

J.M. COETZEE - On the Edge of Revelation

In 1924 Robert Musil published a collection of stories entitled *Three Women*, the spin-off of his work on a novel about the last years of the Hapsburg Empire that began to appear, in installments, in 1930: *The Man Without Qualities*. For readers daunted by this most essayistic of novels, full of thinking, empty of ideas (because, to its author, it was the mark of a poet to be *open* to ideas but to *hold* none), unfinished and perhaps unfinishable, a novel that asks its central question — what Europe is to believe in now that it has ceased to believe in history — in a mode of irony and artifice, *Three Women* may provide a more convenient introduction to the mature Musil.

The most considerable of these three stories, "Tonka," draws on an unhappy entanglement from Musil's own youth (it is remarkable how directly this reserved, ironical modernist transposed the events of his life into his fictions). A young man from a well-to-do Austrian family forms a liaison with a simple Czech girl, Tonka. He takes her off to Berlin, where they set up house together. Then Tonka becomes pregnant. Worse, it appears she has contracted syphilis. The calendar proves her lover cannot be the father, and the doctors insist it is impossible he could have infected her. Yet she persists in her story that she has known no other man. Such is her evident sincerity that her lover asks himself whether there might not be such a thing as immaculate conception (and immaculate venereal infection). But ultimately he lacks the will to believe her. "The woman loved is [not] the origin of the emotions apparently aroused by her; they are merely set behind her like a light.... He could not bring himself to set the light behind Tonka."

He tends the girl as she grows sicker and uglier, does whatever is called for, in a certain sense cherishes her; so that, after her death, he feels his conscience to be clear, and can even tell himself he is a better person for the experience. Only for an instant does the veil fall:

Then memory cried out in him: "Tonka! Tonka!" He felt her, from the ground under his feet to the crown of his head, and the whole of her life. All that he had never understood was there before him in this instant, the bandage that had blind-folded him seemed to have dropped from his eyes — yet only for an instant, and the next instant it was merely as though something had flashed through his mind.

In this fable, whose unhurried, circumstantial opening seems to mark it as of the tamest German domestic realism, about a girl who, though probably lying, is also innocent, and a man who fails an impossible test, Musil found a perfect vehicle — per-

haps, finally, a little too perfect, too schematic — for a constant theme of his: the unbridgeability of the gap between the rational and the irrational, between the moral, based always on the example of the past and therefore on calculation, and the ethical, which calls for a leap into the future.

Musil's thinking maintains a remarkably straight trajectory from his precocious first novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906), to his death in 1942. At the core of his thinking is an idea expressed most succinctly in a mathematical metaphor used by Törless (we should not forget that Musil was trained as an engineer). There is an infinity of rational numbers, that is to say, numbers that can be written as the ratio of two whole numbers. There is also an infinity of irrational numbers, numbers that cannot be expressed as any such ratio. But their two orders of infinity are not comparable. The infinity of irrationals is "greater" than the infinity of rationals. In particular, between any two rationals, no matter how close, lies a cluster of irrationals. Stepping from one rational to the next, as we do every day, is, in Törless's figure, like crossing a bridge whose piers are joined by something that does not "really" exist.

To live and function in the world of the rational, we must deliberately banish from our awareness the irrational that lies dense under our feet and about us. We must accept a convention regarding what is to be treated as belonging to the real world. Such a convention will define everyday language (here Musil is close to his Austrian contemporary Wittgenstein). However, Musil proceeds, accepting the fact of a linguistic contract should not mean that we are committed to the repression of the irrational. Like Ulrich, the hero of *The Man Without Qualities*, we can maintain a certain reserve toward the real world, a living sense of alternative possibilities. This reserve defines one as what Ulrich calls a "possibilitarian," someone prepared to exist in "a web of haze, imaginings, fantasy and the subjunctive mode," to live a "hovering life" without ideological commitment, to be a "man without qualities" whose natural mode will be the mode of irony ("With me," said Musil in an interview, "irony is not a gesture of condescension but a form of struggle").

With so keen a sense of the role of repression in the formation of culture, one might imagine that Musil would have found Freud congenial. But in fact Musil maintained a lifelong reserve toward Freud, whom he regarded as fundamentally mistaken in assuming that the unconscious, the repressed irrational, or what Musil preferred to call, more vaguely, "the other condition," is accessible to the language of rationality. In a certain sense Musil's psychology is more radical than Freud's. To Musil — a positivist in this regard — psychology, in submitting to the rules of logic and causality that govern the rational, confines itself to the rational: "the other condition" is simply out-

side its scope. To enter "the other condition" one must abandon the model of science (*Wissenschaft*), whose instrument is logic, and take up the model of poetry (*Dichtung*), whose instrument is analogy. In Musil's eyes, Freud comes to his deepest insights when he writes not as a scientist but as a "pseudopoet."

This is not the only reason why Musil kept his distance from Freud. To a novelist with an analytical interest in the darker causes of the breakdown of European liberal institutions, the power that Freud attributed to fixed structures in the psyche seemed all too close to the power attributed by nineteenth-century German historicism to the past, betraying psychoanalysis as no more than a continuation of historicism by other means. In addition, there may be — as the critic Karl Corino has argued — a certain willfulness in Musil's attitude, a decision to close his eyes to psychoanalysis because it threatened to superannuate the ethical-metaphysical analysis of the passions he was more comfortable with.

Drawing a clear line, therefore, between the province of *Wissenschaft* and the province of *Dichtung*, Musil set out to explore, as *Dichter*, the submerged, "other" condition. The three stories of 1924 present people on the edge of revelation, at the point of giving — or of drawing back from giving — themselves to an "other" kind of awareness. "Tonka" is a study in ethical cowardice. Despite its simple narrative surface, it is the subtlest of explorations into the will to blindness, a will that is always *behind* the young man's need to believe the girl's unbelievable story, and therefore always hidden from him. In the absoluteness of his sickness, and therefore in the absoluteness required of any remedy for it — *conversion* rather than *cure* — we have a further hint of why the secular science of Freud was unacceptable to Musil.

In "The Lady from Portugal," an uneasier piece of work with blocks of highly wrought prose marking places where Musil is writing his way out of trouble, the miracle, ambiguous and absurd though it is, takes place before our eyes. The love between a jealous older man and his young wife is restored by the exemplary death of a mangy, filthy kitten, which both of them obscurely feel to be Christ. In "Grigia" a geologist working in an isolated valley high in the Tyrol has an affair with a peasant woman, a woman of the earth with an animal's name, through which he attains release from the world, from life itself, into a mystical love of his far-off wife.

Musil is never less than commanding in the ease with which he moves between sense experience, sensuous thought, and abstraction, much like the writer he most admired among his contemporaries: Rilke. In his diary he wrote: "It is not the case that we re-

flect on things. Rather, things think themselves out within us." The line of his prose, when he is writing at his best, as in "Tonka" and many parts of *The Man Without Qualities*, traces a mind pushing gently but unremittingly at the bounds of the hitherto known. No case history in psychopathology gives us as eerie a sense of inhabiting madness as the chapters of *The Man Without Qualities* given over to the sex killer Moosbrugger. Musil's power, here and elsewhere, seems to flow from an effortless ability to annihilate his selfhood and enter the Other:

Pondering this life of his, Moosbrugger had slow interior talks with himself in which he gave the same weight to the unstressed syllables as to the stressed. It made for a quite different life-song from the song one usually heard.... It is hard to find an expression for the unity of being he at times achieved. One can think of a person's life as flowing along like a stream. But the movement that Moosbrugger felt in his life was like a stream flowing through a great, still lake. While it pushed forward it was also mingling backward; the actual progress of life just about disappeared. Once, in a half-waking dream, he had the feeling that he was wearing the Moosbrugger of his life like an old coat; he opened it a little, now and again, and the most wondrous lining came gushing out in forest-green waves of silk.

This having been said, however, there remains in the stories a certain amount of lofty gesturing toward mystical love, transcendent consummation. We see this in "Grigia" and "The Lady from Portugal"; it is also the weakest feature of "The Perfecting of a Love," one of the earlier stories collected here. Nonetheless, "The Perfecting of a Love" is an audacious piece of sustained poetic intensity, and one of the key texts of German modernism. Some fifty-five pages in length, it was the outcome of two years of fevered work by its author. It is the story of a woman, Claudine, who "perfects" her love of her husband by giving herself with reluctant voluptuousness to acts of sexual self-abasement with a stranger she has no feeling for, a complacent middleaged philanderer. By the end of the brief liaison Claudine feels she has reached a state of mystical liberation, "a state...like giving herself to everyone and yet belonging only to the one beloved."

As Musil's private papers make clear, the story is based on the infidelity of his wife-to-be, Martha Marcovaldi. Starting as an attempt to explore his own feelings of jealousy, it became a somewhat grandiose plea for mystical adultery (in a 1913 essay Musil went further, looking forward to a time when "bipolar erotics" would be outdated), but also perhaps (and this is a kind of possibility that Musil's narrative treatment, locked on to Claudine's inner life, does not allow to emerge into articulation) an effort to take over the woman's sexual experience — by writing it, by becoming its

author — and thereby strip it of its disturbing autonomy. "The Perfecting of a Love" was hard to write, I would guess, because it presented a real, and ultimately ethical, challenge to the integrity of Musil's enterprise, the enterprise of yielding himself to the processes by which thought thinks itself out, analogically or paralogically, in metaphors, likenesses, similitudes. The rhythms of Claudine's meditation (if hers is indeed the voice of the text) invite us to lapse into lulled will-lessness as they lead us along what Musil would later call "the maximally laden path...the way of the most gradual, imperceptible transitions," from contended marital rectitude to perverse abandonment.

Claudine's story gives several *fin-de-siècle* twists to the Christian teaching that as long as the soul is pure it cannot be harmed by violations performed upon the flesh. The first twist takes place when Claudine offers her body to violation, the second when she gives herself without reserve, yielding her will as well as her body. The test, we are to presume, is whether she can maintain an ultimate kernel of selfhood untouched by the martyrdom of the flesh. But Claudine is aware of, and does not repudiate, an ultimate stage of perversion the doctrine can undergo: of actively seeking out violation, torture, and death as a means of negative transcendence. To her husband she confesses a fascination with the inner experience of a psychopath she calls G., later to be reembodyed as the sex killer Moosbrugger in *The Man Without Qualities*. "I think...he believes his actions are good," she says. In more ways than one, "The Perfecting of a Love" is an exercise in thinking the unthinkable.

Musil's later attitude toward this story — which appeared in company with the much inferior "The Temptation of Quiet Veronica" in 1911 — is an interesting one: though it remained the only one of his works he could bear to reread, he dissuaded friends from venturing upon it. It was so obscure he said, so much a matter of "the artist's arca-na," that the ordinary reader was all too likely to respond with "revulsion." What Musil is here defending against, I suspect, has less to do with "arcana" a layman might misunderstand than with being identified with the moral position Claudine arrives at, a position to which Musil is driven, however, by his decision to make the woman's disturbing experience his own. In the language of Musil's older rival in the exploration of the underlife of polite Viennese society, the "pseudopoet" Freud, the scandal of the story lies in the wish it betrays in its writer to occupy and author the ultimately fascinating scene of intercourse, supplanting the usurper, the bearded stranger of Claudine / Martha's story.

In one of the dualisms Musil accepts as a premise and then seeks to overcome, man and woman stand to each other in the relation of rational to irrational, *Wissenschaft*

to *Dichtung*. In the years 1906-1911, his first years with Martha Marcovaldi, Musil can be thought of as alternating between a daytime self devoted to science and a nighttime self increasingly steeped in Martha, in reimagining, through the medium of an eroticized female sensibility that he half adopted, half created, her life before she met him. When we set side by side Robert's project of imaginatively living Martha, and Martha's project, after Robert's death, of editing and publishing his manuscripts, in places tampering with them — a project of becoming *his* author — we have as remarkable a dyadic literary household as any since the Tolstoys.

Musil's only important poem, "Isis and Osiris" (1923), is about a sister and brother who devour each other in a love feast. It is a myth which, Musil later came to see, held *The Man Without Qualities* in embryo; and *The Man Without Qualities*, as we have it, drifts to an end in the retreat of Ulrich and his sister Agathe into mystical incest, a species of androgyny, Musil's last metaphor for "the other condition." We usually think of *The Man Without Qualities* as an unfinished novel. But, like Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, another work with epic ambitions, *The Man Without Qualities* had already begun to founder in the 1930s, as history began to move so fast and with such devastating effect that it burst the capacity of literary forms to hold it. Musil's progress with the work, after the publication of Part I, became slower and slower. The shell provided by his tenuous plot was too fragile and ironic a matter for the times; perhaps the private peace of Ulrich and Agathe was the best to be hoped for, under the circumstances.

Nonpareil Books has provided a reprint of the 1966 Delacorte Press edition of the five stories in the standard translation by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, under the title (not Musil's own) *Five Women*. It includes a preface by Frank Kermode, useful when it was written but now out of date, and a bibliography that ends in 1965. Musil's American readers deserve better than this.