**Musil, Robert (1880-1942)**

Robert Musil’s work stands out for its intellectually stimulating and at the same time challenging subtlety and diligence. The essayistic form of his writing, his critical and often self-reflexive style, and his ability to draw connections between disparate cultural and scientific discourses have contributed significantly to literary modernism. Although lacking wider acknowledgement during his lifetime, Musil’s extensive yet unfinished novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*) (1930/32) is nowadays considered one of the most important novels of the twentieth century. Born in the Austrian city of Klagenfurt, Musil spent most of his life in Vienna and Berlin. When Austria became part of the Third Reich in 1938, he and his Jewish wife Martha escaped to Switzerland, where he died in Geneva in 1942.

**Timeline of Life**

**1880 1892-1897 1898-1901 1903-1908 1911-14 1930-1933**

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born in Cadet at military boarding Studies Engineering in Studies Psychology and Librarian at the Technical Lives in

Klagenfurt schools in Eisenstadt and Brno; first literary attempts Philosophy in Berlin University in Vienna Berlin

Mährisch-Weißkirchen

**1933 1934-1938 1938 1939-1942 1942**

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Musil leaves Lives in Vienna Musil and his wife Martha Exile in Geneva Death in Geneva

Berlin escape to Zürich

**Timeline of Works Published During Lifetime**

**1906 1911 1921 1922/23 1924 1930**

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*Die Verwirrungen Vereinigungen. Die Schwärmer Tonka Drei Frauen Der Mann ohne*

*des Zöglings Törleß* *Eigenschaften.* (Vol.1)

**1932 1936 1937**

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*Der Mann ohne Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten Über die Dummheit*

*Eigenschaften* (Vol.2)

Musil was born the only son of the engineer and professor Alfred Musil and his wife Hermine in Klagenfurt. The first decade of his life was influenced by many relocations of the family within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a recurring life-threatening sickness, and frequent conflicts with his parents. As a result, he was sent to military boarding schools, where he had his first sexual experiences including visits to prostitutes as well as homoerotic and sadistic encounters with his fellow cadets. His first publication, the novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (*The Confusions of Young Torless*) (1906), is essentially based on these experiences at the military academy. Focused around the character of pubescent cadet Törleß, the novel is concerned with adolescence and the staggering loss of moral and intellectual certainties that goes along with his coming-of-age. The novel looks beneath the disciplinary facade of the institution responsible for the education of the Empire’s future elite and reveals a world of sexual and moral confusion. While many contemporary critics rejected his debut as obscene, it was later celebrated as anticipation of the rise of fascism and National Socialism. The immediate success of the novel was owed to the leading critic Alfred Kerr, who supported Musil in his search for a publisher and with an emphatic review after the novel’s release.

In 1903, he left Vienna to study psychology and philosophy at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-University in Berlin. He took classes on the philosophical foundations of the sciences, and in his doctoral dissertation engaged himself with the theories and empirical criticism of Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach. At the same time, he became acquainted with the approaches of Gestalt psychology that influenced his future literary work. This is most notably the case in his novellas *Vereinigungen* (1911), which focus on the aesthetic dissolution of the Ego into elements of consciousness and perception. In 1908, Musil rejected an offer for an academic position in Graz to fully dedicate himself to his literary career. But the two and a half years of continuous work on his novellas were not rewarded with success. To support his future wife Martha, whom he met in 1905 and who brought two children into their relationship, he was forced to take a position as a librarian at the Technical University in Vienna.

During World War I, Musil served as an officer on the Italian front and became editor-in-chief of the “Soldaten-Zeitung”. He kept working on his only play *Die Schwärmer* (1921), about a complicated love triangle that is biographically based on the circumstances of the beginning of his relationship with his wife Martha. The almost banal and farcical plot of the play is confronted with the pathos-loaded language of the protagonists provoking an alienation of the audience and exposing the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Although a number of theatres had shown an interest in the intellectually demanding play, it was put on stage only once during his lifetime, in an unauthorized production in Berlin in 1929 that he vehemently tried to prevent.

From 1921 onwards, he began to focus almost exclusively on realizing his plan to write a major novel that would keep him busy for the rest of his life. He did not complete this project. When he died in 1942, he had published two books of his opus magnum *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*) (1930/32) leaving behind a convolute of more than 12 000 pages for the novel’s final third book. The plot takes place on the eve of World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which Musil ironically refers to by the name *Kakanien*). Characterized by long essayistic excursions and intellectual reflections, the novel follows the decay of the bourgeois world and its enlightenment ideals of free will, moral responsibility, and scientific rationality. Unfolding a complex panorama of the knowledge and culture of modernity, Musil sets out to equate ethics and aesthetics by claiming the unity of “precision and soul” and by reconciling the scientific method with a program of a fantastic precision and a sense of possibility. While the plot centres around the mathematician Ulrich, who has taken “a year’s vacation from life” to engage himself in all kinds of intellectual adventures, the novel has also become famous for the figure of the *Lustmörder* Moosbrugger, with which it alludes to contemporary discussions on legal responsibility and free will.

After the National Socialists took power in Germany, Musil and his wife moved back to Vienna, and when Austria joined the Third Reich in 1938, they fled to Switzerland and settled in Geneva, where Musil died in 1942. Until her death in 1949, Musil’s wife Martha worked on his literary estate and also published the third book of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in 1943. After her death, the journalist Adolf Frisé took over the editorial post and since 1955, he published Musil’s collected oevre in collaboration with the Rowohlt Verlag.

**References and Further Reading:**

Payne, Philip, Graham Bartram, and Galin Tihanov. (2007) *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil*. Rochester, NY: Camden House. (Comprehensive overview of Musil’s life and work, including a broad range of themes, genres and perspectives in Musil’s works.)

**Key Biographies of Robert Musil:**

Corino, Karl. (2003) *Robert Musil*. *Eine Biographie*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt. (In German. Includes a lengthy biography and a comprehensive history, reception and analysis of Musil’s writings.)

Allen Thiher. (2009) *Understanding Robert Musil*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. (In English. Includes an overview of Musil’s life and career and in-depth analyses of Musil’s major works including his doctoral dissertation and essays. Especially focused on the relationship between modern literature and science.)

**Key Works**

\* *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (1906, translated as *The Confusions of Young Torless*, 2001)

\* *Vereinigungen. Zwei Erzählungen* (1911)

*\* Die Schwärmer* (1921)

*\* Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Vol.1: 1930, Vol.2: 1932, translated as *The Man without Qualities*, 1996)

\* *Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten* (1936, translated as *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, 1987)