

The Occasionalist Society In Robert Musil's Novel « The Man Without Qualities »

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The Occasionalist Society In Robert Musil's Novel « The Man Without Qualities »

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Abstract:

Robert Musil's Novel "The Man Without Qualities" has been classified in many ways: as historical novel, as experimental novel, as psychological novel, as social novel. The essay discusses these descriptions critically by combining three perspectives. First, by considering the remarks Musil made himself on his novel in his diaries, in his essays, and in the novel's draft chapters. Second, by tracing back the answers provided by literary theory in recent decades. Third, by drawing on Carl Schmitt's concept of occasionalism which he originally coined in examining the literary discourse of political romanticism. The essay comes to conclude that "The Man Without Qualities" can be characterized precisely by its occasionalist structure. The endless conversation in the occasionalist society of Kakania furthermore correlates with the structure of an endless – and therefore unfinished – novel.

The Man Without Qualities is one of the most fascinating novels of literary modernity. Reading Musil is an intellectual pleasure, but—unlike other pleasures—it is not without presupposition. One has to have a soft spot for essayistic digression, irony, the long distance, and unfinished stories. My question in this short essay is the following: What do we read when reading Musil? This implies the question of the novel's character. In recent decades *The Man Without Qualities* has been classified in many ways: as historical novel, as experimental novel, as psychological novel, as social novel, and even as sociological novel. All these classifications remain, at the very least, dissatisfying. I see three ways of coming closer to a more adequate description. The first one is to consider the remarks Musil made himself on his novel; the second is to trace back the answers provided by literary scholars and theory; the third one is to make use of a special literary concept in order to analyze the novel's literary structure. In this respect, I will draw on Carl Schmitt's concept



of *occasionalism*, which he coined in analyzing the literary discourse of Political Romanticism.

1 Contradictory Self-classifications

If we start with Musil's own explanations, we have to consider the passages in his works where he commented on his novel. Literary theorists who were engaged in reconstructing a systematic literary theory in his work have often stated that there is a literary theory in Musil's writings.¹ In his diaries, in his essays, and in the draft chapters of *The Man Without Qualities*, we come across theoretical reflections everywhere. The comments Musil made are most detailed in his draft of a so-called *Selbstanzeige* of his novel, which is to be found in the "general reflections" in the second volume.² In the German language, the word *Selbstanzeige* has a double meaning: it means either "voluntary declaration" – in case of "forgetting" to pay taxes and declaring them afterwards – or "self advertisement" – such as in writing a blurb for one's own book, which occurs in small publishing houses that do not have editors for these purposes. Although Musil was not pushed by his publisher to deliver such a *Selbstanzeige*, he wrote a draft of such a text, maybe in the expectation of advanced self-understanding. This becomes evident with regard to the outcome of the attempt. Significantly, Musil only tells what his novel is not. He declares: "This is not the long-awaited Great Austrian Novel ... This is not a description of the time ... This is not a description of society either ..." (Musil 1983: 1939) and so on.

This *Selbstanzeige* is by far not Musil's only declaration deploying an *ex-negativo* answer. Four years before publishing the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities*, Oskar Maurus Fontana asked Musil in an interview: "What are you working on?" (Fontana [1926] in Musil 1983: 939-942) In his reply to this question, Musil only declared laconically that he was "not writing a historical novel," (939) and explained what he later repeated in his *Selbstanzeige*.

Until today *ex-negativo* declarations like this are not unusual. The prefaces of many books contain statements like "This is not the ultimate book on

¹ See Mark M. Freed, *Robert Musil and the NonModern*, New York 2011; Barbara Neymeyer, *Utopie und Experiment. Zur Literaturtheorie, Anthropologie und Kulturkritik in Musils Essays*, Heidelberg 2009; Roger Willemsen, *Das Existenzrecht der Dichtung. Zur Rekonstruktion einer systematischen Literaturtheorie im Werk Robert Musils*, München 1984.

² Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1983, p. 1939. The *Selbstanzeige* has not yet been translated either into English or French.

Kafka,” or similar phrases which are redundant, because nobody would expect such an “ultimate book.” Musil’s *ex-negativo* declaration, however, has not been his last word. In a draft of an epilogue to his novel he confesses: “At least, this book has become a historical novel” (Musil 1983: 1941). With regard to his original intentions, this sentence reads like a capitulation. Indeed, a historical novel is exactly that which he never wanted to write. Regarding the plot of *The Man Without Qualities*, however, the category of the “historical novel” is not false. One just has to remember the detailed descriptions of the Kakanian world, particularly the relations of the Parallel Campaign preparing the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of Kaiser Franz Joseph’s coronation,³ or novel characters like Paul Arnheim who are portraits of historical figures.

If we should draw a first conclusion from this short stocktaking of Musil’s self-descriptions, we have to resume that he described the novel in categories that he himself rejected. This paradoxical result may be dissatisfying. Assuming that *The Man Without Qualities* is a historical novel, one has to ask which story it actually tells. It’s not easy to give an answer to this question. *The Man Without Qualities* consists of a series of chapters, which do not represent an ongoing story. Stories, or fragments of stories, are starting only to be revealed a short time later. The plot is split up into numerous storylines, until—in the novel’s later parts—there are not even storylines anymore.

In this regard, there is a remarkable correspondence between the narrative form on the one hand, and the novel’s characters on the other. This goes especially for Ulrich, the main protagonist. The problem of Ulrich’s life finds an expression in the narrative form of the novel as well as in the novel’s unfinished character. In a draft of a preface to the novel Musil wrote: “The story of this novel amounts to this, that the story that ought to be told in it, is not told” (1983: 1937). This is a paradoxical formulation that reminds of Franz Kafka’s aphorism: “There is a destination, but no path to it” (Kafka 2002[1918]: 118).⁴ In the case of Musil’s novel, however, one has to turn the tables and say: “There is a path, but there is no destination for it.”

2 Literary Classifications

For decades German studies and especially research on Musil have been dealing with the literary classification of *The Man Without Qualities*. The

³ This event actually should have been celebrated in the year 1918.

⁴ The famous aphorism continues “...what we call path, is a hesitation.”

previous answers to the question of literary classification are however contradictory. It has often been stated that *The Man Without Qualities* should be read as a social novel.⁵ In fact, the novel is a portrait of a society before its decline, an “unmasking” of a morbid society that tumbles into war.⁶ The novel starts in August of 1913, with an accident,⁷ to end in August of 1914 with the outbreak of the World War One. The conflict led to the decline of the Habsburg Monarchy, and that of old Europe in general. The object of the novel is the Austrian society of the Habsburg Monarchy. In Musil’s work the Habsburg Monarchy is always referred to the fancy and playful name *Kakanien*, a name which Musil probably invented.⁸ The name derives from the German abbreviation “k.k.,” from “kaiserlich-königlich,” which indicates the two-sided character of the so-called Dual Monarchy of Austria and Hungary.⁹

Some interpreters go one step further and pretend that this novel provides a portrait of modern Europe as such.¹⁰ This is not without evidence. Musil writes in his diaries: “this grotesque Austria is nothing but a particularly clear-cut case of the modern world” (Musil 1998: 226).¹¹ More than five decades ago, Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser already concluded that *The Man Without Qualities* is “a system of literary canalized philosophical thoughts, which treat in a satirical manner on the basis of the decline of the Danube Monarchy the fate of present day’s European man” (Kaiser, Wilkins 1962: 38). This conclusion is representative for the novel’s reception. For decades many literary scholars judged *The Man Without Qualities* to be more essayistic than

⁵ Cf. Norbert Christian Wolf, *Kakanien als Gesellschaftskonstruktion. Robert Musils Sozioanalyse des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2011 (inspired by Bourdieu); Lothar Georg Seeger, *Die Demaskierung der Lebenslüge. Eine Untersuchung zur Krise der Gesellschaft in Robert Musils “Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,”* Bern/München 1969.

⁶ “Unmasking” is the expression in Seeger’s study “Die Demaskierung der Lebenslüge”.

⁷ A lorry knocks over and injures a pedestrian. For a short moment, the eyewitnesses of the accident are paralyzed, until a gentleman explains: “These heavy lorries they use here have a too long braking distance.” The spectators feel at once “relieved”. The explanation of the “too long braking distance” is sufficient for them. The accident becomes “a technical problem that no longer concerned” them (Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, pp. 10f.). Cf. the English edition Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, ed. Sophie Wilkins/Burton Pike, London 1995, p. 5. – In one of his essays, Musil draws a parallel between this reaction and the mentality that lead to war: “The war may have had a thousand different causes, but it is undeniable that each of them – nationalism, patriotism, economic imperialism, the mentality of the generals and the diplomats, and all the rest – is tied to certain spiritual preconditions that characterize a shared, and therefore codetermining situation. It was like sleeping in a Pullman car of a train, and being awakened only by the crash.” (Musil, “Helpless Europe” [1922], in his *Precision and Soul. Essays and Addresses*, ed. Burton Pike and David S. Luft, Chicago 1990, pp. 116-133.)

⁸ In English, *Kakania* and in French *Cacanie*.

⁹ Kaiser Franz-Joseph I. was King of Hungary and Emperor of Austria in a personal union.

¹⁰ See Walter H. Sokel, “Historismus und Avantgarde. Zur zwiespältigen Bewertung der Moderne im Mann ohne Eigenschaften,” in: Bernhard Böschstein/Marie-Louise Roth (eds.), *Hommage à Musil*, Bern 1995, pp. 145-157.

¹¹ “Dieses groteske Österreich ist nichts anderes als ein besonders deutlicher Fall der modernen Welt.”

narrative,¹² and this is still the prevailing opinion today. The novel's long essayistic considerations in its essayistic chapters are among its most striking features. Essayistic consideration constantly interrupts the narration, to such an extent that the narration is increasingly substituted. This should not be understood as a complaint. Indeed, most of the novel's readers particularly love these chapters.

Musil's mission statement in his draft of a preface is that "The passion of the book is the passion for precision" (Musil 1995: 1760). This "passion for precision" is reflected in Ulrich's character, in his longing for "accuracy" and "precision" (Musil 1983: 244, 246). Precision is a mathematical category. It causes a mathematical and sometimes painstakingly kind of narration in *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil himself was very aware of this. While reading the proofs of his novel, he became "depressed because it is too abstract" (Musil 1998: 364).

With regard to typological questions, one can say that *The Man Without Qualities* is no *Entwicklungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*.¹³ A classical example for this literary type is Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Musil's novel does not trace the development of its characters; it is no coming-of-age-novel either. Instead of an ongoing or linear structure, the plot crumbles at the end of the first book. The novel is self-referential, as the narrator reflects on this in the chapter untitled "Going home." Ulrich walks home at night and thinks about life, and thinks about the meaning of narration for life:

the basic law of this life, the law one longs for, is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: "First this happened and then that happened!" ... Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. ... they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a "course" is somehow their refuge from chaos. It now came to Ulrich that he had lost his elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life still clings, even though everything in public life

¹² See Birgit Nübel, *Essayismus als Selbstreflexion der Moderne*, Berlin/New York 2006; Ulrich Karthaus, "Robert Musil und der moderne deutsche Roman," in: Bernhard Böschstein/Marie-Louise Roth (eds.), *Hommage à Musil*, Bern 1995, pp. 205-227; Robert L. Roseberry, *Robert Musil*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, p. 79; Walter H. Sokel, "Robert Musils Narrenspiegel," in: *Neue deutsche Hefte* 7 (1960/61), pp. 199-214; Wilhelm Grenzmann, "'Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.' Zur Problematik der Romangestalt," in: Karl Dinklage (ed.), *Robert Musil. Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1960, pp. 49-76.

¹³ See for this Thomas L. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*, Basingstoke, 2005.

has already ceased to be narrative and no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out in an infinitely interwoven surface (Musil 1995: 709).¹⁴

These sentences contain the most impressive description of the status of narration in Modernity. For this reason, Ulrich's reflections belong to the most cited quotes in today's poetology. The decisive formula here is that of "narrative order," respectively, of losing narrative order. To be sure, the *Entwicklungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*, like for instance Christoph Martin Wieland's *The History of Agathon* (1773),¹⁵ had a tradition-building effect, so that Musil and his contemporaries like Hermann Broch are in fact influenced by it, but at the same time Musil can only distance himself ironically from this tradition. And he remarks in a late draft of a chapter that *The Man Without Qualities* is "an ironical *Erziehungsroman*" (Musil 1983: 1859).

The genre is indeed turned upside down in his novel. In the course of the action the protagonist Ulrich is more and more dismantled. In this dismantling, which corresponds to the destruction of linear narration, literary scholars came to classify *The Man Without Qualities* as a *roman expérimental*.¹⁶ This concept goes back to Émile Zola and his essay *Le roman expérimental* (1890), first published in 1880. Zola declared that literary work is comparable to an instrument of scientific observation, an instrument of an artificial experiment, evoked by a narrator playing the role of an *observateur* or *expérimentateur*. Although Musil remarks, en passant, that "Zola has made himself an incomplete understanding of natural science," (Musil 1983[1927]: 1183)¹⁷ the experimental moment corresponds to Musil's self-description as *monsieur le vivisecteur*. His diaries begin with the following sentences:

Recently I invented a very fine name for myself: "monsieur le vivisecteur." Of course, inventing of such a fine-sounding name for oneself has to be a pose but, occasionally, in moments of profound exhaustion, in the depression of limb lassitude, it is necessary to recover one's poise by making a word do service for those major stimulants: strength, pleasure, striving... "Monsieur le vivisecteur"—that's who I am! My life: the wanderings and adventures of a vivisectionist of souls at the beginning of the twentieth century! (Musil 1998: 3)

¹⁴ Cf. Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, p. 650. The "infinitely interwoven surface" reminds one of the structures of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that chronicles the passage of Leopold Bloom during a single day, the 16th June of 1904 ("Bloomsday").

¹⁵ Christoph Martin Wieland, *The History of Agathon*, London 1773. Originally published in 1766/67, *The History of Agathon* caused the first theory of novel. See Friedrich von Blankenburg, *Versuch über den Roman*, Leipzig 1774.

¹⁶ See Christoph Hoffmann, "Drei Geschichten. Erzählen als experimentelle Operation bei Musil (und Kleist)," in: Michael Bies/Michael Gamper (eds.), *Es ist ein Laboratorium, ein Laboratorium für Worte*, Göttingen 2011, pp. 162-180; Peter Nusser, *Musils Romantheorie*, Göttingen 1967.

¹⁷ Musil, "Zu Kerrs 60. Geburtstag (1927)," in his *Essays und Reden. Kritik. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II, Adolf Frisé (ed.), Reinbek bei Hamburg 1983, pp. 1180-1186, 1183.

In the first parts of his diaries Musil addresses himself in his self-description as *monsieur le vivisecteur*. Furthermore, *Monsieur le Vivisecteur* is the original draft title of *The Man Without Qualities* (besides other scrapped titles like *The Spy*, or *The Twin Sister*). The expression might have been inspired by Nietzsche. In his diaries, Musil declares that he took the expression “vivisection” from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* and from *The Genealogy of Morality* (Musil 1998: 508). But at the same time, it certainly also derives from the vocabulary of contemporary medicine.¹⁸

3 The Occasionalist Structure

Just as Musil calls himself *monsieur le vivisecteur*, his *alter ego*—Ulrich—can also be characterized as such. Ulrich is constantly analyzing, observing, and dissecting his environment. This leads us back to the correspondence between narrative form and novel characters. One of the dominant traits of *The Man Without Qualities* is Ulrich’s permanent state of reflection.¹⁹ He is conceptualized as a permanently reflecting character, and his reflections are constitutive for the whole novel. Ulrich, a 20th century’s Hamlet, is always reflecting, but never actually acting. He even refuses any engagement or decision because a decision would undermine the “possibilities”—one of the novel’s key words.²⁰ Ulrich is characterized as the “man of possibilities” whose mode of life is the “conjunctivus potentialis” (Musil 1983: 19). On the one hand, it is pure irony that precisely Ulrich becomes secretary of the Parallel Campaign; on the other hand, it is only coherent because the Parallel Campaign is purely idle speech. Nothing happens, except endless conversation.

In 1919, when Musil started writing his novel, Carl Schmitt published his polemical study on *Political Romanticism* (2011[1919]). Musil and Schmitt had been aware of each other’s literary writing and they met in Schmitt’s Berlin home in 1930.²¹ In his critical analysis of *Political Romanticism*, Schmitt pointed

¹⁸ It is significant that also the concepts of other contemporary experimental authors are medical metaphors. In general, the concept of the “experimental novel” is not much convincing, because at a closer glance all kinds of novels evoke “experimental” elements.

¹⁹ For this, see still Renate von Heydebrand, *Die Reflexionen Ulrichs in Robert Musils Roman „Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften“*, Münster 1966.

²⁰ See Genese Grill, *The World as Metaphor in Robert Musil’s “The Man Without Qualities:” Possibility as Reality*, Rochester, New York 2012.

²¹ For the relation between Musil and Schmitt see Galin Tihanov, “Robert Musil in the Garden of Conservatism,” in: Philip Payne et al. (eds.), *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil*, New York 2007, pp. 117-148, 121ff; Friedrich Balke, *Der Staat nach seinem Ende. Die Versuchung Carl Schmitts*, München 1996, pp. 75ff.; Wolfgang Fietkau, “Stand-Ort und Un-Ort. Wissenschaftserkenntnis in der literarischen Transkription Robert Musils und Carl Schmitts,” in: *Wissenschaftskolleg. Jahrbuch* 1982/83, pp. 131-152.

out that the Romantics considered “the possibility as the higher category,” in their disregard of “reality” (2011[1919]: 66). Even the so-called “romantic irony” is an instrument to get in distance to poor reality. Schmitt’s description provides a perfect account of the protagonist’s profile in Musil’s novel. It is obvious that Ulrich also gives preference to the category of “possibility” while ignoring reality. Whatever happens to him, he takes it as an “occasion,” an occasion for endless reflection.

Given this, one may call Ulrich an “occasionalist,” referring to Carl Schmitt’s analysis of the so-called “occasionalist structure of romanticism” (Schmitt 2011[1919]: 78ff). As Schmitt remarks, “The romantic attitude is most clearly characterized by means of a singular concept, that of the *occasio*. This concept can be rendered in terms of ideas such as occasion, opportunity, and perhaps also chance. ... It negated the concept of *causa*, in other words, the force of a calculable causality, and thus consequently, every binding norm. It is a disintegrative concept” (2011[1919]: 16f). Schmitt argues “The romantic subject treats the world as an occasion and opportunity for his romantic productivity” (2011[1919]: 99). Everything is “the beginning of an endless novel,” as Schmitt quotes the romantic poet Novalis. For Schmitt, the word “romantic” becomes “true to its etymological sense,” because the word “romantic” derives from the German word *Roman* which means “novel” (2011[1919]: 74).

To be sure, *The Man Without Qualities* has the features of an experimental novel, a historical novel, and of a social novel. That being said, it can be characterized much more precisely by its occasionalist structure. This occasionalist moment is also true to its protagonists. Whether Ulrich or Agathe, Diotima or Section Chief Tuzzi, General Stumm von Bordwehr or Graf Leinsdorf, Walter or Clarisse—the characters all move like sleepwalkers and act as though in trance. They have no idea of what is happening around them. They are permissive in letting all things happen. Whatever occurs, it is just an occasion for engaging in endless conversations. The correspondence between form and content is thus once more to be noted. The endless conversation in the occasionalist society of Kakania correlates with an endless novel. Given this, it may be no coincidence that the novel remained unfinished.

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