



In the Shadow of Empire

Austrian Experiences
of Modernity in the
Writings of Musil, Roth,
and Bachmann

MALCOLM SPENCER

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Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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CAMDEN HOUSE
Rochester, New York

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First published 2008
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
www.camden-house.com
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-387-8

ISBN-10: 1-57113-387-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Spencer, John Malcolm, 1954–

In the shadow of empire : Austrian experiences of modernity in the writings of Musil, Roth, and Bachmann / Malcolm Spencer.

p. cm. — (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-387-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57113-387-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Austrian literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Musil, Robert, 1880–1942. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. 3. Roth, Joseph, 1894–1939. *Radetzkymarsch*. 4. Bachmann, Ingeborg, 1926–1973. *Drei Wege zum See*. I. Title. II. Series.

PT3818.S64 2008

830.9'00914—dc22

2008018694

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America.

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*To my mother and to the memory of my father
and my grandfather, Dr. Rudolf Dehn*

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Acknowledgments

FIRST AND FOREMOST I WISH TO EXPRESS sincere thanks to Professor Ronald Speirs, head of the School of Humanities at the University of Birmingham, England, for his guidance and support. Without his advice — and the great expertise with which he has at all times directed my research — I could not have completed this book. I would also like to thank Professor Wolfgang Mueller-Funk, who encouraged and helped me in many ways during his three years in the Department of German Studies at Birmingham. Professor Mueller-Funk gave me invaluable help in the earlier stages of this study, and I am especially grateful to him for invitations to present papers at conferences in Austria, Belgium, and Hungary. Professor Philip Payne of the University of Lancaster, England, provided very helpful suggestions regarding the secondary literature on Musil. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for its financial support and continued faith in this research project. I also wish to thank James Walker, Editorial Director at Camden House, for his advice, support, and patience.

The staffs at various libraries and archives have been extremely helpful. I would like to thank the staff of the University Library in Birmingham; Jill Hughes of the Taylorian in Oxford; the staff of the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in London — especially Dr. Martin Liebscher, who extended an invitation to speak at the Musil conference held there in May 2004. I wish to express special thanks to Dr. Annette Daigger and her staff at the Robert-Musil-Archiv of the University of the Saarland, Saarbrücken, Germany, who provided invaluable assistance.

Lastly, I would like to thank the following friends and relations for their various kinds of support: Dr. Pamela Bakker, Frauke Bulczak, Paul Coates, May Dehn, John Faulkner, David Heald, Nicola Kraml, Oliver Learmont, Flora Macdonald, Rodney Mantle, Alexandra Millner, Margaret Norman, and Peter Spencer.

Department of German Studies
University of Birmingham

Introduction: Negotiating Modernity in the Austrian Context

The old order has passed away.

— Revelation 21:4

Narratives of Modernity

THIS STUDY EXAMINES THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY in Austria as reflected in fiction written by Austrian authors between 1920 and 1970. Although Karl Kraus called Austria a “Versuchsstation des Weltuntergangs,” it was only one of many such “laboratories” in which the old order disintegrated: the crisis was universal and the main themes of the fiction examined here are commonly found in other European literatures of the period.¹ This study will, however, demonstrate that the arrival of modernity was experienced in Austria in a particular way. It will also show that the different interpretations of the dilemmas of modernity offered by each of the three writers are closely related to the changing historical conditions under which they wrote.

The central concept of modernity is notoriously hard — perhaps even impossible, to define or date. If modernity is taken to mean “the condition of living in the modern world,” then that definition raises several questions: experienced by whom, in what ways, and where? What are the essential criteria for considering a phenomenon modern and when did society become inescapably modern? That debate might lead to the conclusion that modernity is no more than a catchall term meaning “the totality of perceptions of the world in which we now live” — an idea too vague to be helpful. It is hardly surprising that there is no agreement among interpreters of modernity that it constitutes a single phenomenon or even a viable concept. For instance, Bryan Turner considers the concept of modernity “irredeemably contested” and feels that it is not possible to agree on a set of terms for debate.² Fredric Jameson asserts that any attempt to formulate “a conceptual account of modernity” as such is vain.³ This is because, as Jameson reminds his readers, the notion of the modern has been current since the fifth century A.D., when the Latin *modernus* was first used to distinguish contemporaries from an older period of the church fathers and meant “now” or “the time of the now.”⁴ Jameson’s insistence

that modernity is not a concept — or, at best, a one-dimensional or pseudoconcept — but rather a “narrative category” is therefore persuasive: the term can only be used to denote the thinking or sensibility of an age that considers itself very different from the period immediately preceding it. It would not be difficult to indicate a number of earlier historical periods characterized by a sense of modernity: the Renaissance, with its new relationship toward the classical world; the Reformation, with its emphasis on the propagation of the written word; or the scientific revolution in northern Europe in the seventeenth century. According to Jameson, modernity itself cannot be analyzed, only situations in which there is a consciousness of modernity.⁵

If the concept, taken as a whole, is too elusive to be of much use, then it must be broken into parts or “situations.” Zygmunt Bauman, one of the leading theorists in the field, offers a definition that makes it possible to identify the main narratives of modernity: “I call ‘modernity’ a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity (1) as a cultural project — with the growth of Enlightenment; (2) as a socially accomplished form of life — with the growth of industrial [. . .] society.”⁶

Applying Bauman’s definition, one can break down the concept into several related, interlocking narratives, which can then be examined in their Austrian context. First is *cultural* modernity, a narrative closely linked with modes of thought that arose in the Enlightenment. These include scientific rationality, belief in the state’s power to manage society bureaucratically (called “Josephinism” in Austria), secularization and the concomitant gradual and widespread loss of religious faith that characterized the nineteenth century. Second is *economic* modernity, a narrative that necessarily includes industrialization, high population growth, urbanization, rapid technological development, and the rise of large-scale market economies. Lastly there is *political* modernity, in the form of nationally constructed communities governed wholly or in part by popular sovereignty; these gradually replaced the dynastic, culturally or ethnically heterogeneous, divinely ordained order of the ancien régime. The societies that result from these dynamic processes are mobile and egalitarian, in contrast to the more static and hierarchical societies of the premodern world.

The chronology of these narratives is as riven by controversy as is their definition. For example, Benedict Anderson claims that the rise of print languages in the sixteenth century laid the bases for national consciousness and thereby repositions the debate on nationalism firmly in the “premodern” era.⁷ Whereas some of these processes of modernization can be assigned fairly precise chronologies — such as the different stages of industrialization — others cannot. The old dynastic order legitimized by religious faith ends in widely different epochs in different parts of Europe. In

England the *ancien régime* ended as early as the seventeenth century, whereas in France it lasted until the end of the eighteenth century, and in Central Europe — a fact that is relevant to the severity of the crisis perceived in Austria at that time — it did not end until the beginning of the twentieth century. “*Ungleichzeitigkeit*” was an essential feature of the processes of modernization and will be examined here.

As we have seen, the interpreters of modernity cast doubt on the validity of the general concept. Moreover, their interpretations inevitably tend to focus on one among a multitude of processes of becoming modern. However interesting they may be — Anderson’s analysis of national consciousness (certainly a key element of the modern world) as a culturally constructed “imagined community” has been extremely influential — the readings of these critics can provide no single definition encompassing all the processes of change. For Ernest Gellner modernity is the outcome of the rise of industrial societies with homogeneous cultures, while for Malcolm Bradbury it is “a new consciousness, a fresh condition of the human mind,” and for James McFarlane it is the consequence of the fragmentation and breakdown of value systems held by society at large that took place in the nineteenth century.⁸ If modernity is a set of perceptions in the minds of those who experience differing facets of it in different places in the modern world and at different times, then each individual perspective in this kaleidoscopic view of modernity must necessarily be different. As John Gray has warned, modernity cannot be equated with one of its many facets — such as the emergence of individualism — for “there has always been more than one way of being modern.”⁹ For instance, modernity emerged in Japan in a way that completely differed from its emergence in Europe. Depending on their historical and cultural conditions, broadly similar processes of modernization may appear as benign or destructive to the people who experience them. Secularization is a case in point. It accompanied the rise of nationalism in Europe but did not in the modern Islamic world, where nations have arisen within religiously constructed communities. In western Europe today nationalism is no longer considered a modernizing force but rather a regressive or even antimodern one. The kaleidoscopic nature of modernity could perhaps be compared to a pack of playing cards: some modern societies might hold some of the cards, others might hold similar ones albeit in a different “hand,” but no modern society could ever hold “all” of the cards because the number of perceptible facets of modernity is infinite.

I will therefore proceed from the assumption that modernity can only have meaning when it is anchored in a particular historical context. I will emphasize those strands in the debates that have most validity when applied to the modernization of Austria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I will argue, first of all, that the inexorable decline in religious faith, bringing about what Bauman terms “the disruption and collapse of the

divinely ordained world” is one of the fundamental elements of modernity.¹⁰ In the modern world there can be no unchallengeable logos from which central authority derives but only a mass of competing perspectives that offer no certainty. The ancien régime in Austria was a salient example of this process of disruption and collapse of belief in order and authority. The Habsburg monarchy had persisted into the modern era while still bearing some of the hallmarks of the “divinely-ordained world” in which it had been established: the emperor had accepted many elements of constitutional government, but even at the beginning of the twentieth century still ultimately ruled his multi-ethnic realm by dynastic right legitimized by faith in God.¹¹ No better summary of the hierarchical, religiously founded nature of the ancien régime can be found than Robert Musil’s image of a trinity of fathers: “Vater, Landesvater, Gottvater: es war die Tonleiter des alten Österreich in der Kindheit meines Vaters.”¹² Musil sees the old order as an interlocking patriarchy legitimized by faith in God. However, its “tectonic plates” have become unstable. Any weakening in the authority of one of the fathers leads to the gradual instability of the whole, to that crisis in authority that is an essential element of the crisis of modernity. Moreover, the sense that the coherent value systems of fathers, rulers, and religious certainty underpinning the ancien régime had long since vanished made many late Habsburg intellectuals aware of the spiritual void within the empire. The Casa di Austria is for them an empty house built on receding ground. Indeed, Edward Timms considers the rift between an imposing façade and an inner, disintegrating reality to be the main feature of late Habsburg Austria, not only in its political system but also in its cultural and social life.¹³

McFarlane’s view that modernity was brought about by the *fragmentation* of supposedly secure value systems is without doubt central to an understanding of Musil’s work. The belief that the modern world has irrevocably lost its “inner unity” and is therefore marked by fragmentation and decadence finds its most influential expression in the philosophy of Musil’s lifelong mentor, Friedrich Nietzsche. The latter’s radical challenge of accepted morality and belief and rejection of transcendent authority and religious faith resonates among those Austrian intellectuals who sensed the “Wertvakuum” at the heart of their declining state. “How is it possible to live without a transcendent purpose and a faith?”¹⁴ With these words Roy Pascal defines Nietzsche’s “great question” addressed to all the many writers, artists, and thinkers of the early twentieth century who were influenced by him. The agonizing void left in the modern world by the “death of God” is proclaimed by the madman in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*:

“Wohin ist Gott?” rief er, “ich will es euch sagen! Wir haben ihn getötet — ihr und ich! Wir alle sind seine Mörder! Aber wie haben wir dies gemacht? Wie vermochten wir das auszutrinken? Wer gab uns den Schwamm, um

den ganzen Horizont wegzuwischen? Was taten wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne losketteten? Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Gibt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts?"¹⁵

The madman's anguish is mocked by the unbelieving bystanders, who fail to understand the implications of their own godless state. Nietzsche's prophetic power (here in the literary disguise of "der tolle Mensch") enables him to perceive the spiritual void thirty years before world war broke out in 1914. It is the destructive scale and outcome of the Great War that made the void apparent to the European masses, who in desperation turned to ready-made ideologies that offered the illusion of a restoration of coherence.

As we shall see, book 1 of Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* presents a culture that has been fragmented into competing but empty value systems, one that has lost any inner unity or coherence. It offers its readers an essentially Nietzschean perspective on the chaos of modernity. Its author constantly demolishes the attempts of his characters to impose some sort of order on their fragmented world — whether through ideology, intellectual fad, or fashion — through the bogus public relations campaign of the "Parallelaktion," or simply through the ways of thinking of their own specialized professions. He repeatedly places their patterns of thought, or "systems of happiness," under his and his protagonist Ulrich's critical gaze. As chapters 2 and 3 of the present study will demonstrate, Musil does not always use Nietzschean ideas in the same way as his teacher — and he radically diverges from them in book 2 of his novel, which remained unfinished. Nevertheless, the latter is the most ambitious attempt by any Austrian author during this period to investigate in fictional form the fragmented modern world and to search for integrity within it.¹⁶

The consciousness of *Deus absconditus*, of what Timms calls "a fundamental loss of center" in Austria is an essential narrative of modernity. If we turn now from cultural to political modernity, it can be claimed that the division of the world into nationally constructed states is also fundamental to the modern condition. As has been noted, Anderson sees "nation-ness" less as a political achievement and more as a "cultural artefact," initially the outcome of print-language communities reading the same novels and newspapers, a process fostered by the rise of nondynastic Protestant states such as the Dutch republic and the Puritan commonwealth.¹⁷ For Anderson nationalism is a *cultural system*, one that must be compared with the systems that preceded it, namely, the religiously constructed communities of the medieval age and the dynastic realms of the premodern period. As Anderson reminds us, these dynastic realms were always culturally and linguistically extremely heterogeneous, and their territories were often not even contiguous. In this respect the premodern Habsburg Empire was no

different from the other monarchies in Europe, which in time were to become “French” or “British”; it merely represented an extreme example of such heterogeneity.¹⁸ Its irremediable difference only emerged in the age of nationalism, when it became clear that the Habsburg realm — at least in its Cisleithanian half after 1868 — was *not* national and could never become so. As such, the late Habsburg realm provides interpreters of modernity with an example of modernization taking place within a large, non-national polity. To undertake this was to cut against the grain. By the end of the nineteenth century most people in Europe thought that being “modern” meant living in a strong nation-state, ideally one with a large territory or in possession of vast overseas colonies.¹⁹ Thus, the processes of modernization could be seen as *strengthening* nation-states (such as the German Empire the leading industrial power in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century) and as *weakening* a non-national state. In Timms’s words, in late Habsburg Austria “modernisation accelerated the tendency toward disintegration, as each national group asserted its own identity.”²⁰

The sense of “endtime,” in Anderson’s understanding of the dynastic realm as a cultural system that has come to an end (because it has lost its legitimacy in the minds of men) colors the work of the second Austrian writer examined in the present study. For Joseph Roth the collapse of Habsburg Austria is brought about by secularization and the fall of the divinely ordained order, by the rise of modernity in what is for Roth its most antipathetic form, namely, the ethnically exclusive, capitalist nation-state. Other Austrian writers during this period, such as Hofmannsthal and Zweig, also evoke Austria as a supranational alternative to nationalism, a culturally superior plurality of peoples. Roth shares with them — especially as fascism casts its shadow across their world — a nostalgia for the vanished, “superior” state, but his nostalgia is more personal and visceral than theirs. Unlike Zweig, Roth is not writing from the standpoint of a bourgeois, Viennese, assimilated Jewish identity but rather from that of a Jew on the eastern periphery of the polyglot empire, with the lost world of the shtetl still alive in his imagination (even if it played no real part in his everyday life). I will show that Roth is an essentially religious writer, although it is often unclear whether he is being religious in a Jewish, Austrian Catholic, or vaguely Christian sense. His allegiance to a vanished supranational Austria is indeed almost a substitute for religious faith: “Österreich ist kein Staat, keine Heimat, keine Nation. Es ist eine Religion.”²¹ The pluralism of Roth’s religious beliefs and his need to believe while leading a rootless existence (in contrast to an imagined past in which a binding faith was practiced daily in a settled community) make him what he does not want to be, namely, “modern.”²²

Roth’s ambivalent nostalgia is accentuated by the particular kind of Jewish identity that the vanished empire of his childhood had made possible but one that became untenable in the nation-states of his adult life. As Marsha L. Rozenblit has made clear, Jews in late Habsburg Austria tended

to assume a “tripartite identity”: they were loyal Austrians (“gesamtösterreichisch”) in their political identity, German in their cultural identity (although Jews sometimes adopted one of the other cultures of the empire, such as Czech or Polish), and Jewish in their ethnic identity, enjoying far more tolerance in this last role than was to be the case in the national successor states.²³ A multiple identity of this sort was not desirable in the new nation-states (or “nationalizing” states, as their sense of national identity was still precarious). Indeed, it was rendered impossible by the “binary code” of nationalism (the “us” of the imagined community as defined by those who must be excluded from it, such as Jews and Germans in the new Czech state). Roth’s nostalgia should not be dismissed as a vague longing for a supposedly better past but should be seen as the reaction of a man whose complex identity is threatened by the forces of nationalizing modernity. His nostalgia (from the Greek *νόστος*, meaning “return home,” and *αλγος*, meaning “pain”) is also intensified by his 1930s vantage point. He is fully aware that the past he longs to return to has irrevocably vanished, and that those vestiges of it that still remain are about to be swept away by the new, anti-Semitic, fanatically nationalist German dictatorship. Roth’s position in his novel *Radetzkymarsch* may be intellectually untenable — he constructs a past that never existed except in the minds of those who seek escape from the condition of modernity — but it nonetheless carries a powerful emotional validity for the author.

When it passes through the Austrian “prism” nostalgia takes on particular colors. Above all, it is characterized by the memory of a comparatively recent supranational past that seems to offer a tempting alternative to internecine nationalism. It is possible to imagine nostalgia in other colors: a French nostalgia for the rural France of childhood experienced by urban intellectuals; a German nostalgia felt in the new united Reich for small states and old princely courts; or an English nostalgia for the pastoral landscapes of an England imagined by poets and composers but which, by the beginning of the twentieth century, had largely vanished as a result of industrialization and urban growth. Nostalgia is thus one possible *general* response (one that may be radical or conservative) to the crisis of modernity wherever it was emerging.²⁴ Rapid and relentless material and technological changes — and, above all, the caesura of the First World War — shattered the belief in any imagined “organic” connections with the past.²⁵ The release from past conventions and traditions proved liberating for some Europeans, while the lack of roots was disturbing for others. The “Habsburg myth,” as reflected in some of the literature I intend to examine, must be understood as a particular Austrian version of nostalgia produced by a modern world in which people have lost their roots, traditions, and sense of security.²⁶

The disintegration of the supposedly secure value systems of “Vater, Landesvater, Gottvater” and the rise of nationally constructed communities

are two fundamental features of modernity experienced in Austria in unique ways. A third strand of the debate that has special relevance to the Austrian context is the nature of modernity as a Janus figure, with a destructive as well as a constructive face. For Bauman “order and chaos are modern twins,” yet that order does not wish to acknowledge its twin in its hubristic desire to bring about a “perfect” world.²⁷ In Bauman’s view, the struggle to remove any kind of ambivalence or disorder from the rationally planned, modern world — such as the attempt to expel all “strangers” from the ethnically “pure” nation-state — is not only self-propelling but also self-destructive. At an early stage of his analysis of the attack on ambivalence, Bauman cites Benjamin’s memorable image of the dialectic of modernity, whose unstoppable forward flight of progress leaves in its wake a mounting pile of debris:

[Ein Engel] hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. [. . .] Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm.²⁸

Benjamin here expresses both the blindly ambitious flight of the angel of “progress” from a known point of departure into an unknown future and its chaotic twin, the mountain of rubble and past suffering that accompanies it. Bauman elaborates on that idea, which is central to the understanding of modernity, with his definition of modern politics as “gardening states.” For “order designing” and “waste disposal” go hand in hand in the modern world: “Weeds are the waste of gardening, mean streets the waste of town planning, dissidence the waste of ideological unity, heresy the waste of orthodoxy, strangerhood the waste of nation-building. They are waste, as they defy classification and explode the tidiness of the grid.”²⁹

As I shall show, the modernization of Austria produced different kinds of “Trümmer auf Trümmer”: the enormous destructive power of the first technological, industrial world war, which brought about the fragmentation of the spiritually empty dynastic empire into mutually antagonistic nation-states, followed by the even greater mountains of rubble thrown up by the attempt to create, through war and bureaucratically executed genocide, the ethnically “pure,” fascist, ersatz-empire in central and eastern Europe. The reconstruction of a democratic “Western” Austria after 1945 did not — at least in the eyes of many of its intellectuals — constitute an end to the dialectic of modernity. For them Austria had become a new kind of facade: the “tidy grid” of material prosperity covered a moral void of unexpiated crimes.

One of Bauman's definitions of "modern," coupled with his understanding of the National Socialist genocide as an extreme example of the hidden negative potential of modernity, illuminates this third area of debate. "Existence is modern in so far as it is effected and sustained by design, manipulation, management, engineering."³⁰ If the *ancien régime* was the age of order per se — an order that was given and "natural" because it was presumed to have been ordained by God — then modernity is by contrast "the age of artificial order and of grand societal designs, the era of planners and visionaries — and more generally — 'gardeners.'"³¹ Bauman constantly stresses the centrality of ordering designs, of the "drawing board" in the transforming project of modernity, one that must, by definition, remain unfinished since modernity is all about "incessant and obsessive modernization."³² Bauman sees the Jews as having a fundamentally ambivalent position in the project. Together with the gypsies, they are the sole "non-national" nations, unable to fit into the Europe of nations, "a blot scattered over the emerging order."³³ The desire to engineer a "perfect" society and remove the blots — with an apparently rational, scientific justification on grounds of race or class — found its most extreme form in the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin. For Bauman the Holocaust is not an aberration, a regression into barbarism, but rather "a characteristically modern phenomenon" since it could not have taken place without the most essential achievements of modern civilization.³⁴ "The Nazi mass murder of European Jewry was not only the *technological* achievement of an *industrial* society, but also the *organisational* achievement of a *bureaucratic* society."³⁵ The history of Europe in the first half of the last century was to show how the grand designs of the "gardeners" could go disastrously wrong, how the rationality and science of the Enlightenment could turn against themselves and produce their opposite, namely, chaos and irrationality. And it was Austria — both at the end of the imperial era, as the seedbed for the "planners and the visionaries," and then in the later, disrupted period, as the location for dictatorship and genocide — that exemplified this destructive process.

I will demonstrate that Ingeborg Bachmann, the last of the three writers to be examined here, engages deeply with the "ambivalence of modernity" in her fiction. Her understanding of the hidden possibilities of modern society is determined by her later standpoint, writing a generation after Roth, by which time that destructive potential had become real and "hautnah" for her and her contemporaries. That is not to reduce her understanding of ambivalence solely to the experience of fascism as a child and teenager. Clearly, the shadow of fascism in Austria (and in Germany, for both countries are for her parts of what was once a single "Kulturnation") constantly falls across her poetry and fiction. Bachmann's critique of modern living, however, confronts a far wider range of experiences: the corruption of language itself in a modern, media-dominated

world (a preoccupation of Kraus before her); the ambivalent position of women now that empowering careers appear to be open to them; and the nature of “modern” relationships that purport to offer liberation but lead to new kinds of emotional imprisonment. Whereas Benjamin and Bauman are concerned with the historical and philosophical macrocosm of modernity, Bachmann the creative writer looks *inward* in order to explore the microcosm of damaged human relationships and determine how these may act as crucibles for larger, destructive trends in society. As she wrote in the 1960s in the preface to her unfinished novel *Der Fall Franza*:

[Das Virus Verbrechen] kann doch nicht vor zwanzig Jahren aus unserer Welt verschwunden sein, bloß weil hier Mord nicht mehr ausgezeichnet, verlangt, mit Orden bedacht und unterstützt wird. [. . .] [Dieses Buch] versucht, mit etwas bekanntzumachen, etwas aufzusuchen, was nicht aus der Welt verschwunden ist. Denn es ist heute nur unendlich viel schwerer, Verbrechen zu begehen, und daher sind diese Verbrechen so sublim, daß wir sie kaum wahrnehmen und begreifen können, obwohl sie täglich in unserer Umgebung, in unsrer Nachbarschaft begangen werden. Ja, ich behaupte und werde nur versuchen, einen ersten Beweis zu erbringen, daß noch heute sehr viele Menschen nicht sterben, sondern ermordet werden.³⁶

Like her mentor Musil, Bachmann is deeply critical of a society preoccupied with material and technical progress (to use his terminology, that has “Verstand” at the expense of “Seele”), but unlike him she does not think that new ways of living are available for the recovery of integrity in the modern world. Indeed, she believes that relationships between men and women have become inherently destructive and that language itself has been corrupted. One of Bachmann’s recent critics considers her “great accomplishment” to be “the representational strategy she devised to portray [. . .] historically induced deformations of consciousness.”³⁷

To conclude, the fragmentation of value systems once held to be secure, the division of the modern world into nationally constructed communities, and the working out of the hidden but destructive possibilities of modern societies built on rationality are three fundamental narratives of modernity that have been experienced in particular ways in Austria. A universal narrative of the modern world that intersects with all of these is that of industrialization and urbanization. Thus far late Habsburg Austria has only been referred to as an example of the persistence of the old order, yet it was also — in northern Bohemia, in Brünn (the city of Musil’s youth), in greater Vienna (by 1910 a city of nearly two million), and elsewhere in the economically expanding empire — a modern, industrialising state. The maps of the rapidly expanding railway network in Austria-Hungary reproduced in David Good’s study bear witness to the speed of modernization in Austria, even if it lagged a long way behind that of Britain and Germany.³⁸ Marshall Berman’s eloquent summary of the dynamic new

world of late-nineteenth-century modernity can be applied to Austria as it can to any of the new industrial societies, with the reservation that the “increasingly strong” national sentiments had not yet produced states of their own:

This is a landscape of steam engines, automatic factories, railroads, vast new industrial zones; of teeming cities that have grown overnight, often with dreadful human consequences; of daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale; of increasingly strong national states and multinational aggregations of capital; of mass social movements fighting these modernizations from above with their own modes of modernization from below; of an ever-expanding world market embracing all, capable of the most spectacular growth, capable of appalling waste and devastation, *capable of everything except solidity and stability*.³⁹

Berman’s concluding words — echoing Marx — may act as a common denominator for the different experiences of the three writers to be examined here. The modern world may contain an infinite number of possibilities, yet it is in constant flux and lacks all sense of stability and solidity — whether for Musil’s Ulrich, the man without fixed qualities, or for the disoriented “Heimkehrer” of Roth’s fiction, or for Elisabeth in Bachmann’s “Drei Wege zum See,” whose map of her hometown no longer accords with reality.

The Emergence of Modernity in Austria

The preceding section has isolated strands of the debates on the nature of modernity relevant to Austria. But what were the main characteristics of Austria in the period of the emergence of modernity before and after the First World War? An entry in Musil’s diary for 1920 offers one possible response: “Dieses groteske Österreich ist nichts anderes als ein besonders deutlicher Fall der modernen Welt.”⁴⁰ Musil was a scientist, and his cool analysis contrasts with Kraus’s apocalyptic utterance quoted at the beginning of this introduction. What did Musil mean by this and what conditions obtained in Austria during the first quarter of the twentieth century that made him, as well as other Austrian intellectuals, think this way?

On closer examination Musil’s remark appears unscientific. If the crisis of modernity is a perception in the minds of individuals, it cannot be said to be clearer in one place than in another. What seismograph is Musil using to measure so precisely this cultural earthquake? He cannot be asserting, for example, that *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* explores a moral void several degrees more intense than that of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. However, what is demonstrable in this case is that Conrad was a somewhat isolated figure in his adopted country. He had acquired its

language, but he remained a foreigner, examining the imperial void with the eyes and mind of an outsider. Musil was *not*, in the Austrian context at least, an outsider. He was one of a surprisingly large number of writers and thinkers in Austria — some of them, like Hofmannsthal and Wittgenstein, fairly close to the establishment — who perceived a deep crisis at the heart of their own culture. Of course, the highest ranks of the establishment — the emperor, the archdukes, the ministers, the senior civil servants and generals — did not think at all in this way: Austria was and would continue to be a great power, and in the summer of 1914 the Austrian establishment reasserted this imagined status. What general conditions in Austria were impelling the intellectuals and the lower ranks of the elites toward a collective crisis of culture and identity?

First and foremost Musil thought that the preconditions for Austria continuing to be a great power had ceased to exist since the mid-1860s.⁴¹ With the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, Austria had finally lost the sacral role it had enjoyed (formally, at any rate, if not *de facto*) since the Middle Ages as the guarantor of law and authority throughout central Europe. Though the emperor continued to exert some influence over German affairs, the events of 1848–49 showed the rising strength of both German and Hungarian nationalism, pulling the multi-ethnic realm in two directions and threatening to break it apart. Until 1866 the Austrians could continue to claim a *de jure* superiority over Prussia in German affairs, but the defeat at Königgrätz revealed the *de facto* military, technical, and economic dominance of the northern German state. The enforced “Ausgleich” with Hungary the following year and the establishment of a separate German state in 1871 in effect eliminated the political basis of Austria’s status as a great power. Thenceforth Austria was excluded from Germany and pulled in a southerly direction into the powder keg of the Balkans and assumed a colonial role there to which the multi-ethnic state was unsuited, especially given that its military strength had been put into question by the defeats of 1859 and 1866. The German hegemony in Cisleithania was not a realistic, long-term project. It could not be sustained in the face of the growing national movements among Czechs and Poles that threatened to undermine it. The crisis of nationalism will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter. Here it is sufficient to state that the loss of Austria’s historic identity destabilized the empire and afflicted Austrian intellectuals with an earlier sense of crisis than their counterparts in Britain, France, or Germany.

A second reason for the sense of crisis perceived by Austrian intellectuals lay in the nature of the empire itself, which raised the question of whether it was even capable of modernization. Whereas in Britain, France, and imperial Germany the premodern had merged with the modern — albeit in very differing political forms — this process of political modernization was difficult — perhaps even impossible — to achieve in the multi-ethnic,

dynastic Habsburg realm. Edward Crankshaw sums up the Austrian predicament in the following concise manner: “Vienna had no 19th century as we understand it, or even as the Parisians understand it. The eighteenth [century] slowly waned and then with that calamitous upheaval the 20th was suddenly, starkly there.”⁴² How could an ancien régime modernize itself when its essence and structure made the emergence of a nationally constructed modernity unfeasible? At the start of the twentieth century the old order at the heart of Europe was still outwardly intact, living in the shell of its baroque palaces and churches, upholding the military code of honor, and following the traditions of the court and the aristocracy, with the old emperor at its apex, rigidly adhering to a way of life that had been acquired before 1848. Its capital city of Vienna expressed the juxtaposition of the premodern and the modern in striking ways. As Pascal notes, the city — with its working-class, industrial quarters beset by ethnic and social tensions — lay not far off from “a vast Alpine world with a population hardly touched by modern developments.”⁴³ At its center lay what Musil called the “bewaffnete Insel” of the Hofburg and the many palaces of the feudal aristocracy. Encircling but entirely separate from them was the modern Ringstraße, with its banks and commercial establishments, electric tramways, and the medical and scientific faculties of the university. Pascal strengthens Crankshaw’s point when he writes of the “long, losing battle between the old aristocracy and the forces of disintegration” in Austria, reminding us that Vienna possessed a “core of ancient dignities [separate from] the modern and bourgeois world.”⁴⁴ In chapter 2 I will examine the way Musil uses the Hofburg to symbolize the premodern worldview, understood as belief in an ordered cosmos centered on the emperor and God. The ancien régime had lost its transcendent authority, having become a hollow edifice or, at best, in Musil’s words, “ein anonymer Verwaltungsorganismus.”⁴⁵ Around this seemingly intact but hollow “core” Musil therefore places a metonym for the fragmented world of modernity — the *Parallelaktion* — in which unity can no longer be found and where attempts to construct it by acts of will are fraudulent.

Musil, a modern intellectual who has grown up in a partly premodern realm, suspects well before 1914 that the inevitable processes of modernization will entail its fragmentation and possible dissolution. Yet at the same time the empire around him offers the palpable memory or lingering presence of the premodern, in particular a sense or illusion of wholeness that was fundamental to that vanished worldview and that contrasts so sharply with the fragmentation that is all around him. This is why Claudio Magris describes the world of late Habsburg intellectuals as “das Trümmerfeld der Totalität.”⁴⁶ Magris emphasizes that for such writers the Habsburg realm became a symbol for a totality that was inexorably breaking apart long before its physical collapse at the end of the First World War.

Musil's view of Austria as "ein besonders deutlicher Fall" of the modern world is part of his perception of an overall crisis for which Austria is a paradigm. The fragmented Austria of 1920 is the end result of a long process of inner dissolution that had been apparent before 1914 to those sensitive to it. To quote Musil, "So bleibt zur Erklärung der Leidenschaft des Kriegausbruches wirklich nur die Annahme, daß es sich um die Endexplosion einer europäischen Lage gehandelt hat, die schon lange vorbereitet war und bestand."⁴⁷ By any reckoning Musil would have to be placed at the most critical end of the spectrum of Austrian intellectuals. They did not, however, all perceive an acute crisis in this way. Hermann Bahr might be placed at the other end of the spectrum — not a deep thinker, like Musil, but a highly influential publicist who told educated Austrians what they wished to hear. For example, he insisted that the modernization of the arts in Austria would give the country an identifiable culture. It would, in Bahr's view, produce a literature that was quite distinct from that of Germany, and that artistic movements such as the Secession would lead to a heightened sense of national identity. Bahr believed in a program of modernity that would produce "a total transformation of artistic, cultural and social values."⁴⁸ Musil did not share these optimistic views. He felt that no separate "Austrian" culture was possible and that any transformation would be the result of an individual, inner, mystical experience achieved in opposition to the surrounding social wasteland.

A prescient text by Hofmannsthal, written as early as 1907, articulates the breakdown of Austrian historic identity and the sense of crisis felt by intellectuals. He shows it to be connected with language, the loss of a common culture shared with Germany, and the destruction of a much older, baroque Austria. The narrator of *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* describes his sense of alienation from the language he speaks and the people he meets upon returning to Germany after eighteen years abroad on business. Only the memory of the village in Upper Austria in which he was raised, with its fountain, its "alte, schiefe, vom Blitz gespaltene Nußbaum," and its fresh mountain air gives him a sense of home. Only these things will provide signs of recognition when he returns. "Aber da bin ich nun vier Monate in Deutschland, und kein Haus, kein Fleck Erde, kein geredetes Wort, kein menschliches Gesicht, wenn ich ehrlich sein soll, keines, hat mir dies kleine Zeichen gegeben."⁴⁹ Surrounded by the commercial "Tun und Treiben" of the Germans, the narrator is not at home: "Hier ist es nicht heimlich. Wie in einer großen ruhelosen freudlosen Herberge ist mir zumute."⁵⁰ Since Hofmannsthal's displaced Austrian businessman cannot identify with his fellow German speakers in the new Reich, that part of what once constituted Austrian identity — "Wir sind Österreicher aber wir sind auch Deutsche" — is now lost.⁵¹ All he can do is yearn for the rural, pre-industrial Upper Austrian village of his childhood whose baroque character is expressed in its "Laufbrunnen . . . mit der friedlichen Jahreszahl 1776 in

verschnörkelten thesesianischen Chiffren.”⁵² Like Musil with his “geheimnisvolle Zeitkrankheit,” Hofmannsthal believes his narrator’s sense of unreality and homelessness is a symptom of “eine Art leiser Vergiftung, eine verborgene und schleichende Infektion, die in der europäischen Luft für den bereitzuliegen scheint, der von weither zurückkommt.”⁵³

In this section I have outlined how the breakdown of Austria’s historic identity led prescient Austrian intellectuals to perceive the crisis of modernity earlier and perhaps more sharply than their counterparts elsewhere. The reasons given here were certainly not the only ones. A language crisis caused by living in a multilingual state and a gender crisis brought about by the declining belief in a “masculine,” patriarchal culture should also be mentioned. There were thus several cogent reasons why Musil — and others like him — should think Austria was an especially clear case of the crisis of modernity. For those with the ability to sense it, something appeared to be rotten in the state of Austria. The decay at the heart of the state was, paradoxically, highlighted by its very claims to solidity and continuity. The shadow of empire was visible in two distinct but related ways. The empire had, in its closing days, proved to be a mere shadow of what it had claimed or pretended to be. Following its fall it also cast a long shadow into the future. The inclusive multi-ethnic state — hollow as it had been in reality — acted as a reminder of an imagined totality, contrasting with the narrow, exclusive pseudototalities of the nation-states that were to replace it.

Perceptions of Modernity in Musil, Roth, and Bachmann

In the two preceding sections I outlined the general conditions of modernity and the underlying reasons for the political and cultural crisis in Austria as the ancien régime gave way to the modern era. How did the three writers under investigation respond to the crisis? Although I shall approach this question from historical and biographical perspectives in the next chapter, here I will examine more general or theoretical perceptions of the “modern” in the writings of these three authors in order to compare and contrast them. Of course, none — especially Roth — are chiefly remembered for their theoretical work, although Musil’s philosophical essays of the 1920s reveal the extraordinary range and depth of his thinking on important issues of the time. If asked how the author perceived modernity, many readers would point to the celebrated opening chapter of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, with its scientific presentation of the thermodynamics of the modern metropolis: “Autos schossen aus schmalen, tiefen Straßen in die Seichtigkeit heller Plätze. Fußgängerdunkelheit bildete wolkige Schnüre.”⁵⁴

This opening chapter reflects the bipolarity of Musil's response to modernity: "Es kann sich [. . .] gar nicht um anderes handeln, als um ein Mißverhältnis, ein Aneinandervorbei- leben von Verstand und Seele. Wir haben nicht zuviel Verstand und zuwenig Seele, sondern wir haben zuwenig Verstand in den Fragen der Seele."⁵⁵ The "Verstand" that is acquired from the science of meteorology does not describe the real experience of "ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres 1913," nor can knowledge of the "Bremsweg" of a truck explain away a man's death, although the bystanders wish it could. All the traditional, human feelings that pass for "Seele" — here limited to the lady's "unentschlossenes, lähmendes Gefühl" caused by witnessing the traffic accident — seem inadequate to deal with the random contingency of modern urban existence, in which the extinction of a human life is reduced to a statistic. In this chapter Musil succeeds brilliantly in rendering the metropolis as a Mach-ian flux of sensations in which everything — the people, their "bourgeois" identities (they even have their initials embroidered on their underwear!), the name of the city — has become subjective and unreal, incapable of being understood either through scientific thinking or by means of the outworn, hopelessly inadequate conventions of literary realism.⁵⁶ At the same time, Musil's fascination with the astonishing complexity and potential of modernity is palpable, especially when we learn (in the next chapter) that his protagonist Ulrich has been observing the whole scene with equal fascination.

Everything in this chapter is metonymic: Vienna for the modern city; the weather report for the scientific way of thinking; the male and female bystanders a sort of modern Adam and Eve in the metropolis (though vainly imagining themselves to have secure identities); and the traffic accident for the extreme contingency of modern life. Musil first articulated some of the ideas that lie behind the novel in his 1923 essay "Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom," which he left unfinished, presumably because by the mid-1920s he had decided that such ideas were far better worked out in fiction than in the form of a theoretical essay. Musil argues that the condition of Germany in 1923 — which he describes as "der chaotische Zustand. Narrenhaus verglichen" — is symptomatic of the continent as a whole: "Was im deutschen Fall eklatant geworden ist [. . .] ist latent die geistige Situation von ganz Europa."⁵⁷

Musil's starting point is a comparison of the intellectual situation in 1900 with that of 1923. The *fin de siècle* was distinguished by its belief in the future and by the determination of its followers to be different and do things differently from previous generations. Musil calls it the "letzte geistige Bewegung in Deutschland von großer lebendiger Kraft."⁵⁸ Although he notes that the movements of 1900 were, highly diverse and contradictory, and that their self-belief remained an illusion, he nevertheless thinks that the contrast between 1900 and 1923 is best summed up in