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psychiatry in literature

Moosbrugger: madness and modernism

George Ikkos

When Sophie Wilkins' translation of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* was published in 1975, *The Wall Street Journal* proclaimed: 'At last – the fully fleshed arrival in English of the third member of the trinity in 20th century fiction, complimenting *Ulysses* and the *Remembrance of Things Past*... this last Musil novel is amazingly contemporary'.

Musil possesses extraordinary powers of description, with an ability to paint the physical landscape of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1913 in one page. He is equally astute at depicting complex psychology. At the heart of the novel, in the long section 'Pseudoreality Prevails', is his send up the 'Parallel Committee' whose members gather in Vienna in 1913 to prepare the celebrations for the 70 years' reign of Emperor Franz Joseph in 1918. The irony underpinning the work is our knowledge that the emperor will die in 1916 and the Empire, having joined the losing side during World War I, will be reduced to a dismembered Austrian republic in 1918.

Moosbrugger is a socially disadvantaged orphan, now grown up and working as an itinerant carpenter; he is also an offender with a mental disorder. He has murdered again, this time an equally disadvantaged prostitute who had accosted and harassed him for business or perhaps food. Though Musil's description of Moosbrugger's mental states as a paranoid (schizophrenic?) patient is superb, he is not the man without qualities. That is Ulrich, lover, former military officer and disillusioned engineer, and now academic mathematician who decides to take a year's sabbatical to reflect on his failure to achieve 'greatness', at the financial expense of his overbearing father, Senator and Professor of Law at a Provincial University. Objecting to complete idleness, his father has secured Ulrich the position of secretary to the 'Parallel Committee', chaired by cousin Ermelinda Tuzzi, a 'lady of ineffable beauty', nicknamed by Ulrich 'Diotima' in homage to Socrates' muse in Plato's Symposium. (By association, Musil seeks greatness too!)

Characters include the emotionally unstable Clarisse. Ulrich and Clarisse have taken an interest in Moosbrugger, because he has been sentenced to death despite his severe mental illness. Musil's portrayal of the scholarly dispute between Ulrich's father and Professor of Jurisprudence Councillor Herr Professor Schwung on mental capacity and criminal responsibility demonstrates confident grasp of issues. Both court and psychiatrists are criticised for double standards; judging differently the poor or disadvantaged from the established or well-to-do. As a recent high-profile case involving psychiatrists in the British courts has demonstrated, little has changed since.

In one of the last chapters we find Ulrich, Clarisse, her physician brother and General Stum von Bodwehr as a small group visiting the asylum to meet Moosbrugger. The condition and bizarre behaviour of the inmates are described with fidelity and restraint, while the emotions and reactions of the visitors not without irony. However, when the asylum guards respond brutally to the excitement of the inmates, fearing it could threaten the sensibilities or safety of the visitors, it is Clarisse who seems to make the pertinent observation: 'Clarisse did not approve of them at all. 'What the doctors don't seem to understand' she thought, 'is that although these men are shut in here together all day long without supervision, they don't do anything to each other; it's only we, coming from the world that is foreign to them, who may be in danger.' Moosbrugger remains elusive because the guiding hospital superintendent is called away to an emergency.

As classical Athens for 'Western Reason', 'Vienna 1900' was the cradle of 'Modernity'. The author's masterful depiction of international diplomacy, the impact of technological change, social psychology, consciousness and the unconscious, mind-body relations, perversion, temptation and ethics and Ulrich's search for authenticity and integrity in a fragmenting intellectual landscape in a world at the dawn of the cruel European 20th century makes the novel of universal significance; Moosbrugger, of extra interest to psychiatrists.

Having laboured since 1921, the author died in exile in Switzerland in 1942, during another world war, leaving the final section, 'The Criminals', unfinished. However, at over 1000 pages long and hardly a word in excess, 'The Man without Qualities' is a complete work which has ensured Musil greatness and immortality.

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