

Musil's Ethics of Reading

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"Softly quote a poem to yourself on the floor of the stock exchange, and the stock exchange will become for a moment just as meaningless as the poem is in it."
(Robert Musil, "Toward a New Aesthetic," P&S: 197)

"Er war ein Dichter und haBte das Ungefähre."
(Rainer Maria Rilke)

"We can be heroes, just for one day."
(David Bowie, "Heroes")

The work of Robert Musil is perhaps the best example that the most important tasks one assigns oneself are precisely the ones that are impossible to accomplish. Thus, in true Musilian spirit, I am seeking answers to a set of questions that may – in all likelihood – be impossible to answer. These questions have to do with what I propose to call Musil's "ethics of reading."

What happens when we read? Specifically, what happens when we read Musil? Or, to put it differently, what should happen when we read Musil? In trying to answer these questions I shall follow the lead of Musil's own reflections on the reading process. Throughout his writings, Musil engages in a sophisticated theoretical debate on the function of literature, a debate that offers a number of insights into his views on the nature of reading. His reflections point to a complementarity between writing and reading that allows us, I would suggest, to read Musil's works in general, and his unfinished masterpiece *The Man without Qualities* in particular, as an allegorical quest for the

right kind of readership. For reasons that, I hope, will become clear later on, I wish to define as "ethical" both Musil's literary project and the readership it aims for.

What do I mean when I use the term "ethical" in describing Musil's writing? Musil generally distinguishes between "Literatur," a commodity on the market place of supply and demand, and what he calls "Dichtung," writing that pursues an existential task, that of analyzing reality and contemplating questions of meaning. *Dichtung* in this sense is an anthropological necessity, a task the writer performs to aid his or her culture in making sense of the world. As a note from an essay fragment of 1914 makes clear, Musil takes this task very seriously:

I accord to *Dichtung* an importance that goes far beyond the importance of other human activities. (My translation).

Ich messe der Dichtung eine Wichtigkeit bei, die weit über die Wichtigkeit anderer menschlicher Tätigkeiten emporragt. (GW II: 1327).

Musil's work is characterized by an endeavor to do justice to the issues addressed in all their complexity, based on a mandate of exactitude, a quasi-scientific standard of precision:

Precision, as a human attitude, demands precise action and precise being. It makes maximal demands on the doer and on life. (MwQ I: 267) .

Genauigkeit, als menschliche Haltung, verlangt auch ein genaues Tun und Sein. Sie verlangt Tun und Sein im Sinne eines maximalen Anspruchs. (MoE I: 247).

Musil sets himself, and his prospective readers, extremely high standards; some would say excessively high standards. As is evident from Musil's essays, journals, published works, and unfinished drafts, his work is characterized by uncommon intellectual rigor. What makes reading Musil's journals so fascinating, for instance, is that here one finds oneself, as it were, looking over Musil's shoulder, watching him think: his excerpts from an extremely broad range of literary, philosophical, journalistic, and scientific sources indicate the extent to which he set out actively to engage in the issues of the time with an

altogether encyclopedic hunger for knowledge. We can quite literally observe Musil doing research when trying to analyze a problem, pursuing his topics with the mindset of a scientist.

Musil's quasi-scientific literary enterprise has profound ethical implications. On the most basic level, of course, all of his writings in one way or another attempt to address questions of value and meaning, culminating in the quest of Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man without Qualities*, to find out what he should do with (and in) his life:

My dear Agathe, there's a whole circle of questions here, which has a large circumference and no center, and all these questions are 'How should I live?' (MwQ II: 972).

Meine liebe Agathe, es gibt einen Kreis von Fragen, der einen großen Umfang und keinen Mittelpunkt hat: und diese Fragen heißen alle 'wie soll ich leben?' (MoE I: 895).

The question of the proper conduct of life is, of course, the basic question the philosophical discipline of ethics wishes to address. Yet the ethical dimension of Musil's work goes beyond the level of content in that the ethical concerns are placed in a variety of contexts. In the novel, all characters undertake their quest for ethical orientation in a civilization that finds itself in a pervasive crisis: what traditionally may have been viewed as a question of making the "right" choices in one's actions is thus subject to a bewildering set of complexities. Some of the complexities have to do with the nature of modernity in general: in a post-Nietzschean world in which the autonomy of the subject has been called into question, the very notion of human agency has been dissolved. The individual is no longer the autonomous agent faced with a set of choices: "No matter what you do,' the man without qualities thought with a shrug, 'within this mare's nest of forces at work, it doesn't make the slightest difference!'" (MwQ 7; "Man kann tun, was man will [...], es kommt in diesem Gefilz von Kräften nicht im geringsten darauf an!" MoE I: 13). For the longest time, Ulrich responds to this situation by drifting through life, oscillating between transgressive phantasies of anarchic activism and despondent paralysis, between a vague impulse just to do something (anything, including

murder and suicide) and a resigned withdrawal into theoretical contemplation.

The situation is rendered even more acute if one keeps in mind that the entire novel, and the embedded ethical quests of its characters, are set against the backdrop of an impending civilizational catastrophe: their trials and tribulations take place in the shadow of the looming catastrophe of World War I, signaling the self-destruction of a civilization that has lost its ethical orientation. This horizon of catastrophe implicates the reader in manifold ways: instead of presenting us with narratives of situations involving ethical choices ("right" or "wrong"), Musil's unfinished novel confronts us with a configuration in which we have to place our own values and desires, our impulses and aspirations, into a larger context of crisis – in our age perhaps the prospect of global nuclear annihilation, the danger of environmental self-destruction. Through confronting us with such issues in a powerful aesthetic experience that is, I wish to stress, at once pleasurable and disturbing, Musil's torso of a novel is akin to Rilke's famous "Archaic Torso of Apollo" with its admonition to an existential reorientation, "You must change your life" ("Du mußt dein Leben ändern.")

This change or reorientation, Musil suggests, has less to do with specific choices of action but more with a readjustment of perspective. Given the context of modernity sketched above, the guiding question "How should I live?" cannot be answered with clear-cut instructions on how to act. Ethics, in the Musilian sense, is not a set of norms that guide action, but concerns a mode of being. This ethical mode of being is made possible through the focus on the development of a capacity for certain modes of perception:

There is not ethical action, but only an ethical condition, within which an immoral activity or way of being is no longer possible.

("Commentary on a Metapsychics" [1914], P&S: 56)

Es gibt kein ethisches Handeln, sondern nur einen ethischen Zustand, innerhalb dessen ein unsittliches Tun und Sein nicht mehr möglich ist.

("Anmerkungen zu einer Metapsychik" [1914], GW II: 1017)

The capacity to achieve this "ethical condition," which Musil defines as a different mode of interacting with reality, is intimately related to a capacity to read, both have to do with what Musil, in his seminal essay "Toward a New Aesthetic" ("Ansätze zu neuer Ästhetik") of 1925, calls "another attitude toward the world" (P&S: 197; "ein andres Verhalten zur Welt," GW II: 1141).

In this essay, Musil develops his famous notion of the "other condition" ("anderer Zustand"), making interesting observations on the reading process. In the context of describing the trance-like states induced in the viewer by the then relatively new art form of (silent) film, Musil establishes a connection between such altered psychic states and the experience of various form of art, including literature. Musil stresses that reading is not merely a cognitive process of decoding meaning. Reading, he emphasizes, is as much a bodily experience as it is a conceptual activity:

Even on a page of prose really deserving of the name, one can recognize that a general excitement is communicated *before* the meaning. (P&S: 204)

Selbst an einer Seite Prosa, die wirklich diesen Namen verdient, kann man erkennen, daß früher als der Sinn sich eine allgemeine Erregung mitteilt. (GW II: 1150)

The mixture of cognition and affect, of mental and physiological processes, Musil describes here as the nature of aesthetic experience is especially valid for his own writings. Musil's texts invite and enable the reader to view the world,

not [...] as a field of objective relations, but rather as a consequence of self-oriented experiences (P&S 207)

die Welt wird nicht als ein Zusammenhang dinglicher Beziehungen erlebt, sondern als eine Folge ichhafter Erlebnisse. (GW II: 1153)

[I would translate "Folge" as "sequence" or "succession" rather than "consequence" here!].

Musil recognizes an affinity between this phenomenon and the mystic tradition, but at the same time stresses that there is nothing esoteric to this experience. Every human being, simply by virtue of being human,

Musil insists, has both the capacity and the need to experience this condition. In 1923 he writes:

I believe that the average person is a far more avid metaphysician than he admits. "Avid" is probably not the right epithet, but a dull accompanying awareness of his curious situation rarely leaves him. His own mortality, the minuteness of our little ball of earth in the cosmos, the mystery of personality, the question of an afterlife, the sense and senselessness of existence: these are questions that the individual ordinarily brushes aside his whole life as in any case unanswerable, but that he nevertheless feel surrounding him all his life like the walls of a room.

("The German as Symptom" [1923], P&S: 153).

Ich glaube, daß der Durchschnittsmensch ein viel eifrigerer Metaphysiker ist, als er zugibt. Eifrig ist wohl nicht das richtige Beiwort, aber ein dumpfes Begleitgefühl der sonderbaren Situation verläßt ihn selten. Der persönliche Tod, die Winzigkeit des Erdkugelchens im Kosmos, das Geheimnis der Persönlichkeit, die Frage des Fortlebens, Sinn und Sinnlosigkeit des Daseins, das sind Fragen, die der Einzelne in den meisten Fällen als ohnedies nicht beantwortbar zeit seines Lebens abweist, und die er dennoch wie Wände eines Raums sein ganzes Leben umschließen fühlt.

("Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom" [1923], GW II: 1356-7).

In one important sense, then, Musil's writings reach out to everybody. However forbidding and cerebral Musil may appear, all that he asks of his reader is to acknowledge the importance of the metaphysical questions that concern all of us and to develop a willingness, to use Musil's own metaphor, to step outside the "walls of [his or her] room." We all, Musil claims, carry with us a residual awareness of a different mode of life – the "other condition" which encompasses the "ethical condition" – glimpses of which we can catch through the aesthetic experience of art, through reading.

The kind of reader Musil aims for is an ethical reader, by which I do not mean a reader who seeks concrete advice concerning the conduct of his or her life, the way, perhaps, Hermann Hesse has been appropriated by generations of (mostly adolescent) readers. Rather, it is a reader who shares with Musil the notion that *Dichtung* matters,

that *Dichtung* and ethics are in a sense identical. Perhaps this is why a definition of ethics recently proposed by Geoffrey Galt Harpham actually reads like a description of Musil's notion of *Dichtung*:

Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness – the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-itself, etc. – are articulated and negotiated. (1995: 394).

Musil's writings invite and enable us as readers to enter this arena, to inhabit a space in which we can challenge ourselves through an experience of this kind of otherness.

All of Musil's characters, especially in his novel *The Man without Qualities*, search for meaning, no matter how idiosyncratic a form this search may take. All characters define themselves through what they do and do not read, or rather, *how* they do and do not read. From Diotima's capricious "tie-dyed metaphysics" to Arnheim's philosophical posturing; from Rachel's sentimental attachment to trashy novels to General von Stumm's disdain of civilian "Nur-Literatur"; from Leo Fischel's robust interest in Peter Rosegger's *Heimatkunst* to the bigoted anti-Semitism of Hans Sepp; from Walter's neo-Wagnerian dilettantism to Clarisse's crazed appropriation of Nietzsche, all characters are products of notions acquired from outside, "angelesen" as the German expression goes. All world views and ideologies espoused by the characters are distorted, sometimes perverted, emanations of the metaphysical dispositions discussed above, the need to make sense of the world. No matter how bizarre, such efforts to create meaning are the product of an ethical impulse to find orientation in a reality – as an ironic chapter heading reminds us: "Ideals and Morality are the best means for filling that big hole called soul" (MwQ I: 198); "Ideale und Moral sind das beste Mittel, um das große Loch zu stopfen, das man Seele nennt" (MoE I: 185). Even the pornographic literature Ulrich finds in the hidden drawer of his father's desk speaks to this quest to reach beyond oneself, as Ulrich's comment suggests: "Those are the dregs of mysticism!" (MwQ II: 835); "Das ist der letzte Rest der Mystik!" (MoE I: 769).

For the most part, then, reading in *The Man without Qualities* consists in misreading. To the extent that reading implies in large part a process of appropriation of ideas into one's own mental horizon, every reading is a kind of misreading. Such misreadings are caused by the willful interests of the reader and, often enough, provoked by the text itself, much as Ulrich gives an edition of Nietzsche's works as a wedding present to Walter and Clarisse, thereby sowing the seeds of the destruction of that relationship. The only exception to the general panorama of erroneous appropriations, messed-up lives, and failed human interactions in Musil's novel seems to be the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe. Indeed, it is tempting to view the character of Agathe in Musil's novel as an allegorical embodiment of the ideal reader. It is through his encounter with his "forgotten" sister that Ulrich overcomes his ethical and creative impasse. His conversations with her help him regain confidence in the necessity, the very possibility, of human interaction. Her presence inspires him to attempt to articulate in writing some of the theoretical problems that had been occupying him and he begins to note down his reflections on the nature of emotions and the psychology of love. Ulrich regains his ability to feel and to love by communicating with another human being through conversation and through writing. It is the advent of a reader that makes writing possible. The (would-be) writer finds his (would-be) reader. Here, Agathe's ability to respond to Ulrich's writings, her understanding and responsibility, merge in what one could call, following Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, a "Response-Ability." As we watch Ulrich (and Musil) "learn" to write, we as readers perhaps come closer to learning to read, to develop the capacity to respond. Yet the reader's relationship to Musil's writing is fraught with the same ambivalences that characterize the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe: it is at the same time cerebral and visceral, spiritual and erotic, exhilarating and disturbing, pure and transgressive. Like Ulrich and Agathe, writing and reading are brother and sister, inseparable "Siamese twins," as it were, to use a metaphor from the novel (MWQ II: 976). As an interlocutor in the near mystical "sacred conversations" ("Heilige Gespräche," MoE I: 746) with Ulrich,

Agathe becomes a kind of co-author of Ulrich's writings. Likewise, Musil's works challenge us as readers to become co-authors as well, to enter into a dialogue with ideas that offer a challenge to our own preconceptions.

Yet it is impossible for us as readers to live as one half of a pair of "Siamese Twins". Ultimately, we have to separate ourselves from Musil's writings, no matter how seductive and fulfilling the experience of reading Musil may be. Musil's writings can perhaps transport us to where we can catch a glimpse of the "other condition", they can remind us of the "ethical" mode of existence, they can make us begin to rethink our lives, but ultimately we have to do our thinking ourselves just as we have to live our lives ourselves.

The relationship between Ulrich and Agathe in Musil's novel cannot serve as a model for concrete human interaction in the real world. It is of interest to note that Agathe's reading of Ulrich's journals constitutes a kind of violation of the readerly contract: Agathe finds Ulrich's notes and reads them secretly, without his permission. Perhaps this is an indication that we, as readers, should also violate the contractual bond that binds us to Musil's writings. The readiness to enter into a dialogue, the openness toward creating a bond of communication, the ability to embrace and let go, I wish to suggest, lie at the heart of Musil's ethics of reading.

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