

Modernity Laid Bare

Robert Musil's real name was Robert Edler von Musil. His father, a professor of mechanical engineering had received title nobility in recognition of his achievement, a habitual gesture of Viennese central authorities toward financial wizards, scientists, and generals. Musil's failure to use his full name is revealing: he was a man both of the Central European world, and yet at the same time outside it. The breakdown of the Danubian empire and the reduction of his Austrian homeland to a small, agrarian country, land-bound and rocked by violence, while prey to extremist forces, affected Musil more than he would admit. He exiled himself to Germany and Switzerland (where he died in 1942) brooding on what was happening to his homeland and to the world. The chief outcome was an enormous unfinished novel that placed Musil among the century's great novelists and innovators.

The subject-matter of the novel is of secondary importance. Its merit must instead be sought in Musil's character portraits and rich commentaries. Ulrich is, at age 32, a "man without qualities" to such an extent that we are never even told his family name. Intelligent, cultivated, and well-to-do, he is also utterly agnostic about the present and future, a devotee of unceasing availability and openness. If nothing else, this disposition turns him into an ideal spectator of a world spinning out of control.

There are three things Ulrich bemusedly observes with eager curiosity. The first is "the parallel action" - a quixotic initiative led by intellectuals, bureaucrats, aristocrats, and entrepreneurs seeking a suitable framework in which to celebrate the Emperor after 70 years of rule. The second is the debate around the suitable handling and punishment of Moosbrugger, a man accused of sexual murder. The third is Ulrich's continuing passionate interest in the feminine soul. While the first of these actions allows Ulrich to get in touch with social elites, and the second to reflect upon what occurs in the lower reaches of society, at the instinctive level, it is the third which truly engages him psychologically and existentially. His elegantly snobbish cousin Diotima, his "lost" sister Agatha, the capricious Clarissa, Rachel, and Gerda, all capture his attention, bringing him in touch with the ideological world of Central Europe, filled with socialists, anarchists, and the menacingly crystallizing nationalists and racists.

Musil's greatest success, however, is the manner in which his vision tolerates, inside the realm of doubt, belief in the redeeming power of beauty and even a little faith. In chapter 83, for example, we find a thought that might be familiar both to certain theologians, and to the spirit of Christian existentialism:

God does not really mean the world literally; it is a metaphor, an analogy, a

figure of speech that He has to resort to for some reason or other, and it never satisfies Him, of course. We are not supposed to take Him at his word, it is we ourselves who must come up with the answer for the riddle He sets us.

And, ofcourse, even more significantly, the final pages of the book sketch out a "monastic" option of lonely, genuine contemplation and authenticity.

The tone of [The Man Without Qualities](#) strangely mixes keen lucidity with jocular melancholy. Like Joyce and Mann, Musil is not beholden to wholeness and abundance, nor does he emphasize the human opening toward transcendence. The spiritual piety of tradition is not part of his make-up. Still, in a curious way, these represent the background to his fictional world (like Joyce's Ulysses or Eliot's Waste Land). It may indeed be that the projects of Musil or Joyce would fall to pieces without these backgrounds of allusion. I am not sure I can even be cross with those who turn their reading of the "high-modernists" into a kind of detective search for such signs of tradition. In this sense, Musil's dogged examination of disposability and possibility, as well as his use of irony and ambiguity, become substitutes for wholeness rather than devices of deconstruction.

At the end of the 20th century, we live out, on a planetary scale, what was happening to the people of a limited, and marginal, part of Europe a good hundred years ago. Those people, with all their failings, managed to come up with some truly brilliant ideas to respond, in a very creative way, to their predicaments. The double-monarchy finally went under, but for the reader and observer of a century later, its story is one of achievement and of repeated triumphs. It tells us how a framework could be built in which the waltzes of Strauss could coexist with the most radical avant-garde of the time. It is the story of a world in which crown and altar lived together with capitalist enterprise and radical socialism. It is the story of a world in which social injustice and ethnic friction existed but never reached, nor even approached, the terrors of only a few decades later. What was this world like? Few portray it with more elegance and perception than Robert Musil in his *The Man Without Qualities*. A truly attentive reader will learn much about Central Europe from its luminous pages, but even more about the destiny of our own late 20th-century societies. The first new translation since the Wilkins and Kaiser translation of 1979, the present edition is handsomely produced as well as long-overdue.

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