

LITERARY  
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## EMPIRE IN TIME AND SPACE

ROBERT MUSIL, the most important novelist writing in German in this half-century, is one of the least known writers of the age. Only two modern novelists compare with him in range and intelligence—Proust and Joyce; and the indirect light they cast on him also illuminates "the cultural situation." The popularity that Proust has attained suggests that modern Europe finds it easier to acknowledge the greatness that is sick. Joyce, whose private language made

and Joyce; and the indirect light they cast on him also illuminates "the cultural situation." The popularity that Proust has attained suggests that modern Europe finds it easier to acknowledge the greatness that is sick. Joyce, whose private language made his later work even less accessible than was the autobiographical subjectivity of Proust, is also the object of a cult; and this although both men reckoned with the world's indifference. Musil must have reckoned with it too, but for different reasons; his writing is not exclusive and not bitter. Above all it is not sick. That his chief work, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, with its inimitable ring of authority, its strength and lucidity, remains out of print, except for a privately published posthumous third volume, is a disgrace to German publishing.

Robert Edler von Musil was born in Klagenfurt, Carinthia, on November 6, 1880, and educated at a cadet school. At the age of 26, after the success of his first novel and when he had already given up a lectureship in civil engineering, he abandoned an academic career in philosophy to devote himself entirely to writing.

When he went voluntarily into exile after the *Anschluss*, his books were banned in Germany; he continued writing *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in Switzerland, until his sudden death in 1942. This book, on which he spent twenty years, is of enormous length; twenty unrevised chapters will be included in a definitive edition.

In spite of the general disadvantage of comparing unique works—and comparison with Joyce did, understandably, exasperate Musil himself—the practice can be useful. For thus to compare two contraries is to disengage peculiarities and common qualities that place the writer not merely at the head of his contemporaries but, as Hazlitt said of Wordsworth, "in a totally distinct class of excellence." Work like Joyce's and Musil's is on a borderline; comprehension and comprehensiveness have

ROBERT MUSIL: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Volume 3. Aus dem Nachlass. Lausanne: Imprimerie Centrale.

been strained to the limits of what can be said. Both the book that ends "A way a lone a last a loved a long the" and the book that begins "There was an atmospheric depression over the Atlantic . . ." are gigantic fragments corresponding to an element in the nature of their time. In literature, as in history, we are on a frontier, perhaps passing under the singing statues on the range above Samuel Butler's Nowhere. The greatest works of art are expeditions into

corresponding to an element in the nature of their time. In literature, as in history, we are on a frontier, perhaps passing under the singing statues on the range above Samuel Butler's Nowhere. The greatest

works of art are expeditions into unexplored territory, and in trying to reach the ultimate they may arrive only at a last possibility, their absolute intention summed up by Scott's words from the Antarctic: "Pretence is useless." The result may look like failure, above all in literature, where the heroic often counts for less than the smooth face of success; the message may sound, in the ears of the world, like the cries of dying men. But the world's reaction is like that of a body confusing the pain that the healer causes with the pain of the disease. Once we recognize where the torment lies, we suddenly grasp a fundamental similarity between such writers: the true artist's resemblance to the physician, exquisite in observation, intuitive in diagnosis and causing pain for the sake of healing only.

The richness and largeness common to the work of both writers, the architectural control of design, the preoccupation with history as it exists in the eternal present—all this, analysed further, reveals the differences between them. Joyce, a philosophic artist, in his over-lifesize day and night packed history into a nutshell: a gigantic nut, too hard for most teeth to crack. The huge day is one in which it is easy to get lost, as in a world. How big is a day in reality? And what sort of day is it that contains all history, including the present day? Musil, a philosopher turned artist, did not use mythological means; he treated reality not as something to pack back into the Yggdrasilian pod, but like those Japanese paper pellets which when laid on water slowly unfold in delicate and