

Posthumous Papers of a Living Author
Robert Musil

by Cecile Rossant

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On the future of aesthetics

a review of

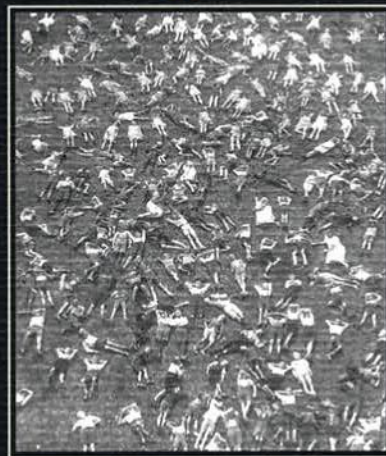
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translated from the German by Peter Wortsman

Archipelago Books, 2006

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Isn't it inevitable that a book comprised of 30 separate texts written in a span of over 15 years cannot suppress the emergence of a portrait of its author? This is especially so in the case of *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* by Robert Musil,¹ because the texts in this little book do not fit into one formal category, as would, for example, a collection of newspaper articles written by a journalist over a similar span of time. Musil sorts these texts into three sections with the following headings: "Pictures," "Unfriendly Observations," and "Unstorylike Stories." At the end of the book, another text, which has been described as a full-fledged short story, stands alone. This text, "The Blackbird," has recently been the subject of several critical analyses.²

I bring up this theme of portraiture or self-portraiture—something more or less, or at least less, narrative than auto-biography—because so many of the texts pivot on the question of the discontinuity of self or “. . . around the identity of

¹ Robert Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, translated from the German by Peter Wortsmann (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006). Original German title, *Nachlass zu Lebezeiten* (1936).

² See: 'Kritische Lektüren der Amsel, Neue Einblicke in Robert Musil's "Nachlaß zu Lebezeiten,"' Oliver Pfohlmann, www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=1593 (24.01.2009).

the narrator." Not as in, 'Who is he?' 'who did this or that,' but rather 'who am I?' And the corollary question 'what is I?' The question regarding self appears

³ Ibid., and http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2006_08_009654.php

⁴ Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a still Living Author*, X.

as a precipitate in many of these stories and in many different contexts or framings.

In one review of *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, the reviewer³ suggests that these texts somehow represent a lesser achievement when compared to Musil's masterpiece, *Mann Ohne Eigenschaften*. In my view, the comparison is invalid. When one considers the action of a text—its effect—it becomes a futile task to compare an expansive novel with one-and-a-half-page texts. Despite its philosophical and discursive qualities, *Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* is a novel. Page after page it creates the impenetrable opacity and seeming continuity of a world unto itself. M.O.E.'s Vienna has its own streets and houses, its own weather and light. These qualities are sustained over time. It even succeeds at creating the passage from city to country, today to tomorrow and night after night and characters whose identities can be linked to a given name and temporal existence. None of the prose texts in this book, and I will be mainly speaking of the prose texts in two sections titled "Pictures" and "Unstorylike Stories," attempt to do this. The truly awesome aspect of these extremely brief texts is that they are both protean and far-reaching in their implications. Musil's vision here is terrifyingly bleak and yet the prose is so tender—its images so precisely drawn, that we as readers are awakened by the intensity of expression which perseveres despite a bottomless powerlessness and uncertainty confronting the narrator. There is nothing resigned in these texts, but rather a vigilance that refuses sentimentality, the comfort of categories, and the simulacrum of clear boundaries.

And, as I began to trace recurrent themes in this book to construct a fragile and associative interpretation of several texts, I found that many texts aggregate around certain themes; they form couplets, or a dialogue across its pages, bypassing titles and the book's formal sections. I will attempt in the following essays to tease these themes into view.

Posthumous Papers of a Living Author also includes a foreword that is a sort of sly disclaimer. Musil explains that he consented to publication in part to fund continued work on his major, though here unnamed, opus, *Mann Ohne Eigenschaften*. He continues to defend his decision by claiming that at least as a living author he could have authorial control over the publication, an oversight he would necessarily have to forgo were he already dead. Tongue in cheek, he points to the general kindness bestowed on posthumously published works as being an important impetus in his wording of the book's title. He expresses his own misgivings on publishing these "little tales and observations" but finds justification in a quote from Goethe: "In one thing done badly you can see the simile of all things done badly."⁴ Why does he take such pains to reveal and evaluate his motivations to publish? Although I certainly cannot answer this question, I found the following line from the foreword very peculiar and telling:

⁵ Ibid., IX.

⁶ Ibid., X.



When this book was suggested to me, and the little parts out of which it was to be constructed lay once again before me, I recognized, or so I thought, that they were after all more durable than I had feared.⁵

Musil here is speaking about a moment in his past, the time “when this book was suggested to me”—and his recognition *then* that the little parts of it were more enduring than he had expected. The words “or so I thought” melt away this temporarily reassuring impression and give the reader the sense that Musil does not consider an authorial voice—or the author himself—as someone who possesses the insights he has had in a given moment as enduring in perpetuity either in himself or in the world at large.

The total loss of a humanist worldview is the theme in many of these texts. Therefore there is nothing to substantiate that a given moment’s perspicacity, or awareness of the presence of God, or sense of one’s relation to another human being, sensation of love, or filial loyalty persists in a subsequent moment and certainly not within the body of an individual. One might mourn or wonder at this loss, but one is helpless in insisting on a continuity of self. As Musil writes in the foreword, “Thus, at times we really are speaking of shadows here, of a life that no longer exists; and furthermore, in some mildly annoying way we are speaking of a life that can lay no claim to conclusiveness.”⁶

Although one can interpret this sentence superficially as a reference to the fact that many of the texts were originally published in newspapers and are thus tied to a particular date in time, and given the shortsighted context of the newspaper, are, after the fact of their first appearance, “outdated” or “obsolete,” it seems, given many of the texts’ philosophical leanings and the unrelenting satirical perspective on the absurdities of the modern condition, that Musil here is referring to a central theme in his vision of existence and in the production and life of the *Dichter* (poet/thinker). The prose text, “Awakening,” one of the “Pictures,” presents a portrait of a man passing through stages of an awakening to this discontinuity of self in little more than a page of text.

A man awakens in an enclosure. He abruptly pulls aside a curtain. Although he cannot actually discern the difference between the darkness of the night sky behind the window compared to the room’s darkness, he seeks and thereby perceives a contrast.



Gott hat mich geweckt. Ich bin aus dem Schlaf geschossen.

Ich hatte gar keinen anderen Grund aufzuwachen. Ich bin losgerissen worden wie ein Blatt aus einem Buch. Die Mondsichel liegt zart wie eine goldene Augenbraue auf dem blauen Blatt der Nacht.

[God woke me up. I had absolutely no other reason to wake up. I was torn out like a page from a book. The moon's crescent lies delicate as a golden eyebrow on the blue page of night.]⁷

Musil uses the word “page” (*Blatt* in German) twice within the same paragraph. It is as if the narrator were suggesting that God, the momentary author of the world, had ripped him out of the narrative of sleep—as one would a page in a book. This image of the given world as pages of a book—pages that can be read consecutively as a consistent narrative of identity and simultaneously, given the aleatory nature of things, the sudden appearances by a capricious God makes one aware of the page-to-page nature of the narrative, that is, its discontinuity. There is a second page—the expanse of night. But in which narrative can the narrator identify himself? He then starts to analyze where he is and thereby recognizes the indeterminacy of the bizarre boundary he occupies.

The extrapolation from an instance of the extraordinary or supernatural into the ever-present being of God unto which one can entrust one's identity/soul/ essence as if to a dependable keeper is in “Awakening” revealed to be a fallacy to cover the shockingly and disturbingly random nature of extraordinary experience, mystical moments, or moments of exceptional clairvoyance and truth as well as their often equally sudden and capricious retreat and dissolution. Musil reinforces the metaphor of the perceived world as consisting of “pages” of a book. Continuity is assured as long as the reader believes in this continuity and as long as it is the goal of the author.

The “staging” of this story reinforces this sense of indeterminacy. The narrator describes an enclosure that has two windows. Beyond one of which it is still night, while through the other, the first signs of day are appearing. The room, like the narrator himself, acts like a stopgap, a hiccup, or an interval of neither/nor, both /and, the sensed/the seen. This little story, as do others in the collection, notably “The Blackbird,” proposes and gives evidence of the radical idea that God exists only as an instant rather than as being the stuff of eternity.

Here, in passing it is interesting to note that God's apparition as described in the bible offers examples of the momentary ecstatic meeting of a human being with a supernatural force in many different forms: voices, events in nature, dreams, and visions. What is in fact rejected by Musil, then, is the

extrapolation of the instance into a continuous unquestionable presence—the narrative of God’s existence. In other stories in the book, notably “Children’s tale,” and in a quite different form in “The Blackbird,” Musil evokes and satirizes the folly in the archaic notion of God speaking through an animal.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

The narrator’s concluding moments of awakening center around another theme: the conflict between the senses—the aural and the optic—and the idea that through each one of our senses a different reality can be constructed and wholeheartedly believed. As the morning light grows stronger and the view through his window becomes clearer, the familiar context of the street below is to him no longer familiar or reassuring. Its elements flicker back and forth between the recognizable and complex abstraction. The narrator’s ability to describe what he sees is necessarily but unsuccessfully mediated by metaphor and emotion.

“

I discover strange fellows, the smokestacks. In groups of three, five, seven and sometimes alone, they stand on the rooftops; like trees in a landscape. Space winds a river around them and into the deep. [. . .] The rod on the roof with the thirty-six porcelain heads, which I count without comprehension, stands as a completely inexplicable structure up against the early morning sky. I’m wide awake now, but wherever I look, my eyes glide over pentagons, heptagons and steep prisms: So who am I?⁸

In this unresolvable perceptual never-land, the narrator’s aural sense then leads:

“

At last two legs come through the night. The step of two woman legs in my ear: I don’t want to look. My ear stands like a gateway on the street. Never will I be so at one with a woman as with this unknown figure whose steps disappear ever deeper in my ear.⁹

He wants only to trust his ears, his sight having already proved deceptive. But he is fooled again: The two legs turn out to be four, those of two old women dressed in black and headed for church.

His own encounter with God is over, two believers pass under his window and he is fully awake and godless. The last line of the story: “At this hour, the soul

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

has long since been taken into custody, and so I won't have anything more to do with it."¹⁰

The story "Clear Hearing" continues this theme of our propensity to construct disparate realities through an isolated perceptual sense. It describes a certain state of perceiving when one's sense of hearing intensifies as the other senses shut down—especially the visual. The first person narrator has gone to bed early because of a slight fever and in a state of half-sleep awaits his lover. In addition to his amplified sense of hearing creating a more precise picture of her activities, her actions seem to multiply exponentially—every task incessantly repeated. He doesn't understand the repetition and feels progressively less confident about his own assessment and the meaning of her actions. According to his accounting, entire days could be passing by.

Many writers have chosen to write a story from a dead person's point of view. What is so fascinating and convincing about Musil's approach here, is that he traces this desire to know the state of being dead (as the ultimate instance of discontinuity), resists the impulse to "assume" this condition and instead explores states of being which are just as perplexing and yet entirely plausible and familiar. One can ask whether one is in fact dead, or as Musil often does, if one has an identity or any steady consciousness of that identity and its presence in and as a body. The condition Musil describes in "Clear Hearing" is one in which we are entirely submissive to our physical condition and one in which we are at pains to understand phenomena in the world around us.

The longest text in the book and the only text that doesn't find its place in one of the three categories Musil has laid down is "The Blackbird." Nevertheless it shares many themes with another text in the section "Unstorylike Stories"—"A Man without Character"—in that in both, two childhood friends meet later in life. The particulars of one of the friends' life path is recounted to the other.

In "A Man without Character," the friend's changes are related to us by his friend, the first person narrator through observation of his friend during consecutive encounters. The friend's changes are analyzed in relation to the accusations directed at him that he has no character.

In "The Blackbird," however, the friend himself recounts the key events that led to his present condition. The story's narrator introduces the two friends as Aone and Atwo and from the irony in the opening paragraph it is clear that with the device of the mitotic division of A into Aone and Atwo is the inference that Atwo is really explaining himself to himself.



The two men whom I must mention in order to relate three little stories, in which the narrative pivots around the identity of the narrator, were friends from youth; let's call them Aone and

Atwo. The fact is that such early friendships grow ever more astounding the older you get. You change over the years, [. . .] but, strangely enough, your relationship with each other stays the same, fluctuating about as little as the communion we each carry on with the divers host of sirs successively addressed as *I*.¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹² *Ibid.*, 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

The mystical story “The Blackbird” explores more fully the punctuated disequilibrium and discontinuity of identity and this concept’s isometric partner: the momentary existence of God.

Atwo describes to his friend the three events or moments that became turning points in his life. As in the story “Awakening,” the first departure occurs during the indeterminate transition from night to day. The two stories also share other images and metaphors: darkness as a palpable material which subsumes our bodies and morning’s arrival marked by an irrepressible rush of the color green: “In the space between the curtains and the blind a dark greenness gushed forth; thin bands of the white froth of morning seeped in between the slats.”¹² In Atwo’s waking dream, he hears the song of the nightingale, and with her flight impulsively decides to follow suit and leave his wife. Even though he reasons that the birdsong he hears is only a common blackbird’s imitation—it’s effect on him is undeniable.

In his second tale, Atwo recounts how he foresaw during his stint in the trenches during WWI that an aerial dart was meant for him and how this knowledge gave him the sensation of God’s immanent presence.

“

And this tone was directed at me: I stood in communion with it and had not the least little doubt that something decisive was about to happen to me. I had no thoughts of the kind that are supposed to come at death’s door, but all my thoughts were rather focused on the future; I can only say that I was certain that in the next second I would feel God’s proximity close up to my body—which, after all, is saying quite a bit for someone who hasn’t believed in God since the age of eight.¹³

In the last tale, Atwo returns to his childhood home after both parents have died. The blackbird returns, this time able to speak. The bird says: “I am your mother.”¹⁴ Atwo had earlier recognized that his actual mother had not only given him life but was also a kind of guardian of a constant image of her child—one which, although outdated, was unquestionable. Atwo cares for the

¹⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

bird/mother as if the bird's continued existence and presence were his only means to claim an identity over time.

In addition to "The Blackbird," a number of stories in this book make reference to World War I, in which Musil served with the Austrian army. The references are either literal and direct as in "The Blackbird," which includes descriptions of life in the trench, elliptical and analogical as in "The Mouse," or more general allusions to war and mortal surrender as in the text titled "Flypaper."

Here I'd like to more thoroughly examine the analogical account of modern war in the story "The Mouse." Again the text is little over two pages. In this "miniature," the human being has already been shifted away from the center. The protagonists are instead a bench and a mouse. "On the Swiss Fodora Velda Alps, more than three thousand feet above inhabited ground, and still much farther off the beaten track: There in peacetime, somebody had put up a bench."¹⁵ What for? One hikes up away from the close, noisy town to a quiet empty place. One sits down and follows the lay of the land from above. Yes, in peacetime, somebody had put up a bench. This type of action—that of seeing the world from up on high was considered and the necessary preparations taken to make this possible: someone had put up a bench: Civilization's bench.

During the war, the bench was abandoned, that is, the possibility of sovereignty—to take a position to contemplate a considerable extent of landscape—substantial enough to project a mapping of one's life—became impossible.



This bench stood untouched, even by the war. In a wide, right hollow. The shots sailed over it. Silent as ships, like schools of fish. They struck far back where nothing and no one was, and for months, with an iron perseverance, ravaged an innocent precipice. No one knew why anymore. An error of the art of war?¹⁶

During WWI and the voluntarily constructed horror of trench warfare, men went below ground like frightened and industrious rodents and abandoned the sovereign position on the Earth's surface marked by the bench. Perhaps they preferred to no longer have this view from above, the view of sovereignty.

"The Mouse" begins: "This minuscule story, that in fact is nothing but a punch line, a single tiny tip of a tale, and not a story at all, happened during the first World War"¹⁷ and ends: "but that's all for this little story, that had already come to an end every time you tried to end it."¹⁸

This is the tip of a story because it is the cap of human history up to the ever-approaching point when a man, a human being—the socialized, civilized animal—will no longer be able to tell the story of the world. That man, that human being has already given up the position from which to speak, to see, and to ascertain. Civilized man—he who built the bench—had already thrown his lot into the trench where no one would know whether the war had come to an end and when one could return to the bench above. “Near the bench, which was seldom visited, a little mouse had dug itself a system of trenches. Mouse-deep, with holes to disappear and elsewhere reappear. She scurried around in circles, stood still, then scurried round again. A terrible silence emanated from the sullen atmosphere. The human hand dropped off the armrest.”¹⁹ One was now dependent and relying on a being above—a director, a manager, a general, on the word from above; and even the mouse, whose traditional domain is the trench, might be in a better position when she takes short leave and climbs out of her below ground domain to ascertain her place in this moment in time and space. Thus:

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 28-29.



And for an instant you had such a strange twisted feeling, that you really no longer knew: Was it this tiny, living black eye [of the mouse] that turned? Or the stirring of the mountain's huge immobility? You just didn't know anymore: Had you been touched by the will of the world or by the will of this mouse...?²⁰

Or is the mouse a stand in for civilized man? The one who, after climbing up from her busy work in the trench encircling the bench is unable to ascertain if she is turning her head or the entire mountain is turning. In this reading, the bench takes on an even larger symbolic or metaphysical significance. Even though the mouse/man can no longer remember the bench's function, nor even simply use it, it still is a geopolitical reference.

During the war, the bench is left untouched, but depending on how a man uses the bench it is either a place of meditation or a place of oblivion and periodically the plinth/plateau of death. Perhaps, in its purely functional form it is the antithesis of the throne. It is a seat belonging to no one, and one that bestows no particular social status. It is just a place to sit. The bench does not augment identity in any way. It is the seat of waiting, uselessness, idle time, and at best, of meditation or because of its position, facing a majestic view or a great artwork, a functional support to prolong that meditation on something sublime. Already, lightly touching down on the ground—the bench is the place of hesitation, of nothing to do, of the world can now pass me by, because I've given up... I'm sitting on the bench, come what may.

²¹ Ibid., 27.

Let's propose that Musil is telling this story from the trench... What then is the bench? Can it be a stretcher, bearing a wounded man or a man near death? Can it support the moment when the bench and whatever minimal consciousness, or semi-consciousness that occupies it, can have a relation to the sun's light—the cosmic. "The bench was abandoned by the war. All day long, from way up in its infinite altitude, the sun sent light to keep it company."²¹

The shots sail over the bench in an arc and relentlessly strike the precipice—the steep face of the rock. The place where there is no footing. The precipice up high in the alps could just as well be the wall of the trench. The topography of the land—its morphology—is innocent. It is the human being that has assigned value to topographical features and who has inscribed borders to define territories.

The bench instead of being a place where one can take in the view, becomes a plinth of oblivion—forgotten by time and circumstance—upon which the body's limbs forget that they once had the capacity to communicate with one another and make meaningful actions. The stories only mention of a human body/presence: "...The human hand dropped off the armrest."

This is a very bleak and accurate view of the willfully destructive oblivion constructed repeatedly in modern warfare.

An animal or group of animals play major roles in 10 of the 19 stories in the two sections of the book titled: "Pictures" and "Unstorylike Stories," and of course in "The Blackbird." The animal presence spans the naturalistic to the symbolic. "Can a Horse Laugh?" includes a detailed empirical account of a horse's behavior, while in "The Blackbird" and "Children's Tale" animals are supernatural and even prophetic entities.

Animals portrayed in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* and a Portrait of a Living Author

I was sitting at my desk and a dusty brown and white bird landed on one of the walls that encloses the balcony, pecked at the wall, flapped its wings, pecked again, and then flew away. Still seated at my desk working, I saw a bird again land at the wall and peck at the same area. The paint there was lifting away. Later, I went out and swept away the fine white flecks of paint that littered the balcony.

On another day, sitting at my desk, I saw a bird land on the same wall and

peck at the same area of paint. Later, still seated, I saw two birds pecking at the paint. The area of the wall without paint grew larger. Birds continued to land on the wall and peck at the loosened paint. One day—I can't recall the exact date, although I think it was a day in the first week of June—I noticed that the area where the birds had pecked away the paint resembled the silhouette of a pecking bird. Since then, I haven't seen any birds hovering at the wall outside my window.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Ibid., 15.

A blackbird arrives on the concrete parapet that surrounds the large circular planter built into the balcony. Several sparrows hop amongst the plants nipping at whatever it is they seek. Of all the birds that visit my balcony, I think the blackbird most closely resembles the portrait the sparrows had pecked into the wall over a month ago. The size of the silhouette and length of the beak, as well as the proportion of body to tail area, are a better match. I wonder, until I had thought of the two together—the blackbird and the wall portrait—why I would have assumed that the sparrows had pecked the silhouette of one of their own kind into the wall. The portrait on the wall could as easily be of another species of bird, the larger, more imposing blackbird, for example. Further, the image may represent a bird flying, falling, or any number of positions familiar only to a bird, and not be, as I had reasoned, a self-reflexive portrait of a bird pecking at a balcony wall.

The point of this little story and its relation to Musil's texts is this: Inevitably, in our reflections on the natural world, we more definitively draw a portrait of ourselves than of another being. Language and reference to visual information forms a hinge that links perception of self to another being.

Musil shrewdly insists on the inconclusive nature of the relationship between a man's observation and the natural world. This view is realized with consummate wit in the story "Can a horse laugh?" Here Musil takes up argument with the following statement by a renowned psychologist: "...for animals don't know how to laugh or smile"²² and then proceeds to describe his own observations of a horse going into a fit of uncontrollable laughter when tickled by an affectionate and playful stable boy. His account is richly described, detailed, and convincing.

“

And suddenly it started to laugh. It flashed its teeth. With its muzzle it tried as hard as it could to push away the boy [. . .] And when with the currycomb he arrived in the vicinity of its shoulders, the horse could no longer control itself; it shifted from leg to leg, shivered all over and pulled back the gums of its teeth as far as it could. For a few seconds then, it behaved like a man tickled so much that he can't even laugh anymore.²³

In the end, Musil slips in an additional twist after leading us to believe that he in fact had observed a horse laughing. Musil writes:



The ability to whinny with laughter seems in fact to be a human talent. But nonetheless, the two of them were obviously playing together [. . .] there could be no doubt that the horse wanted to laugh and was already anticipating the sequence of sensations. So learned doubt defines the limitations of the beast's ability, that it cannot laugh at jokes. This, however, should not always be held against the horse.²⁴

In addition to taking a swipe at the foolhardy “conclusiveness,” Musil is also taking great pleasure in signaling the extent that language and metaphor seduces us to give unwarranted weight—significance and truth value—to our interpretations of the natural world.

Musil quotes just a fragment of the psychologist's statement: “...for animals don't know how to laugh or smile.” Because this short text is both a ‘picture’ delineated with precise details of the horse's physical transformations in mouth, shoulders, and hoof and an argument, can we say that the psychologist's position is fairly represented? The psychologist is explaining or giving justification for something else, perhaps some qualification of ‘human’ psychology—we, in fact, don't know. Musil then goes on to contradict this half statement offering the evidence of his own observations. Now, if this partial statement is inconclusive, as is the answer to the question, “Can a horse laugh?” what we are left with is a still pulsing doubt with regards to the psychologist's position, the truth about horses, and even why Musil had gone to the trouble of writing down his careful observations—in other words, what had he meant to say, and in what context? I have no answers, but I did enjoy the story and Musil's successful representation of the heat of the moment between horse and boy.

Another animal story: “Sheep seen in a different light” more than any other in this section of the book is a “picture.” If I were to assign it to a particular formal tradition, I would classify it as a triptych. Framed, with titles and an inscription, this picture is similar to a hinged panel that might tell the story about the life of Christ, or the birth of Moses. This triptych tells us the story of sheep, God's chosen flock: religious man.

Let's start with the introductory inscription (presumably painted in gold on black stained wood, the thin strip of which unifies the three hinged panels):



As to the history of sheep: Today man views sheep as stupid. But God loved it. He repeatedly compared man with sheep. Is it possible that God was completely wrong?

As to the psychology of sheep: The finely chiseled expression of exalted consciousness is not unlike the look of stupidity.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ Ibid., 19-20.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

The inscription tells all and instructs the reader in how to look at this written text. This story is all about perceiving, as the title suggests: “Sheep seen in a different light.”

The first panel with the heading, “On the way to Rome,” depicts a landscape: the religious flock sings with one voice composed as if in a choir of the man’s, woman’s, and children’s voices. Despite the different registers, the song drives a singular view of time: its finality and its end on earth. With its thorough simplification of the human condition, the image here is like an extremely poetic Hallmark card in which earth’s end and Judgment Day simply and perfectly give way to Heaven and Hell.



In soft swells they lifted and lowered their voices; it was like a wandering train in the darkness, struck every second by light, and the children’s voices stood on an ever-returning hill, while the men strode through the valley. Day and night rolled a thousands time faster through their song and drove the earth onward to its end.²⁶

The second panel “Once again in the South” encompasses the history of man in time. Sheep take the place of man: “Man is twice as big as usual in their midst and reaches like a church spire up towards heaven,”²⁷ and man takes the place of God. Like a continually skipping LP, which hops from the first song to the last and then to any in the middle again and again, the images Musil describes skip time. ‘St. Peter’s time,’ as in ‘wandering Odysseus’ day,’ seem to suggest that, in their ignorant exultation, modernity evaporates. What persists is a single image that swallows the present into the recurring past.

The third panel: “Everywhere...” where the wish for the end of time congeals its subjects—the sheep, religious transcendent man—into a wheel. This wheel doesn’t move. It is a static wheel representing man’s subjugation to ignorance

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ Ibid., 113.

and his belief in a story about time which accepts that time is meted out for us by a higher being.

What does this ‘trptych’ achieve? Composed of snapshots—to now use a modern term—it depicts three scenes of a play and, because of the miniature prologue and its provocative question about the roles and interchangeability of animal and man, sheep and man, God and sheep, and God and man, the story suggests that not only is God-fearing man meekishly playing an infantilizing role but he is in fact in a play—a passion play—in which he is occupying theatrical scenes.

The text’s closing image is both chilling and condemning:



They [the sheep] stick their heads together then, ten or fifteen of them, and form the spokes of a wheel, with the big heavy center point of heads and the otherwise colored spokes of their backs. They press their skulls tightly together. This is how they stand, and the wheel that they form won’t budge for hours. They don’t want to feel anything but the wind and the sun, and between their foreheads, the seconds striking out an eternity that beats in their blood and signally from head to head like the hammering of prisoners on prison walls.²⁸

It is a picture of man banging his head on the walls of the prison house of religion and persisting in willful ignorance. This is also a brief history of the adjective of “sheepishness.” Modernity ridicules it; religion celebrates it. In modernity, however, both exist, side by side: one as a living panorama haunting us and the other as the necessity to accept an indefinable position in the world subject to sudden apparitions of God as if from the past.

For the first of the “Unstorylike Stories,” “The Great Agoag,” Musil has written a strange tale that delves further into the theme of the inconclusive body. This story has a protagonist—a man—a weakling that is something less than a man: a lightweight, a man without presence who had “two arms as thin as the sound of a toy clock,”²⁹ and too little physical substance to successfully woo a woman.

For an inexplicable reason, (and even here, the laughter begins—that even human affections do not always follow the crude *status quo* social plan that women must only be attracted to the full-bodied, muscular physique and sexual prowess of a strong man) one woman does show interest in him.

This gives him cause to defy his natural disposition (or non-disposition) and begin his own bodybuilding program, one he develops himself and which is

therefore low-tech and appropriately thrifty. He harnesses every daily action into his exercise program to exert himself to the utmost. A simple action such as buttoning a shirt he performs with isometric acrobatics—and becomes a study in opposition, extension, and difficulty—and above all, strenuous action. There is something both pathetic and heroic about this character—who, as the narrator points out, will eventually, by continuing such a relentless vigorous program of self-improvement, get strong. He is pathetic in that his own body becomes a battleground without a wise leader or general at the helm. It is a muscular battleground and a battleground of impulse. But the hero's program is aborted before he has reached his physical peak. The man is beaten miserably and sinks to his lowest. Unfortunately, the battleground is not only occurring within his own body, it is apotheosized in the crowd and the mobbing or beating he has to endure. That he is beaten at the hands of the crowd is an eloquent expression of a *de facto* condemnation of his body and even of his project to 'change' himself (from within). It is indeed a hopeless situation. Yet the man with the vanquished body and an already demented, vacant spirit is witness to an accident. An omnibus runs over an athletic man, and, given our protagonist's already disembodied identity, we accept his nearly surreal decision, indeed infantile, but given the circumstances and his bereft state perhaps understandable, to clothe himself in the bus. "It was a sad sight but our man saw his chance and quickly climbed aboard the victor."³⁰ He crawls into the body of the giant. He rides the bus and is convinced that within the bus's shell he can instill fear in physically strong men and earn their respect.

The bus's name: Agoag—presumably the initials of a company name, A.G.O.A.G., is transformed here into the proper name Agoag. When pronounced the name sounds like baby talk, repeating a sound by vocalizing while opening and closing the lips. And if you will allow me to further play at the possible irony of the name AGOAG: from a visual perspective, the name consists of a "null"—"0"—framed by two "AGs," which in German is a very commonly used abbreviation for the word *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*—in English, a consortium, association or partnership. The partnership, here, of course, entirely in the protagonist's imagination, is between man: "0," and bus: "AG—AG." Although these interpretations are in some sense frivolous, it is clear that the name has an uncanny quality.

The narrator makes fun of his character's logic, reasoning, and inner dialogue and in so doing points out how deluded an individual can be in feeling stronger, of higher status, and even more righteous when part of a group. Although the narrator is describing the act/belief of a man who climbs onto a bus, the metaphor can surely be extended to men's relations to military and industrial machinery of any kind as well as to political structures.

Our hero himself could have also been run over by the omnibus—it is in fact an indiscriminate equalizer. Nevertheless, "He took his girlfriend along for the

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Ibid., 116.

³³ Ibid., 117.

ride expecting that she would be able to appreciate intellectual masculine beauty.”³¹ What is intellectual masculine beauty? “Deriving one’s dignity from the reflected rays of an alien power that surrounds them.”³² Unfortunately, His girlfriend cannot understand the principle of transferred prowess. He cannot communicate his sense of respect for the great Agoag and he comes up with this final fallacy: “The strong are strongest alone.”³³

Through my reading and re-reading of the texts comprising *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, a view of Musil himself—1st person narrator, a man at the brink of dawn in the midst of a curiously intimate or private meditation—repeatedly returns, and yet, I have the sense that Musil, with an ironic flick of the tongue, would most likely raise objection and find fault in my illusory wish for a portrait of the man, Musil. I imagine he would find my reading vulgar, or a symptom of a contemporary fashion to look at an author’s writing, or even worse, at all of his production as part of a history and account of self.

Nevertheless, perhaps as an unintended effect, outlines of a thinker, social critic, visionary, and human being are pronounced in these texts. Like single-ply veils, they reveal the contours of the author’s preoccupations—the discontinuity of self and identity, distorted by the inanity of modern society and cultural mores, and the co-existence of multiple realities. What is left behind? A series of arguments? Sirens? Alerts? Paradoxes, prophecies or parables (with or without a moral)? It is the author, deracinated and disembodied, who unclothes himself as if ridding himself of himself as a perpetual character.