



Robert Musil
The Confusions of Young Törless

A new translation by Mike Mitchell

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

THE CONFUSIONS OF YOUNG TÖRLESS

ROBERT MUSIL was born in Klagenfurt, in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia, in 1880. From the ages of twelve to seventeen he was a boarder at military schools which prepared their pupils primarily for service in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His experiences at school helped to make a military career seem unattractive, and Musil instead enrolled to study mechanical engineering at the Technical University of Brünn (now Brno in the Czech Republic) where his father, previously a professor, was now head. After military service in 1901–2, Musil spent a year at the Technical University in Stuttgart as teaching assistant, then took up the study of philosophy and psychology at the University of Berlin (now the Humboldt University). There he completed in 1908 a doctoral thesis on the psychologist and philosopher Ernst Mach. He published his first novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, in 1906. He worked first as a librarian, then as a literary editor. In 1911 he married the painter Martha Marcovaldi. During the First World War Musil served in the Austro-Hungarian army in South Tyrol. After the war, besides plays, short stories, and many essays, he worked on his massive novel *The Man without Qualities*, of which the first two volumes were published in 1930 and 1932. An opponent of Nazism, Musil went into exile a few months after the German annexation of Austria in 1938. From then until his death he lived in Switzerland, trying without success to finish *The Man without Qualities*. He died of a stroke in 1942.

MIKE MITCHELL is the translator of numerous works of German fiction, for which he has been eight times shortlisted for prizes; his translation of Herbert Rosendorfer's *Letters Back to Ancient China* won the Schlegel–Tieck Prize in 1998. He is the translator of Kafka's *The Trial* for Oxford World's Classics.

RITCHIE ROBERTSON is Taylor Professor of German at Oxford University and a Fellow of the Queen's College. His books include *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* (OUP, 1985), *Kafka: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2004), and *Mock Epic Poetry from Pope to Heine* (OUP, 2009). He has translated several books from German, including Kafka's *The Man who Disappeared (America)* for Oxford World's Classics.

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics have brought readers closer to the world's great literature. Now with over 700 titles—from the 4,000-year-old myths of Mesopotamia to the twentieth century's greatest novels—the series makes available lesser-known as well as celebrated writing.

The pocket-sized hardbacks of the early years contained introductions by Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, and other literary figures which enriched the experience of reading.

Today the series is recognized for its fine scholarship and reliability in texts that span world literature, drama and poetry, religion, philosophy, and politics. Each edition includes perceptive commentary and essential background information to meet the changing needs of readers.

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



ROBERT MUSIL

*The Confusions of
Young Törless*



Translated by

MIKE MITCHELL

With an Introduction and Notes by

RITCHIE ROBERTSON

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Translation © Mike Mitchell 2014
Editorial material © Ritchie Robertson 2014

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First published as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 2014

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013938926

ISBN 978-0-19-966940-0

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
<i>Note on the Text</i>	xxxiv
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	xxxv
<i>A Chronology of Robert Musil</i>	xxxviii
THE CONFUSIONS OF YOUNG TÖRLESS	I
<i>Explanatory Notes</i>	166

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

ROBERT MUSIL is best known for *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), the great novel set in pre-First World War Vienna which was his main preoccupation from 1918 till his death in impoverished Swiss exile in 1942. It was especially with this work in mind that Frank Kermode in 1966 deplored Musil's neglect by comparison with other great modernists: 'when it becomes the custom to read and value him it will seem surprising to nobody that one speaks of him as belonging to the same class as Joyce and Mann.'¹

Fascinating and rewarding though it is, *The Man without Qualities* proved too much for Musil. The first part was published in 1930, the second in 1932, but Musil could not bring the novel to a conclusion. The text and drafts in the most authoritative edition cover some two thousand pages.² Although one does not need to read the whole of *The Man without Qualities* to appreciate Musil's gifts as an intellectual novelist with a particular talent for social and erotic comedy, many readers may find that his first and much shorter novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*), published in 1906, provides the best introduction to Musil's fiction, just as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* prepares the reader to tackle *Ulysses*.³ While *Törless* lacks the comedy of the later novel, it shows to the full Musil's subtlety in tracing psychological developments, especially the growth of sexual emotions and their often surprising interconnections with other aspects of experience. *Törless* also shows Musil as a stylist who already commands a remarkable

¹ Frank Kermode, *Modern Essays* (London: Fontana, 1971), 199. Originally published as the preface to Robert Musil, *Five Women*, tr. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Boston: Seymour Lawrence, 1966).

² Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Adolf Frisé, 9 vols. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978), vols. 1–5. The most accessible introduction is Philip Payne, *Robert Musil's 'The Man without Qualities': A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ The word 'Zögling' in the original title is an old-fashioned word for 'pupil', implying an ironic reflection on the inadequacies of Törless's formal education.

range of imagery with which to render subtle psychological nuances.

The events recounted in *Törless* bear a close relation to Musil's own experience. Many years later, in 1933, he told Klaus Pinkus (a friend who helped to support him during his difficult exile years) that nothing in the book was invented.⁴ Born in Klagenfurt, in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia, on 6 November 1880, Musil came from a family of academics and professional people. His father, Alfred Musil, was a mechanical engineer, actively involved in the growth of industry in Austria, Bohemia, and Moravia; in 1890 he was appointed professor of mechanical engineering at the Technical University in Brünn (Brno). A cousin, Alois Musil (1868–1944), was a professor of Arabic, first in Vienna, later in Prague, and a well-known traveller in the Middle East who in the First World War tried to recruit support for the Central Powers among Arab tribes—a counterpart to Lawrence of Arabia on the other side.⁵ The Musil family also had close links with the army: Musil's grandfather was an army doctor, his uncle an army officer. The army, in pre-1914 Austria, seemed to offer a secure career. For this reason, and also because constant rows with his parents made family life difficult, Musil at the age of twelve left home to attend the Militär-Unterrealschule in Eisenstadt, east of Vienna (he entered it on 29 August 1892); this was a preparation for the Militär-Oberrealschule at Weisskirchen (now Hranice, in the extreme east of the Czech Republic), where Musil was a boarder from 1894 to 1897.

On leaving school, Musil moved to the Technical Military Academy in Vienna, but he soon decided that he did not want a military career. Fortunately, his father was by now head of his university, and Musil was allowed to begin studying mechanical engineering at Brünn in January 1898. He not only made a thorough study of mathematics and physics, but became acquainted with most other branches of science. He was also enthusiastic

⁴ Kurt Corino, *Robert Musil: Eine Biographie* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2003), 1537.

⁵ For a recent account of Alois Musil's wartime exploits, see Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin–Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power 1898–1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 153–66.

about sport, especially fencing and tennis but also swimming, rowing, sailing, and cycling. He read a lot, especially Nietzsche, Maeterlinck, Emerson, and Dostoevsky. After doing his military service in 1901–2 in Brünn, he spent a year at the Technical University in Stuttgart as teaching assistant, then made another change of direction by taking up the study of philosophy and psychology at the University of Berlin (now the Humboldt University). His first publications were articles on engineering and domestic heating systems. He also found time to patent an invention, the ‘Musil colour-wheel’, which displayed the colours of the spectrum in various combinations for use in visual experiments. This scientific training was of crucial importance for Musil the novelist. It helped to convince him that emotional states could be described precisely without reducing their complexity, and it made him impatient with the sloppy pseudo-mysticism associated with Beineberg in *Törless* and with the couple Diotima and Arnheim in *The Man without Qualities*.

Alongside his studies, Musil spent two years working on *Törless*, which he completed in March 1905. It was not easy to get the novel published. Even modern-minded publishers were reluctant to bring out a novel by an unknown author, written in a difficult style, centring on violence and homosexuality among schoolboys. With the help of Alfred Kerr, later to become Berlin’s most famous critic, Musil succeeded in getting the novel accepted by a small publisher, the Wiener Verlag, which had already brought out innovative texts by such leading modern authors as Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Heinrich Mann. Thanks again to Kerr, who gave the novel a glowing review in the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag* (*The Day*) in November 1906, *Törless* attracted wide attention and enjoyed good sales. By April 1907 five thousand copies had been printed.

Musil’s subsequent life need be recounted only briefly. Although he completed in 1908 a doctoral thesis on the philosopher and psychologist Ernst Mach, supervised by the distinguished psychologist Carl Stumpf, Musil decided against an academic career so that he could concentrate on writing. He worked for some time as a librarian before becoming, in 1914,

editor of Germany's leading literary periodical, the *Neue Rundschau* (*New Review*). One of his first acts as editor was to request—unsuccessfully—a contribution from Franz Kafka, whose first book, *Meditation*, he admired.⁶ In 1911 he married the painter Martha Marcovaldi, with whom he had had a close relationship since early in 1908. Their marriage lasted—though not without crises—till Musil's death. During the First World War Musil served in the Austro-Hungarian army in South Tyrol, near the Italian front. Thereafter he not only worked on *The Man without Qualities* but also published plays and short stories, among which *Three Women* (*Drei Frauen*, 1924) is of special interest. The German annexation of Austria in 1938 obliged Musil to go into exile, both because he had publicly opposed the Nazis and because Martha was of Jewish descent. Life, first in Zurich then in Geneva, was hard, plagued by poverty, illness, and writer's block. Musil died of a stroke on 15 April 1942.

A School Story

When we find that *Törless* is set in a boarding-school, we may think of the hugely popular English genre of the school story that runs from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes (1857) via Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899), and was given a new twist at the end of the twentieth century in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. School fiction flourished in Germany and Austria around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but its emphasis was on harsh discipline, mechanical learning, and the sufferings of sensitive pupils such as Hanno in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1900) or Hans, the protagonist of Hermann Hesse's early story *Under the Wheel* (1906), who is driven by the pressure of school to commit suicide.

⁶ See Kafka's diary entry of 23 February 1914, in *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. Max Brod (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 260. Kafka offered 'The Metamorphosis', but it was considered too long for the journal. Musil later visited Kafka in Prague: see Kafka's letter to Felice Bauer, 14 April 1916, in Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, tr. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), 503.

Boarding-schools are relatively uncommon in German-speaking countries, but the school Musil attended for ten months each year was a military academy to which pupils were sent from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The military academy at Weisskirchen (a remote town with some 7,500 inhabitants in 1890) had been founded in 1856, though not on the site of a monastery, as in the novel.⁷ The later General Edmund Glaise von Horstenau (1882–1946), who was to become a prominent Austrian Nazi, entered the school in 1897, the year Musil left it, and describes in his memoirs how discipline was enforced with the help of sergeant-majors, and how the older boys terrorized the younger ones. Some boys were driven to suicide; their deaths were officially attributed to depression. Musil's biographer Karl Corino notes that the number of boys who died while at the school was remarkably high; the school even had its own cemetery. On Sundays the boys were allowed to go into the town unsupervised. According to Glaise von Horstenau, many of them frequented prostitutes, and a few picked up venereal diseases.

Not surprisingly, Musil much later summed up the school as 'the devil's a—hole'.⁸ The same school was attended in 1889–91 by Rainer Maria Rilke, who had previously been a boarder at a similar school in St Pölten in Lower Austria. Having been petted and pampered as a child, Rilke found himself, after his parents' separation, thrown into the harsh boarding-school world; he later conveyed its atmosphere in the short story 'The Gym Lesson' (1902), where an unathletic boy overexerts himself in the gym under the eyes of unsympathetic officers and suffers a fatal heart-attack. In 1920 the forty-five-year-old Rilke received a letter from one of his old teachers, now a general, and replied with a very long, painful account of the traumatic effects of his schooldays, which he compared to Dostoevsky's imprisonment in Siberia: 'When, in more mature years... I first read Dostoevsky's *Memoirs from the*

⁷ For this account of Musil's school and his fellow-pupils I rely on Corino's invaluable biography, especially pp. 93–120. Some details are added from Sibylle Mulot, *Der junge Musil: Seine Beziehung zu Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende* (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1977).

⁸ Musil, *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé, 2 vols., revised edn. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983), i. 953. Elision in original.

House of the Dead, I felt that from my tenth year onwards I had been admitted into all the terrors and despair of the prison camp.⁹

The originals of Reiting and Beineberg, the boys who draw Törless into their intrigues, have been identified, which is easy since Musil hardly changed their names. Jarto Reising von Reisinger (born 1878, hence two years older than Musil) was the son of an officer who damaged his career through insubordination and managed to disappear and live incognito, so that Reiting's claim that 'his father had been a remarkably unsettled person who had later disappeared without trace' (p. 42) corresponds to the truth. The school records describe Reising in largely favourable terms as a strongly built, hard-working, popular boy, though inclined to contradict his superiors. He died of tuberculosis in 1899. Beineberg is based on Richard Freiherr von Boineburg-Lengsfeld (also born in 1878), son of an officer; he again made a good impression on his teachers. A photograph confirms that Musil's description of his physical appearance is accurate, even down to the protruding ears. After leaving the school he joined a military unit that was helping to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China. His bravery earned him medals and promotions, but he received a bullet in his head which could not be removed and led to his death in 1905. As for Basini, he appears to be a composite, based partly on Hugo Hoinkes, who was expelled from the school for theft in February 1896, and Franz Fabini, who in April 1896, on the grounds of his bad performance at school, was transferred to another military school in Hermannstadt in Transylvania (now Sibiu in Romania). There is no independent confirmation

⁹ Letter to General-Major von Sedlakowicz, 9 Dec. 1920, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe*, ed. Karl Althaus, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Insel-Verlag, 1950), ii. 203. Any reader tempted to see here a peculiarly Germanic aberration, however, should consider how, from the sixteenth century to at least the nineteenth, discipline in English public schools was imposed through physical brutality; how the boys imitated this brutality by bullying; and how the older boys made younger boys their slaves ('fags'), a practice institutionalized and accepted by the early nineteenth century. It was not unknown for boys to kill one another. See Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon 597-1977* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 60-1. Basini's public maltreatment recalls the persecution of Shelley at Eton (*ibid.* 63-4), while his private torture has a counterpart in *Stalky & Co.*, where the three protagonists, albeit with positive moral intentions, inflict physical torture on some other pupils; see Isabel Quigly, *The Heirs of Tom Brown: The English School Story* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 121-3.

that Reising and Boineburg abused Fabini sexually, as their fictional counterparts do Basini, but it is noteworthy that in the autumn and winter of 1895–6 the school performances of Boineburg, Reising, and Musil all deteriorated sharply, suggesting that something was happening to distract them seriously from their studies.

Although we will never quite know what really happened, the important thing is the fiction that Musil made out of his experiences. He has toned down the military character of the school. It is not the school discipline but the behaviour of the schoolboys that is appalling. If we set this novel alongside English fiction set in boarding-schools, the parallel that comes to mind is *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, where Flashman roasts Tom Brown in front of the fire, 'drawing his trousers tight by way of extra torture'. Flashman is soon afterwards expelled, not for torturing a fellow-pupil, but for being 'beastly drunk'.¹⁰ At Musil's school the teachers are equally unaware of what the boys get up to. But, in contrast to the regime that Musil actually experienced, his fictional teachers seem merely incompetent. The school is not described as a military academy but more vaguely as a *Konvikt*, which would normally imply a boarding-school run by the Catholic Church. The boys seem to learn some military practices. They click their heels to show obedience, and carry elegant swords which seem mainly decorative; their common-room is called a 'mess', as in the army; and we hear of 'the exercises that were done in a big meadow in the park' (p. 53), though the word used (*Freiübungen*) sounds more like voluntary training than military drill.¹¹ What Musil really indicts is the cunningly organized sadism of Reiting and Beineberg.

¹⁰ Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, ed. Andrew Sanders, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 183, 193.

¹¹ Contrast the more recent novel, set in a Peruvian military academy, *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad e los perros*, 1962) by Mario Vargas Llosa, where the older boys subject the new arrivals to sadistic and disgusting initiation rituals; these are institutionalized, however, whereas the similar treatment of Basini by Reiting and Beineberg results from their private initiative. In Vargas Llosa's novel, however, as in Musil's, a small group of boys form a secret circle and control the rest, a weak boy is singled out for bullying, and the authorities (here officers rather than civilian teachers) are naively unaware of the boys' illicit activities.

Sexuality

The contrast between the school routine and the intrigues of Törless's fellow-pupils is part of a larger contrast, running through the novel, between the outer and the inner worlds. The opening paragraphs convey how mechanized and soulless the 'outer' aspect of the world has become. We are at the station, where Törless's parents are returning home after a visit to him. The parallel lines of the railway, running 'endlessly straight in both directions' (p. 5) across the Eastern European plains, represent the subjugation of nature to the mathematically rigid character of technology.¹² The landscape is in any case flat, undistinguished, and depressing; it is made worse by the dust and soot from the trains which cover the acacia trees near the station. Human beings, too, have been subjugated to machinery. The stationmaster comes out of his office at regular intervals, looks for the signal, and checks his watch with precisely repeated movements; he is himself compared to one of the figures that appear on clock-faces to strike the hour; he appears to be merely a part of the remorselessly functioning machinery of the station. Returning to the school, Törless feels himself to be under a 'rock-hard compulsion' (p. 14); he hears the school bell marking the end of the day 'like a savage slash of the knife' (p. 15), warning him that, for the next twelve hours precisely, nothing interesting can happen to him. Though the school is not openly oppressive, it educates its pupils according to rigid norms and is unable to cope with anyone who, like Törless, does and says things not in accordance with these norms. Törless's parents, though loving and considerate, are no better at understanding the peculiar feelings he is trying to articulate.

The discrepancy between the outer and inner worlds is focused in the image of the 'red room', the retreat hidden away in the recess of the school's attics where Reiting and Beineberg hatch their plots and carry out their abuse of Basini—'like something left over from the Middle Ages, away from the warm, bright life of

¹² On Musil's geometrical imagery, see Andrew Webber, 'Reality as Pretext: Robert Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*', in David Midgley (ed.), *The German Novel in the Twentieth Century: Beyond Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 30–44 (pp. 34–8).

the classrooms' (p. 122). When the prospect of tormenting Basini emerges, the two worlds suddenly come very close:

But then everything else was also possible. Then Reiting and Beineberg were possible. This hideout was possible... Then it was also possible that there was a gate leading from the bright, everyday world, which was all he had known until now, to another stifling, surging, passionate, naked, destructive one. That between those people whose ordered lives are lived out between the office and the family as if in a stable, transparent structure of glass and iron, and those other downtrodden, bleeding people, filthy from dissipation, lost in a maze of corridors full of bellowing voices, there is not only a bridge but their boundaries are contiguous, secret and close and crossable at any moment... (pp. 48–9)

The 'surging, passionate, naked' world is especially associated with sex, and its incompatibility with the orderly world to which Törless is accustomed first strikes him when he and Beineberg visit the prostitute Božena. On the way to the sleazy inn where she lives they pass through a poor area of the town, where women flaunt their physicality, men threaten violence, and near-naked children crawl in the mud. In Božena's room Törless is at first left out of the conversation and has leisure to reflect on the contrast between Božena and his mother, who yet are both women and both sexual beings: 'For me this woman is a tangled ball of all sexual desires; and my mother a creature who until now passed through my life in unclouded remoteness, clear and with no dark spots, like a heavenly body beyond all desire...' (p. 34). But such questions, we are told, are a mere distraction from Törless's instinctive awareness that between his mother and Božena there is not a gulf, but a connection, and whatever puzzlement he feels is simply an attempt to avoid acknowledging their connection. This polarized conception of women, as either pure, ethereal beings or repulsive, sexualized beings, is a familiar feature of the male imagination at the turn of the century, and was elevated by Freud, in his essay 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love', into a general conflict between the sexual instinct and the demands of civilization, which might in the distant future lead to the extinction of the human race.¹³

¹³ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), xi. 177–90.

At the same time, Törless's emergent sexuality has a strong masochistic element. It is anticipated in Musil's subtle analysis of the homesickness that Törless suffers when first living in the school. His homesickness is not really a longing for his parents; he can hardly imagine them. Instead, it is an indulgence in emotional pain which also gives him a masochistic pleasure—a 'self-centred, solipsistic suffering inside himself that enclosed him in its voluptuous pride, as in the seclusion of a chapel where a hundred blazing candles and a hundred eyes of sacred pictures scatter incense over the pain of those scourging themselves' (p. 7). Musil's word 'voluptuous' suggests the sexual character of this emotion, without reducing it to sexuality.

Although Törless has sex with Božena every Sunday evening, Musil assures us that he is not debauched. What he has with Božena is not a relationship; it is an expression of his loneliness, of his feeling misunderstood by the world and his inability to understand the world. Part of her appeal is the sense of degradation that Törless feels, as well as the danger of being caught and exposed by one of the peasants who drink in the pub below her room. 'Božena seemed to him an immensely base creature and his relationship with her, the emotions he had to go through, a cruel ritual of self-sacrifice' (p. 31). This is a further development of the masochism that Musil disclosed in Törless's orgies of homesickness.

These inchoate feelings come together in the prospect of tormenting Basini. When Reiting proposes it, Törless is filled with obscure feelings which include a connection with Božena and the masochistic allure of degradation: 'And this profound degradation, this abandoning of one's self, being covered with the heavy, pale, poisonous pustules of shame, that had gone through his dreams like a far-off, disembodied mirror image, had suddenly—with Basini—happened' (p. 48). One can speculate that his own masochistic sense of victimhood is relieved by being projected on to the victim Basini. In the red room Törless joins in tormenting Basini, but not in the crude physical ways practised by his companions. His torment consists in the subtler emotional degradation of forcing Basini to humiliate himself by saying 'I am a thief'.

Törless's sexuality has yet further complexities. He recalls how as a child he wanted to be a girl. This feeling returns as he is lying in bed, enjoying 'the pleasant, mild heat—like a bath and a feeling of sensuality, of which he was no longer consciously aware as such but which in some absolutely inexplicable but very insistent way was connected with Basini' (p. 100), then he falls into a dreamless sleep and wakes up in a comfortable warm mood. He becomes obsessed with Basini. Alone with him in the dormitory, a physical compulsion makes him, despite his better judgement, go over to Basini's bed, whereupon Basini leads him to the hideout and strips naked; Törless is astonished by the beauty of Basini's slim, girlish body. Sex with Basini, initiated by the latter, is the culmination of all these feelings. However, Basini is not really the object of his desire, any more than Božena was earlier: 'Desire going beyond its immediate object was something he had known for a long time—with Božena and much earlier as well. It was the secret, undirected, melancholy sensuality of the heart, not fixed on any person, that is like the moist, black, burgeoning earth of spring and like dark underground streams, that only need some chance event to send them bursting through their walls' (p. 127).

Psychology

The sexual element in the story, though prominent and sensational, has often been considered to be only the framework for Törless's psychological development. In tracing this development, Musil appears to have drawn extensively on his own experience and to have tried to evoke his sensations and emotions with the utmost precision, bending ordinary language and inventing unfamiliar images in order to do so. It would therefore be wrong to translate Törless's experience into any ready-made psychological or psychoanalytic system. References to Freud and other thinkers can sometimes bring aspects of Törless's experience into sharper relief, but they also risk blurring its uniqueness by forcing it into a pre-established mould.

When he wrote the novel Musil was himself studying psychology at university. His supervisor, Carl Stumpf, was among the founders of Gestalt psychology, which argues that our experience

is not just the sum of individual perceptions but has a shape (*Gestalt*) which helps to determine our perceptions. Musil took a strong interest in Gestalt psychology, and its influence is apparent in his later writings, as in the famous opening chapter of *The Man without Qualities*, where the sight and sound of road- and pedestrian-traffic in the centre of Vienna prompt the narrator to observe: 'Cities, like people, can be recognized by their walk.'¹⁴ At the time when he wrote *Törless*, however, Musil was paying particular attention to the philosophical psychology of Ernst Mach (1838–1916), on which he soon afterwards wrote his doctoral thesis. Mach returned to the empiricist scepticism about the self expressed in 1739 by David Hume, who called it 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement'.¹⁵ Mach described the self as 'the complex of memories, moods, emotions, attached to a particular body'.¹⁶ Its apparent coherence came from the chain of memories linking the present to the past. The illusion of a substantial self was no longer tenable. In a phrase that became the watchword of the Viennese avant-garde, Mach declared: 'The self is beyond saving.'¹⁷ The concept of the substantial self, like that of any reality beyond the immediate content of consciousness, was dismissed as metaphysical, that is, as speculation about entities whose existence could never be known.¹⁸ This scepticism fitted well with the anti-metaphysical arguments put forward by Nietzsche, who dismissed the self as a mere projection of the grammatical notion of the subject: because language has the word 'I', one imagines that there must be a real 'I' or self that the word denotes.¹⁹ It directed the

¹⁴ Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, tr. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Knopf, 1995), 3.

¹⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 252.

¹⁶ Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältniss des Physischen zum Psychischen*, 2nd edn. (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1900), 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ On Machian empiricism in relation to literature, see Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); on *Törless*, *ibid.* 208–12.

¹⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Marion Faber, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49 (sect. 54).

attention of the fledgling novelist Musil to the contents of consciousness, and invited equal interest in *all* those contents, including the sensory or mystical experiences previously dismissed as undignified or irrational.

However, Musil agreed neither with Mach's scepticism about the self, nor with the scepticism about the ability of language to describe the real world which was also widespread among the Viennese modernists. The major text of language scepticism was the three-volume *Beiträge zur Kritik der Sprache* (*Contributions to the Critique of Language*, 1901–2) by Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923). According to Mauthner, language cannot convey knowledge, because it cannot refer to reality directly, only metaphorically. Moral and philosophical terms ('virtue', 'immortality', 'idea', 'category') are vacuous. Modern science is just another mythology composed of abstractions. Nothing can be known except the unreliability of language. The only valid use of language is poetic, because poetry seeks only to arouse emotions and stimulate moods. Mauthner analyses Goethe's poem 'An den Mond' ('To the Moon') to show that poetic language alone gives us access to reality—that is, to the feelings Goethe had when writing the poem.²⁰ This argument is, of course, self-defeating. By its logic, Mauthner's critique can tell us nothing about language, only about what Mauthner felt while writing it. Nevertheless, Mauthner's language scepticism may seem close in spirit to the epigraph from Maeterlinck which Musil places at the beginning of *Törless*, and which dwells on the distortion that our inner experiences undergo when we try to put them into words.²¹

In contrast to Mach's epistemological scepticism and Mauthner's linguistic scepticism, Musil's novel can be seen as part of an attempt to place both knowledge and language on a more secure footing. *Törless* struggles to find words to express the experiences he has been through, and attains at least partial success, even though his words mean nothing to his audience

²⁰ Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1901–2), i. 86–92.

²¹ On Mach and Mauthner, see Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 121–39. The authors exaggerate Musil's agreement with Mach (p. 118).

of schoolteachers. The linguistic inventiveness of Musil's style is similarly an attempt to overcome the limits of language by extending its expressive capacity through the bold use of metaphor. Nor does Törless discover that his self is merely, as for Mach, 'the focal point of sense-data'.²² Rather, the self is a reality which develops in conflict with a perplexing but equally real external world.

Among other versions of psychology, Musil had not yet read even the early writings by Freud that were available at that time, such as the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).²³ Like most Central European intellectuals of his day, however, he knew the notorious treatise *Sex and Character* by Otto Weininger (1880–1903). In this book, originally a doctoral thesis, with a strange mixture of biology, sexology, psychology, and ethics, Weininger maintained that all human beings were bisexual, having in their make-up varying proportions of the masculine element (M) and the feminine element (W). These elements did not necessarily correspond to gender divisions, so that there could be feminine men in whom W predominated. W tended, however, to predominate in women. The feminine element was sensual and amoral. Only men were capable of morality. Hence the chapter entitled 'The Nature of Woman and her Purpose in the Universe' asserts (in bold type in the original): 'The most inferior man is still infinitely superior to the most superior woman.'²⁴ Women generally fell into two categories: the mother and the whore. We recognize here the polarized attitude to women shown by Törless and later analysed by Freud. By showing how Törless grows beyond this polarized outlook, Musil establishes some distance

²² Peter D. Smith, *Metaphor and Modernity: German Literature and the World-View of Science 1780–1955* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 228. I am following Smith's argument about the relation between Musil and Mach.

²³ Cf. Andrew Webber, 'Sense and Sensuality in *Törleß*', *German Life and Letters*, 41 (1988), 106–30, who argues on internal evidence that Musil must already have known Freud. This essay also appears in Webber, *Sexuality and the Sense of Self in the Works of Georg Trakl and Robert Musil*, Bithell Series of Dissertations 15 (London: MHRA, 1990), 103–33.

²⁴ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, tr. Ladislaus Löb, ed. Daniel Steuer and Laura Marcus (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 230.