The Man without Qualities (novel)

By Walter Fanta

Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man without Qualities) is a novel by Robert Musil, begun in 1918. The first book was published in 1931, and the first part of the second book was published in 1932. The incomplete novel offers a panorama of social, cultural, and intellectual life in Vienna from August 1913 until the outbreak of war.

Table of Contents

1 The Theorem of Human Shapelessness
2 Kakanien and the Parallel Action
3 Outbreak of the War as Final Destination of the Novel
4 Reception

Notes
Selected Bibliography
Citation

The Theorem of Human Shapelessness

From 20 August 1914 through the end of 1917, Robert Musil (1880-1942) served as an officer of the Austrian Imperial Army on the southern front. After the war, the need to come to terms with the outbreak of war became the focus of Musil's literary ambitions. His essay-style reflections on the matter led him to formulate the Theorem der menschlichen Gestaltlosigkeit ("Theorem of Human Shapelessness"). This theorem postulates that humans are an "extraordinarily indolent mass" who are hollow when it comes to "every moral question"\(^1\) and can be molded socially from the outside. A human is, according to Musil, "a creature of adaptation, who conforms himself to circumstances and situations."\(^2\) The essay in which Musil formulated the theorem remained a fragment, but his published essay, "Die Nation als Ideal und Wirklichkeit" ("The Nation as Ideal and Reality"), made
explicit that the theorem was a fruit of the war. He wrote:

I believe that what we have experienced since 1914 will have taught most people that, ethically speaking, the human being is almost formless, unexpectedly malleable, capable of anything; good and evil range equally widely in him, like the pointer on a sensitive scale.[3]

Musil later transferred this concept of human formlessness to the realm of his novel.

**Kakanien and the Parallel Action**

In an interview in 1926 Musil explained the aim of his project: "That war began, had to begin, is the sum of all conflicting forces and influences and movements that I show."[4] The chronotopic setting of the novel in *Kakaniaen* (derived from the term "k. u. k.," the traditional shorthand for the Imperial and Royal insignia of the Habsburgs), as well as its cast of characters, serve to create a grand socio-analysis of the war in the manner of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002).[5] Musil attempted a socio-psychological explanation of the deeper causes of the outbreak of the Great War. Even a traffic accident described in the first chapter of the novel is often interpreted primarily as a symbolic reference to the greater accident of the world war.

In reference to the the conflict of nationalities, the anticipated breaking point in Kakanien’s system, Musil writes ironically:

> It was only that everyone’s natural resentment of everyone else’s efforts to get ahead, a resentment we all feel nowadays, had crystalized earlier in Kakanien, where it can be said to have assumed the form of a sublimated ceremonial rite, which could have had a great future had its development not been cut prematurely short by a catastrophe.[6]

In the novel, the *Parallelaktion* (Parallel Action), a planned Austrian event to honor the 70th jubilee of Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria (1830–1916) in 1918, is also meant to counter the German celebrations of Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859–1941). This event proves to be a stage for what Musil calls *Seinesgleichen geschieht* (translated variously as "the likes of it now happens" or "the self-same occurs"). The parallel action is a brutally honest satirical description of somnambulance and pseudo-activity, which historian Christopher Clark has described as the characteristic behavior of the political elite of Austro-Hungary.[7]

**Outbreak of the War as Final Destination of the Novel**

In the face of political developments in Germany in the 1930s, Musil radicalized his intention of using the novel as a warning against the "next mass catastrophe."[8] He identified the takeover of the Nazis in 1933 as an even more horrific repetition of 1914 and regretted that his project had become a historical novel. Until the end of his life he meant for the novel to lead up to chapters depicting the
mobilization, wherein he wanted to link the reality of the war, emerging from the civilizing fiction of an age of eternal peace, with the narrative inversion of all characters in the novel. With the outbreak of the war arises the potential for the emergence of antithetical qualities in every human being. The main character Ulrich would, in accordance with this unrealized plan, go to war in an act of intellectual and moral suicide.

Reception

The first book was received with great interest, especially in critical circles. Thereafter, a silence prevailed around Musil’s novel for a long time. Starting in the 1950s, however, its triumphal march around the world began with translations in many languages. The Man without Qualities was awarded its place as one of the most important German-language Modernist novels and as a unique literary-philosophical experiment; literary scholarship stresses, above all, the novel’s significance for the explanation of the deeper causes of war.

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Notes

Selected Bibliography


Citation


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The Man Without Qualities is told in the third person and the narrating voice is extremely warm and humorous. The author is wryly amused by the whole world, including his characters. When a man has set his house in order, he should also take to himself a wife. The man without qualities. The protagonist, Ulrich, a thirty-year-old bachelor, has abandoned all thoughts of being a success or making his mark in the ranks of his great nation. Instead, he has decided to take a year’s holiday from the world and from himself to become an observer of the quirks of modern urban life, and of his own life, which he views with amused detachment. The novel is set in 1913, in Vienna, capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I like the way Ulrich has a nickname for his homeland, Kakania. Volumes; 23 cm. "The Man Without Qualities is an unfinished modernist novel in three volumes and various drafts It is typically considered to be one of the most significant European novels of the twentieth century. The novel is a ‘story of ideas’, which takes place in the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's last days, and the plot often veers into allegorical dissections on a wide range of existential themes concerning humanity and feelings. It has a particular concern with the values of truth and opinion and how society organizes ideas about life and society. The Man Without Qualities, unfinished novel by Austrian writer Robert Musil, published as Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften in three installments in 1930, 1933, and 1943. Musil’s sprawling masterpiece was his life’s work. On the surface a witty, urbane portrait of life in the last days of the.