

Robert Musil: Literature as Experience

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Robert Musil was a trained scientist with a formidable intellect, an expert in behavioral psychology, mathematics, and engineering who was also widely and deeply read in philosophy.¹ Science and philosophy were the quarters from which, with Nietzschean fervor and intent, he approached his mission as a writer. He was impelled by the desire to create through imaginative writing, by experimental means, a new morality that would reflect the new world brought about by the discoveries of the physical and human sciences, a morality that would replace the tattered set of outmoded ethics whose hollowness Nietzsche and the industrial, scientific, and technological revolutions of the nineteenth century had so pitilessly exposed. He unremittingly worked toward the goal of achieving in his writing a new synthesis of spiritual and moral values with the utmost scientific precision.

One major strand of Musil's enterprise was his attitude toward experience and language as it developed out of his early training in the discipline of behavioral psychology and philosophy associated with William James, Husserl, and Mach, thinkers who were attempting to synthesize empirical scientific progress and cultural values. This theme is particularly interesting in light of our century's enduring obsession with language and its role in constituting or mediating or inhibiting our experience of the world.

Too often in discussing the complex web of ideas behind a writer's work we forage in the work for the ideas, without pausing to think that the processes of fiction are radically different from those of intellectual discourse, and that the two cannot be equated. What makes Musil so interesting is that he had the scientific training and ability to engage thoroughly in intellectual discourse, but spent his life trying to reinvent this discourse in prose fiction, creating a new kind of literature in the process.

In this century philosophy and literary criticism and theory have followed two general orientations. One gives priority to language as mediating our knowledge of the world, the other subordinates language to sensory and perceptual experience, which language serves to mediate. The first view holds that language precedes experience “logically, ontologically, and genetically, and modifies and distorts experience.” The second gives priority to “the logical and ontological primacy of experience over language” (Koestenbaum xii). These orientations are by no means mutually exclusive, but serve to indicate a primary emphasis on one or the other aspect. The orientation favoring language describes a general line from Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Mauthner, Saussure, and Heidegger through structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction; the second, originating in the philosophy of Husserl, reaches generally through phenomenology to existentialism and to the group of phenomenologist critics Sarah Lawall has called “the critics of consciousness.”

The approach based on the primacy of language over experience assumes, as one commentator has put it, “that at least some, and perhaps all philosophical problems are the logical consequences of quasi-grammatical errors or ambiguities in the use of language.” Husserl, on the other hand, “assumes that language reflects the structure of experience, or, if it does not, that we can examine experience independently of language” (Koestenbaum xii). Today this latter notion, which disregards language as the vehicle through which experience is rendered, seems naive. But for the purpose of my argument, I would like to maintain a distinction between the emphasis on language and the emphasis on experience, even while recognizing that it is not absolute. (“Experience” is taken here to refer to perceptual and sensory experience and its cognitive effects.)

My general argument is that writers of the early modernist generation, and certainly Musil, were not blocked by language’s presumed inability to represent experience, but on the contrary were struggling to develop a new kind of literary language that would adequately represent experience as a cognitive process as it was then coming to be understood. Musil’s extraordinary enterprise, in particular, does not seem amenable to structuralist or post-structuralist theoretical generalizations. He was a writer of fiction who was attempting to forge with the greatest possible precision a language of images that would portray the inexact process by which a character proceeds through life within the envelope of his individual perceptions, sensations, thoughts, and experiences. In *The Man without Qualities* Musil pushed this further, attempting to reconcile this process of individual perception with the utopian goal of a world in

which social institutions would be morally and ethically revitalized. The work of art was to point the way to this revitalization.

Musil's was an experiment at once literary, scientific, and moral, and the language of fiction was for him the means to craft the revaluation and reintegration of values that Nietzsche and Mach had called for. He was not interested in discovering the relation of mind to world from an abstract point of view, but in experimentally integrating mind and world through the images and situations of the surrogate reality of fiction.

Where, aside from Nietzsche and Mach, was Musil coming from? His teachers and those who influenced him when he was young, the pre- and early phenomenologists Brentano, Mach, Stumpf, Husserl, and William James, were engaged in trying to counter the Newtonian and Cartesian reduction of the world to impersonal elements and mechanical processes, as expressed in the mid-nineteenth century by means of the reigning scientific paradigm of positivism. Positivism admitted as evidence only those things that could be measured and quantified; Dickens grotesquely caricatured it in the figure of Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. The direction the early phenomenologists took was the result of new insights into cognition and an ardent desire to unify human understanding on the basis furnished by idealistic philosophy. Their basic criticism was directed at what seemed to them a too narrow notion of science.² They were not out to reject positivism, but rather sought to broaden this then prevailing scientific paradigm by including among its empirical concepts a fluid continuum of reason *plus* sensation and feelings and not simply discrete measurable data alone, as constituting the totality of data on which scientific hypotheses should be based. As Alfred North Whitehead put it in 1925, "The disadvantage of exclusive attention to a group of abstractions, however well-founded, is that, by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. In so far as the excluded things are important in your experience, your modes of thought are not fitted to deal with them" (Whitehead 59).³

Musil offers the interesting case of a writer trained as a scientist for whom literature operates primarily on the basis of empirical perception and sensory experience and for whom language serves as the vehicle to represent experience. This argument implicitly rejects the idea that what literature conveys is graspable only through an analytic procedure that reduces it to rational or rationalized elements of language such as narrative and discourse. A writer, even an analytic writer like Musil, might be interested in pursuing other goals: in his case, as Philip Payne notes, this includes the winning back of the ground of the subject. This ground "has been lost," Payne says, "in the field of ideas, to the march of a militant objectivity which is both superficial and insensitive; it has been

lost in the field of morals with the sense that principles are written on tablets of stone rather than in the human heart; it has been lost in the field of science with the disappearance of the observer from the scope of what he observes" (Payne 210-11). It might also be said of modernist literature generally that it resists the attempts of theory to reduce literary expression to the problem of language alone. This kind of literature uses language to project images that incorporate action in an envelope of sensory experience rather than using it descriptively or discursively. The senses, emotions, affects, moods, and subliminal effects involved in perception and experience are considered essential. It is too reductive, as some critics would have it, to consider literary language as merely a doomed attempt at some kind of rational discourse that eludes both writer and reader, a fruitless butting one's head against the walls of the "prison-house of language."

The anchoring of modernist literature in perceptual and sensory images possibly illustrates what Wittgenstein meant when he wrote in the *Philosophical Investigations* that "a picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Wittgenstein 48, ¶ 115). Suzanne Langer expressed something similar when she said that the artist's way of knowing feelings and emotions "is not expressible in ordinary discourse [because] . . . the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concepts of feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language" (Langer 91).⁴

As a series of cognitive images, this kind of literature is primarily based on and appeals to an expanded notion of experience, using language as its vehicle. The writer seeks to engage the reader in the experience by creating verbal images that attempt to re-evolve the perceptual and sensory aura of the experience for the reader. Writers as ambitious as Proust or Musil will further seek ways to raise experience, understood in this fashion, to the level of the generally representative, so that it might serve a socially representative function as well—become cultural experience, as it were. The overwhelming focus of literary theory on language as discourse in recent times has not been very helpful in comprehending this notion. Language-based critics or theorists generally operate by positing or assuming language as the exclusive field of operations and then excerpting linguistic micro-features such as metaphors, metonyms, or discourses from a work and analyzing them narrowly within a structural, quasi-philosophical, political, ideological, or sociological context, without paying particular attention to other aspects

All this is perhaps simply another way of maintaining that literature as an art is essentially empirical and descriptive rather than abstract and analytical: Flannery O'Connor called art a virtue of the practical intellect. Broadly speaking, the phenomenological perspective offers a foundation for the premise that modernist literature, using language as its vehicle, functions primarily as a mediator of experience as perceived by an experiencing consciousness. My thesis is that when writers call upon philosophers, they do so not to grasp and argue the philosophical system, but to define an experimental and necessarily *ad hoc* field for their own fictional representations. So although Musil's thought was largely formed by a specifically phenomenological environment, his many quarrels with phenomenological theory are marks of the questing and questioning writer rather than the concerns of a developing psychologist or philosopher. It is therefore not my purpose to summarize or criticize Husserl's philosophy; Musil did both in some detail in his *Tagebücher* (*Diaries*). My focus is rather on how Musil's way of projecting the world in literature, strongly formed by phenomenological ideas, provided a base and framework for his experimental writing.

This said, Musil's connection with the early phenomenologists was a direct one: he was thoroughly grounded in empirical phenomenology as well as empirical science. Carl Stumpf, to whom Husserl dedicated the *Logical Investigations*, was Musil's *Doktorvater* in Berlin; he wrote his controversial doctoral dissertation on Ernst Mach under Stumpf's direction (*Toward an Evaluation of Mach's Theories*, 1908). Musil's goal as a writer of uniting precision with soul, as he put it in the *Man without Qualities*, arose out of this background.

For the writer as well as for phenomenology and empirical science, "precision" was a tough problem. In Husserl's view, in one critic's words, "there is no absolute criterion of precision. Precision is a function of context and subject-matter. . . . [In order] to accept Husserl's analyses we must grant that *vague* experiences are legitimate objects of philosophic scrutiny. We cannot restrict our efforts to the simple, the clear, and the distinct. . . . [What is to be analyzed] consists of obscure, fuzzy, and cloudy clusters of experience. . . . The fact that the experiences analyzed are often vague does not diminish their *certainly*" (Koestenbaum xiii). Scientific rationality and precision—still upheld as a primary value, but enlarged—is therefore to be seen as a variable that is a function of different contexts rather than a categorical summation of fixed points. Musil's self-imposed task as a writer was to find a literary language able to render with precision these "obscure, fuzzy, and cloudy clusters of experience."

Musil was born in 1880, the year Husserl turned twenty-one. This was the year in which Zola, in the conclusion to his essay "*Le Roman expérimental*," called for a new kind of novel, one that would embody the unfolding discoveries of empirical science about the workings of mind and body in relation to the world. This new empirical method would replace the traditional conventions that reach back to classical drama and rhetoric with a new, experimental method, the triumph of which, Zola wrote, "is an inevitable evolution. Literature . . .," Zola goes on to say, "does not depend merely upon the author; it is influenced by the nature it depicts and by the man whom it studies. Now if the savants change their ideas of nature, if they find the true mechanism of life, they force us to follow them, to precede them even, so as to play our role in the new hypotheses. The metaphysical man is dead; our whole territory is transformed by the advent of the physiological man. No doubt," Zola continues, "'Achilles' anger,' 'Dido's love,' will last forever on account of their beauty; but today we feel the necessity of analyzing anger and love, of discovering exactly how such passions work in the human being . . . : we have become experimentalists instead of philosophers" (Zola 598-99).⁵

As a novelist and a firm believer in positivism, Zola tried to follow this program by combining affect and intellect in his construction of character and in his passages of narrative description. Zola's successors, although less confident about positivism than he was, attempted to fashion images in a new way that would reflect the complexities of cognition as it was then coming to be understood, and—still "scientific" in the experimental sense—would use art to expand knowledge. (The example of Zola figures in Musil's diaries.) This new way of fashioning literary images, founded on a more inclusive concept of precise science than the mere gathering of data, would make serious fiction itself a branch of knowledge, giving it a social, "scientific" function. Art as knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), as projected by Nietzsche and his literary followers (Musil, Kafka, Rilke, and Thomas Mann, among others), would be both scientific and moral and could serve as a principal means of restoring unity (but a new kind of unity, not an old one) to the rapidly fragmenting values of Western culture. (Here we see the considerable influence of Mach, whose vision is inscribed in the works of many of these writers.)

By the turn of the twentieth century positivism was fading as the leading paradigm of basic scientific thinking. Rather than attempting to uncover a few basic, material laws, scientific thought was turning to less rigid notions. It was becoming a process, as John Weiss has noted, of "pragmatic, hypothetical analysis, revealing tentative, if highly probable, generalizations. With the new physics that was developing, the natural

sciences “ceased to be the ally and main support of the materialistic metaphysics which had seemed unassailable since the eighteen-fifties. If matter in motion was not the ultimate reality but merely a useful hypothesis for explaining some natural phenomena, one could legitimately reestablish equality of status for man’s values, ideals, and emotional responses to his environment” (Weiss 12-13). Karl R. Popper put this new footing of scientific investigation succinctly: “I think that we shall have to get accustomed to the idea that we must not look upon science as a ‘body of knowledge,’ but rather as a system of hypotheses, that is to say, as a system of guesses or anticipations which in principle cannot be justified, but with which we work as long as they stand up to tests, and of which we are never justified in saying that we know that they are ‘true’ or ‘more or less certain’ or even ‘probable’ ” (Popper 317, quoted in Holton 20). Musil, in the course of a detailed series of notes and comments in his diaries in 1904 or 1905 discussing Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, notes that “. . . there remains only a scale of degrees of probability, and it is conceivable that a certain level of probability is what we call certainty” (*Tagebücher* 119; translation mine). Bergson, with his emphasis on experience as flux, also contributed to undermining the notion of a fixed rhetorical literary language used to depict defined characters in defined situations, and William James called his influential study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁶

It was this paradigmatic change in the assumptions of scientific thought that gave Musil the impetus for his experimental search to communicate with precision, through fiction, an expanded notion of experience. In a Machian context science and literature could be thought of as aspects of a unitary process with different emphases but the same goal, the increase of knowledge through a process of rigorous experimentation: knowledge not for its own sake, but knowledge that would lead to a higher and more humane morality while still passing the test of experimental rigor. Although outside the scope of this discussion, Musil’s overriding purpose was a moral one; his passion and his intellect were both fueled by his specifically equating ethics with aesthetics—an equation that seems to have had its roots in Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and which is also found in many other writers around the turn of the century.⁷

Throughout his fiction Musil stresses both the inadequacy of received metaphysical notions and the inadequacy of traditional rhetoric and conventions of narrative literature to explain the world. He put hypotheses he derived from the phenomenologists’ view of experience into the testing crucible of fictional situations. As a writer he was concerned with image-making, but he wanted to construct fictional

situations that, in accord with the Husserlian approach, would be consonant with empirical scientific verification. Art as knowledge in fiction could thus become, as Zola had prophesied, part of science, although Zola's empiricism had been totally positivistic, while Musil's was more thoroughly scientific and experimental. In Musil's view, the chief function of language as it is used in literature is to mediate experience as projected by the author. These experiences and feelings are not the author's own, at least in primal form: there is a distinction between autobiography and fiction. They are rather material the writer can work with. (Suzanne Langer notes that "every work of art expresses . . . not feelings and emotions which the artist *has*, but feelings and emotions which the artist *knows*; his *insight* into the nature of sentience, his picture of vital experience, physical and emotive and fantastic" [Langer 91]).

The burden of language as Musil understands it is not to mystify, but to analyze and order experience without reducing it. He makes his characters, within their immediate fictional situations, attempt to relate to each other and the world through their changing perceptual and sensory envelopes in terms of the experiences he tries out on them. What we can know, according to Husserl, is not the actual physical world but only our experience of it. Unlike Husserl, Musil is quite rigorous in making this process experimental and in developing a literary language that can express it with great precision. He puts all his major characters in this same experimental stance.

This is a tough enterprise for a writer, for not only is representing the complexity of experience thus understood a boundless task, but it rejects as impossibly artificial (not "true to life") the traditional literary notions of plot, dramatic action, and characterization that normally provide a guiding structure for readers as well as writers. The results are contradictory and paradoxical: self and world, as Musil treats them, dissolve into a flow of endless "possibilities," of the kind so lovingly developed in *The Man without Qualities*.⁸ The only way to temporarily arrest this flow, Musil postulates, is for an individual to attain an attenuated, tentative, ineffable, and quite transitory mystical state that he calls the "other condition," an ecstatic state of heightened awareness similar to that advocated by Walter Pater.⁹

The problem with regarding thoughts and sensations as a stream or flow with intermittent stases is, to quote William James, "introspectively, to see the transitive parts for what they really are. If they are but flights to conclusions, stopping them to look at them before a conclusion is reached is really annihilating them. . . . Let anyone try to cut a thought across the middle and get a look at its section, and he will see how difficult the introspective observation of the transitive tract is. . . . Or if our purpose

is nimble enough and we do arrest it, it ceases forthwith to be itself. . . . The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like . . . trying to turn up the light quickly enough to see how the darkness looks" (quoted in Holton 124).

Musil, who was quite familiar with James's work, understood this dilemma very well: throughout his diaries, essays, and interviews he worries endlessly about the technical problems this posed for him as a writer. Rejecting narrative in the traditional sense, he relies on a narrator external to the action to frame and control the experimental process as it unfolds. But since each scene is limited to representing the envelope of perceptions, sensations, actions, and experiences of the characters who are perceiving, sensing, acting, and experiencing within it, each scene tends to become a hermetic unit and *mise-en-abyme*. No extended dramatic narrative (for which characters must be defined as consistent types or counters) is possible. Musil's "non-narrative narrative" consists of a sequence of quasi-independent micro-narratives, each of which could be extended at will in any direction or interspersed with other micro-narratives. Like Husserl, Musil believed in building up and analyzing *all* the data that hypothetically constitute experience. He did not, like Thomas Mann or Hermann Broch, for example, begin with an *a priori* set of values or literary notions.

This might explain why Musil had trouble finishing anything, notably *The Man without Qualities* and his essays: the experimental path he set up, "the path of the smallest steps" as he called it, that would ultimately reconcile the potential of probability with the reality of what actually happens, can never end. This is a negative consequence of his dedication to a hypothetical approach that gives primacy to "a scale of degrees of probability," and that defines certainty as only the closest approach to the greatest achievable degree of probability—a kind of Zeno's arrow of probability suspended in its flight toward certainty.

Of course language as well as experience may be looked at as also constituting an amalgam of emotions and ideas, especially in the sequences of cognitive images that are a major feature of much modernist literature. Something of Musil's sophisticated awareness of this interdependence—in this respect he is unlike Husserl—can be indicated by an argument of Mary Hesse's that is very close to Musil's conception. Hesse claims that meanings are not fixed in relation to universals or types, but "grow in dynamic interaction with culture and experience." If the meaning of words is thus changeable rather than fixed, the way to get beyond individual uses of each word is, Hesse argues, "to replace the Aristotelian model of 'intuition of the universal,' which goes from particulars 'up' to the universal and 'down again' to its other realizations,

by a model that goes 'horizontally' from particulars to particulars. Members of a class . . .," she argues, "are loosely grouped by relations of similarity and difference into fuzzy, overlapping, and temporarily defined classes whose boundaries change with experience and cultural convention" (Hesse 38). This last statement is related to Husserl's inclusive notion of experience and indicates the principal way that Musil, like William James, sees language as mediating the ever-shifting boundaries of perceptual and sensory experience, relying on constantly changing contextual determinations of meaning rather than on fixed ones. The narrator of *The Man without Qualities*, for instance, says at one point that everything that the central character, Ulrich, and his sister Agathe "encountered on the plane of ideas had the tensed, tightrope-walking nature of the once-and-never-again, and whenever they talked about it they did so in the awareness that no single word could be used twice without changing its meaning" (Musil, *GW* 4: 1400).¹⁰

Pity the poor writer! The conflicts and paradoxes inherent in this approach to fiction are set out at the very beginning of *The Man without Qualities*. A scientist and mathematician, Ulrich is unable to fix any actual or potential moment in the flow of experience as definitive, or to fashion a language that could mediate the flow of experience in any reliable fashion, such as empirical science demands. In his very first appearance in the novel, Ulrich is standing behind a window in his house with a stopwatch in his hand, trying without success to freeze the flow of traffic and pedestrians on the street outside in a statistical measurement.

Representation, and the language that is its vehicle, can only be valid in Musil's view if rendered with the utmost precision. *The Man without Qualities* contains a veritable catalog of the ways people talk, write, and interact in their lives, and these ways are considered unsatisfactory and insufficient. Each social class, profession, and individual in the novel is given his/her/its/their own hermetic vocabularies and grammars. Musil included mystic, philosophical, and scientific language, as well as the everyday conversational idiolects of each of the characters in the novel. (Each character speaks in his or her own style, idiom, vocabulary, and syntax, crossing but rarely intersecting with the others.¹¹) Musil even includes body language, as well as the inner, unrealized language of the inarticulate and the insane! The problem, as he saw it, lay in somehow fashioning a language that would overcome these obstacles and permit objective communication of the whole complex flow of experience from person to person and within society as a whole, and thus make *true* communication possible.

I would disagree with Marike Finlay, who sees Musil's *oeuvre* exclusively in terms of discourse, that is, narrative considered solely as

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a problem of discursive language. Finlay says that *The Man without Qualities* "is the discursive practice which is, par excellence, built up of the pragmatic material interaction of infinitely expanding fields of other discursive practices." *The Man without Qualities*, she says, "is not narrative; it is a constant narration made up of other narrations, a discourse of and with other discourses. Herein lies the major transformation that Musil's discursive practice effects on the procedures of the classical episteme, thus heralding the opening of the modern episteme" (Finlay 133-34).

It is quite true that the problem of narrative was a central one for Musil, but it is misleading to focus on this *only* as a problem of discourse, in the current fashion, as Finlay and others have done. If a writer envisions experience as a complex floating membrane of thoughts, feelings, memories, and sensations that changes at every moment, and language likewise, then conventional techniques of narrative, and even some not so conventional, will appear reductive and impossibly simplistic, but discursive analysis alone is not capable of encompassing the phenomenon. A recurring image in Musil's fiction is that of puffy white clouds continually forming and reforming as the invisible force of the air moves them along against the background of a remote, unattainable blue sky. These moving clouds are non-narrative and non-discursive, but they figure the billowing reality of experience that Musil is trying to encompass and express.

In his novella *Tonka* an impatient young middle-class scientist, whose understanding of the world is exclusively scientific and empirical, has an affair with a silent, uneducated working-class girl. Tonka, the girl in question, has a powerful intuitive understanding of the world, but cannot express herself at all through language. He is totally articulate, she is totally inarticulate. Musil's problem was how to present their relationship as a flow of solipsistically individualized experience. At one point they are sitting at the edge of some woods, "and he was simply gazing into space though half-shut eyelids, not talking, letting his thoughts roam. Tonka began to be afraid she had offended him again. Several times she took a deep breath, as if about to speak, but then shyness held her back. So for a long time there was no sound but the woodland murmur that is so tormenting, rising and sinking away in a different place at every instant. Once a brown butterfly fluttered past them and settled on a long-stemmed flower, which quivered under the touch, swaying to and fro and then quite suddenly being quite still again, like a conversation broken off. Tonka pressed her fingers hard into the moss on which they were sitting, but after a while the tiny blades stood up again, one after the other, row on row, until there was finally no more trace of the hand that had lain

there. It was enough to make one weep, without knowing why. If she had been trained to think, like her companion, at that moment Tonka would have realized that Nature consists of nothing but ugly little things that one hardly notices and which live as sadly far apart from each other as the stars in the night sky. The beauties of Nature. . . . A wasp was crawling over his shoe. Its head was like a lantern. He watched it, contemplating his shoe, which was sticking up broad and black, oblique against the brown of the earth" (Musil, "Tonka" 275 [ellipsis in original]).

This passage presents the disparate flow of stimulation and response in two mismatched lovers in a natural setting. The setting provides an external unity—it is the same for both—but the characters' responses to it place them in different worlds. The man observes nature strictly as an empirical scientist would, noting only objective data and apparently decrying feeling—but in doing so he exhibits feelings he refuses to acknowledge. Tonka, without his education or ability to articulate her thoughts in words, shrinks from nature because of her feelings for the man. She is able to *feel* the world directly but not to conceptualize or judge it (hence her experience can only be indirectly pointed at); the man conceptualizes and judges the world but cannot feel it, at least directly. The setting is a screen on which the characters project what each is experiencing but cannot express, and of which, at some level of consciousness, they are only dimly aware. It is these subliminal feelings that shape the experience and that Musil is trying to shape into a story.

Here, then, Musil is experimenting with how language can be made to convey the flow of experience in a way that is inaccessible to the conventional languages of literature and science. By his ingenious use of language, he draws the reader into re-feeling what the characters are feeling. This ability to evoke with great precision in the reader the complex web of feelings associated with the situation and thoughts of the character is perhaps Musil's greatest achievement as a writer.

This technique is far more skillfully developed in *The Man without Qualities*. At one point Ulrich and his sister Agathe, who is living with him, are "changing to go out for the evening. There was no one in the house to help Agathe aside from Ulrich; they had started late and had thus been in the greatest haste for a quarter of an hour when a short pause intervened. Piece by piece, nearly all the ornaments of war a woman puts on for such occasions were strewn on the chairbacks and surfaces of the room, and Agathe was in the act of bending over her foot with all the concentration called for by the pulling on of a thin silk stocking. Ulrich was standing behind her. He saw her head, her neck, her shoulders, and this nearly naked back; her body was curved over her raised knees, slightly to the side, and the tension of this process sent three folds around

her neck, shooting slender and merry through her clear skin like three arrows: the charming physicality of this painting, escaped from the instantaneously spreading stillness, seemed to have lost its frame, and passed so abruptly and directly into Ulrich's body that he left the place he was standing and, not so entirely without consciousness as a banner being unfurled by the wind, but also not with deliberate reflection, crept closer on tiptoe, surprised the bent-over figure, and with gentle ferocity bit into one of those arrows, while his arm closed tightly around his sister. Then Ulrich's teeth just as cautiously released his overpowered victim; his right hand had grabbed her knee, and while with his left arm he pressed her body to his, he pulled her upright with him on upward-bounding tendons. Agathe cried out in fright."

"Up to this point everything had taken place as playfully and jokingly as much that had gone on before, and even if it was tinged with the colors of love, it was only with the really shy intention of concealing love's unwonted dangerous nature beneath such cheerfully intimate dress. But when Agathe got over her fright, and felt herself not so much flying though the air as rather resting in it, suddenly liberated from all heaviness and directed in its stead by the gentle force of the gradually decelerating motion, it brought about one of those accidents which no one has in his power, that she seemed to herself in this state strangely soothed, indeed carried away from all earthly unrest; with a movement changing the balance of her body that she could never have repeated she also brushed away the last silken thread of compulsion, turned in falling to her brother, continued, so to speak, her rise as she fell, and lay, sinking down, as a cloud of happiness in his arms" (Musil, *GW* 4: 1081-82).¹²

Musil's notion that the task of literature is to represent with precision the fuzzy wholeness of experience was but one of many analogous attempts by modernist writers to try to find new and more accurate forms of expression. Even Henry James had written in 1888 that "experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle on its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind" (H. James 52).

The problem raised by many modernist writers is one central to phenomenological theory: a view of "consciousness" and "experience" such as Musil's presupposes a subjective consciousness, that is, an individual mind—whether the character's, narrator's, author's, or some combination of them—that is doing the perceiving and experiencing. What is the nature of the world independently of being perceived, Husserl had wondered. This was a question that intensely preoccupied Musil.

How can a bridge (a utopian, hence idealistic bridge) be built from this

isolated subjective mind to the social, moral, and ethical concerns of society at large? Does not this approach to perception and experience, so radically centered on the subjective mind, commit a writer to a mode of fiction centered on solipsistic characters? (Virginia Woolf's and D. H. Lawrence's fiction, Rilke's novel *Malte Laurids Brigge*, and Joyce's two major novels also raise the question.) In much of fiction written in the last few decades, on the other hand, characters are frequently counters or stereotypes, actors in social situations rather than perceiving consciousnesses. Does this "post-modern" fiction rest on or appeal to sensation, perception, and experience at all, in the phenomenological or modernist sense?

There would seem to have been in the early phenomenologists and in Musil an underlying idealism that has since been lost, a belief that in spite of the increasing solipsism and dehumanizing specialization of modern life there is some sphere or some level—one hardly knows what to call it—in or on which all the conflicting and apparently unrelated fragments, self and world, feeling and intellect, science and society, skepticism and belief, could somehow be melded into a coherent, ethical whole. This might explain why the phenomenological basis is no longer fashionable in literary criticism and theory, and why language-based criticism, with its entrenched skepticism about idealist assumptions, has become dominant—it suits the temper of our time, which is disillusioned about any form of larger unity in the world. In the tradition of idealistic philosophy, phenomenology conceived experience as the experience of an individual person, but underlying the phenomenological enterprise was the intention of bringing about moral and ethical reform on the level of the larger community, and the belief that this could be done through an awakened subjectivity that would somehow expand outwards from the individual to the social and cultural world. Our time, however—as Musil himself trenchantly observed many times in his essays and in *The Man without Qualities*—has moved instead to a collectivist mode of thinking in which political, ideological, ethnic, and tribal thought and behavior rather than the individual's subjectivity have become the framework for social thought, and in which literary characters, no longer the anchoring centers of the world they had been since Romanticism, have become in extreme cases cartoon characters. In collectivist fashion the contemporary human sciences, psychology, medicine, and sociology approach the individual only as a statistical manifestation of generalized and abstracted characteristics. (Thus the disease is more important than the patient, who represents for the medical profession only a manifestation of it, a "case.")

Musil found reason enough to despair of himself and the world around him, of which he was a strenuous, acute, and untiring critic; but he still believed, as did many of his modernist contemporaries, that there was a way forward, if only it could be found, and that a bridge had to be built from the individual person equipped with a new and heightened awareness to a new society in which ethics would assume a central place. This was the matrix of his experimental struggle to forge a language that would truly represent and communicate experience.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Vincent Crapanzano and to E. J. Baylis Thomas for their helpful comments and suggestions in the preparation of this article. A broad and invaluable picture of the importance of the psychology of perception in late nineteenth and early twentieth century European and American culture can be found in Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991). Ryan is more concerned with the broader picture of empiricist psychology as a cultural phenomenon at the turn of the century. She focusses on Musil more narrowly in relation to empirical thought, whereas my focus is on the problems that arise at the experimental boundary between theory and fictional technique, as Musil tried to construct a world-view in his fiction that was inspired but not explained by empiricist philosophy. Another, much broader, contextualization of the cultural phenomenon is in Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1992 <1990>). Also valuable but more technical is Hartmut Cellbrot, *Die Bewegung des Sinnes: Zur Phänomenologie Robert Musils im Hinblick auf Edmund Husserl*, Musil-Studien Bd. 17 (Munich: Fink, 1988). See, too, Karl Menges, "Robert Musil and Edmund Husserl: Über phänomenologische Strukturen im *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*," *Modern Austrian Literature* 9.3-4 (1976): 131-54.

2. "The incapacity and unwillingness of science to face problems of value and meaning because of its confinement to mere positive facts seems to [Husserl] to be at the very root of the crisis of science and of mankind itself. In contrast to the science of the Renaissance, which had been part of a comprehensive philosophical scheme, a positivist science of mere facts appeared as a truncated science endangering man, and in fact endangering itself, by a 'decapitation.'" Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971) 1: 80.

3. William James had voiced a similar thought in *The Principles of Psychology*: "Science . . . must be constantly reminded that her purposes are not the only purposes, and that the order of uniform causation which she has use for, and is therefore right in postulating, may be enveloped in a wider order, on

which she has no claims at all." (Authorized Edition in Two Volumes. New York: Dover, 1950 <1890>) 2: 576.

4. To discuss the central importance of the emotions in relation to perception and sensation for Musil and the phenomenologists is beyond the scope of this paper. There is a good exposition in Cellbrot, and in the chapter in the *Nachlaß* of *The Man without Qualities* titled "Agathe stößt zu ihrem Mißvergnügen auf einen geschichtlichen Abriß der Gefühlspsychologie" (GW 4: 1138-46). See also William James, *Principles of Psychology*, chapter 2, "The Emotions," and Heydebrand 117-33.

5. Musil offers a short but penetrating analysis of Zola's essay in a 1927 tribute on the sixtieth birthday of the critic Alfred Kerr. Musil notes that while Zola had misapprehended the nature of science he had framed the problem correctly, "for literature can not be spared having to conform to the scientific depiction of the world, and a great part of contemporary literature's lack of objective referentiality [*Gegenstandslosigkeit*] comes about because it has been behind the times." (GW 8: 1183. Translation mine).

6. For Musil's relation to Bergson see Heydebrand 213-16.

7. See also Musil's *Tagebücher* and Thomas Mann's essay, "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Our Experience."

8. "In *Ideas* ¶ 47 [Husserl] talks of possible worlds. His notion of possible worlds is very heavily constrained, however. Since for him the world is not the world transcendent of us, not the actual physical world, that is, but only our experience of it, what is possible for Husserl means what is experienceable. And experienceability, he says, 'never betokens any empty logical possibility, but one that has its motive in the system of experience.' " Samuel R. Levin, *Metaphoric Worlds: Conceptions of a Romantic Nature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 59.

9. See Ryan, chapter 2. There is a mention of Pater in Musil's diaries.

10. Translation mine (copyright Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.).

11. Language as Babel is used in a similar way in Hofmannsthal's 1921 play *Der Schwierige*. Walter Moser has treated this topic in Musil in an excellent article, "La Mise à l'essai des discours dans *L'Homme sans qualités* de Robert Musil," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12.1 (1985): 12-45.

12. Translation mine (copyright Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.).

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