

A Diagnosis of Modern Life

Robert Musil's
Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften
as a Critical-Utopian Project



Stijn De Cauwer



P.I.E. Peter Lang

Introduction

The Cultural Critique of Robert Musil

1. Robert Musil as a Cultural Theorist

After Musil's death in 1942, it took several decades for his masterpiece *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* to receive the attention it merits, mainly due to its unfinished state and overwhelming scope and complexity. Nowadays the novel is acknowledged as a modernist classic that has its place in the canon of the greatest literature of the twentieth century, next to Joyce, Proust or Kafka. In 1999, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was voted as the most important German-language novel of the century by a jury of 99 German writers and scholars, before classics like *Der Zauberberg* or *Der Prozess*.

More recently, Musil's work has also drawn increasing attention from philosophers, finding in his writings reflections of such richness and originality that they deserve to be studied on their own. French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse raises the question in one of his studies of Musil whether the time hasn't finally come to regard Musil's thought as a philosophy in its own right (Bouveresse, 2001). Also in France, a book has appeared with the title *La philosophie autrichienne de Bolzano à Musil; Histoire et actualité*, granting Musil a central place in Austrian philosophy (Mulligan and Commeti, eds., 2002). In 2014, the philosophy journal *The Monist* published a special issue devoted entirely to 'the philosophy of Robert Musil'. In their classic study of Vienna at the turn of the century, Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin wrote: "In its own way, therefore, *The Man Without Qualities* is pre-eminently a 'philosopher's novel', and deserves special attention from students of twentieth-century philosophy..." (Janik and Toulmin, 1973, p. 119) Throughout the years, Musil's work has been eagerly used by the most diverse thinkers, philosophers or literary critics, who all gratefully make use of the huge amount of challenging ideas and images that can be found in his writings.¹

It is by no means the intention of these people to artificially separate Musil the thinker from Musil the writer. It is a fact that Musil consciously refused an academic career in order to work on his great novel. Besides

¹ Thinkers as diverse as Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Ricoeur, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Jean-François Lyotard, Giorgio Agamben, Peter Sloterdijk, Michel Serres, Avital Ronell or Jacques Bouveresse have either written an essay about Musil or referred to Musil's work in their texts.

the occasional essay, play and short story, it was the novel, though quite an unusual one in his case, that was for him the preferred form and medium to express himself. It should also not be forgotten that Musil had some very harsh things to say about philosophy as a discipline, which, he thought, was too inclined to reduce experience to grand, rigid systems and overly limited in what it deemed worthy of philosophical reflection.² In *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* he writes: “Philosophers are despots who have no armies to command, so they subject the world to their tyranny by locking it up in a system of thought.”³ (MwQ 272) Musil consciously chose *not* to have a career as a philosopher but as a writer, which was a medium that allowed him to both expose the limits of certain domains, whether philosophy or science, and to combine the best of these worlds.⁴

The tendency to speak of ‘the philosophy of Robert Musil’ comes out of the fact that Musil’s work contains such an incredible amount of original, sharp and unique reflections which cannot be reduced to any direct influence or intellectual trend, that even scholars feel as if they are only beginning to get a grip on the complexities of his work. As Michael A. Bernstein

² In his writings about Musil and other authors, Milan Kundera strongly emphasizes that the type of reflection in Musil’s writing is very different from philosophy: “To emphasize: novelistic thinking, as Broch and Musil brought it into the aesthetic of the modern novel, has nothing to do with the thinking of a scientist or a philosopher; I would even say it is purposely a-philosophic, even anti-philosophic, that is to say fiercely independent of any system of preconceived ideas; it does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs; its form is highly diverse: metaphoric, ironic, hypothetical, hyperbolic, aphoristic, droll, provocative, fanciful; and mainly it never leaves the magic circle of its characters’ lives; those lives feed it and justify it” (Kundera, 2007, p. 70-71) And elsewhere, Kundera writes: “There is a fundamental difference between the ways philosophers and novelists think. People talk about Chekhov’s philosophy, or Kafka’s or Musil’s, and so on. But just try to draw a coherent philosophy from their writings! Even when they express their ideas directly, in their notebooks, the ideas are intellectual exercises, paradox games, improvisations, rather than statements of thought.” (Kundera, 1988, p. 78)

³ “Philosophen sind Gewalttäter, die keine Armee zur Verfügung haben und sich deshalb die Welt in der Weise unterwerfen, daß sie sie in ein System sperren.” (MoE I 402)

⁴ Musil scholars have always grappled with the complex mixture of prose, essay and theoretical reflection in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Austin Harrington writes: “In *The Man without Qualities*, Musil is at once novelist and essayist, poet and theorist.” (in Bloom, ed., 2005, p. 178) I believe that Burton Pike is correct when he writes: “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 Bloom, ed., 2005, p. 77)

writes: "...the whole nature of his achievement, the ways in which his work is both difficult and rewarding, constitutes such a singular case that even a thorough grounding – and delight – in the complexities of other great modernist authors does little to prepare oneself for an encounter with a body of writing like his." (Bernstein, 2000, p. 36) The position I will take in this book is different from scholars who study Musil for his literary value or those who want to situate him within a philosophical tradition. From every page of Musil's work, whether *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the essays or his diaries, it is evident that Musil sees it as his main goal to do an intervention in the cultural climate, which seemed to go from one crisis to the next. His body of work could be described as one long critical analysis of the shortcomings in the artistic, intellectual and political debates of his time, but *analysis* is not strong enough; his writings are meant to be a direct experience that problematizes the common conceptions by which people view themselves and the world and that allows for the formation of different conceptual frameworks. I will regard his work as a forceful cultural critique and Musil himself as one of the most lucid and original cultural theorists of his generation.

One only has to open up a random page of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* to notice the relentless critical edge of his writing, which made some critics wrongly conclude that Musil seems to simply reject everything or that his negativity is total and all-encompassing. In his view, literature first and foremost had to serve a critical function. Ulrich, the protagonist of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, gives the novel unambiguously a critical function: "Every great book breathes the spirit of this love for the fate of individuals at odds with the forms the community tries to impose on them. ... Extract the meaning out of all literature, and what you will get is a denial, however incomplete, but nonetheless an endless series of individual examples all based on experience, which refute the accepted rules, principles, and prescriptions underpinning the very society that loves these works of art!"⁵ (MwQ 398-399).

Musil was driven by a need, not simply to describe his society and provide a detailed portrait of it, but to intervene in the intellectual, moral, artistic and political debates of his time. His incisive observations are always at the same time a problematization, a displacement of what he is describing,

⁵ "Jedes große Buch atmet diesen Geist aus, der die Schicksale einzelner Personen liebt, weil sie sich mit den Formen nicht vertragen, die ihnen die Gesamtheit aufnötigen will. Zieh den Sinn aus allen Dichtungen, und du wirst eine zwar nicht vollständige, aber erfahrungsmäßige und endlose Leugnung in Einzelbeispielen aller gültigen Regeln, Grundsätze und Vorschriften erhalten, auf denen die Gesellschaft ruht, die diese Dichtungen liebt!" (MoE I 585-586)

ruthlessly exposing its shortcomings and inadequacy to cope with the huge challenges of modernity. His aim was to expose the flaws and impasses of the intellectual life he was living in, along with its disastrous consequences, and to increase the capacity to explore other possibilities. His ambition was nothing less than to change the way society was ordered and how human beings define themselves, and for this he chose the novel, which had to serve as a large ‘experimental station’, as his preferred means of expression.⁶ Only the novel allowed him the flexibility to explore possibilities from different angles and to permanently readjust his approach, which was necessary to face the rapidly changing historical conditions, as opposed to academic philosophy which he compared to an overbred bulldog that is no longer capable of biting.⁷

Before presenting the stakes of this book, I will briefly describe Musil’s life, his main concerns and the complexities surrounding *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

2. Musil’s Life and Background

Musil was born in 1880 in Klagenfurt, Carinthia.⁸ His only sister died as a young child before his birth. His father belonged to the well-off Habsburg administration and in 1890, the entire family moved to Brno (also known by its German name Brünn) where Musil’s father was appointed as a professor in mechanical engineering. Musil grew up in a rather peculiar domestic situation: from 1882 to her death in 1924, his mother Hermine took a lover into their house, who lived there all that time with the consent of Musil’s father and who was called ‘uncle Heinrich’ by little Robert, even though it was never a secret that he was his mother’s lover. Musil was born into an environment which stood for traditional Habsburg values and customs, but which at the same time

⁶ In their study of Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Douglas Dourham and Martin Jesinghausen claim that the peculiar style of the book was influenced by new developments in the sciences, such as the discovery of electromagnetic forces. Like an experimental laboratory, Nietzsche was “experimenting with the configurations and contexts of the drives, observing the changes in ‘atmosphere.’” (Burnham and Jesinghausen, 2010, p. 68) The influence of Nietzsche on Musil cannot be underestimated.

⁷ In an early draft for *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, when Ulrich was still called Anders, Musil writes: “Sodann war er sich klar über die von nichts sonst erreichte Verfeinerung des Denkens, welche auch der sozusagen historisch überzüchteten (überzüchtete Bulldoggen sind praktisch feig und können nicht beißen) Philosophie zukam.” KA\LESETEXTE\BAND 4 Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften die Vorstufen\aus dem Nachlass ediertes\die Romanprojekte 1918-1926\der Erlöser\I. Kapitel 41.

⁸ For further information on Musil’s life and background, see the biographical works of Karl Corino. (Corino, 1988, 2003)

was very accepting of experimenting with lifestyles that challenged the common moral norms.

This paradox became more problematic when he was sent to the military boarding schools of Eisenstadt and Mährisch-Weißkirchen, an experience that became the inspiration for his first literary success: *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, published in 1906. Rilke, who shortly went to the same school at Mährisch-Weißkirchen, had to be removed from the school by his parents after less than a year. While the institutions were supposed to install an unshakable sense of moral duty and loyalty to the Habsburg values in the students, all coming from respectable families, Musil described the fierce homo-erotic games and sadistic bullying that went on at night. It was as if the school was a miniature image of the future moral hypocrisy and cruelty of the Nazi era. Nevertheless, at the age of 26, Musil had a literary success which both evoked awe for its style and shocked reactions for its content.

After the boarding schools, Musil spent one year at the Military Academy of Vienna, abandoning it after one year because he was tired of the boorish types the military attracted and he moved back to Brno to study engineering like his father. While devoting his day time to his studies, he frantically spent his nights reading up on literature and philosophy, which provided what was lacking in his studies. From that time on he kept a series of detailed notebooks in which he systematically recorded his ideas, his reflections on his readings and the times, along with experimental drafts for future novels. In 1902, he was appointed as assistant at the Technical Institute of Stuttgart, one of the most prestigious institutions for engineers, but already after one year he could not find anything compelling about the job anymore and he moved to Berlin to begin doctoral studies in philosophy and experimental psychology. That department, with notable professors like Carl Stumpf, was at that time a cutting-edge place for the study of epistemology, early phenomenology and experimental psychology. During his stay there, Musil invented a color wheel used in psychological experiments which is patented to his name. In 1908, Musil finished his doctoral studies with a study of the Austrian philosopher of science Ernst Mach, under the supervision of Carl Stumpf.⁹ Stimulated by his early literary success and disappointed by his disagreements with Stumpf, Musil finished his doctoral studies without much enthusiasm, having already decided that he would embark on a career as a writer.¹⁰

⁹ This dissertation topic was an odd choice from the start because Stumpf had a notorious hatred of Mach's theories.

¹⁰ Musil's incredibly diverse educational trajectory is mirrored by Ulrich in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

Musil, who had married his wife Martha in 1911, rejected academic positions offered to him and made the choice to devote himself completely to literature. It became clear quite soon that he was not able to make a living out of this, and besides the occasional job such as writing for journals or working at a library, he was dependent on a support grant founded by Thomas Mann, a dependency which was all the more painful to him because he had a strong dislike of Mann. The publication of five novellas under the titles *Vereinigungen* in 1911 and *Drei Frauen* in 1924, and two plays, *Die Schwärmer* in 1921 and *Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer* in 1924, did not bring him much fame.

During the First World War, Musil served on the Italian front, having profound experiences that would continue to fascinate him all his life, most importantly a certain feeling that he described as mystical and which he recorded in the series of vignettes and short stories *Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten*. Not long after the war, Musil began his great novel, which would keep him occupied to his death in 1942 and which he was not able to finish.

3. Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften

While certain parts of the novel and early drafts can be traced back to sections of his notebooks from before the war, Musil began composing the novel full-time in 1924. Under pressure from his publisher, Ernst Rowohlt, who had been giving him advances on the novel, Musil published the first volume in 1930. This first volume contained parts 1, *Eine Art Einleitung* (A sort of introduction), and 2, *Seinesgleichen geschieht* (Pseudoreality prevails). In 1933, Musil reluctantly published the second volume of the novel, or part 3, *Ins tausendjährige Reich/Die Verbrecher* (Into the millennium/the criminals). It has become the custom amongst scholars to refer to volume 1 and volume 2 of the novel, referring to the way they were originally published (and not to the format the novel might have now, such as in the English or other translations), and I will follow this custom in this book.

While the first volume received praise from colleagues such as Thomas Mann, Elias Canetti or Hermann Hesse, it seemed not to receive the attention that Musil hoped it would receive. The political circumstances certainly did not help the publication of following parts of the novel. Directly after the publication of the second volume, Musil left Berlin with his (Jewish) wife to Vienna and after the *Anschluss* of 1938 Musil once again had to leave the country. Not being able to obtain the necessary documents to go in exile to the US like his more famous colleagues, he fled to Switzerland, where he was miserable and without financial resources, unexpectedly dying of a stroke in 1942. Musil had been an outspoken

opponent of the Nazi regime and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was soon on the list of banned books.¹¹

In order to keep the modest interest in his novel alive, Musil felt the pressure to publish a continuation of his novel in 1938, which he withdrew at the last moment while they were already in the printing galleys, not being satisfied with them. These chapters are now known as the *galley chapters*. It became increasingly clear that a conflict was arising between the need to bring the novel to a sound conclusion and the experimental ethic which the novel was supposed to exemplify. Musil developed parallel and mutually incompatible plot-lines and possible continuations, experimenting with different versions, which were impossible to integrate into one novel, let alone provide an ending. When he died, Musil left a huge amount of chapter drafts, fragments and plot ideas behind which now make up the *Nachlass*. In 1943, shortly after Musil's death, his wife published the galley chapters and a part of the fragments as volume 3, beginning a long and ongoing debate about the proper form in which the novel should be published.

4. The Impossibility of Coming to a Synthesis of the Times

Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften is set in Vienna, 1913, and presents the futile attempts of a group of elite members of Austrian society to prepare for the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's coronation, which was supposed to take place in 1918, hoping to outdo the similar German plans to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of their Emperor Wilhelm II's reign. This so called parallel campaign was supposed to lead to a grand patriotic event for which they wanted to gather the best ideas their times has to offer and find the one crowning idea Austria is supposed to stand for. As the novel unfolds, the meetings held at the house of the aristocratic Tuzzi and his ambitious wife nicknamed Diotima, under the supervision of count Leinsdorf, become more and more chaotic. To the despair of the people involved, the more they want to reach a synthesis the more their ideas seem to be conflicting and incommensurable with each other.

¹¹ Musil's problems with getting the continuation of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* published are described in the interview with Oskar Maurus Fontana from 1938. Fontana was trying to help Musil to get a third volume published after it was confiscated by the authorities as *unerwünschte Literatur*. A book could only be published after a positive evaluation from the ministry of propaganda. Fontana was able to organize a meeting with the publisher Claassen from Hamburg, but Musil rejected the offer. He seemed demotivated and distracted. He soon left the country, after telling Fontana: "Ich kann in dieser Luft nicht atmen, und die Luft hier wird noch viel stickiger und gefährlicher werden." (in Dinklage, ed., 1960, p. 343)

An unusual figure amongst these guests is Ulrich, the central character of the novel, who was asked to become the secretary of the parallel campaign through his father's connections in high circles. He is the 'man without qualities' that the title of the book refers to. In his educational and career choices, Ulrich has followed an equally uncertain path as Musil: he abandons a career as a soldier, an engineer and a mathematician shortly after beginning them. In the beginning of the novel, we hear Ulrich declare that he will take a year off from his own life to gather the necessary grip on the complexities of the times so he can make the right choice. Society had become so fragmented and confusing that it was no longer clear how one could lead a life that could make a constructive impact on society, instead of just adding to the conflicting forces and opinions.

Ulrich relentlessly problematizes the opinions of the illustrious guests of Diotima's salon, from the wealthy German businessman Arnheim to general Stumm. He takes the circulating opinions to absurd conclusions and exposes their inherent blind spots. Instead, Ulrich formulates a series of baffling utopian proposals about how life could be organized differently, a process which continues throughout the novel and the fragments: from the utopia of essayism to the utopia of inductive living.

Several side plots are developed alongside the main plot. We follow the case of a psychotic killer of prostitutes, Moosbrugger; both his own thought process and the desperate attempts of society to come to terms with such a monstrous figure. The case of Moosbrugger becomes an obsession for many characters in the novel, especially Ulrich's friend Clarisse. Clarisse, wife of the failed artist Walter, develops an unhealthy attraction to the irrational, fuelled by an obsession with Nietzsche, which makes her gradually lose her mind and regard the merciless killer Moosbrugger as the savior.

In a significant passage, general Stumm heads to the national library to ask the librarians for a volume that presents an overview or synthesis of the best ideas of his time. He soon discovers that the modern archive can assign each book neatly its proper place in the archive, but that there is no such thing as a book that can provide an overview of the content of the books, let alone provide a synthesis. The rigid order goes at the cost of insight. What Stumm learns in this passage is that he is living in times where so much knowledge and ideas are produced that it is no longer possible to acquire some kind of a vantage point from which it is possible to have an overview of the whole.

In his novel, Musil exposes the different inadequate responses to the drastic way in which modernity has changed society and made it sheer incomprehensible. In Musil's view, people were incapable of seeing beyond

certain patterns of responses and their shortcomings, which escalated into the cataclysms of the First World War and the Nazi regime. How to organize society and our lives in a manner that could meet the complicated demands of modern times, when the old models had failed and it no longer was possible to find a vantage point from which society in all its complexity could be overviewed, is one of the many questions Musil wanted to address.

5. The Best of Two Worlds: Science and Mysticism

As if the first volume is not challenging enough, the second volume presents the reader with an apparent shift in plot and subject matter. After Ulrich has heard that his father had passed away, he meets his sister Agathe, whom he had not seen in a long time, in the fatherly house. The introduction of Agathe into the story introduces new themes into the novel. Ulrich and Agathe, who had just abandoned her conservative husband Hagauer, get along remarkably well. They feel like kindred souls or even twins. After openly mocking the corpse of their deceased father, they choose to forget about the events in the city and continue their happy seclusion in their father's house and garden. The topic of their long conversations soon turns to mysticism, an 'other condition' as opposed to our ordinary disposition to the world, and a romantic attraction develops between the siblings. While in the published parts Ulrich and Agathe cannot maintain their secluded state, in one of the famous chapter drafts in the *Nachlass* they embark on a journey to a Mediterranean island, experiencing a blissful union.

This thematic turn in the second volume has caused a lot of misunderstanding and skeptical reactions from critics. A recurring accusation was that Musil lost himself in private mystical fantasies because he felt that he could no longer get a grip on the political escalation of the 1930s. A problematic debate began between scholars who believed that the novel was supposed to end with the mystical union of Ulrich and Agathe, or those who believed it was supposed to end with the chaos and destruction of the war. Formulating the debate in such a manner completely misrecognises the fact that there are many more possible continuations of the novel in the *Nachlass* and that none of these possible continuations has any greater intrinsic importance over the other.

Central in Musil's analysis of his times was that there seemed to be a problematic split between two different realms. On the one hand, it could not be denied that the sciences had achieved an enormous progress. On the other hand, many artists wanted to denounce its dehumanizing and alienating effects and to defend the world of the soul. For Musil, one of the

most problematic schisms in the intellectual-artistic world was the conflict between positivists and those who rejected science and rationality as a whole, pleading for vague, irrational and poorly defined notions such as intuition. Throughout his writings, Musil incessantly rejected these two extremes. Musil refused to blame reason or the intellect and argued for bringing a form of intellect to the realm of the feelings. In an essay critical of Oswald Spengler, he wrote: "In the physical realm we have found an accommodation (the concept of function). In the spiritual realm we are completely helpless. Intellectuality leaves us in the lurch. But not because the intellect is shallow (as if everything else had not left us in the lurch as well!) but because we have not worked at it."¹² (PS 147)

Musil distinguished two spheres, which he provisionally called the *ratioid* and the *non-ratioid*. The realm of the ratioid allows for the formulation of laws, regularities and communicable results. The non-ratioid, on the other hand, was characterized by the exception over the rule: singular experiences which could not be turned into universally valid and unambiguously communicable rules. For Musil, both ethics and aesthetics fell in this latter domain. The opening passage of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* already brilliantly exposes the gap between the ratioid sphere, concerned with facts, and the non-ratioid sphere of singular experiences and values:

A barometric low hung over the Atlantic. It moved eastward toward a high-pressure area over Russia without as yet showing any inclination to bypass this high in a northerly direction. The isotherms and isotheres were functioning as they should. The air temperature was appropriate relative to the annual mean temperature and to the aperiodic monthly fluctuations of the sun, the moon, the phases of the moon, of Venus, of the rings of Saturn, and many other significant phenomena were all in accordance with the forecasts in the astronomical yearbooks. The water vapour in the air was at its maximal state of tension, while the humidity was minimal. In a word that characterizes the facts fairly accurately, even if it is a bit old-fashioned: It was a fine day in August 1913.¹³ (MwQ 3)

¹² "Im Physischen haben wir uns geholfen (Funktionsbegriff). Im Geistigen sind wir ganz ohnmächtig. Die Intellektualität läßt uns im Stich. Aber nicht, weil der Intellekt seicht ist – als ob uns nicht auch alles andre im Stich ließe! – sondern weil wir nicht gearbeitet haben." (GE 856)

¹³ "Über dem Atlantik befand sich ein barometrisches Minimum; es wanderte ostwärts, einem über Rußland lagernden Maximum zu, und verriet noch nicht die Neigung, diesem nördlich auszuweichen. Die Isothermen und Isotheren taten ihre Schuldigkeit. Die Lufttemperatur stand in einem ordnungsgemäßen Verhältnis zur mittleren Jahrestemperatur, zur Temperatur des kältesten wie des wärmsten Monats und zur aperiodischen monatlichen Temperaturschwankung. Der Auf- und Untergang der Sonne, des Mondes, der Lichtwechsel des Mondes, der Venus, des Saturnringes und viele andere bedeutsame Erscheinungen entsprachen ihrer Voraussage in den

Walter Benjamin wrote about Franz Kafka: “Kafka’s work is an ellipse; its widely spaced focal points are defined, on the one hand, by mystical experience [...] and, on the other hand, by the experience of the modern city-dweller.”¹⁴ (Benjamin, 2002, volume 3, p. 325) Hardly ever has a writer been so schooled in the precision and rigor of the sciences, at ease with modern big-city life and interested in the classics of mysticism as Robert Musil. This is one of the aspects that makes his work both so compelling and hard to characterize. As opposed to simply dwelling in the tension field created by these two poles, as if in an ellipse to use Benjamin’s image, it was Musil’s aim to develop a new ethic which would bring the best of both worlds together. This new ethic, which would redefine both human life and the organization of society as we know it, should combine the precision of the sciences with the drive of the feelings and the creative possibilities of the imagination. How such a combination could be achieved was the central question Musil was trying to resolve throughout his life.

6. The Incapacity to Face Modern Times as a Moral Problem

While most of the attention goes to his masterpiece *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Musil wrote throughout his life a series of essays and public lectures which are of an immense richness and scope. Many of the ideas which remain implicit in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* were more explicitly formulated and explored in the essays. Some of them, such as his public address of 1936, *Über die Dummheit*, are so packed with compelling insights that they have attracted considerable scholarly attention. One of the most important essays that I will use in this book is the long and unfinished text *Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom*. This essay, although it has remained a fragmented draft, contains the most detailed and explicit overview of Musil’s analysis of his times. It was supposed to become a general summary of his cultural and political analysis of society from the end of the nineteenth century to Musil’s present in which he tries to define some of his central ideas, from the mystical *anderer Zustand* (*other condition*) to his theory of the amorphous nature of human beings, the *Theorem der menschlichen Gestaltlosigkeit* (*theorem of shapelessness*). It is unclear

astronomischen Jahrbüchern. Der Wasserdampf in der Luft hatte seine höchste Spannkraft, und die Feuchtigkeit der Luft war gering. Mit einem Wort, das das Tatsächliche recht gut bezeichnet, wenn es auch etwas altmodisch ist: Es war ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres 1913.” (MoE I 9)

¹⁴ “Kafkas Werk ist eine Ellipse, deren weit auseinanderliegende Brennpunkte von der mystischen Erfahrung [...] einerseits, von der Erfahrung des modernen Großstadtmenschen andererseits, bestimmt sind.” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 760)

why the essay has remained unfinished, probably because Musil gave priority to his novel and the flexibility of the novel form.¹⁵ The version in the *Gesammelte Werke* edited by Adolf Frisé, which is also the basis for the English translation, is considerably different from the edition in the *Lesetexte* of the recent Klagenfurter Ausgabe, but the latter also contains all the transcripts of the different drafts.

Musil was of the opinion that people were lacking the concepts to come to terms with modern life. Modernity had transformed the old ways of living and made the old moral guidelines hopelessly inadequate. People could no longer identify with the old moral order and the roles they were supposed to take up in life, yet they were also incapable of forming new and better guidelines to live by. They were only capable of assessing the present in terms of old models and looking at the past for solutions. Thus they could only regard the present as a period of decline or degeneration of a presumed old order and either seek solutions in the past or in idealized abstractions. For Musil, the cataclysm of the First World War came out of the incapacity of the people to come to terms with the present, while the anxiety and urge to do something about their confusion caused the widespread longing for war. While Musil saw the period after the war as a rare historical opportunity for drastic change, he saw that people had not learned anything from the war and soon embarked on an even more violent and regressive political path.

For Musil, the incapacity to face modern life is first and foremost a moral problem. In *Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom*, Musil claims that human beings are essentially shapeless but they adopt the prevailing morals, values and roles from the society they were born in. Claiming that people were in essence shapeless was rather subversive in times when naturalized racial and nationalist conceptions of human beings were becoming the norm. Out of anxiety for the contingency of existential life choices, people tend to cling to the moral order they are born in. Because of this, morality becomes petrified and does not allow the formation of new and better ethical models. In this analysis, morality, our value system, is closely connected with epistemology, the concepts by which we organize our knowledge about the world. It was this petrified morality that made people feel at odds with modern life.

When the members of the parallel campaign want to find the one crowning idea that Austria is supposed to stand for, they presuppose some kind of a pre-existing unity, an Austrian essence with certain traits that the people embody. As opposed to such static and essentialist views on

¹⁵ I will provide a possible explanation in the concluding remarks of chapter 1.

human beings and society, Musil regards society as constantly changing. The contemporary should not be assessed in terms of the past, but turned into a question to be explored. Questions of identity, gender roles, what binds a nation or a society, are issues that should be permanently reconsidered. They should be considered as problems which need to be addressed and reformulated over and over again in a constant process, updated to the changing historical contexts. An issue such as ‘what forms a nation?’ is, according to Musil, not something that one should presume in advance but a complex question that one needs to reconsider over and over again. By approaching the contemporary in terms of presumed essences or old models, people are incapable of properly assessing it and to come up with new conceptual and ethical models that could be adjusted to the complexities of modern life.

7. Toward an Ethics of Transformation

Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften is one of the classic novels describing the overwhelming impact of modernity on the big city, drastically transforming people’s lives to the extent that they felt alienated. The way people led their lives only a few decades earlier now seemed like ages ago. The speed of life, modern means of transport and communication, increasing commodification and modern city planning turned the city into an overwhelming mass of stimuli, often inducing a feeling of chaos, vertigo or anomie. Many writers of that generation have tried to describe the drastic way in which people’s lives were determined by modern city life, with its hectic pace, relentless mechanism and increased bureaucratization which made people feel like they were a mere cog in a machine, no longer able to get a grip on their surroundings or their own lives. As Musil wrote in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, modern life had finally made its way to the self, so that it no longer felt like individuals were the owners of certain qualities, but that certain qualities were taking possession of an individual. Writers such as Kafka, Alfred Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Elias Canetti in *Die Blendung* or Hermann Broch in *Die Schlafwandler* have described the dehumanization that modern society caused, as if people turned into inhuman chains in a machine, or even worse, as if they were losing their individuality in a mass mechanistic process. Theories of alienation, anomie, reification, mechanization, rationalization, dehumanization or demoralization all tried to explain why modern life felt like sheer incomprehensible madness to most people. What seemed like an overwhelming swirl and chaos was at the same time a standstill, ever more of the same, to borrow Horkheimer and Adorno’s image, like a machine rotating on the spot (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1981, p. 156).

Yet, while *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* certainly starts by presenting such a picture, Musil was of an entirely different opinion. As opposed to many of his contemporaries, Musil saw his times as a period of unusual possibilities. The fact that old ways and morals were rapidly being destroyed was in his view a positive thing. Unfortunately people were not able to embrace the potential that their time offered to drastically reconfigure what it means to be human and re-organize society on different principles. In a way, the transformation of human life that modernity brought along was an opportunity to redefine human life and overcome the sense of alienation, if it was guided by a proper ethics. Even though Musil was very skeptical of all the lofty talk about ‘creating the new man’ that could often be heard in the period around the First World War, his ambition was also nothing less than re-defining humanity as we know it, which had to be achieved by an ethics that was suitable for modern life.

The ethics that Musil had in mind was based on his background as a scientist. Scientific thought, for Musil, is not about finding laws in spheres where such a thing is not possible, but about treating knowledge as partial, situated and provisional. Scientific findings have to be constantly readjusted, corrected and updated, in a never-ending process. The same approach could be adopted to our lives. As opposed to considering human behavior as expressions of innate essences, life could be organized on the basis of hypotheses or essayistic experimentation. Musil wanted to enhance a sense of possibility, *Möglichkeitssinn*: an awareness that the present figuration of life could also have been different and better. In such a view, error plays an important role. Error allows for subtle readjustment, reconfiguration and reformulation, and should be distinguished from structural incapacity. This was Musil’s life project: “The task is to discover ever new solutions, connections, constellations, variables, to set up prototypes of an order of events, appealing new models of how one can be human, to *invent* the inner person.”¹⁶ (PS 64)

For him, society is in a constant transformation, and to keep up with these changes, we have to create epistemological and ethical models that have enough flexibility to be constantly readjusted. The biggest danger is a rigidity that makes such flexibility impossible, and Musil saw this rigidity in petrified morality and certain ideological apparatuses. Modernity had shattered the old life and transformed society and human beings beyond recognition. But modernity has also allowed humans to regain the capacity for flexibility and transformation if they could develop an

¹⁶ “Die Aufgabe ist: immer neue Lösungen, Zusammenhänge, Konstellationen, Variable zu entdecken, Prototypen von Geschehensabläufen hinzustellen, lockende Vorbilder, wie man Mensch sein kann, den inneren Menschen erfinden.” (SED 167)

ethics that would be better suited for modern life than the old petrified morality.

8. Musil's Influences: Inheriting Problems

It is a fact that Musil was extraordinarily well-read and up to date on the newest directions in the arts, philosophy and the sciences. The scope of his interests was immense, writing down reflections on his readings in his notebooks. Not only did he follow the newest writings in philosophy, mathematics or the life sciences and had a sound knowledge of the classic works, he never ceased to critically take on the ideas of his contemporaries and to position himself differently in relation to the views he was reading. This is a very peculiar and important feature of Musil as an intellectual: he took all the works he read, from Gestalt theory to mysticism, as challenges, as laying out the stakes of problems, as inheriting problematizations of an important matter, and not as a set of answers or a framework that he could adopt himself.

In all his radicalism and orientation toward the future, Musil was not an avant-gardist who wanted a drastic break with the past. He was of the opinion that most of the views and theories he read, however ideological or skewed, were often trying to raise important issues but because they were phrased in a problematic conceptual framework, they could not phrase the problem adequately and come to satisfactory answers. Musil sees intellectual history as the inheriting of problems and not as a theoretical frame to approach the world. The view on history adopted by Hans Blumenberg in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* could equally apply to Musil: "The continuity of history [...] lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems..."¹⁷ (Blumenberg, 1983, p. 48) The problems inherited had to be continuously reformulated, re-articulated and reconsidered. Problematization, turning taken-for-granted matters into questions to be resolved, is the central operator at work in Musil's intellectual endeavors.

It is only by keeping this in mind that we can consider the influences on Musil. The two influences that are pointed out the most are Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernst Mach¹⁸. Musil was an avid reader of Nietzsche throughout all his life. At different stages of his life he kept on returning to him, but like with all his influences, he takes up Nietzsche as a challenge.

¹⁷ "Die Kontinuität der Geschichte... liegt nicht im Fortbestand ideeller Substanzen, sondern in der Hypothek der Probleme..." (Blumenberg, 1988, p. 59)

¹⁸ There have been many scholarly works on the influence of Nietzsche or Mach on Musil, such as Charlotte Dresler-Brumme, 1986; Gunther Martens, 1999; Peter D. Smith, 2000; etc.

Nietzsche's body of work presented first and foremost a set of important challenges, as the laying out of problems in which he wants to position himself: the critique of morality, history as a discontinuous process, viewing the times in terms of health and sickness, experimentation with the self.... While Musil described Nietzsche's work as a park full of possibilities that nobody seems to walk in, there was no other thinker that had lead to so many problematic interpretations with detrimental effects as Nietzsche. In fact, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* could be read as a long critical look at the legacy of Nietzsche and how his work was relentlessly abused and misread, which becomes the most explicit in the passages about Clarisse. As I will make clear in this book, the ghost of Nietzsche is never far away in Musil's analysis, though he wanted to distinguish it from the way Nietzsche was commonly used by his contemporaries.

The influence of Ernst Mach on his work is even more subtle and complex. While his dissertation on Mach was in the end critical of Mach's theories, many scholars have argued that the influence of Mach on Musil remains nevertheless important, especially the replacement of causality by functionality, the importance of sensory impressions or the denial of any form of 'I' or self. Musil had the same critical relationship to all the theorists he respected, from Emerson to Carnap, from Bergson to Buber.

Sometimes credited to his ambition and competitiveness, Musil was often fiercely negative about the writers of his generation. Mainly Thomas Mann was the brunt of his scorn, but also Hermann Broch or Sigmund Freud. Reversely, Mann had great respect for Musil and even called the first volume of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* the most important book of that year. Franz Kafka, Alfred Döblin and Elias Canetti sent Musil their writings, before they were acknowledged as literary giants themselves, eager to have his feedback.

It is an understatement to say that Musil was as critical as he was intelligent and well-read. The way certain authors exerted an influence on Musil was by presenting him with challenges and problems that he found compelling, not in providing him with theories or concepts that he unambiguously took over.

9. The Different Editions of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*

After the original two volumes of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and the third volume published by his wife Martha after Musil's death, all subsequent editions had to come to terms with the unfinished nature of the novel and the large amount of remaining fragments and chapter drafts.

In 1952, a new edition was published edited by Adolf Frisé. Frisé had made the choice to edit the novel as much as possible and ‘puzzle’ the fragments together into a somewhat coherent narrative leading to a conclusive ending. This heavily edited edition led to a rather unfortunate debate in the 1950s and 1960s about the presumed ending of the novel. The first English translation of the novel appeared in 1953 by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser¹⁹, though both scholars disagreed with Frisé’s editing of the novel. Inherent in this search for the grand conclusion of the novel was a debate about the final meaning of the novel: was the novel going to end in destruction and world war or in the utopian, mystical romance of Ulrich and Agathe? While most of the Musil-scholars nowadays view the unfinished nature of the novel as an important part of the work, something which was inevitable for strictly internal reasons, namely Musil’s views of the novel as a site for experimentation with different possibilities, this debate still flares up every so often.

Responding to the critiques of the way he edited the novel, Frisé published a new edition in 1978 as part of Musil’s collected works in nine volumes. Two years earlier, he had also edited the first edition of Musil’s diaries and notebooks. For the collected works, Frisé fundamentally changed his approach, no longer attempting any form of reconstruction or imposing an order on the novel, but presenting the fragments as they are, as parallel, mutually exclusive plot lines and continuations. This edition became the standard edition of Musil’s work and the basis for many translations. From that moment on, the experimental open ending of the novel became an inherent part of the novel, even adding to its value, though recently the influential German opinion maker in literary affairs, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, refused to regard *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* as part of the great German literary canon because Musil was not able to bring his novel to a sound conclusion and to decide on a conclusive ending²⁰.

In 1992, 50 years after Musil’s death, a version of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* appeared with an additional CD-ROM containing the literary *Nachlass*. This edition was the first to use the opportunities of new

¹⁹ In 1995, a new translation was made by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike.

²⁰ Much more moderately than Reich-Ranicki, the American literature scholar Harold Bloom uses the unfinished nature of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* to value him slightly less than Joyce, Proust or Kafka: “Because of the unfinished (and unfinishable) nature of his masterwork, *The Man without Qualities*, he cannot quite be placed in the company of Joyce and Proust and Kafka, or even of Thomas Mann and William Faulkner, among the High Modernists.” (in Bloom, 2005, ed., p. 1) For more on the complications with the editions of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, see Walter Fanta’s *The Genesis of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. (in Payne et al., 2007, eds., p. 251-284)

digital technology to present Musil's complex and expansive *Nachlass* to the reader.

In 2009, there was the release of a new digital edition of Musil's collected works and *Nachlass*: the Klagenfurter Ausgabe, edited by Walter Fanta, Klaus Amann and Karl Corino, from the Musil-Institute at the University of Klagenfurt. On one single DVD, which will be gradually updated in the following years, we are presented with Musil's complete writings, his entire *Nachlass*: the different versions of his novel and essay drafts, his correspondence, transcripts of his handwritten notes, annotations and working comments, a glossary of relevant names and more. The amount of information on this single disc is simply overwhelming. For the first time, the reader can freely float through the fragments, different versions of the same text and the transcripts, whether following his or her own interests or the cryptic numeral indications that Musil gave the fragments to bring some kind of order to all the drafts. At any place where the scholar finds himself in the maze which is Musil's *Nachlass*, he or she can take many different directions from there, fully exploiting the possibilities of digital technology such as hyperlinks.

It is at this stage unclear to assess in which way the new Klagenfurter Ausgabe will impact Musil-scholarship, but that it will make an impact is without doubt. Musil's collected works have left the stage of being a manageable book and are now presented as a digital archive, a wealth of information in which researchers can delve. But while the new edition certainly makes it easier for the scholar to find passages on the immense amount of topics Musil has written about, passages that previously were hard to find, the new edition can also come across as a Kafkaesque maze, a dazzling archive with different drafts of the same text, before which the scholar can be rather perplexed. The Klagenfurter Ausgabe has all the benefits and problems of a modern archive, which could leave the scholar equally perplexed as general Stumm in the Viennese library. While everything Musil ever wrote is now presented on a single disc, his work is now more than ever a heterogeneous, fragmented body of drafts, and trying to come to terms with it can seem as daunting and impossible as general Stumm's attempt to find a synthesis of the intellectual life in the library archives.

For this book, I have chosen to ignore the suggested manner of citing by the editors of the Klagenfurter Ausgabe, because such references would be impossibly long, and chose to use abbreviations for the cited texts instead. Only where I am referring to a singular section in the Klagenfurter Ausgabe, such as a small fragment, will I provide the full reference in a footnote.

10. The Reception of Musil's Work

This introduction by no means allows for a presentation or an overview of the diverse ways in which scholars have taken up Musil's work²¹. Yet, certain general trends can be distinguished. In the 1950s, scholars tended to go for an existentialist reading of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, emphasizing the general sense of alienation and anxiety in modern life. Another early trend was to approach Musil's work in a psychoanalytical or psycho-biographical manner. Themes in Musil's work were explained in terms of Musil's biographical information, mainly in terms of his lost sister and peculiar family situation. The important Musil-scholar and biographer Karl Corino is a prominent example of this approach.

A trend that has grown since the works of Claudio Magris in the 1960s and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin in the 1970s was to see Musil's work as an unusually lucid and insightful source for the cultural-historical study of Vienna in the first half of the 20th century. Similarly, scholars such as David Luft want to situate Musil within his cultural-historical context.

But the approach that has evoked the most heated debates was the scholarship that tries to assess Musil's work as a cultural or social criticism. Especially in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s Musil's work evoked very conflicting evaluations, often part of debates around the value of modernist literature for cultural criticism. Recently, scholars such as Stefan Jonsson have even read Musil in post-colonial terms, presenting Musil's theory of the subject as a subject that cannot be taken up in rhetoric about national identities. And finally, many scholars have focused on an ethical reading of Musil. This scholarship often places the emphasis on Musil's theories of morality and ethics and, as well as Musil's mysticism. A recent, original contribution to this strand of research is Patrizia McBride's *The Void of Ethics, Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*.

Without ignoring the valuable contributions amongst the different approaches to Musil's work, this book will be closer to the traditions of reading Musil in terms of cultural criticism and ethics than the psycho-biographical readings or the strictly stylistic studies of Musil's texts. Rather than trying to find the source of Musil's themes and interests in his family life, I will try to emphasize his work as a critical intervention in the prevailing intellectual, artistic and moral views and practices, situating his work within the broader Viennese context.

²¹ For an excellent overview of the main trends in the reception of Musil's work in English, German and to a lesser extent French, see Tim Mehigan's *The Critical Response to Robert Musil's 'The Man without Qualities'*. (Mehigan, 2003)

The reception of Musil's work has certainly not always been positive. Paradigmatic for many of the later negative evaluations of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was Georg Lukács' article from 1958, *Die weltanschaulichen Grundlagen des Avantgardeismus*. While Maurice Blanchot's review essay, written at the same time in France, was nuanced and well-informed (Blanchot, 1959, p. 184-206), Lukács' article was reductive and rather dogmatic. Lukács accuses modernist writers such as Joyce, Beckett, Benn and especially Musil of being overly obsessed with formal criteria, solitariness and reflection. According to Lukács, writers such as Musil, as opposed to Thomas Mann, reject all connection to reality or history. For Lukács, the problem with writers such as Musil is ideological, a fault in their *Weltanschauung*. By allegedly rejecting reality outright and praising an unlimited subjectivism (in the view of Lukács), they fail to adopt a clear perspective to their work, and fail to clarify the difference between concrete and abstract potentialities in their characters and situations, merely devoting their energies to the pseudo-realization of abstract potentialities. The result is a lack of interest in reality, a critique that remains empty without a clear direction and an obsession with the pathological as a vain escape from the problems of society.

The criticism that Musil's work failed as a cultural critique because it falls apart in a wholesale, indiscriminate negativity on the one hand and abstract, private utopian fantasies on the other hand, was repeatedly expressed in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the works of German scholars Hartmut Böhme and Klaus Laermann, bearing the stamp of Lukács' early critical assessment. This view was fueled by the misunderstandings surrounding the second volume of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and the problematic debates about the presumed ending of the novel, thus evading one of the most crucial aspects of the novel: the experimental and open-ended nature of the work as inherently following from Musil's ethics. Lukács' negative evaluation of the pathological that pervades *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was echoed by clinical psychologist Louis Sass in *Madness and Modernism; Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought*, demonstrating the eerie resemblance between the writings of modernist writers, using once again Musil as a prominent example, and traits associated with schizophrenia such as detachment, *derealization* of the world or an obsession with formal experimentation.

These recurring and rather negative assessments of Musil's writings have the advantage that they allow us to formulate the most important complexities and confusions concerning his work that need further clarification.

11. A Critical-Utopian Project

What are the most common problems that scholars have encountered in Musil's work? Firstly, scholars have been troubled by the pervasive negativity in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. What was it that Musil found problematic about his times? What did he want to critique and expose, and more importantly, how does this critique operate in the novel? Secondly, what does Musil's utopianism consist of? What was he trying to achieve and, considering the criticism that Musil's work seems to fall apart into an indiscriminate negativity and abstract, private utopian fantasies, how does the utopian aspect of his work relate to the critical aspect? And thirdly, what do we have to make of all the pathological behavior, the madness or the obsession with crime and transgression which seems to be prevalent in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*? Was it indeed a form of escapism or the reflection of maddening times as some have argued, or does it serve a function in Musil's novel as a critical-utopian project?

These three broad themes that dominate the reception of Musil's work are what I want to clarify in this book. Moreover, instead of seeing them as three distinct topics, I will argue that all three are inseparable from each other and can only be understood in relation to each other. The critical aspect of the novel cannot be understood without an understanding of the utopian aspect and vice versa. The theme of the pathological cannot be understood unless it is seen in the light of the novel as a critical-utopian project. Inversely, the critical-utopian aspect of Musil's work has to be seen as an intervention in a certain condition society was stuck in, and which, according to Musil, had all the features of a pathological condition. These topics are closely interwoven and make up the heart of Musil's cultural critique.

In the first chapter I look at Musil's work as a critical project. In Musil's analysis of the mechanisms that were hampering people from facing the present and to form new epistemological and ethical models adequate for modern life, morality and ideology play a crucial role. Although the term 'ideology' appears very often in Musil's writings, it turns out that Musil used this term in varying ways, making it hard to assemble his scattered writings into a coherent theory of ideology. In his view, people were profoundly shaped by the prevailing moral order, a bond which was strengthened, perpetuated and motivated by ideological apparatuses. Such a moral order presented itself as natural and did not allow reflection on its contingent nature. The complex mechanizations of morality and ideology led to the continuing crisis in which the present was evaluated in terms of the past or idealized abstractions, and the conception of human life was trapped in naturalized ideological rhetoric, increasingly racialized and

nationalist. Throughout *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Musil relentlessly exposes and problematizes the mechanisms that kept people in a state of rigidity, blocking them from transforming their ethical and conceptual guidelines so as to update them to the challenges and possibilities of the modern world.

In the second chapter, I look at Musil's work as a utopian project. If the first chapter presents what was hampering the capacity to form a new ethics, the second chapter will explore how Musil was trying to overcome this state and what he was hoping to achieve. Crucial in this chapter will be to formulate an answer to Lukács' compelling accusation that Musil could not give a direction to his critique. His utopianism did not consist of advocating one single program or goal, towards which one had to strive in a straight line. It is neither a certain place nor a future moment in time, as the utopian is often conceived. Instead, Musil wants to have a more flexible view on human life, the way society can be organized and the way history proceeds. He wants to open up a sense of possibility, allowing for the exploration of different and better formations. His utopianism does not move toward one stable ideal state but is inherently open-ended, aiming toward the constant reformation and readjustment of one's aims and norms. Rather than being concerned with one specific end, Musil's critical-utopian project is concerned with exploring the conditions of possibility for more flexibility and the constant readjustment of our aims and norms. In this sense, the critical project, the problematizing of limitations, is part of one and the same movement as the utopian project, the exploration of new possibilities, and should not be seen as two separate realms as in the critique of Lukács.

In the light of this reading of Musil's utopianism, I look at the different utopian proposals throughout *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and the recurring debates about the presumed ending of the novel. I argue that Musil's utopianism cannot be reduced to a series of utopian proposals or to one particular utopian proposal that could serve as a normative conclusion. Furthermore, I compare Musil's views with Lukács' earlier theories of reification, Ernst Bloch's writings on utopianism and the Nietzschean view on history. Finally, I clarify that Musil's interest in the Viennese women's movement can only be understood in the light of Musil's critical-utopianism as I formulate it in the chapter.

In the third chapter I explore the different ways in which the pathological plays a role in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Musil had been critiqued by Lukács for having an obsession with the pathological for the sake of itself, as a form of escapism. Rather than one homogenous theme, I will argue that the role of the pathological, madness and the monstrous

in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, works on different levels at the same time. From his earliest writings to his very last, Musil described society often in terms of a pathological condition. From these diverse writings, I distill a Musilian theory of pathology, which should be distinguished from the ways other artists adopted the theme of madness or pathology to critique society. The defining moment which shaped Musil's views on the pathology of society was a visit to a psychiatric hospital in Rome in 1913. Pathology is for Musil a compulsive, frantic state, which comes out of a lack of comprehension, an incapacity to face the demands of the present or an imbalance between feelings and the intellect. Pathology is a form of rigidity which does not allow for the formation of new and better models, compulsively going for frustrated, destructive and inadequate acts instead. The period between the turn of the century and the Nazi period seemed to resemble such a pathological state.

This leads us to a second level: Musil never stops critiquing the rhetoric of pathology adopted by conservative, moralist groups. There was a widespread tendency to dismiss new forms of art as pathological, immoral or degenerate. He exposes the rhetoric of those defending the old moral order and a naturalized view on humans, society and its values in clinical terms, as if everything which poses a threat to this order is a deviation of a 'healthy', 'natural' order. In this sense, the judgment 'pathological' is part of the prevailing rigidity and part of the actual pathological condition society was in.

And finally, I situate the prevalence of pathological, transgressive behavior in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* as a technique to expose the inadequacy of the current moral models or norms and to increase the need and possibility for new ethical formations. As in the previous two chapters, I situate Musil's view in his intellectual context. In this context, the reasons for Musil's objections to Freudian psychoanalysis can also be better understood. Both the writings of Georges Canguilhem on pathology and Nietzsche's complex views on health and disease are of great help in clarifying Musil's implicit theory of pathology.

12. Concerns with Using the Texts of Musil

Musil's writings that we have at our disposal can be divided into the texts that Musil deemed ready for an audience and the writings that were Musil's personal explorations (drafts, notebooks, fragments...). We know as a fact that Musil was highly demanding and strict on his own texts before he considered them to be finished and good enough to appear in publication, such as when he withdrew twenty chapters that were ready to be published as the continuation of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* because

he thought they needed further reworking. The texts that were not ready for publication and the writings that were never intended to be public, such as the diaries, are characterized by their fragmented nature. Phrases are repeated or broken off in mid-sentence, passages recur in multiple varieties, and provisional sections were reworked over the course of many years. We should remain aware of the explorative nature of the works he did not intend to be published. These texts were provisional and could have been reworked.

In the early twenties Musil had the intention to publish a volume with his collected essays with an introduction, a project that got abandoned²². In the 26th notebook, Musil writes about the problem of collecting essays that were intended for a very specific context. He would either have to keep the essays as they were, and provide the contextual situation in an introduction, or rewrite the essays. Musil's intellectual reflections were not meant to be some kind of a-temporal universal theory or a system that could be used outside of its specific context. Musil's essays were interventions in a very specific situation and, for Musil, they only derive their value from their engagement with a particular context. From Musil's point of view, intellectual reflections have to come to terms with the facts of the present, the conditions of the times, and the specific politico-intellectual configuration of society, and, if not, they are simply a part of the problem. The issue of context cannot be underestimated when looking at Musil's essays. He wrote that he abandoned the idea of collecting his essays because "... I feel far too strongly how elements in them that are connected beneath the surface were shaped by the particular occasion that provided me with the stimulus, even though I did not actually feel that I was ready to write; thus what was for me essential always found a home in something peripheral."²³ (D 26) Exactly as the kind of thought that Musil advocated, his reflections have to be seen as partial truths, engagements with a very specific context and concrete setting, knowledge that always is and *has to be* provisional, something one always returns to in order to rework and keep on reworking. An attempt to define a certain concept in his work will always be a

²² Fontana writes that it saddened Musil that his essays could not get collected and published. The publisher S.-Fischer-Verlag declined: "Dagegen schmerzte es ihn sehr, seine Essays nicht gesammelt vorlegen zu können. Er hatte viel an der Vorbereitung des Bandes gearbeitet und er hatte sich viel davon versprochen, besonders deshalb, weil man mit Hilfe der Essays sein geistiges Wesen und seine literarische Leistung besser und klarer hätte ermessen können." (in Dinklage, ed., 1960, p. 335)

²³ "...weil ich viel zu sehr fühle, wie in ihnen etwas unter der Oberfläche Zusammenhängendes durch die Gelegenheit modelliert wurde, die mir, der ich mich eigentlich gar nicht zum schreiben bereit fühlte, einen Anlaß unterschob; so wurde das Wesentliche eigentlich immer im Nebenbei untergebracht." (TH26 7)

provisional definition, a working hypothesis. Hypothetical thinking and essayistic exploration were values that Musil highly endorsed, and this is how the many fragments of notebooks, essays and novel drafts have to be read. On the other hand, the ideas that Musil *did* intend to be read by a wider audience, shaped in a more timeless and accomplished form, were of course for the most part novelized in his magnum opus *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

To this we have to add a second problem. In the same notebook 26, Musil emphasizes that all the ideas he has developed belonged to a specific intellectual debate going on at the time, and that the ideas he wishes to account for, do not belong to him alone. However, Musil also wrote that he always felt to be different and that he wanted to express certain ideas because no one else wrote them. This is one of the trickiest problems one encounters when studying Musil. Taking up an existing theory which he proceeds to slightly displace in order to problematize or rework the issues at stake is a very typical feature of Musil's intellectual work. Throughout *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* we can find many examples of the displaced use of almost literal statements from people as diverse as Nietzsche, Emerson or Maeterlinck. Musil wants to engage with existing thoughts and take up their ideas in order to, as it were, change them from within and to rework the thought process. Musil is not interested in delimiting to what extent an idea is 'his' or belongs to a specific intellectual tradition. Musil never merely adopts an idea from someone else unchanged, and yet, all his thoughts are direct engagements with existing theories. Some of the theories he wants to tackle are nowadays almost forgotten, while hugely popular in Musil's time. Although his ideas are often embedded in an existing debates and theories, the way in which Musil challenges them is so profound and original that his ideas survive the specific context in which he deployed them.

Indeed, in a postscript to this book, I argue that Musil's ideas, his cultural theory if you wish, can be taken out of its historical context and still be of great value to certain disputes and problems that our society faces today.