" (5). In another crucial diary entry Jakob

²⁸⁷ Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997) 10.

relates that he is going “every day to the shop and ask if my photographs will not be ready soon. Each time I can go up to the top floor in the elevator. I find that rather nice, and it matches my many other inanities. When I travel in an elevator, I really do feel that I am a child of my times” (23f.). Of course, as the elevator makes clear, the “shop” is actually a department store (“Warenhaus” in Walser’s original). This details is far from trivial. The provincial corner shop of yesteryear has recently given way to what Berghahn calls “palaces of consumption”—set up on the premises of increasing anonymity and rationalized mass production, which is, after all, why Jakob can feel, when he frequents them, like a “child of his time”.

The photographs, at any rate, serve the sole purpose of marketing the commodity that Jakob constitutes; the Principal intends to attach them to the CV Jakob is expected to write in order to optimize the job search. The fact, as suggested above, that it is precisely the finished CV that will kick off the crucial turn of events by making the Principal warm towards Jakob must not be underestimated; the central marketing tool, representing the technical, monetary nature of people’s relationships, turns into the stumbling block that prevents these relationships from continuing. Civil society—in Jakob’s words “what people call European culture” (“Zivilisation” in the German original)—is eventually recognized as the actual cruel, violent wilderness that needs to be left behind. Actual benefits cannot be made out yet, just a utopian hope glimmering from beyond the horizon. The imagined events curiously resemble those in *Peter Pan*—traveling, “doing business with the desert dwellers,” dispersing “a throng of hostile people, though I don’t know how

it happened” (174). ““Getting away from culture, Jakob, you know, it’s wonderful,”” said the Principal from time to time, looking like an Arab” (ibid.). Later, “the indians” make Herr Benjamenta “a Prince”; “we were organizing a revolution in India;” “I was always the Squire and the Principal was always the Knight” (175). It’s Jakob’s private Neverland—just like Barrie’s a hodgepodge of boyish dreams. Yet they remain but the vaguest adumbrations. Entire decades wear away in seconds, recalling the famous scene from Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, where Frédéric disappears for years, traveling; he comes back merely a short paragraph later that aspires to embrace an eternity. This is still shocking to witness, after the preceding years have been depicted with an at times excruciating attention to detail.

Famously, few of Flaubert’s contemporary critics appreciated these cunning hiatuses (the ending, where an event is praised as “the best thing that ever happened to us” that took place before the narrative of the book even begins, being a second, even more striking one). They were enraged at the “blunders” the author had presumably made. Robert Walser revels in very similar blunders, and most likely for similar reasons as affected Flaubert. Within the ellipsis lies a criticism, all the more pervasive for its being unvoiced: there must be something fundamentally wrong with what has been narrated before. The elaborateness and circumstantiality of its deadpan, tacit rendering is tantamount to the outrage it represents.

This paradoxical strategy where the opposite of what is claimed is actually effected is exemplified in the following scene: “To be drilled is an honor for pupils,

that's as clear as day", Jakob once says. "But we don't rebel either. It would never cross our minds. We have, collectively, so few thoughts. I have perhaps the most thoughts, that's quite possible, but at root I despise my capacity for thinking. I value only experiences, and these, as a rule, are quite independent of thinking and comparing."²⁸⁸ Jakob pronounces, for everyone to be heard, the guiding principle of Peter Pan's behavior: a neglect of thoughtful hesitation and a plea for instinctive action. Does this make them close ranks? Quite the opposite! For although Jakob professes to prefer so-called worldly experience, the mere fact that he pauses to develop the thought and pronounce it already thwarts the intention. In contrast, it is impossible to imagine Peter doing the same; he is much too busy keeping pace with the breathlessly unfolding plot.

There is a second set of analytical tools ready to lay bare the disparate ideological disposition of *Peter Pan* and *Jakob von Gunten*. In the fall semester of 1974–75 Foucault gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France centering on the abnormal (attempting to produce, in his own words, "an analysis of the domain of abnormality as it functions in the nineteenth century").²⁸⁹ In the process he defines three figures "in which the problem of abnormality is gradually posed" (55). The two of them that are most valuable for my purposes are the "human monster" (ibid.) and the "individual to be corrected" (58).

²⁸⁸ Walser, 1999, 94f.

²⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. by Valerio Marchetti et al. (New York: Picador, 2003) 55.

Peter Pan exhibits all characteristics of the monster. His exceptional position among children (and eventually men) that is so famously emphasized in the opening sentence—his inability to grow up—mirrors Foucault’s conception of the monster; what defines it, he says, “is the fact that its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature” (55f.). At one point, Foucault even seems to be rewriting *Peter Pan*’s initial paradox: “Essentially, the monster is the casuistry that is necessarily introduced into law by the confusion of nature” (64); likewise, Barrie fastens the law all the more tightly by admitting its one exception. The place where the monster appears could thus be called, Foucault says, a “juridico-biological domain” (56). Still, its characteristic feature is precisely its enormous rarity: “The monster is the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases. The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden” (56). The monster contradicts the law. But instead of warranting disciplinary measures, in the face of the monster the law remains still. The reaction to the monster’s appearance might be violence, “the will for pure and simple suppression,” or “medical care and pity” (ibid.). Yet law itself, the monster’s actual opponent, that which it attacks, is unable to respond to it: “the monster is a breach of law that automatically stands outside the law” (ibid.).

Why this would fit Barrie’s needs so perfectly becomes clear if one has a look at Foucault’s second figure of abnormality, the individual to be corrected—as whose archetypal manifestation Jakob von Gunten emerges. Whereas the mon-

ster is “a cosmological or antic cosmological being,” the individual to be corrected is a political one. It fully participates in society, and if it does not submit to the latter’s authority, it must be corrected—precisely because it can: “The individual to be corrected emerges in the play of relations of conflict and support that exist between the family and the school, workshop, street, quarter, parish, church, police, and so on” (57). In many ways it seems to be more harmless than the monster; after all it can be grasped within the habitual system of normative concepts. At the same time, this is exactly what makes it harder to prosecute: Since its nature is not essentially averse to the law, it may not always technically breach it, but just provoke or “stretch” it. Foucault theorizes this problem (or rather, the answer to it) by introducing what he calls “modern expert opinion”: “Its essential role is to legitimize, in the form of scientific knowledge, the extension of punitive power to something that is not a breach of the law” (18). “Delinquents” are invented that are no “authors of crime,” but objects “of a specific technology and knowledge of rectification, readaptation, reinsertion, and correction” (21). Specifically, Foucault has psychiatric institutions in mind, but to a rather useful degree his description applies to their weaker forms, to their second-order vestiges, so to speak: schools and situations resembling them.

Danger is the key word here. “The most dangerous time for the male youth would be that from leaving school at the age of 14 and the enlistment in the army,” we already heard it say in a strategic meeting of the German Privy Council that constituted one step toward the introduction of a system of mandatory secondary

education.²⁹⁰ Foucault talks about the two poles of an institutional network, “one expiatory and the other therapeutic”:

To be sure, they are not a response to illness, for if it were only a question of illness we would have specifically therapeutic institutions. But nor are they a response to crime exactly, since for this punitive institutions would suffice. This continuum with its therapeutic and judicial poles, this institutional mixture, is actually a response to danger (34).

Early on, Jakob admits to the reader that he likes to lie on his bed, with his shoes on, and smoke cigarettes, “which is against the rules. “Schacht [a friend] likes to offend against the rules and I, to be candid, unfortunately no less” (10). Shortly thereafter, he needs to see the Principal for the first time in his office.

I bowed and said, in a feeble tone of voice: “Good-day, Principal.” In those days, I hated this servile and polite way of behaving, it was just that I knew no better. What seemed to me laughable and dimwitted then, now seems apt and beautiful. “Speak louder, you rascal,” exclaimed Herr Benjamenta. I had to repeat the greeting “Good-day, Principal” five times. Only then did he ask what I wanted (16).

A perfect example of Walser’s befuddlingly and characteristically volatile style, this first lesson in humiliation is immediately, without any circumlocution, followed by an attempt at insurrection. The long and short of it is that Jakob, furious that “one learns absolutely nothing here,” asks for his leave as well as his money back. His plan: “I’ll take to the streets and sell myself as a slave” (ibid.). Here is his own interesting comment, from the unknown space and time where Jakob tells the story—a future beyond the confines of the book: “Today I almost double up with laughing when I recall this silly behavior” (ibid.). Precisely *why* this behavior should have been so silly, Jakob does not say. Not now, not ever. As far as I am con-

²⁹⁰ Stürmer, 272.

cerned, this is a prime manifestation of the satirical silence that lies behind (and is hinted at by) the deadpan affirmation furtively defying its face value. The Principal advises Jakob that he can, if nothing else, know his surroundings: “I advise you, keep calm. Nice and calm.” This, he already utters “as if in deep thought, without a care in the world for me.” Jakob feels “as if a terrible, incomprehensible storm was creeping up on me.” All he can do, in the face of this reaction, is to say, “as the rules required, ‘Adieu, Principal,’ clicked [his] heels, stood at attention.” Crestfallen, he leaves: “Thus ended my attempt at revolution. Since then, there have been no willful scenes. My God, and I have been defeated” (all *ibid.*).

Once more, the paradox is key: Jakob stands “defeated”. His entire diary amounts to a chronicle of increasing correction. And yet, the ending sees the evaporation of it all, of even all attempts at correction: “We shook hands, and that meant a great deal,” thus, with hindsight and covertly, confounding any previous disciplinary action. Interestingly, the monstrous Peter Pan likewise faces attempts at correction. This does not, by the way, contradict Foucault’s decree that the monster cannot be corrected; Peter Pan can naturally be grasped within the normative system of the fantastic (or monstrous) realm of Neverland, inhabited by similarly fantastic (or monstrous) creatures—it is just *our* world that fails to submit him to its order. Once in Neverland, Wendy tries, a couple of times, to domesticate him. In fact, her mere presence works toward this end: After she has been wounded by an arrow, Peter decides to build a house for her (or rather, have his boys build it). Wendy, still in a swoon, sings the construction plan: “I wish I had a pretty house,/

The littlest ever seen,/With funny little red walls/And roof of mossy green.”²⁹¹ As Carol Mavor notes, Wendy’s little house “was not just a replica of the red-walled houses of Kirriemuir,” where Barrie grew up, but “most specifically of the little wash house behind Barrie’s own tiny home at 9 Brechin Road, where he first performed plays with his childhood friend.”²⁹²

Two things should be noted here: First, Peter Pan will escape this (as any) attempt at domestication/correction. Just after the house is done, he returns, accompanied by his boy soldiers, to “their cave.” Second, while this allows Barrie to keep up the rebellious, edgy semblance, he manages to marinate it, as it were, in sweet nostalgia—implicitly for his own childhood²⁹³ and more explicitly for the good, old values of merry England that any child should internalize as early as possible: Once the house is done, the boys put Wendy inside, before stepping out again themselves: “‘All look your best,’ Peter warned them; ‘first impressions are awfully important.’ [...] He knocked politely. [...] The door opened and a lady came out. It was Wendy. They all whipped off their hats” (66). Similarly, in the question and answer scene with Hook—which I said resembles a quiz game; just as much, of course, it resembles a teacherly test—, in that scene Peter wins precisely by fully submitting to what is “expected” of him—before he manages to turn it around in

²⁹¹ Barrie, 2005, 65.

²⁹² Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 225.

²⁹³ “Barrie’s dreams of miniature worlds, of nests and houses and boys that are eternally small are not only a place of refuge, but they are the immediate outcome of ‘his suffering.’” *Ibid.*, 225.

his favor. The fact that Peter, even though he succumbs to the traditional code of behavior, always comes out on top, is likely firmly to instill the ethical basis of his actions in their young witnesses' minds. Barrie's strategy stands, in short, in the most direct contrast to Walser's, which builds on the opposite effects: Jakob regularly attempts *actual* (read: *actually* dangerous) insurrections, prone to overthrow the traditional order of things—and just as regularly fails. Clearly, he is no hero-monster, but a miserable individual to be corrected that, in fact, *is* corrected unremittingly. At the end, however, Peter Pan loses by going the way of all monsters, hero or otherwise: Barred from the bourgeois pleasures of home sweet home, replete with real mothers, real jobs and real babies (as opposed to the Neverland-proxies), he must forever, and forever forgetful, stay on the outside—a most unfortunate fate illustrated by means of the window bars through which he can merely peek in, confined, as it were, in the world-spanning loneliness of a paralyzed past in which only he can move about. Peter Pan becomes subject, in his readers' minds, to the Foucauldian pity that chooses, rather than to violently rally against it, to grieve for the monster. His only relief (if it is not his ultimate tragedy) is the perennial circularity of his existence: nothing ever stops. Once a new generation of children has been born, he will again abduct them to Neverland, for the same short, intermittently adventurous stage in the preordained process of their mandatory maturation.

This conceptual field is so forceful that it shapes even the geography of Neverland, which is not for nothing an island with its occupants running circles: The

Lost Boys, the indians, the pirates and the crocodile all tail after each other, and have done so for ages, in a perfect merry-go-round without ever getting the idea simply to turn around.

Jakob von Gunten, on the other hand, eventually glimpses a way out, embarks on a journey that promises to be anything but circular: after all, his one achievement has been to escape the authoritarian claim that things must remain as used to be. This different stance, embracing linearity as opposed to circularity, corresponds to Jakob and Peter's Foucauldian forms and in turn to their respective political implications: the fantastical creature that is the monster must forever be enshrined in the recurrence of the eternally same. Since it does not know change, it is a fundamentally "unpolitical" being—which, according to Brecht, mainly means that it "allies itself with the 'ruling' group."²⁹⁴ The individual to be corrected, in contrast, embodies if not the reality then at least the hope (and aspiration) for revolution.

Lastly, the imbalance between circular and linear setup does not fail to affect the reader/spectator: in *Peter Pan*, as in most children's fiction,²⁹⁵ the voyage on

²⁹⁴ Bert Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," cited in Terry Eagleton & Drew Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 126.

²⁹⁵ "The happy endings of texts of children's literature most characteristically involve two interrelated and apparently contrary events. First, there's their protagonists' stated or implied realization that the childish desires for freedom, adventure, and so on that have driven the plot of their stories thus far were misguided and immature—a moment defined as an end to childishness and an entry into maturity. Second, and as a consequence of this, there is the reward of a safe home in which to be safely childlike—the happy acceptance of which is a sign of true maturity." Nodelman, 226.

which he embarks takes him from safe innocence to “exotic adventure” (which however is, as has been emphasized, surreptitiously subdued by a continuation or even amplification of the customary order and hierarchy in disguise) and back to safe innocence. The reader may close the book and his eyes in relief; the work is done and all is good. *Jakob von Gunten* works the opposite way: it keeps insinuating the undesirability of adventure in its process only to take off at, or rather after, the end into an unknown future, any fixed societal order and habitual hierarchy having crumbled before. Yet a utopian promise is in the air. The reader of this book is left behind baffled and uncomfortable. The actual story, he realizes, has not even begun. He has merely been through the busywork of tearing down, or more likely of merely detecting—as scales fall from his eyes—the ideologico-literary pattern that had hitherto held him in its grip.

One of the most intriguing suggestions—implicit like most—with which *Jakob von Gunten* leaves the reader may consist in the narrative form that it gives to a notion that Jacqueline Rose articulates as follows: “The idea that childhood is something separate which can be scrutinised and assessed is the other side of the illusion which makes of childhood something which we have simply ceased to be.”²⁹⁶ While *Peter Pan* is determined to cast cement into this idea, *Jakob von Gunten*, which sees the tide rising, refuses to go under with it.

Even the nature of this tide is hinted at, if one is willing to look for it, like J. M. Coetzee. He thinks that a great part of Jakob’s qualities, his “cynicism about

²⁹⁶ Rose, 13.

civilisation and about values in general, his contempt for the life of the mind, [...] his elevation of obedience to the highest of virtues,” while taking delight in malicious pranks, Jakob’s taking pride in noble descent and his fondness for the “all-male ambiance” of the Institute Benjamenta, that all these taken together “point toward the type of petit-bourgeois male who, in a time of greater social confusion, would find Hitler’s Brownshirts attractive.”²⁹⁷

Of course I am not proposing, in the last minute, a radical rereading of Jakob. I find it however fascinating that this strand is present in him, too. He is, in comparison with Peter, the disproportionately more disquieting imp. Peter, the endearingly pitiable monster, is ultimately harmless, an ancient rite that does everything to stabilize the ways of the ruling faction than to inhibit or even threaten them. Jakob’s importunity is not to be shaken off so easily and all the more so for its vacillation among the meanings.

²⁹⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Literary Essays, 2000–2005* (New York: Viking, 2007) 20.

“How Could Fools Get Tired”:

Kafka and Kipling’s Far-flung Boys

“There would appear to be, then, at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think.”²⁹⁸

“The youth who daily farther from the East
Must travel.” Wordsworth

There are few accounts of the relationship between J.M. Barrie and Rudyard Kipling, who was five years Barrie’s junior (they were born in 1865 and in 1860, respectively). Naturally, the celebrated authors—associated primarily with books for children—knew each other. At least on one occasion, a banquet, they dined together.²⁹⁹ Charles Allen’s excellent biography about Kipling’s early years, *Kipling Sabib*, records another encounter, which occurred in writing.

Kipling had just, in 1890, published *The Light That Failed*, a sentimental novel. It is hardly soothing that, according to Allen, Barrie apparently wrote “one of the kinder reviews.” It sounds rather merciless: “[Kipling’s] chief defect is ignorance of life,” Barrie said. “This seems a startling charge to bring against one whose so-called knowledge of life has frightened the timid. But it is true.” Kipling had indulged himself with imagined feelings that had no basis in reality. “We see

²⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002) xxi.

²⁹⁹ An article in a 1925 issue, No. 326, of the magazine *The Living Age* is called “Banqueting with Barrie and Kipling.” See <http://bitl.in/wnddy>. Retrieved in March 2011.

at once that his pathos is potatoes,” Barrie concludes. “It is not legitimate.”³⁰⁰ No wonder the accounts of their encounters are so sparse.

At any rate, the charge is startling indeed. Especially because of the one who charges. In the last chapter Barrie’s own characters have, after all, been shown foremost to dwell in the realm of ideology, rather than “reality.” Yet Barrie may have a point. And not only as far as the actually rather flat melodrama in question is concerned. Even the later *Kim* (1901), which even Edward Said would not have labeled—while entertaining many reservations—anything but “a work of great artistic merit”³⁰¹, seems to escape reality to an astonishing degree. Yet before we get to the core of this matter, laid bare by Said in his 1987 introduction to the Penguin edition of *Kim*,³⁰² I would like to say a few words about the contents of this chapter.

While the last one depicted what one could call deliberate orphans—Jakob, who ran away from home to become an utterly charming zero, and, if not Peter, then at least Wendy and her brothers, who out of their own free will took off to an adventure in order to return home safely—this one gives the screw an additional turn; now the protagonists are orphans not by choice, but by accident or repudiation. In one case, tone and mood are actually bleaker. In the other, they are not, which is somewhat surprising.

³⁰⁰ Cited in Charles Allen, *Kipling Sabib: India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Little Brown and Company, 2007) 312.

³⁰¹ Edward Said, “Introduction,” in Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Penguin, 1987) 30.

³⁰² In 1993, Said would turn this introduction into a chapter of his landmark *Culture and Imperialism*.

At the end of *Jakob von Gunten* the eponymous protagonist and his newly found friend Mr Benjamenta are about to set off into a promising future; “it looked as if we had both escaped forever, or at least for a very long time, from what people call European culture” (174). In the two novels that stand at the center of this chapter, Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) and Franz Kafka’s *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared* (1911–1914; published in 1927) this escape has been realized. Hence the question is: Has this youthful utopia, removed from the spheres of adult bullying and ideological abuse as instruments of imperial power, been found?

If *Jakob von Gunten* proposes such a place beyond its last pages, Kim O’Hara and Karl Rossmann—the teenage protagonists of the respective novels—have apparently arrived there: Kim in the far East, Karl in the far West. The opposite geographies are merely an indicator of the numerous opposites in their wake. Just like with Walser and Barrie there are however more than enough commonalities to warrant juxtaposition: Both texts are—in spite of their presumably attained utopia—essentially road novels; their plots rely on restless scene changes in a rather picaresque mode. Even the means of travel, by foot and by train (or, in Kim’s case, *te-rain*), are the same, which in turn provides excellent means of comparison. Both Kim and Karl—originating from Europe (even though Kim was born in India to an Indian mother and an Irish father)—do not really belong to their surroundings, a displacement which Kim turns to good account. Karl not so much. By nature, they are both observers rather than participants in society; scenes of eavesdropping, of deliberate and undeliberate witnessing pervade both novels.

And, lastly and most importantly, their youth, which they maintain beyond the last pages,³⁰³ plays a decisive role, serves as a functional device in the ideologico-discursive struggle about the imaginary of youth that every discussed text engages in.

Kafka's prose is characterized by what one might call spaceless sparsity—bereft of dialects, it seems to be uttered from everywhere and nowhere at once.³⁰⁴ Kipling's prose, on the other hand, dazzles in its vernacular exuberance. The diverse religious orders, castes, different languages, sociolects and dialects, puns, etc. make it, as Judith A. Plotz notes, a hard book to read.³⁰⁵ Right from the start it plunges the (Western) reader into bewildering sentences: The proud owner of “a complete suit of Hindu kit, the costume of a low-caste street boy,” Kim stores it “in a secret place under some baulks in Nila Ram's timber-yard, beyond the Punjab High Court, where the fragrant deodar logs lie seasoning after they have driven down the

³⁰³ *Kim* opens when the protagonist is thirteen and ends when he is seventeen. Karl is sixteen throughout.

³⁰⁴ Hannah Arendt puts the same realization thus: “His [Kafka's] language is clear and simple, like everyday speech cleansed of all negligence and jargon. Kafka's German is to the infinite plurality of possible linguistic styles what water is to the infinite plurality of possible beverages.” Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 2007) 94.

³⁰⁵ Plotz adds: “My own experience in teaching *Kim* to intelligent undergraduates [...] suggests that the book is very hard reading for all but experienced readers of Kipling and/or inhabitants and residents of India. Students [...] found *Kim* difficult in the multiplicity of its language codes, the difficulty of its idioms, the subtlety of its plotting, and the range of its political, historical, and social references.” Judith A. Plotz, “The Empire of Youth: Crossing and Double-Crossing Cultural Barriers in Kipling's *Kim*,” *Children's Literature* 20 (1992): 129.

Ravi.”³⁰⁶ Turning the page, one is confronted with “figures that had encrusted the brick walls of the Buddhist *stupas* and *viharas*.”

Kipling’s italicization emphasizes the curious nature of the description, reassuring the reader that his sense of semantic loss is nothing to be ashamed of. Yet what is it ultimately good for? Clearly, Roland Barthes’s *effet de réel* has taken an exotic turn: The void of significance for the plot that Barthes famously alleged for the barometer on the wall over the piano in Madame Aubain’s drawing room in Flaubert’s “Un cœur simple” extends, in Kipling, to an even vaster void of meaning. Here, the banal excess, the “luxe” of narration, sports an even more excessive and luxurious gown because, interestingly, rather than thwarting it, the exponentiation of incomprehensibility in fact increases the reality effect—the “significance of this insignificance”, as Barthes calls it with respect to the barometer, is, more than ever, the insinuation that “we are the real.”³⁰⁷

It seems natural that Barthes discovered this device in Flaubert, indeed a seeker of human “truth,” but strictly within the stylized realm of literature, brimming with gorgeous mannerisms, much admired by his successors, notably Proust, an accomplice dealer in the vicissitudes of life and literature: Before you may want to enhance the verisimilitude of your prose, you are rather likely to have felt a sense of doubt in it.

³⁰⁶ Kipling, 1987, 51.

³⁰⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, vol. 267 (Hill and Wang: New York, 1986) 143, 148.

The same applies to Kipling, who takes pains to improve on the reality effect, in an intensified way. Even more than holds for Flaubert, Kipling's effort to make believe may serve to conceal an underlying dearth of reality.

To understand the depth of surprise triggered by this suspicion it may be useful to look, beside Barthes, to Bakhtin. While, as we have said, both *Amerika* and *Kim* incorporate set pieces of the picaresque tradition of traveling rascals, *Kim* moves beyond it toward what Bakhtin calls "the great novels of the Second Line," for which the picaresque novel paved the way:

The novel begins to make use of these languages, manners, genres; it forces all exhausted and used-up, all socially and ideologically alien and distant worlds to speak about themselves in their own language and in their own style—but the author builds a superstructure over these languages made up of his own intentions and accents, which then becomes dialogically linked with them."³⁰⁸

Yet this seemingly exemplary case of polyphonous "heteroglossia" conceals a lacuna—or maybe an especially perfidious authorial superstructure—that Said points out in his criticism of *Kim*, which will reverberate through this chapter as a sort of *basso continuo*. The accusation is that *Kim* partakes in the "invention of tradition": namely, of an orientalized India. For explanation, Said draws on Christopher Hutchins's *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India*. Hutchins writes that by the late nineteenth century, an

³⁰⁸ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004) 409.

India of the imagination was created which contained no elements of either social change or political menace. Orientalization was the result of this effort to conceive of Indian society as devoid of elements hostile to the perpetuation of British rule, for it was on the basis of this presumptive India that Orientalizers sought to build a permanent rule.³⁰⁹

“If one were to read *Kim* as a boy’s adventure story,” Said says, “or as a rich and lovingly detailed panorama of Indian life, one would not be reading the novel that Kipling in fact wrote, so carefully inscribed is the novel with such considered views, suppressions and elisions as these.”³¹⁰ An observation whose importance cannot be stressed enough; there is in fact not a single incident in the novel that would suggest a native opposition to the colonial rule, while many suggest the contrary.³¹¹

It is crucial to single out this powerfully deceiving heart of the novel. In it we recognize the close relation to Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, which as I have shown works towards very similar ends. Not surprisingly—with the potentially anti-imperialist tendencies not only ruled out, but inverted to the contrary—Robert Baden-Powell was quick to seize upon the novel as he would seize upon *Peter Pan*.

One of Lurgan’s tests to gauge Kim’s fitness for the Great Game (British intelligence in India) immediately made it into Baden-Powell’s scouting handbook:

³⁰⁹ Francis Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967) 157. Cited in Kipling, 1987, 28.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹¹ Among the examples noted by Said there is the old indigenous soldier, whom Kim and the lama meet on the road. He, who helped to quench the Great Mutiny of 1857, continues proudly to wear his uniform and is, apparently reverently, greeted by passers-by. His account of the revolutionary events—“a madness ate into all the Army [...]. Then came the Sahibs from over the sea and called them to most strict account” —represents, according to Said, “the extreme British view on the Mutiny.” Moreover, “Kipling puts it in the mouth of an Indian whose much more likely nationalist counterpart is never seen in the novel at all” (26).

“Kim’s Game,” in the tradition of scouting often mistakenly rendered—in what must amount to more than a mere Freudian slip—as the “King’s Game.” In the novel it is called the “Play of the Jewels” or “Jewel Game.” An assortment of gems are put on a plate. Before they are covered the players must try to remember as many as possible. Kim is proud to recall all but one. When the Hindu boy, who serves Lurgan, beats him to it—he remembers every single one and is able to describe them in much greater detail—Kim is infuriated. Lurgan explains that practice makes the master. Henceforth, Kim and the Hindu boy practice it every morning, “sometimes with swords and daggers, sometimes with photographs of natives.”³¹² Swords and daggers are handy anyway when push comes to shove, but to recall (enemy) faces is no paltry talent when on imperialist mission.

In the afternoons, the two boys hide behind curtains in Lurgan’s shop and switch jewels, daggers and native photographs for customers, whom, when the shop closes, they enumerate, adorning the chronicle with character analyses, “as shown in his [the respective customer’s] face, talk and manner,” and a guess of “his real errand” (207). In the evenings they play a game of disguise, or rather an imperialist charade. Lurgan makes up their faces, “with a brush dab here and a line there changing them past recognition,” they put on costumes and enact individuals from various backgrounds. Lurgan, lounging on a “worn teak-wood couch,” theorizes about the demeanors differing from caste to caste. All the while, the “Hindu child played this game clumsily. That little mind, keen as an icicle where tally of

³¹² Ibid., 206.

jewels was concerned, could not temper itself to enter another soul; but a demon in Kim woke up and sang with joy as he put on the changing dresses, and changed speech and gesture therewith” (ibid.).

As Kim alarmingly verbatim emerges as Peter Pan’s impish, devilish soul-mate—think of the scene where Peter impersonates Hook, even convincing the man himself, or later the crocodile, each time to the most brutal effect—it seems likely that Baden-Powell joined him in his song of joy. How else could one account for passages such as the following, from *Scouting for Boys*:

When you are travelling by train or tram always notice every little thing about your fellow travellers; notice their faces, dress, way of talking, and so on, so that you could describe them each pretty accurately afterwards; and also try and make out from their appearance and behaviour whether they are rich or poor (which you can generally tell from their boots), and what is their probable business, whether they are happy, or ill, or in want of help.³¹³

The examples of *Kim*’s influence on Baden-Powell’s “character factory” (Michael Rosenthal) are too numerous to point them all out. Just one more: In the successor to *Scouting with Boys*, a pamphlet called *Rovering to Success* (1922), Baden-Powell advises his young readers: “It is said that nearly half the ill-health of the nation may be traced to bad teeth.”³¹⁴ When Kim awakes in the Indian dawn he chews “on a twig that he would presently use as a toothbrush.”³¹⁵ Kafka’s Karl, on the other hand, has many talents, too. Exhibiting exemplary bodily hygiene is not among

³¹³ Baden-Powell, 2005, 67.

³¹⁴ Robert Baden-Powell, *Rovering to Success: A Book of Life-Sport for Young Men* (London: H. Jenkins, 1922). Cited in Lerer, 170. The full text of *Rovering to Success* can be found online: <http://goo.gl/yVGnzt>. Retrieved March 2014.

³¹⁵ Kipling, 1987, 121.

them. This may be one of the reasons why he never made into any guide book for aspiring imperialists.

I said that tone and mood of *Amerika*³¹⁶ were bleak. In a strange inversion of clichés one might even say that of the two novels it seems to be the brooding, ill-fated, delirious, malaria-stricken one, whereas *Kim*, set in the far East, epitomizes the American dream of endless opportunity for the savvy, optimistic individual.

Speaking of personal hygiene, *Amerika* begins with a lost suitcase, containing Karl's only proper set of clothes: "Now, at the beginning of his career, when he most needed to be in clean clothes, he would have to appear in a dirty shirt. Those were fine prospects."³¹⁷ The fatalism that permeates the atmosphere of every scene has not left even the narrator untouched. If the mode of *Kim* is jubilation, the mode of *Amerika* is despair. Consequently, Karl's arrival in the New York harbor—his parents sent him off because a servant girl had got herself pregnant (against Karl's will, Kafka insinuates)—is already marked by a retreat: into the ship with which he came. Karl, looking for a lost umbrella (of course, he is expecting rain), gets lost in its underbelly. He emerges with an erratic new friend, the stoker, who

³¹⁶ For the sake of brevity I will cling to this title, which Kafka's literary executor Max Brod originally chose for publication. Some scholars prefer *The Man Who Disappeared* because posthumous notes by Kafka seem to suggest it.

³¹⁷ Franz Kafka & Michael Hofmann, *Amerika* (London: Penguin, 2007) 7. The suitcase, by the way, will eventually turn up again. Not a single item is missing, which is especially true for the symbolism that it carries: "What kind of strange suitcase is that?" Mr Green asks at one point. Karl replies: "It's a suitcase that soldiers in my home country enlist with, it's my father's old army suitcase. It's very practical." Ibid., 63.

is eager to get himself and Karl into specifically Kafkaesque trouble. The showdown takes place in the captain's quarters: "So there was the enemy [a certain Schubal, the stoker's superior], sprightly and snug in his Sunday suit, with an account book under his arm, probably the wages and work record of the stoker, looking round into the eyes of all those present, one after the other, quite shamelessly gauging the mood of each one of them."³¹⁸

Imagine an enemy in *Kim*, "snug in his Sunday suit, with an account book under his arm!" Impossible. For a novel that is essentially about operations meant to secure the power of the British Empire in India, the word "enemy" is dropped surprisingly seldom. But when it is, for example as a mean-spirited Russian spy attempts to wrench from the lama's hands a drawing of the Wheel of Life, neither Sunday suit nor account book are anywhere to be seen. The Russian smacks the lama in the face, prompting Kim to lunge at him: "Next instant he was rolling over and over downhill with Kim at his throat. The blow had waked every unknown Irish devil in the boy's blood, and the sudden fall of his enemy did the rest."³¹⁹ Apparently, every genre breeds its enemies, be they Rider-Haggardly spitfires or unsavory bureaucrats.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

³¹⁹ Kipling, 1987, 291. Another mention of an "enemy" in *Kafka* confirms this impression. As a guest in Mr Green's mansion, Karl is asked to say good-bye to Miss Klara, Green's daughter. A few minutes before, the two of them took part in an unmotivated and altogether harmless wrestling match, which amounted to nothing. Clearly, Karl sees things more sternly: "But his [Karl's] greatest doubt was whether he could go to Miss Klara at all, seeing as she was his enemy." Kafka & Hofmann, 57.

The setting of Kafka's first novel—it preceded "The Trial" and *The Castle*, but was abandoned before completion—is significantly more "realistic" than most of his later writing (less marked by the ghostly atmosphere of the fantastic that is somewhat reluctant completely to let go of the claim to reality). It has been called his most "earthly" work, as opposed to the heavenly or the hellish.³²⁰ The uncanny—showing in an almost Nabokovian way that we, along with the characters, are situated in a parallel universe that bears merely superficial resemblance to ours—pervades it nonetheless.³²¹ Mark Anderson notes that the text, which at the beginning is supposedly about New York, is stubborn not to yield any famous street, building or tourist sign prone to serve as a spatial point of reference.³²² The stark contrast to Kipling can be glimpsed in the first paragraph:

"As the seventeen-year-old Karl Rossmann, who had been sent to America by his unfortunate parents because a maid had seduced him and had a child by him, sailed slowly into New York harbour, he suddenly saw the Statue of Liberty, which had al-

³²⁰ Willy Haas, German man of letters, writes the following, which Walter Benjamin, in an essay on Kafka, cites approvingly: "The powers above, the realm of grace Kafka has depicted in his great novel *The Castle*; the powers below, the realm of the courts and of damnation, he has dealt with in his equally great novel 'The Trial'. The earth between the two, earthly fate and its arduous demands, he attempted to present in strictly stylized form in a third novel, *Amerika*." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) 127.

³²¹ An early translator of Kafka's novel, Edwin Muir, writes: "Amerika [...] shifts uneasily between the metaphysical and the actual, and [...] while its scene is a fantastic version of the United States, it occasionally crosses to a province which is not of the actual world at all." Edwin Muir, "A Note on Franz Kafka," *The Bookman* 72:3 (1930): 237.

³²² Anderson writes: "The Hotel Occidental, Butterford and Rameses, Clayton and the Theater of 'Oklahama' (as Kafka spelled it in the manuscript)—the few places marked with a proper name are so improbable, contradictory, or imaginary that they seem to constitute a mythical rather than a referentially verisimilar landscape." Mark M. Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siecle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 107.

ready been in view for some time, as though in an intenser sunlight. The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the unchained winds blew about her form.”³²³

Strikingly, the signature torch of the Statue of Liberty, emanating a beacon of hope to the poor and wretched of the earth, has been replaced by a sword. Idealism gives way to martial *realpolitik*, except there is nothing real about it. At least not in the materialist sense of reality. In Karl’s clouded private world, however—for “a sudden burst of sunshine” implicates an otherwise cloudy sky—that will lead him from defeat to defeat or, more precisely, from unjust sentence to unjust sentence, the image seems rather apt. Incidentally, *Kim* begins with a very similar coupling of youth and war, yet—contrary to Kafka—furnished with a sense of recalcitrance and supremacy: “He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform opposite the old Ajaib-Gher—the Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum.”³²⁴

Two modes of realism—Kafka aims at it indirectly, through the lens of the fantastic; Kipling, in order to conceal a gap, employs a strategy that bears similarities to what Adorno, commenting on Balzac, once called “realism from loss of reality”: “Epic literature no longer controlling the concrete, which it attempts to save, must exaggerate through its habitus to describe the world with enhanced accuracy—precisely because it [the world] has become strange and cannot be held

³²³ Kafka & Hofmann, 3. Interestingly, in the German original Karl is sixteen, rather than seventeen. His additional anniversary in the English edition is probably due to some further inconsistencies in the book. At another point, Kafka indeed makes Karl seventeen.

³²⁴ Kipling, 1987, 49.

close anymore.”³²⁵ If one accepts Said’s observation of a fabricated Orientalism in *Kim*, Kipling’s writing constitutes a case of a particularly cunning realism from loss of reality—or rather a realism from *repression* of reality. Kafka, on the other hand, may be said to voice precisely what has been repressed—in the case of the first sentence of the novel the cruelty hiding behind hope, the sword that takes the place of the torch of freedom and Enlightenment.

In a way we are dealing here with a slightly slanted thought experiment recently concocted by Slavoj Žižek, suggesting that we imagine a remake of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* by Hemingway and Kafka, respectively. Hemingway—if only superficially—resembles Kipling in that the characteristic device of his writing is the ellipsis; he loves merely to hint at a backstory that must be lurking somewhere in order to explain what is happening. Thus, Žižek points out, Hemingway would leave out all the details about Norman’s condition, his dead mother, etc.: “The spectator would simply perceive that there is another (Norman’s) story which needs to be told, but remains absent—there is a hole.”³²⁶ In Kafka’s version, alternatively, Norman’s story would be the very framework of the narrative: “Norman’s weird universe would be narrated directly, in the first person, as something completely normal, while Marion’s story would be encoded/framed by Norman’s horizon, told

³²⁵ “Realismus aus Realitätsverlust. Epik, die des Gegenständlichen, das sie zu bergen trachtet, nicht mehr mächtig ist, muß es durch ihren Habitus übertreiben, die Welt mit exaggerierter Genauigkeit beschreiben, eben weil sie fremd geworden ist, nicht mehr in Leibnähe sich halten läßt.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Balzac-Lektüre,” in *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1961) 30.

³²⁶ Slavoj Žižek & John Milbank et al., *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) 62.

as enigmatic and hidden” (ibid., 62f.). Karl’s two months in New York, for example, have acquainted him with no more impressions of the city than the one street he could glimpse from his balcony (which the uncle admonished him not to enter). Yet when he is off uncle Jakob’s hook Karl still fails to take in the world. On route to Rameses with Delamarche and Robinson his companions

evidently saw much more, they pointed this way and that, and with their hands they arced towards squares and gardens, which they referred to by name. It was incomprehensible to them that Karl had been in New York for over two months, and had seen nothing of the city but one single street. And they promised him that once they had made enough money in Butterford, they would take him to New York and show him the sights, and in particular certain places of paradisaal entertainment (74).

This instance shows how apt Žižek’s description of Kafka as director of *Psycho* in fact is: Since the scenes where Karl’s observation clashes with that of another character are relatively few and far between, we tend to forget how likely skewed the perspective of the narrative is. To be sure, this differs from a sheer fantastical warping of the world in a Nabokovian or Borgesian way. Just a few sentences above the cited passage, we encounter a bridge leading from New York to Boston across Hudson River. Yet this is not the point. Robinson and Delamarch remind us that there may be more to be seen here and aptly named than Karl may be aware of.

At the other end of Žižek’s scheme, there is a decisive difference: Hemingway makes sure no one misses the gap; Kipling, however, most likely convinced even himself that there was none to begin with. We will see some evidence of this later on. Thus it is really a repressed, rather than a lost, reality that constitutes Kipling’s realism. At the same time this thought experiment exemplifies the complementary

positions of Kafka and Kipling who are essentially talking about the same thing—stranded boys in far-away lands. The two authors inhabit their antipodal positions, as I will show, in a variety of dimensions. Thus, they map out the extreme coordinates in the ideological imaginary or, with Foucault, in the dispositif of youth as Europe is gearing up for war.³²⁷

The concept of pole and antipode may seem like a metaphor; nonetheless it is also and particularly true for space, literally and symbolically. First, Kipling's India is the true country of infinite possibilities, an ever expanding horizon of adventure and experience. If time never seems a pressing issue for Kim, it must be because there is enough space to accommodate all events—in any frequency or succession. Georg Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel*, has observed that in a lot of 19th-century European fiction, time is elevated almost to the status of a character; with time, illusions are not so much lost as recognized. Still in Proust, everything changes over time, characters' relationships as well as the characters themselves. Accordingly, Said contrasts the “tight, relentlessly unforgiving *temporal* structure” with *Kim*'s “rather loose structure based as it is on a luxurious geographical and spatial expansiveness”:³²⁸

³²⁷ In a 1977 interview, “The Confession of the Flesh”, Foucault defines the term dispositif (which gets translated as “apparatus”): “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.” Foucault, 1980, 194.

³²⁸ Kipling, 1987, 42f.

In *Kim*, you have the impression that time is on your side, because, I think, its geography—to an English reader as India might be to a modern Western tourist—is yours to move about in more or less freely. Certainly Kim feels that, and so, too, in his patience, and the sporadic, even vague way in which he appears and disappears, does Colonel Creighton. The opulence of India's space, the commanding British presence there, the sense of freedom communicated by the interaction between those two factors: this adds up to an overwhelmingly positive atmosphere irradiating the pages of *Kim*. This is not a driven world of hastening disaster, as in Flaubert and Zola.³²⁹

This impression is supported even by Kipling's vocabulary. Kim's benign master, the lama's goal is, after all, "to free myself from the Wheel of Things by a broad and open road" (57). When they enter the Grand Trunk Road, Kim thinks to himself, with eyes that are "open wide": "This broad, smiling river of life, he considered, was a vast improvement on the cramped and crowded Lahore streets" (109). And, in true Baden-Powell fashion, Hurree Chunder's technique of measuring distances by counting paces—"it was divisible and sub-divisible into many multiples and sub-multiples"—interests Kim very much: "By the look of the large wide world unfolding itself before him, it seemed that the more a man knew the better for him" (211). So this is where the idea of *Bildung* went, having snuck out of the European backdoor; far-traveled, it now sports an imperialist uniform. If it ever was its own agent, pursuing knowledge for its own disinterested sake, it has now given in to the sneaking corruption of the mind known as ideology.³³⁰

Kafka's *Amerika*, on the other hand, is a closed, stuffy place. One can hardly breathe in its cities and the countryside is not exactly refreshing, either. "Every-

³²⁹ Ibid., 42f.

³³⁰ Arguably, there is no space free of ideology. Hence, the ideal of *Bildung* is just as ideological. In this case, however, I am using the term in its more immediate sense of "cover-up of a hidden agenda". This does not necessarily have to be the agenda of the author of any given text. It is sufficient, if one can detect the operation with hindsight.

thing here was constricting him”, we learn—through a sort of free indirect thought—about Karl while he tries to get out of Mr Green’s country house, which, in spite of its numerous rooms and long corridors, instills in Karl a sense of utter strait.³³¹ Even when Kafka talks about sound he manages to emphasize its cramped quality. Not so much in the English translation where a peculiar sentence reads: “When he’d finished [playing the piano], the shattered silence of the house slunk back” (60). A more literal translation—the German, too, is very quirky—would have it like this: “After the ending the disturbed silence of the house drove back into its place *as if in a large jostle*.”³³² Finding a place to sleep is a recurring problem; in the Hotel Oriental the lift boys—among whom, for the length of a chapter, Karl ranks—make do with their working place. With his friend Therese Karl “would hurry through narrow icy passages, climb long flights of stairs, circle the narrow courtyards,” etc. (102). Speaking of the chapters: they seem to mesh at the same time seamlessly *and* abruptly. While they constitute rather hermetic worlds of their own, as if oblivious of each other’s existence, there is still no sense of Karl being able to freely choose his path. There are always characters around who press his actions, no matter how fiercely (and he *is* fierce at times) he defends his own ideas and ambitions.

This special take on the picaresque tradition, with its emphasis on the powerlessness of the hero, moves Karl into close formal vicinity of Bertolt Brecht’s

³³¹ Kafka & Hofmann, 55.

³³² My italics. The quaint original: “Nach der Beendigung fuhr die gestörte Stille des Hauses wie in großem Gedränge wieder an ihren Platz.”

Mother Courage. Like him, she traverses an adverse and pernicious world as in a series of disconnected episodes she cannot control (even if, unlike Karl, she is convinced otherwise). The parallel provides yet another crucial insight. Brecht's decision not to present history "in one unified action as an intersubjective conflict"³³³ poked, when the play came out in 1949, the smoldering conflict between himself and Lukács about how to best render reality in literature. It is rather revealing that in our constellation of writers, while Brecht would side with Kafka (whom he liked with reservations), Lukács would side with Kipling (whom he generally saw as an apologetic herald of English imperialism).³³⁴ Still, Rainer Nägele can sum up Lukács's position in the *Realismusstreit*³³⁵, the controversy about realism—a position that Lukács himself had spelled out a decade earlier in the essay "What Is At Stake Is Realism" ("Es geht um den Realismus")—like this: Lukács "opposed his concept of realism, a mode of representation that mirrors the world in familiar anthropomorphic forms, to a formalism that disfigures the familiar and repeats the alienation of the modern world in the decadent products of many modern artists."³³⁶ If one only considers the form, Kipling is the ideal proponent of Lukács's poetics; he uses *Kim* as a lens in which a complicated and confusing state

³³³ Rainer Nägele, "1949: History, Evidence, Gesture," in David E. Wellbery et al. (eds.), *A New History of German Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004) 845.

³³⁴ Kipling appears several times in Lukács's writings. For example in his *Moskauer Schriften* (1934–1940), he writes of a variety of "escapes" from "capitalist reality" in literature. Kipling is counted as a representative of the escape "into the not yet capitalist world of the colonies." Georg Lukács, *Moskauer Schriften* (Frankfurt: Siedler, 1981) 51.

³³⁵ The *Realismusstreit* is often referred to as *Expressionismusdebatte* as well.

³³⁶ Nägele, 842.

of affairs is bundled precisely into a unified action and an intersubjective conflict. Balzac, Lukács's often-cited role model, pursued the same path in order to narrativize the conditions of an early capitalist society. Brecht was rather fond of Balzac, but historicized the situation of his texts more than Lukács, who surprisingly faltered before this central task of the dialectical materialist: "Be like Balzac," Brecht writes in the essay "Against Georg Lukács" (1938), "only up-to-date!" And continues: "I suspect it will depend on whether it will be a socially relevant statement if someone says 'That' (and 'that' will refer to a contemporary) 'is a Père Goriot character.' Perhaps such characters will not survive at all? Perhaps they arose in a web of contorted relationships of a type which will by then no longer exist."³³⁷ Brecht goes on, however, slyly to point out that Balzac had confessed to have been inspired by the Wild West stories of James Fenimore Cooper—in turn a likely candidate in the literary lineage of Kipling.³³⁸

This division, with Brecht/Kafka on the "good" (historically acute) side and with Lukács/Kipling on the "bad" (nostalgic, regressive) one, is hardly surprising. Things become more interesting, if one projects their relationship onto another critical constellation: that of Foucault and Frantz Fanon. Said has done half the work already. In *Culture and Imperialism* he compares the two "roughly contemporaneous" thinkers, "both of whom stress the unavoidable problematic of immobi-

³³⁷ Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 2002) 76f.

³³⁸ See Werner Mittenzwei, "Marxismus und Realismus: Die Brecht-Lukács-Debatte," *Das Argument* 46 (1968): 23. Mittenzwei's essay provides a concise summary of the debate.

lization and confinement at the center of the Western system of knowledge and discipline.”³³⁹ He continues:

Fanon’s work programmatically seeks to treat colonial and metropolitan societies together, as discrepant but related entities, while Foucault’s work moves further and further away from serious consideration of social wholes, focussing instead upon the individual as dissolved in an ineluctably advancing “microphysics of power” that it is hopeless to resist (278).

The thought ends with a clear assessment of these positions. Fanon is “moving from confinement to liberation.” Foucault on the other hand, oblivious of the imperial context within which he himself is writing, represents “an irresistible colonizing movement that paradoxically fortifies the prestige of both the lonely individual scholar and the system that contains him” (ibid.). The tables are turned. In Fanon’s critical work Said applauds what he scorns in Kipling: the holistic approach, the effort of explaining by establishing interconnections.³⁴⁰ And vice versa: Foucault’s shortcoming is Kafka’s merit. The irresistible and “ineluctably advancing microphysics of power” are after all a succinct description of Karl’s predicament, traditionally taken to express the modernist condition. It is fascinating that in the realm of literature, rather than in that of criticism, the very same reproach of fortifying one’s prestige, while engaging in an otherwise ultimately harmless enterprise, has been made before—by none other than Brecht. His criticism of modernist art and many modernist literary techniques is repeated like a far-away echo in Said’s criticism of Foucault.

³³⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 278.

³⁴⁰ I am decidedly talking about the form here, not about the content.

During the *Realismusstreit* someone objected against Franz Marc's blue horses. Brecht ironically remarked that this slight warping of reality was hardly a crime—if need be, biologists could genetically engineer them. Yet, blue horses were not exactly his artistic ideal, either. Brecht did not think it commendable to interest the working class in blue horses. In his opinion, art was already occupied with more pressing matters. Thus, he sharply criticized the direction of impact of modernist art to render things irre recognizable. “I see that you eliminated the motifs from your paintings,” he writes in the essay “On Abstract Painting”.³⁴¹ Instead of the chair there was merely the curve of the chair. And instead of the burning house there was merely the red sky. “If you were not communists, but willful servants of those in power, I would not be surprised about your paintings. In that case they would not seem inappropriate to me, but logical” (29).

Before this judge Kafka, too, must plead guilty. He eventually abandoned *Amerika* because he considered it a failure. It is not unlikely that this was also due to the jumble of literary techniques. Beside Brecht's own decontextualizing picaresque mode of providing discrete chapters that seem to constitute highly individual worlds overwhelming the protagonist, Kafka resorted to a formal abstraction comparable to what Brecht complains about in the *Brücke* artists' paintings. Consider the following passage from the second chapter. Karl has arrived at his uncle's grandiose New York apartment, towering high over the city. “A narrow balcony ran along the entire length of the room,” Kafka writes. This is what Karl sees:

³⁴¹ Cited in Mittenzwei, 29.

In the morning and evening, and in his dreams at night, that street was always full of swarming traffic. Seen from above, it appeared to be a swirling kaleidoscope of distorted human figures and the roofs of vehicles of all kinds, from which a new and amplified and wilder mixture of noise, dust and smells arose, and all this was held and penetrated by a mighty light, that was forever being scattered, carried off and eagerly returned by the multitudes of objects, and that seemed so palpable to the confused eye that it was like a sheet of glass spread out over the street that was being continually and violently smashed.³⁴²

In this epitome of urban modernity (and modernism) horse-driven carriages have given way to different types of “vehicles”. Yet if there were any horses and if one watched them through the kaleidoscope of Karl’s vision, they would almost certainly appear blue. The portrayal of the world through or even as a “smashed sheet of glass”—complete with the synecdochical experience of things as described by Brecht³⁴³—appears almost already as a parody of modernism, even though it predates, say, Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* by more than a decade. The perspective emphasizes the viewer, rather than what is viewed. Rather than expansion, the movement is retreat: Norman Bates taking a walk on the balcony of his mind. Erich Kahler’s inward move, described at length in the first chapter, is fully realized. Naturally, this position is prone to being dismissed or at least criticized as unpolitical. And indeed—in this regard Brecht and Said’s views coincide. The passage from *Culture and Imperialism* cited above ends with the remark that both Fanon and Foucault had Hegel, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Canguilhem, and Sartre in their heritage. “Yet only Fanon”, writes Said, “presses that formidable arsenal into anti-authoritarian service” (278). Foucault, on the other hand, “perhaps because of his

³⁴² Kafka & Hofmann, 28f.

³⁴³ Brecht’s red sky instead of a burning house seems to correspond to Kafka’s *roofs* of vehicles and to the discrete sensations of noise, dust and smell, disconnected from their origins.

disenchantment with both the insurrections of the 1960s and the Iranian Revolution, swerves away from politics entirely” (ibid.).

One does not need to follow Said’s speculation about Foucault’s motives that inspired the French scholar’s later work. Yet if one looks for comparable escapism in Kafka, one will find it. About the time where he conceived *Amerika*, he had found his writerly routine. In a letter to his friend Felice Bauer he describes it as such:

Office from 8 to 2 or 2 1/3, lunch until 3 or 1/4 4, then sleeping in bed [...] to 1/2 8, then 10 minutes of exercise, naked at the open window, then going for a walk for an hour, alone or with Max or with another friend, then supper with the family. At 1/2 11 (often even at 1/2 12) sitting down to write and keeping it on—depending on energy, eagerness and luck—to 1, 2, 3 o’clock, once even to 6 in the morning.³⁴⁴

A few weeks after this letter, Kafka’s father demanded that his son temporarily replace the manager of an asbestos factory that his family (and Kafka himself) was invested in. Kafka objected vehemently, lest his tight schedule be mixed up, leaving him no more time to write. On 7 October, 1912, the situation escalated, when Kafka’s favorite sister Ottilia changed her mind to support their father’s plan. “*As if in a flight*, Kafka wanted to throw himself into literature”, writes Oliver Jahraus in a description of the scene.³⁴⁵ Apparently, that very night Kafka managed to write a

³⁴⁴ My translation. The original reads: “Von 8 bis 2 oder 2 1/3 Bureau, bis 3 oder 1/4 4 Mittagessen, von da ab Schlafen im Bett [...] bis 1/2 8, dann 10 Minuten Turnen, nackt bei offenem Fenster, dann eine Stunde Spazierengehn allein oder mit Max oder mit noch einem andern Freund, dann Nachtmahl innerhalb der Familie, [...] dann um 1/2 11 (oft wird aber auch sogar 1/2 12) Niedersetzen zum Schreiben und dabei bleiben je nach Kraft, Lust und Glück bis 1, 2, 3 Uhr, einmal auch schon bis 6 Uhr früh.” Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice*, ed. by Erich Heller et al. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1983) 67.

³⁴⁵ Oliver Jahraus, *Kafka: Leben, Schreiben, Machtapparate* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006) 110. My italics.

single page of *Amerika*, before he penned a cry for help to Max Brod, who immediately turned to Kafka's mother. Eventually, Kafka managed to evade the job in the factory, which was, by the way, supposed to last only two weeks.

The "politics" of this stance—I use the word in order to stay close to Said's complaint—are so subtle as to be invisible to the cursory observer (or to someone with a different, more immediate project at hand). It appears that if Kafka would rather not acknowledge the fact that there is a mundane world of familial obligations or needs. If it did not exist, he could not be happier. And his writing would look the same. Of course, I do not believe this.

I do not want to reiterate here the arguments whose entirety one could call—borrowing from chess vocabulary—the "modernist defense." Suffice it to remember two remarks by Adorno from his essay on Kafka: "Kafka sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality." And the second one: "As was done thousands of years ago, Kafka seeks salvation in the incorporation of the powers of the adversary. The subject seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself. It prepares to complete the fate which befell it."³⁴⁶ These two passages, besides explaining his view of Kafka, illustrate Adorno's intrinsically dialectic understanding of modernism. Keeping up the metaphor and turning around an old adage, one could paraphrase it like this: The best offense is a good defense. In Adorno's view Kafka wins, so to speak, by recoiling into itself, by

³⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983) 251 and 270, respectively.

praising the little room left, by only meekly and vainly revolting against the daily atrocities—in other words, he ultimately wins by losing.

The numerous disillusionments Karl experiences in the course of *Amerika* correspond to reality as he himself lived it—albeit in an encoded way, impossible to solve, particularly in the sense that *there is no* solution. One cannot construct a simple psychological connection between Kafka's misgivings or anxieties about his father and Karl's expulsion first from Europe, then from uncle Jacob's house. Still, there is something to it. The “refuse of reality”, as the fortunate translation renders Kafka's “Kehricht [also rubbish or waste] der Realität”, informs and inspires a narrative that attacks as it retreats. The refuse owes to a refusal that precedes it.

Of course *Amerika* is discussed here not first and foremost because of its formal adherence to the modernist literary tradition. The emphasis on the inward move, the recoiling into itself, is however essential to my analysis. In it, the two modernist traditions converge: formal abstraction and what I call the reclamation of youth. In this first attempt at the novel form Kafka apparently tried out what means he had at his disposal. So besides Brecht's picaresque mode and the warped vision of a sensorily overwhelmed individual he made his central character young in the specific way that is true for all the authors I look at. Kafka put Karl onto the

perennial threshold between fixed identities,³⁴⁷ still reinforced by his constant travel, the mutability of his ideas and the variation of his companions.

One might object that in this sense he resembles Kim. The crucial difference between them is once more akin to Said's comparison of Foucault and Fanon—and once more in an inverted way. Paraphrasing Said, one might say that Kafka and Kipling have their subject in common, yet only Kafka (paradoxically by his “Foucauldian” means) presses that formidable arsenal into anti-authoritarian service.³⁴⁸ And Kipling—at the time he writes *Kim*—is still some years short of swerving away from politics. He will, though—at least from his unanimous embrace of the British empire, much like the later Barrie, whose imperial optimism gave way to the sinister gloom of *Mary Rose*.

It is in this light that I would like to regard the tricky and surprising constellation of Brecht, Lukács, Foucault and Fanon. It seems likely that Brecht was right in suspecting that a certain “web of contorted relationships” as it might have existed at the time of Balzac had all but disappeared by 1900. To keep up a charade of “a serious consideration of social wholes”—as Kipling arguably does in presenting the India of *Kim*—would then be only *faux*-political. And the capitulation before unseen and rather ghostly new social formations—Kafka's choice—, the retreat to

³⁴⁷ One could object that “perennial” is not correct literally, in the Peter Pan sense. As an answer I would like to point out that it is hardly coincidental that Karl neither grows up, nor “learns” anything as one might expect from a *Bildungsroman* hero subject to change and maturity. The fact that this is true for the length of the book, which after all constitutes the entire life of his main character, makes me call it “perennial”. In the universe the novel devises it is.

³⁴⁸ Like with Barrie and Walser, the distributions of anti-authoritarianism and popular fame/monetary success seem to be inversely proportional at the time.

the refuse and refusal of them, to engage with the microphysics, rather than the macrophysics of power, may turn to be the politically and intellectually sincere undertaking.

A rather direct illustration of the two writers' differing stances toward the political is their awareness and treatment of social classes. It is conspicuous that Karl relentlessly moves down the ladder of power and recognition. Initially, he is safeguarded by his influential uncle. The life he leads and the people he meets are decidedly upper-class. In the mornings he takes riding lessons and writes with a priceless pen on an antique wooden desk when he is not secretly contemplating the kaleidoscopic sight of New York from above—his uncle's lodgings not only providing great modernist views, but also signaling a befitting social status.

All of a sudden and without warning Karl plunges or rather is plunged deep down the social ladder. Now he has to homelessly wander the streets carrying around his few salami-smelling belongings in a soldier's suitcase. At first he manages to find some work, but by the end of the book he merely hopes to be "employed"—most likely there will not be any payment—by a near-mythic Nature Theater of Oklahoma notorious for taking in anyone. Virtually every other institution in the book—uncle Jacob's house, Pollunder's country estate, the Hotel Occidental, etc.—is instead utterly hierarchical and elitist (and, as will be seen, the Nature Theater is essentially no exception).

Kim lives in an altogether different country, Kipling's India, where, as Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, "the natives and the Raj inhabit differently or-

dained spaces, and where with his extraordinary genius Kipling devised Kim, a marvelous character whose youth and energy allow him to explore both spaces, crossing from one to the other with daring grace as if to confound the authority of colonial barriers.”³⁴⁹ As if. Essentially, Kim’s recalcitrance takes the same form as in the first sentence of the novel where he had a great time sitting astride the big gun, symbol of imperial rule—it is superficially presumptuous, but actually harmless or worse, effectively supporting, by means of the diverting charade of rebellion, the authorities it pretends to undermine. This mechanism is all-too familiar from Peter Pan.

By the way: If one looks more closely at the trope of (more or less) freely moving about, of the exploration of social spaces that is at the heart of both novels, one may differentiate between Kim’s *carelessness* and Karl’s *nostalgia*. Kim is always eager to experience, to live and learn, so to speak (even though he arguably does not learn much). Said said the tone of the book was positive. Not least, this is due to Kim’s lack of grief. He could mourn his parents’ deaths, yet he does not. He might worry about the insecurity of his position and gauge his present actions as to the diverging prospects they may constitute. Nothing of the like. He is a figure of the future and never strays from it. His kinship to Peter Pan, the boy who forgets everything the minute it happens, never shines through more clearly. If an ideology were built on this—and it was, and Barrie as well as Kipling contributed a great

³⁴⁹ Said, 1993, 78.

deal to it—it would have no concept of trauma. This comes in very handy when you have a war to wage.

Karl, too, is closely related to a flying figure, but to a very different one: Walter Benjamin's angel of history. Like him, he cannot help being propelled into the future by a storm blowing from paradise. All the while he is looking backwards. The mode of his inner consciousness, rather than his outward movement, is nostalgia. As Mark Anderson writes, Karl remains "constrained to keep moving in a permanently renewed condition of exile that is reinforced by allusions to Adam and Eve's banishment from Paradise and the Jews' historical flight from Egypt."³⁵⁰

There is a passage in *Kim* that should not go unmentioned, for it is in a sense Kipling's counterpart to Kafka's balcony scene. It occurs in the first third of the book, after Kim and the lama have started their journey. Having left Lahore, they hit the Grand Trunk Road, one of the oldest means of traffic in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Lama, supposedly busy with meditation, so much so that he does not even notice vendors selling holy water from the Ganges, "looked steadily on the ground." His young disciple, not so much:

Kim was in the seventh heaven of joy. The Grand Trunk at this point was built on an embankment to guard against winter floods from the foothills, so that one walked, as it were, a little above the country, along a stately corridor, seeing all India spread out to left and right. It was beautiful to behold the many-yoked grain and cotton wagons crawling over the country roads: one could hear their axles, complaining a mile away, coming nearer, till with snouts and yells and bad words they climbed up the steep incline and plunged on to the hard main road, carter reviling carter. It was

³⁵⁰ Anderson, 106.

equally beautiful to watch the people, little clumps of red and blue and pink and white and saffron, turning aside to go to their own villages, dispersing and growing small by twos and threes across the level plain.³⁵¹

At first sight, there are quite a few similarities to Karl's experience of the bustling city life of New York. Notice the elevation ("a little above the country") reminiscent of a large balcony ("a stately corridor"). As in Kafka, the perspective is panoramic, like several camera snapshots digitally fused; we are getting "the whole picture." Various sensations are recorded, various senses appealed to—vision and hearing most directly, others in a more evocative way. Most strikingly, the jumble of details, the sometimes blurry manifestation of things seems to suggest at least a mild case of formal modernism: People turn to "little clumps of red and blue and pink and white and saffron." Still, this is about where the similarities end.

The positive feel that as Said noticed suffuses the novel constitutes the starkest contrast to Karl's emotional state of being lost and alienated. The difference in height of balcony and road is sufficient to yield utterly disparate impressions. Karl's New York appears to be miles away, it cannot be touched or engaged with. It spreads out like a strange and foreign organism that is merely prone, in case one came in contact with it, to activate own's immune system. In contrast, Kim's Grand Trunk Road, even though elevated, *is* the very place where everything happens, rather than just providing a pedestal from which to behold it. Kim observes it from its middle, while being an organic part of it. Even more, his own hybrid heritage as well as his natural curiosity and desire for movement and freedom make him

³⁵¹ Kipling, 1987, 111.

the perfect embodiment of everything the road represents. Lastly, the ostensible modernism is a misunderstanding. It is unclear who speaks, if it is Kim, an unknown narrator or a free indirect compound of the two, but Kipling's narrator is hardly blinded by the colors he describes. Not only does he never forget that they are actually people, but he also knows where they are headed ("turning aside to go to their own villages"), presumably to buy or sell the "grain and cotton" that he has safely registered as their errands. Sights and motives could not be clearer. In the whole scene, so holistically described, there is no lacuna of interpretation, no hermeneutic loss, which in Kafka is the heart of the main character's loneliness and alienation (and through him, of the reader).

Kim's vision may seem more vivid and concrete than Karl's. In fact, it is the more abstract of the two. The collapse of space, with the narrator and main character apparently in the middle of things, belies the true extent of its strategic distance. In his foreword to the Penguin edition of *Kim* Said writes about Colonel Creighton: "Creighton embodies the notion that you cannot govern India unless you know India, and to know India means understanding the way it operates" (34). Creighton—one of the most prominent replacement fathers for Kim in this book that is surely not lacking in such figures—has taken Kim under his wing (for interests not entirely selfless, of course) and sees to it that Kim learns this important lesson. Once he arrives at St Xavier's in Lucknow, the most prestigious boarding school for English children, the first idea rammed into the freshman is this: "One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that some day, when examinations are

passed, one will command natives” (173). So much for the classless and raceless utopia evoked by Kim’s experiencing and describing the Grand Trunk Road from within the traveling crowd. The contrast of appearance and essence is too strong for Kipling not to have been aware of it. It is much more likely that in his construction of the novel he was careful to heed a principle also held dear by Creighton: “The Colonel evidently respected people who did not show themselves to be too clever” (165).

Kipling makes sure that his pages never lose the sense of charming and quaint chaos. For example, just before Kim arrives at St Xavier’s, the boy makes his driver visit the bazaars of the city. As in the famous scene in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, where the reader is barred from directly participating in Emma’s (in all likelihood sexual) encounter in the carriage in Rouen, Kipling only draws the faintest sketch of the afternoon Kim spends in the society of prostitutes in Lucknow. The passage is rather pointless for the plot, too. The idea is to emphasize Kim’s reluctance to domestication, to prove once more that his intuition comes before his intellect. Also, the alleged unruliness of Indian city life is presented in a seemingly apologetic and amused manner. Thomas Richards writes: “*Kim* is a narrative of the high command. No action takes place within the novel that cannot be integrated into the orbit of contingent necessities sanctioned by the state.”³⁵² He goes on to specify his brilliant observation:

³⁵² Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (New York: Verso Books, 1993) 22.

The novel performs a work of assimilation: it codifies the wanderings of the many nomadic forces it contains, allowing them extraordinary latitude even as it adjusts them to accord with the implied decrees of the high command. The actions of the novel form a series of picaresque incidents that are random and accidental in name only, because, no matter how far they may seem to veer from the presence of a plan, they always take place in exact accordance with the dictates of headquarters” (ibid.).

This is a world where the unknown, far-away “high command” watches over you like a God or a strong, loving father (if you happen to be, racially, politically, compatible). With his benevolence acting as a sort of cosmic background radiation you cannot fail. This is simultaneously the support for Kim’s unswerving forward-looking and its secret goal: the reunion with the father. Its symbol is the image of the “red bull on a green field” that would one day come to his aid—one of the most prominent leitmotifs of the novel. Kim is looking out for his father’s prophecy all along; it becomes true when he joins the ranks of the secret service. Kim’s recognition of the red bull on a military flag also leads to the discovery, facilitated by—*nomen est omen*—the catholic Father Victor that he is in fact not native, but Irish. Further such facilitators of the voyage of life are of course the lama, Creighton as well as the schoolmaster at Xavier’s. The father figures in *Kim* safely reach down into the realm of Lacan’s Imaginary; they help structuring the narcissistic subject in their wake.

In Kafka, the opposite is true. Father figures may be abundant, too, yet only as treacherous, fleeting manifestations of a promise that is never kept. The real father is lost twice, once before the first page, the second time when Karl loses his photography, which he has been carrying. To be more exact, it disappears after Robinson and Delamarche—temporary replacements of the father—have rum-

maged his suitcase in front of the Hotel Oriental. They also leave him in the lurch twice: at the hotel and again at Brunhilda's place, where Karl is abused as a servant. The unthankful roles of his uncle and Mr Pollunder have been discussed already.

In a central discussion of the paternal figure in his psychoanalytic theory, Jacques Lacan stresses “the ravaging effects” on the child by a father “with all too many opportunities of being in a posture of undeserving, inadequacy, even of fraud, and, in short, of excluding the Name-of-the-Father from its position in the signifier.”³⁵³ Thus, the “way to psychosis” would be opened. To Lacan the psychotic is essentially one who is theoretically able to love (in a way that “abolishes him as a subject,”³⁵⁴), but this love must necessarily remain unrequited because on the part of the lover no subjectivity is achieved. The object of love is experienced as the Other in the most rigorous way, namely, as Lacan puts it, in its “radical heterogeneity” (ibid.). The mirror image of the psychotic, the neurotic, goes the opposite way. In a comment on the same passage, Žižek writes: “the neurotic becomes an autonomous subject of desire in turning away from the impossibility of the command to love the neighbor.”³⁵⁵

What is Karl's constant quest for communication and understanding—ultimately for love—that fails and fails again if not the psychotic's disoriented onrush

³⁵³ Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in *Écrits*, ed. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 218f.

³⁵⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses* (New York: Norton, 1978) 253.

³⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters,” in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries into Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 4of.

against the bulwark that looks like the fortification of the outside world but is likely but the border of his own mind? The one time where Karl seems close to mutual love, with Therese in the Hotel Oriental, the attempt is thwarted by the combined parental efforts of Robinson and the head waiter: the first lures him away from his post at the elevators, the second is merciless in his punishment: “I want no excuses, you can keep your lying excuses to yourself, for me the mere fact that you weren’t there is quite enough.”³⁵⁶

Karl, a character made of the refusal of reality, perpetuates in his psychosis the damaged relationship between father and son. The distance between the spectator Karl and the world he sees, emblematically depicted in the image of the far-away balcony (or the balustrade that will appear on an image, even further removed, at the very end of the book)³⁵⁷, is tantamount to the distance between child and parent.

Ultimately, it is not important what exactly influenced Kafka’s terrible images. It may or may not be helpful to know of the incident that his biographer Peter-André Alt recounts: On 19 April 1916 Kafka recorded in his diary a dream where Kafka lifts his father “like a child”, merely secured by the “small strings” of

³⁵⁶ Kafka & Hofmann, 115.

³⁵⁷ At the meal before the long train journey, Kafka observes the pictures piled up at the end of the table. They are showing the Nature Theater of Oklahoma. From where he sits he can see only one: “This picture showed the box of the President of the United States. At first sight, one might think it wasn’t a box at all, but the stage, so far did the curved balustrades cut out into empty space.” Again, the father figure inside is distant and cannot be reached; if anything, it is inhabited by an egomaniacal neurotic, the opposite principle of the psychotic: “It was hardly possible to imagine people in this box, so sumptuously self-sufficient did it look.” *Ibid.*, 215.

his nightgown, over the handrail of a balcony for him to better observe the procession happening on the street.³⁵⁸ The scene is not easily exhausted by interpretation, but it seems safe to notice the associations with violence and danger, again connected with complications between parents and children (or, to be more precise, father and son) as well as with balconies, balustrades and handrails—and thus with great, potentially deadly heights. This is no single coincidence. In the famous short story “The Judgment” (1912) a young man quarrels with his father about a friend’s existence. At the end he commits suicide. The quarrel is described in great detail. In just a few lines Kafka reports the suicide:

Out of the front door he bolted, across the roadway, driven toward the water. Already he was clutching at the railing as a starving man clutches for food. He swung himself over, like the accomplished gymnast he had been in his youth, to his parents’ pride. With weakening grip he was still holding on when he spied between the railings an approaching bus that would easily cover the sound of his fall, called out in a faint voice, “Dear parents, I have always loved you,” and let himself drop. At that moment an almost endless line of traffic streamed over the bridge.”³⁵⁹

When Kafka hits Kipling’s Grand Trunk Road it is in his very own fashion. Kafka’s young man (named Georg—a feeble, emaciated echo of the dragon slayer) turns his back on Kipling’s bustling miracle of life. In the act of committing suicide he pledges allegiance to his parents, whom he has always loved. At the same time it is

³⁵⁸ Alt, 465.

³⁵⁹ Franz Kafka, *The Sons* (New York: Schocken, 1991) 16. Max Brod reports that when Kafka wrote “almost endless line of traffic” he was thinking of “a strong ejaculation.” The German “Verkehr” has in fact the double meaning of both traffic and sexual intercourse. See Oliver Jahraus & Stefan Neuhaus, *Kafkas “Urteil” und die Literaturtheorie: Zehn Modellanalysen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2002) 97. Following this idea, it would seem that Georg, rather than slaying the dragon, is slain by his father in a complete annihilation of his life: at the moment of his death everything reverts to the moment of his conception.

insinuated that it was them who severed the bond. In his view they never felt unconditional love for their son, but merely pride for measurable achievements.

The parade of baleful balconies goes on, in life and in literature. In the Brunelda chapter of *Amerika* Robinson tries to lock out Karl on the balcony. This does not quite work, but incidentally Delamarche and Brunelda arrive. At the same time a spectacle unfolds on the street—a procession just like in Kafka’s dream one and a half years later: “A few isolated shouts from people gradually amalgamated into a general hubbub” (166). A judge will be elected, and a candidate is carried through the city. Kafka’s description of the event spans a couple of pages. At some point, Brunelda patronizes Karl by forcing her glasses on his eyes. The moment is reminiscent of the beginning of *Kim*, where the curator of the Lahore Museum (the “Wonder House”) gives his glasses to the lama (“A very feather upon the face!” [*Kim*, 60]), except that in Kafka things never dovetail as conveniently as in Kipling: “‘I can’t see a thing,’ [Karl] said, and tried to remove the glasses. But she held them in place, while his head was so cushioned on her breast he could move it neither sideways nor back” (*Amerika*, 170).

The sensation of terrible, possibly life-threatening constriction on a balcony is likewise the essence of a key scene from the famous letter to his father that Kafka never sent. It illuminates the fact that in *Amerika* the reason for the street parade observed on the balcony is a judge (or a judge candidate) in a way that is no less interesting for its impenetrability.

There is just a single incident I can remember from those early years, but perhaps you remember it as well. Once I whimpered long in the night for water: not from thirst, but probably in part to entertain myself. After threats had failed to help, you took me out of bed, carried me to the courtyard balcony and left me there alone in my shirt for a little while outside the closed door. I won't say that you were wrong; perhaps that was the only way to get some peace in the night; but I will say that it characterized your education methods and their effects on me. I was from then on probably obedient, but I had an inner scar. [...] And for years I was tormented by the thought that this giant man, my father, could almost without reason come to me in the night, and lift me out of bed, and leave me on the balcony; he was my final court of appeal, and for him I was such a nothing.³⁶⁰

As I said, I am not interested in Kafka's private motivations, fantasies and traumas for their own sake. What matters is that he made use of them to capture and narrativize an unspeakable condition of his present, the same "sad, shadowy transformation" that Adorno would recognize with hindsight: the cancellation of the established contract between the old and the young.³⁶¹ Like Büchner and Walser Kafka saw that in order to communicate one needs to adopt different positions, rather than the insinuation that everybody is fighting on the same side all along, while hierarchies are covertly kept intact. Kafka's portrayal of a case that Lacan would have diagnosed with psychosis is a tacit outcry for assistance. The closeted neurosis found in *Kim*, on the other hand, merely serves to conceal an utter lack of understanding between potential partners. To be sure, this lack is by no means natural, but ideologically fabricated. In his way, Kipling is very candid about it; Kim is but a plaything in Colonel Creighton's hands—who himself is a small joint in an apparently perpetual chain of command. And the lama, in this scheme clearly the

³⁶⁰ Franz Kafka & Richard Stokes et al., *Dearest Father* (Richmond, U.K.: Oneworld Classics, 2008) 8.

³⁶¹ See the end of the chapter on Büchner.

positive figure, is hardly more than a child himself. He lives in his own reality—and even more, in a potentially unsettling, dangerous one—but he is under surveillance and, for the time being, tolerated by the government.

In order to see how these incompatible stances played out it is worthwhile fast-forwarding to 1914. *Kim* has long proven a huge success and Kipling is one of the most celebrated English authors. Meanwhile, Kafka fumbles with what will remain the last chapter of his novel project—“The Nature Theater of Oklahoma.” After a hiatus of almost two years he has taken the manuscript up again in the Fall in order to add one chapter. Upon its completion he will abandon the project, leaving it as an unfinished fragment.

The chapter has a long history of being read as Kafka’s sole “optimistic” or “positive” ending to any of his novels or stories. Max Brod initiated and encouraged this attitude. In his afterword to the first edition, published in 1927, he states that the bleak endings of “The Trial” and *The Castle* are “just about kept in check” by the ending of *Amerika* (his choice of title, while Kafka called his work-in-progress *The Lost One* [*Der Verschollene*]).³⁶² Hannah Arendt, whose two essays on Kafka³⁶³ are otherwise masterful interpretations, seems to take for granted the se-

³⁶² See Hartmut Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch in zwei Bänden* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1979) 417. Kafka’s title comes up in a letter to Felice Bauer, dating 11 November 1912. A later diary entry (30 September 1915) confirms that, had Kafka completed the novel, it would have ended with the protagonist’s death. Kafka compares Karl Rossmann to K. of the *Trial*, who would both be killed, Rossmann “more pushed to the side than hurled to the ground.” See Brod, 137. The two titles are rather suggestive by themselves; Brod’s *Amerika* carries a glimmer of hope, whereas Kafka’s *Lost One* clearly points in the opposite direction.

³⁶³ “Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew” and “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” which features the section “Franz Kafka: The Man of Goodwill”.

quence in which Brod published Kafka's work: "The Trial" in 1925, *The Castle* in 1926 and *Amerika* in 1927. Thus Arendt takes the latter to point the way towards Kafka's putative Zionist utopia. This becomes clear when, at the end of "The Jew as Pariah," she writes that the land surveyor K. of *The Castle*, "unlike the hero of Kafka's last novel, *America* [sic], [...] does not start dreaming of a new world and he does not end in a great 'Nature Theater' where 'everyone is welcome,' where 'there is a place for everyone' in accordance with his talents, his bent, and his will."³⁶⁴

If Kafka ever considered such a positive outcome, he veered away from it afterwards, in the subsequent novels. It seems more likely to me, however, that the chapter never registered the slightest moment of hope and redemption in the first place. Incidentally, it was written alongside "The Trial" (August 1914–January 1915) and "In the Penal Colony" (October 5–18)—two of Kafka's bleakest works. In comparison with the allegedly more "realistic" chapters preceding it, its atmosphere has been called "dreamlike."³⁶⁵ Yet in fact Karl's effort to be accepted as a worker with the Nature Theater is closer to a bureaucratic nightmare.

For means of registration there are seemingly infinite and infinitely specialized office booths spread out on the racetrack where the Theater has set up camp—Karl strays from the one for engineers to the one for "people with technical qualifi-

³⁶⁴ Arendt, 87.

³⁶⁵ The most lyrical version of this idea may be found in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, under the rubric "Second Harvest." He writes: "But pleasant, fulfilled dreams are actually as rare, to use Schubert's words, as happy music. Even the loveliest dreams bear like a blemish its difference from reality, the awareness that what it grants is a mere illusion. This is why precisely the loveliest dreams are as if blighted. Such an impression is captured superlatively in the description of the nature Theater of Oklahoma in Kafka's *America*." Adorno, 2005, 111.

cations” in order to arrive at the “office for former secondary schoolboys” (209). Kafka is not more explicit, but it is clear that in terms of magnitude the enlistment section of the Nature Theater rivals the spectacle at the entrance. There, “a hundred women dressed as angels in white cloths, with great wings on their backs were blowing into golden trumpets” (203). This befits the bureaucracy of the registration, which is itself mind-blowing—for Karl’s voyage is not yet over: “But then, when Karl said he’d been to a secondary school in Europe, they declared this wasn’t the right place either, and had him brought to the office for people who had attended secondary school in Europe” (209). Karl is finally accepted, if only because coming from a European secondary school is regarded as something so lowly that no papers are required; whoever admits to such a cradle can presumably be taken at his word—why would he lie? Things do not brighten up when Karl is asked for his name. He gives “what had been his nickname on his last jobs: ‘Negro’” (210). At his next station, where he meets “the leader,” he is dismissed with a portentous remark: “In Oklahoma, we’ll check everything over again” (213). And one of the trumpeting angels called Fanny—apparently an old acquaintance, whom Kafka failed to introduce earlier—says: “We play for two hours. Then we are relieved by the men, who are dressed as devils” (205).

Rather than Arendt’s Zionist paradise, Kafka’s Nature Theater—complete with the train ride into literary Neverland (because the author abandoned the project right there)—is, if not an anticipation of the concentration camps,³⁶⁶ a

³⁶⁶ The new recruits must run to the trains waiting for them. “That wasn’t very difficult, though, for—Karl only noticed it now—no one had any luggage” (217).

grotesquely enhanced portrayal of the recruitment bureaus and military transport to the trenches of World War I, which had begun less than three months before Kafka started the chapter.³⁶⁷ Thomas Anz has even argued that it was the very beginning of the war that triggered an expansion of Kafka's thematic horizon: from 29 July onwards, the day after the declaration of war, when Kafka jots down the first notes that will inform "The Trial", his formerly solitary subjects of family and fathers are enriched through "the ramified power of judges, leaders, human resources managers, officers, commanders or inspectors, solicitors' offices, dossiers or machines."³⁶⁸

The striking similarities between Arthur Holitscher's travel report "Amerika heute und morgen" (America today and tomorrow), published in 1912 and evidentially read by Kafka, and the novel have often been discussed.³⁶⁹ The most famous one is that Kafka adopted a crucial misspelling from Holitscher—an image caption showing a hanged black man and his white lynchers cynically reads "Idyll from Oklahama." It was only Max Brod who corrected Kafka's relentless use of "Oklahama." The lynching scene taken together with Karl's calling himself "Negro" and with his pending being pushed aside suggests a motivic preoccupation with race

³⁶⁷ See, for a more explicit discussion of the thesis, Alt, 371.

³⁶⁸ Schneider & Schumann, 248.

³⁶⁹ See for example Bodo Plachta, "Der Heizer/Der Verschollene," in *Kafka-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Bettina von Jagow et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008). Also Alt, 370.

and discrimination.³⁷⁰ So much so, in fact, that the allegorical correspondence of the chapter to the mobilization of World War I has remained largely unnoticed.

It is Anz's merit, however, to have scrutinized official calls to arms in Prague newspapers from Summer/Fall 1914 and to have compared them to Kafka's descriptions. He found the individual departments (for engineers, pupils, students) to match the registration bureaus of the Nature Theater. Furthermore, Anz notes numerous semantic parallels between the language of war propaganda and that of the Theater's officials: particularly verbs such as "register" and "accept" as well as "the excessive use of the epithet 'great'"—the discursive abundance of the "great war" and the "great time" in 1914 matches Kafka's "great Theater."³⁷¹ (It might be added that the expression "theater of war" is also common in German.) Anz's list is rounded out by the occurrence of appropriate instruments (trumpets and drums), again by the intertwinings of the linguistic allurements of war and advertisement, strict schedules, salutary-apocalyptic renderings of mundane events (the trumpeting angels and devils), troop transports by train (Kafka often uses the word "troop" [Truppe], which in German signifies a group of actors as well as a group of soldiers) and the gigantic bureaucratic efforts involved in mobilization on a grand scale.

³⁷⁰ Howard Caygill argues that the empty President's booth from the picture Karl looks at toward the end of the chapter shows in fact the scene of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. "The 'Nature Theater' is a scene of execution, but specifically the scene of the execution of the President who emancipated the black slaves." Howard Caygill, "The Fate of the Pariah: Arendt and Kafka's 'Nature Theatre of Oklahama,'" *College Literature* 38:1 (2011): 8.

³⁷¹ See Schneider & Schumann, 257.

In other words, as one can emphasize the racial undertow of this richly allegorical chapter, the same is possible for the military one. In fact, the first serves as a sort of specification of the second; Karl, the newly enlisted European soldier on his way to the front, resembles the American “Negro” in that he is just as declassed and completely at the mercy of nameless, faceless officials like the “leader,” who are about to abuse their absolute patriarchal power.

Talking about war and images of the apocalypse—on August 2 1914 Kafka jotted down in his diary: “Germany has declared war on Russia. —Swimming in the afternoon.”³⁷² Kipling, on the other hand, preferred the grand, unbroken gesture. Two days after Kafka, on August 4, he wrote in his diary: “Incidentally Armageddon begins.”³⁷³ While Kafka entertained ideas of actually enlisting, but was called indispensable by his employer, Kipling was too old. Besides, his severe nearsightedness had already foreclosed the desired military career early in his life. His son John was just as nearsighted. Still, he was just about to turn 17 and he was the son of a stubbornly patriotic and very influential father.

According to the biographer Jad Adams, a story is told how Kipling, the father, was helping to recruit volunteers outside the Bear public house in Burwash High Street when a neighbor snapped: “Why don’t you send your own bloody boy?” Kipling is said to have been so embarrassed that he never visited the local

³⁷² Cited in Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Decisive Years* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005) 462.

³⁷³ Cited in Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) 120.

village again.³⁷⁴ Henceforth, he was not content writing war-instigating articles for newspapers.³⁷⁵ He activated old friends and pulled strings with the higher military echelons. On 10 September, he had a meeting with the colonel of the Irish Guards. John was asked to report to Warely barracks on 14 September. Jad Adams writes that there can be no doubt John, who while in London was regularly visited by his father (who sent “the Rolls Royce to his barracks,” 171), went to war with enthusiasm.

After some time in Dublin, he was sent to France. Within six weeks he entered the Battle of Loos, part of an Allied attack on the Western Front, engaging 54 French and 13 British divisions. The first of 26 letters to his parents registers John’s looking forward to the fighting (or at least his desire to make-believe): “Dear Old Things,” the letter, dating Monday 16 September 1915, starts. “I am writing this in a train proceeding to the firing line at 15 mph (its top speed) [...] we are billeted in a splendid little village nestling among the downs about 20 miles from the firing line [...] the country is looking awfully nice.”³⁷⁶ This was however to change. The death toll at Loos was greater than in any previous battle of the war. Witnesses reported seeing Kipling fall with a neck wound, but intense machine gun and shellfire made retrieval impossible. It would take years until the spot where he presumably fell was back in British hands. Along with thousands of others John Kipling was re-

³⁷⁴ Jad Adams, *Kipling* (London: Haus Books, 2005) 167.

³⁷⁵ For an impression of tone and attitude these lines, published in *The Times* in the first week of the war, may suffice: “For all we have and are,/ For all our children’s fate,/ Stand up and take the war./ The Hun is at the gate!” Cited in *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

ported missing. Thus, it was virtually simultaneously that he and Karl Rossmann shared the same fate, that is, if one follows Kafka's title *The Lost One*. The German "Der Verschollene" explicitly denotes persons who disappear in battle. After a constitutionally determined period of time they may be declared dead.

His father reacted by writing "My Boy Jack": "Have you heard news of my boy Jack?/ *Not this tide.*/ 'When d'you think that he'll come back?'/ *Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.*" To an old friend, Lionel Dunsterville, he wrote: "It was a short life. I'm sorry that all the years work ended in that one afternoon but—lots of people are in our position and it's something to have bred a man."³⁷⁷ Still, Kipling would never be the same again. John's ghostly presence haunted the family³⁷⁸ and overshadowed his father's life and writing. Oliver Baldwin, a schoolmate of John's, described the change that afflicted Kipling as such: "He was proud his son had joined the army. Here his inferiority complex had come out—he was not able to be a soldier himself, but his son was in uniform." When John went missing: "From that date Kipling became an entirely different man. [...] It broke him completely. He shut up like a clam. All his creation went. [...] All the lovely side of his nature—all the 'Jungle Book', all the playing with children [...], went like that."³⁷⁹ Baldwin also remembered that Kipling wanted him to take his son's place, "so that

³⁷⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling: 1911-19*, ed. by Thomas Pinney, vol. 4 (London: Macmillan, 2004) 345.

³⁷⁸ On her daughter Elsie's twenty-first birthday, on 2 February 1917, Kipling's wife Carrie wrote: "A quiet coming of age and all the coming of age we shall have in our little family now." Cited in Adams, 174.

³⁷⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 1936. Cited in *Ibid.*, 174.

he would have somebody connected with him fighting.” In a bizarre twist of literary history, the aging Kipling repeated, one step removed, the young J. M. Barrie’s attempt at becoming his own dead brother. Kipling tried to imagine an afterlife for his son by all means possible—moral justification or, if need be, by having a friend assume his place.

Kipling’s hatred for the Germans, which had never been mild, now went utterly overboard. He accused them of “perversion and degeneracy,” a charge that he extended to English pacifists, socialists as well as to anybody else who contemplated ceasing to fight.³⁸⁰ Adams writes: “Kipling conceives of the war through the metaphor of the unleashing of dark desires, best kept concealed, an indication of his own feelings” (175). As in Kafka’s story, the death of a son is accompanied by what seems to be at the same time an evocation and a repression of sexuality. The crucial difference, of course, is that Kafka represents the son, while Kipling is very much the father. In a verse couplet for his son’s (symbolic, because there was no body) tombstone he wrote: “If any question why we died,/ Tell them, because our fathers lied.”

Like Barrie Kipling recognizes too late that his life-long identification with boyhood was acquired at the expense of his own children (or wards, respectively). Death acts as the cruel reminder that there are confines to the playground. Kafka was never possessed by the desire to remain a boy, but had felt compelled to adopt the role of the perpetual son. Thus he had developed a much more scrupulous sen-

³⁸⁰ In the face of German atrocities, the pacifist must feel, according to Kipling, “a certain perverted interest.” See *Ibid.*, 175.

sorium for the vicissitudes of power and powerlessness. The endings of the two novels bear witness to this.

The last pages of *Kim* and *Amerika* constitute diametrically opposed configurations of sleep and vigil, travel and paralysis. This is the passage in Kipling:

He did not want to cry—had never felt less like crying in his life—but of a sudden easy, stupid tears trickled down his nose and with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without. Things that rode meaningless on the eyeball an instant before slid into proper proportion. Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to. They were all real and true—solidly planted upon the feet—perfectly comprehensible—clay of his clay, neither more nor less” (331).

Under a “many-rooted tree” that “knew what he sought, as he himself did not know,” Kim drifts off: “Hour upon hour he lay deeper than sleep” (332). When he eventually wakes up, he thinks: “I have slept a hundred years. Where—?” (336).

As Kim lies unconscious Kipling fills four pages in which the lama and Mah-bub, two principal father figures (who symbolically watch over him just as the narrator does) sort things out. When Kim awakens his crisis is over, everything having slid back into proper proportion. Pragmatic concerns return into focus. Thus, a sense of something very central to the novel is restored, namely Kipling’s American Dream in India: the idea that everything is possible, that one can go anywhere and be anything. Edward Said has pointed out that this “wish-fantasy” strategically coincides with Creighton’s Great Game. Kim’s “inexhaustibly renewed capacity for disguises and adventure,” his general energetic, optimistic and forward-moving being goes hand in hand with Creighton’s “device of political

surveillance and control.”³⁸¹ In real life, however, Kipling had to find out the hard way that using a son’s naive lust for adventure as a canvas or blank slate for fatherly anxieties and ambitions was not such a good idea. John’s, that is, actually Rudyard Kipling’s dream of imperialist self-fulfillment, of which *Kim* is an early wish-fantasy, shattered in the trenches of the not so Great Game then called the Great War.

Things are much different in *Amerika*. The respective passage reads:

“They rode for two days and two nights. Only now did Karl begin to grasp the size of America. He looked out of the window tirelessly, and Giacomo craned towards it with him, until the youths opposite, more interested in playing cards, had had enough, and gave him the window seat opposite. [...]

On the first day they travelled over a high mountain range. Blue-black formations of rock approached the train in sharp wedges, they leaned out of the window and tried in vain to see their peaks, narrow dark cloven valleys opened, with a finger they traced the direction in which they disappeared, broad mountain streams came rushing like great waves on their hilly courses, and, pushing thousands of little foaming wavelets ahead of them, they plunged under the bridges over which the train passed, so close that the chill breath of them made their faces shudder.”³⁸²

These are the last lines, the point where Kafka abandoned the novel. Instead of Kim’s moment of rest *Amerika* ends with an image of apparently ceaseless travel. What is more, Karl does not sleep. One might be tempted to gloss over the word “tirelessly” and refrain from taking it literally, did it not echo the punchline of an early story, written in 1903 and published in 1913, a year before Kafka wrote the passage above: “Children on a Country Road.” It has been called one of the few instances of extended description of nature in Kafka, of apparent peace of mind, pos-

³⁸¹ Kipling, 1987, 44.

³⁸² Kafka & Hofmann, 218.

sibly even the hunch of happiness.³⁸³ All of this is shared by the ending of *Amerika*. Still, the more fascinating parallel is the idea of a pleasant insomnia.

The few pages of the story's narrative recount the happy, if rather violent games of a group of children on a country road. The nameless narrator, also a child, joins them from his room after "I was given my supper by candle light"—we never learn by whom, there are but the ghosts of parents.³⁸⁴ His perspective on his playmates' childish games—they push each other from the country road into the ditch and mimic the cry of American Indians—remains that of the outsider. This sense is emphasized by Kafka having the narrator in his first dialog, rather miraculously, ask for "no quarter", which in the German original is even more puzzling because Kafka employs the unusual plural, "Keine Gnaden."³⁸⁵ "We ran our heads full tilt into the evening," motivic ground is broken. "There was no daytime and no nighttime" (22). Then the children run onto a bridge as on familiar metaphoric turf. Sure enough, Kafka writes: "There was no reason why one of us should not jump onto the parapet of the bridge" (24). Yet, because as we know this is a different story, Kafka moves on. Eventually, the children stop to sing and wave at a passing train—potentially the one that Karl Rossmann is riding?

³⁸³ See Alt, 256.

³⁸⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*, ed. by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 2000) 21.

³⁸⁵ No wonder in the story this bizarre uttering is met with the reply: "No quarter? What kind of way is that to talk?" Yet Kafka never explains.

We can imagine him there just fine because in the train “all the carriages were lit up, the windowpanes were certainly let down” (ibid.). Then, a crucial passage: “So we sang, the forest behind us, for the ears of the distant travelers. The grownups were still awake in the village, the mothers were making down the beds for the night” (ibid.). This is where the narrator determines that “our time was up.” He feigns running back home. In fact, however, at the first crossroads he turns into the woods.

I was making for that city in the south of which it was said in our village: “There you’ll find queer folk! Just think, they never sleep!” “And why not?” “Because they never get tired.” “And why not?” “Because they’re fools.” “Don’t fools get tired?” “How could fools get tired!”³⁸⁶

Is it too much to imagine that this is precisely where Karl Rossmann is headed?

The city in the south, that is, still farther removed from what people call European culture than Jakob von Gunten might ever have dreamed?

Karl has always been a fool, the most naive and innocent of picaresque heroes; he surely is not smart and street-savvy as Kim, who consequently sleeps and does not see. It is only fools who never get tired. Ceaselessly, they gaze onto the atrocities piling up around—and especially ahead of— them, prepared by their parents who will be long to admit that they lied their sons into their graves. Karl’s travel must necessarily go on. Other than Kim, who is betrayed by Creighton, he knows of no cure that would ail him. Kim remembers, as if brainwashed in his sleep, that “roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven,” etc. Kipling’s novel, which featured an episode of railroad travel early on,

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 25.

ends on a halting note. The old *Bildungsroman* model is claimed to be still intact; after his ordeal, Kim has arrived somewhere. He has attained maturity and can thus go on, leading the responsible life of an adult. (That is, if he made it out of the trenches alive, into which the very same ideology led him.) Kafka—who followed Jakob von Gunten’s call to leave Europe behind and took the trouble to send Karl to the country most associated with freedom—ends with an image of continuous travel. Utopia, he seems to say, is perpetually deferred. The reality principle tells him that ultimately, Karl will be pushed to the side. Yet for the time being he actively and tirelessly hopes, just as the land surveyor K. is ever hoping to reach the castle. While Europe’s fathers are busy engaging their sons in a war that will defeat everybody involved, Kafka’s rather voiceless cry echoes that of another of his narrators. In the late story “The Departure”, simultaneously trapped and yearning for new horizons, he replies to the question where he is going: “just away from here, just away from here. On and on away from here, that’s the only way I can reach my goal.”³⁸⁷

³⁸⁷ Kafka, 1946, 137.

“The Sniveling Brat Within Me:”

Concluding with Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke*

“Today’s poet ought to be a child,
but a cunning, sober, and careful child.”³⁸⁸

Witold Gombrowicz

“I may say indeed that insofar as I am a philosopher,
mine is a philosophy of laughter.”³⁸⁹

Georges Bataille

It is as if Artaud saw it coming. In his Mexican travelogue “Concerning a Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras,” supposedly dreamed up under the influence of peyote, the surrealist visionary wrote: “Elsewhere, a statue of Death loomed huge, holding in its hand a little child.”³⁹⁰ The trip occurred in 1936. In 1937 Artaud returned to France, where he found a walking stick of knotted wood that he believed had belonged not only to St. Patrick, but also to Lucifer and Jesus Christ.³⁹¹

Such events seem to set the stage for Witold Gombrowicz’s strange novel *Ferdydurke*, published late that same year, 1937. The Polish writer, born in 1904, had as a boy witnessed the theater of cruelty that goes by the name of World War I. The impression left him a lifelong atheist and pacifist. Now, as the Nazis were gearing up for an even greater war, Gombrowicz found himself invited to South America,

³⁸⁸ Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) vol. I, 66.

³⁸⁹ Georges Bataille, *Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986) 93.

³⁹⁰ Antonin Artaud, *Artaud Anthology* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965) 71.

³⁹¹ See Bernd Mattheus & Elena Kapralik et al., *Antonin Artaud* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 1977) 232.

as a guest on the maiden voyage of a new ocean liner, bound not quite for Artaud's Mexico, but for Argentina. On August 22, 1939, it arrived in Buenos Aires. Eight days later, Germany invaded Poland. With the threat of war imminent, the ship was ordered back. Having already boarded, Gombrowicz decided to disembark at the last moment. He would stay for 24 years, while the war and the communist regime that followed all but eclipsed his persona and his work, with *Ferdydurke* as its high point, from public memory in Poland and internationally.

In many ways it was a fresh start for him, which he came to appreciate. In his diary, dating from 1953 to 1969 and often regarded as his masterpiece,³⁹² Gombrowicz wrote:

I was suddenly in Argentina, completely alone, cut off, lost, ruined, anonymous. I was a little excited, a little frightened. Yet at the same time, something in me told me to greet with passionate emotion the blow that was destroying me and upsetting the order I had known up to now. War? The destruction of Poland? The fate of those close to me, my family? My own destiny? Could I take this to heart in a way, how shall I say this, in a normal way, I, who knew all this from the beginning, who had

³⁹² This special case of a diary defies most clichés of the form. Rather than the mundane soliloquy of an individual in order to register the fleeting present or serving the higher purpose of self-reassurance, slowly composing the narrative of one's life, Gombrowicz's diary was from the outset directed to the specific audience of the readership of the Polish magazine *Kultura*, based in Paris. The various mini-essays, diatribes, jokes, travelogues, and what else Gombrowicz chose to put on those pages were published in installments and eagerly read by the Polish émigré intelligentsia. Only sometimes do the entries formally meet the expectations of the genre. Because of their infrequency they seem all the more parodic, for example: "Thursday. I got up, as usual, around ten o'clock and ate breakfast: tea with ladyfingers, then Quaker Oats. Letters: one from Litka in New York, the other from Jeleński in Paris. I left to go to the office at twelve (on foot, not far). [...] I went to Rex's for coffee. Eisler joined me. Our conversations go more or less like this: 'Well, what's new, Mr Gombrowicz?' 'Pull yourself together at least for a moment, Eisler, I beg of you, sir.' Upon returning home, I stopped at Tortoni's to pick up a package and to talk with Poczo. At home I read Kafka's *Diary*. I fell asleep around three. I make known the above so that you will see what I am like in my daily routine." Gombrowicz, 2012, 100.

already known this? Yes, I am not lying when I say that I had been living with catastrophe. When it happened, I said something to myself like: Ah, so it has finally happened and I understood the time had come to take advantage of the capacity that I had cultivated in myself to separate and leave.³⁹³

In the face of loneliness, penury and the loss of both his friends and the habitat of his native language, Gombrowicz resorted to a new beginning; he became, so to speak, Artaud's little child in the hand of the towering statue of Death. The New World, he would later claim, had attracted him in the first place because of its "youth" and "immaturity". Incidentally, these concepts had long been the focal point of his writing.³⁹⁴

Gombrowicz's project is the unmaking of received ideas, he strives for freedom from what he calls "form" (shorthand for ideologies, customary manners, outward appearances, even the image one has of oneself), craving for a world of immaturity—or more precisely, a world whose inhabitants recognize and embrace their innate and inescapable immaturity, which they usually try to obfuscate by means of solemnity, gravitas, sobriety, and the like. In his own words: "Immaturity—what a compromising, disagreeable word—became my war cry."³⁹⁵

Gombrowicz's literature is a means to this end, rather than an end in itself. One could call it tendentious, although in its playful exuberance, self-mocking grandiloquence and anti-authoritarian orientation it differs greatly from what usually goes under that name.

³⁹³ Ibid., 159.

³⁹⁴ See Ewa Kuryluk, "Poland's Cunning Child in Exile: Diary Volume 1 by Witold Gombrowicz," *Los Angeles Times*. <http://lat.ms/18r9xXB>. June 11, 2013.

³⁹⁵ Susan Sontag, "Foreword," in Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000) viii.

Gombrowicz is less known in the United States than in Europe, but even there he is mainly cherished by fellow writers. Susan Sontag calls *Ferdydurke* “extravagant, brilliant, disturbing, brave, funny, wonderful”,³⁹⁶ Milan Kundera—who has a thing about non-mimetic, conceptual writers—counts its author among his “pleiad of great Central European novelists: Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz.”³⁹⁷ John Updike notes in his blurb on the back cover of the 2000 translation of *Ferdydurke*, which arguably made the novel available to English readers for the first time,³⁹⁸ that Gombrowicz is “one of the profoundest of late moderns, with one of the lightest touches.” In 1968, in the year before his death, he allegedly lost the Nobel Prize by one vote.³⁹⁹

The reason why he is the patron of this conclusion, however, is because the tendencies of a literary youth refusing to mature, as they have been outlined in the previous chapters, come together in his writing—and are finally furnished with explicit poetics. Gombrowicz takes the cue, furthering, refining and radicalizing his precursors’ project.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., xv.

³⁹⁷ At another instance, Kundera extended his praise: “I consider *Ferdydurke* to be one of the three or four great novels written after Proust’s death.” Milan Kundera, “Gombrowicz malgré tous,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* (March 8, 1990).

³⁹⁸ In 1961, there had been an abridged translation of *Ferdydurke* into English, by Eric Mosbacher. In addition to omitting what the new translator Danuta Borchartt describes as “some of the most beautiful and important passages” was, however, a combined indirect translation of the French, German and possibly Spanish translations. See Danuta Borchartt, “Translator’s Note,” in Gombrowicz, 2000, xvii.

³⁹⁹ See Stanisław Barańczak, “Gombrowicz: Culture and Chaos,” in *Breathing Under Water and Other East European Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 95.

After the rather short period that the main part of this dissertation looks at, roughly the years from 1900 to 1914, the motif of youth hesitant to grow up was far from falling out of favor. Particularly in the second half of the century, after the “invention” of pop music, a teenage culture often stylized in opposition to adult culture soared. Eventually, the distinction of “high” and “low” art or culture has been metaphorically mapped on different stages of growth and thus maturity. Already in the fledgling youth culture of the 1950s and early 1960s the overlaps of the aesthetic and the political were considerable. The same is true for the history of cinema, particularly with respect to the French *nouvelle vague*. In most cases the works, just like the cultures they both represented and inspired, exhibited a skepticism of official authorities and ideologies that, however vaguely, associates them with the project of Büchner, Joyce, Musil, Walser, and Kafka. As far as literature goes, novels such as André Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* (1925), Denton Welch’s *In Youth Is Pleasure* (1943), J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour tristesse* (1954), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), or later Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover* (1984) come to mind.

It is characteristic for all of these that their use of youthful protagonists enables them to assume a marginal perspective, from which they can lash out at a putative mainstream culture, voice criticism, or devise an alternative reality. For example, *The Tin Drum* records and processes traumatic national history by virtue

of Oskar Matzerath's minuscule figure, who declares himself to be one of those "clairaudient infants", whose "spiritual development is complete at birth and thereafter simply confirmed."⁴⁰⁰ *Lord of the Flies* transposes a Cold War era post-apocalyptic, atomic dystopia to an exotic island—*Peter Pan* on the Bikini Atoll, so to speak. *Lolita* scandalized its readers by presenting a sort of blueprint for sexual aberrances and confusions, even perversions of identity; in its course, the putative adult comes to assume the position, that is to say, the dependency of the youth, and vice versa. Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* despairs of what he calls the phoniness of the (post-)modern world and longs for a new authenticity, which he locates, if anywhere, in his little sister Phoebe's purity of heart. And midnight's children, most of all their protagonist Saleem Sinai, come to embody a country's sensation of recently attained freedom from a colonial past; they do want to grow up, but to a tradition they feel the urge to invent anew. In short, all these books constitute visits to territories suppressed by, in the words of Jakob von Gunten, "what people call Western civilization." This does not, however, necessarily place them in the same genealogy as the novels discussed in the previous chapters.

A negative poetics, lurking, skeptical, biding its time, distinguishes them from most ostensible successors specified above. They do not work, with hindsight, through historical trauma, screaming for remembrance in a mode of baroque, emotional realism (as in *The Tin Drum*). They do not aspire to invent, in a sort of inverted *Bildungsroman* mode, the new traditions and hence future existing condi-

⁴⁰⁰ Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) 35.

tions of a country reborn after colonialism (as in *Midnight's Children*). Neither do they exhibit any pathos of authenticity, nor do they care to present man as inherently violent (as in *Lord of the Flies*). They do not seek a solution or catharsis, but confine themselves to representing the dramatic problem. If their narratives were punctuation, they would be extended question marks rather than exclamation marks. That is why I propose Witold Gombrowicz as their legitimate successor or, rather, their literary executor.

One could say that Gombrowicz takes the negative poetics of his precursors and turns it inside out in order to arrive at a sort of negative positivity, or vice versa. This is the main reason why his literature is characterized by an excessive joy. Its fundamentals may be desperate and its conclusions bleak—man's basic desire to communicate with himself and with others always necessarily fails, getting bound up in form instead—, but this recognition could not possibly be more fun. Gombrowicz is so serious about self-degradation that it is ultimately exhilarating and elevating. As Robert Boyers notes: "Gombrowicz was a skeptic for whom skepticism itself seemed an absurd and settled posture he was obliged at every turn to subvert."⁴⁰¹ In this respect, he is a close relative of Luis Buñuel and Monty Python. Also, he is as philosophically staunch as they are.

⁴⁰¹ Robert Boyers, "Clues That Lead Nowhere: The Impudent Witold Gombrowicz," *Harper's Magazine* (March, 2006): 86.

Ferdydurke is essentially a novel of ideas, or rather, of an idea. The poet and essayist Charles Simic sums it up as “the irrational, anarchic reality buried beneath the conventional surface of life.”⁴⁰² The conflict between these two is mediated through what Gombrowicz calls form. In his diary, he elaborates:

The most important, most extreme, and most incurable dispute is that waged in us by two of our most basic strivings: the one that desires form, shape, definition and the other, which protests against shape, and does not want form. Humanity is constructed in such a way that it must define itself and then escape its own definitions. Reality is not something that allows itself to be completely contained in form. Form is not in harmony with the essence of life, but all thought which tries to describe this imperfection also becomes form and thereby confirms only our striving for it.⁴⁰³

Form obviously means many things for Gombrowicz, but it can be noted that conceptual thinking is among them. This becomes clear in the last sentences of the quote. Even the effort to conceive of the failings of conceptual thinking (“thought which tries to describe this imperfection”) falls prey to form.

The title *Ferdydurke* is already a satirical commentary on this predicament. Gombrowicz himself once remarked that he chose the titles of his books “the way we name dogs, simply in order to tell one from another.”⁴⁰⁴ Accordingly, it is often noted that *Ferdydurke* does not mean anything.⁴⁰⁵ This is not quite correct. Susan

⁴⁰² In what—even though the following passage does not sound like it—is actually a lengthy appraisal of Gombrowicz, Simic notes that he finds it “impossible to like *Ferdydurke* entirely. The problem with novels of ideas is that a single theme [...] can become insistent.” Charles Simic, “Salvation Through Laughter,” *The New York Review of Books* 53:1 (2006).

⁴⁰³ Gombrowicz, 2012, 114.

⁴⁰⁴ See Ruth Franklin, “Imp of the Perverse: Witold Gombrowicz’s War Against Cliché,” *New Yorker* (July 30, 2012): 76. In this context it seems worthwhile noting that the dog Gombrowicz owned late in his life when he had already moved to the south of France was called Psina, which means “poor little dog” in Polish.

⁴⁰⁵ “Start with the title,” Susan Sontag begins her foreword to the novel. “Which means... nothing.” Gombrowicz, 2000, vii.

Sontag rightly remarks that “there is no character in the novel called *Ferdydurke*” (vii). There is, however, a minor character called Freddy Durkee in Sinclair Lewis’s likewise satirical novel *Babbitt* (1922), whom the narrator runs into in a restaurant.⁴⁰⁶ Also, Rolf Fieguth, the editor of the current German edition, notes that the Polish word root “dur-” means idiot or idiotic and that the syllable “dyd” is reminiscent of *dydek* (colloquial for money).⁴⁰⁷ He also mentions that *Ferdy-* suggests masculinity, whereas *-ke* is a feminine suffix. Fieguth writes: “Gombrowicz himself, erotically self-describedly ‘uncategorical’, uses his title sometimes as a masculine noun, sometimes as a feminine one” (373). Thus, *Ferdydurke* both means nothing and, if not entirely everything, quite a lot; it accepts the prerequisite of the title for a form, but rather than arriving at one, it documents the striving as well as the shortcomings.

Also, it mocks the contemporary Polish critics who had numerous derided Gombrowicz’s first publication, the collection of short stories *Memories of a Time of Immaturity* (1933). Apparently, Gombrowicz had decided on the title in the last minute. He would soon regret it, realizing that he had equipped the more skeptical readers with the ideal weapon for their lashing: Look at this writer who admits to

⁴⁰⁶ In 1984 Bogdan Baran was the first to conjecture that Gombrowicz had borrowed his title from *Babbitt*, which had been translated into Polish in the early 1930s. Henryk Markiewicz confirmed this theory in 2000, upon finding a hitherto unknown story by Gombrowicz called *Uszy* (Ears) and written in 1935. It features a character named Ferdy Durkee, a salesman, who is being terrorized by the dealer M. Moseman. Ferdy manages to provoke him, humiliate him and finally force him to strip naked. See <http://www.gombrowicz.net/Ferdydurke,1396.html>. Retrieved in April 2014.

⁴⁰⁷ Rolf Fieguth, “Nachwort des Herausgeber,” in Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2004) 373.

his major failure, that is, his immaturity! The deadpan surrealist mode of the stories and the narrator's often self-denigrating tone only helped fuel the misunderstanding. In his next book Gombrowicz countered this criticism by embracing it; beside the apparently gratuitous title, the narrator, a certain Joey Kowalski (the Polish equivalent to John Smith), is introduced as the 30-year-old author of a book called *Memories of a Time of Immaturity*, which has been trashed by the critics—a hilarious *mise-en-abyme* of interlaced realities.⁴⁰⁸ “In vain my friends advised me against using such a title,” Gombrowicz writes, “saying that I should avoid even the slightest allusion to immaturity.” The narrator, however, defends his choice:

Yet it just didn't seem appropriate to dismiss, easily and glibly, the sniveling brat within me, I thought that the truly Adult were sufficiently sharp and clear-sighted to see through this, and that anyone incessantly pursued by the brat within had no business appearing in public without the brat. But perhaps I took the serious-minded too seriously and overestimated the maturity of the mature.⁴⁰⁹

This is the dialectics of maturity/immaturity in a nutshell. By exposing his immaturity, the sniveling brat within himself, Gombrowicz strives for maturity. The surrealist pranks of his stories are attempts to overcome what he perceives as the duplicitous make-believe of everyday life, to reveal the false pretenses that govern people's behavior, to set free the repressed energies of naivité, amazement, oafishness. In short, his seemingly affected coquetry with immaturity conceals an attempt

⁴⁰⁸ For the new edition of *Memories of a Time of Immaturity* Gombrowicz added two largely independent sections of *Ferdudurke*, “The child runs deep in Filidor” and “The child runs deep in Filibert”, and called the new book “Bakakai”, after the street where he spent his early years in Buenos Aires. As with *Ferdudurke* he changed the original spelling, in this case from Bacacaj. It came out in December 1957 in Poland, in a time of relative political relaxation. Since 2004 there has been an English translation under the title “Bacacay”, by Bill Johnston (New York: Archipelago Press).

⁴⁰⁹ Gombrowicz, 2000, 4.

at authenticity. This is the moral heart of his poetics and, by extension, of the poetics of predecessors.

The structure of *Ferdydurke* seems to combine the components of those whose youthful flag it flies (it is interesting, by the way, that the separation and coalescence of body parts play a major role in the book). Like *Jakob von Gunten*, it is about the unmaking of an individual and his always deferred recomposition; like *Leonce and Lena*, it is a light-hearted grotesque full of puns that deals, among other things, with the lamentable impossibility to look upon one's own head and that ends with the hint of a maturity virtually indistinguishable from a systematized immaturity; like *Amerika*, it is a picaresque narrative of loosely connected episodes that eventually breaks off rather than comes to a close. Like *Portrait*, its narrative is clearly constructed according to a conceptual framework; the stages of family, school and university that Stephen has to work through one by one correspond to school, foster-family and landed gentry relatives that Joey Kowalski, the narrator of *Ferdydurke*, joins, wrestles with, and finally leaves in each of the three parts of the novel. In between, Gombrowicz inserts two short stories, "The Child Runs Deep In Filidor" and "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert," both preceded by a preface, in which the author dwells on poetological questions.

Simic has remarked that "Gombrowicz's book owes something to both Rabelais and Voltaire, the comic novel tradition and the philosophical tale,"⁴¹⁰ but at the beginning, it looks like a curious blend of Kafka and Proust:

⁴¹⁰ Simic, 22.

Tuesday morning I awoke at that pale and lifeless hour when night is almost gone but dawn has not yet come into its own. Awakened suddenly, I wanted to take a taxi and dash to the railroad station, thinking I was due to leave, when, in the next minute, I realized to my chagrin that no train was waiting for me at the station, that no hour had struck.⁴¹¹

This interesting mix of *In Search of Lost Time* (the gradual coming to, the reacquaintance with one's body), *The Metamorphosis* (waking up in the morning, the sensation that something is out of joint) and *The Wish to be a Red Indian*⁴¹² (the disappearance of taxi and train vs. the horse) sets the tone of the narrative. One rightly suspects that what will follow will be a story about the overcoming of fear, about self-determination and emancipation in a hostile or at least paralyzing environment. Also, it will be about the disappointment in the unoriginal nature of reality. The possibility of dream, fantasy and laughter prefigures. It is clearly an existential laughter, at once funny and terrified. Still in bed, Joey Kowalski feels "the dread of nonexistence, the terror of extinction, it was the angst of nonlife, the fear of unre-

⁴¹¹ Gombrowicz, 2000, 1.

⁴¹² This is the short text *The Wish to be a Red Indian*: "If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there were no spurs, threw away the reins, for there were no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone." The piece first appeared in *Betrachtungen* (Observations; 1913). Cited in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1931-1934, vol. 2., part 2*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2004) 800. Also in Benjamin, 1968, 115. The scene prompts Benjamin to reflect on a childhood photograph of Kafka, "probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of about six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child's suit. Palm branches loom in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the subject holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds. [...] The ardent 'wish to be a Red Indian' may have consumed this great sadness at some point. [...] A great deal is contained in this wish." Benjamin, 2004, 800.

ality” (ibid.). The reason for this plight, we will soon learn, are the scathing reviews, the sneer and jeer his last book was met with. The consequence:

I felt that my body was not homogeneous, that some parts were still those of a boy, and that my head was laughing at my leg and ridiculing it, that my leg was laughing at my head, that my finger was poking fun at my heart, my heart at my brain, that my nose was thumbing itself at my eye, my eye chuckling and bellowing at my nose—and all my parts were wildly raping each other in an all-encompassing and piercing state of pan-mockery (2).

This pan-mockery of body parts heralds the subsequent omnipresence of the “pupa” and the “mug”, of which we will hear more in a minute. Throughout the book, fingers, buttocks, ears etc. will be singled out, embarrassing, diminishing and infantilizing the victim in the process. “I was halfway down the path of my life when I found myself in a dark forest,” Kowalski echoes Dante, “but this forest, worse luck, was *green*” (original emphasis). Kowalski’s inferno is the violent diminution, being rebuffed into adolescence because he fails to meet the requirements of maturity: “‘Joey,’” his “aunts, my numerous quarter-mothers” would say “between one babble and another, ‘it’s high time, dear child. What will people say? If you don’t want to be a doctor, at least be a womanizer, or a fancier of horses, be something... be something definite...’” (3).

The aunts’ demand that Kowalski refuses aims at the same thing that Musil feared under the name of ideology and that made him turn to the subject of youth because it was only there that he felt adequately free of the burden of ideology to “still narrate something,” without paying his dues to one system of belief or other. One might go so far as to say that Musil and Gombrowicz turn to youth almost reluctantly. They are just short of alternatives as long as they do not want to comply

with this advice: be something definite. In this deliberate eschewal of form, Büchner, Musil, Joyce, Kafka, Walser and Gombrowicz write in concert. For historical, political and poetological reasons as they have been elaborated in the previous chapters they withstand the call for closure and stability. They swerve to youth as one dodges a blow. They make use of the freedom it grants for a literary evasive maneuver. At the same time, the narrative matrix thus opened up can be fleshed out with palpable forms of protest, constant and concrete reminders of this repressed aspect in the adverse ideology. This is why Gombrowicz was attacked so mercilessly both for *Memories of a Time of Immaturity* and *Ferdydurke*. His philosophical temperament allowed him to see he had hit a soft spot; he attributed the gruff reactions to people's instincts not to have their everyday cover blown. As he saw it, they chose to hold on to their self-image of maturity and to continue repressing their sniveling brat within.

In *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz has Kowalski search himself through a hysterical soliloquy. Will he be able to put an end to the grimaces, the "impotent, bestial, mechanical, knee-jerk kind of laughter" regularly taking hold of him? "No longer stimulate, titillate, and attract the immaturity of others with immaturity, as I have done thus far," Kowalski concludes a couple of pages later, after a long rant against the pervasive hypocritical seriousness oblivious of its roots in childish play, "but, on the contrary, elicit my own maturity and with it evoke their maturity, speak from my soul to their soul!" Yet immediately he adds: "The soul? And forget the

leg? The soul? How about the leg? How can one forget the legs of cultural aunts?”
(11).

Obviously, he has reached an impasse, torn between his penchant for immaturity and the understanding that the display of maturity is his sole chance to be respected, in society and as a writer. Eventually, he feels a growing desire to write: “Oh, to create my own form! To turn outward! To express myself! Let me conceive my own shape, let no one do it for me!” (14). At this moment, Pimko appears, “a doctor of philosophy and a professor, in reality just a schoolteacher, a cultural philologist from Kraków, short and slight, skinny, bald, wearing spectacles, pin-striped trousers, a jacket, yellow buckskin shoes, his fingernails large and yellow” (14), in other words, the epitome of maturity.

This is Kowalski’s Faustian moment, where he, wrestling with the Erdgeist, with the principal conditions of his existence, just about to “be free to expound my own views against everything and everyone,” meets his Mephisto. Except this time instead of Faust catching Mephisto, it is the other way around; Pimko snatches the embryonic text from under his hands. “And sitting squarely on his wisdom, he went on reading. I felt sick at the sight of him reading. My world collapsed and promptly reset itself according to the rules of a conventional prof” (15). As Pimko reads on, Kowalski grows smaller and smaller: “My leg became a little leg, my hand a little hand, my persona a little persona, my being a little being, my *oeuvre* a little *oeuvre*, my body a little body, while he grew larger and larger” (16). The feeling in bed that something was terribly out of joint finally proves true; this is where

Kowalski's metamorphosis happens. Instead of a giant bug, he turns into an adolescent boy, who is consequently ushered to school. "I wanted to scream," Gombrowicz writes, "I'm not a schoolboy, it's all a mistake!" I tried to run for it, but something caught me in its claws from behind and riveted me to the spot—it was my puerile, infantile pupa."

Within the hysterical stream of the exuberant faux-baroque that characterizes the language, the pupa is one of the main concepts of the text. Danuta Borchartt, the English translator of *Ferdydurke*, explains: "The Polish word *pupa* (pronounced "poopa") [...] means the buttocks, behind, bum, tush, rump, but not one of these adequately conveys the sense in which Gombrowicz uses "pupa" in the text. [...] The pupa is his metaphor for the gentle, insidious, but definite infantilizing and humiliation that we inflict on one another."⁴¹³ It is joined by its conceptual sibling, the *mug*, shorthand for the destructive elements in human relationships. At the very end of *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz writes that "the infantile, infernal pupa reached its zenith, its culmination, and scorched us directly from above."⁴¹⁴ This flaming pupa, belittling whoever steps into its limelight, is even more merciless than the mug "because there is no escape from the mug, other than into another mug, and from a human being one can only take shelter in the arms

⁴¹³ Gombrowicz, 2000, xviii–xix. As Borchartt relates in a similar piece on translating *Ferdydurke*, after discussions about a fitting rendering with her editor and Susan Sontag, the author of the foreword, Borchartt decided to keep "pupa" unchanged, "and we'll see how it fares in the English language." Danuta Borchartt, "Translating Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*," *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Letters & Life*. http://www.corpse.org/archives/issue_5/critical_urgencies/borchar.htm. September 15, 2013.

⁴¹⁴ Gombrowicz, 2000, 279.

of another human being. From the pupa, however, there is absolutely no escape.”⁴¹⁵

Note how this quasi-mystification of a putatively autochthonous vocabulary thwarts and parodies the idea to reach through language a higher sensation of reality. This is the opposite strategy to Kipling’s *effet du réel*, where the unintelligible exoticism of certain words, sparingly sprinkled across the text, enhances the sense of wonder, while leaving the general impression of a scene unobstructed. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, decides to put rather obscure concepts into the center of his writing. Instead of meaning one specific thing, like a type of wood or apparel, they gesture at a diffuse variety of things. In our attempt to fathom them, we are alerted to the trickiness of language and led to mistrust the text as well as our own thinking. Simultaneously, this linguistic excess or *jouissance* of Gombrowicz’s writing, as it soars into grotesque and incomprehensible heights, indirectly emphasizes the phantasmagoric character of the narratives preceding it.

In this light, *Jakob von Gunten* emerges as an extended metaphor—Alfred Jarry would have called it a pataphor. Whereas a metaphor is the comparison of a real object or event with a seemingly unrelated subject in order to emphasize the similarities between the two, the pataphor uses the newly created metaphorical similarity as a reality that serves as its own basis. The same is true for Kafka’s “Judgment.” Neverland, as a single gigantic phantasmagoria of parental discipline and a public school code of honor, is another likely contender. And when Büchner

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 281.

dreams up the fairy tale realms of Pipi and Popo (pee and bottom), an astonishingly explicit foray into infantile psychology *avant la lettre*, can the coincidence of Büchner's Popo and Gombrowicz's "pupa" be merely that—coincidental, arbitrary, lacking any deeper connection? In both cases the invention of a world whose main function is the veiled criticism of society spins around a private part, which in this new context, taken out from its bashful hide-out and placed into the center of attention, is above all ludicrous.

Büchner and Gombrowicz are joint in their effort to subvert traditional hierarchies by putting the belittling element into the middle of the text or by naming an entire kingdom after it, respectively. In a single gesture, a mooning of sorts, the customary monopoly on violence, exerted by the state or the teacher/headmaster, is at once ridiculed and mollified, the stern adult replaced by the child. Valerio's laughable law of criminalizing work is mirrored by the servants' slapping their masters at the end of *Ferdydurke* and one highborn character "fraternizing" (sic; for the act is unspeakable) with a farmhand.⁴¹⁶ The contorted ethics of the world the writers inhabit are exposed by the relation to a topsy-turvy alternate universe,

⁴¹⁶ This is the reaction of Kowalski's uncle from the landed gentry upon hearing about the friendship struck between Kowalski's friend he brought from the city and a valet: "Fraternizing,' he repeated, 'he's fraternizing with peasantry, eh?' He tried to give it a name, to make it passable in a worldly, social, experiential sense, because a purely boyish fraternization was unacceptable, he felt that he wouldn't have been served this in a good restaurant." Ibid., 239f. The excitement goes on for over a whole page. Eventually, still the uncle: "So he's a pervert after all!" Konstanty exclaimed. 'Not at all. He fraternizes without anything, and without perversion. He fraternizes like a boy.' 'A boy? A boy? But what does it mean? *Pardon, mais qu'est-ce que c'est—boy,*' he played dumb, 'as a boy with Valek? In my house—with Valek? With my lackey?' He got mad and pressed the bell. 'I'll show you the boy!'" 241.

whose laws reach so deeply into the terrible that they reappear on the other side, the hilarious.

This mode is inherent to the other texts as well, sometimes in the more subdued way of *Törleß* and *Portrait*, where sadomasochist fantasy abounds or, respectively, a palimpsest of Greek and Catholic mythology rife with priests “of eternal imagination” and young Daedaluses/Icaruses getting ready to slip over wings of joy. At other times, the “real” world tends to disappear completely and no longer forms a viable counterpoise to the phantasmagoria of the narrative. Beside Büchner, this is particularly true for *Jakob von Gunten* and *Amerika*. The way their stories develop resembles a sort of syllogism—from relative verisimilitude (Jakob arriving at the school, Karl arriving at his uncles house in New York) over a subsequent shaking of reality (for example the endless corridors in Mr Pollunder’s mansion or Karl’s being strangled by Pollunder’s brooding daughter in *Amerika* and the hidden dwellings, shrouded in legend, of the Benjamentas, themselves a mysteriously incestuous couple, in *Jakob von Gunten*) to, in the third step, a complete overthrow of the habitual order, giving way to the promise of Utopia (the Nature Theater of Oklahoma and the crumbling of the servants’ school and the common journey outside Europe).

This procedure is rather complex, both with respect to its method and to its implications. Slavoj Žižek indirectly elaborates on one of the latter, in Lacanian concepts. With Lacan’s shift of emphasis to the Real, Žižek writes in an appendix to *The Plague of Fantasies*, fantasy is “conceived as the formation which fills in the

gap of the Real—as Lacan put it, one does not interpret fantasy.”⁴¹⁷ Fantasy is therefore a sort of mediator between the truly unfathomable, pre-linguistic structure of things, the Real, and the intelligible world ordered by the symbolic. It is the by-product, the fall-out of the effort to understand something that cannot be understood. Žižek writes: “Lacan opens up the possibility of a radically non-hermeneutical phenomenology—of a phenomenological description of spectral apparitions which stand in for constitutive nonsense” (ibid.).

It is this moment where the attempt to make sense, mindful of its inherent impossibility to make sense, is at its most tense between veracity and nonsense that I am interested in. It reveals why Büchner, Kafka, Walser, Joyce and Gombrowicz resorted to youth and fantasy as the matrix of their literature. Adorno helps clarifying this. In his *Aesthetic Theory* he talks about a closely related paradoxical disjunction, between rationality and irrationality. The history of modernity, Adorno says, “is that of a straining toward maturity as the organized and heightened aversion toward the childish in art, which becomes childish in the first place by the measure of a pragmatically narrow rationality.”⁴¹⁸

The deflected, shifted, parodist assault on maturity is an assault against this strand of modernity, the conceptual manifestation of a philosophy of history corresponding to Hegel’s *Bildungsroman* program. *Peter Pan* takes part in the capers of this assault, but dares only go half the way. Peter Pan, the character, must serve as a sort of scapegoat and take all the blame. Meanwhile, the Darling children return

⁴¹⁷ Žižek, 1997, 180.

⁴¹⁸ Adorno, 2004, 43.

home safely, leaving all lust for adventure, rupture and revolution behind, and grow up in London as *comme-il-faut* petty bourgeois. Leonce and Lena revel in their victory, but unabatedly affected by a palpable melancholy, supposedly because they know, as does Büchner, writing the play while hiding from the warrant on his head, how dubious this victory is—a utopia that will forever be confined to the shallow boundaries of pen and paper. It is only in Gombrowicz that impudence and insurgency gains full confidence.

From the beginning he felt that by bolstering youth, by making immaturity his war cry⁴¹⁹ he could most effectively irritate and scandalize his readers and critics. He had found a way to tackle the implicit ideology—by definition invisible to most—of maturity. Essentially, *Ferdydurke* is Lacan's non-hermeneutical phenomenology, the seemingly senseless dance of spectral apparitions standing in for constitutive nonsense.

For Gombrowicz, the task at hand was to detect an alternative modernism which salvages the individual. His writing is an act of self-assertion in the face of a systematic facelessness. In ancient times, according to Hegel, the heroic individual appeared in his society as an “independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment,” whereas in modernity he is only “a restricted member.”⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ “Immaturity—what a compromising, disagreeable word!—became my war cry,” Gombrowicz told his interviewer and quasi-biographer Dominique de Roux in the course of a series of talks that took place in Vence in Southern France and that were later published as a book. Witold Gombrowicz & Dominique de Roux, *A Kind of Testament* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973) 50.

⁴²⁰ Hegel, 1998, 194.

Hegel continues: “He is not, as he was in the Heroic Age proper, the embodiment of the right, the moral, and the legal as such. The individual is now no longer the vehicle and sole actualization of these powers as was the case in the Heroic Age” (ibid.).

Hegel goes on to mention efforts of his contemporaries Goethe and Schiller, who, discontent with this stance of the modern individual, came up with characters such as Götz von Berlichingen in the eponymous play (written in 1771, published in 1773) and Karl Moor in *The Robbers* (1781). Karl Moor may even gain a victory, rehabilitating himself—or rather, his self—from condemnation through the outside conditions, yet Hegel is quick in relativizing it.⁴²¹ Even Schiller’s Wallenstein, who soars above Moor’s and Götz’s petty privacy and tries to single-handedly give history a spin, must eventually learn that his commanders are not loyal to him, but to “the monarch of the state, the Emperor of Austria” (196)—and he must thus, as an individual subject, succumb to the objective power of history.

In contrast to Hegel, Gombrowicz hails from the other side of the commotion that shook the modern state, after the revolution of 1848 and the First World War. Think of Barthes’s diagnosis of the shock of 1848, after the emancipatory dreams of the masses were crushed at the barricades: “[H]enceforth, this very ideology [of

⁴²¹ “Yet how tiny and isolated must this private revenge turn out to be, owing to the insufficiency of the requisite needs, and, on the other hand, it can only lead to crime, for it incorporates the wrong which it intends to destroy.” Ibid., 195.

universal emancipation and the breaking of enslaving chains] appears merely as one among many possible others.”⁴²²

In the previous chapters the subsequent inward and outward moves of literature as a means of coping with this situation has been described at length. Now Gombrowicz enables us better to understand the self-assertive quality of youth, as he employs it to counter Hegel’s verdict, which in his time has not so much lost its validity as diagnosis, but its positive connotations. Writing *Ferdydurke* in the mid-1930s, Gombrowicz is acutely aware of the continually precarious position of the individual, delivered to objective conditions which—rather than serving a rational spirit of communion and the utopia of overcoming the relationship of master and slave⁴²³—seem only prone to the contrary, to aggravating the abjection and suppression of the individual. Once in Argentina, while observing from afar the slaughterhouse Europe has turned into, Gombrowicz runs into a parade of young soldiers in the street. He records the event in his diary:

An invasion of pinioned legs, and bodies, inserted into uniforms, slave bodies, welded together by the command to move. Ha, ha, ha, ha, gentlemen humanists, democrats, socialists! Why, the entire social order, all systems, authority, law, state and government, institutions, everything is based on these slaves, barely grown children, taken by the ear, forced to pledge blind obedience (O priceless hypocrisy of this mandatory-voluntary pledge) and trained to kill and to allow themselves to be

⁴²² Barthes, 1968, 60.

⁴²³ See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 19ff. “The relation between Master and Slave [...] is not recognition properly so-called. [...] The Master is not the only one to consider himself Master. The Slave, also, considers him as such. Hence, he is recognized in his human reality and dignity. But this recognition is one-sided, for he does not recognize in turn the Slave’s human reality and dignity. Hence, he is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize. And this is what is insufficient—what is tragic—in his situation. [...] For he can be satisfied only by recognition from one whom he recognizes as worthy of recognizing him” (19).

killed... All systems, socialist or capitalist, are founded on enslavement, and, to top it off, on the enslavement of the young, my dear gentlemen rationalists, humanists, ha, ha, ha, my dear gentlemen democrats!⁴²⁴

In an upshot of the criticism inherent in the books of his precursors Gombrowicz invigorates the individual by giving it a voice—that laughs. His method of going against the continuous enslavement of the young—and one should take note that he does not limit it to fascism or communism, but explicitly includes democracy and humanism—is impudence. The same impudence that sets the tone of the diary as a whole. The first page reads: “Monday: me. Tuesday: me. Wednesday: me. Thursday: me.” Leaving out the dates, a system readily observed throughout the book, is a first instance of impudence because it reduces the idea of specifying the date of composition ad absurdum. Just like the titles of his books, the specification of the mere day of the week does not mean anything really.

The second instance of impudence is the emphasis of the “I”. Of the very same I that Hegel saw marginalized by modernity: “Outside the reality of the state,” Hegel says, subjects “have no substantiality in themselves.”⁴²⁵ Gombrowicz takes up the task of restoring this substantiality. “Do not allow yourselves to be intimidated,” he writes. “The word ‘I’ is so basic and inborn, so full of the most palpable and thereby the most honest reality, as infallible as a guide and severe as a

⁴²⁴ Gombrowicz, 2012, 353.

⁴²⁵ The whole passage from his *Aesthetics* reads: “For substantiality is no longer merely the particular property of this or that individual, but is stamped upon him on its own account and in a universal and necessary way in all his aspects down to the tiniest detail. Therefore whatever individuals may achieve in the interest and progress of the whole by way of right, moral, or legal actions, nevertheless their willing and achievement remains always, like themselves, when compared with the whole, insignificant and nothing but an example.” Hegel, 1998, 183.

touchstone, that instead of sneering at it, it would be better to fall before your knees before it.⁴²⁶

Such remarks were sure to cause outrage among the exiles in the early to mid-fifties, who, as a contemporaneous émigré Polish writer attests, were “thirsting in those troubled times for spiritual support and advice from the moral authority that the Polish writer traditionally had been.”⁴²⁷ Subverting this habitual system of authority had from childhood onwards been at a great pleasure to Gombrowicz⁴²⁸ as it was part of his poetics, derived from what comes close to a philosophy of history. Another entry in the *Diary* reads: “To be an individual... I do not want to say that collective and abstract thought, that Humanity as such, are not important. Yet a certain balance must be restored. The most modern direction of thought is one that will rediscover the individual man” (110).

And it is in and through laughter that Gombrowicz rediscovers him. The absurd, the grotesque or the plain comic has always been present in the writing of his predecessors, but more as a potential, largely untapped, unleashed only at times, as Milan Kundera reminds us, writing about the beginning of *The Trial*:

⁴²⁶ The passage goes on: “I think rather that I am not yet fanatical enough in my concern with myself and that I did not know how, out of fear of other people, to surrender myself to this vocation with enough of a categorical ruthlessness to push the matter far enough. I am the most important and probably the only problem I have: the only one of my protagonists to whom I attach real importance.” Gombrowicz, 2012, 140.

⁴²⁷ Barańczak, 97.

⁴²⁸ Born into a well-to-do family of the landed gentry, Gombrowicz grew up in an environment that respected social hierarchies and was laced with aristocratic pretenses.

Two gentlemen, perfectly ordinary fellows, surprise K. in bed one morning, tell him he is under arrest, and eat up his breakfast. K. is a well-disciplined civil servant: instead of throwing the men out, he stands in his nightshirt and gives a lengthy self-defense. When Kafka read the first chapter to his friends, everyone laughed, including the author.⁴²⁹

Kundera adds the cast of the film version of *The Castle*, as imagined by Philip Roth: “Groucho Marx plays the Land-Surveyor K., with Chico and Harpo as the two assistants” (ibid). Whether a joke is funny, Kundera says, depends on your position toward it, if you are inside or outside of it. The *Kafkan*, he says, “takes us inside, into the guts of the joke, into the *horror of the comic*” (ibid.; original emphasis). Now, in the tradition of writers fighting against maturity, Gombrowicz is the first one who takes us outside again, into a realm where the sovereignty of the “I” is uncontested by any other power. Gombrowicz’s “I” is a state which has declared its independence.

Theories of the joke from Thomas Hobbes to Freud are usually based on a double movement of elevation and denigration. Hobbes: “The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”⁴³⁰ And Freud: “Everything comic is based fundamentally on degradation to being a child.”⁴³¹ The paradoxical twist of Gombrowicz’s humor—intensify-

⁴²⁹ See Words Without Borders, *The Wall in My Head: Words and Images from the Fall of the Iron Curtain* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter Books, 2009) 7.

⁴³⁰ From the discourse on *Human Nature*. Cited in Wallace L. Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling Behind Laughter and Humour* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007) 141.

⁴³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960) 227.

ing Kafka, Walser and Büchner's—is that he elevates himself to the level of the childish. I find it hard to say it better than with Adorno:

No less, however, does art rebel against precisely this form of rationality, which, in the relation of means and ends, forgets the ends and fetishizes the means as an end in itself. This irrationality in the principle of reason is unmasked by the avowedly rational irrationality of art, evident in its technical procedures. Art brings to light what is infantile in the ideal of being grown up. Immaturity via maturity is the prototype of play.⁴³²

Unaware of the Polish author, Adorno condenses in these lines a theory of Gombrowicz's writing and of his pranks. Once more, youth—the deliberate embrace of the infantile—appears as a force of protest against the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed maturity. The irrationality that this “maturity” attempts to suppress is accentuated through the irrationality of Gombrowicz's self-denigration. In an overt, almost brutal manner, he follows through what was available all along, if in a more subdued and subtle way, in the literature of his predecessors: the suffering and the complaint that modernity confused ends and means somewhere along the way. The crushing of the individual for the benefit of the state, with Hegel's theoretical blessings and through decades of political restoration, is recognized as a meander, leading into disaster. This is why all the utopias, as conjured by the writers discussed here, are based on acts of egalitarian communion: a land of plenty in *Leonce and Lena*, artistic freedom from constraints of school and church in *Portrait of the Artist*, the equal partnership of Jakob and Mr Benjamenta in *Jakob von Gunten*, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma (at least in the hope it emanates) in *Amerika*, and the friendship of lord and servant at the end of *Ferdydurke*. Fraternity trumps patri-

⁴³² Adorno, 2004, 43.

archy; the relationship between father and son is mainly a synecdoche of the relationship between state and individual.⁴³³ Hence the utter decline of the *Bildungsroman* model, which is, if only its rare ideal manifestation, a machine issuing stately subjects bereft of subjectivity.

This focus on the reinstatement of the individual has little to do with, say, Rastignac's megalomaniac fantasies of conquering Paris, nor with Nana's modest wish to achieve numb self-fulfillment in a sort of sexual instinct, nor with Dickens's astutely sentimental narratives of good hearts thriving in the event. Whereas Dickens, Zola and Balzac's attention is always on society as a whole and they thus employ a panoramic view, the writers discussed here represent a new turn in literary history. Society is dubious from the onset. It is no longer taken for granted as the fertile soil for the making of a person. Rather, it appears as a crooked, untrustworthy universe, merely mediated through the skeptical eyes of the beholding protagonists. This is by the way as true for *Peter Pan* and, to a somewhat lesser extent, for *Kim*.

The reason for this is a perceived change in the structure of society. If one extrapolates this trend to obliterate the individual, as it was already so palpable in

⁴³³ Gombrowicz is highly aware of this. His diary abounds with thoughts on the problem of stemming from, as he called it, a secondary or inferior culture of Europe, one that glorified itself in order to measure up to France, England, Germany, but always fell short, like an adolescent awkwardly striving to be seen as an adult. In his own words: "Therefore it seemed paradoxical to me that the only means by which I, a Pole, could become a fully valuable phenomenon in culture, was this one: not to hide my immaturity, but to admit it; and with this admission to break away from it; and to make a steed out of the tiger that was devouring me up to now, which steed (if I could mount it) could take me farther than those Western folks who were 'delineated.'" Gombrowicz, 2012, 207.

the years leading up to the Great War, if one follows its trajectories to their vanishing point, one arrives at totalitarianism—famously Adorno and Horkheimer’s sad realization of the dialectics of Enlightenment. What is maturity writ large—in Gombrowicz’s sense as pompous self-importance adamant in its will to dominate, ignorant of its own shortcomings, lacking humor and generosity—other than a nascent totalitarianism? The literary revolt against maturity is essentially a revolt against proto-fascist tendencies.

Klaus Theweleit describes the curious workings of Nazi ideology. Some scholars, he writes, have suggested that Nazism buttressed the family, but this would not have been unconditionally the case: “Nazism also destroyed it.” While the regime partly reinforced the figures of mother, father and the family, it divested them of any real sovereignty. The family “remained more or less an obstacle to the fascist will to world domination.”⁴³⁴

Correspondingly, fascist family policy pursued two avenues. It lent support to the formal power of the father (demanding absolute obedience of children) and to the position of the mother as the great bearer of children. But educational control was ultimately withdrawn from parents, as children within the fascist youth organizations—the Hitler Youth and German Girls League (BDM)—were made to swear direct obedience to the Führer. In the event of conflict between the Führer and family demands, the child was encouraged to take action against its parents as an informer in the service of the Führer (ibid.).

The family, Theweleit goes on, was thus “stripped of the only function that might have lent it human substance as a site of relationships, of communication, of protection; it became an organization for the terror of formal domination” (ibid.).

⁴³⁴ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Vol. 2: Male Bodies, Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 252.

Still—and reminiscent of Žižek’s imp of perversity, which can articulate its cruel truths merely nonverbally—, any public derision of the family was prohibited. Here, Theweleit detects the source of what he calls the fascist double-bind: “While the state defended the dictum of ‘honoring thy father and mother’ with increasing vehemence,” he writes, “it simultaneously deprived parents utterly of the qualities on which a child’s respect might have been founded” (ibid.).

It is in this light, I believe, that the poetics of immaturity is revealed as the striving for maturity that it actually is. The critical impetus that is at its heart tears through the veil of such ideological hypocrisy: the assertion of the family that is actually its effacement; or the evocation of maturity that is actually a confession of self-righteous naiveté. The gestures of wanton diminution, stubborn humility and implicit or explicit laughter hardly conceal a desperation with such a status quo as well as the effort to fight it, while refusing the opponent’s weapons. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have observed: “It is by the power of his non-critique that Kafka is so dangerous.”⁴³⁵ And, very much in the same vein, Bataille comments on the Communist distrust of Kafka:

If the adult gives a major sense to childishness, if he writes with the feeling that he is touching a sovereign value, he has no place in Communist society. In a world from which bourgeois individualism is banished, the inexplicable, puerile humour of the adult Kafka cannot be defended. Communism is basically the complete negation, the radical opposite, of what Kafka stands for.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 60.

⁴³⁶ Bataille, 1985, 167.

The delicate point here is how superficial assumptions are overturned. Rather than as the bogeys of the bourgeoisie, the writers opposing maturity (and with it, the *Bildungsroman*) appear as its most ardent defenders. What they actually struggle against are the anti-bourgeois trends embraced by a bourgeoisie that has fallen for stately discipline. There is a marvelous scene from *Minima Moralia* that encapsulates this insight. It is called “The Bad Comrade” and starts with an emblematic sentence: “In a real sense,” Adorno writes, “I ought to be able to deduce Fascism from the memories of my childhood.”⁴³⁷ It continues:

As a conqueror dispatches envoys to the remotest provinces, Fascism had sent its advance guard there long before it marched in: my schoolfellows. If the bourgeois class has from time immemorial nurtured the dream of a brutal national community, of oppression of all by all; children already equipped with Christian-names like Horst and Jürgen and surnames like Bergenroth, Bojunga and Eckhardt enacted the dream before the adults were historically ripe for its realization (ibid.).

Adorno adds what seems to me like the indirect poetics of the mistrust against maturity: “The outbreak of the Third Reich did, it is true, surprise my political judgement, but not my unconscious fear. [...] In Fascism the nightmare of childhood has come true” (192f.). He describes the capricious cruelty of the lawless zones of the schoolyard as well as the bonding between teachers and hooligans—if not in class, then after leaving the institution.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ Adorno, 2005, 192.

⁴³⁸ “Those, however, who were always truculently at loggerheads with the teachers, interrupting the lessons, nevertheless sat down, from the day, indeed the very hour of their matriculation, with the same teachers, at the same table and the same beer, in male confederacy, vassals by vocation, rebels who, crashing their fists on the table, already signaled their worship for their masters” (193).

We have seen the same mechanism time and again, described by Walser, Joyce and Musil. Gombrowicz adds the farce to the tragedy, a duel of mugs and grimaces, which is eventually won by the fighter who puts on a face of sanctimonious purity and innocence, the cliché of youth: “His face turned as luminous as a rainbow after a storm, and the wondrous Eaglet-*Sokol*, the pure, innocent, uninitiated Lad, beamed in all of the seven colors of the rainbow! ‘Victory!’ shouted Pyzo.”⁴³⁹ The witnessing narrator feels the effect on himself: “I was grimacing, grimacing, and I knew that I was losing myself in that grimace. I thought I would never escape Pimko” (ibid). The grimace represents the prison of form, a code of manners issued by the mature authorities and suppressing the individual. The fight of rude “boys” against innocent “lads” is only instigated by the cunning Pimko. By stubbornly calling the swearing schoolchildren innocent, he manages to impose the matrix defining the subsequent quarrel. There is no “outside” of it anymore.

It will be long until Joey manages to escape, after an extended, tragic-hilarious stay at the house of a family programmatically called Youngblood, where he falls in love with a “modern schoolgirl.” For her sake, he makes another effort to attain maturity, the quality she admires most. Yet she has only contempt for his fruitless attempts. Eventually, he accompanies his friend Kneadus to a family estate in the country where Kneadus makes his pass of “fr... aterization,” instructing the valet about the French Revolution and the Declaration of Human Rights. Also, he has him “hit [him] in the mug” (227), which Kneadus relishes: “We’re brothers. I

⁴³⁹ Gombrowicz, 2000, 65.

was finally able to communicate with him” (ibid.). Joey’s uncle, the patriarch of the estate, cannot for the world understand this behavior. In vain, he tries to map it on familiar patterns, like pederasty (“Prince Severyn also had his moments!” 239) or bolshevism (“Is he some kind of an agitator?” 236).

At the end, a commotion takes hold of the lords, their servants and the peasants from the nearby villages—“immaturity spilled everywhere” (272). The last scene of *Ferdydurke* is a vague flight, reminiscent of the one Kafka’s narrator in “Children on a Country Road” undertakes—he almost seems to run by in the background. Joey thinks to himself: “Where do I turn, what do I do, where am I in this world? Where do I put myself? I was all alone, even worse than alone, because I had become like a child” (ibid). In order to restore some meaning to the utter inexplicability of the situation, Joey decides to kidnap his cousin Zosia, tell her that he loves her and run away to Warsaw, “to begin a new life in secrecy from anyone—and the kidnapping would have justified such secrecy” (274).

What we see here is an ideology in the making, Musil’s dreaded storytelling in order to equip the world with the footing it does not have. The last pages read like what might simultaneously be a parody of and a homage to the end of *Kim*: “Grasshoppers hopped. Crickets buzzed in the grass. Birdies sat on trees or flew about” (275). Finally, the cogs and wheels of the world have clicked into place. Of course, Gombrowicz cannot resist, after admitting that “there is absolutely no escape from the mug,” telling us that we can chase him if we want, “I’m running away, mug in my hands” (281). Which is followed by the last lines of the book,

another embrace of the childish, evoking, as if it were its radicalization, the ending of *Leonce and Lena* with its surrealist dream of an inverted society. Here, it takes the diminutive form of nursery rhyme: “It’s the end, what a gas. And who’s read it is an ass!” (ibid.).

What is, it remains to ask, the effect of this anti-authoritarian impulse, the long struggle against the ideology of maturity on the latter part of the twentieth century, after the demise of Nazis and Soviets and after even *Ferdydurke* could finally be published in Poland in 1986? Is its interest merely historical?

In her preface to the English edition of *Ferdydurke*, Susan Sontag writes: “Almost as dated is [Gombrowicz’s] assumption that adults claim to be mature” (xiv). At first glance, this seems true. At the latest with the end of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and the post-1989 culture of consumerism, the ideal of maturity fell out of favor. Neoliberal capitalism adopted immaturity as its war cry, except what had been a war cry now presented itself as a pipe of peace and what had been immaturity now posed as youth, positively conceived.

This act of semantic make-up, undoing the self-mockery and thus lifting the dialectical tension of the concept, repainted Gombrowicz’s mug into a proper face. Its energy prone to contentiousness and rupture was tamed and domesticated so as to fit a system whose hierarchies were thinly disguised and all the more rigid for it. This is why Sontag is only superficially right. Society may no longer lay claim to maturity, but its obedience to the current call for immaturity and youth conceals an unabated adherence to Hegel’s *Bildungsroman* ideal of acquiescing in the status

quo. Thus, the tables have not really turned. The soap opera of success, seriousness and self-importance that Gombrowicz found intolerably mendacious is still on. This is why the program of *Ferdydurke*, spelling out at its crassest and clearest the poetics of its forbears, is no less acute now than it was then. As Gombrowicz writes in his diary: “We must feel like actors in a bad play who cannot fulfill themselves in their limited and banal roles. This consciousness will allow us at least to maintain our maturity until the moment when we are able to become more real.”⁴⁴⁰ It is the hidden irony of the texts championing immaturity that they long for precisely this moment.

⁴⁴⁰ Gombrowicz, 2012, 69.

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