

Walter Moser, Robert Musil. La mise à l'essai du roman, Paris (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme) 2019, 224 p. (Bibliothèque allemande. Série Philia), ISBN 978-2-7351-2487-9, EUR 19,00.

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Walter Moser has a long familiarity with the work of Robert Musil. Since the early 1980s, he has written highly stimulating and insightful essays that have been published in various journals and conference proceedings. It is thus particularly welcome to have these revised essays now available in book format. »Robert Musil. La mise à l'essai du roman« consists of ten chapters that focus on three main topics: 1) the reception of Musil's work in France; 2) Musil's attempts to account for, and overcome, the crisis of the liberal subject; and 3) the interdiscursive and experimental function of literature.

Moser starts his monograph by recalling how due to the great demands the novel puts on its readers, »The Man Without Qualities« taught him how to read slowly. In the second chapter, he investigates the paradoxes of Musil's reception in 1935 and 1981. While in 1935, Musil's parallels between bolshevism and fascism as collective regimes were met with hostility, Musil's work was hailed in France in 1981 as part of a renewed interest in Fin-de-siècle Vienna. Yet, in both cases, the reception was based on simplifications, misreadings, and a failure to do justice to Musil's unique intellectual endeavor.

In 1935, Musil's comments did not find any resonance at a time of high ideological polarization that viewed bolshevism and fascism as mutually exclusive. In 1981, critics drew on clichés (the association with Proust and Joyce, the myth of the cursed poet, the teleology of the fragment, or the »quasi-magic formula« [p. 32] of the perpetual work in progress) in order to make his work more familiar. In doing so, they resorted to stereotypes that Musil precisely sought to challenge. Chapter three focuses on Musil's ambivalent reactions to the development of sport and the emergence of a culture of the body in the 1920s. While interested in sport activities and the mystics of sport, Musil criticizes the professionalization and commodification of a cultural practice whose success is symptomatic of the crisis of the liberal subject. Sports offer a bodily ersatz to the idealist representation of the subject while pushing other cultural practices into the background.

Chapters four to eight explore the interdiscursive function of literature. Starting with a conceptual distinction between intertextuality – i. e. the connection and circulation of specific texts – and interdiscursivity – i. e. the dynamics and interaction of discourses as system of rules and individual acts – Moser examines literature's unique ability to incorporate a wide range of existing discourses and to put them to the test.

Novels, in particular, are privileged sites for interdiscursive experimentation. One of the primary aims of »The Man Without



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Qualities« is to lay bare and critically reflect on discursive practices with the help of irony, parody, narrative setting, character interaction, and essayistic reflections. The opening paragraphs of the novel are a case in point. Musil juxtaposes two types of discourses: a lengthy weather report in a pseudo-scientific jargon and a brief ordinary statement – »It was a fine day in August 1913« – that could be the standard beginning of a realist novel. This ironic juxtaposition draws attention to, and disrupts, our habits as readers of fiction. It also points to the complexity of the discursive attempts to »describe the factual«.

Interdiscursive experimentation takes on many forms in Musil's novel: for instance, the murderer Moosbrugger becomes the focus of contrasted legal and psychiatric discourses that fail to grasp his singularity. Characters with fossilized worldviews (Stumm's military vision or Clarisse's literal Nietzscheanism) interact with each other. Conversely, Ulrich, a versatile intellectual hero, breaks down discursive barriers in order to try out new hypotheses and to challenge ideological postures such as the false idealism of his cousin Diotima and the business tycoon Arnheim. Musil incorporates specialized discourses in a mimetic fashion while introducing metadiscursive comments through the narrative voice and essayistic passages. Interdiscursivity also takes place at the level of metaphors and analogies, bringing into contact discursive realms that are usually set apart.

The interdiscursive potential of literature – Moser notices – becomes particularly salient in times of crisis when existing structures and representations dissolve and new configurations emerge. Musil draws on a broad array of discourses – mysticism, psychiatry, probabilities, statistics, or thermodynamics – to account for the crisis of the liberal subject and the rise of collective phenomena, and to explore new forms of subjectivity. One striking feature is his tendency to push the interdiscursive experimentation to the extreme, thus making any definite conclusion impossible.

Moser pays particular attention to the ways in which Musil's essayism, his rejection of false dichotomies, and his integrative thinking create a discursive complexity marked by ambivalence and undecidability. Furthermore, he analyzes Musil's distancing strategies – e. g. the creation of tensions between the characters' utterances and actual behavior, or the ironic undermining of their thought processes – with great care: Ulrich, for instance, dismisses the genius moral while behaving in a way that seems to reinforce it. His thought experiments are marred by a sense of provisionality, indeterminacy, and even arbitrariness. The aim of literature, thus, is to problematize rather than offer easy solutions. The drawback of such interdiscursive experiments, however, is pragmatic powerlessness.

Chapter 9 returns to the reception of Musil's work by exploring its connections to early Romanticism, modernity and postmodernity. Musil's novel shares early Romantic features such as reflexivity, fragmentariness, and performativity. Similarly, it lends itself to postmodernist readings in its reliance on irony, parody, fragmentation, recycling of heterogeneous materials and questioning of the notion of history. Yet, such parallels should be taken with a pinch of salt: Musil does not share the Romantic



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longing for totality and he derides Romantic illusions. Similarly, while some formal aspects of his work may be associated with the postmodernist agenda, Musil remains committed to the enlightened ideal of an intellectual mastery of the world he lives in.

The final chapter explores Musil's literary response to the crisis of the subject by focusing on his idea of a character entirely made up of quotations. While psychiatrists analyze such depersonalization as a form of pathology, Musil turns this feature into a constructive aesthetic principle that lucidly acknowledges the demise of the sovereign subject. His attempt echoes Mário de Andrade's novel »Macunaíma« (1928) and its »hero without a character«. This Brazilian novel is based on a montage of fragmented and heterogeneous elements that reflect the condition of the postcolonial subject.

Walter Moser's book is a highly enjoyable and thought-provoking read that brilliantly fulfills its goal to cast an innovative light on Musil's work and the »interdiscursive richness of his novelistic writing« (p. 215). Although this monograph arose from a series of scattered articles, it reads like a coherent whole, and the occasional repetitions create mutually reinforcing echoes that highlight the consistency of the analysis. Moser has taken Musil's invitation to read slowly to heart, and his monograph offers a masterful lesson in cautious and attentive reading.

The combination of analytical finesse and theoretical breadth, the methodical exploration of interdiscursivity, the attention to detail, and the sensitivity to the contexts of reception are particularly impressive. In the introduction, Moser signals that in contrast to Jacques Bouveresse and Jean-Pierre Cometti – two Musil scholars he feels a particular affinity with – he would focus on Musil's writing. Indeed, his scrutiny of the text is remarkable: Moser quotes lengthy passages and analyzes them in depth, thus giving us a feel of the density of Musil's prose as a multilayered web of meanings.

As a follow-up to Moser's remarks on Musil's ties to postmodernism, one may point out an additional paradox: Musil has been barely read or commented by postmodern thinkers. In fact, the reception of his work has been most intense among philosophers – such as Bouveresse – who criticized postmodernism and who viewed the tendency to conflate literature and philosophy with great suspicion: Bouveresse celebrates Musil as a model of rigor while dismissing the fuzziness and intellectual complacency of postmodern theorists.

In the concluding paragraphs of his study, Moser qualifies his previous statements about the powerlessness of literature by highlighting the ongoing relevance of Musil's work. In doing so, he echoes Musil's own thoughts about the social function of literature. Aware of the limited impact of his work, Musil felt that as an exterritorial and untimely activity, literature was fulfilling nevertheless an important task. Critical distance matters in times blinded by urgency. Similarly, the essays gathered in Moser's monograph have not lost their relevance. Not only do they illuminate Musil's intellectual endeavor, but they also offer a fruitful contribution to the ongoing debates on the cognitive potential of literature.



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