

I. A Sort of Introduction

In which our subject is preliminarily described, with respect to some of his qualities & complications

To recount the life of a man who lived so much in his mind is paradoxical. Indeed, it recalls the challenge Robert Musil himself poses in a section of his novel *The Man without Qualities* entitled, “A Chapter that Can be Skipped by Anyone who Has No Very High Opinion of Thinking as an Occupation.” “Nothing,” the narrator warns, “is so difficult to represent by literary means”. While cogitation itself is not always palpably dynamic, it does become quite exciting when it grapples — as is often the case in this novel about how to live the “right life” — with the fruitful tension between ideas and action, ideals and reality. Like his favorite poet, Rilke, whose iconic poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” admonishes the reader, “You must change your life,” Musil was part of a Modernist movement which strove to make art that was “erschuetternd,” i.e., convulsive, an art that would enliven its audiences and instantiate personal transformations. Walter Pater’s famous “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* quotes Novalis, saying “Philosophieren ist vivificieren, dephlegmatisieren”. For Musil, who was an avid reader of the German Romantic author of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, not only philosophy, but great art, too, vivifies, dephlegmatizes. As such, it is imperative that the thoughts entertained by even the most seemingly contra-mundum recluse be bound to the central question of how to live in the world, that the thoughts themselves press up against the perceived limits of the actual, testing and expanding received ideas and possibilities and probabilities. Such tensions will prove all the more fascinating when the *mise en scène* of that real world is the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, fin-de-siècle and Post-

WWI Vienna and Berlin, with a last act in Swiss Exile during WWII— a particularly tumultuous historical and cultural epoch that happens to be spanned by Musil's short lifetime (1880-1942).¹

Musil, whose one grandfather helped build the first European railroad, was 4 years old when the city of Steyr, where his father presided as high-ranking engineer, was first illuminated in an electrical display. He came of age amid the *frissons* and challenges of Modernism—new science (relativity, quantum theory, evolution); new woman (feminism, flappers, androgyny); new psychologies (Machian, Gestaltian, Freudian); new art movements (Symbolism, Impressionism, Expressionism); amid the discourses of positivism, phenomenology, and a revival of mysticism. Most shattering of all was the political and social reality of two horrific world wars, the decline of an Empire, the rearrangement of the map of Europe, and the rise of the age of Totalitarianism. As a student of engineering, mathematics, the psychology of perception, physics, philosophy, and as auto-didact of anthropology, religion, history and literature, he was armed with multiple vocabularies with which to respond to and reflect upon this changing and increasingly uncertain world—a world in which the traditional foundations of religion, morality, and social structures had been, as Nietzsche's madman put it, "wiped away with a sponge". Musil, along with Kafka, Rilke, Broch, Wittgenstein, and the mature Hofmannsthal was a central figure in what David S. Luft calls "the generation of 1905"—a group of "Cisleithanian" Austrians (Moravian, Bohemian German speakers dwelling in the area to the east of the Leitha River) who, despite their skepticism and sophistication, conceived of the task of art, the realm of "spirit," as a serious and important matter². While the decadence of *fin de siècle* certainly

¹ Morton Hoi Jensen in his illuminating essay on the challenges of literary biography, "The Fiction that Dare Not Speak its Name," notes that, "on the whole, very little *happens* to writers in the practice of writing, even those who, like Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Mann, or Naguib Mahfouz, lived in the thick of history, with all its peril and precariousness," admitting that, "Writing is not an activity that can be meaningfully described from the outside". In *Liberties*, 242-243. Having read Jensen's essay *after* writing a draft of this introduction, I was astonished by the similar themes we both found fascinating—and have, subsequently, woven some of his words into what comes below.

² See David S. Luft. *The Austrian Dimension in German Intellectual History*.

helped to form them, they all, in their own ways, rejected nihilism in favor of a particularly potent blend of ethics and aesthetics.³ While contemporary scholars stress the “language crisis,” a widespread skepticism about the ability of words to express the increasingly important ineffable and internal states, Luft reiterates my own feelings when he writes that “what is actually most striking is the believe in language, the commitment to language. The writers of this generation—Musil, Kafka, Broch, Hofmannsthal, and Rilke, as well as Ludwig Wittgenstein and the idiosyncratic Kraus—believed in language...[and] in civilization and modern sciences as well”.⁴

Musil was a hyper-intellectual polymath (it was said that he was “too intelligent to be a creative writer”), who embodied in his own person the larger societal conflicts between the poles of science and art, logic and mysticism. He followed all questions out to the borderland between the dichotomies he called “ratioid” and “not-ratioid,” or “precision and soul.” Despite then an intelligence that might seem more suited for the sciences or philosophy, he concluded (a bit like his one-time neighbor, Ludwig Wittgenstein) that an essayistic, metaphor-rich literature was the best mode in which to conduct his open-ended experiments.

Famously proclaiming that what was needed was more reason in the realm of mysticism and more mysticism in the realm of reason, Musil navigated the rocky waters of his times and *just* managed to stay afloat, despite the frequent proximity of despair and social and cultural collapse, despite the enormity of the intellectual and artistic tasks he had set himself, despite the banning of his books, poverty and exile. Notwithstanding moments when he claimed he was “on the brink of suicide,” he neither succumbed to nihilism on the one hand, nor cravenly held fast to one or another comforting illusion or rigid ideology on the other. Instead, he bravely bore the unease of facing the void—which for him, as for Nietzsche, was rather rife with dizzying possibilities, fruitful tensions, and multiple

³ “None of these writers [Rilke, Kafka, Musil, Broch, Hofmannsthal] took Nietzsche to be decadent—or even nihilistic”. Luft, 103.

⁴ *Ibid*, [p. # needed]

meanings than empty and meaningless. His own life was, in many ways, an object lesson in the difficulties that he metaphorized in his 1921 play “The Utopians” as the plight of a lone human being out on his own plank on a wide and endless sea.

“My life story,” he writes in the autobiographical notebook he had begun to keep in 1937, “should be interesting in that I am a very disciplined, rigorous writer, but my development was beset by all sorts of obstacles” (*T* 935). The infinity of thought—its possibilities and radical openness—necessarily presses up against the limits of the real. And out of this friction, the lineaments of a writer’s life can begin to be traced.

The spaces he lived in, at least in his adult life, were small, possibly cramped; certainly they were so during the first years of WWII, and while in exile in Switzerland; unsatisfactory, temporary, uncomfortable. Perhaps like the confines of a mortal head —no matter how broad and high the brow of genius—within which that seeming infinity of ideas and impressions teems and churns. A poltergeist-brain still somehow alive, just barely succeeding at the *legerdemain* of living off nothing,⁵ knocking against the walls of need, hunger, an unappreciative public, horrific political realities and confusion about how and when to take a stand against them, knocking against the mortality of the body itself. Robert Musil worked on and on and on in a series of stifling rooms, filling pages and pages with markings, words, abbreviations, symbols; notebooks catalogued and cross-referenced by theme, work, character, question; paragraphs transposed, revised, crossed out, destroyed, lost, rediscovered, with markings and marginalia in different colored inks, in pencil too, pages and pages, some typed, mostly by Martha (his wife and imaginary twin), new and different versions of scenes written decades before, old words and old worlds made new, new words and new worlds put into

⁵ Indeed, Musil titled a book written during a particularly bleak period, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, wherein he suggested that the writer in Germany had already long been dead. Later, while in Swiss exile, imagining his posthumous success, he wrote that it was “quite an ontological trick to have to wait until dying to be allowed to live” (*B* I, 1083).

relation with the old ideas and the still-unanswered, probably unanswerable questions, pages and pages, seemingly *ad infinitum*, unfinished, unfinishable, yes—as unfinishable as the irrepressible continuation of a life force, seemingly self-generating, as if they could continue to write themselves even after the early death of their First Mover, the Author.

These pages, including letters and diary entries and drafts of chapters for the great unfinished novel, *The Man without Qualities*, as well as for stories and plays and essays, and for projects—like his dystopian Novel, *Planet Ed*—never even rightly begun, but conceived and put aside for later, for “after the novel would be finished” —as if that time could ever come—are collected together and called, in German, *Der Nachlass*, the (literary and biographical) remains. And they constitute over 9000 pages of words, having been rendered since 2009 as non-linear as was Musil’s brain itself, in the *Klagenfurter Ausgabe*, begun as a CD-Rom, and now being fashioned into a new on-line compendium. One used to be able to search this database for any word or name, a phrase or passage, the way a living mind gropes for something forgotten; but unlike a mere mortal brain, this artificial intelligence retrieves the sought-after passage instantly, along with all the other instances when Musil wrote it down—as if the amassing of all of these words had been conjured in no time at all. But how might such time be more rightly reckoned or measured? Surely not by counting words or numbers of pages. It seems impossible, when we consider, in mortal measure, how many there are.

We might measure the time spent writing by the number of cigarettes he consumed, tobacco burned away into ashes and smoke, immeasurable and inchoate thoughts burned into the laser-sharp focus of crystal-clear sentences—he wrote the words down, smoked the cigarette down to his fingertips, but he still was not satisfied, wanted yet another smoke, and another. “I live to smoke,” he wrote. But he might just as easily have said, “I smoke to write”.

Musil’s own notes toward an autobiography help and hinder us as we strive to visualize his life. A writer, presumably, would like to make himself interesting, finding the most piquant bits about

his ancestors, searching out early signs of genius in the lineage or explanations for idiosyncrasy. A writer, moreover, obsessed with the problems of linear narration and with plumbing the depths of the irrational and irreducible sources of self, will piece together his life story using Modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness, imagistic juxtaposition and displacement, and the story will be shot through with the anxieties of the alienated, fragmented mind. The distinction between life and art may often be murky, and the so-called facts of the artist's life may be fictionalized almost as much as the fiction will be peppered with facts. The hero or anti-hero of a novel may sometimes tell us more about real life than a biographical account. Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre's *La Nausée*, calls attention to the process by which we narrate our own lives:

Nothing happens when you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a semi-total: you say: I've been travelling for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go There are moments—rarely—when you make a landmark, you realize that you are going with a woman, in some messy business. The time of a flash. After that the processing starts again, you begin to add up hours and days. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926. That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life.

When you begin to “tell”—narrate, put into form—*voilà*:

Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. I can't describe it; it's like the Nausea and yet it is just the opposite ... I see that it happens; that I am myself and that I am here; I am the one who splits the night; I am as happy as the hero of a novel ... I do not know whether

the whole world has suddenly shrunk or whether I am the one who unifies all sounds and shapes.⁶

Proust, too, played with the quicksilver substance spanning expanded realm of real life and the sudden, surprising quickening into heightened moments—a *quickening facilitated by form*. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* admits that the translation of reality into art requires a thrilling reduction and abstraction. He has, he confesses, reduced the whole environs of Combray to a few outlines, “like the decor one sees prescribed on the title page of an old play, for its performance in the provinces”. “As though,” he continues, “all of Combray had consisted of but two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o’clock” (I 33). Musil, aware of the way that life sometimes consists of “[d]ays ... tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition,” also experienced exceptional moments of intensified being—states he conceptualized as a state of consciousness he came to call “the Other Condition.” The narrator of *The Man without Qualities*, a book which is as concentrated and expansive as Proust’s, repeatedly wonders if it would be possible to live life like a character in a book, with “all of the fatty tissue” of uninspired quotidian experience removed, in only “exceptional states” of heightened consciousness.

Indeed, Musil’s novel becomes—once its narrator has left the intrigues of the Parallel Campaign and related social-cultural irony behind, almost entirely focused on the question of whether it might be possible to live life in “the other condition.” This state of heightened consciousness was akin to Sartre’s “Nausea,” Proust’s “exceptional moments,” and, of course, to Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being”. But as is the case with all “family resemblances,” as Wittgenstein would warn us, there are differences too. In response to a disapproving friend of the family, Musil defended the sibling incest in his novel by affirming that incest was just a form of metaphor. Siblings are like and

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unlike at the same time. Not only are these various species of exceptional consciousness metaphorically related, being similar and different among themselves, but they also are often directly impelled—explicitly for both Proust and Musil—by the epiphanic apprehension of metaphoric correspondences. The delicious and irritating differences between two or more things that are yet so maddeningly similar, the friction between expansiveness and leaving things out makes up a significant ingredient in the spell that conjures Musil’s special state.⁷

When faced, then, with telling the story of Musil’s own life, we cannot help but be conscious of the problems and pleasures inherent in narration. Where to begin, how to end? What to include, what to leave out? What is true? What is merely an interpretation or distortion? These literary problems are also the problems of a literary biographer, as Morton Hoi Jensen, biographer of Jens Peter Jacobsen, sensitively discusses in his essay, “The Fiction that Dare Not Speak its Name”. While one may strive to avoid committing the “biographical fallacy” of conflating the author’s work with his or her life, “All writers,” Jensen reminds us, “lead double lives: one on the page, one off. And no account of portrait of a writer’s life will resolve this fissure”.⁸ Reflecting on the perils and pleasures of biography, and the fine line between fact and fiction, Jensen notes that, “A biography, if it is to be more than just a collection of evidentiary material, must necessarily tell a story, and a story distinguishes itself by what it leaves out as much as by what it includes”.⁹ These are, as we have already noted, Musil’s own burning questions and one answers them only provisionally. Still, it may be best to attempt an entry—albeit doomed to fail—with that most difficult-to-describe vignette: the author thinking at his desk.

⁷ For more on this complex of metaphoric extratemporal moment in Proust and Musil, see my book, *The World as Metaphor in Robert Musil’s Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

⁸⁸ Hoi Jensen, Morton, “The Fiction that Dare not Speak its Name”. *Liberties*. Spring 2022, Volume 2, Number 3, 247.

⁹ *Ibid*, 251.

There are photographs of him sitting before one—a vast desk, to be sure, with enough space for reams of paper, towers of pages, towers of books, folders and boxes filled with loose leaves. We know that some were lost (one briefcase in a taxi cab). Though much of the *Nachlass* was kept safe during WWII in an abandoned Viennese apartment, it was then moved and stored elsewhere, and subsequently destroyed. Luckily, he and Martha had many important papers with them in Switzerland. Other papers still were secreted away, like the one folded-up page, carefully hidden in the resewn lining of Martha's coat (referring to an adultery, to the sexual secrets of a happy, but complex marriage). For a page can be folded up almost as tightly as the snaking membranes of a brain, taking up little space until unfolded, released. When read, the expansion exponentially unfurls, as each word is a portal to a much larger room, an estate, a city, a country, a cosmos—into the “Other Condition” of timeless-spaceless significance.

Still, he referred, with bitterness, to the last rooms where he and Martha lived in Geneva, Switzerland, on Chemin des Clochettes 1, as “Puppenzimmer,” dolls' rooms. We can easily imagine him as an overgrown Alice in Wonderland, with arms and legs ranging awkwardly out of the opened windows, trying, painfully, to write. Horribly humiliating for such a correct and upright man. Despite the difficulty, he might yet appreciate the artistic uses of such spatial incongruities. In *The Man without Qualities* he wrote of the toy horse Ulrich admired as a child, noting that the magic it emanated came from its distance from reality, a distance effected by its diminutive size and tawdry material. In a theater review of a Russian Cabaret—one of the only theatrical experiments he praised unconditionally in his many reviews—he is thinking, as well, of this horse, and hearkening to the powerful effect afforded by strange juxtapositions of near and far, real and unreal, small and large:

Remove, for example, the life-sized quality of a horse, its ability to move, and the undefinable essence of its realness, and it remains a small brown papier mâché pony, with a swan's neck,

tiny black hooves, gracious little leather straps; it stands behind the magic window of a pastry shop and it penetrates, along unreal passageways, into the soul of a child, shining with a glittering splendor that is never again attainable. Perhaps the strange magic of primitive sculptures and drawings, the enjoyment of sketches or extreme stylizations, the overwrought ornamentation of our fashions, yes, the whole essence of human art and artificiality, is based on nothing more than such internal amalgams of the under- and the over-real.

Now do the same thing with a cabaret song; let go entirely of the little bit of sense that it may have. And, instead of that, sing nothing for many minutes except, “Ach, that is the little hunter,” or “Occarina-Macaroni,” and you will arrive at the same borderland. On the far side of this border lies idiocy; on the nearer side, however, the little hunter prances —blond, merry, round, and as green as an illuminated billiard table—around three singing farm girls, who prod it in circles with a melody that shimmies from their hands and their hips; and right there on that border, exactly in the middle, you are sitting, and you are as happily sad as if you were sitting in water and wanted to make puppets out of it.¹⁰

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Transport, transubstantiation, from real to unreal, to under (sub-) and over (hyper-) real, through metaphor and imagination, arrived at through portals opening onto timelessness and vast spaces, landing in a sort of puddle, but glad to be there.

Other horses, too, aside from the papier mâché pony or “the little hunter,” all of them straddling the space between real and unreal, haunt Musil’s menagerie of childhood memories. In a marvelous essay called “The Discovery of Childhood,” published in 1926 in *Der Berliner Tageblatt*, Musil

¹⁰ Translation mine, from *Theater Symptoms* (Contra Mundum Press, 2022), p.

communicates some of the wonder which the retrieval of lost or faded memories held for him.¹¹ Lifting the curtains onto a rainy day — his own Proustian madeleine — provides the Open Sesame to some forgotten experiences, moments whose most characteristic quality is that they themselves were times when other more metaphorical curtains were lifted to reveal heightened apprehension. There was a game, he recalls, played on rainy days, with riders and horses and a drawn racecourse with all the obstacles; he would always place his bets:

[O]n the chestnut and on six. Firstly, because red was my favorite color and I was born on the sixth of November; secondly, because when I was a child, although my father always rode a brown horse, he spoke passionately about a sorrel he had when he was a boy — a chestnut that turned the bright color of pheasant plumage when it was ridden hard and sweat. That's why I always laid my bets on the chestnut and on six; but my true love was really the black, which I always placed in the fifth section, because 5 was my unlucky number. And this was the peculiarity of the horse game.

But, this essay informs us, the most significant beast that was real and not real was one that figured in a charming story wherein the young “Robbie” dares to ask his “Uncle” to give him one of his horses—and this cousin of his mother shocks him by saying Yes! That the bestowal of the gift was qualified by a proviso, which the boy did not understand at the time—that he would have to wait until the horse “bites the dust,” was in retrospect insignificant. What continued to matter was the intensity and complexity of the feeling of happiness upon believing he would get his wish ... and the subsequent difficulty, decades later, of accessing or describing it:

¹¹ In all of Musil's writing, both allegedly non-fictional or fictional, there is a mixture of fact and fancy, autobiography and embellishments. This mostly autobiographical essay is inaccurate in some details, but also contains much biographical fact.

But when I search for the word for how it felt, I sense that I will never find it, for this kind of happiness never came again in my life: One can only say, it was as if both of the curtains, which I spoke of earlier, were pulled back at once — the one opening onto reality and the other onto an internal self; an indescribable tangle of sleep and waking, a union between I and horse, that ate its way completely into my entrails. But these are merely weak words for a boundary that dissolved, one certainly no less significant than the one between madness and rectitude.¹²

Indeed, boundary states, such as the one referred to here between madness and rectitude, or those between precision and soul, mathematics and mysticism, between what can and cannot be grasped with Reason, between criminal and holy, male and female, meaninglessness and heightened significance, between science and art ... would be his haunting ground for the rest of his life and in all his work. He was writing his first book, *The Confusions of Young Törleß*, while cramming to pass the entry exam required for philosophy and psychology. By day, he worked as an apprentice for a steam engine manufacture, but having abandoned his military and engineering careers, he divided his free evenings between learning Latin and Greek, making up for lost time in *belles lettres*, and writing a book which has as one of its central themes the dichotomy between science and art, logic and emotions. The tension was his daily lived experience. Amid its harrowing narration of brutal schoolboy sadism and sexual and moral experimentation, the young Törleß comes to learn that everything and everyone has a “double face”—that there is no reassuringly clear border between moral upright behavior and transgressive criminality—and ultimately to accept that there is no way to ever fully reconcile the complexly fractured self to the world. Musil—who may also have learned the same lesson—passed

¹² “Die Entdeckung der Familie”.

his exams and continued his studies of philosophy and the psychology of perception, culminating in a doctoral dissertation on Ernst Mach, who famously affirmed that the self was nothing but a bundle of sensations. Then his presentiments were further confirmed, through his experience of the communal “ether swoon” of WWI and, four years later, its horrific repetition during the rise of Fascism and Collectivism. He developed his “Theory of Human Formlessness,” observing that one could metamorphose from good citizen into monster and back again quite effortlessly. Most thoroughly of all, he experimented with aesthetic and ethical complexity throughout his unfinished masterpiece, *The Man without Qualities*—wherein a lack of fixed qualities signals, not a hollowness, but an abundance of irreducible possibilities.

While fragmentation and dissolution are, of course, general hallmarks of Modernist vision, one might be forgiven a certain metaphoric sleight of hand, which, by leaving certain things out and focusing on the similarities of others, imagines that Musil had a particularly propensity to dissolution. From this distance, we call him an “Austrian” writer, but in fact—like Rilke and many other “Austrian” literati—he was a typically motley citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, which ruled uneasily until 1918 over peoples speaking German, Czech, Slovene, Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Polish, and Italian. Luft’s erudite cultural history centers the matrix of intense artistic and intellectual activity to the west of the River Leitha (Cisleithian), and, in mapping out what contributions were “Austrian” (as opposed to German or pan-European, or Hungarian—which he argues had a separate cultural development from Cisleithanian Austria), he delineates a particular resistance to “self-righteous ideologies”. “Much of Austrian intellectual life was,” Luft writes—including Moravian and Bohemian under the rubric of “Austrian,” “anti-ideological in ways that emphasized respect for the complexity of the world,” and further notes that this “anti-ideological vision was embodied most effectively in Musil—the sense of accepting a variety of ideologies,

languages, cultures, worldviews, and personalities”.¹³ Although it is well-known that Kafka and Rilke hailed from Bohemia, it is less usually acknowledged that most of the luminaries of what we now usually call “Austrian”—Freud, Mach, Karl Kraus, Brentano, Bolzano, and countless others—were born and developed in the German-speaking cultures of Moravia and Bohemia. Musil, himself, born in *Brno*, was only slightly Austrian by birth. Of four great grandparents, only one was strictly Austrian by birth; the others were either *Böhmisch* (Czech) or Moravian. In an interview in 1937, Musil referred to his “mixed blood, of that particular Slavic-German medley.”¹⁴ He grew up, thus, amid the ethnic tensions and richly differentiated languages and cultures of the Empire—a central subject of the first part of the great novel that is, however, left behind as the book circles out into more timeless, cosmic realms.

There were other lessons in multiplicity and relativity as well in Musil’s childhood: by the time he was 12 years old, his family had moved house 5 times (and, if one counts his residence at the first of two military schools, he lived in 6 different places in only twice as many years); perhaps more significant was his mysterious illness: he missed as much as 10 months of school between 1889 and 1892 (from the age of 9 to 12) due to a “brain and nerve” malady that may have been meningitis—an episode featuring hallucinations and altered consciousness states. Surely all of these experiences would be good training—before young Musil even read Nietzsche—for radical perspectival vision. His career trajectory, whether cause or effect of this over-abundance of talents or restlessness, like Ulrich’s in the novel, is a zig-zagging road from the military to engineering, to philosophy, to experimental psychology and physics, and ultimately to literature. While one must resist equating Musil with his literary alter-ego Ulrich, there is certainly a strong metaphoric relation between the author and this young man who is dubbed by his friend Walther “the man without qualities” because of his inability

¹³ Luft, 56.

¹⁴ “dem gemischt[en] Blut, jen[er] besonder[en slawisch-deutsch[en] Faerbung“ cf. Fn c, p. 1480, n. 64: Robert Breuer, „Gegen den Strom. Wir sprechen mit dem Dichter RM“ (1937)

to commit to any one career, person, or ideology. And yet, as others have quipped before, Robert Musil rather had rather too many qualities than none

Musil's fiction, his plays and his essays are, indeed, highly autobiographical. Although the extensive scholarship machine has worked hard to compare fictional events to biographical ones and fictional characters to their supposed models, the literary work cannot and should not be read as an *accurate* depiction of his life story—and I will endeavor, in this book, to be as clear as possible about what is life and what is art—even though Musil rarely was. His notebooks, diaries, and letters are themselves riddled with inventions, with fictional interventions, with romanticizations and outright distortions. Names of fictional characters are interchanged with their models in diary entries and titles of works-in-progress are written down alongside descriptions of actual events, as if to clearly say: this real-life experience will be useful in this or that artistic project. Experiences presumably undergone by Robert Musil himself are described as having happened to any number of Musil's fictional alter egos: Anders, Ulrich, Hugo, Grey Eyes, Monsieur le Vivisecteur (m.l.v), etc., or to other characters with more tenuous relations to their creator (i.e., a species of his childhood illness appears in the novel as undergone by Agathe, not Ulrich); and biographical researches occasionally reveal that what actually happened is quite different than even the diary accounts suggests. Sometimes Musil does not describe a particularly intense experience until long after it occurred, almost insuring that it will be inaccurate—or, if looked at more sympathetically—that it will have taken on a metaphoric valence. One particularly passionate episode is a love affair of 1901, ever-after romanticized as “the Valerie affair”—which turns up in the novel as “the affair with the Major's wife,” even though the model for this experience was not married.¹⁵ The experience becomes a cipher, a touchstone for a set of ideas and emotions related to the “other condition”. What was true and what invented remains, despite intense research, difficult

¹⁵ I myself fell for this conflation and confusion of biographical and fictional detail and made the mistake of writing inaccurately in the past that Valerie was a married woman, which, were it true, provides an explanation not present in the real-life story for Musil's flight from love.

to untangle. Did they or didn't they? While a fictional account says that "Anders" consummated his affair with Valerie, Karl Corino insists that a letter written by Musil, which uses the formal Sie form, is evidence that no serious intimacies occurred.¹⁶ Another, more disturbing instance of literary distortion is the use and abuse of Musil's relationship with Herma Dietz, his unmistakable model for the Novella heroine "Tonka." Later we will explore in detail how Musil, who most likely infected his lower-class mistress with syphilis— while she was probably pregnant with his own child— rewrote the story after her death so that the female character, not the male, was the unfaithful one and the bearer of the fatal protozoa.

While this can be seen as conscious obfuscation, it is only fair to understand it within the context of Musil's overall methodology of metaphoric apprehension. Notwithstanding his obsession with accuracy, whether something actually happened or not was hardly the central question. As he himself said, in an interview with Oscar Maurus Fontana, "the real explanations of the real occurrences do not interest me... The facts are always interchangeable anyway. What interests me is the spiritually typical; I mean to say: the ghostly sense of what happens". Further, referring to himself in the third person, he writes elsewhere:

There are writers who are obsessed with one theme. They feel: this one or none at all. It's like love at first sight. The relationship of R[obert] M[usil] to his themes is a hesitant one. He has many at once and keeps them after the hours of first love are over, or even if there never were any. He exchanges parts of them arbitrarily. Many half-developed themes wander and never surface in any book.

¹⁶ Corino....

The notebooks, thus, are not strictly repositories of autobiographical material, but rather ore for possible use; he is mining his own and others' lives for the detailed exempla of the "spiritually typical".¹⁷

An awareness of the exponentially expanding possibilities of the typical was not, alas, a formula for coming any more swiftly to conclusion or for gaining more time in which to explore or write. On the contrary. For, amid all the digressions and divagations, one grows old all too soon and one's bones ache, and even timeless states of alternate heightened consciousness may fail to fully console. Although time is not always experienced as linear, as we creep on towards death, we know that there will be a *telos*, a final ending, and though the world may continue, we, at least, will no longer be here to experience those timeless mystical moments that once compensated for the unmystical, persistently dull, forward march of linear time.

If one is a writer or any kind of artist—or, perhaps, an inventor, a scientist pursuing some impossibly far-off quest, or any other kind of utopian feat—one despairs of ever having enough Time in which to fill up the small Space of the page of mortal life one is granted. The quest is "utopian" because that something that one wants to create or discover *seems* to be *no-where*; at least it has not yet been found. Any new creation—the real embodiment of a mere idea—is just as unlikely as the instantiation of an ideal alternate reality. This is not a refutation or denial of reality, for the new thing will not be seen if it cannot bind itself to what is already real, if it does not find purchase in the physical and material nature of the world or the real human desires and dreams that thrash against the stony walls that seem to bind us until someone brave and persistent enough finds a new way through, around, or deeper in. The "new" something was always there, a part of the real, but had not been

¹⁷ Marie Louisa von Roth, in "Robert Musil in Spiegel seines Werkes: Versuch einer inneren Biographie" records many of the passages I refer to, adding his proviso about his notebooks: "'I' in this book means neither the author nor a person invented by him, but rather a mixture of both of them". Roth concludes: "The role of the writer, his personality, i.e., the fundamentals of his being, his way of thinking and his ethics may be crystalized from the work." In LW, W13.

adequately seen and described before. It had been waiting to be revealed and explained, from out of the complexity of all that there is.

It is important to realize that Musil's skepticism about our ability to come to a final version of our co-created picture of the Real was not a nihilistic denial of meaning(s), nor a despairing denial of truth(s). He was engaged in a serious experiment, impelled by a search for right conduct of life, which seemed to have something important to do with possibility and the spaces it opens up in what we mistakenly take to be a limited status quo. He was not escaping life, engagement, reality, but earnestly attempting to face it and to be an agent—a creative subject, to use Nietzsche's phrase—of its continual transformation. Unlike some of his pseudo-mystical contemporaries, who doubted the efficacy of words and preached silence and stupor—and even more unlike contemporary post-modern thinkers who deny the possibility of any meaning or shared communication whatsoever—he affirmatively generated a proliferation of words, more and more possibilities, to mock, by overfilling, the purportedly empty voids of Nihilism with his multiple meanings. Like Nietzsche, he knew that the artist's role is to create—even if something must be destroyed before beginning to build again; and that the world contained an infinite amount of material with which to build.

Still, in a sense, any new creation is an insult to the status quo, and to linearity. And it constitutes a rebellion against preconceived limitations of space. It stops time, expanding and elevating a moment into a shimmering, hovering pause. It expands space, by opening up a new portal, a new possibility, in what seemed, moments before, fully complete, inviolable, solid. If, moreover, one, like Musil (writer, physicist, engineer, psychologist of perception, philosopher, mathematician, mystic, mortal), resists completion to an almost pathological degree, this suspension of time is spun out in Arabian Nights fashion, to an almost impossible extent, over vast reams and rolls of paper, over decades of space.

As a scientist, he was committed to the experimental method and fascinated by the workings of probability and possibility. This commitment manifested itself in a writing practice obsessed by alternate and non-linear versions, each with different admixtures and outcomes. What if this character instead of that character were in this or that situation? What if we added some more of this chemical? Or of this? Like an exponentially self-generating kaleidoscopic version of Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (Elective Affinities), the scientist Musil poured elements into alembics and observed the explosions and the failures. He resisted coming to conclusion, though he would write down and even reluctantly publish some approximations, some attempts at suggestions of possible answers to his ethical and aesthetic question: how should one live?

Thinking is non-linear, but one thinks, rightly or wrongly, of writing as if it were moving in one direction, from beginning to end; on the page, from left to right and top to bottom; in the book from front to back. Nietzsche, always the contrarian, wrote that good writing was *rücksichtig* and *vorsichtig*, a pun on two German words that mean *careful*, but also mean *backwards-* and *forwards-looking*, always aware of how whatever is being written relates to what came before and what will come after. When looked at this way, “before” and “after” are no longer such stern mistresses of time and space. For the manuscript starts to become circular, or, rather, like a reverberating star—whose center illuminates its edges just as its edges tell us about its center. Or, again, like a sky filled with many reverberating stars—all possible spaces circling in and out of our normalized experience of time.

His commitment to the artistic and philosophical practice of the “motivated” moment demanded that all actions (and the writing of a sentence is surely a kind of action) be fiercely compelled, that they be motivated by a burning need, a heightened flaming, vivid intensity. This sort of artistic practice may be pursued practicably if, like Nietzsche, one is willing to publish the fragments of the expanding and retracting star in pieces, in books of aphorisms even, with each fragment existing as a new comet penetrating and excavating the heavens, without the luxury of a concern for the niceties

of perfection or about the inconsistency of contradictions and complexity that necessarily obtain over the course of a life's work. Nietzsche wrote by flashes of intermittent lightning, in the rare moments when he was well enough to use his tormented eyes and when his head did not ache too much to think (or too much *from* thinking). His relationship with time and space and the filling up of the area of the page with the rush of non-linear words was necessarily different from Musil's—for Musil was a man with what seemed at the time to be plenty of time, if only he had not been a perfectionist or a writer committed to the architecture of possibility. As it turned out, he miscalculated (though he surely could not have done differently, had he known), since he died very young, at 62, in the midst of a revision to a beautiful passage from "Breaths of a Summer's Day," a passage about timelessness and "the other condition," about a garden, which shimmers and seems to magically hold the moment—that moment which Faust is forbidden to ask to linger awhile, no matter how beautiful—a passage that he had first written years before. He was returning to the center of the star as if no time had passed at all.

Had he lived another ten or twenty years, I do not believe his task ever could have been completed, not even if he were immortal; his great work was inherently inconclusive; it contained its infinity within its mortality. He could not and would not come to closure.

He also, probably, could not have felt at home anywhere in the world, even if he had not been forced, first by poverty, then by the war and even worse poverty, to move about and then go into exile with his Jewish wife. He wrote that the Jew and "the Intellectual" (*Geist* is the word he used, which also means Spirit or Mind) were extraterritorial. Only as an outsider could he see and comment upon what he saw. Only as outsider could he dare to open up space and time, invent a new language and describe new vistas within the given, see what had always been there, but never had been revealed before.

In an early literary fragment, Musil imagines asking those he dubs the "2 X 2 = 4 people" to tell him what a street is. Their answer, which he translates to mean, "Something straight, day-bright,

serves as something to move forward on,” does not satisfy him in the least. For a street, he muses, “can just as easily be many-branching, mysterious, and beset with riddles, with ditches and underground passageways, hidden dungeons and buried churches.”ⁱⁱ As a scientist of possible space and time, a physicist in the early days of relativity science, as an extraterritorial outsider, he knows that reality itself is stranger and more complex than any linear or habitual description could fathom.

Musil’s commitment to experiment was grounded in an evaluation of all things and events based upon a concept he called “the Utopia of the Next Step”: nothing, no written draft, no criminal or allegedly good act could be judged in the moment of its becoming, but only by the *next step* that it engendered. (Shades of Nietzsche’s judgment of Bizet, who made him, he said, “fruitful”; and who thus was deemed good). Musil had read Nicolas of Cusa and was familiar with the idea that every point is part of a line—but that a line must not be thought of as straight, but as something that stretched round until it became a circle. Thus, the next step was not conceived of as a marching forward, but as a returning back, now enriched and complexified, to the beginning, to a reverberating central presence in the “other condition” of infinite space and time.

And the next step after that might be a firm footfall on the very solid sidewalks of a metropolitan city, onto the street as seen by the young Musil—in fact, without any mystical over-reaching or descent into fantasy, truly “many-branching, mysterious,” a street replete with portals: bridges and pathways and tunnels, houses and apartment buildings, hallways and basements and attics and drawing rooms, and especially studies, with large writing desks piled high with pages, filling up with words; pages shuffled and reshuffled, resisting their bindings and exploding their margins again and again, *ad infinitum*, as long, anyway, as people still care to read and think and consider the still unfathomed mysteries of time and space, the varied meanings of our lives. As long as people continue to endeavor to approach, along the many-branched byways, approximate and open-ended answers to the question of how to live, and of what agency we might have in discovering and describing to others

that which always hides in plain sight—waiting to be seen and revealed—amid the non-linear space that somehow holds within its limits the infinity of a thinking mind.

ⁱ Translation mine, from *Theater Symptoms: Robert Musil's Plays and Writings on Theater* (New York, London, Melbourne: Contra Mundum Press, 2020).

ⁱⁱ "From Out of the Stylized Century (The Street)" in *Thought Flights*, translated by myself (New York, London, Melbourne: Contra Mundum Press, 2009).