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

Philip Payne

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## Robert Musil's 'The Man without Qualities'

Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* is perhaps the most important novel in German written this century – certainly it is among the most brilliant, puzzling and profound. This, the first comprehensive study of the work to appear in English, guides the reader towards Musil's central concerns.

It examines how Musil laboured through draft after draft to produce material that would pass his own strict literary 'quality control', and traces major themes through different layers of narrative with the aid of close textual analysis. It details how Musil subjects leading figures of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna to intense ironic scrutiny, and how, by drawing on his extensive knowledge of philosophy, psychology, politics, sociology and science, he works into his novel essayistic statements which record the state of contemporary European civilisation. It follows through an extraordinary literary experiment in which Musil immerses Ulrich, his hero, in the inner experiences of a murderer, and identifies Ulrich's determination, despite many entanglements (one with a flirtatious nymphomaniac, another with a frenzied female follower of Nietzsche, another with a campaign to assert the cultural supremacy of moribund Imperial Austria over upstart Prussia), to fulfil his primary task, namely to find the vital link between thinking and doing, and so discover the right way to live. Through a disturbing, and deeply serious, liaison with his own sister, Ulrich is shown to struggle through to the brink of self-discovery and enlightenment.

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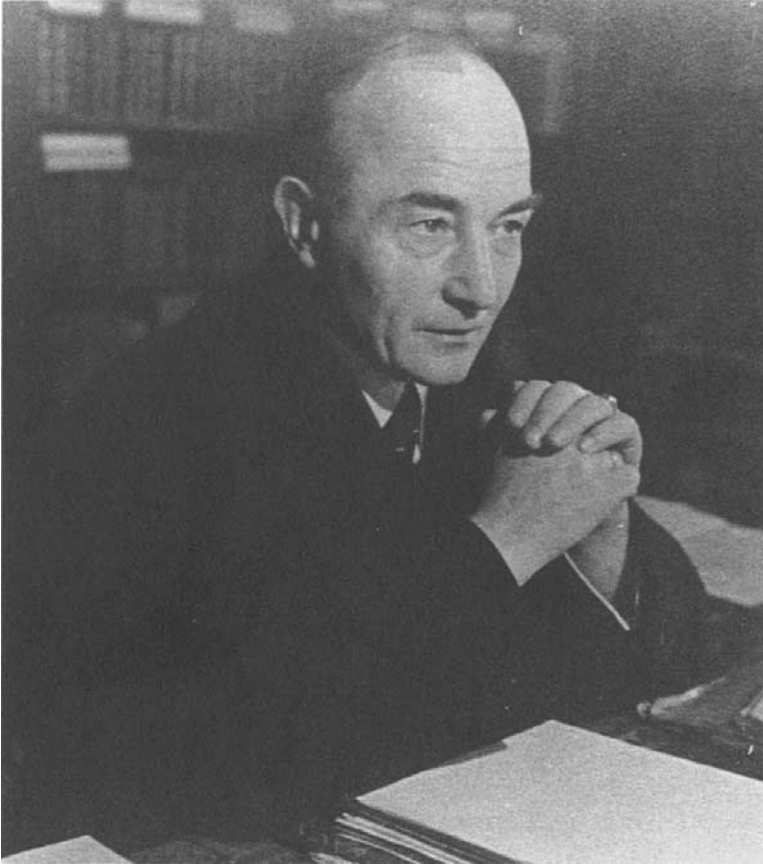
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Robert Musil in his study (Rasumofskygasse 20,  
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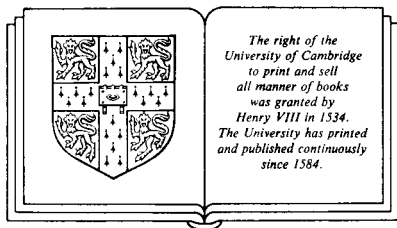
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# Robert Musil's 'The Man without Qualities'

*A Critical Study*

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To Anne

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## PREFACE

Robert Musil's reputation has grown steadily since his death in 1942; if experts were asked to list the major figures in German literature since the turn of the century, there is little doubt that they would rank Musil with Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Bert Brecht and Rainer Maria Rilke as being one of the most important. His work is a central contribution to twentieth-century Austrian and German culture and is frequently quoted by historians who value the irony and succinctness of his formulations and the accuracy and depth of his insights. In view of Musil's importance within the context of European literature, it is not necessary to apologise for the present book which is concerned primarily with the interpretation of Musil's incomplete masterpiece, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*). However, I am conscious, of course, that this is not the only study of Musil's work written particularly with English-speaking readers in mind. Anglo-Saxon scholarship can be proud of the collective contribution of Burton Pike, Frederick Peters, David Luft and Hannah Hickmann to our understanding of Musil's literary work, for they were all inspired, not only with enthusiasm for Musil but with a desire to be intermediaries between the reader, whether expert or not, and the given text. This study is, however, the only one published in English which offers a general introduction to *The Man without Qualities*.

Not only is the contribution of Musil to German literature itself worthy of continuing re-evaluation, but the huge growth in critical work on Musil means that our knowledge of the author requires constant up-dating. A single example will illustrate this. Musil's literary portraits are almost invariably drawn from life. Of all the major figures in his literary works, only one seemed to be entirely of Musil's making: Moosbrugger, the murderer in *The Man without Qualities*. Here, it appeared, Musil had allowed his imagination to take flight and to produce a magnificent monster. Karl Corino



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demolished this illusion in a recent paper in which he argued conclusively that Musil had based the Moosbrugger-theme on a murder which had preoccupied the newspaper-reading public in Austria before World War I – indeed the post mortem on the victim in *The Man without Qualities* is taken almost verbatim from a paragraph in one of these newspaper reports!

As far as the reception of Musil is concerned, the most important events of recent years have been Adolf Frisé's editions of Musil's *Tagebücher (Diaries)* (1976), *Gesammelte Werke (Collected Works)* (1978) and *Briefe (Correspondence)* (1981). Just as the original Frisé 'readers' edition' of *The Man without Qualities* ushered in the post-war era of interest in Musil, so it is already clear that these later contributions mark not only a new phase in Musil scholarship but also, and more significantly, a deepening appreciation of Musil among the general public. The effect of these editions is only now starting to be seen in research publications.

It is quite impossible to record fully my debt to Musil scholarship – though some indication of this will be found in my text and notes – but it would be equally wrong not to thank those to whom I owe so much, in particular Adolf Frisé who not only furnished the textual basis for Musil-scholars to work with – an astonishing achievement, combining indomitable energy with painstaking accuracy – but who has provided me personally with invaluable advice about Musil's life and work, with support in my research, and generous hospitality; I should also like to mention Professor Marie-Louise Roth and her colleagues, Frau Militzer, Frau Daigger and Frau Chevalier, who have made the *Robert-Musil-Arbeitsstelle* in Saarbrücken not only an indispensable store of research material but a delightful place to work in. Martin Swales first suggested this book and then followed it up with advice, criticism and encouragement; Graham Bartram, a colleague at Lancaster University, has laboured patiently and precisely through draft after draft of my work, helping me to reshape much of what I originally said; Eric Harber provided considerable intellectual stimulation and explained how some of the problems which Musil faced are similar to those of his contemporaries in English literature; Iain White of Cambridge University Press has guided me with patience, skill and good humour through the final stages of preparing the manuscript; my oldest and deepest debt is to Peter Stern, who supervised my post-graduate studies on Musil and who has continued to keep a critical eye on the progress of my work since.

I am most grateful to the Canada Council for a scholarship to

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pursue my work in Europe, to the Austrian Cultural Institute for a grant for a summer's study in Vienna, to the University of Toronto for providing study leave for my research and to the University of Lancaster for a research grant to help me complete this book. I also wish to extend my thanks to the editors of *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, *Literatur und Kritik*, *Musil-Forum*, *New German Studies*, *Sprachkunst* and *wirkendes wort* for permission to make use of articles of mine which first appeared in their journals, and to the Director of the Germanic Institute in London for allowing me to include part of my paper from *Musil in Focus*, edited by Lothar Huber and John White.

I would like here to thank Bill Pobjoy whose teaching provided a stimulus whose force has not diminished with the passage of time, to express my gratitude to Chris Campos for his undergraduate supervisions and to Wolf and Erika Meyer-Erlach for their friendship and support during the earlier stages of my work on Musil, and to remember Stan Wilkinson who passed on his deep involvement in literature and life to so many of his pupils.

My family has learned to live with this obsession with Musil's work: my wife did not know me at the time when I contracted it; Emma, Tom and, more lately, Harry have grown up with Musil, but perhaps Jack will be less seriously affected since his birth has coincided almost precisely with the completion of this book.

Lancaster, June 1987

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In most cases, quotations from Musil's works are given in my English translation. Musil's style, word-play, antitheses, fluent transition from one subject or idea to another, and subtle matching of literary and scientific terminology present a formidable challenge to the translator. I have tried to be faithful to the original, even though this often results in English which sounds rather stilted. Where a word in Musil's text implies a range of meaning for which there is no adequate synonym in English, I have sometimes added the original German word in brackets. All quotations from German originals other than Musil's works are given only in my translation, with the exception of references to titles of books and articles in German.

In the text below, page references given in brackets after quotations from Musil's works are to the following German editions:

*Gesammelte Werke (Collected Works)*, edited by Adolf Frisé, 2 vols (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1978)

*Tagebücher (Diaries)*, edited by Adolf Frisé, 2 vols (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1976)

*Briefe (Correspondence)*, edited by Adolf Frisé, 2 vols (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981)

Quotations followed by a simple page reference are to *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man without Qualities)* which is Volume I of *Gesammelte Werke*. (In the endnotes this volume is identified by the abbreviation 'MoE'.) Otherwise, page references are preceded by one of the following abbreviations or titles: 'GWII' for *Gesammelte Werke II*, 'TbI' or 'TbII' for '*Tagebücher I*' or 'II', and 'Briefe I' or 'Briefe II'.