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978-0-521-11060-0 - Robert Musil's 'The Man Without Qualities': A Critical Study

Philip Payne

Excerpt

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Part I
ASPECTS OF MUSIL'S LIFE
AND WORKS

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I

IMPRESSIONS OF ROBERT MUSIL
SEEN FROM WITHIN

In 1939 Musil's head was modelled in clay by the sculptor, Fritz Wotruba. Wotruba was thus in a unique position to study him, at least from without. These are his impressions: '[He was] a handsome man with a powerful and well-proportioned body [...]. His manner was that of an Austrian gentleman of the old school, his skull and build were typically Slavic, his fine head, set on a thick neck, had an air of fatigue.'¹ Others were less struck by physical attributes – for them the charm of old Austria, the fastidiousness of the man in matters of dress and hygiene, were only superficial. What mattered was more the special psychic signature. Hans Mayer wrote: 'In discussion, as in every movement he made, Musil conveyed a sense of strain. Every verbal exchange with him was forced.'² A close friend, the psychologist Johannes von Allesch, records the 'enormous [...] intensity which Musil expended in attempts to grasp both things and events firmly in his mind'.³ Wolfdietrich Rasch, too, registers 'the vibrations of a highly responsive sensibility [...], sceptical, tensed [...] to register answers to passionate questions, ceaselessly on the alert'.⁴ Rasch takes us from objective to subjective mode, from Musil seen from without to Musil seen from within. The evidence of Musil's inner life is to be found in his *Tagebücher*.

Musil's diaries are records of the 'subject' in the sense in which Schopenhauer talks about the world as being 'object-for-the-subject', in other words a place which only exists in so far as a consciousness is there to observe it.⁵ Musil is extraordinary in his self-awareness, his awareness of himself as subject. This subject has many aspects: it is, by turn, husband, lover, political observer, intellectual, creative writer, scientist, or simply a consciousness that registers what it is like to be alive. Below, we shall examine a few sketches from Musil's continuing self-portraiture in his *Tagebücher*. Although we can identify recurrent concerns and attitudes, the overriding impression we receive of Musil's self-perceptions is

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of bewilderment and disorientation. The following entry is characteristic of his self-questioning: 'In the morning a spontaneous thought: it really belongs to the 40th or 50th, but not to the 60th year of a life: who and what manner of man are you? What are your principles? How are you proposing to round things off?' (TbI, 946). Thus, only a short while before his death, Musil's vision of himself remains unclear. It would therefore be inappropriate, in what follows, to offer much more than impressions.

It is 30 March 1930. Musil is working desperately hard on *The Man without Qualities*. He has to serve two masters: his own obsession with getting the work right so that it will be intellectually watertight and formally perfect, and his publisher whose patience has been stretched almost to breaking point by Musil's repeated failures to meet deadlines. To add to this Musil's health is not good. He decides to take bromide and, with that constant fascination for himself as the human being whom he knows best, then sets down in writing what effect this has on him: 'a [...] certain [...] excitement [...] A convulsion in the head like blood suddenly being drained away. Expected an unpleasant final moment as with an anaesthetic' (TbI, 711) – as if it were not enough to feel these things, to know this anxiety, Musil anticipates them and makes a record of them, holding on to them for posterity, for the sake of understanding. (This sense of the intellect as a fascinated but helpless onlooker at the spectacle of life is present in much of Musil's work.) The next morning on waking, the watching mind makes a discovery about this curious body with which it is fused: it experiences 'an uncharacteristic laziness, a reluctance to get up' (TbI, 712). 'Aha!', says Musil, 'so that is what it feels like to wake from a good night's sleep, to feel relaxed.' The sense of feeling different from usual provides an awareness of a tension so constant that it is imperceptible, it becomes the measure of how Musil usually feels: 'because I feel so different (I recognise) that I am normally in a state of nervous tension' (TbI, 712). Musil looks in the mirror of the mind and – meets Musil.

Musil often observes himself observing. Looking further back we find an entry in his diary from 1913, the time when Musil was precisely the age of the hero of *The Man without Qualities*; he has been married for just two years: 'Towards the end of November. I have gone to bed early, I feel I have caught a slight cold, indeed I'm perhaps running a temperature. The electric light is switched on; I

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see the ceiling or the curtain over the door of the balcony. You began to get undressed after I had already finished doing so; I am waiting. I simply listen to you. Incomprehensible walking to and fro' (TbI, 286). We begin with a succinct record of actions and sense impressions; then comes the evidence of the mental effort involved with the words: '*incomprehensible* walking to and fro' (TbI, 286) (my emphasis). From here on, the sense of the mind straining to understand merges with the descriptive detail: Musil's perceptive apparatus is wide awake, registering sensory data, but he also takes account of the activity of the mind as it shapes impressions into images of specific actions: 'You come to put something on your bed; what can it be[?] You open the cupboard, put something in or take something out, I hear it shut again. You put hard objects on the table, others on the marble top of the chest of drawers. You are constantly in motion. Then I hear the familiar sounds of hair being let down and brushed' (TbI, 286).

On one level, the diary here is recording the tension which is generated as a man waits for a woman to undress and get into bed; on another we have a quite technical account of the interplay of perceptual apparatus and sensory data, namely Musil diverting his irritation into an *ad hoc* attempt to grasp how the psyche tries to come to terms with the uninterrupted onslaught of experience. This is mind trying to master matter:

Water rushing into the wash-basin. Before that, clothes being slipped off; now more of them; it is incomprehensible to me how many clothes you are taking off. The shoes. Then your stockings move to and fro constantly just as the shoes did before. You pour water into glasses, three, four times, one after the other. In my visualisation I have long exhausted every conceivable possibility, whereas you, in reality, clearly still have things to do. I hear you putting on your nightdress. But still you are far from finished.

(TbI, 286)

Musil never, to my knowledge, used these lines in any literary work. They seem to have been just a kind of exercise, a training of the mental faculties – what else would have made him take the trouble to record all these thoughts, to which he adds, as a final flourish, the 'mark' of himself as observer?

Again a hundred small actions. I know you are hurrying; so clearly all this is necessary. I understand: we observe the behaviour of dumb animals and are astonished how, in beings which are not supposed to have a mind, action succeeds action from morning till night. It is precisely the same now. You have no awareness of the countless movements your hands perform.

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You have no awareness of all the things which seem necessary to you and which yet are quite insignificant. But they emerge in sharp relief on the profile of your life. *I, as I wait, happen to feel it* (TbI, 286–7) (my emphasis).

The impressions set down here confirm both the 'vibrating sensibility' which Rasch recognised – the unceasing watchfulness which finds relaxation difficult even on the threshold of sleep – and the inveterate note-taking, the obsessive writing-up of existential data. (Incidentally, Musil disliked being observed himself; in his favourite coffee-house in Vienna he would remain standing until a table became available from which he could watch others, but which gave others no opportunity to watch him undetected!)⁶

Observation was the precondition for his literary production; the diaries tell us even more about Musil's work than about his life. Frisé's superb edition gives us overwhelming evidence of the way in which the roots of Musil's works reach right back into his life, his reading and his times.⁷ We know that characters from his works are based on real people: the successive heroes of the various novel drafts which led to *The Man without Qualities* – Achilles, or Anders, or Ulrich – were based on Musil himself; Walter, the hero's friend, on Musil's friend, Gustav Donath; Clarisse, Walter's wife, on Gustav's wife, Alice Donath; Agathe on Martha Musil. But this edition of the *Tagebücher* also demonstrates how Musil captured the spirit of each character in the novel by going back from the moment when he was working on the relevant section of the text to the source material he had noted down in one of his notebooks when his impressions of Alice, or Gustav, or whoever, were still fresh in his mind (which might be ten, twenty or even thirty or more years in the past). The evidence of this recapitulation of experience is to be found in the many later notes which Musil made in the margin of his diaries.⁸ It is not only within the circle of his friends and acquaintances that this is so – it works, too, for other real people around whom Musil created some of his characters. Frisé's edition provides details of this process, reaching in many cases beyond his notes through to the appendix where material from other sources among Musil's papers is reproduced. Thus we are able to reconstruct something of the creative process from its source in Musil's day-to-day experience, through the slow transformations in the author's imagination to the final formulation in a literary work. We watch, for example, the real Prinz Alois von und zu Liechtenstein, one of the co-founders of the Austrian 'Christlich-Soziale Partei', gradually changing into the only-a-couple-of-

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degrees-less-than-real Graf Leinsdorf;⁹ we follow Ellen Key's ideas from their origin in her essay, 'Die Entfaltung der Seele durch Lebenskunst' ('The Unfolding of the Soul through the Art of Living')¹⁰ to the point where they issue sweetly from the charming mouth of Diotima, Ulrich's cousin in *The Man without Qualities*;¹¹ and we wonder what Martha Musil must have made of her idealised literary self, Agathe, when she breaks with her precept-spouting educationalist husband, Georg Kerschensteiner (who was renamed 'Gottlieb Hagauer' in the novel), only to become emotionally embroiled with another pedagogue, Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (dubbed August Lindner in *The Man without Qualities*).¹² Frisé identifies the source of countless excerpts from articles and books from the field of science, or psychology, or education, or music, or philosophy, or religion, and shows where an idea taken from one of these sources has found its way into Musil's published *œuvre*. The authenticity of tone of *The Man without Qualities* derived in part from the unique skill with which Musil worked material which he had borrowed from a living author into his account of the words or thoughts of a fictional character.¹³ *The Man without Qualities* is, among many other things, an anthology of some aspects of contemporary¹⁴ intellectual history. But, even so, the reader does not ever quite become lost in the reconstruction of another's ideas because he or she remains conscious of the critical awareness of the author as a hyper-sensitive, insatiably curious and sceptical observer.

Musil would have published far more if he had not spent so much time writing and rewriting in preparation for publication. The matching of the real to the fictional is an extraordinarily time-consuming process in Musil's hands, involving personal psychological experimentation: Musil lived for a considerable period with the ideas of each intellectual he portrayed, getting the feel of what it was like to think this way. Seen from this inner perspective, *The Man without Qualities* has the quality of a vast research project moving almost imperceptibly forward through innumerable stages. It involves not only acts of creative imagination but also slow and sometimes tedious sifting through, and reshaping of, the accumulated manuscript pages in which authentic existential data – the stuff of Musil's experiences – are recorded.

Why did Musil write this way? I think that the reason was that, for the material to be embodied in his literary work, Musil laid down standards of 'quality control' which were unusually stringent. The satirist, Franz Blei, caught this sense of striving for perfection

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when he greeted Musil one day with the words 'And how many pages did this gentleman strike out last night?'¹⁵ As far as possible Musil chose material which he had experienced himself; where that was not possible he worked with material until he felt he had taken possession of it psychically whether it was an Austrian aristocrat making a speech, a Viennese lady enthusing about the 'Soul', or a murderer about to be hanged.¹⁶ To meet Musil's requirements the finished text, in position in a narrative, had to keep faith with that original lived or re-lived experience and so bring the reader into the closest possible contact with the world from which it was originally taken. But this was only the first requirement, the second was to make the reader reflect intensely on that world.¹⁷

Why then did Musil become a writer of fiction at all? Was he not rather cut out to be a philosopher? The diaries help to explain this choice of career. In his late twenties Musil was asking himself precisely the same question. In 1905 he 'interviewed' himself in an attempt to sort out his ideas:

Let us have a short talk with ourself, Herr Musil. So you know days when you have no sympathy with artists?

Yes.

And also days when you go out of your way to avoid philosophers?

Indeed. There are times when the former are too lacking in philosophical sophistication, and there are times when the latter are too lacking in humanity.

What about today?

Today I'm on the side of the artists. I felt irritated at the Institute and, by way of contrast, spent the evening next to a table where artists sat, delighting me with their harmless merriment. (Tb1, 149)

But, of course, Musil cannot leave it at that; the two sides have to be analysed precisely. 'Artist-Musil' rests his case on the way in which he is able to situate a particular idea in a living human context, showing its effect on human relations; this, he suggests, is beyond the powers of the philosopher. 'Philosopher-Musil' counters quickly: 'Certainly; but the creative author has no grasp of ideas. He cannot imbue an idea with the fine flavour which the philosopher's palate demands' (Tb1, 150). In 1908, when he writes to a professor at Graz turning down the academic post he has been offered there, the conflict seems unresolved even though an important decision has been taken; he is conscious of the honour attached to such an invitation, he writes, 'but my love for creative literature is no less strong than that for academic research and, because of it,

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a decision which may seem straightforward became one of existential significance for me' (Tbi, 893).¹⁸

So the decision is taken; Musil becomes a creative writer. But he has a serious 'handicap' – an unusually critical and probing mind. He wants not only to describe the things he studies, but, as we have seen, to comprehend them, and he obliges the reader to follow the path of reflection which he has taken. There is a touch of envy mixed with scorn when he says of Balzac: 'his types are only meaningful because he believes in the meaningfulness of the atmosphere in which they live' (Tbi, 342). The message hidden in this remark about Balzac is that Musil is not content to leave the task of trying to make sense of things to other men; he spends his waking life trying to find some sense. Creative writers are often satisfied when they can say of a passage: 'Yes, that is precisely the experience I wished to convey, I have captured it exactly!' Musil is not content with that; he is consumed with Faust's desire to know more than common men – to reach a pitch of self-knowledge and knowledge about others that will help to transform civilisation.

In 1913, by now committed to creative writing but still fascinated by 'Wissenschaft', Musil meets a professor of anthropology in Rome: '[The Professor] works about 14 hours a day [...] Has published a great deal. Looks like a smart young Roman coachman, but has a very finely-worked forehead which is at once beautiful and ugly' (Tbi, 277). Then comes the Musilian sting: 'Psychically he seems like a seventeen-year-old. His scientific work has not the slightest effect on the way he lives' (Tbi, 277). This, for Musil, is a most serious charge, for he, as 'Wissenschaftler' and writer, wants to influence the way that we live in this century. The Italian anthropologist, this expert on mankind, is 'as naive as a blithe monk' (Tbi, 277) – he knows next to nothing about what it is to be alive. Musil, by contrast, subsumes everything – his creative energy, his scientific approach, his wide knowledge – to a critical, as well as creative, study of life today. This is his individual contribution to the collective enterprise of all those of like mind, who want society to be internally coherent and consistent. His contribution will take on many different forms: the attempts to overturn convention in *Die Schwärmer* (*The Enthusiasts*), for example, or the probing of aspects of mystical experience in *Drei Frauen* (*Three Women*), or the sometimes gentle, sometimes virulent satire, in *The Man without Qualities*, directed against social inertia. Musil's understanding of his function as creative author can be illustrated by his account of the role of the hero of *The Man without Qualities*

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in an interview in 1926: '[I introduce] a young man [...] who has been schooled in the best of contemporary knowledge, in mathematics, physics, technology. [...] He [...] realises to his astonishment that reality is at least one hundred years behind what is happening in the realm of thought' (GWII, 940). Implicit in this statement is Musil's wish to change the world, to bring it up to date.

In an immediate historical context, however, Musil's desire for objectivity, coupled with the mood of intense reflection in his writing, may appear as culpable inactivity. On a visit to Berlin he watched the effects of the Nazi 'Machtergreifung' on those around him, among them his landlady:

March 1933. Three days ago the Reichstag burned. Yesterday the emergency regulations to exterminate the Communist and Socialist Parties appeared. The new men are throwing their weight about. In the circles with which I came in contact, there was first a general feeling of outrage, an instinctive response to this blow in the face for truth, for freedom and the like. It is the reaction of the liberal education which these people have grown up with. Yesterday, after Goering has expounded the reasons for these measures in a calm, friendly, masculine voice, Frau Witte is already visibly wavering. 'If it's true, what the Communist Party was preparing, then it's really bad!' The hypothetical element in this statement is already shrinking. (TbI, 722)

Here too, Musil gives the impression of not being directly involved in what is happening; it is as if he were not a member of contemporary society at all, but outside, looking in. At a time when other authors were actively resisting Nazism he seems to adopt the attitude of a later historian who, in a great leap of creative imagination, has projected himself into the past and is now looking about him, in impotent astonishment, at what the Nazis are doing in 1933:

Freedom of the press, of expression of any kind, freedom of conscience, respect for the individual, [...] etc., all the basic liberal rights are now set aside without even one single person getting extremely annoyed, indeed by and large without people being particularly bothered at all. They all simply let it pass over them like a fierce storm. The average individual does not yet feel affected. It would be possible to be most deeply disappointed by this, but it would be more correct to draw the conclusion that all the things which have been done away with here do not much concern them any longer. This was indeed the case. Has the individual human being made any use, for example, of his freedom of conscience? (TbI, 723)¹⁹

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When Musil wrote this, he was only a visitor to Germany, but the sense of non-participation is nevertheless disturbing. He was involved whether he liked it or not, and, five years later, was to have his books banned in Austria as well as Germany by these 'new men'. With hindsight we can recognise here a form of 'inner emigration' and, though Musil seems to have put himself in personal danger by protesting about the actions of the Nazis in Vienna in 1938,²⁰ he did not display the political courage in the fight against Fascism of, for example, Thomas Mann or Bert Brecht. Musil may have been wrong in this, but he knew precisely where he stood, he had thought out his position carefully and was ready to defend it: he insisted that the creative author had an obligation to his work to keep aloof from practical politics.²¹ Creative writing left no room for any other commitment, no time or energy should be spared for other things, but the works which grew from this private commitment, once made public, would alter readers' perceptions of the world and thus shape the future. Politically-committed colleagues dismissed this attitude as naive; the journalist, Egon Erwin Kisch, a Communist, having listened to Musil's defence of his views at a writers' conference in Paris in 1935, called him an 'asozialer Problematiker' ('asocial poser of problems').²² But Musil was firmly convinced that an author who became involved in politics was compromising his work. He felt that Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) would have benefited from a longer period of gestation and greater personal commitment from its creator. As it stood it was neither well-researched nor properly finished but merely 'in its "intellectual" sections [. . .] like a shark's maw' (Briefe 1, 504)!

Musil's attitude towards the external world explains his isolation. Michael Hamburger argues that this was typical of many figures in German literature in the first decades of this century: 'To an extent almost inconceivable in any other age, each considerable writer seemed then, and still seems, to move within his own orbit, a law unto himself. Whether large or small, his readership did not constitute a public, far less the public.'²³ With Musil this sense of isolation is accentuated by his own natural predisposition and by the unusual range of his interests, which spread so much wider than those of his fellow-writers that their concerns often seemed to him to be shallow and parochial. He did have a small circle of literary friends and acquaintances in Vienna (including Franz Blei, Alfred Polgar, Franz Theodor Csokor and Oskar Maurus Fontana) whom