

## Preface

In his Nobel Lecture of 1992 Derek Walcott evoked a city inhabited by transcultural citizens. “It would be so racially various that the cultures of the world—the Asiatic, the Mediterranean, the European, the African—would be represented in it, its human variety more exciting than Joyce’s Dublin. Its citizens would intermarry as they chose, from instinct, not tradition, until their children find it increasingly futile to trace their genealogy.” Persons in such places will learn, Walcott continued, to cross cultural boundaries, to reassemble the broken pieces of history and redefine the world.

Walcott’s lecture epitomizes a notion of human subjectivity that has emerged in late-twentieth-century art, literature, music, architecture, cinema, and cultural theory. By and large, the concept of a transcultural subject is conditioned by contradictory global processes that have produced mobile, transnational patterns of cultural affiliation, at the same time reinforcing political and economic barriers between north and south, rich and poor, white and colored. The effects are seen everywhere around the globe, especially along geopolitical faultlines such as the Caribbean world, the scarred archipelago that Walcott remaps in his work. In literature from such regions, nearly everything is political; its political dimensions are typically made manifest as interrogations of identity and community.

This book is a study of the works of the Austrian writer Robert Musil (1880–1942), who lived in a historical situation similarly intersected by cultural, social, and economic contradictions, and who also envi-

sioned a human being who would trespass cultural limits. Musil's Austria was the first postimperial culture in modern Europe. Although the Austro-Hungarian Empire had no overseas colonies, it ruled over a vast array of nationalities, and in terms of *cultural* diversity and conflict it is therefore comparable to the major colonial powers. The rapid modernization of the empire and its eventual collapse in 1918 triggered an intense intellectual activity commonly discussed under rubrics such as "fin-de-siècle Vienna" or *modernité viennoise*. Behind these labels, I would like to suggest, we find a historical experience that is structurally akin to a phenomenon that was to affect other European states only later, the experience of postcoloniality. Indeed, Austria's postimperial culture was characterized not only by explosive conflicts between a residual feudal system and an emerging capitalist society, but also by the struggle between a crumbling imperial regime and various movements of what we today would call identity politics: Zionism and anti-Semitism; women's movements and antifeminism; nationalism, racism, and fascism. These conflicts compelled Musil and other intellectuals of his time, such as Sigmund Freud, Georg Lukács, Hermann Broch, Elias Canetti, Karl Kraus, Otto Bauer, Franz Kafka, and Joseph Roth, to examine the force of collective identities of ethnicity, nationhood, or masculine authority. Today's intellectuals address similar issues, mapping a world of postcolonial migration, globalization, and intercultural conflicts.

Robert Musil's works projected a "new human being," one who would resist assimilation into imperialist, nationalist, or fascist communities. I would like this study to honor that intention and to convey a sense of its theoretical and political urgency. The parallels between our time and Musil's are so striking that it is no longer possible *not* to read his writings historically and politically. My aim in writing this book is to explore these parallels. I will use Musil's work to shed light on our current interrogations of identity, and I will use contemporary theory to elucidate Musil's work, in an effort to grasp both as belonging to one and the same historical process. Such a dialectical approach will deepen the understanding of the postimperial situation in Austria and

Germany between the two world wars; conversely, it will expose the historical legacies resonating in contemporary discourses on nationalism, ethnicity, Eurocentrism, universalism, and multiculturalism.

My discussion of Musil's work is thus intertwined with an inquiry into the *history* of human subjectivity and identity. Consequently, this book is situated at the intersection of literary criticism, intellectual history, and cultural theory.

First, as a study of early-twentieth-century Austrian and German literature and culture, it discusses Musil's monumental novel *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*) and presents a new interpretation of its theoretical content, aesthetic specificity, and historical significance.

Second, as a historical account of theories of human subjectivity, *Subject Without Nation* delineates a sequence of ideological paradigms, from 1789 to the present, which have served to define "human nature"; this book may therefore be read as a history of modern identity.

Third, as an intervention into contemporary debates, my study provides a critical perspective on the disputes between universalists and particularists, Eurocentrists and multiculturalists, protectors of universal human values and defenders of cultural rights.

What unites these objectives is the old Kantian question "What is man?" Is there a universal human element? If so, how should it be described? Musil's intriguing answer is that the universal element consists of "a big, vacuous, round O," or "a vacuum through which all the feelings glow like blue neon tubes" (*MWQ* 432, 444 / *MoE* 398, 409). In short, what human beings have in common is emptiness and lack. That the human is distinguished by lack implies that it is characterized by need. In Musil's view, however, human lack is irremediable; the subject's need for psychic unity and recognition cannot be satisfied. No matter what role, group, profession, model, or ideal the subject may identify with, it still will never be but "an emergency substitute for something that [is] missing" (*MWQ* 416 / *MoE* 384).

Such a view of the human being directly contests the one prevailing in Musil's culture, which held that a person possesses a particular essence

that is expressed in—and hence determines—his or her race, culture, gender, and social rank. It is also directly opposed to the liberal conception, according to which the human being has a universal essence that makes the person independent of social identities, sex, and cultural origin. Therefore it also challenges both of the major alternatives that are regularly repeated in contemporary discussions about identity politics and universalism. These discussions are generally framed by the assumption that we have to choose one of the alternatives above, either the rooted order of the “tribe” or the disembodied liberty of the individual. The paradigm of human subjectivity articulated in Musil’s work, and later elaborated in poststructural, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial theories, suggests a radical alternative. In this view, the human being is at once particular, due to a constitutive need to assert an identity that guarantees social recognition and communal belonging, and universal, due to an ineffable capacity to exceed the identities that condition this belonging.

Robert Musil lived and worked in a historical moment when cultural identities had become so fixed that they appeared to predetermine the destiny of every citizen and to reduce men and women to their status of belonging. At the height of scientific racism, Musil responded to such fascist tendencies by stating, scandalously, that there was no difference between a German and an African. Even more important, he wrote a novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, that depicts a person who, being without identity, was able to assume any identity and to disclose the illusory nature of each. Encountering monolithic ideologies at every turn, Musil reacted by multiplying difference and by stressing that the human being always differs from his or her cultured self. The universal human element, Musil’s novel asserts, resides in this inexpressible ability to differ, in this “inclination toward the negative,” which, according to the novel’s narrator, leads a person “to abolish reality” and to change the world.

In present-day intellectual discussions, Musil’s reply to the question of “human nature” retains its progressive force. That Musil conceptualized such an idea as a response to the authoritarian ideologies in postimperial Austria and Germany is crucial, because it reveals the his-

torical depth and genealogical beginnings of our own discourse, and it indicates the cultural values and political positions that are at stake.

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