

THE INTERSECTION OF SCIENCE
AND LITERATURE IN MUSIL'S

The Man Without Qualities

Thomas Sebastian

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As the utopian projection of a world in which the conditional mood is preferred to the indicative, Robert Musil's ambitious novel *The Man Without Qualities* is widely recognized as a great example of aesthetic modernism and a profound reflection on the "postmodern condition." Based on the new and more inclusive English translation by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, this study provides the English-speaking reader with a well-researched commentary that situates Musil's novel in the cultural, literary, and scientific context of the early twentieth century. Revealing the novel's many philosophical underpinnings, the study analyzes the intersection of theoretical reflection and aesthetic imagination essential to Musil's programmatic move beyond realism. Thomas Sebastian explores Musil's background in experimental psychology, which he studied under the pioneering psychologist Carl Stumpf, and how it and other strains of scientific thought, including that of Ernst Mach, on whose philosophical ideas Musil wrote his doctoral thesis, are reflected in his great novel.

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Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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First published 2005
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620 USA,
www.camden-house.com
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK,
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN: 1-57113-116-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sebastian, Thomas.

The intersection of science and literature in Musil's "The man without qualities" / Thomas Sebastian.

p. cm. — (Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57113-116-7 (hardcover: alk. paper)

1. Musil, Robert, 1880-1942. Mann ohne Eigenschaften. I. Title.
II. Series: Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture (Unnumbered)

PT2625.U8M445 2005

833'.912—dc22

2004027938

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK the editors of this series, Jim Hardin and Jim Walker, for their trust in my scholarly expertise, and Alan Astro for his help in getting me started. Without their encouragement and support, I would not have ventured into a book-length study of *The Man Without Qualities*. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends at Trinity University. Time and means available for research are limited at a small liberal arts college; however, I was twice granted a stipend that enabled me to visit archives in Vienna as well as the Arbeitsstelle für Robert-Musil-Forschung in Saarbrücken, Germany. I would especially like to thank Trinity's librarian Maria McWilliams. She never tired of fulfilling my requests for difficult-to-find sources that I wished to explore. I would like to reserve my greatest gratitude for my wife, Judith Geerke. She committed herself to the task of making sure that the manuscript adheres to standard English usage. Needless to say, there are limits to what she could do in improving the product of a foreign speaker. Therefore, I am ultimately responsible not only for the content of this study but also for its style and choice of expression.

T. S.
November 2004

Musil Editions Used, with Abbreviations

QUOTATIONS FROM *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* are from *The Man Without Qualities*, translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) and are referenced with a page number in parentheses. Where the citation would be otherwise unclear, the page number is preceded by the abbreviation *MWQ*. Page references marked by an asterisk indicate an altered translation.

The following editions of Musil's works are also referred to using the abbreviations indicated, throughout the book:

- B* *Briefe 1901–1942*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. 2 volumes. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1981.
- BN* *Briefe-Nachlese*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Saarbrücken: Internationale Robert-Musil-Gesellschaft, 1994.
- D* *Diaries*. Selected, translated, and annotated by Philip Payne. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- GW* *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. 2 volumes. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978. Volume 1: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Volume 2: *Prosa, Essays, Reden*.
- OMT* *On Mach's Theories*. Introduction by G. H. von Wright. Translated by Kevin Mulligan. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982.
- PP* *Posthumous Papers*. Translated by Peter Wortsman. Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1987.
- PS* *Precision and Soul*. Edited and translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- TB* *Tagebücher*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. 2 volumes. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1976.
- T* *Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955.

All translations from works not available in English are my own.

Introduction

DESPITE ITS awe-inspiring scale, Musil's novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*¹ is a torso. Its first volume, containing 123 chapters, comprising parts 1 and 2, appeared in late 1930. A second volume of equal length was supposed to follow soon. Yet when the second volume appeared at the end of 1932, it contained only the thirty-eight chapters of part 3. Part 4 of the novel never materialized. Nor is it certain that part 4 would have entailed the novel's conclusion, as Musil originally planned. Until the day of his death in April 1942, Musil seems to have been undecided how to conclude the novel. His posthumous papers show numerous related yet inconclusive sketches and drafts, including twenty galley chapters that never made it to press and that the author had begun to revise after 1938. Why Musil — who had signed a contract with a publisher as early as 1922 and publicly discussed the novel's plot and characters in 1926 — was unable to finish the work is much debated among scholars. Many critics are inclined to interpret the novel's unfinished state as a result of its complex genesis and structure rather than to accept it as mere coincidence. For a number of compelling reasons, they find either a symptom of the author's psychological problems or an inadvertent allegory of his style and ideas in the novel's truncation. Some critics view it as an effect of both.

However, incompleteness has not prevented the novel's recognition as one of the great books of the twentieth century. Today, *The Man Without Qualities* ranks among the classics of aesthetic modernism. Although conceived as a satire on the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the eve of the First World War, the novel comprises a profound diagnosis of modern urban life in general. It furthermore is an experiment undertaken to test the limits of the novel, a genre whose origin and conventions have become associated with a bygone era. No other German-language author of the early twentieth century made the aesthetics of storytelling the explicit theme of a novel to the degree that Musil does in *The Man Without Qualities*. Foregrounding its own construction, the novel unfolds as a self-reflective meta-discourse concerned with the possibilities of storytelling. Character and plot are constructed as allegories of a fragmented world that resists epic representation. However, even though one finds

similar narrative strategies, tropes, and figures in Romantic literature, Musil did not share the Romantics' predilection for self-reflexivity and the abyss of transcendental negativity. Rather, his writing exhibits a "critical realism" that implies both a revision and a radicalization of late nineteenth-century literary conventions.

Musil considered Zola's *roman expérimental* as a "promise never fulfilled" (*TB I*, 217). However, Musil's own concept of experimental literature is quite different from that of the naturalistic writers of the previous generation. For Musil, the purpose of literature is not to illustrate the laws, regularities, or patterns of behavior, whether hereditary or socially conditioned. Instead, literature has the function of bringing to the fore precisely that which cannot be apprehended by the rational methods underlying a scientific understanding of the world. Referring to Zola, Musil stated around 1920 that it makes a difference "whether one as a half-scientific person whose imagination is gripped by the pleasures of science writes a pseudoscientific novel, or whether one really goes all the way to the end of the trampoline of science and only then jumps" (*PS* 67).

Accordingly, the elasticity of science allows for exciting yet unsustainable leaps. In science, one is always forced to return to the same ground, but Musil proposed instead to use science as a springboard. The different trajectory he had in mind is illustrated by his comparison of the literary work to "a bridge arching away from solid ground as if it possessed a corresponding pier in the realm of the imaginary" (*PS* 208). This bridge looks very similar to the one traversed by the mystic, yet it "never entirely loses its connection with the ordinary attitude" (*PS* 208).² In other words the writer takes a foothold in common perceptions and knowledge only to leave them behind. However, Musil's bridge metaphor does not indicate whether poetic imagination provides a ground for knowledge at all, and if so, what kind of knowledge that could possibly be.

Musil's critique of naturalism in no way harbors the notion of a supra-natural world. Rather, it is inconceivable to him that literature and art should ever manifest themselves in something other than aesthetic expression. In this respect, Musil shared the modernist's fundamental belief that "the subject-matter of art is only that which can be expressed in art" (*TB I*, 449). The novelist's work does not represent ideas that could just as easily have occurred differently: their occurrence is determined. To accept indeterminacy in the writer's task would mean to acquiesce to the edifying and ornamental function that nineteenth century bourgeois culture expected of literature and art during its heyday. Reminiscent of

Matthew Arnold's dictum that poetry is "criticism of life," Musil stated that a work of art is essentially a "negation of life" (PS 196). The poetic work claims its unique place due to the particular type of insight it conveys. Musil referred to the writer's intuition somewhat paradoxically as *das nicht-ratioide Denken* (non-ratioid thinking), a neologism he invented in an essay published in 1918 under the title "Skizze der Erkenntnis des Dichters" (Sketch of What the Writer Knows). Here he juxtaposed two kinds of knowledge, the one called the "ratioid," the other called the "nonratioid." The former includes everything that can be subjected to rational inquiry, everything that can be systematized by science and summarized in laws and rules. This knowledge is characterized by "a certain monotony of facts" and "predominance of repetition" (PS 62). It perpetually eradicates difference by reducing the other to the same. But above all, this knowledge can be universally communicated.

By "nonratioid," on the other hand, Musil means the recognition of a reality that is singular and unique. It is a reality that cannot be represented through mathematical symbols or logical propositions. It cannot be repeated. "If the ratioid is the area of the domination of the 'rule with exceptions,' the nonratioid area is that of the dominance of the exceptions over the rule" (PS 63). Musil described the one as "fixed and solid," the other as "fluid." Accordingly, the one is the inverse of the other.

Within the topology of *The Man Without Qualities*, the "ratioid" is referred to as *das Seinesgleichen*. This noun first appears in the German original in the title of part two: *Seinesgleichen geschieht*. The first English translation of Musil's novel by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser tries to render the phrase literally as "The like of it now happens." But this completely hides the multiple meanings of the original phrase. In German, *seinesgleichen* functions grammatically as an indefinite pronoun. It is conventionally used where one would say "people like him," or "things like that" in English. The pronoun expresses sameness and reciprocity. It stands for a syntactic relation between subjects that are similar, equal, or identical. Musil, however, employs the word not as a pronoun but as a noun. Significant for the author's metaphorical use of the pronoun is the way it reoccurs in Ulrich's interior monologue:

The goals, the voices, the reality, all this seductiveness that lures and leads us on, that we pursue and plunge into — is this reality itself or is it no more than a breath of the real, resting intangibly on the surface of the reality the world offers us? What sharpens our suspicions are all those prefabricated compartments and forms of life, semblances of reality [*das Seinesgleichen*], the molds set by earlier generations, the ready-

made language not only of the tongue but also of sensations and feelings. (*MWQ* 135)

In the vocabulary of Musil's hero, the *Seinesgleichen* — rendered as “semblances of reality” in this passage taken (as are all quotations from the novel in this study) from the new English translation of *The Man Without Qualities* by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike — is a neologism for the “prefabricated compartments and forms of life.” It refers to the absence of originality and uniqueness. In his skeptical mood, Ulrich recognizes everything as similar or equal to some other already existing entity or concept. Indeed, recognition itself takes place only as recognition of the same. Nothing unique or authentic exists because people's minds, life, and creativity appear predestined by a repetition of the same. Nothing appears to be “real” in and of itself; everything is revealed as a simulacrum. This suspect and unreal reality is discovered not only in thoughts and perceptions, in the forms of social interaction and in speech, but — remarkably — also in “sensations and feelings.” Even affect is considered to be channeled through “prefabricated compartments,” that is, has its own law, ratio, or form.

Expressed in the paradoxical figure of “a man without qualities” is the enigma of individuation. “One human being, when you think of it, means nothing more to another one than a string of similes,” says Ulrich to Bonadea (633). Shortly after writing *Young Törless*, Musil drafted a letter in which he drew a distinction between “psychologischer Wissenschaft” and “psychologischer Kunst” by emphasizing the difference between explaining things and finding out what things *feel* like. He stated unequivocally: “Ich will nicht begrifflich sondern fühlbar machen” (*B* 24, I do not want to explain but show what it feels like). However, emotions and feelings entertain for Musil a cognitive function. That emotions and feelings are epistemic is fundamental to Musil's ideas concerning the merit of literature and art. Musil is steeped in precisely the kind of thinking that the philosophical schools of the twentieth century were eager to overcome. In Musil's often quoted 1925 review essay of Béla Balázs's theory of film, “Ansätze zu einer neuen Ästhetik: Bemerkungen über eine Dramaturgie des Films” (Toward a New Aesthetic: Observations on a Dramaturgy of Film), the influence of a certain type of neo-Kantian philosophy of mind is especially palpable. The following passage shows how Musil incorporates specific psychological concepts and terminology to fend off the notion that “thinking” is an element foreign to the art work:

Above all, we must remember that not only our intellect [*Verstand*] but also our senses are “intellectual.” It is common knowledge that we see

what we know Even smells and tastes, if they are not very penetrating, can be distinguished only poorly without the help of something specific with which to compare them. And the same is even truer for actual emotional [*seelische*] experiences, of which one may say without exception that the form [*Gestalt*] they assume in different people is that of the picture these people had already formed beforehand. This goes so far that without preformed stable representations — and these are concepts — really only a chaos remains; and since on the other hand concepts are dependent on experience, there arises a condition of mutual formation, like that between a fluid and an elastic container, an equilibrium without firm support for which we have still not found any description, so that it is fundamentally as mysterious as the surface of a swamp. (*PS* 201)

By referring to “stable representations” as “concepts” and “mutual formation” of experience and concepts, Musil alludes to Kant, who was, however, primarily concerned with the cognition of the external world (i.e., the truth of mechanical physics based on Newton’s laws). According to Kant, the manifoldness of a perception receives its unity through a mutual adaptation of concept and intuition. However, Musil’s allusion to Kant’s epistemology must be read in the context of the entire essay. Art and literature are not about the cognition of external objects. What manifests itself in art, says Musil, is an experience “that can never be completely repeated, that cannot be fixed but is individual, even anarchic” (*PS* 205). Apparently, then, Musil was trying to demarcate an experience entirely set off from and juxtaposed to the dualism of sensual impressions and reason, emotions and intellect. Such an experience underlies the psychology on the basis of which Kant traced the transcendental ego. At the same time, however, Musil argued with Kant — albeit the Kant of the third critique who wrote on the sublime — that it is necessary to denounce “ordinary experience” in favor of the extraordinary that transcends it.

However, Musil was not sympathetic to the destruction of form, which he considered the hallmark of the avant-garde. For him, the avant-garde’s intention to liberate what lies so to speak “below” the surface of transcendental synthesis misses the point. According to Musil, it creates at best “neue Erlebnisse, aber keine neue Art des Erlebens” (*GW* II, 1148: new sensations without any new kind of experience).³ The phrase highlights Musil’s position as being that of a writer situated between nineteenth-century realism and the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Musil thought that expressionistic art merely tried to provoke sensations without a *Gestalt*, that is to say without any form that

would elevate the new and unfamiliar sensations (*Empfindungen, Erlebnisse*) into a true experience (*Erfahrung*). In other words, Musil claimed that expressionist or surrealist art had no true intellectual content, and for this reason has been rightly compared to “primitive art.”

On the other hand, however, Musil was not a complacent realist. Rather, it appears as if he intended to criticize feelings and emotions that, for lack of a better word, one might want to call “stereotypical.” Musil emphasized the point that people’s affects are not necessarily more authentic than their thoughts and deeds. As he wrote in the same essay, *Toward a New Aesthetic*:

We find ourselves, then, in a divided situation. It is not thinking but, rather, simply the need for practical orientation that drives us to general formulations, to formulas for concepts no more than to formulas for our gestures and sense impressions, which fall asleep after a few repetitions just as do the representational processes that are tied to words. But then hostility should not be directed against thinking, as almost always happens in such contexts, but must seek to free itself from the individual’s practical, factual, normal condition. But if this does occur, nothing remains but the dark realm of the “other condition,” in which everything provisionally ceases. (*PS* 201)

There exist, as every reader of *The Man Without Qualities* knows, not only stupid thoughts but also stupid moods. They are prefigured. After all, Musil’s novel satirizes people’s misjudgment in 1914, the atavism of their wishes, tastes, and feelings. As is evident from the psychological characterization of the actors involved in a “patriotic campaign” whose goal is to trump the thirtieth anniversary of the Prussian emperor by celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the Austrian emperor, emotional attachments to old ideas and former states of action are responsible for the creation of a *Seinesgleichen*. Yet neither Germans nor Austrians had anything “the like of it” to celebrate in 1918, the year when the First World War came to an end and the old European order fell apart. The title of part 2, *Seinesgleichen geschieht* (the like of it now happens) is translated by Wilkins and Pike as “Pseudoreality Prevails” (81). False — that is, never critically reflected — emotional responses are indicative of the formation of a “pseudoreality,” since people’s “feelings have not yet learned to make use of their intellect” (33). Similarly, Musil’s speech on *Dummheit* (Stupidity), delivered in 1937 to an international assembly of writers, many of whom had been forced into exile, and for which Musil was criticized by the left, attempted to provide a psychological explanation for the rise of fascism. For Musil, it could not be explained solely in

political and sociological terms. By stupidity, Musil meant not the lack of intelligence. Rather, stupidity derives from an affective resistance to the complexities of modern life. Stupidity is an affective state that betrays the existence of a cognitive dissonance.

As this study will show, Musil's interpretation of mental states and attitudes must be understood in the context of a terminology the author became familiar with as a student of psychology. Musil's philosophical acumen and great familiarity with the sciences has inspired a number of studies that unravel the ideas, themes, and motifs that link *The Man Without Qualities* to the various scientific and philosophical discourses prevalent at the time of its conception. This study continues that effort. While situating Musil's work in the cultural and literary context of the early twentieth century, this study focuses on the intersection of theoretical reflection and aesthetic imagination essential to Musil's programmatic move beyond "epic naïveté." It relates the ideas underlying the novel's construction to the epistemic shifts that occurred in the humanities and the sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century. Musil's own training as an engineer and his subsequent graduate studies in philosophy and psychology account for many of the scientific citations and allusions that crop up in *The Man Without Qualities*. Grasping these topical references contributes to a broader understanding of the novel's expressed skepticism about narrative.

For Musil, literature is concerned not with the universal but with the particular, not with the ordinary but with the extraordinary, not with humankind but with the individual. Accordingly, literature is eminently ethical, since it is in the realm of moral judgment that one is asked to suspend instinctual responses or mechanical applications of preformed notions. Reviewing a book on Arthur Schnitzler, who as a writer represents fin-de-siècle psychology par excellence, Musil remarked that readers who treat literary characters as if they were real people act like monkeys who reach into a mirror for their own image. In other words, these readers mistake a metaphor for the real. Evidently, literary fiction can seduce the reader into erroneous ontological beliefs — which was why Plato felt compelled to exclude art from the Republic.

Musil knew of course that the confusion between the imaginary and the real is no coincidence. Since a literary narrative is a teleological construct of figures and tropes, characters in a novel are as imaginary as mirror images. They appear whole because they are completely determined by the matrix from which they are drawn. Contrary to real people, literary characters are finalized and complete. They are topological, not temporal creatures. However, readers of literature enjoy the totalizing