

The Unfinished

The Anglo-Saxon temperament has a weakness for innocence, even a touch of grossness, in its novelists. It bridles at intellectuality, at the application to fiction of systematic philosophy. The teller of tales - of sophisticated, psychologically refined tales - is one thing. The logician, the metaphysician, the mind trained in philosophy or science, quite another. The term "thinker", crucial to European and Russian culture, rings awkwardly in Anglo-American. It savors of cold coffee cups in what was Central Europe or of Gauloises on the Left Bank. This is particularly so when the term is attached to a novelist. And there *is* more than a grain of perception in this prejudice. The intelligence in great art and literature is something of a mystery. Such intelligence is obviously formidable in its capacity to organize, to edge out of common focus, to recreate our reading of the world. But the preeminent feat in fiction - the presentation of rounded, autonomous characters, of situations both specific and suddenly universal - can occur in works neither formally cultured nor cerebrally intelligent. Indeed, an enigma of naïveté, even of physical immediacy, often generates literary or visual invention: do not listen to a great sculptor or painter on politics or aesthetics; watch his or her hands. The wisdom of numerous classic novelists is of a peculiarly visceral, instinctive order. Their work is shaped at depths below conscious articulation, let alone reflection - depths that are inaccessible to the rest of us. All this makes more fascinating the exceptions: the writers of fiction who are also major systematic intellects.

There have been two in the twentieth century: Marcel Proust and Robert Musil. There are, of course, other writers who present themselves as candidates. Elias Canetti, a fervent admirer of Musil, is a special case inasmuch as he produced only one novel, and at an early age. Thomas Mann carried within himself far portion of Western culture, and his narrative genius was manifest. But there is in that towering mastery a perennial conservatism; what he had was an expository of brilliance in the adaptation of already available philosophies, such as those of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud. Henry James's critique of society and his anatomy of human relations are of the finest. But they are those of a master impressionist, and he more or less uneasily left philosophical argument to his brother. The political instincts and the feel for the turbulence of history in an Andre Malraux, a Graham Greene, and a Saul Bellow are acute. Yet we would not look to these witnesses for any original contribution to philosophy, to the development of logic or epistemology in any ordered - let alone systematized - way. Joyce mimes ideas, parodies them, dramatizes them, sets them to incomparable verbal music; he does not have them. By contrast, if the notion of literature should disappear, Proust's place in intellectual life would remain eminent. He is,

after Aristotle and Kant, one of the seminal thinkers on aesthetics, on the theoretical and pragmatic relations between form and meaning. His analyses of the psychosomatic texture of human emotions, of the phenomenology of experience, are of compelling philosophical interest. Even in his lifetime, it became a cliché to set "Proust on time" beside Einstein and the new Physics. "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" is interwoven with motif of epistemology, philosophy of art (including music), and ethical debate which nevertheless have their own independent status. Only Musil provides a counterpart.

This is, at an obvious level, a matter of biography. Musil was a highly trained and qualified mechanical engineer with a keen grasp of mathematics and mathematical logic. His thesis bore on the technical aspects of Ernst Mach's philosophy of physics. (Einstein shared with him an engagement with Mach.) From 1903 to 1908 Musil was also occupied with the study of experimental clinical psychology and of theories of behavior. There is hardly a page in his immense oeuvre - so much of it as yet unpublished in English - that does not argue, by precept and example, for the radical unison of the philosophical and the poetic (The German *Dichtung* makes this symbiosis easier to express) For Musil, thought - be it mathematical, analytic, discursive or aesthetic - is form. To think rigorously is to shape rigorously: the concordance between genre and content should be as logical and as inevitable in a novella or a play as it is in the blueprint of a machine tool or in an algebraic proof. There is nothing cold or mandarin about this heroic conviction. It gives to Musil's stories and to "The Man without Qualities", a subtle lustre, a summons to adult response, an imaginative authority of the rarest force. Musil honors his readers by the demands he makes of them

For an American public in the nineteen-nineties, they may prove onerous. Musil grounds the world of his analytic imaginings wholly in that of Kakanien, the lavatory term he invented to designate the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy. His texts swarm with allusions, sometimes covert and sometimes oblique, to Austrian politics and society, to the philosophical-sociological debates in Vienna before the First World War, to incidents of criminality or fashion in the city of Mahler and Freud, and to the diverse styles of rhetoric and jargon in fin-de-siècle Vienna-Budapest-Prague. No less than Joyce, Musil constructs the fabric of his vast design around minutiae of exact local reference. But his motive is not Joyce's. The pressure of abstraction on Musil was such - the temptation of the philosophical essay or epistemological investigation was so constant - that he strove to give to his fiction the concreteness of locality. It is the unresolved tension between the alternatives of the systematic and the poetic, the scientific and the literary - or, rather, a staunch refusal to acknowledge that they *are* divergent alternatives - that confers on his writings their unsettling power.

Both the power and the disturbance emanate from his early masterpiece, "Young Torless", published in 1906. The German title tells of *Verwirrungen* - of the maddening disorders, confusions, vertigos - that afflict the adolescent hero in the erotic-sadistic atmosphere of the military academy. Musil himself was familiar with this scene. His portrait of the artist as a young cadet belongs to a widespread genre - one that extends from "Tom Brown's School Days" all the way to "The Catcher in the Rye". But Musil's portrait has a much higher purpose. Consciously or not, Musil has already sensed his arch-theme: that of psychological, sexual, and social disorder in the doomed culture of Central Europe. Already, the clairvoyant in him is unmistakable: the episodes of ritual humiliation - of sadomasochistic practices in this tight-buttoned hell, of choosing a scapegoat with 'alien' traits - anticipates, almost unbearably, events to come. "Die Versuchung der Stillen Veronika" - where *Versuchung*, "temptation", evokes *Versuch*, a 'trial', or 'attempt' - was completed in 1911. It may well be the single greatest short story in German. (There is more than one element of inspired kitsch in Mann's "Death in Venice".) Behind this uncannily charged miniature lies the less concentrated canvas of Goethe's "Elective Affinities". Musil's tale and Goethe's novel depict a shift toward reflexes within us which we register in even the most direct of erotic encounters. The title of the short book in which Musil's story is included, "Vereinigungen" - meaning 'unions' or 'concordances' - is bitterly ironic: there are none to be found. It is in sexual encounters that solitude is sharpest, that the imagined wealth of remembered, alternative, or illusory possibilities devastates the pretended truth of the moment. Men and women sleep not with each other but with the memories, the regrets, the hopes of unions yet to come. Our adulteries are internal; they deepen our aloneness.

Even beyond Proust's, Robert Musil's sensibility was hermaphrodite. He could focus on the unspoken or subliminal current of feminine consciousness, on women's speech to themselves, with an exactitude, a daring precision, that no other modern writer has quite matched. "The Temptation of Quiet Veronica" and its companion piece "The Perfecting of Love", concise as they are, required years of strained labor. They demonstrate, as do the Novellas gathered in "Three Women" (1924), that it is possible for an exceptional intellect and imagination to pass through the Freudian tunnel and emerge into a light altogether more scrupulous in its reading of human enclosedness. Had we only these shorter fictions, the occasional lectures *such as the one on stupidity, delivered in the teeth of Nazi Vienna), and the voluminous notebooks, diaries, shards of literary-social criticism and satire, Musil's place in literary history would be considerable. As it is, these *opera minora* seem to stand in the bright shade of the colossus: "Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften. Translated into English, 'Eigenschaften' has, unavoidably, been rendered as 'qualities'. It is a rendering that omits crucial con-

notations of selfness, of singular appropriation to oneself, almost of 'self-possession', with all its philosophical-moral-economic attributes. 'Qualities' lets drop the decisive analogies with the ontological-psychological investigations into the ego not only in Freud but in Husserl and Heidegger. "The Man Whose 'I' Is in Search of His 'Me'" would be an absurdly awkward paraphrase, but it might be more exact.

When Robert Musil died suddenly in Geneva, on April 15, 1942, he was in exile (his wife was Jewish) and was virtually destitute. His publications were, in the main, pulped or out of print, and many of his papers, left behind in Vienna, were destroyed in the war. His magnum opus, on which he was working only moments prior to his death, lay hopelessly unfinished. Musil's very name seemed to ring a bell - and then a muted one - only with a few eminent contemporaries, such as Mann and Broch; with a handful of fellow refugees; and with the bureaucrats in various relief organizations, who had become increasingly weary of his desolate applications for help. Today, however, there is an academic-critical Musil industry. A series of monographs devoted to his work has now passed twenty volumes. Already, the bibliography of scholarly commentary is vast, and theses are cascading. The claim that "The Man Without Qualities", even as we have it, towers over modern fiction in the German language is near to being a banality.

Yet there is a good deal that remains confused. The first volume of the novel, comprising a hundred and twenty-three chapters, appeared in 1930. Sales were hardly massive, but critical attention was immediate and almost entirely positive. Critical consensus held it to be the book after "Ulysses". In 1933, however, when the thirty-eight chapters that make up the second tome were published, few reviewers took note. This lack of attention was due only in part to Hitler's assumption of power in Germany and to prompt Nazi denunciations of Musil as an obscurantist, decadent pessimist, useless to readers in the new dawn. Even sympathetic critics were baffled by the second volume's myriad complexity of narrative strands, by the palpable indecision of structure and tone. What followed were twenty chapters, which Musil revised in galleys between 1937 and 1938 but then withdrew from his publisher, and the enormous *Nachlass* - the posthumous material, comprising, in different Musil archives, some twenty thousand pages. The Knopf claim, emblazoned on the dust jacket of the new edition, that this translation is "the first in English to provide a complete text" is simply not true. There can be no 'complete' text of a work that remains drastically incomplete; quite different editorial arrangements are and will continue to be possible. What we have here is a translation, by Sophie Wilkins, breaking off with Chapter 38 of Part 3, followed by some six hundred further pages from the *Nachlass*, dating from 1920 to 1942, and selected and translated by Burton Pike. Particularly

with regard to the first two panels of the triptych, this enterprise is essentially based on the German edition issued by Rowohlt in 1978. Though the Rowohlt Musil supersedes previous attempts it is itself necessarily incomplete and selective as to posthumous matter. Unsurprisingly, it has provoked scholarly-critical doubts. Despite thirty four megabytes of data on CD-Rom which appeared in 1992, there can be no definitive "The Man Without Qualities".

As is well known, Musil sets out to chronicle, to elucidate critically, the death of Europe and its culture. (Spengler was a significant influence). The philosophical epic begins in August, 1913, exactly a year before the catastrophe. If there is a structural keel, it is Musil's acidly ironic invention - though an invention based on fact - of the 'Parallel Campaign'. The reign of Emperor William II of Germany would reach its thirtieth glorious year in 1918. Preparations for this august event were actually under way in Berlin. How, then, could Austria do less than celebrate, also in 1918, the seventieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's accession to the throne - surely a nobler and more blessed event? The committee that was assembled to study and develop this inspired proposal functions as the pivot of the novel, bringing many of its main characters into ideological, social, political and sexual interaction. The ultimate fatuousness of the project, given the as yet unknown realities of 1918, and the deep-lying hypocrisies and illusions that it exposes serve Musil as a touchstone for his encompassing thesis of spiritual decay.

This thesis is argued further in a number of ancillary plots, each prodigal enough to form a novel in its own right. Moosbrugger, the sadistic sex murderer, fascinates the elegant, emancipated circles of mundane Vienna. His crimes are, in one sense, enactment of the fantasies of the disturbed, Nietzschean Clarisse (whose androgynous impulses mirror something central in Musil). Dr. Paul Arnheim - based, in part, on the German-Jewish statesman and thinker Walther Rathenau - exhibits those gifts for detachment and for ironic vision which were at once the glory of the Central European life of the mind and a symptom of its incapacity for direct political action in the face of the inhuman. As in Balzac or Proust, the cast in Musil is large. It spans every social condition, from slums to *palais*, from bohemia to military eminence. Musil's combinatorial techniques, especially in Volume I, are awesome.

When Agathe - the sister of 'the man without qualities', Ulrich - enters the novel, what was previously a kaleidoscope narrows to a laser. The siblings have scarcely seen each other since childhood. Agathe is drifting away from a second marriage. Ulrich's sexual affairs have, like Musil's, been numerous and instructive, but they have left him disposable and at the surface of himself. Agathe is a vibrant sleepwalker, who takes care not to exceed the sheltering distances that separate her from awaken-

ing. The philosophical armature of her somnambular élan is set out by the novelist. It is that of the cult of authentic life, of finally declared feeling, at whatever private or social risk; it relates Nietzsche to Bergson, and is dramatized in writers as otherwise diverse as Henry James (witness the hymn to 'only living' in "The Ambassadors") and D.H. Lawrence. The secret of recovered life lies, in part, in a knowing retrieval of childhood. Proust is the supreme strategist of this spiralling return. Ulrich and Agathe find themselves journeying homeward, to the 'unsealing of a crypt', that is also a cradle or a box of magical toys, masks, mementos. The other motion of recovery, of authentication in the face of the constraints of the social-normative order is that of the quantum leap. 'Leap is the wrong word, in that the forward thrust can be one of almost impalpable nuance and gradations. But there is a *salto mortale* nevertheless - a step into the void.

"The Man Without Qualities" is the narrative-psychological apex of an aesthetic of brother-sister relations - an aesthetic that takes its modern guise in Byron, in Shelley, in Baudelaire's incantation to *mon enfant, ma soeur*. Specifically, Musil follows on the mythology and, one can almost say, the politics of love between brother and sister set out in Wagner's "Ring". Musil presses toward a new intensity of metaphysical and ethical valuation the ancient intuition that a brother's passion for his sister, a sister's for her brother, can alone satisfy the ache of eros for total oneness. Love between organic strangers, however vehement, cannot abolish the paradox of solitude, of the unbridgeable. Love between those whom blood and inheritance conjoin fuses the needs of narcissism (self-love) with those of total intimacy with another. "Now I know what you are: you are my self love." And this very insight, being communicable, defies aloneness.

In retrospect, the entirety of Musil's genius - the rigor of psychological notation, the eerie depths of the novellas, the ability to make intimate detail representative of philosophical argument and social crisis - can be seen as a prelude to the Ulrich-Agathe chapters. Nothing in modern literature, except the saga of the Narrator and Albertine in Proust, comes close. Step by step, Musil unfolds the hesitant ecstasy of soul and spirit which inspires the Siamese twins as they probe the complex wonder of mutual rediscovery. They proclaim an elective affinity so unguarded as to make of them twins of different gender and age, but twins nonetheless. Gender, moreover, flickers uncertainly. There is something radically boyish in Agathe's lithe charm, in the smiling cynicism, whereas what Ulrich feels crowding upon him is not only his sister's femininity but his own, now liberated from conventional restraints. Within a shared idiom, simultaneously impressionistic, encoded, and strangely resonant with the metaphysical discourse on eros as we know it from Plato or from Nietzsche,

'dream' and charged immediacy alternate. Is theirs a joint self-delusion, an infinitely gentle folie a deux? Agathe says, "But it does happen in one's sleep! There you do sometimes see yourself transformed into something else. Or meet yourself as a man. And then you're much kinder to him than you are to yourself. You'll probably say that these are sexual dreams, but I think they are much older."

Agathe's intimation of a primal archetype is given shape, famously, in the "garden episodes" from the chapters withdrawn by Musil in 1938 and still unpublished at his death. Their setting is deliberately Edenic. Theological fantasies play in Ulrich's mind even as the air is toying with Agathe's hair - with her "blond head like light on light against the sky." What if God Himself would devalue the world if He were to come closer to it by even the tiniest step? This esoteric notion is a figuration of Ulrich's unease about the finality of his love for Agathe. "A deep moat from some other world seemed to enclose them both in a nowhere world of their own." But, precisely because "it is imagination" (one of Musil's key doctrines), morality continues to exercise its questioning role. The closer the twins are to each other, the more demanding the conditions of possibility. An unexamined love is not worth living. "Moonbeams by Sunlight", the title of Chapter 46, aims at suggesting something of the countercurrents, the "reflections", in both the optical and the psychological vein, that attach to his pas de deux. (The hint of choreography, of an intricate but also self-ironizing pavane, is compelling.)

These chapters are the cruellest of tests for any translator. The closest analogy in English might be the sections miming Eden in Henry James's "The Golden Bowl". But with a constant difference: in Musil the analytic-philosophical lineaments are persistently vital. Perhaps one should think of Santayana's fiction, but at a much higher pitch of authority. It would be otiose to anatomize this or that passage of the Pike rendering in the word-for-word light of the German original. A translation of this scope needs to be lived with. What we are given here manifestly supersedes previous attempts. It may well turn out to be the best Musil available to an English-language readership. The comic strands, notably in a personage such as Tuzzi or Diotima, are strikingly recaptured. Passing vignettes show Wilkins' virtuosity: "Then it occurred to him that one could just as well say that a woolen blanket resembled a night in October. He felt a gentle uncertainty on his skin and drew Bonadea closer." Or the delicious sketch of Diotima reading, brushing back her sumptuous black hair from her forehead, "which gave her a logical air". Grasp the full connotations of the apposition of these two words, and you will be at the heart of Musil.

Why the incompleteness? This, of course, is the 'Musil question'. Why the incapacity or unwillingness to choose between alternative endings when these are more or less ful-

ly set out in the vastness of the posthumous papers? Material circumstances mattered, undoubtedly. Musil's *misère*, his pariahdom, the disappearance of his name and works from a Europe whose collapse into barbarism he had so acutely foreseen made him feel that the formal completion of his labors, let alone their publication in any conventionally accomplished form, was a wholly unrealistic prospect. Moreover, what meaning would his own reduced existence have if "The Man Without Qualities" were out of his hands? (The parallels with Proust are evident) But it can also be argued that incompleteness is of the essence, that it was latent in the celebrated initial sentence about the barometric pressure hanging low over the Atlantic and moving inexorably eastward. Time has no stop; or does human history, even where it is apocalyptic. There are no last judgments - only attempts, as in differential calculus, to get nearer to the truth, to the finally incommensurable. Musil explored and pondered a finale of incest for Ulrich and Agathe. Rightly, he balked at the simplemindedness, at the novelettish flavor, of any such solution. Already, they cohabit far beyond the flesh. Musil was familiar with "The Magic Mountain", and was himself an ex-combatant who was ascetically at home in uniform; and so he could easily have closed on a scene of world war. But one senses that Mann's precedent did not convince him. Even the horrors of 1914-18 had proved to be only an unfinished chapter of European tragedy. Thus there is something strangely right about the interminability of "The Man Without Qualities" and the aleatory challenge posed by the archive, containing, as it does pages of the highest interest and the highest art. Completion might have diminished the unbounded life of the torso.

George Steiner - The Unfinished
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