

Robert Musil

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This is a short biography on Musil in the rororo series published by Rowohlt Verlag. I used to buy a few of them in my youth, and have in recent years read and reviewed a few, more precisely on Mann and Kant. They are meant as short Bild Monographien, or more to the point as scrap books, in which extended excerpts from their writings (Selbstzeugnissen) are mixed with pictures of people and places. I guess they make it possible to get some measure of the man, more extensive than a bare dictionary entry but not as full as a regular biography, which in many cases would constitute a too formidable investment in time and commitment. They end with a short 'Zeittafel' to summarize. The end effect is nevertheless somewhat unsatisfying. Trying to be not too much nor too little, ending up being both too little and too much.

At the center of Musil's life is the struggle to write the big novel 'Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften'. It was a very ambitious undertaking, the first volume of which took him almost a decade to write, while only the first part of the second volume was published, being rushed so by a frustrated publisher. The work as a whole remains unfinished 'Ein Buch ohne Abschluß'. Musil was by all accounts an intelligent, talented and above all serious man, who took writing to be his overriding ambition. He obviously wanted to make a mark, to change the nature of the novel, as profoundly, if not more so than Proust and Joyce had done. His background was solid. He was only child of a couple. He Alfred Musil, working as a high class engineer stemming from a distinguished Austrian family, his mother Hermine, born Bergauer, was of German-Bohemian stock, thus also part of the Austrian empire. His father would at the end of his life be ennobled, in fact hereditarily so, hence it would also be imparted on Robert himself, and much good it would do him. Musil followed a career as an officer and an engineer. He did attend a military secondary school, the experiences from which he creatively transformed into 'Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless' being his first published work and received with critical praise. But he did abort his career as an officer and instead started to study at the same technical institution his father headed. Musil had a definite technical talent and a respect and familiarity with mathematics, which is seldom seen in the literary world. Despite success as an engineer he also aborted this career and instead started to study philosophy in 1903, finishing with a dissertation on the physicist and later philosopher Mach five years later. He then spent two charmed years as a literati in Berlin, frequented cafés, met a divorcee - Martha Marcovaldi - who already had children and married her in connection with moving to Vienna as an intern and later librarian at the Technical University of Vienna (Technischen Hochschule Wiens) where he contributed to a number of literary journals eventually becoming an editor of one. This charmed life was interrupted by the First World War, during which he served as an officer on the Italian front, and during which he edited and published the 'Soldaten-Zeitung'. After the war he returned to his publicistic activities and would soon as a free man of letters (freier Schriftsteller) work primarily in Wien but also in Berlin

and start his project. He would early on be the recipient of the Kleist-Price for his drama 'Die Schwärmer', which had no commercial success, and whose performance turned out to be a disaster, the script severely deformed by the director and producer. He would also later receive a price from the City of Vienna for some other of his shorter works. But since the early twenties, 'Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften' was his main pre-occupation. When it finally arrived on the scene in 1931, when the author was already past fifty, it met with success, but one which did not translate into financial independence. In fact he would for the rest of his life be plagued with financial difficulties, exacerbated by his lifestyle to which he had been born and become fused with. He would always like to eat well, as well as being dressed expensively. A society was formed to give him support, the advances of his publisher becoming more and more erratic. Under pressure he was forced to publish at least a first part of the projected second volume but nothing more would be forthcoming, although he was always at work with it.

A true writer is one to whom writing does not come easily. This has famously been said by Thomas Mann, but it certainly had even more bearing on Musil, who tended to disparage the easy success of rivals such as Mann, until he eventually benefited morally and financially by them. He got stuck, suffered under severe inhibitions, and even sought professional help to sort them out. The problem was that he was not just about to spin a yarn, but had a definite idea of what he wanted to achieve, and struggled to articulate it, just as a mathematician may grapple with a problem, only to repeatedly trash what he has achieved and start over again. Thus he constantly rewrote what he had written, recast his disposition of the material, only to start again from scratch. Nevertheless the first volume would amount to some 700 pages. At the center of the novel is Ulrich, the man without qualities, as he has all of them, and hence can never decide for any piece of definite action. Incidentally Ulrich is cast as a mathematician. Ostensibly Ulrich has been assigned to head 'Die Parallelenaktion' meant to celebrate 60 years of the imperial rule of Francis Joseph in 1918, to overshadow the mere thirty years of the German emperor William III. The set up affords a lot of occasions and excuses to set up rambling philosophical discussions between various characters, not surprisingly mostly based on Musil's own friends and acquaintances. Later on the novel revives through the introduction of Agatha, the unknown twin sister of Ulrich. This introduction is not an afterthought, which may have been natural to expect, but planned all along. The potentials of this are indeed potent. One idea of course being the old Platonic one of the missing complement (which incidentally was meant as a rather vulgar joke by Plato), that each individual exists both as a man and woman, and of course the close connection between the two hovers tantalizingly close to consummated incest, which of course was very sensitive, and hence important to be put in a wider context, which made piecemeal publication of fragments dangerous to the proper reception of the novel.

1933 made continued presence in Berlin impossible, especially as his wife was of Jewish descent and besides his books were banned in the Third Reich. He predictably moved back to Vienna, where the precariousness of his financial situation becomes even more pronounced. Maybe as a consequence he suffers from elevated blood pressure, and suffers a stroke in 1936, from which he would never really recover, in spite of continued physical exercise, the overdoing of which may have caused his stroke. In 1938 he was forced into

exile in Switzerland, where his prospects of gainful occupation were even slimmer than before. No publisher wanted to touch his works. He moved to Geneva, living on charities, and succumbed to a second stroke on April 15 1942, to the day, seventy-five years before the writing of this review.

Editions of his book using the Nachlaß were not published until the fifties, reviving his reputation, which had fallen into oblivion during his last decade. (He noted bitterly that no one recognized him when he turned sixty.) As sometimes happens the fame and recognition he may have desired did only materialize posthumously, but he needed it less for his vanity than for his material comfort. However, the desire for a posthumous fame may not be so bad if you can dispense with material rewards, at least it will not lead to disappointment.

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