

'DAS MUSS EIN ENDE HABEN!'

**Reflections on the Ending of Musil's
Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer"**

Christian Rogowski, Amherst

"Im Theater werdet ihr euch
vorkommen wie im Theater."
Peter Handke, **Weissagung**¹

If one understands drama as a representation of a developmental process, the outcome of such a sequence of events is of crucial importance for an interpretation of the drama as a whole. In a comedy, the ending dictated by the rules of the generic traditions is usually the achievement of the protagonist's societal goals as well as a happy union of the loving couple in the form of a marriage. Musil's "Posse" **Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer**, however, denies its audience such a reassuring ending: as Alpha contemplates the possibility of entering into a marriage with a virtual stranger, her erstwhile lover Vinzenz declares his resolve to become a servant. This is not the outcome one would have expected from the "Wiedersehen mit meiner Seele" (GW I, p. 430)² that Vinzenz had so skillfully arranged. I would argue that this kind of overt violation of generic conventions indicates an awareness that these conventions had become highly problematic. Written in 1923, the play belongs to the period marked by the "crisis of modern drama" as described by Peter Szondi.³ Szondi shows how European drama from Ibsen to Brecht displays an increasing tendency to question common assumptions about human nature and social reality. Insights into the structural complexities of internal and external reality rendered problematic a genre that is based on what can be communicated verbally and visu-

ally in a concrete enactment. The crisis thus centers around the problem of the representability of modern reality on the stage. My suggestion is that Musil's play participates in the aesthetic crisis as outlined by Szondi. For instance, the "Posse" addresses the question whether human interaction can be represented in the conventional manner of illusionistic theater: the dramatic conflicts between the characters are repeatedly deflated and shown to be a series of instances of role-playing stage-managed by Vinzenz. In highlighting devices that undermine any claim to psychological realism, Musil's play engages in a dramaturgical debate over the conventionality of dramatic representation, contributing to a critical self-examination of the dramatic genre.⁴

In its final gesture, the play appears to violate the conventions specific to the genre of comedy. For an interpretation of the dramatic significance of this final gesture it is useful to draw on typological models that situate the play within the context of the various aesthetic options available to a dramatist during the period. As I hope to show in the following, the complex structure of the ending represents an extreme radicalization of the critical self-examination of the play: we are not merely confronted with a parody of generic conventions, but ultimately with a veritable critique of the communicative conventions which inform our reception of drama in general.

There have been various attempts at formulating a typology of endings in modern drama. Peter Haida, for instance, places the dissolution of the traditional comedy ending against the backdrop of the socio-political situation around the turn of the century.⁵ In a manner similar to Szondi's, he argues that the form of the comic genre changed in response to the changing social realities. The traditional harmonious ending which affirms the social **status-quo** turned out to be no longer feasible giving way to a variety of new forms of endings for which Haida tries to develop a typolo-

gy. He bases his typology on two criteria: the question of whether the audience's expectations are fulfilled or not at the outcome of a comedy, and the question of whether the thematic conflicts are resolved or not. This dichotomy leads him to distinguish between four "Ideal-Typen" of comedy endings, one traditional ending versus three modern alternatives. On one side, "der positive Schluß" survives, the traditional affirmative ending which leads the dramatic action of the comedy to its expected and happy conclusion. After the turn of the century, as Haida demonstrates, this type of ending is largely restricted to trivial drama.

The "negative" side is represented by three variants: firstly, there is the "offene Schluß" in which the audience's expectations are thwarted as the action is shown to be a mere segment of a larger process which is not brought to a close; secondly, there is the "Karussellschluß" which suggests that the action will continue in a circular manner as a repetition of the segment presented; finally, there is the "parodistische Schluß" which formally mimics the traditional happy ending by adding negative overtones.⁶ According to Haida, all three "negative" forms of comedy endings activate the audience into drawing their own conclusions about the dramatic presentation, its outcome and its social implications.

If one applies the terms of Haida's typology to Musil's comedy, the ending of the "Posse" appears to be a mixture of the open and the parodistic variants: Alpha decides to accept the Baron's marriage proposal in defiance of the fact that her marital status is rather chaotically undefined (she is as yet not divorced from Apulejus-Halm). This decision certainly represents a parody of the traditional outcome of a comedy and its happy marital union. Vinzenz's departure, on the other hand, while bringing the play's action formally to a close, leaves all the essential thematic questions open. We do not know what will happen; we are not even sure

whether Alpha and Vinzenz might not get together again after all. Alpha actually suggests that she might follow Vinzenz's decision to become a servant. The play's final words are significantly vague:

*ALPHA: Soll ich wohl in das gleiche Haus kommen?
Du verschaffst mir, wo Du bist, eine Stelle als
Dienstmädchen?*

*VINZENZ: Nein, wollte ich Dich bitten, in ein an-
dres Haus zu gehn; wir sind einander vielleicht
doch zu ähnlich. (GW I, p. 453)*

By using the past tense form "wollte" and the qualifying "vielleicht", Vinzenz subtly distances himself from the content of his request in the very form his utterance takes. His last words go against one of the central tenets of comedy, since in traditional terms it is precisely a certain degree of similarity in a loving couple which assures their compatibility. In this fashion, the ending of Musil's comedy appears to gain its "open" quality by the very element which traditionally makes the "closed" happy ending possible. For all its stimulating insights, Haida's typology nevertheless fails to account for the peculiar nature of the ending of Musil's play, since it assigns the designations "open" and "closed" with regard to comedy in general only on the basis of the outcome rather than the overall **structure** of the drama at hand.

In his article "Pyramide und Karussell", Reinhold Grimm presents an analytic dichotomy for dramatic structures in terms of process rather than outcome. He views modern drama within the context of the dissolution of the kind of normative poetics of drama represented by Gustav Freytag's **Die Technik des Dramas** of 1863. The structural ideal of drama as a five-part "pyramid" formed around a central **peripatheia** gives way to the new forms of modern drama which stress the incompleteness of the dramatic action by way of presenting the action as a mere segment of a potentially repeatable series of events. Grimm uses the image of a carousel as a

descriptive term for such quasi-circular structures. His prime examples are Schnitzler's **Reigen** and Brecht's **Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder**. In both plays, a sequence of scenes is arranged around a single thematic center:

Ein Geschehen kreist also um einen Mittelpunkt. Bei Schnitzler "dreht es sich" um die Liebe, bei Brecht "dreht es sich" um den Krieg. Die eigentümliche Struktur dieser Werke wird durch den Kreis nicht minder präzise verbildlicht als die klassische Dramenstruktur durch den pyramidalen Bau, den Freytag entwarf. Die Dramaturgie der Pyramide weicht der Dramaturgie des Kreises, wobei der Zerfall der einen Struktur sich als heimlicher Aufbau der anderen enthüllt.⁷

With his observations, Grimm is very much in keeping both with Peter Szondi, who in his **Die Theorie des modernen Dramas** outlines the course of the dissolution of an allegedly "absolute" form of drama, as well as with Volker Klotz, who in his book **Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama** develops the polar opposition of "closed" and "open" forms of drama.⁸ On the face of it, Musil's **Vinzenz** seems to comply with Grimm's description of a closed form: its three acts are structured symmetrically, centered around the "peripatheia" of the seduction of Alpha by Vinzenz and the ensuing fake murder/suicide by Bärli in the second act. Its action is framed by the arrival of the protagonist, Vinzenz, and his final departure. Yet the play's ending is anything but "closed": we do not get the traditional marital union but rather a separation of the two protagonists. Moreover, Vinzenz's farewell at the end of the play constitutes an added coda rather than a denouement of the plot. Grimm's terminology cannot account for the structural peculiarities of Musil's play.

Haida's and Grimm's typological models need to be augmented if they are to be useful for an analysis of the particular nature of Musil's "Posse". Numerous aspects have to be considered. For instance, there are the puzzling complexities surrounding Alpha's relationships: her indecision between Vinzenz, the Freundin, Apulejus-Halm, the Baron and the

five important men defies any expectations the audience may bring to a comedy ending. In fact, the play actually reverses the familiar comedy scheme by placing a marriage proposal at the beginning (when Bärli importunes Alpha to marry him) rather than the end and by ending in comprehensive indecision rather than in a marital union.

Another factor is the essentially cumulative structure of the play. Its three acts are characterized by a succession of three **coups de théâtre**⁹ as conflicts are built up and suddenly "resolved": in act one, there is Vinzenz's miraculous appearance when Alpha is threatened by Bärli; in act two, Bärli's attack on Alpha turns out to have been pre-arranged by Vinzenz as a quasitherapeutic experience; in act three, the quarrel between Alpha and her Freundin is redefined as a screen test for an alleged film project. Each of these can be seen as a miniature version of the classical dramatic "pyramid" so that Musil's "Posse" features a succession of what Grimm calls three quasi-Brechtian "Stückchen im Stück".¹⁰ With reference to **Mutter Courage**, Grimm points out that the carousel structure is not an absolute polar opposite to the pyramid structure in so far as a circular effect can be achieved by a successions of dramolets of pyramid form. In Musil's three **coups de théâtre**, however, the symmetry is disrupted by way of the deflation of the dramatic illusion and its radical redefinition as role-playing. The second half of the pyramid thus never finds its completion, since the action is always broken off at the point of culmination. Since the three **coups de théâtre** to a certain extent present us with a repetition of analogous situations, it can be argued that the structure of the play takes on a circular quality: all three situations revolve around instances of theatricality.

Like Brecht's **Mutter Courage**, Musil's comedy can be seen structurally as a series of what turn out to be little dramolets. Discussing circularity, Grimm points out the corre-

lation between the use of the revolving stage and the circular structure of Brecht's play in Brecht's own exemplary production of 1956:

Der Planwagen der Mutter Courage rollt auf ihr [i. e. auf der Drehbühne] herein und hinaus: er rollt im Kreis. Brecht, Stückeschreiber und Regisseur in einer Person, stellt also gewissermaßen das Karussell auf die Bühne. Damit erweist sich jedoch das Technikum der Drehbühne für 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder' als adäquater Ausdruck der vollen Kreisstruktur, zu der auch dieses Stück drängt.¹¹

To be sure, the melancholy account of Vinzenz's failed "Wiedersehen mit meiner Seele" is a far cry from Brecht's poignant "Chronik aus dem dreißigjährigen Krieg"; Musil's dramaturgy of surprise is based on principles different from Brecht's "epic" theater. However, there is a certain structural affinity between the two plays. In this context, it is of interest to note that, as early as 1924, one of the more perceptive critics of the Viennese production of Musil's play, the drama critic and film theorist Bela Balázs, had argued that the "Posse" was characterized by the circularity of its thematic structure:

Robert Musil hat die neue, höchst zeitgemäße Form der logische Dreh-Bühne geschaffen. Durch den 'Dreh' seines Denkens, so durch hundert logische Gegenströmungen getrieben wird, kreisen alle Erlebnisse wie das Ringelspiel um den Helden herum, ohne die Bühnenarbeiter weiter zu bemühen.¹²

Balázs uses the metaphor of a "logische Dreh-Bühne" to describe the circular motion of the thought processes which the play embodies and engenders. This would suggest that while the play in its symmetrical three-act structure appears to comply with the rules of the "pyramid" structure (i.e. a "closed" form of drama), the three acts present a repeated motion around a thematic center, thus creating a "carousel" structure (i.e. an "open" form of drama). Moreover, in the three **coups de théâtre**, Musil's play as it were incorporates three "closed" dramas gone awry. This suggests that cate-

gories such as "pyramid" and "carousel" or "closed" and "open" drama ultimately are too vague to be meaningful for an analysis of the complex ending of Musil's comedy.

A valuable contribution to the understanding of the peculiar nature of the ending of *Vinzenz* is provided by a theoretical distinction which Wolfgang Trautwein offers in his article of 1984, entitled "Offenes Finale: Akkumulation, Kreisbewegung und Ausbruch im deutschen Drama zwischen 1890 und 1933".¹³ On the basis of models of dramatic communication more exhaustively discussed by Manfred Pfister,¹⁴ Trautwein argues in favor of an

*Abtrennung eines internen Kommunikationszusammenhangs der handelnden Figuren - die Handlungsebene -, von der übergreifenden Kommunikation des Theaters mit seinem Publikum.*¹⁵

In his own analysis of "open" endings of drama, he restricts himself to the level of inner-dramatic communication while incorporating Grimm's attention to the overall dramatic structure. Trautwein's categories of "Akkumulation", "Kreisbewegung", and "Ausbruch" roughly correspond to Haida's three "negative" types of comedy endings ("parodistic", "circular", and "open"). He rightly argues against Haida that an activation of the audience on the level of theatrical communication ("Vermittlungsebene") does not necessarily require an "open" structure of the "Handlungsebene".¹⁶ Trautwein actually cites the ending of Musil's "Posse" as an example of a circular structure:

*Die abermalige Trennung von der Jugendgeliebten, mit der sich in Musils *Vinzenz* und die Freundin bedeutender Männer* (1923) der Kreis schließt, verweist über die komisch typisierten 'bedeutenden Männer' auf das gesellschaftliche Ganze.¹⁷

Trautwein locates the circularity of the play not in the recurrence of the several *coups de théâtre*, but in the final separation: Vinzenz's departure constitutes a repetition of the earlier separation which in turn had been the precondi-

tion for the "Wiedersehn mit meiner Seele", that is, the very precondition of the play's action itself. To Trautwein, this repetition functions as a commentary on the social conditions which render love impossible.

In the light of the various modes of circularity in the dramatic structure, we have to conclude that the ending of Musil's **Vinzenz** actually presents us with a combination of all possible forms of endings both in Haida's and Trautwein's typologies: within Haida's typology, it is "parodistic" with regard to Alpha's decision to marry; with regard to Vinzenz's departure it is "open"; to this we now have to add Trautwein's thesis that with regard to the repetition of a separation it is "circular". Within Trautwein's typology, the three **coups de théâtre** are an example of "Akkumulation", since the play's action suggests that Vinzenz will continue his "playful" mode of existence even after the play is finished. With regard to Vinzenz's departure, it is a kind of "Ausbruch", since Vinzenz at least appears to be moving into a different environment. That Musil apparently contemplated writing a sequel to his "Posse" under the working titles "Fasching" or "Vinzenz im Kloster" supports both interpretations, with the "Fasching" project pointing in the direction of "Akkumulation" and the "Kloster" project pointing in the direction of an ironic version of the "Ausbruch" structure.¹⁸ Finally, as outlined above, Trautwein himself sees the "Posse" as an example of "Kreisbewegung" on account of the repetition of a separation as the crucial plot element.

The fact that all of the typological concepts discussed above can be applied in one form or another to the ending of Musil's seemingly innocuous "Posse" should alert us to the extraordinary complexity of its construction. I would like to suggest that the confusing problem of describing the nature of the comedy's ending may be solved if one recognizes that all these categories remain on what Trautwein calls

the "Handlungsebene". Musil's "Posse" repeatedly thwarts the audience's expectations by revealing that plot developments turn out to be instances of roleplaying. In this manner, the play addresses the problem of dramatic communication by constantly shifting the focus from the level of inner-dramatic communication (the "Handlungsebene") to that of the overall dramatic communication (the "Vermittlungsebene"). The disorientation engendered by such shifts attests to the importance of the "Vermittlungsebene" for an understanding both of the play's dramaturgy and of its thematic substance.

Musil's disorientation of his audience differs from the Brechtian "Verfremdungseffekt" in that it does not set up another level of mediation supposedly superior to the dramatic presentation (which is what is achieved by Brecht's "epic" devices). Brecht's "alienation effect" essentially sets up a hierarchic structure in which the initial disorientation of the audience is tendentially sublated on a higher logical level in the service of re-orientation. Musil's dramaturgy of surprise denies the audience such a reassuring experience of ultimately arriving at a new orientation.¹⁹

Although the two levels of dramatic communication are not structurally separated, it is crucial to acknowledge both their importance and their co-presence. The "Handlungsebene" ends on a note of indecision, since we do not find out the exact outcome of Alpha's meanderings, nor do we find out the exact terms of Vinzenz's departure. In the course of the play, the general problem of disorientation is ostensibly resolved by the new interpretations provided retroactively for the three **coups de théâtre**. By way of contrast, at the end of the play, the particular disorientation regarding the relationship between the two protagonists is not resolved. Since orientation here is used in the sense of a "definitive" interpretation, it is important to note that the

problem of definitive interpretations is prominently thematized. Initially, the problem of certainty is associated with closure, with the motif of "ending". As Gilbert Reis has pointed out, the comedy actually starts with a request for an ending:²⁰

BÄRLI: Das muß ein Ende haben!

ALPHA: Sagen Sie mir, warum muß es ein Ende haben? Sehen Sie diese Bürste an; sie hat zwei Enden. Nein, sie hat überhaupt so viele Enden wie Haare. Zählen Sie ihre Enden. Ich möchte wahrhaftig einmal erfahren, woher man solche Gewißheiten nimmt! (GW I, p. 410)

Alpha's puns around the two uses of the modal verb "müssen", the double meaning of "Ende", and the problem of certainty foreshadow the problem of interpretation which will become crucial to the play as a whole. Bärli's first line links the notion of an ending with the notion of interpretation, since he is asking for his ill-defined relationship with Alpha to come to an end. The notion of orientation is thus linked with closure. By way of contrast, Alpha advocates keeping things suspended by refraining from definitive designations. In the third act, however, Alpha has changed over to Bärli's position, when she wants to prevent Vinzenz from leaving her. Now it is she who insists on a clear definition of her relationship with Vinzenz. Her request for the ill-defined state to come to an end is phrased in the very words which Bärli had uttered at the beginning of the play:

ALPHA: Das hat ein Ende! Das muß ein Ende haben!

VINZENZ: Schau! Er hält ihr die Bürste an beiden Enden und mit allen Borsten hin. So viele Enden! Erinnerst du dich nicht mehr? (GW I, p. 448)

The juxtaposition of closure and suspension which began the play in the confrontation between Bärli and Alpha over Bärli's marriage proposal now reappears in the farewell between Alpha and Vinzenz. Now Alpha's reluctance towards closure is turned against her. The verbal motif "Ende" is put in the service of the play's circular structure, suppor-

ted by the visual motif of the hairbrush, highlighting the circularity under reversed conditions.

There is, however, yet another element which points to the circular structure of the play, again in terms of a reappearance of a situation under reversed circumstances. At the beginning of the play, Alpha calls for help when she is threatened by Bärli's violence. Vinzenz appears from his concealed position when she calls his name. In act three, there is a similar situation: when Alpha is confronted by the five "bedeutende Männer" and their ultimatum, she calls out Vinzenz's name again:

ALPHA ratlos: Also, das ist stark...! sie sieht wie eine Tigerin der Reihe nach ihre Gegner an. Sie ruft. Vinzenz! Im Nebenzimmer bleibt es totenstill. Ich heirate Vinzenz! (GW I, p. 445)

This time, Alpha's call for help goes unanswered. While Vinzenz had disappointed Alpha in the first instance by not coming to her rescue earlier, here he fails to come to her rescue altogether. The precariousness of the situation remains unresolved for a while, since Vinzenz appears only after the jealous fight between Alpha and the Freundin has taken the "seriousness" of the conflicts to yet another theatrical extreme. The coda of the play, the farewell scene between Vinzenz and Alpha which follows this excess of theatricality, not only contains the discussion on closure in the reappearance of the "Ende" motif, it also marks a shift from locating a definitive interpretation in the end result of a process towards locating it in the seriousness of the communication. Vinzenz points to death as the ultimate end by way of his melancholy reference to the finality of time: "Das Ende ist das letzte: ein weißes Haar." (GW I, p. 449)

Death as the ultimate yardstick makes possible the first and only instance of serious and authentic discourse in the play:

ALPHA bleibt stehen: Warum willst Du noch zum Abschied lügen?

VINZENZ: Aber um Gotteswillen, nein. Du denkst auch, ich sei im Zuchthaus gesessen, ich treibe mich mit Mördern und Frauenzimmern herum und spiele? Ich will Dir die lautere Wahrheit sagen: In Wahrheit lebe ich wie jeder andre. (GW I, p. 449)

The comedy has left the sphere of theatrical make-belief and moves toward an analysis of truth. The farcical excesses of the dramaturgy of surprise make way for the emergence of seriousness. Musil himself described this serious quality of the play's coda movingly as

ein gewisses Schleierlüften im 3. Akt, Ernst, Müdigkeit hinter der Possenfigur, der Spaß ist aus, es regnet Asche, aber man soll ein Menschengesicht für einen Augenblick sehn. (Ich lebe wie jeder andre ... usw.) [...] ²¹

The move from the comic to the serious sphere on the "Handlungsebene" affects the "Vermittlungsebene" by way of the thematization of seriousness which characterizes the play's coda. The focus shifts from the motif of closure ("Ende") to the motif of seriousness ("Ernst") as the yardstick for interpretation. This shift invites the audience to apply the category of seriousness to their interpretation of the play as a whole.

When Vinzenz has finished his account which culminates in the confession that he lacks the ability to take his own talents seriously, Alpha reminds him of the past when he should have proved his love for her:

ALPHA: Dir fehlt der Ernst für Dich selbst! - Ich habe Dir schon gesagt, daß Du geistig tot bist für mich: aber warum hast Du damals, ich spreche jetzt von der Vergangenheit, warum hast du damals, als ich Dir gesandt war, nicht den Mut zu Deinem Ernst gefunden?! (GW I, pp. 449-450)

It is precisely at this point that Alpha's confrontation with Vinzenz is interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. In the fashion of Musil's first play *Die Schwärmer*, the

discourse is interrupted at the crucial moment when a communion between the two characters in question appears to be possible. Unlike the *Schwärmer*, however, the "Posse" allows the discourse to continue even after the interruption. Yet the possibility of communion has vanished:

VINZENZ: *Es läutet! Er schickt sich an zu öffnen.*
ALPHA: *Antworte! Es läutet abermals, sehr energisch.*

VINZENZ: *Aber Liebe zwischen zwei Menschen von Bedeutung ist doch keine Privatangelegenheit. Er läuft hinaus. Zurückkehrend. - Sondern ihr Gesamtverhältnis zur Welt! (GW I, p. 450)*

Vinzenz resorts to impersonal general statements at a moment of the most intense personal confrontation. The value of his thesis about the nature of love is undermined by the fact that it marks an evasion of the issue with which Alpha presents him, that of accepting the seriousness of human interaction, accepting the notion of responsibility in love.

While Vinzenz may be justified in arguing that Alpha's emphasis on personal responsibility is a privatistic distortion of the social significance of love, it becomes clear that his refusal to take anything seriously is in part a consequence of his inability on the personal level to face up to his own responsibility. Earlier, Vinzenz had claimed that his decision to leave Alpha was an expression of the intensity of his love for her:

VINZENZ: *Ja, das ist es doch: ich hatte Dich auch lieb. Damals auf dem Dampfer, Du warst noch nicht verschwunden, standest du noch steil und klein da, beschloß ich schon, unser Versprechen - wie soll ich sagen? - zu lösen. So lieb hatte ich Dich!*
(GW I, p. 428)

The fact that he nevertheless broke this decision in order to experience a "Wiedersehen mit meiner Seele" contradicts his subsequent privileging of the "Gesamtverhältnis zur Welt". His lack of seriousness is partly revealed as an

unwillingness to confront the seriousness of his breach of Alpha's trust.

The evasive quality of his response to Alpha's accusation is highlighted by the form his reaction to the doorbell takes. It is of interest to note that in the written text the first ringing of the doorbell is not mentioned in the stage instructions. The reader initially finds out about it only from Vinzenz's remark "Es läutet" (GW I, p. 450). The printed text tries to evoke the eagerness of Vinzenz's response which in a staged version of the play would be brought out by the rapidity of his response to the sound of an off-stage bell. Vinzenz's eagerness to evade the confrontation with his responsibility towards Alpha is enhanced by the fact that there is nothing which would compel him to answer the door in this situation. In fact, Alpha actually tries to urge him to respond to her accusation ("Antworte!"). The ultimate irony of the situation becomes evident when Vinzenz' remark about the "Gesamtverhältnis zur Welt" is not only punctuated by his momentary disappearance, but also by the appearance of Alpha's husband: at the very moment when the important issue of a responsibility towards the world at large is mentioned, a ridiculous representative of this world appears in the shape of Halm. The moment of seriousness is over, with Halm's appearance we are back in the reality of the "Posse".

With this reemergence of the "Posse" figure, the focus shifts back from the level of mediation to the level of the play's action. Yet the "Vermittlungsebene" remains present by virtue of a subtle scenic pointer in the scene: Vinzenz's answering the door subtly anticipates his announcement of his decision to become a servant, since answering the door is one of the duties of a servant. This point is made several times in the play: in act one, at the end of his conversation with the love-sick Bärli, Vinzenz had already answered the door to Apulejus-Halm once before:

BÄRLI: [...] Ich muß ihr einen Denkkzettel geben,
das ist es! *Es läutet, sie stutzen.*
BÄRLI *brummig*: Wollen Sie wohl die Freundlichkeit
haben, nachzusehn? (GW I, p. 417)

In this scene in act one, Vinzenz ushers in Halm. Halm carries a bouquet of flowers for Alpha (p. 418) and claims to have been invited to Alpha's "Namenstag". Vinzenz engages in role-playing by pretending not to know him. He addresses Bärli:

VINZENZ *zurückkehrend*: Sie sind mit den Gewohnheiten des Hauses besser vertraut als ich: der Herr hier behauptet Alphas Gatte und für diese Stunde eingeladen zu sein. (GW I, p. 417)

The final scene in act three is a repetition of an earlier incident under reversed conditions. This is stressed both visually and verbally: again, Vinzenz ushers in Halm, who again carries a bouquet of flowers (p. 450). Moreover, Vinzenz's final announcement that he wants to become a servant establishes a connection with the first instance of Vinzenz playing a servant in act one:

VINZENZ: Ich möchte Bedienter werden: Haben Sie vielleicht eine Empfehlung?
HALM: Bedienter? Köstlich.
VINZENZ: Am liebsten würde ich es bei Ihnen; da kenne ich schon einigermaßen die Verhältnisse.
(GW I, p. 451)

Twice the familiarity with the domestic situation is foregrounded as an element central to the role of a servant. In act one, in front of Bärli, Vinzenz pretended not to know Alpha's husband. This was seen to be a part of his role-playing, since we later found out that he had been employed by Halm to spy on Alpha and Bärli.

Yet throughout act one, there is another level of role-playing which subtly comes to the fore in visual terms: in the scene with Halm, Vinzenz actually already engages in performing a servant's activities in his interaction with Halm. Once Bärli has withdrawn, however, Halm and Vinzenz drop the

pretence and talk about their "Ehebruchsklage" scheme. In serving Halm coffee (p. 418), Vinzenz plays the part of a servant, anticipating his later decision. Later in act one, this visual motif of playing the servant is both enhanced and ironically reversed when the doorbell rings again: Vinzenz now assigns Halm the task of opening the door to Alpha's friends, again using words which foreshadow the final scene of act three:

Es läutet ziemlich heftig.

Das sind die Freier. Öffnen Sie; Sie sind mit den Verhältnissen hier im Haus besser vertraut als ich.

Halm geht öffnen. Vinzenz tritt unterdessen mit einer Tasse Kaffee bei Bärli ein. Halm kommt mit den Besuchern zurück. (GW I, p. 421)

Here, Vinzenz passes the role of servant on to Halm, pointing to Halm's familiarity with the domestic situation. However, Vinzenz continues to play servant towards the Großkaufmann Bärli by now serving coffee to him. The double-edgedness of his roleplaying is conveyed in visual terms. But let us look at the exact terms of Vinzenz's announcement in act three once he has heard that Halm does not want him as a servant:

VINZENZ: Da mich Halm abgelehnt hat, werde ich als Bedienter bei einer Lebedame beginnen oder bei einem Börsenmann. (GW I, p. 453)

"Lebedame" is a term an outsider would use to describe a flamboyant woman like Alpha, while "Börsenmann" evokes the world of big business at the stock exchange, the world of a "Großkaufmann" like Bärli. This would suggest that Vinzenz's decision at the end of the play does not really present us with anything new: the entire action of the play can be seen as an instance of role-playing on Vinzenz's part, as a kind of dress-rehearsal for his final decision. The motifs of answering doors and serving coffee as well as the verbal echoes to act one (the motif of the domestic "Verhältnisse") function as subtle hints that the play as a whole has to be

seen as a circular structure. The entire play in retrospect appears to be an acting out of the very decision which supposedly ends it. In a strange twist of logic, the outcome of the "Posse" turns out to be its very precondition. The play is - as it were - put in quotation marks.

The circular dramaturgy of Musil's play challenges the contractual basis of theater: social convention invites the audience to expect the dramatic presentation to aspire to the status of a fictional reality. In showing its protagonist in his role-playing as a mere imitation of a dramatic protagonist, Musil's play drops even this pretence. What we have been witnessing does not aspire to the fictional reality of drama but unmasks itself as a mere simulacrum of drama. The "open" ending on the level of the play's action, the "Handlungsebene", loses its validity as the level of action itself is dissolved in the covert circularity of the play's structure. The destruction of the "Handlungsebene" leaves us only with the level of dramatic communication, the "Vermittlungsebene". Here, however, the circularity of the play's structure constitutes a closing off of the play from its audience. If we as the audience are no longer able to validate a fictional reality, the act of communication collapses. The "Posse" violates expectations about the nature of dramatic action no less than those about the nature of dramatic communication. The play's dramaturgy renders drama impossible.

In view of this aspect of the ending, one of Musil's own comments appears in a new light. It stems from the letter to Alfred Kerr, in which Musil stresses his comedy's dadaistic spirit of a "doppelten Nichternstnehmens, weder der Welt, viel weniger noch des Theaters".²² With regard to the ending, Musil writes:

*Eine Figur hineingezeichnet, den Vinzenz; nachdem mir die zweite der Alpha nicht recht gelang. Am Schluß landesübliches Finale als Mißtrauensvotum gegen die Gattung.*²³

Musil's words of a "Mißtrauensvotum gegen die Gattung" contains a crucial ambiguity: while ostensibly referring only to the "Gattung" of "Posse" (as a subgenre of comic drama), the term "Gattung" is also applicable to the genre of drama as a whole. Our analysis has shown that the "Posse" goes beyond a critique of social reality or of dramatic conventions; in the dissolution of the "Handlungsebene", Musil's play becomes a comprehensive vote of no confidence on the dramatic genre as such.

Vinzenz's abortive "Wiedersehn mit meiner Seele" and his difficulties in finding "sein eigenes Leben" (GW I, p. 452) are the kind of subject matter which is too heavy for the genre of "Posse" to carry. The "Posse" appears to cancel itself out as an art-form inappropriate to such subject matter. In raising doubts as to the validity of dramatic experience it performs a gesture which amounts to a self--denunciation of the genre of drama as a whole. Paradoxically, however, this act of self-denunciation is performed in a drama. This leaves open the question of a redemption of the genre. **Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer** represents Musil's farewell to drama. The dramaturgical debate it engenders with its multiple "endings" does not come to a conclusion. The crisis of the genre continues.

Anmerkungen

1) Peter Handke: **Stücke I**. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 57.

2) Robert Musil: **Prosa und Stücke, Kleine Prosa, Aphorismen, Autobiographisches**. Herausgegeben von Adolf Frisé: Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983 [= **Gesammelte Werke I**; references to the play are to this edition and appear in the main text in parentheses abbreviated as GW I, followed by the page number].

3) Cf. Peter Szondi: **Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880-1950)** [1956]. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 11th edition 1975.

4) I regard this as a general characteristic of Musil's approach to drama in contrast to Günther Schneider, who wrote with reference to Musil's first play **Die Schwärmer**: "Illusion und Illusionswidrigkeit werden im Stück selbst als Problem der Schwärmer (nicht als Theater- oder Formproblem) thematisiert." Günther Schneider: **Untersuchungen zum dramatischen Werk Robert Musils**. Bern & Frankfurt: Lang, 1973, p. 12.

5) Peter Haida: **Komödie um 1900**. Wandlungen des Gattungsschemas von Hauptmann bis Sternheim. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1973.

6) Cf. Haida, op. cit., chapter XI: "Komödienschluß und Gattungsschema," pp. 152-159.

7) Reinhold Grimm: "Pyramide und Karussell," **Strukturen**. Essays zur deutschen Literatur. Göttingen: Sachse & Pohl, 1963; here quoted from **Beiträge zur Poetik des Dramas**. Herausgegeben von Werner Keller. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, p. 370.

8) Cf. Volker Klotz: **Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama** [1960]. München: Carl Hanser, 10th edition 1980.

9) Cf. Marie-Louise Roth: "Robert Musil **Vincent et l'amie des personnalités**. Essai d'interprétation," in: Karl Konrad Polheim (ed.), **Sinn und Symbol** Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Joseph P. Strelka. Bern, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris: Lang, 1987, p. 436.

10) Grimm quotes this concept from Brecht's **Kleines Organon**; cf. Grimm, loc. cit., p. 367.

11) Grimm, loc. cit., p. 370 [my parenthesis].

12) Review in **Der Tag**, August 24, 1924, quoted after Paul Stefanek, "Musils Posse **Vinzenz** und das Theater," **Musil-Studien** 7 (1981), p. 136.

13) Wolfgang Trautwein, "Offenes Finale: Akkumulation, Kreisbewegung und Ausbruch im deutschen Drama zwischen 1890 und 1933," **Sprache im technischen Zeitalter** 91 (15. September 1984), pp. 155-178.

14) Manfred Pfister, **Das Drama. Theorie und Analyse**. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1977.

15) Trautwein, **loc. cit.**, p. 156.

16) Cf. Trautwein, **loc. cit.**, p. 156.

17) Trautwein, **loc. cit.**, p. 170.

18) On the plans for continuations of **Vinzenz** cf. Heft 21 of Musil's diaries in: **Tagebücher**. Herausgegeben von Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 608-612.

19) On affinities and differences between Brecht's dramaturgy and that of Musil cf. Bianca Cetti Marinoni, "Verfremdungseffekte bei Robert Musil als Stücke-Schreiber," **Musil-Studien** 14 (1986), pp. 104-132. Also Norbert Kohlhasse, "Von der Revolutionsbühne zum 'Theater ohne Eigenschaften'," **Schweizer Monatshefte** 48 (1968), pp. 717-731.

20) Gilbert Reis, **Musils Frage nach der Wirklichkeit**. Königstein/Ts.: Hain, 1983, p. 139.

21) Letter of November 15, 1923 to Berthold Viertel, in: **Briefe 1901-1942**. Herausgegeben von Adolf Frisé unter Mit-hilfe von Murray G. Hall: Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981, vol. 1, p. 319.

22) Letter to Alfred Kerr of December 8, 1923, **Briefe I**, p. 326 (cf. note 21).

23) **Ibid.**