

The Critical Response to Robert Musil's
The Man without Qualities

Tim Mehigan

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The Austrian writer Robert Musil ranks among the foremost novelists of the twentieth century. Despite a series of lesser but well regarded shorter works, his literary reputation rests almost entirely on his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man without Qualities), a life-work in the truest sense, which became the focus of all his energies and thinking from 1924 until his death in 1942. This study analyzes the principal trends in scholarship on the novel from the 1950s to the present. It contrasts earlier criticism, which foregrounded the eponymous central character's search for identity against the background of existentialist assumptions, with more recent criticism, which has focused on aesthetic and ethical approaches to the novel within the broader context of theories of value. A focal question in the study centers on the persistent difficulty critics have encountered with the idea of "Eigenschaftslosigkeit," the state of being without qualities named in the novel's title. Earlier criticism viewed the absence of qualities positively as a stage before union with the divine. Recent approaches have found difficulty in making commitment-free versions of subjectivity accord with social theories of value, particularly in the light of the conclusion of the novel, where war was to be seen as the logical outcome of the social descriptions sustained over the earlier sections. This difficulty is compounded by the controversy that raged for many years over the order of the unpublished later chapters. While this controversy has waned of late, the positions it marked out are still central to deciding what is involved in the notion of "Eigenschaftslosigkeit" and whether it has the capacity to further our understanding of modern subjectivity.

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Abbreviations	x
Introduction: Parallel Actions	1
1: Early Philology and Existentialist Readings	20
2: From Social Criticism to Cultural Critique	38
3: Psychological and Psychoanalytical Readings	67
4: Aesthetic Readings	81
5: The Order of Feeling: Ethical Readings	108
6: The Information of Communication	130
Editions of <i>Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften</i>	143
Musil Bibliographies	145
Works Consulted	147
Index	175

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Abbreviations

QUOTATION FROM MUSIL'S NOVEL *The Man Without Qualities* is referenced to the following German edition of Musil's novel: Robert Musil: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Sonderausgabe. 2 vols. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1981. Quotes from the novel are rendered by the customary short form *MoE* and the page number.

Quotes from Musil's diaries are rendered by the short form *TB*, the appropriate Roman numeral for the volume number, and page number, and refer to the following edition: Robert Musil: *Tagebücher*. 2 vols. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1976.

The short form *B*, followed by the appropriate Roman numeral for the volume number, and the page number, is taken from *Robert Musil. Briefe 1901–1942*. 2 vols. Edited by Adolf Frisé, with the collaboration of Murray G. Hall. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1981.

GW with number and page reference refers to the collected works of Musil in nine volumes: *Robert Musil: Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*. Edited by Adolf Frisé. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1978.

Other works of Musil are individually cited, as appropriate.

Introduction: Parallel Actions

Ich glaube nicht einmal, daß ein Künstler sein eigenes Werk versteht, wenn es fertig ist. Es kommt vielleicht für die menschliche Entwicklung auch gar nicht darauf an, was der wirkliche Inhalt eines Kunstwerks ist, sondern nur auf das, was dafür gehalten wird; jeder Einzelne, jede Epoche tritt mit anderen Schlüsseln heran und erschließt sich etwas anderes, das Kunstwerk ist in dieser Hinsicht ein Ästhetikum an sich, das es so wenig gibt wie das Ding an sich in der Welt der Wirklichkeit. Entkleidet man dies der Paradoxie, so erscheint das Verstehen des Kunstwerks einfach nicht als ein unendlicher Prozeß, der sich mit immer kleineren Abweichungen einem adäquaten Erfassen nähert, sondern als eine Mehrheit solcher Prozesse mit ganz verschiedenem Ergebnis

— Robert Musil

THE APPEARANCE OF THE first part of Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in 1930 with the Rowohlt-Verlag in Berlin was something of a sensation. The novel immediately aroused great excitement in literary circles, and was extensively reviewed in the press and in journals in Musil's native Austria and in Germany. With this major new work of fiction Musil finally appeared to deliver upon the promise that had struck the literary critic Alfred Kerr upon reading drafts of Musil's first novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* in 1906. Rowohlt brought out a second part to the new work at the end of 1932, only months before Hitler's ascension to power in Germany. The response to this second volume, however, was noticeably less enthusiastic. Its title — "Ins tausendjährige Reich (Die Verbrecher)" (Into the Thousand-Year Reich [The Criminals]) — struck a satirical note toward political events that were unfolding in Germany, while the story itself seemed to drift more and more into an intellectual utopia few readers could understand, much less share. Moreover, the novel still remained unfinished. Nothing more of it was to appear in Musil's lifetime, although Musil continued working on chapter drafts right up to the last days of his life. In 1938, following the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany, what had appeared of the novel was placed on a list of banned books, thus putting the entire project of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in jeopardy. In the same year, Musil headed into exile with his wife Martha Marcovaldi, taking only those materials with him he considered essential for completing work on the novel. The Musils finally settled in the city of Ge-

neva in neighboring Switzerland in 1939. Musil died there in the middle of the Second World War in 1942, the year in which the “final solution,” the extermination of the Jewish people, had become Nazi policy.

Musil’s novel, initially so exuberantly received, had therefore steadily receded from public view over the course of the 1930s, and along with it the name of its author. With Musil’s sudden death from a stroke in his sixty-second year, the novel appeared on the point of sinking into oblivion altogether. In 1943, a year after Musil’s death, his widow attempted to revive the novel and the literary reputation of her husband by bringing out a third volume at her own expense. This limited edition — twenty-four chapters based on notes that Musil had been working on before his death, including all but two of the chapters he had initially authorized, but then withdrawn from publication in 1938 (the so-called “Druckfahnenkapitel”) — drew little public or critical response in the last years of the war. Furthermore, this edition of the novel did not complete Musil’s project in any final sense. Subsequent attempts to divine the outline of the novel and to reason out its conclusion, though they continue to the present day, have remained inconclusive.

There was scarcely any interest in Musil or *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in the years immediately following the Second World War. To a small number of scholars — among them, most notably, Hermann Pongs, who was working on an ambitious historical study of German fiction at this time — Musil remained a writer of importance. Outside Germany, Musil entirely escaped attention. The widespread indifference toward Musil and his novel in the years immediately after the war moved Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser — subsequently to become Musil’s English translators — to draw attention to Musil in an anonymous review in 1949 in the *Times Literary Supplement* “as one of the least known writers of the age” who was nevertheless “the most important novelist writing in German in this half century” (1949, 689).¹ This claim must have appeared preposterous to an English-speaking public who had never heard the name of Musil before, much less learned to appreciate him as one of the great authors of the twentieth century. Despite Wilkins and Kaiser’s article, interest in his major novel was to remain muted in the English-speaking world for some time to come. J. B. Priestley, a highly regarded English critic and author, for example, saw fit to exclude the name of Musil from his major study of world fiction *Literature and Western Man*, published in 1960.² (Priestley considered Thomas Mann, Musil’s main literary rival, “Germany’s greatest novelist.”) Even in the academy there were few stirrings. The first work of criticism on Musil in English — an essay by Hugh Puckett in the American journal *Monats-*

hefte — did not appear until 1952.³ In fact, Musil cannot be said to have entered the scholarly mainstream in English-speaking countries until the mid 1950s. The appearance in 1954 of the first volume of *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies*, a bibliographical reference work based at Cambridge University, in which an entry was made against the name of Robert Musil, may be taken as a convenient point for measuring the upswing of interest in the author in the anglophone world. The entry refers to three essays on Musil — by Karl Michel, Walter Boehlich, and Ingeborg Bachmann — that had appeared in the first issue of the German literary journal *Akzente* in 1954.

A compelling reason for the heightened interest in Musil and his novel in the 1950s was the appearance in 1952 of a new edition of the *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* with additional materials from Musil's posthumous papers, edited by Adolf Frisé and published by Musil's old publishing house Rowohlt — the first reissue of Musil's novel since 1930/32. Although Frisé's edition of the novel was not entirely beyond reproach — his decision to incorporate the posthumous papers in a "finished" version of the novel was energetically debated in subsequent years — it brought Musil's novel to the attention of a literary public beyond the confines of the academy. The new 1952 edition of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was hailed as a significant event and immediately aroused a great deal of critical interest. By 1956 it led to a new study in German according Musil prominent status in discussions of the German novel.⁴ The first dissertations on Musil completed in Germany appeared in the same year.⁵ Back in England in 1957, *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies* recorded the 1955 publication, also with the Rowohlt-Verlag, of Musil's *Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden* (the diaries, aphorisms and essays) with the words "a publication of first importance." It also made mention of the 1957 publication of the *Prosa, Dramen, späte Briefe*, the third and last volume of Rowohlt's collected works of Musil (the *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*) in its yearly edition of 1958. French and Italian translations of the novel appeared in 1957 and 1958; the first installment of the English translation by Wilkins and Kaiser had appeared as early as 1953. It can be confidently stated, therefore, that Musil, virtually forgotten in his own country by the outbreak of the Second World War, had attracted a following by the late fifties in both Germanys,⁶ his native Austria as well as in England, France, and Italy.

Two more decades were to pass, however, before the name of Musil and his epic novel were to attract widespread attention. As the decade of the sixties began, the work of several scholars whose names have since

come to be closely identified with Musil began to appear in academic journals and publications. Among these scholars were Walter Sokel in the United States, Helmut Arntzen and Woldfriedrich Rasch in Germany, and Karl Dinklage in Austria. In 1964, as the scholarly enterprise of hermeneutics was in full swing, Wilhelm Bausinger published a historical-critical analysis of the genesis of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* with Rowohlt in Germany — the first stage in what he hoped might become a definitive historical account of the emergence of the novel. This ambition was quickly overtaken by Frisé's later editions of the novel, and was finally superseded by the appearance of a critical addition of Musil's notes to his novel on CD-ROM on the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1992. In 1965 the first bibliography devoted to scholarship on Robert Musil appeared — already some measure of the amount of critical attention Musil had attracted in the years since Frisé's edition of his works in 1952.

The publication of an annotated edition of Musil's diaries in 1976 and a revised and improved Rowohlt edition of the collected works (the *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*) two years later, both edited by Adolf Frisé, transformed Musil scholarship. The diaries and the new edition of the works were a revelation for Musil scholarship and fundamentally altered the understanding of Musil as a writer. The diaries were valuable on their own because they showed the immense amount of learning in which all Musil's writings were steeped. They revealed Musil as a conscientious reader of physics, chemistry, engineering, and mathematics and showed his deeply nuanced understanding of philosophy, psychology, and the emerging discipline of psychoanalysis. They also revealed that Musil kept up with new literature, particularly of German and Austrian origin, and had more than a passing familiarity with English and French literature (which he appears to have read in German translation). The diaries revealed influences on Musil that had not been widely appreciated, notably the American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941). They also brought to light Musil's familiarity with Goethe, Lessing, and Shakespeare, and his ambivalence toward Thomas Mann. Musil's sound judgment in appraising controversial ideas of his day also became apparent in the diaries. For instance, after reading the first volume of Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* in 1918, Musil, a great believer in the humane project of civilization, immediately foresaw the danger in weakening and racializing the idea of culture (cf. *TB I*, 406). The diaries therefore added weight to what studies of Musil from the early sixties in Germany had been emphasizing, namely Musil's declared aim in his

works to undertake a grand “conceptual dealing with the ideas of his time.”⁷ The diaries made clear that Musil made himself familiar with these ideas in a fair and non-polemical way.

Frisé’s 1978 edition of Musil’s works, which contained in a separate volume roughly one third of Musil’s formerly unpublished notes from *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, threw light on Musil’s approach to his craft. Responding to earlier criticism of his attempts to provide a conclusion to the narrative, Frisé now eschewed any attempt to do so, instead reprinting not only the chapters Musil had finished before his death, but also chapter variations, drafts of chapters, and notes containing questions pertinent to plot and character development. The new arrangement of the *Nachlaß* volume confirmed what had only been partially understood in the 1950s and 1960s — that Musil worked “experimentally” with his own texts, exhaustively laboring over sections and chapters of his works until a final form emerged. Francesca Pennisi is one of many critics who have interpreted Musil’s approach to writing as part of the “problem situation” of his novel. These notes showed that for Musil — more than almost any other writer — writing was a laborious process in which textual variants jostled with each other for attention and, in the final analysis, for the right to occupy center stage. Accordingly, they brought about a new understanding of the status of Musil’s published texts, which could be seen for the first time as but one “authorized” version among competing versions of ideas, motifs, and plot variations. Since the *Nachlaß* had also shown Musil to have published no more than the “torso” of his major novel during his lifetime, Musil scholarship in the late seventies and eighties had no difficulty following trends contesting the dominance of “authorship” in the wake of Roland Barthes’s announcement of the “death of the author.”

The absence of a finished version of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and of an “authoritative” Musil was to do Musil’s literary legacy no permanent injury. By slow degrees before 1978 and quickly thereafter, Musil was established in the critical literature as one of the foremost German-speaking writers of the twentieth century. Important milestones on Musil’s road to literary fame were the foundation of the international Robert-Musil-Gesellschaft in Vienna and the publication of the first issue of its journal in 1975, the *Musil-Forum*, based in Saarbrücken at the University of Saarland. In 1982 a collection of influential essays on Musil appeared in the well-known *Wege der Forschung* series, edited by Renate von Heydebrand. A new English translation of Musil’s novel by Sophie Wilkins appeared in 1995, attracting positive reviews, notably by Nicholas Spice in the *London Review of Books* in 1997.⁸ Today Musil’s reputa-

tion rivals, and in some respects even exceeds, those of Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. However, unlike these writers, who still command a substantial readership outside academic circles, Musil's reputation was largely constructed by scholars and academics working at German, Austrian, English, French, Italian, and American universities in the postwar period. In an important sense the reputation of this fiercely independent and idiosyncratic writer still depends on these same scholarly institutions and is sustained by them.

An overview of the publication history of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* provides valuable insights into its reception in the postwar period. Six thousand copies of the first edition of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* were published by Rowohlt in 1952. From 1956 to 1960 another 23,000 copies were published in four new editions of the novel — an indication of the level of interest in Musil that had been building over the second half of the fifties. Over the next ten years, a further 33,000 copies were published in five new reprintings, bringing the total number of copies published between 1952 and 1969 to 62,000. From 1970 on, a new pattern emerged: Rowohlt began to issue significantly higher print-runs of its new editions. Fifty thousand copies of a special edition of the novel brought out in September 1970 sold so quickly that second and third printings of 10,000 copies each became necessary in 1972 and 1974. The statistics show that the novel had attracted more readers during this four-year period in the early seventies than in the seventeen years prior to that time — a clear indication of a heightened level of interest. The 1978 edition of the nine-volume collected works, of which *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* constituted volumes one and two, and a simultaneously released paperback edition with identical pagination of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, also sold well: taken together, a further 50,000 copies were issued between 1978 and 1981. To date, more than 172,000 copies of volume one of this paperback edition of the novel containing Book One and thirty-eight chapters of Book Two, and more than 103,000 copies of volume two, which contains additional materials that did not appear in Musil's lifetime, have been published. The 1978 and 1981 publications provided Musil's readers with reliable editions that have become the basis for research and scholarship on the author.

Although useful for its account of the passage of Musil's novel to public attention, the edition history throws little light on how Musil's novel has been received and understood by successive generations of readers. Such a task — the undertaking of the present volume — can only be gleaned from a study of the critical literature on Musil. Which works of criticism may be considered to constitute critical literature for

the purposes of the present study? Rogowski, for example, whose critical commentary on the secondary literature on Musil's works was published in 1994, excepted from consideration most doctoral dissertations and master's theses and based his reception history on what he calls "mainstream literature" on Musil. Part of the justification for this *modus operandi* lies with the fact that the vast majority of doctoral and master's theses are not readily available to the general public and are sometimes difficult to track down even for the specialist. Against this view must be set the fact that much of the most interesting work that has been done on Musil has been done as or emerged from doctoral research. There is great value, therefore, in highlighting the valuable contribution that the best doctoral research has made in drawing an overall picture of Musil, even if Rogowski's point about the uneven and repetitive nature of much of this research must still be borne in mind. The present study aims to provide an insight into both the more accessible secondary literature that has appeared in the mainstream academic press, and the more specialized studies that have resulted from university research.

In discussing such work, I do not pretend to present an exhaustive study of the entire critical output on *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. The enormous proliferation of studies on Musil's major novel in the postwar period precludes such an undertaking. Nevertheless, I do seek to discuss the most interesting and important work on Musil's novel that has been written, especially in German and English, and to make evident how these views have changed over time. In following this goal, it quickly became evident that Musil's work has been considered by a variety of critical approaches that cannot be brought under a neat periodization. While many of the works on Musil in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, were rooted in existentialist assumptions and a sense of melancholy about humanity and society typical of the immediate postwar period, existential critique has persisted in Musil studies despite being displaced in the main by more socially and aesthetically focused approaches that still form the most popular avenues to the novel. Any attempt to divine trends in postwar scholarship on Musil must therefore take account of the fact that the appearance of new critical approaches has not meant that older approaches have ceased to have application to their subject or to command interest among scholars. Rather, one witnesses today a rich variety of approaches. Social and cultural critique commands attention alongside old-style textual hermeneutics. Biographically informed approaches seek a new accommodation with poststructural approaches to writing and the text, or remain aloof from them. Furthermore, the widely proclaimed "death of the author" (Roland Barthes) has not meant the death of the

text, but, if anything, its resurgence amid a new chorus of different voices and approaches. A guide to the secondary literature on *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* must meet the challenge of interpreting this startling variety of critical approaches without succumbing to undue simplification. At the same time, this consideration of trends in Musil criticism seeks to take account of the immediate cultural and political context in which scholarship in the last fifty years has sought to maintain its relevance both within the academy and within the wider community.

The present survey of the critical literature on *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* addresses itself both to new readers of Musil and more established readers and critics working within the field of Musil scholarship. While only the significant works of secondary literature — pre-eminently those in book form — have been dealt with at length, shorter studies such as articles and essays have been considered where these offer a fruitful or novel point of entry to interpreting the author and his work. Finally, a work of reception history might be considered to be an especially apt way of approaching an author who saw his own generation as being distinct in its nature and ambitions from the one that had gone before. Musil, addressing the demise of an age at the end of what E. J. Hobsbawm has called “the long 19th century,” wrote in an immediate sense for the generation that came to prominence at the end of the First World War,⁹ but also for a future age — one that he imagined would be more liberal, tolerant, and optimistic than his own. The story of scholarship on *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* indicates not only that Musil has spoken to a succession of generations since the appearance of his first novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, in 1906, but continues to speak to them, perhaps more clearly and persuasively than ever before.

The modern scholar investigating the works of Robert Musil encounters a vastly different critical situation than that which prevailed in the two decades following the Second World War. Whereas the scholar of the fifties and early sixties relied on a small number of influential critical works on the author, the full compass of individually cited books, essays, articles, and book reviews on Musil nowadays numbers in the thousands. Even if the scope of this immense output is reduced to include only the significant criticism on the author, today’s scholar would still spend years absorbing the two or three hundred important critical works on the novel that have appeared over the last fifty years. For this reason, modern scholars of Musil have long given up the pretense of consulting the critical works on the author in any comprehensive way. More usual is a highly selective treatment of individual works of scholarship that appear either sympathetic to their chosen critical methodology,

or at sharp variance with it. Even in such cases, Musil scholars struggle to demonstrate even a basic mastery of the vast criticism on the author.

Despite the overwhelming number of critical responses Musil and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* have attracted since the 1950s, certain works of criticism and certain topics of critical debate stand out. The most influential of the early works of criticism was Helmut Arntzen's study on satire, first published in 1960, subsequently revised and republished in 1970, and reissued again in 1982 in a third edition. Arntzen's study drew attention to Musil's satirical portrait of the Austrian state, which Musil had dubbed "Kakanien" (Kakania), and inspired a generation of socially critical approaches from the late 1960s onward. Among the most prominent of these is Hartmut Böhme's study of Musil that appeared under the title of *Anomie und Entfremdung* in 1974. Böhme's approach mixed Frankfurt School Marxism, Weberian sociology, and psychoanalysis in seeking to account for the heavily ironical portrait of Kakania as well as the somewhat dysfunctional individualism of the novel's antihero Ulrich. Böhme's was the first of the critical approaches to generate interpretative categories that could satisfactorily address both Musil's view of a society in steep social and historical decline and the type of individualism he contrasted with it.

Böhme's approach was built on the assumption that Musil's unfinished novel, had he brought it to an end, would have dissipated into war and chaos and the protagonist's unconventional pursuit of individual happiness would have foundered in a degraded focus on the self. Böhme, in reaching such conclusions, was very much following the dominant view of the day about the novel's outcome. This view, issuing largely from the influential opinion of Woldietrich Rasch, who had written extensively on Musil in the early 1960s and had known Musil personally, argued that Musil could not sustain his utopian vision against the forces of social dissolution which were increasingly prevalent in his time. War and chaos, Rasch held, were to represent the final outcome of the novel. Rasch's view had won out over a contrary position maintained by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser in their study of 1962. Wilkins and Kaiser had argued that Musil's picture of encroaching war and social dissolution would not overwhelm the private utopia of sibling love pursued in the name of "der andere Zustand" (the Other Condition). Wilkins and Kaiser instead believed that the unusual love between Ulrich and his sister Agathe was to be sustained against the collapsing social order they found around them. Wilhelm Bausinger's monumental historical-critical study of Musil's novel of 1964 — certainly one of the stellar achievements of early Musil scholarship — also came out in broad support of the Wilkins-