

published in: *newsletter MODERNE. Zeitschrift des Spezialforschungsbe-  
reichs Moderne – Wien und Zentral-  
europa um 1900*, 3. Jg., H. 2  
(September 2000), pp. 10-13.

1 Musil, Robert: Franz Blei [07.0E.  
1918]. In: Ders.: *Gesammelte Werke*.  
Hg. v. Adolf Frisé. Bd. 8. Reinbek: Ro-  
wohlt 1981, p. 1022f.

2 Ders.: Franz Blei – 60 Jahre  
[17.01.1931]. In: Ders. 1981, Bd. 8,  
p. 1203.

3 Musil, Robert: *Tagebücher*. Hg. v.  
Adolf Frisé. Bd. 1. Reinbek: Rowohlt  
1976, p. 617.

The idea of modernity is often associated with rational logic, probably the dominant theme of the Enlightenment. But modernity cannot be seen as a one-dimensional concept, rather as a very complex phenomenon with many ideas which can complete or oppose each other. At the beginning of the 20th century, intellectual history (›*Geistesgeschichte*‹) became a very influential theory in the literary studies. The initial phase of the ›National Philology‹ – especially of ›German Studies‹ – was dominated by a few methods. Around 1870, Hermann Hettner, Wilhelm Scherer and Erich Schmitt imported the ›Positivism‹ of Auguste Comte and Hippolyte Taine into this young discipline. In opposition to ›Positivism‹, Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first scholars in Germany, who practised intellectual history. While ›Positivism‹ is based on analysis, ›*Geistesgeschichte*‹ gives preference to synthesis.

Both theories had a significant influence on literature: Positivism is the central theoretical base of Naturalism. As we know, the Naturalists paid closest attention to producing literature in analogy to the natural sciences. In opposition to that, the term ›*Geist*‹ became very interesting for a lot of writers, for example for Robert Musil and a close friend of his, the essayist, critic and mediator of culture, Franz Blei, born in Vienna in 1871. In 1918 Musil wrote about Blei:

Er umfaßt mit seiner Liebe vieles, das sich nach gemeiner Ansicht nicht miteinander vertragen darf, nicht aus Unbestimmtheit, sondern aus Überbestimmtheit, weil er gedrängt ist von dem, was er selbst sagen will und aus der Verschiedenheit der Rede nur das an seine Anklingende heraushört. Die Ursache seiner Zustimmung ist nicht die Übereinstimmung, sondern die Analogie, und wo er die Ansicht wechselt, ist es nicht seine, sondern die des Dinges. Durch Analogie entdeckt er das, was er liebt im Katholizismus wie in der Antike und im Rokoko, verdeutlicht es heute an der Galanterie und morgen an der Arabeske, ist heute verliebt in eine Theorie, morgen in eine andere. Aber immer ist es eine Theorie. Ein nie gesättigtes Verlangen nach Geist läßt sie wechseln und das hat einen nicht genug gewürdigten objektiven Grund.<sup>1</sup>

Musil says that Blei's love includes a lot of issues, which are – according to conventional opinion – contradictory. But that is not due to uncertainty but rather to over-certainty. Blei's own questions are at the centre of his attention, and in the different communications he only deals with what touches his own theme. The reason for his affirmation is not correspondence, it is analogy. If he changes his opinion, it is not his opinion but that of the object. By means of analogy he discovers what he loves in Catholicism, in antiquity and in the Rococo. Sometimes he demonstrates through the concept of gallantry, other times through arabesque. Sometimes he is in love with one theory, sometimes with another. But it is always theory. An unquenched desire for ›*Geist*‹ lets the theories change, and this has an objective reason – which is not appreciated enough –, says Musil. In another essay, Musil wrote that Blei would have significantly caused more ›*Geist*‹ and form in the German language than there would have been without him.<sup>2</sup> The term ›*Geist*‹ is connoted positively. It is the basis of a value-judgement. Musil, like Blei, uses it in two ways: First, people can have ›*Geist*‹, second, ›*Geist*‹ is found in particular ideas. But what do people understand exactly by ›*Geist*‹? Doesn't this term have a very vague meaning in common usage? And more than this, ›*Geist*‹ is a basic concept in Philosophy, where it is also used ambiguously.

In his diaries, Musil defines this term as a power out of space and time, which manifests itself in consciousness and will.<sup>3</sup> In another passage, Musil describes ›*Geist*‹ as a fullness of thoughts rooted in the depths of feelings (*Tagebücher*, 904). Here he connects ›*Geist*‹ with emotions. In this way he differentiates between ›*Geist*‹ and rational logic. Both are forms of understanding, but only people who understand just what they like have ›*Geist*‹ at their disposal. On the other hand, for rational logic it is completely of no importance to be emotionally involved (*Tagebücher*, 904).

How can people develop ›*Geist*‹? According to Musil the subject can develop ›*Geist*‹ by means of education. He differentiates two forms of intellectual nourishment: »Aufnahme durch persönliche Verarbeitung (Studium, Originalstudium) und in Emulsion« (*Tagebücher*, 540). Absorption through personal studies and through emulsion. ›*Geist*‹ is an ability which can be acquired. But Musil adds that a strong ›*Geist*‹ is not formed by a great diversity of knowledge but by a few vital thoughts (*Tagebücher*, 156f.). Furthermore, for Musil ›*Geist*‹ has a nourishing function for rea-



4 Simmel, Georg: Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur. In: Ders.: Gesamtausgabe. Hg. v. Otto Rammstedt. Bd. 14. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1996, pp. 385-416.

lizing one's full potential, but it is not a task of ›Geist‹ to produce practical order. More than this, by arguing ›Geist‹ produces countless possibilities, the term touches a fundamental point of the aestheticist thinking of Robert Musil, the idea of a ›sense of possibilities‹ (›Möglichkeitssinn‹), on which he especially elaborated in his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

### Musil and Hegel

Of course, Musil's concept reminds us of Hegel, particularly of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But essential aspects have changed:

- 1) Hegel used the diction of Christian tradition. Musil was an atheist and did not use this diction, maybe because he was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and Empiriocriticism, especially that of Ernst Mach.
- 2) Out of this difference results that Musil never equated (like Hegel did) the absolute with ›Geist‹. As previously mentioned, Musil defined ›Geist‹ as a power out of space and time.
- 3) About the development of ›Geist‹, Hegel wrote that the uniting of ›Geist‹ happens just on the basis of a previous splitting or separation. According to Hegel, a real unification is one which surmounts this splitting. He defined this process as well as the result of this process as ›Geist‹. In Hegel's opinion, ›Geist‹ is the new, more differentiated unity which is richer than the original unity and is finally the developed self. In this sense, ›Geist‹ is additionally the fulfilling of freedom. On the other hand, Musil thought ›Geist‹ is a question of education. As we have seen, Musil described ›Geist‹ as a learnable faculty. But the main point is that he emphasizes the emulsion. There must be a strong connection between the objective ideas and the personal preconditions. The subject has to become a harmonious unity with the ideas of ›Geist‹. According to Musil, ›Geist‹ enables a form of self-realization.
- 4) The relation to reality  
Hegel, just as Musil, often analysed the term reality. Hegel thought reality is not an object behind experience, but the full connection which is demonstrated in experience. By means of experience the opposites of consciousness and object cancel each other out. When he says that the absolute is the reality as an associated connection, he operates again with the idea of the absolute. Musil's view is completely different. He does not believe in one reality. In the thesis on Ernst Mach and in the novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (1906/1907), he tries to describe the experience of speechlessness in another, »second« reality, in the reality of the inner, of the mental experiences which are not ascertainable by rational logic and which are not describable. The result of this are two fundamentally different, opposite perspectives:
  - a) the public perspective – we are able to communicate about; and
  - b) the mental, the inner perspective, which cannot be expressed.

According to Musil, there is no possibility to connect these two completely different perspectives. This view results from the loss of the faith in one reality. For Musil, life always offers many possibilities, several realities. All of them are right and it is not really possible to rate one possibility or one reality higher than the other.

### The concept of ›Geist‹ in the texts of a contemporary: Georg Simmel

Similar to Musil, who defined ›Geist‹ as a trans-subjective entity from which the individual can obtain creativity, the sociologist Georg Simmel described ›Geist‹ as an objective element which finds its expression in ethic and intellectual, in social and aesthetic and in religious and technical forms. It builds a special cosmos of ideas and history. Describing the dualism between the subjective life and the contents of ›Geist‹, Simmel argues, subjective life is restless and ending but the contents of ›Geist‹ are, if they are once created, fixed and timelessly valid. According to Simmel, this dualism exists when a human being becomes conscious of its subjectivity, when a human being calls himself »Ego« and has become his own object.<sup>4</sup>

5 Ders.: Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben. In: Mills, C.W. (Hg.): *Klassik der Soziologie*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1966, p. 381f.

6 Simmel 1996, p. 388.

7 Simmel 1996, p. 390.

8 Blei, Franz: *Das große Bestiarium der modernen Literatur*. Berlin: Rowohlt 1922, p. 119.

Simmel differentiates – like Hegel did – between an objective and a subjective ›Geist‹. The objective ›Geist‹ is created by subjects and determines the subject. In the form of objectivity ›Geist‹ follows an immanent logic of development (»immanente Entwicklungslogik«). Because of the countless number of its producers, the objective ›Geist‹ is without form and limits. In the opinion of Simmel, this deep opposite of forms effects the problems of modern life. In the essay *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* he explains:

[D]ie tiefsten Probleme des modernen Lebens quellen aus dem Anspruch des Individuums, die Selbständigkeit und Eigenart seines Daseins gegen die Übermacht der Gesellschaft zu bewahren.<sup>5</sup>

The problematic nature of modern life results from the desire of the individual to defend its independence and its peculiarity against the superior strength of the society. Especially the inhabitants of large towns who are dominated by the economy of money and the power of rational logic are confronted with a rapid and incessant change of external and internal impressions. The superior strength of the object demands a great deal of the subject and makes the individual feel inadequate and helpless. Finally, this circumstance causes an increase in nervous tension.

### ›Geist‹ and ›Kultur‹

The idea of ›Geist‹ has a close connection to the concept of culture and civilisation in Georg Simmel, as in Robert Musil and Franz Blei. Georg Simmel explains that in the dualism between object and subject there is the idea of culture. He defines culture as »Verfeinerung der Seele«. Just as ›Geist‹ in Musil's culture is a faculty which can be acquired. The parallel becomes more evident in the definition of a cultivated person: One can reach the level of culture,

wenn die aus dem Überpersönlichen aufgenommenen Inhalte wie durch eine vorbestimmte Harmonie nur das in der Seele zu entfalten scheinen, was in ihr selbst als ihr eigenster Trieb und als innere Vorgezeichnetheit ihrer subjektiven Vollendung besteht.<sup>6</sup>

The cultural development is based on the absorption of the contents from the superpersonal ›Geist‹. But this reception seems to follow a predestined harmony and the content of the soul seems to display just that what it uses as an inner impulse for its subjective perfection. Culture as well as ›Geist‹ leads to self-realization. Simmel also believes that the specific characteristic of the process of cultural development is the becoming objective of the subject and the becoming subjective of the object.

Die Spezifik des Kulturprozesses liegt im Objektivwerden des Subjekts und im Subjektivwerden des Objekts[.]<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Georg Simmel, Robert Musil and Franz Blei describe the idea of culture. One year before Simmel, in 1910, Blei reflected on culture in the essay *Die deutsche Kultur*. The second basis of the following explanation is the essay *Von der Streitfrage über die biologischen Begriffe Kultur und Zivilisation*, written by Robert Musil but published in Franz Blei's best known book *Das Große Bestiarium der modernen Literatur*, in 1922. These two essays complement each other and are interesting in another way, because they also document the related intellect between these two writers. The similarities are so great that the second essay was repeatedly attributed to Blei. That is not surprising if we consider that Blei and Musil met daily and discussed their theories and projects.

Already in 1910 Blei differentiated culture and civilisation. According to him, in a modern society, which he connects with an abundance of information and mobility, there is no space for culture. Culture has become a historic entity, which would have existed in some Greek republics, in some states of the Renaissance, in the Middle Ages and in Paris from Louis XIV to Louis XVI. In the 20th century, he sees a relapse into an »American« civilisation. In this point, Blei follows the historical dimension of Herder by describing culture as a life-form of communities, which starts, modifies itself, completes itself and dissolves. Already in an essay written in 1908, Blei developed a pyramidal model of evolution, which starts with primitive religious cults. As a reason for this he submitted that primitive religions would be sensuous and wouldn't philosophise. The second period and highest step is called ›Kultur‹ and is connected with the ritual, in which order and passion would be kept in balance. In the same way Musil argues: »Jeder Zivilisation ist eine Kultur vorausgegangen, die in ihr zerfällt.«<sup>8</sup> Before every civilisation, there has



been a culture which breaks down in the civilisation. Musil connects culture with a unified ideology and a still unified way of life. In this way of life a natural access to myths and religion must be given. On the other hand, he describes civilisation as a form of culture in a confused way. Technical control of nature and a complex, intelligible social system of relations are the marks of a civilisation which is characterised by dilution and exhaustion. Musil, just as Blei, connects culture with communities and civilisation with societies. Similar to Georg Simmel, the two writers lament about the increasingly confusing, pluralistic modern way of life in large cities, but they never forget that their imagination of culture is just a theoretical condition, an idealistic Utopia which is not reachable in reality.

The idea of the decline of culture was very common around 1900. We only have to recall Oswald Spengler's influential book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, in which Spengler argues that the rise and fall of culture follows a biological law. He also uses culture for creatively original periods, which are founded in myths and religion. However, he describes civilisation as epigonal-static end-periods which are determined by rationalism, enlightenment and sophism. As somewhat of a contrast, in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918) Thomas Mann connected the boundary between ›Kultur‹ and ›Zivilisation‹ with the boundary between ›Geist‹ and politics, between freedom and the right to vote, between poetry and literature. He diagnosed a decline and criticised the reduction of culture to its propagandist function for social and political reforms.

In contrast with Blei and Musil, Mann operated with political arguments. But all of the writers, in their literary work, reacted to the changed conditions of life: Thomas Mann made use of an ironical style, Franz Blei wrote more and more satirically and Robert Musil developed the essayistic novel.

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