

## John Bayley - Death and the Dichter

*Dichter* is not at all readily translatable. It has a wider sense than "poet," and a more transcendental one than "writer." Goethe, the archetypal *Dichter*, created masterpieces in every genre, but was also the model of thinking and being, in the science and ethic of a civilized state. Never much like its English, French, or Russian counterpart, the German novel, coming from the pen of a *Dichter*, has always more resembled an enterprise of the philosophical imagination.

Frank Kermode gave this interpretation of *Dichtung* when he spoke of its "elaborate attempts to use fiction for its true purposes, the discovery and registration of the human world." That might mean much or little. A modest masterpiece, like a novel of Jane Austen's, could be said to achieve such a goal as effectively as a work of vast and deliberate metaphysical scope, if not more so. It's a question for the reader, and for the way his mind works. In the relative world of the novel revelation may come to him from an unexpected quarter. Or the discerning reader may go only for a novelist-*Dichter* with whom revelation is an open promise. Milan Kundera, a lively, but it must be said exceedingly naive, commentator on these matters, assures us that the novelist is an "explorer of existence,...man's being, which the novel alone can discover."

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In a sense Kundera and Kermode are on sure ground, but there is a snag. By hailing the novelist as a *Dichter* (the word has unfortunate if fortuitous connotations with *Diktat*) they bestow on the novel a conscious and transcendent function, one that goes with the German and Goethean tradition.

A *Dichter* can remain a *Dichter* only by asserting his own absolute preeminence and authority; and, as D.H. Lawrence very sensibly put it, the strength of the novel is that it is "so incapable of the absolute." Nothing is more absolute than an idea, and the naiveté of a lively and creative intellectual like Kundera emerges in his persistent belief that the more striking its ideas, the more effective the novel. All his disclaimers, all his insistence that the novelist is not playing with ideas but exploring human individuality, serve only to emphasize his real allegiance. For him the three great novelists of this century, the ones who really matter, are all men — all, one might say, specifically *masculine* — and all Central Europeans: Broch, Kafka, and Musil. And of these the real intellectual's novelist, the one most committed to ideas, is Musil. He is the apotheosis of the modern *Dichter*, one who has passed beyond life into a world of abstract inquiry about it. In the foreword to his essay collection, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, as in its title, he made a joke of this. "Can a *Dichter* still speak of being

alive?"

Well perhaps not. The author of *Axel's Castle* observed that the artist's valet would do his living for him: Musil in the next century allots the same role to thought. He was frank about this. In his diary in 1910 he wrote: "Where I cannot elaborate some special idea, the work immediately becomes too boring for me." In one of the essays and dialogues assembled in his book *The Art of the Novel* Kundera observes that Fielding *tells* a story, Flaubert *describes* a story, and Musil *thinks* a story. The odd and indeed slightly comic paradox in all this is Kundera's insistence, where Musil and the modern novel are concerned, on the Heideggerian existence — *in der Welt sein* — of Musil's apparently "unliving" characters. "Making a character 'alive,' " says Kundera, "means getting to the bottom of his existential problem...nothing more."

But people don't walk around with an existential problem. They walk around worrying about a visit to the dentist, buying a pound of sausages, wondering if their husbands are being unfaithful. The novel has always known this and has invented itself accordingly. As Kundera elsewhere implies, and rightly, the novel has always known what the existential thinkers in our time have been preaching as a new gospel: and yet he is himself most impressed and influenced by those novelists who have made the most elaborate attempts to use fiction for the discovery and analysis of "existence." It is a question of which comes first: the novel, or thoughts and ideas about the novel, the metaphysical uses that the form can supply after the event. Walter Benjamin — no mean judge — saw this clearly, and said that Musil was a thinker but not a novelist: a thinker who made use of the novel.

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Musil himself might well have agreed. He was not dogmatic on such issues. As *Dichter* he saw himself primarily as an explorer of "the other condition," which is both the goal and the process of thinking about oneself, experiencing oneself. And by experiencing oneself one may reveal one's experience to others. This is the delicate point in our relations with Musil — are we sharing an experience, or being asked to admire a highly complex and specialized one of his own? Is he, like Tolstoy, a solipsist who speaks for us all, or one who is only interested in a unique self?

It is the same kind of contradiction as that between man as an existentialist and as someone who is preoccupied about his pound of sausages; and to do Musil justice he is neither disturbed by it nor even made self-conscious. Of the triad of novelists exalted by Kundera he is closer to Broch than to Kafka, or to other intellectual European novelists like Canetti and Thomas Mann. But he remains very much a writer on his

own. It is obvious that when we read Kafka, a very different sort of writer, we are no more meeting fully recognizable individuals than we are in the pages of Musil. Kafka's figures are so compelling because we are at once engrossed in their experience, becoming a beetle with Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, or the victim of a mysterious trial with Josef K. What happens to them is so absorbing that we are not interested in what they are like. But with Jane Austen's *Emma*, say, interest is divided between Emma as a personage, presented for our acquaintance and amusement, and Emma as a set of experiences that the author invites us to share. With Musil we have something quite different, none of these more familiar introductions to the world of other people, but simply to the mind of a man who once said that he made fictions because they were the only vehicle for the unphilosophical view that everything in thought and experience can be simultaneously true and false.

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Hence the unpositive nature of Musil's world, its lack of "characteristics." Most novels depend on emphasizing, even exaggerating, the characteristics of things and people, so that we soon recognize everything and begin to feel at home in the world the novelist invents for us. Musil's long, unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, which should really be given in English the clumsier title of "The Man Without Characteristics," pretends to use some of the usual business of the novel. There is the "Collateral Campaign," a society project for rehabilitating the Austrian Empire; there is much satire on bureaucracy; there are investigations of a sex murderer, Moosbrugger, and of the incestuous love between Ulrich, the man without qualities, and his sister Agathe. There is the suggestion of a world on the brink of the disaster of the First World War. There are also portraits *à clef* of powerful women of Musil's acquaintance, such as Lou Andreas-Salomé.

But all this is of little importance beside the play of thought — and it must be said, style — which is the real Musil experience. Musil's triumph ultimately is to do what all other great novelists do: that is to say, compel us to share the authenticity of his world; but it is a world in which fact, event, and consideration are, as it were, ineradicably interchangeable. That is why it would be vulgarly misleading to speak of Musil's world as existing on the brink of the abyss of war and anarchy, because the abyss may cease to exist or turn out to be something quite different. For the same reason the novel could not end, but would merely go on, until its author, impoverished and ill, died in Switzerland in 1942, just after completing a sentence. Like fiction's version of Penelope's web it secretly and mysteriously unraveled itself even while it was being so delicately and carefully woven.

In some metaphysical way that might be considered the highest destiny of the novel form, its ultimate essence; and it is certainly true that highly intelligent people who do not read ordinary novels will read Musil with deep admiration. He is a philosopher's pet, like Wittgenstein, perhaps because philosophers, who try to establish what can be known, are seduced by a world of such palpable intelligence in which knowledge and experience remain absolutely free and uncommitted.

Intelligence, for Musil, is embodied in the erotic, in its sensations and discoveries, and the most graphic passages in all his books deal with sexual musings and intimations as a part of the "other condition," the state that medieval mystics, in whom Musil was much interested, frequently likened to certain kinds of erotic experience. A tiny essay in *Posthumous Papers* called "Maidens and Heroes" muses about the thoughts, or nonthoughts, of servant girls exercising dogs. Is their world one of Zen-like calm, or of "thinking that the movie's about to begin"? Another, in a style even more mesmeric and haunting, describes the narrator going to bed in a hotel room with a slight fever, and listening to the woman with him making her own preparations "in the realm of reality":

Incomprehensible, all the walking up and down: in this corner of the room, in that. You come over to lay something on your bed; I don't look up but what could it be? In the meantime you open the closet, put something in or take something out; I hear it close again. You lay hard, heavy objects on the table; others on the marble top of the commode. You are forever in motion. Then I recognize the familiar sounds of hair being undone and brushed. Then swirls of water in the sink. Even before that clothes being shed; now again: it's just incomprehensible to me how many clothes you take off. Finally, you've slipped out of your shoes. But now your stockings slide as constantly over the soft carpet as your shoes did before. You pour water into glasses, three or four times without stopping. I can't even guess why. In my imagination I have long since given up anything imaginable, while you evidently keep finding new things to do in the realm of reality. I hear you slip into your nightgown. But you aren't finished yet and won't be for a while. Again there are a hundred little actions. I know that you're rushing for my sake, so all this must be absolutely necessary, part of your most intimate I, and like the mute motions of animals from morning till evening, you reach out with countless gestures, of which you're unaware, into a region where you've never heard my step!

In such explorations of the erotic consciousness, as a form of prolonged meditation, Musil the *Dichter* does indeed seem to forgo the authority of that high poetic intelligence, and take on some of the novel's diffidence, its relative and nonabsolute qualities.

Musil was, like Wordsworth, "a traveller, whose tale is only of myself." And yet like many if not most mystics he was an eminently practical man in daily affairs, by turns a mathematician, engineering student, successful soldier in the first war; and then a prolific reviewer and essayist, and editor of a periodical. He wrote one play that was a failure and another that had a considerable success. It is true that all this brought him little profit. His touchy independence and reluctance to commit himself to offers meant that he and his wife lived on the edge of poverty. Friends even set up a "*Musilgesellschaft*," into which subscriptions were paid for their support. As *Dichter* on the one hand and day-to-day man of letters on the other he led a double life, one not uncommon in an artistic setting but carried by Musil to extreme lengths. *The Man Without Qualities* was incessantly restarted and revised, and the publisher, Ernst Rowohlt, grew reluctant to pay further advances. He continued to do so nonetheless, remarking later that though many authors threatened to shoot themselves if support were withdrawn Musil was the only one he thought might really do it.

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In all these vicissitudes Musil's wife, Martha Marcovaldi, was both pillar of strength and alter ego. Seven years older than her husband, she had been married twice before, first to a young man who died and then to an Italian merchant by whom she had two children. He made trouble about a divorce, which eventually had to be obtained in Hungary. In all his difficulties Musil came to see her as "another side of himself." He wrote in his diary that she "was someone he had become and who had become him." Fortunately Martha was tough enough to stand up to this most invasive of solipsists. In his helpful study Lowell Bangerter records that Musil's first German biographer, Karl Dinklage, announced in an address that "Martha was for Robert Musil the intellectual, spiritual, physical complement that was necessary for him to become what he is today for us and the world."

In a sense all Musil's fictional situations take for granted such an interchangeability. His characters are all himself, or, as he would probably have put it, he has the power of endowing with himself anyone he creates. The same might, after all, be said of Tolstoy, or any other great novelist. Yet it remains true of Musil in a special sense, the sense in which he can be said to *think* his characters and their "story." His first and most popular novel, *Young Törless*, which came out in 1906, already demonstrates this

tendency. Outwardly a more or less conventional *Bildungsroman* concerning the events in a military academy, it represents more convincingly the play of mind in a single person: the brutal cadets Reiting and Beineberg and their victim, the cowardly theif Basini, are acting out the "larval" impulses of young Törless in his search for his true selfhood in the "other condition." But the book owed its success to being received by its readers, in the bourgeois era, as a steamy revelation of what actually went on in such a school.

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Musil himself saw the "special idea" of his novel as a kind of microcosm of contemporary society, the idea adumbrated — but also, as was typical with Musil, eluded and contradicted — on a much larger scale in *The Man Without Qualities*. Much later, in a diary entry during the Thirties, he referred to his brutal pair of cadets as "today's dictators *in nucleo*," but that seems like the hindsight of a writer who was always, and deliberately, pretentious. Musil, as much as Joyce, is an intensely personal and domestic bard, although all great writers can of course be seen, or can see themselves, as prophets of political doom, civilization's collapse. "We cannot halt the deluge," Musil exclaimed in the 1930s. But the way he thinks a story echoes the title he gave his essays: it does not depend on the daily vicissitudes of life and history. The mystically erotic transcends such things, as it transcends conventional sex barriers. Törless's homosexual experiences are no more specifically homosexual than the relations of Ulrich and his sister Agathe in *The Man Without Qualities* are specifically incestuous, or Moosbrugger is a real sex murderer.

All these things are in the mind, or, as we should have to say in the case of a cruder writer, in the sexual fantasy. Moosbrugger believes that the world's existence depends on his crimes, an exaggeration of Ulrich's search in incest for his other self, a total relation such as Musil saw in himself and Martha. Musil in fact exemplifies perfectly, on the highest of planes, the way men cannot help imagining women. His female characters, like Joyce's Molly Bloom and Gretta Conroy, are themselves male fantasies. There is a certain irony in the fact that the untrammelled exercise of the intelligence on the novel, by so supreme an intelligence as Musil's, results in a rarefied form of something with which men are all too familiar — dreams of fair women. Shakespeare does not in this sense imagine Lady Macbeth speaking of the tenderness of suckling a child; and Tolstoy does not fantasize about Natasha Rostov's translation from coltish girl into slatternly earth mother. These are matters of universal knowledge and experience, as a down-to-earth genius presents them. But Musil's touchingly and indeed hauntingly objective presentation of Tonka, one of the "Three Women" in a short collection with that title published in 1924, is not quite what it seems.

The real Tonka was a simple workingclass girl called Herma Dietz, with whom Musil lived for a time while working as a young man in technical and scientific institutes. The story explores, thinks as it were, her simplicity; and how it dissolves the distinction between deceit and innocence, so that Tonka can be, in some sense, faithful to the narrator, even when it is obvious that she has made love with another man and contracted VD. The story is not really interested in her as a social being, but in the metaphysical status the narrator confers on her. What fascinates him is that she has no power of speech, and thus embodies something his own intelligence has with infinite subtlety concluded: that an idea or a person — anything in the world — can be simultaneously true and false, existent and nonexistent.

Tonka is now combined in a paperback volume with two earlier *nouvelles*, published in 1911 with the title *Unions*. All are concerned with women of the imagination, Tonka being the most notable, and the most elaborate a meditation entitled "The Perfecting of a Love." A woman travels to see her daughter at school, her husband absorbed in his work remaining at home. As in a modern film she encounters the shadowy figure of a man who stands outside her hotel door at night, and with whom she eventually makes love, feeling the moment to be the perfection of her union with her husband, "a state that was like giving herself to everyone and yet belonging only to the one beloved." "Grigia" reverses the pattern, a husband parting from his wife to work on a project in the South Tyrol, where he makes love with a peasant woman, whose husband lures them down a mine shaft and blocks the entrance. The girl escapes, but the narrator appears to have been seeking the perfect venue for a mystical *Liebestod* with his own wife, which then takes place, at least in the narrator's and the reader's imagination. Musil certainly puts queer ideas into other people's heads.

Published in Zurich in 1936, the ironically named *Posthumous Papers* contains a number of short sketches and stories written for magazines over the previous years, often terse reminiscences in miniature of the longer *nouvelles*. Some are dry and witty comments in newspaper style. Aply rendered as they are by Peter Wortsman, they cannot convey a great deal, in English, of the elliptical symmetry and richness of Musil's German. As a prose poet he is at his best over short distances, moments of what the critic Frederick Peters, in his study called *Robert Musil: Master of the Hovering Life*,<sup>\*</sup> defined as "ultimate narcissism." Nothing of course is "ultimate" in Musil, but "hovering life" conveys very well that flashpoint of the solipsistic and the external worlds which he conveys so marvelously, sometimes in images like that of the gathering of people in *The Man Without Qualities*, who seem to take wing in a myriad mental impressions before alighting "like waders on a sandbank."

An ironic little essay in *Posthumous Papers* called "Black Magic" conveys as well as anything in his work its simultaneous feel of density, mathematical logic, and seductive unpredictability. Like Kundera, and indeed like most representatives of the culture in which the expressive word originated, Musil is fascinated by the relation of kitsch to life and to art. Kundera claimed, from extensive experience of the political systems of Eastern Europe, that ideals like "the Brotherhood of Man" were only possible on the basis of kitsch. Musil's more subtle view has the same implication. For him "art is a tool which we employ to peel the kitsch off life." Kitsch may be life's answer to "the horrible gaping contingency of all one does," but art — and especially the art that really explores sex — can do the job much better. Art strips life layer by layer. "That in life which cannot be employed for art's sake is kitsch."

It is the center of Musil's philosophy as *Dichter*. Or is it? Abruptly he switches away into a pattern of seriocomic syllogisms:

Art peels kitsch off of life.

Kitsch peels life off of language.

And: The more abstract art becomes, the more it becomes art.

Also: The more abstract kitsch becomes, the more it becomes kitsch.

These are two splendid syllogisms.

If only we could resolve them!

He proceeds to do so in a few sentences worthy of Alice in Wonderland, or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* run mad. "Art equals life minus kitsch equals life minus language plus life equals two lives minus language."

Then the essay, one of a collection entitled "Ill-tempered Observations," switches as it concludes into quite another key again:

A black hussar has it so good. The black hussars swore an oath of victory or death and meanwhile stroll around in this uniform to the delight of all the ladies. That is not art! That's life!



Where do these black hussars come from and what do they mean for Musil? Are they a *Dichter's* companions, the bodyguard as it were, who protect his genius, or the escort who have him under arrest? The artist swears an oath, but the man who lives continues to stroll around day by day, in his artist's uniform, to the delight of the ladies? Art is like death: it swallows up its devotee, who continues to lead a posthumous life.