

## Robert Musil. “Psychology of the Apprentice”

Robert Musil. „Psychologie des Lehrlings. Das Buch von Hugo Lukacs.“ Review of Dr. Hugo Lukacs. *Psychologie des Lehrlings*. Wien: Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte in Wien, 192. *Der Wiener Tag* (May 30, 1928) reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, *Kritik: Literatur—Theater—Kunst 1912-1930*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek: Rowohlt), 1681-83.  
<http://roteswien.com/musil/Musil%20Psychology%20of%20the%20Apprentice.pdf>

Translated and annotated with a commentary by Paul Werner.

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Psychology is a discipline for which there are practically no rules but instead an unusual abundance of phenomena and correlations. In other words: systematic research in this area has shown itself to be extremely fruitful in the detail, but the organizing system does not allow itself to be understood. So far there are at the very least a dozen forms of “Psychology” that represent not only schools of thought but disconnected research programs as well.

The practical application of such a discipline (even in Applied Psychology, concerning which there began to be much interest over the past few decades) comes down as much to personal sensitivity as in the engineering sciences a generation earlier, when a good technician, for all his grasp of mathematics, physics and chemistry, had to have a feeling for correct dimensioning in his fingertips.<sup>1</sup> I mention this because the

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<sup>1</sup> Musil had first trained as an engineer before switching to Psychology and Philosophy.

author of the little pamphlet under review (published under the imprint of the Vienna Chamber of Labor)<sup>2</sup> is a well-known psychiatrist who as far back as several years ago published a series of essays detailing extraordinary outcomes in the education of those children on whom the influence of education seemed without effect. His methodology relied roughly on the theoretical concepts of Individual Psychology as originally developed by Alfred Adler, and the same holds true of the present study. The systematic investigation of emotions, of the nature of everyday conflicts and such, was indeed first developed within Psychoanalysis as well as Individual Psychology; and because the current theoretical state of Psychology is not yet fit for orthodoxies many practitioners choose to treat its guiding principles as optional, depending on the task at hand. Moreover, it must be said, once overly refined theoretical points are set aside the assumptions of Individual Psychology concerning mental development are in good and close agreement with the conclusions to which others have come from various psychological orientations.

What emerges in Lukács with particular clarity is a social-pedagogical or, alternatively, an ethical-constructive feature that touches indirectly but very significantly on conclusions that could have been drawn from literary descriptions of social life since Dostoevsky.<sup>3</sup> In practice today, the affection of litterateurs for “unhealthy” characters rests on no deeper basis than the relationship established by writers between what is socially useful and what is bad: the two are symptomatic of nakedly

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<sup>2</sup> Hugo Lukács (born 1875, commonly spelled “Lukacs” in German) was a Jewish Hungarian-born psychoanalyst and a follower of Alfred Adler who ran the Socialist-sponsored Educational Counseling Center (*Erziehungsberatungstelle*) in Vienna. (The Social-Democratic Administration in Vienna leaned toward Adler over Freud, but in practice there was a good deal of cooperation between the two tendencies.) Lukács committed suicide in Paris in 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Musil is drawing a distinction between *Dichtung*, “Poetry” but also creative, inspired writing, and *Literatur*, meaning more commonplace market-oriented writing.

divergent valuations of the selfsame behavior on a deeper level. The affection shown ever since by literati for “unhealthy” characters has rested on little else. In contrast with earlier times, this conviction of the outward incompatibility of forms of human behavior, along with a deep affinity of moral opposites, is characteristic of contemporary literature. It first made its appearance as a feeling that traditional morality was double-edged, along with the glorification of “Decadence.” It manifested itself, likewise, and was included more or less consciously as a component of tendencies of formal disintegration within Impressionism.<sup>4</sup> The second phase, which remains to be completed, consists in a new moral synthesis of that which began as the dissolution of the old morality. It has become a commonplace of daily life that people and deeds are good or bad, useful or harmful, healthy or sick depending on circumstances;<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The expression “disintegration of form” refers to a commonplace argument of positivist and neo-Aristotelian cultural critics in the late nineteenth century: because Art was specular its audience would be expected to absorb the formal qualities of whatever they viewed much the way a piece of wax absorbs an imprint. Thus the broken strokes of Impressionist painting would disorganize the inner mental construct of the viewer—a proposition enthusiastically taken up by various Anarchist critics and painters; see Th. van Stockum and Jan van Dam, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* [1934-35], 4th edition (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1966), 91; Patricia Leighton, *Reordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> This typically Nietzschean conception of morality is echoed in the words of one of the characters in Arthur Schnitzler’s novel of aesthetic calculation and careerism, *Das Weg ins Freie*:

Yes, I have felt free of guilt. Somewhere in my mind. And somewhere else, deeper perhaps, I have felt guilty... and still deeper, innocent again. It's only a matter of how deeply we look inside ourself. And if the lights on all floors are turned on, all of us are, at the same time: guilty and innocent, cowards and heroes, fools and wise men. Arthur Schnitzler, *The Road into the Open* [*Das Weg ins Freie* 1908], trans. Roger Byers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 296.

Musil’s understanding of “decadence” and “moral vacuum” is starkly at odds with the recent, interpretation found in Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

what's still missing going forward is a functional morality to supersede the rigid, obsolete black-and-white ways of thinking as well as the resulting ever-unhealthy adjustments of behavior to patterns of social dependency.

This, precisely, is where the founding concepts of Individual Psychology have made essential contributions to our understanding. Certain practical concepts (or at least concepts that can easily be retooled to be practical) have emerged from observations of the purposive character of all mental life, but they remain significant even without this prerequisite. In practical terms: there is a strong impression, when observing previous outcomes in the treatment of hard-to-educate children by Lukács, that the antisocial and immoral behavior of these little monsters can be shown to be not merely the result of specific circumstances, but that it can be reversed by relatively easy interventions and influences. Because I was curious about the social significance of his work I got in touch with the author; since then I have often had occasion to study his achievements. Even today in the field of Psychology (as previously stated) a great deal still depends on the practitioner's personal feel for the scientific touch, and from other qualities as well where a doctor's responsibilities are involved. Where all of these conditions are combined the field of practice comprises whatever can be successfully grasped, up to and including everything, it seems, that leads to the usual and out-of-the-ordinary catastrophic conflicts of life.

Failure on the job, in one's marriage, disappointment over children, criminal inclinations, perversions to the point of severe neurosis, etc., all accompanied by seemingly incurable physical defects or merely moral and mental lapses apparently do not require a physician—in short the whole range, of daily woes and lapses, great and small—turns out, in many cases, to consist of little more (so to speak) than survival mechanisms that have become “full-blown” and that can be removed and dismantled by the mildest approach in the world, through a series

of interviews requiring little more intrusion than a friendly conversation, and that can subsequently be resolved and eliminated by repeated practice. This technique is actually no more than a kind of doctor-directed school of life, but I think I can say that it is possible with its help to succeed in literally taking charge of one's own fate.

Naturally, "Psychology of the Apprentice" addresses only a very small part of this; nevertheless it is important to initiate a shift toward social problems like these, and the problem of apprenticeship is among the most urgent. In general no more is known about this than the apprentice-boy pranks of the previous generation, or at most one or another of those misleading claims that "already" these young fellows are being "radicalized," torn from their innocent childhood state by the "Democrats."<sup>6</sup> All the same, it's extremely important to investigate how things stand in reality and under what conditions they operate, for these are the conditions under which the offspring of the Proletariat and of the lowest ranks of the bourgeoisie grow into adolescence—those to whom a major political influence will fall within the next few years.

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<sup>6</sup> A reference to the Social-Democrats (*SDAPÖ*) who controlled the administration of Vienna and who were the subject of unrelenting attacks by the Christian-Social Party and others. Contrary to Musil's claim they sponsored an enormous amount of research and practice in the fields of youth education and psychological development; they were particularly concerned that the apprentice's adjustment to the workplace was overwhelmed by issues of patriarchal submission and repression. See for instance Rudolf Ekstein, "Reflections on and Translation of Paul Federn's 'The Fatherless Society'," *The Reiss-Davis Clinic Bulletin* 8 (Spring 1971 8): 12.

## COMMENTARY

Robert Musil (1880-1942) is best known for his unfinished roman-fleuve, *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), which ranks among the master-novels of the twentieth century. Appropriately enough for the present text, his earlier breakthrough novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Jünglings Törless* (*The Confusions of Young Törless*, 1906) deals with the agonies of adolescence in a confused moral system; at the same time the review included and translated here—concerning a book on psychoanalytic technique—marks a temporary truce in what Karl Corino (1974) calls Musil’s “desperate defensive battle against Psychoanalysis” (p. 242).

The translator has been tempted to smooth over Musil’s uncharacteristically awkward style. Musil had undergone therapy with the author of the book in question in order to deal with a crippling writer’s block that had kept him from his novel; two years later he would give a copy of the first volume of *The Man without Qualities* to Lukács with the inscription “Für Doktor Hugo Lukács, ohne den es dieses Buch nicht gäbe! (For Doctor Hugo Lukács, without whom this book would not exist!)” Ironically, Lukács had helped Musil to free himself from his writer’s block by encouraging a strategy of irony, irony being a way of dealing with conflicts through the opposition of apparently incongruous and incompatible elements. That the incompatibility itself, rather than the incompatible elements, might be a symptom (as Freud had argued in *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*) was an insight that Musil, in this review as in his earlier novel, had difficulty reaching. Musil was far more comfortable with Nietzsche’s model of the drives, which is topographical, rather than Freud’s, which is structural. J. M. Coetzee (2007) argues that Musil “preferred psychology of what he ironically called the ‘shallow’—that is, empirical and experimental—variety” (p. 36). The

present text is a good indication, in style and content, of how deeply (or not) Musil was willing to go; while Albert Pfadigan (2003), in a review of Karl Corino's authoritative biography of Musil, states:

Musil's personal notes are inconsistent in key points, but Corino undertakes the speculative yet valuable attempt to find out what was the subject of Musil's therapy with the individual psychologist Hugo Lukács and the subsequent debates with the [Freudian] analyst René A. Spitz. Did the two find access to Musil's deep covetousness, his socially damaging self-conviction, and his compulsions?

Don't bet on it.

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