University of Groningen

Natura non facit saltus

Godioli, Alberto

Published in:
Beyond Given Knowledge

DOI:
[10.1515/9783110569230-014](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110569230-014)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Godioli, A. (2018). Natura non facit saltus: Gadda, Musil, and the Flux of Reality in European Modernism. In H. Veivo, J-P. Montier, F. Nicole, D. Ayers, B. Hjartarson, & S. Bru (Eds.), *Beyond Given Knowledge: Investigation, Quest and Exploration in Modernism and the Avant-Gardes* (pp. 189-203). (European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies; Vol. 5). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110569230-014>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Alberto Godioli

Natura non facit saltus

Gadda, Musil, and the Flux of Reality in European Modernism

“Because life is a stream”: Heraclitean Modernism

The idea that reality (both inner and outer) should be seen as an uninterrupted flow, as opposed to a discrete set of well-delimited elements, is one of the most widespread *topoi* in European modernism. “Life is a continuous flux that we try to arrest in stable and determined forms, within and outside ourselves”, wrote Luigi Pirandello in his essay-manifesto *L'umorismo* (On Humour, 1908); “these forms are the concepts, the ideals with which we try to keep ourselves consistent [...]. But within ourselves the flux continues, indistinct, flowing under the banks, beyond the limits that we impose [...]. In some stormy moments, all those forms miserably collapse, devastated by the flood”.¹ Pirandello’s use of fluidity as a metaphor to depict reality as an ever-changing continuum is, of course, far from being an isolated case – suffice it to mention the river imagery in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, or the omnipresence of flowing water in Woolf’s *The Waves*: “And we ourselves, walking six abreast, what do we oppose, with this random flicker of light in us that we call brain and feeling, how can we do battle against this flood; what has permanence?”.² In the view of many modernist authors, as in Heraclitus’s famous fragment, it is indeed not possible to step into the same river twice.

This Heraclitean perspective on life implies, first of all, a radical questioning of the boundaries between individuals: “How can you own water really? It’s always flowing in a stream, never the same, which in the stream of life we trace. Because life is a stream” (Leopold Bloom in ‘Lestrygonians’); “she felt that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically [...] it was all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose, and Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead” (Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*).³ Reality at large is seen as a “multiform unity” in which all demarcations are blurred, as

1 Luigi Pirandello, “L’umorismo”, in: *Saggi e interventi*, Ferdinando Taviani (ed.), Milan 2006, 775–948, here 938 (my translation).

2 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, London 1976, 160–161.

3 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Oxford 2008, 146; Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London 1977, 92.

in Proust's description of Elstir's famous seascapes: "One of the metaphors that occurred most frequently in the seascapes which surrounded him here was precisely that which, comparing land with sea, suppressed all demarcation between them. It was this comparison, tacitly and untiringly repeated on a single canvas, which gave it that multiform and powerful unity".⁴

The attempt to capture the metamorphic flux of reality clearly lies at the heart of several formal and epistemological innovations brought about by modernist fiction. Epiphanies or moments of being mostly coincide with the fleeting instant in which the "walls of partition" between phenomena fall down, leaving the subject with a sense of "irrational tenderness" towards the continuum of life: "It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself".⁵ Likewise, the very notion of *stream of consciousness* attests to a widely shared interest in seizing – as Auerbach phrased it in the final chapter of *Mimesis* – the "continuous rumination of consciousness in its natural and purposeless freedom".⁶ Following a long-standing critical tradition, this salient aspect of modernist aesthetics is usually interpreted in the light of early twentieth-century irrationalism and anti-intellectualism, with particular regard to the influence exerted by thinkers like Henri Bergson and William James:

Each [psychic state] is borne by the fluid mass of our whole psychic existence. [...] Now, states thus defined cannot be regarded as distinct elements. They continue each other in an endless flow [...] a flux of fleeting shades merging into each other. (Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, 1907)

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890)⁷

⁴ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, transl. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, London 2000, Vol. 2, 480.

⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 63.

⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton 1953, 473.

⁷ See respectively: Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, Keith Ansell Pearson and John Ó Maoilearca (eds), London 2002, 172; William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, New York 2007, Vol.1, 239.

The influence of Bergsonism is definitely relevant, and has been widely investigated by scholars;⁸ on the other hand, much less critical attention has so far been paid to alternative modernist perspectives on the continuum of reality. The present chapter aims to explore the non-Bergsonian side of the flux *topos* by focusing on the work of two major exponents of Italian and Austrian modernism respectively, namely Carlo Emilio Gadda and Robert Musil.⁹ As will be demonstrated, both Gadda and Musil tend to envision life as a metamorphic flow; but while questioning the validity of conventional representations of reality, they also refuse Bergson's scepticism towards rational analysis. In this respect, their reflection should rather be linked with the developments of the natural sciences between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Fluxes and *Quanta*: Carlo Emilio Gadda

Written in the early phase of his literary career, *Meditazione milanese* (1928) is by far Gadda's longest and most significant philosophical work. Not by chance, fluidity and the questioning of discrete partitions run as leitmotifs throughout the essay: "Reality reveals itself like the Heraclitean river, full of whirlpools and entangled intersecting forces" (MM 777); "It is a remarkable mistake of speculation to always see the I and the one where they do not exist, to see limits and barriers, where you only have ties and entanglements" (MM 647). As in the other modernist examples mentioned above, such a perspective on reality results in a radical critique of the very idea of permanent substance – i.e. Kant's noumenon, or thing-in-itself. A whole chapter of *Meditazione*, significantly titled "La grama sostanza" (The miserable substance), is in fact devoted to debunking this philosophical myth: "The traditional notion of substance is a foible, a chimera" (MM 868); "If the Heraclitean glimmers had had the chance to better establish themselves in a proper development, we would have saved ourselves some pain and some miles, and the idea of substance wouldn't have overwhelmed everything" (MM 866).

⁸ See for instance: S.E. Gontarski, Paul Ardoine and Laci Mattison (eds), *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, London 2013; Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Montreal 1996.

⁹ Abbreviations: MM = Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Meditazione milanese*, in: *Scritti vari e postumi*, Dante Isella et al. (eds), Milan 1993, 615–894 (my translation). TAM = Gadda, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, transl. William Weaver, New York 2007. MWQ = Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, transl. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, London 1953.

Traditional views of the *ego* as an autonomous, stable entity are among the first victims of this Heraclitean approach – “I... the foulest of all pronouns”, as Gadda would later write in *Acquainted with Grief* (first written in 1938–1941).¹⁰ Similarly, in Gadda’s view, conventional morality should give way to a deeper awareness of life’s continuous metamorphoses: “only by means of abstraction can we talk about good feelings, evil feelings as if they were definite, fixed, undisputable [...]. It would be like claiming that cloud accumulations, rising like dreams from the mountains and the forests, have fixed and definite geometrical shapes” (MM 824). Nonetheless, Gadda’s critique of the stiff abstractions imposed by everyday logic does not result in Bergsonian irrationalism; rational analysis still remains our best (if limited) tool to investigate the chaotic flux of reality, although it should first break away from commonsensical conventions and simplifications. As openly stated in *Meditazione*, the main influence behind Gadda’s anti-substantialism comes from the most recent advances in the natural sciences: “In modern physics, the permanence of substance (physical substance, e.g. copper) through any kind of manipulation is a steady belief. But on the other hand, the study of radioactive phenomena and other electrochemical observations have started to shake this notion, to undermine it” (MM 874). According to Gadda, early twentieth-century physics is also the main factor preventing us from any further idolisation of the Self as a stable entity:

Recent physical theories, i.e. physical-mathematical, biophysical, psychological and psychiatric theories, have conjured against the idolisation of the I, this totem; with their overflowing stream, [these theories] have submerged its moronic head. They have irreversibly compromised the fetishistic idea of an I that persists and resists through time, triumphant in its day of glory.¹¹

The imagery evoked by Gadda is quite similar to the one used by Pirandello in *L'umorismo* (“in some stormy moments, all those forms miserably collapse, devastated by the flood”) – remarkably, though, the flood here is not caused by an irrational abandonment to the stream of life, but by the counter-intuitive achievements of scientific inquiry. Gadda’s scientific gaze on the continuum of life is further illustrated in his literary works – in the short-story collection *L'Adalgisa* (1943), for instance, the idea of psychic states flowing into each other (Leibniz’s *petites perceptions*) is rendered through a comparison with integral calculus: “‘Les petites perceptions’ [little perceptions] in Leibnitz’s psychology (Nouveaux Essais

¹⁰ Gadda, *Acquainted with Grief*, transl. William Weaver, New York 1969, 86.

¹¹ Gadda, “Come lavoro” (1949), in: *Saggi Giornali e Favole*, Dante Isella et al. (eds), Milan 1991, Vol. 1, 427–443, here 428 (my translation).

sur l'Entendement Humain) are infinitesimal increments in the individual's life, unperceived motives behind a decision; just as 'la fonction différentielle' [the differential function] is the infinitesimal increment of an algebraic function".¹²

The best literary illustration of Gadda's non-Bergsonian handling of such notions is provided, however, by his most famous work: *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, an unorthodox detective novel started in 1945 and first published in volume in 1957. Detective Ciccio Ingravallo's investigation on the murder of Liliana Balducci is, in fact, only a pretext for a broader philosophical inquiry into reality as "a dramatically Heraclitean downflow, πάντα δε πολεμος [everything is war]" (TAM 136). The first page of the novel, introducing Ingravallo's philosophical theories, is quite indicative in this regard:

He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed. He also used words like knot or tangle, or muddle, or *gnommero*, which in Roman dialect means skein. [...] The apparent motive, the principal motive was, of course, single. But the crime was the effect of a whole list of motives which had blown on it in a whirlwind (like the sixteen winds in the list of winds when they twist together in a tornado, in a cyclonic depression) and had ended by pressing into the vortex of the crime the enfeebled "reason of the world". (TAM 5)

Gadda's imagery this time does not draw on the semantic area of fluidity; the prevailing metaphors here are the "tangle or muddle", and the winds twisting together to cause a "cyclonic depression". Both images, however, illustrate the idea of the world being a complex continuum, in which it is impossible to isolate independent, well-delimited phenomena. The all-encompassing entanglement underlying any kind of event makes it impossible, of course, to set a clear boundary between guilt and innocence – as the novel untangles, it will become apparent that everyone is more or less involved in the continuum of guilt, thus making the search for a culprit almost irrelevant (although Ingravallo will pursue his investigation until the *dénouement*). In short, the questioning of conventional views of the world as a set of discrete phenomena results – as Gadda will put it in a 1954 essay – in the "Dostoevskian acknowledgement of the common burden of guilt: so that one's guilt is the guilt of everyone".¹³ The notion of continuum is further developed in the novel on other levels as well, including the systematic

¹² Gadda, *L'Adalgisa*, in: *Romanzi e Racconti*, Dante Isella et al. (eds), Milan 1994, Vol. 1, 289–564, here 559 (my translation).

¹³ Gadda, "L'Egoista" (1954), in: *Saggi Giornali e Favole*, 654–677, here 655 (my translation).

blurring of gender boundaries (in contrast with the sexist environment of Fascist Rome, in which the novel is set): “the gramophone was transformed, with the most perfect nonchalance, from male to female and vice versa [depending on who was singing]” (TAM 155) “you couldn’t understand whether it was a man or a woman, who in proceeding among the consolations of offspring and of the hoe, had sprouted a beard” (TAM 273); “She had one of her hands in the other, resembling Cosimo *pater patriae* in the so-called portrait by Pontormo” (TAM 274).

The most significant occurrence of our leitmotif, however, takes place in the seventh chapter of the novel, during the interrogation of a young prostitute named Ines Cionini. This episode will play a crucial role in the solution of the case¹⁴ — yet, Ines’s involvement in the story seems to be accidental:

Chance (*non datur casus, non datur saltus* [there is no chance, there is no leap]), well it looked like it had been chance that night helping the perplexed, setting the investigation right, as the winds changed: chance, luck, more than any sagacity of art or hairsplitting dialectics. (TAM 185)

As Gadda himself suggests, what has just happened in the seventh chapter *seems* to be fortuitous (“it *looked like* it had been chance”), which does not mean it actually *is*: for an author who conceives the world as an infinitely complex tangle of multiple causes, it is indeed hard to believe that coincidences and leaps are anything more than an illusion produced by the limits of human reason. In short, the Latin parenthetical “*non datur casus, non datur saltus*” is meant to be taken seriously, and refers to some of Gadda’s deepest philosophical beliefs. As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere,¹⁵ the direct source for this passage can be identified in a paragraph from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The proposition that nothing happens through blind chance (*in mundo non datur casus*) is therefore an *a-priori* law of nature. [...] The principle of continuity forbids any leap in the series of appearances, that is, of alterations (*in mundo non datur saltus*) [...]. [These propositions] are all entirely at one in this, that they allow of nothing in the empirical synthesis which may do violence or detriment to the understanding and to the continuous connection of all appearances.¹⁶

¹⁴ On the importance of this episode in the overall structure of the novel, see in particular Ferdinando Amigoni, *La più semplice macchina. Lettura freudiana del «Pasticciaccio»*, Bologna 1995, 33–56.

¹⁵ Alberto Godioli, “The World as a Continuum: Kantian (and Dantean) Echoes in Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio*”, in: *Modern Language Review*, 110, 2015, no. 3, 695–705.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith, Basingstoke 2007, 248–49 (Transcendental Analytic, ii, 2, 3); emphasis in original.

Further evidence of Kant's influence on Gadda's framing of the "continuous connection of all appearances" is provided by another passage focusing on the "non datur saltus" principle in particular:

Between reality in the field of appearance and its negation there is therefore a continuity of many possible intermediate sensations [...]. The property of magnitudes by which no part of them is the smallest possible, that is, by which no part is simple, is called their continuity. Space and time are *quanta continua* [...]. Such magnitudes may also be called *flowing*, since the synthesis of productive imagination involved in their production is a progression in time, and the continuity of time is ordinarily designated by the term *fluere*. [...] A phenomenon as unity is a *quantum*, and as a quantum is always a *continuum*.¹⁷

Alongside the Heraclitean emphasis on the semantic area of flowing, Kant's use of the word *quantum* (actually a recurring term in this section of the *Critique*) is particularly intriguing. The same term is in fact used by Ingravallo himself, in the incipit of the novel: "What he meant was that a certain affective motive, a certain amount or, as you might say today, a *quantum* of affection, of 'eros', was also involved even in 'matters of interest'" (TAM 6).

To be sure, Ingravallo's theories on the "quantum of eros" are directly informed by quantum mechanics: Gadda's interest in early twentieth-century physics is well documented in his writings, and was partly determined by professional reasons (he was an engineer by trade, and that remained his profession until 1940).¹⁸ Nonetheless, Kant's *quanta continua* can be seen as an equally important influence on the detective's terminology. Gadda actually seems to notice an unexpected compatibility between Kant and quantum mechanics, thus anticipating a more recent trend in the philosophy of science;¹⁹ in his personal copy of the *Critique* (annotated around 1929), right next to Kant's statement that every *quantum* can be simultaneously considered as *continuum* and *discretum*, Gadda significantly wrote the words "atoms" and "molecules".²⁰

In conclusion, the notion of *quantum continuum* allows Gadda to establish an unexpected connection between a relatively neglected aspect of Kant's thought

17 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 343–47 (Transcendental Analytic, ii, 2, 3).

18 See in particular: Gabriele Frasca, *Un quanto di erotia. Gadda con Freud e Schrödinger*, Naples 2011.

19 See in particular Stephen R. Palmquist, "Kantian Causality and Quantum Quarks: The Compatibility between Quantum Mechanics and Kant's Phenomenal World", in: *Theoria*, 28, 2013, 283–302; Michel Bitbol, "Reflective Metaphysics: Understanding Quantum Mechanics from a Kantian Standpoint", in: *Philosophica*, 83, 2010, 53–83; Shahen Hacyan, "Einstein's 'Spooky Actions at a Distance' in the Light of Kant's Transcendental Doctrine of Space and Time", in: *AIP Conference Proceedings*, 861, 2006, 1117–1119.

20 Godioli, "The World as a Continuum", 697.

on the one hand, and quantum mechanics on the other; both influences are crucial in Gadda's non-Bergsonian approach to the flux of reality. Even though the world's continuum defies the rules of conventional logic, it is nonetheless Ingravallo's duty to investigate it with the tools of rational or even scientific thought: he still needs to process the evidence, untangle the knot as much as possible, and eventually find a culprit (no matter how philosophically problematic this notion might have become in his view). As will be discussed in what follows, Musil's *Man without Qualities* addresses the same epistemological problem in a very similar way.

“Clouds rushing away”: Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*

The Heraclitean πάντα ῥεῖ [everything flows] is a central concept in Musil's masterpiece, *The Man Without Qualities* (on which the author worked from 1921 to his death in 1942). The protagonist, 32-year-old mathematician Ulrich, famously has “a vague intuitive feeling that this order of things is not as solid as it pretends to be; nothing, no ego, no form, no principle is safe, everything is in a process of invisible but never-ceasing transformation” (MWQ 296–297). In Ulrich's view, as in Gadda's, it is indeed “a remarkable mistake of speculation to always see the I and the one where they do not exist” (MM 647). And again, as was the case with Gadda, one of the main implications of this anti-substantialist worldview is the need to reform moral norms, in order to adapt them to the fluidity of life: “one gradually comes to feel a compulsion to change the fundamental forms of a morality that for two thousand years has been adjusted to changes of taste only in minor details, and to exchange it for another, one that will fit more closely and elastically to the mobility of facts” (MWQ 300).

Such an emphasis on the metamorphic quality of reality is accompanied in Musil by various sets of recurring metaphors – one of which is water, i.e. the main subject of Ulrich's scientific interests: “this archetype of all liquids was, physically speaking, fundamentally not a liquid at all but, according to circumstances, a solid body, a liquid or a gas” (MWQ 130). The best exemplification of water's instability across solid, liquid and gaseous states is, of course, clouds; and indeed, clouds are Ulrich's favourite metaphor when it comes to conveying the variability of both human feelings and moral notions:

The nonspecific emotion changes the world in the same way the sky changes its colours, without desire or self, and in this form objects and actions change like the clouds. (MWQ 471)

Polonius's cloud, which appears sometimes as a ship, sometimes as a camel, is not the weakness of a servile courtier but completely characterises the way God has created us. [...] One rarely imagines how far this extends. In truth it reaches from beautiful, ugly, good, and evil, where it still seems natural to everyone that one man's morning cloud should be another man's camel, through bitter and sweet, fragrant and stinking, as far as the apparently most precise and least subjective impressions of colours and forms.²¹

Take greed, greatness, cheerfulness, or whatever you like: it is only the hollow earthly characterisation of processes that are far more powerful than their ridiculous trailing thread, which our understanding seizes in order to pull them down to us. In truth, all our feelings are inexpressible. We press them out in drops and think that these drops are our feelings. But they are clouds rushing away!²²

As already noted, Gadda used a strikingly similar image in *Meditazione*: “[Individual feelings] are like clouds gravitating around a certain shape, while at the same time changing their shape. Only by means of abstraction can we talk about good feelings, evil feelings as if they were definite, fixed, undisputable [...]. It would be like claiming that cloud accumulations [...] have fixed and definite geometrical shapes” (MM 824). Remarkably, *Nuvole in fuga* (Clouds rushing away) was also one of the working titles for what would later become *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*.²³

If cloud formations are so consistently used as a metaphor for life's fluidity, then meteorology stands out as an ideal illustration of a scientific approach to the flux. It is quite fitting, in this respect, that the very first paragraph of *The Man Without Qualities* features a thorough description of the weather phenomena taking place on the day in which the action starts:

There was a depression over the Atlantic. It was travelling eastwards, towards an area of high pressure over Russia, and still showed no tendency to move northwards around it. The isotherms and isotheres were fulfilling their functions. The atmospheric temperature was in proper relation to the average annual temperature, the temperature of the coldest as well as of the hottest month, and the a-periodic monthly variation in temperature. [...] The vapour in the air was at its highest tension, and the moisture in the air was at its lowest. In short, to

²¹ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, transl. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, New York 1995, Vol. 2, 820–821.

²² Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Vol. 2, 1311.

²³ Gadda, *Romanzi e Racconti*, Vol. 2, 1152.

use an expression that describes the facts pretty satisfactorily, even though it is somewhat old-fashioned: it was a fine August day in the year 1913. (MWQ 1)

Even the apparently simplest circumstances (such as a “fine August day”) are the result of the dynamic interaction between multiple forces in constant transformation; quite significantly, as discussed above, Gadda used a very similar image – a “cyclonic point of depression” caused by wind systems – in order to illustrate Ingravallo’s theories on the complex entanglement of causes underlying every event (TAM 4). As was the case with Gadda, this fluid interpretation of reality does not result in Bergsonian anti-positivism, but rather coincides with a strong interest in the debates taking place within the natural sciences between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Musil’s main influence in this regard is, of course, Ernst Mach’s “Heraclitean universe”.²⁴ Mach’s critique of the notion of substance extended well beyond the realm of physics, as demonstrated by his highly influential essay *The Analysis of Sensation* (1897):²⁵ by studying bodily sensations as a metamorphic “continuum” (AS 64), Mach overtly aims to attack “the philosophical notion, at first impressive, but subsequently recognised as monstrous, of a ‘thing-in-itself’, different from its ‘appearance’” (AS 6–7) – indeed, something quite similar to the “miserable Substance” discussed by Gadda in *Meditazione milanese*. Building on his interpretation of reality as a continuum, Mach formulates his famous statement on the ego, with which Gadda would certainly have agreed: “The ego is not a definite, unalterable, sharply bounded unity. None of [its] attributes are important; for all vary even within the sphere of individual life [...]. The ego is unsavable” (AS 24).

In Musil’s novel, the echo of Mach’s scepticism towards the self is perhaps most visible in the figure of Moosbrugger – the infamous murderer and rapist whose “whole life was a comically and distressingly clumsy struggle to gain by force a recognition of his sense of self”, notwithstanding “the uncanny feeling as though he were not firmly settled inside his skin” (MWQ 71). Moosbrugger’s psychiatric condition, involving a volatile and intermittent sense of his own ego, is a recurring subject of debate throughout *The Man Without Qualities*; as I will argue in the next section, focusing on the juridical implications of his case can set the basis for another fruitful parallel between Musil’s and Gadda’s converging ideas on the continuum of reality.

²⁴ Thomas Sebastian, *The Intersection of Science and Literature in Musil’s The Man Without Qualities*, Rochester 2005, 22. See also: Catherine Wilson, “Mach, Musil, and Modernism”, in: *The Monist*, 97, 2014, no. 1, 138–155.

²⁵ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations* (= AS), transl. Cora May Williams and Sidney Waterlow, New York 1959.

Modernist Polarity: Partial Insanity in Musil and Gadda

One of the most extended reflections on Moosbrugger's case is provided in Chapter 60 of Part 1, titled "Excursion into the Realm of Logic and Morals". Notably, this chapter contains a Latin expression quite similar to the one we found in *That Awful Mess*:

Moosbrugger was one of those borderline cases known to jurisprudence and forensic medicine, and indeed even to laymen, as cases of diminished responsibility. [...] *Natura non facit saltus*, she does nothing by leaps and bounds; she prefers gradual transitions and on a large scale too keeps the world in a transitional state between imbecility and sanity. But jurisprudence takes no notice of this. It says: *non datur tertium sive medium inter duo contradictoria*; in plain English: the individual is either capable of acting contrary to law or he is not, for between two contraries there is no third or middle term. [...] The psychiatrists distinguish between incurable mental diseases and such as by the help of God in time become better of their own accord, and, finally, such as the doctor, admittedly, cannot cure either but which the patient could have avoided [...]. This second and third group supply those merely inferior sufferers whom the angel of medicine does of course treat as patients when they come to him in his private practice, but whom he shyly leaves to the angel of the law when he encounters them in his forensic practice. (MWQ 287–288)

The continuum principle is applied here to the field of jurisprudence. When the judge denies the partial insanity motion for Moosbrugger, Ulrich criticises the sentence on account of its implied lack of respect for the infinite middle terms between lucidity and insanity, and consequently between guilt and innocence. The gap between the law and the continuum of moral responsibility is certainly one of Gadda's favourite themes as well, as shown not only by *That Awful Mess*, but also — and more pertinently — by his preparatory sketches for *Novella seconda* (1928), whose subject bears a striking resemblance to Moosbrugger's case. Gadda's unfinished novella is based on the real-life story of Renzo Pettine, a matricide whose partial insanity ("semi-infermità mentale") had failed to be recognised by the jury:

The jury has deemed the boy [Renzo Pettine] sane, he was even denied partial insanity. But it seems to me that the poor wretch was judged too harshly, and that the partial insanity plea should have been accepted. [...] One can be insane in his higher faculties, while at the same time maintaining a large portion of his physical, physiological and locomotive powers.²⁶

26 Gadda, sketches for *Novella seconda*, in: *Romanzi e Racconti*, Vol. 2, 1313–1319, here 1314–1317 (my translation).

Musil and Gadda's fluid conception of insanity and criminal responsibility is best understood in the broader historical framework of their respective juridical contexts. In *The Man Without Qualities*, Moosbrugger's case is explicitly set against the coordinates of legal debate in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire around 1914: as repeatedly stated in the novel, Ulrich's father is part of a committee of illustrious jurists, which had been assigned the task of reforming Kakanian's outdated penal code. One of the main points of contention within the committee, as well as a major source of concern for Ulrich's father, is the proposal to "extend the concept of mental impairment, for which punishment is not in order, in the vague form of diminished responsibility, even to those numerous individuals who are neither insane nor morally normal: that army of inferior persons, the morally feeble-minded, which sadly enough constitutes one of the ever-growing diseases of our civilization" (MWQ 342 – letter to Ulrich from his father). The origins of this proposal are traced back by Musil to the "social school of thought" (MWQ 587), whose main exponent was the German jurist and criminology Franz von Liszt (1851–1919); as pointed out by Ulrich's father, however, the German social school has in turn a "Roman precedent", represented by the Italian anti-classical school of Raffaele Garofalo, Enrico Ferri and Cesare Lombroso.²⁷ Both the Italian and the German movement advocated a rethinking of the notion of criminal responsibility, based on scientific evidence pointing towards the widespread existence of fluid intermediate states of partial insanity (and therefore diminished responsibility). The legal status of Moosbrugger clearly embodies this conflict: the "angel of medicine" might well acknowledge partial insanity as a reality, but "to the legal mind insanity is an all-or-nothing proposition" (MWQ 583). As stated by Ulrich's father, "while empirical logic recognizes the existence of persons who are partly insane and partly sane, the logic of the law must never admit such a mixture of juridical states; before the law, a person is either responsible for his actions or not responsible" (MWQ 344).

The puzzling implications of partial insanity were also widely debated by Italian jurists, in the same years in which Gadda was working on *Novella seconda*. In 1925, three years before *Novella seconda*, the Fascist Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco started his reform of the previous penal code, the so-called "Codice Zanardelli" (dating back to 1889). As shown by a speech delivered to the Parliament in May 1925, Rocco took a clear position on the issue of diminished responsibility:

27 Svein Atle Skålevåg, "Moosbrugger: The Genealogy of a Demi-Fou", in: *Pólemos*, 7, 2013, 61–82, in particular 77–78.

The Chamber acknowledges the momentous issue currently debated among psychiatrists and criminologists, on the existence of partial insanity. Some say that partial insanity does not exist, because one is either mad or not mad. Yet we cannot deny (science shows it) that there are grey areas between sanity and madness, whereby a criminal who is partially insane cannot be deemed entirely responsible, or entirely innocent. [...] I agree that those criminals should be committed to special institutes, and only exceptionally should they be committed to criminal hospitals, because the latter are usually meant for incurable criminals.²⁸

By acknowledging the existence of partial insanity, Rocco openly distanced himself from what Gadda refers to as “classical school, integral responsibility, etc.”.²⁹ In February 1926, only a few months after Rocco’s speech, Renzo Pettine killed his mother, Erminia Ferrari. In his closing statement pronounced in 1927 at the Corte d’Assise in Milan, Genunzio Bentini (Pettine’s lawyer) defends the notion of partial insanity in terms similar to those used by both Rocco and Musil: “Is madness a door that can be closed hermetically? Is it not possible that a glimpse of light might come in from the cracks and crevices, from time to time?”³⁰ As pointed out by Bentini, Pettine’s case calls for a productive, if complicated, dialogue between the “man of the Law” (*uomo della legge*) and the new insights provided by the “man of Science” (*uomo della scienza*) – a challenge similar to the one faced by Ulrich’s father and the other committee members, in *The Man Without Qualities*: “the laws to be updated had been in operation since the year 1852, so that on top of everything they had proved highly durable. [...] No doubt their understanding of psychology was about fifty years out of date; that easily happens when one has to till one’s own field of expertise with the borrowed tools of a neighbour” (MWQ 586).

The need for legal judgement to adapt to new scientific evidence is a crucial point in both Gadda’s and Musil’s reflections on partial insanity. Their emphasis on the continuum between sanity and insanity should not be seen as a way to radically question the validity of the Law as such; as we read in *Novella seconda*, “the judges are called to judge (and they cannot abstain from judging)”.³¹ Acknowledging the flux of reality is rather a starting point for Gadda and Musil to rethink legal deliberation as a dynamic process, where justice can (and should) be always

²⁸ Alfredo Rocco, *Discorsi parlamentari*, ed. by Giuliano Vassalli, Bologna 2005, 186 (my translation).

²⁹ Gadda, sketches for *Novella seconda*, 1315.

³⁰ Genunzio Bentini, “In difesa di Renzo Pettine”, in: Carlo Masera (ed.), *Arringhe celebri: da Demostene a Carnelutti*, Milan 1957, 225–253, here 250.

³¹ Gadda, *Novella seconda*, in: *Romanzi e Racconti*, Vol. 2, 1027–1069, here 1061 (my translation).

sought for, although it can never be achieved entirely – it is impossible to draw an exact line between criminal responsibility and its opposite, but it is still our duty to adjust as much as possible to the complexity of life. In order to further contextualize this point, it is particularly useful to refer to the notion of modernist polarity, as defined by Desmond Manderson in “Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law” (2012).³² The article focuses on another modernist author, namely D.H. Lawrence, whose Heraclitean stance has been highlighted by Manderson as well as by several other scholars – “there is no rest, no cessation from the conflict”; “in Time and in Eternity all is flux”, Lawrence himself writes in the 1915 essay “The Crown”.³³ In Manderson’s analysis of the novel *Kangaroo* (1922), Lawrence’s philosophy of *polemos* and fluidity takes on a distinct legal connotation: the flux of reality generates a conflict or “polarity” between the Law’s “predictable rules” and life’s “unpredictable circumstances”, pointing to the unavoidable imperfection of all legal decisions. According to Manderson, however, the modernist questioning of juridical certainty does not necessarily coincide with an irrational, drastic refusal of the rule of law; on the contrary, it can be an opportunity to rethink the Law and its application as an endless process, where “legal decisions prefigure not an *end* to interpretative and normative disagreement, but another text to be defended and transformed in the flux of their ceaseless oscillation” – in other words, the Law is not supposed to “maximize certainty” anymore, but rather to “manage uncertainty”.³⁴ Likewise, in their handling of Pettine’s and Moosbrugger’s cases, Gadda and Musil do not divest (juridical) reason of its function; they rather redefine it as an imperfect but necessary tool, that needs to be constantly recalibrated in the desperate attempt to do justice to life’s dynamic flow.

Conclusion: Modernist Epistemologies

As detailed above, both Gadda and Musil devote particular attention to an epistemological issue that is central to European modernism at large: how can we attain knowledge of a reality that is in constant flux, when the intellect can only provide us with a crystallised, inauthentic conceptualisation of it? So far, mod-

³² Desmond Manderson, “Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law”, in: *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 2, 2012, 475–505.

³³ D.H. Lawrence, “The Crown”, in: *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, London 1988, 251–306, 256 and 304. On Lawrence and Heraclitus, see in particular Robert E. Montgomery, *The Visionary D.H. Lawrence: Beyond Philosophy and Art*, Cambridge 2009, 132–167.

³⁴ Manderson, “Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law”, 503 and 477.

ernist responses to this predicament have been usually identified with Bergsonian irrationalism; yet, this association (however well-founded) should not overshadow the importance of alternative approaches, aiming to get closer to the truth by reforming rational thought *from within*. To be sure, both Gadda and Musil are well aware of the limits of human reason, and of the utopian quality of such an attempt. Significantly, in *That Awful Mess*, the most important developments in the investigation do not depend on deductive logic, but rather on what the detective and the reader might perceive as “chance”. To a similar effect, Ulrich’s faith in scientific investigation sometimes yields to the power of non-rational modes of knowledge, as in the final dream of mystical union with Agathe or in the occasional moments of communion with nature:

He climbed up on one of the hillocks or lay down on the shore in the surrounding company of sea, rock and sky. There was no presumption in this feeling of companionship, for the difference in magnitude disappeared, as also did the difference between mind and nature, animate and inanimate; indeed, every kind of difference between things grew less in such communion. [...] Nor did he reflect on these phenomena – as another man, like a huntsman on the trail, might try to track an observation down by thinking along after it – indeed, he was probably not even aware of them. But he was absorbing them. (MWQ 144–145)

Nonetheless, Gadda and Musil refuse Bergson’s anti-intellectualism, in the name of a continuum between literature and scientific modes of knowledge. According to both authors, the epistemological function of literature is not essentially different from that of calculus, quantum physics, meteorology, or forensic psychiatry – each in their own field, all those disciplines can (and should) try to bridge the gap between the discrete structure of rational thought and the continuous flux of reality. This does not mean that a rigid dichotomy should be established between rationalist and irrationalist responses to the Heraclitean dilemma; while Gadda and Musil incorporate elements of anti-intellectualism in their works, other authors that are normally considered in a Bergsonian perspective may actually be influenced by early twentieth-century scientific debates as well.³⁵ In conclusion, works like *Meditazione milanese*, *That Awful Mess* or *The Man Without Qualities* should rather be seen as an example of how the modernist *topos* of reality’s flux is in fact the result of a complex dialogue between heterogeneous influences and divergent epistemological stances.

³⁵ With regard to the influence of quantum physics on British modernism, see in particular: Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*, Cambridge 1997; Ian Ettinger, “Relativity and Quantum Theory in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*”, in: *Zeteo: The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*, 4, 2012, 1–18; Paul Tolliver Brown, “Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”, in: *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32, 2009, no. 3, 39–62.