

Genese Grill  
(Burlington, VT, U.S.A.)

*Musil's «On Stupidity»  
The Artistic and Ethical Uses of the Feminine Discursive*

Abstract

Robert Musil's 1937 address «Über die Dummheit» navigated a challenging subject in a treacherous climate for free speech and simultaneously affirmed Musil's conception of the necessary symbiosis of aesthetics and ethics. This paper argues for a reading of the address and its preparatory notes wherein Musil's gendered «Stupidity» (*Die Dummheit*) represents the ethical role of the artist, as poetic, non-conscripted voice – and, thus, of Musil himself – in a period of totalitarian brutality and linear «final solutions».

In 1931 Robert Musil was nominated by Thomas Mann to take the vacant seat left by Arthur Schnitzler on the Writers' Section of the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin, but was rejected, allegedly because he was «too intelligent to be a true creative writer»<sup>1</sup>. Despite this ambivalent slur and despite Musil's contempt for anti-intellectualism and what he called «wishy-washy mysticism», he was, in fact, a rather curious champion of types of thinking often maligned as stupid. Trained as an engineer, a philosopher, a behavioral psychologist and a mathematician, he abandoned all of these professions in order to become a creative writer (a *Dichter*) and even admits to having taken up the study of logic and mathematics «in order to conquer them»<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, many Musil scholars, attached to his

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Amann, «Literature and Politics» in *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil* (Camden House, 2009), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Musil writes that he was «von einer tiefen Verachtung für den Verstand erfüllt» (filled with a deep contempt for reason). «Zur gleichen Zeit» (At the same time), he continues, he began to throw himself into his fresh enthusiasm for logical and mathematical studies, in order, he explains, «um sie zu besiegen» (to conquer them). *Klagenfurter Ausgabe* (Klagenfurt Edition): Annotated Digital Edition of the Collected Works, Letters and Literary and Biographical Remains, with Transcriptions and Facsimiles of All Manuscripts.

hyper-intellectuality, persist in calling him a «scientific rationalist» and in arguing that he ultimately rejected what by their standards are unintelligent, i.e., aesthetic and mystical solutions to the problems posed in his great, unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities*. Yet, these problems, including such unanswerable questions as «how to live the right life», «how do we hold a feeling fast», and «what is reality», are precisely of the sort which necessitate a humble admittance of incapacity, of, even, a sort of stupidity in the face of an infinite questioning about what it might mean to be human. They are questions which can only be explored by means of dismantling mono-logics and certainties and by creating a new, living, *poly-logos*, by facilitating a new sort of seeing. And to see new is, almost by definition, to see in a way that looks stupid to those who are entrenched in some old surety. There may not be words or syntax yet to describe what is new, but one certainly can't use the old ones in the old way; thus the new seer is caught in a moment of stuttering and stammering, circling and speaking in tongues. The new seer may find his or her project endlessly complex, unfinishable, like Musil's expanding novel, while another will have finished, efficiently and smoothly, in no time at all.

The other morning I was on my way to discuss with some intellectual lady friends whether or not logic is a male construct we might better dispense with. I told this to two of my male friends on my way out the door. «What», exclaimed one of them, «you had better not try using logic to debunk it!». I tried to explain the much-discussed difficulty of using a male-made language to talk about modes of being potentially external to it, when the other friend picked up a knife in the dish rack and said, «We men call this a knife. What do you women call it?» The word logic, of course, comes from the word *logos*, therefore language and logic are thought to be inextricably related. What is a knife? It is a stabber and a spreader. A pricker and a slicer, a threat and a promise, a tool and a cold metal caress.

When examined in light of contemporary feminist poetics, the impulse to answer the question of definition with multiple personal associations rather than one simple word is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's notion of a «sex that is not one». Multiple answers speak the language of multiple erogenous zones in contrast to the mono-directional thrust of the male *logos*. What does this imply about logic? In attempting to answer my friend's question, I thought about the idea of multiplying instead of re-

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ducing, of infinite proliferation, of dialogics and poly-logics, and, of course, I thought of Musil's sketch «What is a Street». In this sketch Musil mocks the  $2 \times 2 = 4$  people whom, were you to ask them, «What is a street?» would be annoyed by the stupidity of the question and answer: «a street? A street is a street. Period.» The other kind of person, the seer or visionary, Musil calls him, «knows most certainly that a street is not something straight and day-bright, but rather that it can just as well be ... something with multiple branches, filled with secrets and riddles, with traps and underground passageways, hidden prisons and buried churches,»<sup>3</sup> a means to become lost or to really find one's complex self – or even to find another human being in a new world.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche, another thinker with an ambivalent relationship to rationality, argues that polytheism was important because it helped people to see with individual and varied eyes, and taught them how to see a «plurality of norms» instead of being mono-centered. This variety, although nominally about «gods, heroes, and overmen of all kinds, as well as near-men and undermen, dwarfs, fairies, centaurs, satyrs, demons, and devils», came to be a structural model of seeing individually and of establishing the rights of the individual, «free-spiriting» and «many-spiriting». Polytheism became a prototype for the individual's «strength to create for ourselves our own new eyes – and ever again new eyes that are even more our own; hence man alone among all the animals has no eternal horizons and perspectives.»<sup>4</sup> We create limits and horizons ourselves, defining and ordering regenerative chaos. While this is understandable and probably necessary, Nietzsche, in his posthumous essay «On Truth and Lying in a Supra-Moral Sense», reminds us of our role as «creative subjects» in the constant proliferation of these constructions and encourages us to make ever new and more varied metaphors to describe and arrange what is essentially a fluid and ungraspable reality<sup>5</sup>.

The many new eyes that are eternally created and recreated by such a process are also present in Rilke's «Archaic Torso of Apollo», where the headless sculpture shines like a candelabra of individual candles: «For» as

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Musil: *Tagebücher* [Diaries]. Ed. Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 191-92.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, «On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense» in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Norton, 2001), 874-884.

Rilke writes, «there is no place that does not see you»<sup>6</sup>. The many points of de-centered seeing tell the viewer, the reader, the poet, «You must change your life», circling us around to the connection between the formal/aesthetic and the ethical/worldly. A body that sees — breaking out of all bounds like a star with many points — is a body made entirely of eyes — multiple points of vision without one center. A novel, too, can have multiple centers.

Being without center, however, does not mean being without meaning, or without ethics. On the contrary, this multiplicity of shifting, changing perspectives requires an even greater attention than that «wretched contentment» Nietzsche diagnosed in his contemporaries. Success, as Walter Pater described it, is the «failure to form habits. » And art, like the consciousness of the reality of death, is a means to wake people up, «vivifizieren, dephlegmatisieren» as Novalis describes the purpose of philosophy<sup>7</sup>. Abstraction, Musil writes in his essay *Toward a New Aesthetic*, explodes «the normal totality of experience» and this explosion, he maintains, is «the basic capacity of every form of art»<sup>8</sup>. Art, he writes, «is a “disturbance” in which elements of reality are reconstituted as an unreal whole that usurps the value of reality»<sup>9</sup>. In his search for the best way to live, Musil sought a «motivated life» through engagement with what he called the *living word* and a constant revivification of relative aesthetic and ethical vision.

The constant destabilization is accompanied by an opening to possibilities, and the articulation of new creation, but to see new is initially to see like a child, an innocent, or a fool. It is to stutter, stammer, stumble. It is a necessarily inefficient process, and Musil, who turned over every idea in his mind in painstakingly thorough relation to every other idea, constantly testing its relative and current validity, was speaking of himself when he titled an important unpublished essay, «Ruminations of a slow-witted man»<sup>10</sup>. And he may have been thinking of what he referred to in one note as the «sympathetic role that idiots play in art» when, in a very early version of his novel concept, he named his protagonist Hans Narr, a

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, 483, translation mine.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Berkeley & LA: U of California P, 1980), 188.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*. Ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1990, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Musil, *Precision*, 196.

<sup>10</sup> Musil, *Precision*, 214-236.

German version of the archetypal Foolish Hans or Jack the Knave<sup>11</sup>. Before he arrived at the name of Ulrich for this character who would be his «friend», his alter ego, he tried a variety of names, including Anders, which means «other». The relationship between foolishness, otherness, and the marginal role of the artist and intellectual is highlighted by this palimpsest of names, just as it is by Musil's laboratory of a thousand manuscripts, their obsessive and deferring re-visioning, their infinite proliferation of metaphors, analogies, possibilities. Like other Modernist novelists, Musil's goal was to enable fresh-seeing by opening up a narrative field of perspectival circularity, dwelling in momentary presence rather than pushing toward linear progress, worldly success, or conformity to preconceived concepts. This fresh seeing aimed to create an existential awareness of the individual's role in the continual co-creation of realities through poly-logical imagining.

Modernist re-visioning was an aesthetic-ethical imperative of great moment in an era where the myth of historical progress came to be paired with treacherously totalitarian *Gleichschaltung*, a new word coined by the Nazi regime to connote the enforcement of a policy of totalizing conformity of ideas, attitudes and action<sup>12</sup>. The resistance to the coming of

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<sup>11</sup> K4: Lesetexte. Band 4, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Die Vorstufen. Aus dem Nachlass Ediertes. Vorarbeit zum Roman. Haus ohne Gegenüber: «II. Fassung: Der zum Bewußtsein der Eigenart seiner Kraft gekommene Hans Narr. Der zur Feinheit des Geistes gekommene Hans Narr. Er sucht seine Schwester auf – die verlobte, spät verlobte – und überzeugt sie».

<sup>12</sup> Two aphorisms by Musil defining this Nazi neologism: «Gleichschaltung. Another measure of the strangeness of what is happening today with the German spirit is that a word has come into usage for a large part of these happenings which presents the native speaker with no less difficulty than it does a foreigner. «Schalten», the action word at its foundation, belongs to the older history of the German language and had possessed in the present day only a weakened life, so that there were indeed many derivations of it in use, while it itself was somewhat petrified and only used in specific situations. So one can say, for example, that someone schaltet free (disconnects or isolates) from something, but the simple sentence one schaltet no longer carries a complete meaning. On the whole, the word is most often seen in the formula «schalten und walten», which means something to the effect of to manage and to have a free hand, but which is spun with a bit of poetical moss. One grasps that there is some Romanticism behind the idea of using the word schalten. Its original meaning signifies to push, tow, set in motion, force. This Romantic word has the most modern of children. A Schalter is something at the train station, namely a ticket office, and something having to do with electrical room lighting signifies a little window that one can push open and closed, but also there is, in an electric power station, something called a large «Schalt-board» [...] – «Gleichschaltung: 1) The word It marks the strangeness (it will be difficult for foreigners to understand it) of

*Gleichschaltung* is embodied in Musil's novel by the alternate consciousness state he calls the Other Condition. This Other Condition is an extra-temporal aesthetic mystical experience, which functions as an interruption to the rule of what in the title to the first book of Musil's novel is called «seinesgleichen geschieht», or the self-same prevails. In Book II, «The Criminals: Into the Millennium», it is this extra-temporal condition of otherness, as ethical-aesthetic quickening, that prevails as the most promising utopian configuration of a-social deviation from sameness marked by its title. Alterity, in other words, is tantamount to crime; and crime is a necessary stage in the process of new seeing, which itself is often seen as a form of crime.

In his controversial 1937 talk, «On Stupidity», Musil presents stupidity (*die Dummheit*, a feminine noun in German) as a female artist, a *Künstlerin*, who, instead of answering with one simple word, responds in multiple associations when she plays the association-word game. For example, when prompted with the word «prison», she will answer, «consists of cells where one locks up useless people»; when prompted with the word «sick», she responds with a personal experience: «I was sick once». When prompted with «father», she tells a tale of brutality: «he threw me down the stairs once»<sup>13</sup>. Stupidity, this woman artist, talks too much about herself, is unseemly and improper, and doesn't seem to think or express herself in a linear manner. Musil had argued in his 1929 essay, *Woman, Yesterday and Tomorrow* that «Woman is tired of being the ideal of the man who no

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what is happening today in Germany, that this word *Gleichschaltung*, which plays such a large role in it, cannot be directly translated into other languages. This word was suddenly there one day out of nowhere for the not-yet-National Socialist Germans. Lamps, machines are *gleichgeschaltet* (switched into conformity) – and Germans. Difference between norms and similarities. It has active and passive meanings in psychiatry. Levers and similar mechanisms, electric currents *ein- und ausschalten* (switching on and off). *Schaltwerk* (control unit). *Schalthebel* (switching lever) In general: *Gleichstrom* (co- or parallel current): a current whose direction remains the same. There is a *Batterieschaltung* (accumulator switch) for galvanic elements, next to and following one another. One speaks of (different) modes of *Schaltung* in dynamo machines. Likewise in an electrical lighting system. *Schalten*, middle high German. To push, tow (esp. a ship), into movement, to force. In new high German becomes = to steer; old high German *scaltan* = to push, new high German. *Schalter* = sliding sash from middle high German *schalter* (*schelter*) = bolt. *Schaltjahr* (leap year) already in old high German because of the day that is pushed forward. (to push is also a basic meaning of *schalten*) [*Walten* really = being strong] see *Gewalt* (violence) [...]». KA: *Lesetexte* Band 14. *Gedichte, Aphorismen, Selbstkommentar. Aphorismen aus dem Nachlass. Ich stelle zusammen*. Trans. mine.

<sup>13</sup> Musil, *Precision*, 282-283.

longer has sufficient energy to idealize, and [that] she has taken over the task of thinking herself through as her own ideal image». In 1929 he had written that women, who were intent on becoming the actors of themselves, had contributed to «a great purification of the atmosphere», concluding with approbation that the new woman, «no longer wants to be an ideal at all but to create ideals, to contribute to their formation just as men do»<sup>14</sup>. Had he changed his mind in less than a decade?

Avital Ronell, in her book *Stupidity*, registers nausea in response to what she sees as a lapse into misogyny in this 1937 address, suggesting that Musil evades the real bully of totalitarianism whom he cannot directly attack by picking on someone weaker<sup>15</sup>. But let us look at this a bit more closely. Musil's *On Stupidity* is a very strange address, filled with a more than usual amount of ambivalence and an even less than usual amount of closure for Musil. He rarely connects the different strands of ideas, rarely shows us directly how one section seems to contradict the other, how the different types of stupidity are hopelessly mixed up on the hierarchy of good, bad, dangerous, higher, lower, peaceful, violent, brutal, passive, victimized, sadistic, holy. The address asks a good deal of the listener. It seems, often, to not make sense. Is it in code? Could he have spoken directly at that time if he had wanted to? About an address he presented in 1934 in Vienna he noted that its success consisted in the fact that he had dared, at all, to speak<sup>16</sup>.

Both Ronell and Musil agree that premature closure is a prime characteristic of the bad sort of stupidity. Coming too quickly to closure, thinking that one has complete mastery over something or someone, believing one has understood everything are signs of stupidity. Thus, if we are not to jump too quickly to conclusions, we may register our discomfort (nausea even) at Musil's association, but should stay to explore what is incompletely in the air here. The association of the woman artist and stupidity is probably not, as Ronell points out, merely grammatically determined by their shared noun gender; there is more to it, conscious or not; although not, in my reading, misogyny. It might seem even more damning that the woman artist in the finished talk is originally an «imbecile» or an «idiot» in

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<sup>14</sup> Musil, *Precision*, 213.

<sup>15</sup> Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*, University of Illinois Press, 2002, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Musil noted that the greatest success of this speech was that he had spoken at all («der Erfolg dieses meines Vortrags hat hauptsächlich darin bestanden, daß ich überhaupt gesprochen habe»). *KA: Lesetexte*. Band 9 Reden. Vortragsmanuskripte aus dem Nachlass. Der Dichter in dieser Zeit. Einleitung Basel.

the notes, until we read Musil's admission: «the idiot who answers like I do»<sup>17</sup>. Musil, as becomes clear when one examines the preparatory notes for his talk, is actually identifying himself, and the artist and intellectual in general, with this maligned and threatened woman artist, «die Dummheit», who knows that it is sometimes wise to hide one's intelligence from the brutes who are more powerful. While some men may blame her for this subterfuge, Musil notes, «a realistic observer will recognize it as a weapon which encircles her». Further, the imperative outlined in his 1929 essay that the human body, woman's body in particular, free itself from the ideals imposed upon it from outside, in order to become «the actor of itself», is an apt image for Musil's radical rejection of the total rule of *a priori* forms, externally imposed ideals, communal language and values. The Modernist artist, like the new woman, wants to create her own ideals and come to his own conclusions about reality, wants, in sum, to participate in the ongoing creation of the world through discourse.

While in the talk he makes the fleeting connection between the imbecile/woman artist's answers and the poetic, in his notes for the address, he expands on this, remarking that the imbeciles' answers have a great plasticity, a corporality «... they do not answer conceptually, but tell a story, dramatic or epic ...». They narrate superfluities and contexts that «are connected to the theme through an underground sea»<sup>18</sup>. The stupid woman artist who answers in complexly personal associations in the address is a twin to Musil himself, a person who sees the undersea or underground connections between ideas and things, sees knives and streets and fathers and stupidities as multi-faceted impressionistic shape-shifters, different in different circumstances; and anyone who would censure her is a  $2 \times 2 = 4$  person, hopelessly obtuse. In this context, the imbeciles, the women artists, the idiot poets who, Musil writes in his notes for the address, speak like «painterly primitives» when responding to associative prompts, are stand-ins for Modernist artists, maligned by National Socialist theory as «entartet» (degenerate). Yet, Modernist artists themselves (Musil included) often happily admitted of some affinity with the art of the insane, of children, and of «primitive» cultures, precisely because this work provided access to the «spherical»<sup>19</sup> realms of the subconscious and sub-logical.

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<sup>17</sup> K4: Transkriptionen und Faksimiles: Nachlassmappen. Nachlass Gruppe III. Mappe III/4. «Über die Dummheit». III/4/97. Schm Entwurf 7. Trans. mine.

<sup>18</sup> K4: Transkriptionen und Faksimiles: Nachlassmappen. Nachlass Gruppe III. Mappe III/4. «Über die Dummheit». III/4/97. Schm Entwurf 7. Trans. mine.

<sup>19</sup> Musil learned this word from Ernst Kretschmer and discussed its meanings in a



Despite its tendency to utilize the emotional capacity of collectivist hysteria for its own purposes, the reign of linear mono-logic, meanwhile, was sadistically intent on eliminating even the quietest individual voice of dissent or alternative vision.

The political nature of Musil's address is much clearer in the preliminary notes, where he was able to be braver, revealing that he felt himself as artist and human directly endangered and maligned by the invectives of the totalitarian regimes in power. In one instance he notes the danger to which one who questions the prevailing valuations of stupidity exposes himself. He could be accused of having a «destructive attitude during the contemporary historical development» which he calls «the ether swoon». «Yes», he continues, «it is not impossible that there would be hotheads who would accuse him of a lack of a patriotic or *völkisch* attitude». Musil finishes ironically: «Of that lack he knows himself to be exonerated. And I hope that no one would fear that this will become a polit[ical] exposition. I am only speaking about stupidity»<sup>20</sup>. Later Musil comments about the German «herd instinct» which had already existed before it found its current political form, and a slight bit later on the relevance of a discussion of sadism, «because our time has developed a social sadism» related directly

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number of diary entries: See *Tagebücher*, 838: «6. April 1930. Frühling – Brüder Čapek – Prag – diese drei Worte verbunden durch ein ziemlich unsinniges Zeitwort bildeten meinen Bewußtseinsinhalt beim Aufwachen nachmittags. Ich hatte die ganze Zeit über geglaubt, nicht zu schlafen, sondern wach zu denken. Es wäre eine Art gestörtes Denken, das mit der Freudschen Traumtheorie nichts zu tun hat. Aber etwas später kam mir doch vor, ich hätte ein ähnliches Bild vor mir gehabt, wie eins einmal in der Prager Presse war, einer der Čapeks ein Blumenbeet gießend. Das wäre dann wohl ein Bilddenken, “sphärisch” in Worte übersetzt». [6. April 1930. Spring – Čapek brothers – Prague – these three words bound together by a seemingly meaningless verb constituted the content of my consciousness upon awaking in the afternoon. The whole time I had thought that I had not been sleeping, but rather had been thinking while awake. It would have been a kind of disordered thought quite different from Freud's theory of dreams. But later it occurred to me that I had had seen a picture before me, similar to one I had seen once in the Prager Presse, of one of the Čapeks watering a bed of flowers. That would be rather a thinking in pictures, «spherically» translated into words] And: «Nur habe ich das früher durch eine Art Anklingen (assoziativ oder “sphärisch”) zu erklären versucht. Es ist aber wohl so, wie beim Schreiben selbst: wenn aus einer Leitidee Gedanken hervorgehn, die man unmöglich wissen konnte» (*Tagebücher*, 862). [But in the past I have attempted to explain this as a kind of suggestion (associative or «spherical»). It is, however, the same with writing itself: when ideas arise from out of a main theme that one could not have anticipated.] Trans. mine.

<sup>20</sup> KA: Transkriptionen und Faksimiles: Nachlassmappen. Nachlass Gruppe III. Mappe III/4. «Über die Dummheit». III/4/113. A 1 1. Trans. mine.

to «humanism's lack of resistance»<sup>21</sup>. While humanism does not know how to defend itself, society, Musil laments at the start of the address, is guilty of its own resistance, a resistance to art which he calls a special kind of «art stupidity». The word stupid, he notes further, had often been used to refer to poetry in more intellectually happy and liberal times; but now it has been replaced in part by «political and national invective» and an unconscionably excessive brutality and passionate intensity aimed at anyone who would dare to see differently. Music that is «übermodern» (overly modern), Musil notes, is called «undeutsch» (un-German), really just another word for stupid<sup>22</sup>. The idiot is the other, par excellence.

The intellectual and the Jew, writes Musil elsewhere, as if he were talking about the type of the man without qualities, are both extraterritorial, stateless beings. They cannot, in other words, be successfully integrated into the *Gleichschaltung*. The stranger, adds Georg Simmel, referring to the role of the Jew in contemporary German society, «is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of “objectivity”. But objectivity does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement». The stranger's «dangerous possibilities», Simmel suggests, proceed from the fact that «he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent»<sup>23</sup>. This openness is reminiscent of Irigaray's impulse to liberate the subject from a pre-configured logos in *The Way of Love*. Outside of the safety of what she calls its «language-house», «the subject accepts being unsheltered. A stranger in his own land, he turns back to a more radical disappropriation, where keeping the senses awake is indispensable for survival ... here the eyes have another function than recognizing the same, the identical ... They open anew upon the unknown ... they discover again astonishment, contemplation, admiration, restored to the ingenuousness of the child. They see anew, not blinded by what they have to see in accordance with speech»<sup>24</sup>. Such seeing requires a resistance to settled sureties and to what Musil would call dead words. To utilize living words, on the other hand, is a form of Keats' «negative capability».

<sup>21</sup> KA: Transkriptionen und Faksimiles: Nachlassmappen. Nachlass Gruppe III. Mappe III/4. «Über die Dummheit». III/4/115 A 1 3. Trans. mine.

<sup>22</sup> KA: Transkriptionen und Faksimiles: Nachlassmappen. Nachlass Gruppe III. Mappe III/4. «Über die Dummheit». III/4/5 H 5. Trans. mine.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Simmel. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, NY: The Free Press, 1950, 404.

<sup>24</sup> Luce Irigaray. *The Way of Love*. Continuum, 2004, 45.

Shakespeare, as Keats wrote was «capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason»<sup>25</sup>. This resistance to premature closure and polarized posturing is an aesthetic practice of flexible ethical aliveness in the face of stale and outmoded received ideas, absolutes, and finalities.

In conscious distinction to the parole of «final solutions», Musil chose to approach provisional answers to unanswerable questions and, furthermore, to do this in the language of literature. He chose to write a novel instead of a work of philosophy precisely to avail himself of the formal languages of subconscious imagery and infinitely associative metaphor, variation and repetition, deferral and suspension of time and narrative, realms he knew from his extensive studies of psychology, anthropology and religious experience to be dangerously close to the pre-logical, primitive, mystical or insane. Musil considered the exceptional and fleeting consciousness of the aesthetic Other Condition to be the foundation of ethics and of a motivated conduct of life. To act according to ethics or ideals, alas, is considered foolish and adolescent, feminine, idealistic, unrealistic, if not anti-social or threatening, even today. But society, the state or nation, as Musil repeats again and again in the aphorisms and sketches from the period of *Gleichschaltung*, is in dire need of the autonomous voice of the marginalized *Geist*, an untranslatable but key word that signifies a combination of spirit, intellect, feeling and culture. Indeed, the synthesis of what Musil called «precision and soul» embodied in the word *Geist* strikes at the heart of what he diagnosed as a deeply problematic polarization of thought and feeling. While many Musil scholars still believe that he intended to reject the aesthetic mystical Other Condition as possible solution to the problems posed in the novel, I maintain that it remained central to Musil's conduct of life, his narrative aims, and aesthetic-ethical activity. But this is not to say that Musil did not care about reality.

Aesthetic experimentation, far from being disinterested, is intrinsically related to political and social liberation, to social ethics, as is the experimental novel, perhaps precisely because, as Bakhtin noted, it is inherently anti-canonical. «The novel», writes Michael Holquist in his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, «is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial con-

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats, qtd. In Albert Elmer Hancock. *John Keats: A Literary Biography*. Boston & NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1908, 121-122.

straints of that system»<sup>26</sup>. Allen Thiher, in his *Understanding Robert Musil*<sup>27</sup>, puts the case even more directly, when he says that both Musil and Bakhtin «wrote to defend freedom against stultifying dogma and illiberal totalitarianism» (137). Thiher writes that he knows of «no other thinker ... who stressed with such lucidity that ethical thinking and art are interrelated». Thiher connects this resistance to Musil's «theory of the destruction of forms», invoking the Kabbalistic mystical imperative to continually repair the original vessels of creation which are said to have burst because they could not «contain the light emanating from God's being». Thiher reminds us that although «the vessels must be continually broken so that the light may be propagated [...] there must also be vessels so that it can be contained. The destruction of the forms of perceived thought and perception is a necessary process, which gives access to a new condition beyond received ideas and their rationality». After the destruction, in other words, there must be new creation, new forms.

Bakhtinian heteroglossia and polyphony are terms of generative delight as they dare to revel in the infinity of creative possibilities in the face of death camps and the silencing firing squad. I think here of the experience of Bakhtin's great countryman Dostoevsky, who may have learned how to speak in tongues and how to celebrate the idiot from his dramatic reprieve from execution. Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky's idiot hero, has learned to see while away in Switzerland, as a result of his epileptic attacks, which have the effect of making everything look «strange». His attacks are preceded by moments of an Other Condition of ecstasy so powerful that, Dostoevsky writes, «all these gleams and flashes of the highest sensation of life and self-consciousness, and therefore also of the highest form of existence» seemed to him «the acme of harmony and beauty»<sup>28</sup>. Despite his association of these moments with disease and idiocy, he declares that «For this moment one might give one's whole life». These «higher moments» contain «infinite happiness», he concludes, making the connection between these small units of interruption to the normal flow of time and infinity or timelessness: «At that moment», says Myshkin, «I seem somehow to understand the extraordinary saying that *there shall be no more time*»<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Holquist. «Introduction». *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: U of Texas Press, 1981, xxxi.

<sup>27</sup> Allen Thiher. *Understanding Robert Musil*, Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2009, 201.

<sup>28</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Macmillan, 1923, 224.

<sup>29</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 225.

Musil, who had one of his first mystical experiences during the First World War when he was almost killed by an aerial dart, understood Dostoevsky's connection between an ethical imperative of Heideggerian «being towards death», extra-temporal aesthetic experience and the wakefulness of seeing new. Musil's quest in the novel to make a heightened feeling last is foreshadowed by Prince Myshkin's story of a condemned man who expressed dismay that he had not lived every moment as an eternity while alive. Myshkin admits that even when the man is miraculously set free he probably didn't «live each moment as an eternity and not waste one» ... that in truth, «he wasted many»<sup>30</sup>. But he still insists that, despite its seeming impossibility, he believes it could and should be attempted. Musil too, although admitting that it is impossible to keep a feeling fresh or to maintain the ecstasy of the Other Condition indefinitely, celebrates the value of the flame that is recurrently ignited there and its instigation toward what he calls in one note, «a deepening of personality» and «something fine everyday»<sup>31</sup>. Whether it is impossible or not to live every moment as an eternity and not waste one, to do so would certainly be deemed idiotic in a society which avoids the reality of death at all costs. Yet, since death in fact is the most objective thing there is (there is not one of us who is not condemned to die), to ignore it seems the greatest of delusions and fictions! Maybe this is why art, created by that great transformation artist, Stupidity herself, is always reminding us of death, if only by its quickening to life.

What is seen as stupid, Musil explains, depends on the context. As the fool-hardy but righteous Antigone said to her more reasonable sister Ismene, «One world approved my wisdom; another thine»<sup>32</sup>. What is stupid may be heroic, but, as Musil notes, society generally favors seamliness and successful enterprises over rashness and excess. Antigone, after all, is killed at the end, and she gave up her life for a mere ideal, a spiritual matter. Sophie Scholl, the young German resistance fighter who with her brother distributed fliers condemning the National Socialist regime at their university, was «stupid» enough to cast the fliers down into the entrance way of the university after she and her brother had succeeded in avoiding detection. But was it not deemed stupid enough by most people for her to have dared to distribute the fliers, to have dared to resist in the first place?

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<sup>30</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *K4: Kommentar & Apparat*. Register. Autoren und Werke. K: Key, Ellen.

<sup>32</sup> Sophocles. *The Plays and Fragments*. Trans. & ed. by Richard Jebb. Cambridge: The University Press, 1900, 107.

The unnecessary gesture, in any case, her arm casting the fliers like living birds onto the heads of her terrified and silenced co-patriots, this beautiful, irrational, unexplainable gesture of freedom, cost both siblings their heads. But she had already lost hers.

Because stupidity, though hard to define, seems mainly to be associated with being impractical, incapable, inefficient, useless, something like poetry, perhaps, or love, or dreaming, or an overly idealistic insistence on values or self-expression. But to be too reasonable or too capable, notes Musil, is stupid too, and somewhat inhuman, lacking the proper degree of emotional connectivity. He may have been thinking of his own notorious coldness. We know that he struggled with how brave he was or was not willing to be in his vocal criticism of the totalitarian regimes of Germany and Austria, and, we know, as he put it in his *Ruminations of a Slow-witted Mind*: how much the «challenge and duty to speak. To exercise criticism»<sup>33</sup> weighed upon him. He may have wished he could have been stupider, but he had his Jewish wife's life, as well as his own, to consider.

Perhaps it takes a man who was considered too intelligent to be a creative writer to say it with impunity, but while we work to articulate the complexity of this world that is not one, we would do well to wonder at the strange topsy-turvydom which declares the stuttering, stammering seers of new worlds, the pioneering founders of new languages and customs, the unseemly actors of themselves the stupid ones, when compared to those who think they already know or who rest comfortably upon the laurels of an already-constructed and controlling system of pre-judgment and assumptions. It is quite a brave, or rather a fool-hardy task to hearken to a presentiment of an «other» way of seeing and to try, amid all the haziness of the vision and in opposition to the clarity and dominance of the status quo, to articulate what it looks like, what it might bring us, how it might be integrated into what we already have and already know. Call it stupid if you can't find a better word for it, inefficient, chaotic, primitive, idealistic, incomplete, digressive, non-linear, mysticism, utopia, feminine, irrational, aesthetic, un-German, useless, or any number of insulting words. But it probably takes a good deal more intelligence to listen for the complex and infinite strains of a polyphonic *living logos* than it does to recognize the same old mono-syllabic one-note knife.

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<sup>33</sup> Musil. *Precision*, 227.