

OEDIPUS ENDANGERED:
ATREAN INCEST AND ETHICAL RELATIONS IN MUSIL'S
DER MANN OHNE EIGENSCHAFTEN

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In his 1931 essay, “Der bedrohte Oedipus,” Robert Musil provokes the ire of the psychoanalytical establishment with this bold prediction: “Soweit ich weiß, steht heute der vorhin erwähnte Oedipuskomplex mehr denn je im Mittelpunkt der Theorie; fast alle Erscheinungen werden auf ihn zurückgeführt, und ich befürchte, daß es nach ein bis zwei Menschenfolgen keinen Oedipus mehr geben wird!” (504). Oedipus, it would seem, is the Everyman of human psychological development, an archetype, an icon, a bastion of our collective mythology.¹ The stain of this master narrative appears to seep to the very core of twentieth-century cultural consciousness. This paper argues, however, that Musil’s narrative masterpiece, *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, threatens the privilege of the psychological autocracy of the Oedipus myth.

The myth of Electra runs through the novel like a musical leitmotif, and the sibling incest mimed by Ulrich and Agathe provides the framework for the first threads of a new relational ethics as a space of intersubjectivity. I propose that Musil invokes Ernst Mach’s theories of the provisional ego and sensation body in his interpretation of the Atrean myth to challenge the singular, masculine-gendered subject position of the Oedipal model. The novel’s narrative trajectory eventually transcends Mach’s “unrettbares Ich” and moves beyond the cliché of a Viennese crisis of identity. Through an investigation of *Körpersemiotik* and experimentation with gender in the form of androgyny, hermaphroditism, and the “new woman,” Musil engages in a larger argument with modernity and the culture of militarism and morality. At the end of the aforementioned Oedipus essay, the author ventures the question: “Werden wir statt des Oedipus einen Orestes bekommen?” (504). In *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Musil answers this query in the affirmative.

Musil’s life and work from about 1924 until his death in 1943 (exiled in Switzerland) was solely dedicated to the production of one mammoth masterpiece of literary modernism, which, by the author’s own admission, had become a historical novel in the process of its creation (5, 1941).² *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, a precise silhouette of the waning Habsburg Empire, is suffused at first with biting irony,

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which is suddenly replaced by a poignant, almost sentimental lyricism that risks descending into the worst kind of kitsch. The seemingly endless dialog and diatribe on such lofty subjects as love,³ morality, freedom, mysticism and social deviance, contrasted with political intrigue aimed at the general glorification of a pathetically outdated empire, is strategically crammed into the anticipatory pre-war year of 1913.

Tension also mounts around Musil's protagonist, Ulrich, whose main claim to fame is his *Eigenschaftslosigkeit*, the total absence of any defining characteristics or traits. At the age of thirty-two and entirely lacking in professional ambition, this son of a prominent Austrian aristocrat suddenly decides all at once to take a year off from life, during which time he hopes to make some meaningful discovery about the nature of humanity and the world. As time slows down and the plot all but grinds to a halt, bogged down in numerous pages of idle contemplation, the reader's patience and the writer's capacity are stretched to the limit.⁴ The novel is infuriatingly masterful in taking on subjects of grand scale that hold great promise and result in ever larger circles that lead to an inevitable vortex; *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* is about something and nothing at the same time. And yet the resulting creative intensity is never resolved, for the work remains a novel fragment.⁵ It is as if the characters have been cut off in mid-sentence as the anxiety of pending war is frozen in the air. The author never has to orchestrate the suicide, murder, or *Liebestod* of the protagonist and his sister, for they are figuratively terminated in the dangling threads of the novel's refused conclusion.

I. *Peripeteia and Pierrot*

Mann ohne Eigenschaften presents its anti-oedipal polemic in very subtle ways. The pervasive paradigm of Oedipus and his complex are never directly challenged, rather his position is usurped by his other: Electra. Halfway through the novel, when Ulrich's attempt to transform himself and the world has proven entirely unsuccessful, the narrative is abruptly shaken by the death of Ulrich's father. This precipitates a dramatic upheaval in the protagonist's life and initiates a significant shift in tone. The narrator dispenses with clever, ironic ploys that poke fun at everything from the self-satisfied society dames with their lavish wardrobes and secret affairs to the petty and obsequious ways of the Austrian civil service with its ludicrous and antiquated bureaucracies.

A new narrative voice emerges as the Atrean myth of Electra seeps through the pages of the third book and stains the characters with the painful legacy of patricide and sibling incest. This is no parlor joke – the patriarch's sudden death, precipitating haunting reverberations of Agamemnon's ghost, coupled with the much anticipated reunion between Ulrich and his long-absent sister, Agathe, constitutes the *peripeteia* in the novel. Electra's story is unearthed in this poignant recognition scene. Never mentioned by name, the myth has been scraped to its bare bones, reduced to a few crucial clues. The first of these is the death of the father.⁶ The children seem almost pleased at the passing of their overbearing father. However, the recurring sense of

loss and confusion in the second half of the novel is akin to that felt by the Atrean children at the senseless murder of Agamemnon.

The other major element of the myth's structure is precisely the *anagnorisis* of Electra and Orestes. During the much-anticipated recognition scene, the earth ought to cease rotating on its axis for one long moment of gaping silence. Musil heightens the suspense of this encounter by maneuvering his subjects into place and then delaying their meeting in much the same way as does Sophocles in his Attic version. And yet, there is something almost artificial and contrived about this first meeting. As I will show, this is merely a trial run for the real recognition scene, which appears much later in the novel.

Ulrich arrives at the family home following his father's death, exhausted and dishevelled after a train journey, only to learn that Agathe, whom he labels his "unbekannte Schwester" (3, 674), is indisposed and cannot see him right away. He is confused by this inhospitable reception and does not know what to make of it since he barely knows his mysterious sister (they have barely seen each other since early childhood). Conscious of the power dynamic in play, Ulrich surmises that her reluctance to rush to greet him gives Agathe the upper hand in the situation. Finally, after an agonizing hiatus, the siblings are poised to enter the scene. Unlike the Electra myth of antiquity, in which Orestes disguises himself as the messenger of his own death, here brother and sister both know what is at stake in this reunion. Or at least they think they do.

In subtle rebellion at having been abandoned upon his arrival – "Sie hätte mich doch wenigstens in der Wohnung gleich begrüßen sollen!" – Ulrich decides to wear "eine[n] große[n], weichwollige[n] Pyjama, den er anzog, beinahe eine Art Pierrotkleid, schwarz-grau gewürfelt" (3, 675). Little did he know that his sister has taken the same exaggeratedly casual attitude toward her dress and has donned almost identical pyjamas. When Ulrich enters the room, he is confronted with a Pierrot, "der auf den ersten Blick ganz ähnlich aussah wie er selbst" (3, 676). Equally flabbergasted, Agathe exclaims: "Ich habe nicht gewußt, daß wir Zwillinge sind!" (3, 676). Though certainly suspenseful and anxious, this recognition scene differs fundamentally from the Greek myth. While the protagonists in the Hellenic versions display emotions ranging from shock and dismay to disbelief and bittersweet tears, Ulrich and Agathe seem more awkwardly surprised and somewhat clumsy in their first interaction. They must wait patiently for the second *anagnorisis* to truly recognize each other. Once they get over the incredible coincidence of their matching outfits and the uncanny *doppelgänger* experience, the siblings resort almost immediately, as if out of adolescent shyness, to conversational banalities such as the sports they prefer.⁷ Still, the meeting is not without lasting consequences. Even if they are as yet blind to the true nature of their bond, Ulrich and Agathe begin to function as one indivisible unit. From this point forward, they progressively refer to their status as "Hermaphroditen" and "Siamesische Zwillinge," and consider that they are inextricably linked in some kind of platonic, one might even say "mythical," union.

II. *Oedipus Meets Mach*

And so it is that Ulrich and Agathe in turn mime this artful meeting of Pierrot with him/herself.⁸ Their extraordinary encounter constitutes an identity crisis for Musil's protagonist, from which, it seems, he will never recover. The mere possibility of an Oedipal scenario is forever banished from the novel, since Ulrich's consciousness is now unmistakably and irreversibly split, as if severed at the root into two distinct, platonic halves. Oedipus, Freud's Oedipus at any rate, has as his sole purpose the pursuit of a unified and developmentally complete consciousness. Oedipus may, in his emergent state, waffle somewhat in his object choice, but this ambiguity gives way in the end to a secure and singularly masculine subjectivity. Freud is adamant on this point: "Anyone who fails [to master the Oedipus complex] falls a victim to neurosis" (149). According to this view, the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe is a sign of neurosis, for it is the successful mastery of the Oedipal stage that awakens and installs the incest taboo.⁹ Contrarily, I would argue that the siblings are able to negotiate an ethical pact precisely because they do not fall victim to the restrictive social initiation of the Oedipus complex.

Though Musil initially followed the father of psychoanalysis in setting up sexual relations as a crucial cultural model, his system diverged significantly from that of Freud because of his insistence on the coexistence of eros and intellect as a move toward a revolutionary, sexual ethics.¹⁰ Moreover, he repudiated the cult-like status and seemingly unscientific approach of the psychoanalytic establishment. While Musil seems to have set out, in part, to refute the primacy of Freud's principal paradigm, these theories were by no means his sole reference point. In fact, he had written his doctoral dissertation, *Beitrag zur Beurteilung der Lehren Machs*, on the pre-Freudian psychology of Ernst Mach (1838-1916), a physicist who had given the Austrian public a new formulation of the monist doctrine of positivism.¹¹ Mach's famous dictum proclaiming the unsavable self, "das unrettbare Ich," became a powerful catchphrase and dominated the psychological landscape of Viennese modernism. Adopted by the influential cultural critic, Hermann Bahr, it became an axiom for the crisis in language and the crisis of identity itself. As Mach himself said: "[das] Ich [ist] keine von der Welt isolierte Monade, sondern ein Teil der Welt und mitten im Fluss derselben darin" (quoted in Frank 325). As such, and this is Mach's central argument, subjectivity can exist only as a bundle of sensations and as a fiction of its own perceptions of the world. Or as Musil interprets it: As soon as one attempts to analyze the self, "löst es sich in Relationen u[nd] Funktionen auf" (8, 1403). This is demonstrated in *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* when all that appears tangible and malleable in its characters slips through one's fingers like the finest silt.

I propose that *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* simultaneously engages with and critically evaluates Mach's theories and that the Electra myth serves as a platform for this dynamic dialog. The novel denies Freud's exclusive Oedipal narrative, all the while leapfrogging Mach's deconstructive metaphysics and opening up a space for alternative ethical relations. The encounter of the mythological siblings in the guise of Ulrich and Agathe, together with Musil's experimentation surrounding their

negotiations of subjectivity and positionality, provide the basis for a new ethics to emerge.

The author makes no attempt to outline a systematic theory of ethics. In fact, an ethical *system* is an oxymoron: “Wo eine Regelmäßigkeit sich einstellt,” laments Musil, “dort hat sich eine Moral gebildet” (8, 1305). In *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, morality is shown to be static and artificial, whereas ethics functions as a continuous, fluid, and relational project. “Moral ist in ihrem Wesen als Vorschrift nach an wiederholbare Erlebnisse gebunden” (8, 1093), whereas Ulrich states in the novel: “Das Unmoralische gewinnt sein himmlisches Recht als eine drastische Kritik des Moralischen!” (3, 959). Later in the novel, such statements become bolder and more anarchic in tone, and as Musil himself comments in connection with the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe: “Nichts ist fest. Jede Ordnung führt ins Absurde” (5, 1834). In much of this enigmatic section, the narrator speaks in axiomatic phrases, spitting out philosophical vignettes and leaving the reader to decipher his code. Unwittingly, we become schooled in the doctrines of Mach, which will then be mutated through Musil’s clever manipulation of character and narrative development.

III. *Recognition Scene Turned Seduction Scene*

While Musil at times forgets he has vowed never to analyze a character, he usually allows his protagonists the freedom to experience their own fluid shifts. One scene in particular demonstrates Musil’s narrative technique and relational theory. In the chapter “Beginn einer Reihe wundersamer Erlebnisse,” near the beginning of the *Nachlaß*,¹² Ulrich and Agathe are preparing for yet another evening out with friends. Already late, they are dressing hastily, and Ulrich is assisting his sister in the absence of qualified maidservants. The narrator outlines in the minutest detail this scene, in which Agathe puts on a silk stocking. Her body becomes the object of an artist’s gaze: “am Hals rundete die Spannung des Vorgangs drei Falten, die schlank und lustig durch die klare Haut eilten wie drei Pfeile” (4, 1082). Her brother loses his cool distance and is helpless in the face of the powerful kinetic force connecting him to his sister; the painting “schien ihren Rahmen verloren zu haben und ging [...] unvermittelt und unmittelbar in den Körper Ulrichs über” (4, 1082). Suddenly, Ulrich leans over his sister from behind and bites into one of the folds on her tenderly exposed neck.

This moment, marking a turning point in the sibling relationship, is one that I characterize as the *second recognition scene* in the novel. In the antique myth of Atreus, *anagnorisis* is a single event, and there is no need for Orestes and Electra to reenact their first meeting.¹³ However, according to my reading, Musil’s rendition suggests that Ulrich and Agathe never really *saw* each other during the Pierrot scene. They were too absorbed in establishing the pecking order of the sibling hierarchy. Ulrich was still acting his spoiled playboy routine and Agathe was preoccupied with plotting the end of her marriage. Only at this point does the narrative’s veneer of irony finally fall away to reveal the quasi-mystical union of two souls.

At frequent intervals following the first recognition scene, Ulrich and Agathe critically evaluate themselves as the two halves of Plato's original human (3, 903), as Pygmalion, as the Hermaphrodite (3, 905), and as the Siamese twins (3, 908; 3, 936; 3, 945); they even refer to themselves as hermits (3, 801). Very early on, Ulrich comes to understand the nature of his dependent relationship with Agathe; she is the sister who will allow him to love himself. His self-analysis reveals a deficiency that she can apparently fulfill:

Ich weiß jetzt, was du bist: Du bist meine Eigenliebe! [...] Mir hat eine richtige Eigenliebe, wie sie andere Menschen so stark besitzen, in gewissem Sinne immer gefehlt [...] Und nun ist sie offenbar, durch Irrtum oder Schicksal, in dir verkörpert gewesen, statt in mir selbst! (3, 899)

After a great deal of debate and reflection, Ulrich refines this hypothesis:

Aber auch ich muß doch etwas lieben können, und da ist eine Siamesische Schwester, die nicht ich noch sie ist, und geradesogut ich wie sie ist, offenbar der einzige Schnittpunkt von allem! (3, 945)

This kind of analysis abounds in the chapters leading up to the second recognition scene, and the tone is cerebral and sterile. Ulrich may have softened around the edges since the arrival of his sister, but his thinking is still mired in an intellectual, even clinical, quagmire. What this second *anagnorisis* reveals is clearly on a different plane.

Following the initial description of Ulrich lunging in a vampiric maneuver toward Agathe, the whole scene is repeated in extreme slow motion, this time emphasizing the somatic distortions of this single gesture. In a cinematic frame-by-frame analysis, we learn that Agathe has been liberated into weightlessness and has lost her balance. The event has called all muscles into play, but simultaneously paralyzes their limbs (4, 1082). The siblings abandon ordinary language for a kind of corporeal code, such that "der geschwisterliche Wuchs der Körper teilte sich ihnen mit, als stiegen sie aus einer Wurzel auf" (4, 1083). Indeed, they suddenly recognize their collective blindness as if a cloudy film has been peeled back from their eyes:

Sie sahen einander so neugierig in die Augen, *als sähen sie dergleichen zum erstenmal*. Und obwohl sie das, was eigentlich vorgegangen sei, nicht hätten erzählen können, weil ihre Beteiligung daran zu inständig war, glaubten sie doch zu wissen, daß sie sich soeben unversehens einen Augenblick inmitten dieses gemeinsamen Zustands befunden hätten, an dessen Grenze sie schon so lange gezögert, den sie einander schon so oft beschrieben und den sie doch immer nur von außen geschaut hatten. (4, 1083; my emphasis)

Ulrich and Agathe are granted the gift of a special vision, which gives them insight into the nature of their relationship as they stand on the crest between their past and their future. They see that they have been hovering at this precipice since the night of their first meeting. They had been trying all along to articulate in ordinary language what they have now experienced physically as a "shared condition" or "anderer Zustand."¹⁴ What had been an accident of bodily gesture has become a

catalyst for something more. Even when Ulrich picked up the phone and canceled their engagements for the evening he showed no signs of sobering up (4, 1083). Far from being an isolated incident, this moment has set the scene for the next phase of Ulrich's and Agathe's collective being.

IV. *Romanticism Revisited*

For what seems like an eternity after Ulrich's daring overture, the siblings remain silent. Only their glances meet as they navigate through unknown territory using a new somatic language. They sense that their movements are censored by some warning, a higher force that has nothing to do with moral codes (4, 1083). When they finally regain the use of their voices, they speak in a forgotten tongue, borrowing vocabulary and imagery from early Romantic poets such as Tieck, Schlegel, and Novalis. As if from nowhere, Ulrich blurts out to Agathe: "Du bist der Mond [...] Du bist zum Mond geflogen und mir von ihm wiedergeschentk worden" (4, 1084). With these prophetic words, he places his sister in the role of female redeemer in the Romantic tradition.¹⁵ She is his mirror image, thereby strengthening their hermaphroditic bond. Agathe been given back to Ulrich, and he implicitly has been given back to himself, and has found love for himself through his love for his other half.

Breaking the spell in the most annoying manner, the narrator interrupts our romantic scene – "Verläßt man hier das Gespräch der Geschwister [...]" (4, 1084) – to inform us that we are in the midst of an artificially altered reality and must not fully integrate into this magical world. Soon, however, the narrator forgets his task of waking the reader and carries on with such clichéd romantic epithets as the all-encompassing corporeality of the night far from the harsh light of day, which facilitates a state of "grenzenlose Selbstlosigkeit" (4, 1085). If this scene were removed from its context, it might seem to be extracted from Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, with its lovers "in dunkle Nacht gehüllet," or from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*,¹⁶ where the magical couple feels their love threatened by the jealous and deceitful day.¹⁷

Musil's sexual imagery has clearly been borrowed from his Romantic predecessors. The sensual moon, icon of intoxicating desire, beckons irresistibly and invites the siblings into a magical union of the flesh. And yet, like a magnet that attracts and repels with equal intensity, the moon seems to draw them together and keep them apart (4, 1085). Still, they are aware of love's fever in their bodies (4, 1086), and gaze longingly toward the celestial sphere, as if transplanted from Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic painting about two lovers mesmerized in lunar observation. Just when their metaphysical union threatens to dissolve into a sexual consummation, Ulrich adds a puzzling corollary by comparing Agathe to "Pierrot Lunaire." The narrator again severs the bond with any romantic paradigm with a clinical analysis of this archetype: "In der bleichen Maske des mondlich-einsamen Pierrots [...]; es drückte also die Vorliebe für Mondnächte beträchtlich ins Lächerliche hinab" (4, 1086). For a number of reasons, the siblings are kept from expressing their love in a sexual union of the flesh: one reason is Ulrich's admission

that their scene has slipped into a sentimental debauch, trivialized to the point of kitsch (4, 1086). Then the Pierrot allegory returns from the first recognition scene bringing with it the overtones of androgyny, hermaphroditism and general confusion around sexual identification. But a more significant deterrent is the unknown force that has marked the siblings for some “höhere Ahnung” (4, 1083).¹⁸

With the return of a rather pathetic image of Pierrot, the siblings realize they are nothing but characters in their own plot. Nevertheless, brother and sister both understand that they have experienced, even for a fleeting moment, a hint of what Ulrich names: “Seligkeit des Gefühls” (4, 1086). In a posthumous note, Musil writes: “U[lrich] weiß sich u[nd] Ag[athe] [als] eine Art letzte Romantiker der Liebe” (5, 1844), thereby making their allegiance explicit.¹⁹ In many ways, the siblings’ journey to another reality comes across as clichéd and sentimental, but it is rescued from descending into kitsch at the last minute by common sense that breaks through the veneer. Having recognized that they are characters in their own play or figures in a painting, they take the necessary steps to close the scene. Agathe unexpectedly calls “Gute Nacht!” to her brother and then, as though waking suddenly from a slumber, she closes the curtains so quickly that the tableau of the two of them standing in the moonlight vanishes suddenly and completely (4, 1087). The Romantic dream is eclipsed as quickly as it emerged.

In a larger sense, Ulrich’s and Agathe’s romantic encounter illustrates Musil’s attempt to compensate for a loss of authenticity in the world around them. Their collective mourning for what was and their yearning for what might be colors the narrative as they linger on the cusp between genuine meaning and irony, between sincere love and debauched vulgarism. But like the mythological characters whose roles they restage, they too must make a decision and move forward. Typically, a traditional recognition scene is followed by stunned silence at having *seen* for the first time, and yet Electra and Orestes both know they cannot gaze forever into each other’s eyes. They have a task before them; their love alone will not redeem the kingdom of Argos, and they take up their swords and go to battle. So, too, Ulrich and Agathe must confront their future together.

V. *Sensation Body and Provisional Fictions of the Ego*

In the middle of the prolonged romantic scene, Ulrich feels the need to theorize their relations, and he explains: “Wir hatten unsere Körper vertauscht, ohne uns zu berühren” (4, 1084). The body emerges as a central metaphor for their relationship, be it a physical body or a “sensation body,” as postulated by Mach. It is no coincidence that the catalyst that finally allows Ulrich and Agathe to understand the depth of their connection is a single physical gesture. What cannot be understood on a cognitive level must be approached on the corporeal level.

In a very early work, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen* (*The Analysis of Sensations*), Mach relates that in his youth he had come across Kant’s *Prolegomena to All Future Metaphysics* in his father’s library, and this precipitated his later inquiry into the “superfluity of things in themselves.” He explains that one day “the world, including my own selfhood, suddenly appeared to me as a coherent mass of

sensations, in which my sense of self was only and simply a stronger cohesion” (24). In his later work, *Erkenntnis und Irrtum (Knowledge and Error)*, Mach further outlines his theory of the ego’s construction through its fundamental interdependence with the body’s spatial surroundings and its experience of sensations: “There is something all but unexplored standing behind the ego, namely our body” (8). Inasmuch as the body is the only vehicle for knowledge of the self, it is equally vulnerable to errors of perception: “the imagination rounds off incomplete findings [...] thus occasionally falsifying them” (7). In other words, the dependence upon outside forces and the processing of these forces as internal circumstances of sensation can lead to delusion. This propensity to confuse knowledge and error based upon a misunderstanding in the interpretation of incoming data renders the self a fundamentally unknowable entity; in consequence, “an isolated ego exists no more than an isolated object: both are provisional fictions of the same kind” (9). As a “provisional fiction,” the self is nothing more than a sensation cluster, connected to plants, animals, and objects through its sensory perceptions. Essentially, humans are not too different from machines, argues Mach: “some kind of weird and wonderful automata” (18). Far from despairing at this seemingly fatalistic view of the ego, the psychologist insists that this model of human development is actually liberating because it frees us, first, from the mind/body dichotomy and then from a static, fossilized notion of self.

Mach’s phenomenological and pragmatic approach to the perception of the self is important for Musil’s project in a number of ways. For one thing, as we have observed, the characters in *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* are shown to be fluid entities, without ground. Initially, it seems that remedying this would be a reasonable task, and Ulrich tells his sister optimistically: “Wir suchen einen Grund für dich” (3, 959). Eventually, however, the narrator recognizes the impossibility of such a project, and describes another version of being, “welches wir im Grunde nicht begründen können” (5, 1752).

Another important factor for Musil’s characters is Mach’s theory that emotions are part of the overall experiential phenomena of the body. He explains:

At first glance, feelings, affects and moods of love, hate, anger, fear, depression, sadness, mirth and so on, seem to be new elements. On closer scrutiny, however, they are less analyzed sensations linked with less definite, diffuse and vaguely circumscribed elements of internal space: they mark certain directed modes of bodily reactions known from experience. (1976, 17)

Ulrich echoes Mach’s theory when he elaborates his own thoughts on the emotion of love to Agathe: “Da ist erstens ein körperliches Erlebnis, das zur Klasse der Hautreize gehört” (3, 941). Love is, for Ulrich, first and foremost a physical-mechanical experience rather than one of the soul; this is illustrated by the fact that their mutual experience of love entails sharing and even exchanging bodies. Ulrich describes a sensation that affects his body when he is close to a woman, “als sei ihm da selbst ein zweiter, weit schönerer Körper zu eigen gegeben worden” (3, 898). Being twins is not enough; they must be Siamese twins and physically connected so that all sensations are shared. The narrator begins to utter Mach-like phrases on the

coexistence of emotion and physical sensation, such as Ulrich's dream "zwei Menschen zu sein und einer" (4, 1060).

Clearly, Musil is engaging with Mach's theories in order to understand the nature of his characters' subjectivity. But he eventually goes beyond Mach's corporeal aesthetics and challenges his mentor. Musil supports the notion of the ego as an unstable cluster of physical sensations, essentially a nothingness, which is at every moment being redefined according to new spatial and sensational circumstances. He parts company with Mach when he develops from this model a complex set of *social* relations. Not only is the ego a fluid entity, but it intermingles and interferes with other sensory beings. Ulrich and Agathe are determined by their respective somatic perceptions; however, they also codetermine each other's beings through their interactions.

Further exceeding the limits of Mach's theories, Musil seems dissatisfied with a notion of the "unrettbares Ich" and the pessimistic view that the ego is really nothing but an accident of error and false perception. Instead, he proposes and demonstrates an alternative, some would say utopian, perspective. Ulrich and Agathe embark upon a path of discovery, recognizing the inherently unsettled nature of their collective being as a cluster of sensations, and they do so through the catalyst of love. Without love, their status as Siamese twins or shared hermaphrodite would be at best ridiculous and at worst pathetic. Love itself compels them to seek a better alternative to the status quo. "Aber das Reich der Liebe," affirms the narrator, "ist ja in allem die große Anti-Realität" (4, 1319), and this is the inspiration for the siblings' quest to imagine a reality beyond the limits of morality. Indeed, they risk everything and enter into their ethical pact, an experiment of gargantuan proportions.

Ulrich is more articulate than Agathe about their desire to meld fully with each other. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly voices the wish to abandon his masculine identity and become his female other. He recalls how, even as a child, when he saw his sister dressed up for a birthday party, he longed desperately, "ein Mädchen zu sein" (3, 690). Later in the novel, his love for Agathe awakens in him "Sehnsucht, sie zu sein" (4, 1311); he yearns to be his sister at any cost. But to be his sister is far more than simply wishing to unite completely like Siamese twins. It becomes a code word for a particular way of being that Ulrich and Agathe begin to cultivate consciously after their mystical recognition; they step deliberately beyond the confines of moral codes and strict social structures and withdraw into what they call "ein zweigeschlechtiges Mönchtum." Ulrich asserts this alternative definition of sorority: "die 'Schwester' [ist] ein Gebilde, das aus dem 'anderen' Teil des Gefühls entsteht, der Aufruhr dieses Gefühls und das Verlangen, anders zu leben" (4, 1314). Together, Ulrich and Agathe acknowledge their existence as that of the "third sister," the intermingling of "I" and "you."²⁰

VI. *The New Woman*

Ulrich's desire to embody womanhood itself in the form of his/a sister is foregrounded by the rise of a new ideal of femininity in the novel. Very early on, we

find evidence of a dichotomy between two categories of women, characterized by body type: the round, soft, maternal woman and the hard, tight, boyish girl. The female characters in the novel are equally divided among these two categories: Diotima, Bonadea, and Leona all fall into the maternal group, while Clarisse, Gertha, and Agathe are more androgynous and boyish. Diotima, Ulrich's confidante and cohort in the *Parallelaktion*, is described as embodying "ein Schönheitsideal [...], das hellenisch war [...] mit ein bißchen mehr Fleisch" (1, 109). She has a large, warm body with feminine curves and several rolls of voluptuous fat on her neck. On the other hand, Clarisse's "kleiner, nervöser Leib" (1, 53) is hardly maternal, but rather "hart und knabenhaft" (1, 354). Over time, this tendency accelerates until she becomes an emaciated rack of bones, devoid of feminine flesh.

In his slow eradication of the maternally connoted female body from the novel, Musil refers tacitly to the legacy of Johann Jacob Bachofen or even Otto Weininger. In Bachofen's anthropological study of mythology, *Mutterrecht*, the primitive, maternal principle finally gives way to the laws of paternity precisely when Electra decides to avenge Agamemnon's death. And the misogynist Weininger, who abhorred all things maternal, saw in women the roots of social disease. He was disgusted by the so-called bisexuality of culture and the feminization of the ego, and considered this phenomenon a symptom of decadence and social decay. Musil can hardly be said to uphold either of these theories. He observes and comments upon the same phenomenon of gender ambiguity and experimentation; however, he introduces this new construction of femininity in order to celebrate women's liberation from their maternal responsibilities and their newfound ability to interact with a free-floating set of gender signifiers.

Musil theorizes this concept in his essay, *Die Frau gestern und morgen* (1929), where he begins by describing an outdated version of femininity. Women's bodies become caricatures in his descriptions: "Der ideale Mund hatte die Größe und Rundung eines Stecknadelkopfes und die Händchen und Füßlein saßen mit der Ohnmacht kleiner Falter am üppigen Kelch des Leibes" (642). Female bodies were prudishly buried beneath wads of fabric, which had the opposite of the desired effect, creating "eine ungeheuer künstliche Vergrößerung der erotischen Oberfläche" (641). In an early chapter of *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the narrator expounds upon these same points almost word for word, postulating that the extensive clothing of the traditional woman was something of a civilized aphrodisiac. Maternal and corpulent, these women were sexual beings.

The ideal of woman changed, proposes Musil, with the Great War. The new woman shed her camouflaging layers and her maternal role all at the same time: "[Sie] wendet sich vorläufig an die Knabeninstinkte des Mannes, ist knabenhaft mager, kameradschaftlich, sportlich spröd und kindisch" (645). She remains physically immature and is principally concerned with matters of how to prevent reproduction. This fact is made evident in the novel when Ulrich's friend and confidante, Clarisse, maintains a self-imposed chastity in spite of her husband's tireless pleading for conjugal relations. Another of the protagonist's female companions, Gertha, also denies herself and Ulrich the pleasures of the flesh when,

at the height of passion, a twisted scream hurtles from her body in a violent purging of all sexual impulse.

Agathe, too, falls squarely within the bounds of the new woman,²¹ such that when Ulrich sees her for the first time in feminine attire, he mistakes this costume – “vor die schlanken, hohen, den seinen ähnlichen Beine [...] hatten sich Röcke gesenkt” – for a disguise (3, 694). Women’s clothing is a foil more jarring than the Pierrot pyjamas of their first meeting. Her body is “groß und schlank,” and her shoulders are “von einer gesunden Breite” (3, 896), all of which contributes to Ulrich’s confusion surrounding her gender status. In fact, his very first remark about her appearance notes the sexually ambivalent and immature nature of her body: “Ihre Brust ging nicht in Brüsten verloren” (2, 676). He is so shocked that he is incapable of determining whether his initial fascination with her arises out of curiosity or sexual desire.

This pre-pubescent, androgynous and perhaps asexual image of Agathe acts as a mirror for Ulrich’s construction of his own masculinity. Musil never writes an essay on “Man Today” or the nature of the new man. But Ulrich’s own self-conscious analysis of his character and his relationship to Agathe speak to a larger shift in the development and manifestation of masculinity, a shift that I would posit as a threat to the Oedipal scenario. This is not a man whose sexual development is either predictable or complete. He refuses to identify with or emulate the kind of man his father was and purposefully casts off the shadow of the domineering man. The absence of his biological mother precludes any Oedipal mother-son conflict. And, while he appears to go through a period of infatuation with maternally connoted women, Ulrich does not take part in the ritual of usurping the power of the maternal in order to assert his masculine, sexual supremacy. Mother figures simply fade away when the new woman takes center stage as the dominant cultural and corporeal aesthetic.²²

My point here is that the demise of the Oedipal scenario is inversely proportionate to the rise of the Electra myth. When Ulrich is finally ready to turn his back upon his father’s world for good, the myth of Atreus is introduced. The son leaves behind the security of paternal inheritance and the solid Oedipal subjectivity it connotes. Following the father’s death and the recognition scene, Agathe and Ulrich slowly begin their retreat from the world; they abandon the life of Viennese high society and begin their self-imposed exile as recluses. The two of them lose any clear sense of identity they might have had and enter a zone of liminal subjectivity. By the end of the *Nachlaß*, the two have practically fused into one being, so complete is their union. Agathe describes a dream she has, in which she entered her body lying on the bed, only to discover that it was her brother’s body. She is startled by this uncanny sensation, which takes the *doppelgänger* motif of Siamese twins one step further. The dream continues with her taking her brother’s body into her arms, lifting it up high in exaltation. Their bodies melt into each other such that they are indistinguishable. The dream represents a state of utopian bliss, a simultaneous stasis and complete fusion of subjectivities that Ulrich first mentioned in the moonlit scene. There is a religious sense of awe to this scene, as though Agathe were Mary Magdalene lifting Christ’s dead body to become one with it.

Agathe's dream also signals a shift in her overall role in the novel. She becomes the driving force behind their collective actions, exemplified by Ulrich's repeated desire to become her, to meld with her. As Ulrich casts off his allegiance to Oedipus, Agathe accepts the role of Electra, courageous and defiant.²³ She asserts her independence and sets her own agenda, and Ulrich, like Orestes, seems happy to follow. Though her task is not that of orchestrating a literal matricide, her characterization as the new woman acts as a figurative matricide. She extinguishes the maternal element in herself, just as Musil postulates its erasure from the cultural imagination.²⁴

Agathe's new role is foreshadowed by Ulrich's own suggestion, shortly after their first meeting, that the siblings might also take on the roles of Isis and Osiris as they perform the alchemy of becoming symbolically one. Musil explores this theme elsewhere in poetic form: "Isis und Osiris" (1923) reveals the grizzly story of Isis stealing her husband's male member: "Und die Schwester löste von dem Schläfer / Leise das Geschlecht und aß es auf" (597). In exchange, she gives him her heart, which he in turn consumes. The poem parallels the siblings' quasi-incestuous relations in *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* in that Osiris, like Ulrich, is figuratively emasculated. Unlike his mythological counterpoint, however, Ulrich is a willing victim. In both cases, the brother/lover's sacrifice is rewarded when he gains access to the coveted trophy: his sister's heart. Such a metaphor of cannibalistic ritual is perhaps a more profound symbol of the depth of their union than sexual consummation itself.

The novel starts off with Ulrich as a solitary and singular protagonist in a quasi-*Bildungsroman* quest for a purpose and meaning in life. By the end of the unfinished work, we are on much less solid ground. Agathe and Ulrich have melted into each other to the extent that they function as one character, with Agathe or the androgynous new woman as the dominant force. Oedipus has been abandoned, and Electra and Orestes have become one. Musil is not alone in his explorations of this scenario. In his 1977 play, *Hamletmaschine*, Heiner Müller presents us with a similarly subtle critique of Oedipus. In fact, the author suggests elsewhere that Oedipus has long outlived his usefulness: "Im Jahrhundert des Orest und der Elektra, das heraufkommt, wird Ödipus eine Komödie sein" (*Projektion 1975*, 16). Müller replaces Oedipus with a failed Hamlet in disguise, who wavers on the edge of an abyss, a crisis in consciousness of such proportions that he, too, declares his desire to abandon his masculinity: "Ich will eine Frau sein" (15). He does not want to be just any woman; he wants to be Electra. Like Ulrich, Müller's Hamlet figuratively fuses with and is transformed into an Electra-character,²⁵ albeit a disabled one. Müller's disfigured and wheelchair-bound Electra also enacts a symbolic matricide in her denial of her own fertility, threatening to annihilate all her unborn children.

Unlike Müller's Electra, whose anarchic view privileges destruction as the only ethical stance, Musil's characters embrace the possibility of creating and nurturing an alternative reality through their own ethical relations. As I have already argued, Musil refutes Freud's Oedipal subject in part by looking to Mach, whose metaphysical scepticism constructs the subject as a provisional fiction of physical

sensations. Mach's pessimistic pragmatism, however useful as a provisional model, does not provide all the building blocks for Musil's project. He does not want his version of Electra and Orestes to end up in a void or in a relational *cul-de-sac*.

VII. Nietzsche and the Abyss

It is to Nietzsche that Musil looks to complete his vision of an alternative relational ethics. The philosopher is present as a backdrop throughout *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, first introduced through Ulrich's close friend, Clarisse. He had given her the complete works of Nietzsche as a wedding present, and indeed she begins to embody the spirit of Dionysus. The narrator remarks upon the unspoken force that threatens her stability: "Etwas Unbestimmbares riß sich dann los in ihr und drohte mit ihrem Geist davonzufiegen" (1, 62). Clarisse even proposes a "Nietzsche Year" as a parallel to the ridiculous jubilee year planned for Emperor Franz Joseph. Her obsession reflects the extent to which this philosophy dominates the landscape of cultural consciousness in Musil's Vienna. However, Clarisse's rather shallow reception of Nietzsche – she cherishes the weighty tomes but seems not to have read them – and her worship of him as a statuesque icon act as a counterpoint to Musil's larger conversation with the philosopher toward the end of the novel. The author's allegiance to Nietzsche is more implicit than explicit, but it permeates his prose, especially in the third book and *Nachlaß*.

"All ordered society puts the passions to sleep," asserts Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, a message paralleled by Musil's conviction that morality is a narcotic that lulls even sharp minds into a dull, sleepy trance. The author sees in Nietzsche the potential for a different kind of drug, perhaps one that stimulates productive insomnia to "reawaken the sense of comparison, of contradiction, of joy in the new, the daring, and the untried" (Kaufmann, 1963, 93). The characters in *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* are engaged in a Nietzschean experiment of audacious joy, through which they escape ordered society to imagine something new. Agathe and Ulrich risk everything to break free from social mores, and their actions echo Ulrich's aphoristic bluntness: "alles ist moralisch, aber die Moral selbst ist nicht moralisch" (3, 1024).

While Musil does not expressly mention Nietzsche in the novel's treatise on morality, the creative tension of the characters' unfinished and permeable subjectivities recalls the philosopher's invitation to move beyond one's own self in an explosion of Dionysian excess. Musil demonstrates his theory of ethical relations through the perpetual metamorphosis of his characters and their courageous endeavors to harness their love and sketch a new vision of intersubjective being. In so doing, he provides a model for modern individuals to recreate themselves constantly and to embrace the chaos of the changing world around them.²⁶

Agathe and Ulrich may engage in a Nietzschean experiment of joy, which leads to a hermaphroditic fusion of Electra and Orestes; however, their coexistence does not culminate in the kind of Dionysian frenzy that consumes Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Electra as she performs her famous *Totentanz*. Instead, their

challenge is to walk an ever-narrowing precipice between two extremes: utopia and anarchy.²⁷ Like Nietzsche's tightrope dancer in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, they are confronted on either side by a cliff and a bottomless abyss. Perhaps the impossibility of succeeding at such a feat is what prohibits Musil from completing his masterpiece. The novel refuses to end with Electra and Orestes walking hand in hand into the sunset. On the contrary, it simply peters out as Ulrich and Agathe teeter ever closer to the edge of the abyss. In order to stay alive, they must reject the slumber of moral stagnation and stay awake to imagine new ways of being in the world.

¹ Freud states that the legend of King Oedipus from classical antiquity has universal validity and that "every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex" (149). Indeed, by the time Musil began serious work on his novel, the theory of the Oedipus complex had gained such notoriety in the field of psychiatry and among the general public that this might have seemed to be true.

² The first volume, published in 1930, received so much praise that Musil began to dream of a Nobel Prize. Under pressure from his publisher and his readers, the second volume was divulged in 1933 and was less of a success, due in part to the political climate as well as Musil's own view that it was a less polished piece. *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was banned in Germany and Austria in 1938, and censorship would eventually extend to all his works. In dire financial straits throughout the remaining years of his life, Musil labored increasingly over the manuscript, though with little progress.

³ After meditating and hypothesizing upon the nature of love in conversations mostly with Agathe, but also with anyone who will listen (Clarisse, Bonadea, Diotima), Ulrich boils the problem down to its essential questions: "wie man seinen Nächsten liebe, den man nicht kenne, und wie sich selbst, den man noch weniger kennt [...], wie man überhaupt liebe," and "was Liebe 'eigentlich' sei" (4, 1223-24). These are not only important questions with regard to his relationship with Agathe, but Ulrich feels compelled to include "millions of loving couples" in his equation. This is just one example of how our protagonist ensures his own failure by setting himself impossible tasks. His musings on other subjects are of equally preposterous proportions.

⁴ Indeed, the praise for *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* has not been unanimous. Peter Handke called the work "ein bis in die einzelnen Sätze größenwahnsinniges und unerträglich meinungsverliehtes Werk" (quoted in Luserke 96).

⁵ Critics use the word "fragment" when referring to *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Luserke 103, Rogowski 75), and rightly so, though I prefer the label "incomplete." In the strict sense of the word, of course, the work is a "fragment," but I simply cannot bring myself to use this term to describe a novel that runs to almost two thousand pages including all the extensive unpublished posthumous papers, depending on the edition. Fragmented it is, and increasingly so toward the end, though it is debatable whether this is a result of the unfinished nature of the project or rather a factor of an intentional aesthetic transformation within the text. I tend to support the latter interpretation: Musil struggles to provide narrative closure, in part due to the lack of plot towards the end. His characters have abandoned their social roles, but they have not replaced their former lives with any clear plan of action. Though many critics and scholars have insisted upon a clear distinction between the published segments of *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and the *Nachlaß*, I have chosen to treat Musil's latter drafts and notes as part of the whole. These chapters may be rough and unpolished, but they nevertheless provide important clues to the direction of the author's considerations on a number of key points.

⁶ And here, we can include Ulrich's and Agathe's biological father, the patriarchal figure of the aged Emperor Franz Joseph, as well as the terminally ill Habsburg Empire itself. The seventieth jubilee celebration of Franz Joseph's accession to the throne, planned for December 2, 1918, is the subject of the great *Parallelaktion*, an elaborate planning committee with which Ulrich becomes involved. The whole scheme revolves around the attempt to overshadow the German celebration of Wilhelm II's jubilee in June of that year. Ulrich's father explains: "Da der 2. XII. natürlich durch nichts vor den 15. VI. gerückt werden könnte, ist man auf den glücklichen Gedanken verfallen, das ganze Jahr 1918 zu einem Jubiläumsjahr unseres Friedenskaisers auszugestalten" (1, 79). This scheme reveals the full extent of the ludicrous activities within the government (especially as the whole *Parallelaktion* dissolves into a social club) and the lengths to which the Austrians will go to uphold their historical supremacy over the Germans. The campaign is a ridiculous and desperate attempt to resuscitate a dying tradition and the prestige it once evoked, and a symptom of a larger philosophical problem of the "nonempty gap" (Ryan 216) that invades much of the rest of the novel in different forms.

⁷ Surely it is no coincidence that the identical disguise is that of Pierrot, the notoriously ambiguous circus figure, descended from early European *commedia dell'arte* theatre. He has been known as *Pulcinella*, *Punch*, *Pedrolino*, or *Petrushka*, the simpleton and fool who exposes and ridicules his masters. This melancholy clown suffers slightly from schizophrenia, appearing at once mischievous and playful, then sinister like the jealous and cynical operatic figures of Rigoletto and Pagliacci. But the aspect of Pierrot's personality of most interest to us is the ambiguity surrounding gender identification in Ulrich's and Agathe's chance meeting. Traditionally gendered male, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Pierrot was increasingly played by women, the most famous of which is undoubtedly Frank Wedekind's Lulu character. This double articulation of Pierrot as feminine man and masculine woman irreparably alters the nature of the siblings' reunion. They can no longer be identified as man and woman, with all the erotic overtones implicit in the Attic recognition scenes. Instead, they meet as brother and sister, as twins, perhaps even as each other's alter ego.

⁸ Perhaps Musil knew of Mallarmé's fascination with the self-identical play of murder, incest, and suicide orchestrated by Pierrot, the mime. In a brutal and bizarre drama, Pierrot illustrates his murder of the unfaithful Colombine. He ties her to the bed while she is sleeping and tickles her feet, so that her "ghastly death bursts upon her among those atrocious bursts of laughter" (quoted in Derrida 199). Pierrot simultaneously plays the murderer and his female victim, thus initiating the simultaneous collapse of both gender and subject/object boundaries. A single character takes on a form of oscillating androgyny, in an illustration of what Derrida calls a "masturbatory suicide." While it is certain that Musil's invocation of Pierrot has a different aim, the analogy is a useful one.

⁹ It is important to establish the metaphorical nature of sibling incest between Agathe and Ulrich. Their bond is not really of a sexual nature. Rather, they use the fuel of eros to orchestrate their quasi-transcendent union.

¹⁰ Musil parts company with Freud on the fundamental issue of biology. Freud insists upon the "biological foundation of the Oedipus complex," thereby rendering it an essential part of human sexual development. For Musil, this is a simplistic view, which fails to take into account the significance of social, psychological, and indeed ethical factors.

¹¹ A genius of many talents, Mach was, among other things, a physicist, an engineer, a psychologist, and a philosopher. He is known for his theories on epistemology and positivism, and for his experiments in optics, acoustics, electronic induction, physiology, and photography. He held posts alternately as Professor of Mathematics, Physics, and Philosophy, and was inducted into the Fluid Mechanics Hall of Fame as one of the leading

pioneers of supersonic aerodynamics. He is perhaps most famous for his discovery of the unit of the speed of sound, appropriately labeled the “Mach.”

¹² The *Nachlaß* is divided into two sections: the first is a group of twenty chapters which appear relatively intact and have undergone the first stages of the intense polishing to which Musil subjected all his work. The second section consists of notes, sketches, and drafts for future chapters or versions of other chapters. There is much repetition and the writing is disjointed and almost fantastic in nature. We witness an unraveling of character and plot such that all of the first three books of Musil’s masterpiece almost appear to come apart at the seams before our eyes. Upon reading this section, everything that has come before these pages seems like fiction, and the dream-like, visionary quality of these final musings becomes the real novel. Here Musil experiments with various alternative scenarios, including the possibility of Ulrich having sexual relations with a number of the women in the text: Agathe, Diotima, Clarisse. This testifies to Musil’s own complaints that publishing the work piecemeal limited him severely; he considered the novel a continual work-in-progress, experimental in nature, and felt that the release of early chapters distorted the entire work (Pike xii). Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the *Nachlaß* is the light they shed on Musil’s concept of mysticism and what he called “*anderer Zustand*.”

¹³ Classical and neo-classical drama often include a recognition scene as a means of driving the plot forward. Aristotle accorded it great importance and developed criteria for *anagnorisis*, which included some kind of false inference. Whether deliberately contrived or not, there is necessarily a misunderstanding concerning the true identity of a character (Dupriez 433-34). While Ulrich and Agathe do not appear to fall prey to such Aristotelian false inference, there is indeed, I would argue, a misunderstanding. For they never get beyond the Pierrot costume to see the true nature of their relationship. Thus, this chapter constitutes a second recognition, one that seems to run almost the entire course of the novel without full resolution. Ulrich and Agathe are in a constant state of *seeing* each other for the first time.

¹⁴ Musil introduces the term “*anderer Zustand*” in the third book to refer to Ulrich’s and Agathe’s experiment in creating an alternative, imaginary social reality. The author never clarifies this ambiguous epithet, perhaps because defining it might ruin the magic of the quasi-utopian twosome the siblings attempt to nurture and sustain.

¹⁵ We need only think of examples such as the “beloved” in Novalis’s *Hymnen an die Nacht*, Lucinde in Schlegel’s novel of the same name, or the many Wagnerian redeemers: Senta, Elisabeth, Brünnhilde, and Isolde. These women all sacrifice themselves to facilitate the transcendence of the male hero, often an artist struggling to realize his creative potential. While Agathe’s role in *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* does not fit easily into this paradigm, there are elements of this tradition at play in the novel, especially in this critical chapter. Ulrich does most of the talking, and Agathe acts more as facilitator to his experience of discovering self and subjectivity. As we shall see, this model breaks down when it becomes clear that Ulrich cannot simply overcome his existential angst even when he finds his Platonic mate. From Ulrich’s mature perspective, Wagner’s predictable plots will seem foolishly simple. In the final sections of the narrative, Agathe emerges as the dominant force in the guise of the new woman.

¹⁶ Novalis is no stranger to the world of *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Agathe is in the habit of quoting Novalis – “Was kann ich also für meine Seele tun, die wie ein unaufgelöstes Rätsel in mir wohnt?” (3, 857) – even though she denies belief in the soul. She leaves it to her brother to answer such questions. Wagner, too, figures prominently in the novel; his music is the source of tension between Clarisse and Walter, Ulrich’s childhood friends. They play duets of his music on the piano and are enchanted by its romantic fervor; Walter even compares their suffering to that of Tristan and Isolde. Wagner also functions as a backdrop in

the novel (Clarisse's brother is conspicuously named Siegfried), representing a now defunct world where authenticity was still sought and sentimentality was not regarded as kitsch.

¹⁷ Along with the ubiquitous romantic characterization of night as a refuge from the harsh realities of the light, both Novalis and Wagner speak of a new kind of sight: for Tristan and Isolde, to be "nachtsichtig" (80) means being able to see the lies of the strict moral and social codes imposed by day. And Novalis's lovers have access to the night's loving sun, "liebliche Sonne der Nacht" (151), a secret inner piercing light fueled by passion. Ulrich's and Agathe's new extended vision features some of these same characteristics, allowing them access to a higher plane, but also freeing them from a static and repressive moral system.

¹⁸ That Ulrich and Agathe do not consummate their love is in some ways a strange reversal of Wagner's erotic philosophy in *Tristan und Isolde*. While Wagner was an unabashed fan of Arthur Schopenhauer and his philosophy of will-negation, he allowed himself certain liberties in its application. The *Liebeshod* makes for a perfect Schopenhauerian climax, with Isolde as otherworldly redemptress, and yet their physical union of the flesh contradicts the philosopher's doctrine of asceticism. While Musil's motives are clearly not the same as Wagner's, his decision to deny Ulrich's and Agathe's sexual desires contradicts the romantic imperative of erotic love and paves the way for them to transcend their earthly existence (and here this might be translated as the strict moral codes of Viennese society) and move toward the construction of a relational ethics, with Schopenhauer's will-negation acting as the driving force.

¹⁹ Manfred Frank interprets *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* as part Romantic allegory and part Romantic critique. He points to the appropriation of key concepts regarding the construction of the self and argues that Musil adopts Novalis' critique of Fichte's self-determining self in favor of a self that is determined by a non-self. He demonstrates that Ulrich's and Agathe's foray into Romanticism represents a quasi-religious aspiration, which abolishes totalizing systems and unfolds as an anarchic project.

²⁰ Near the end of the *Nachlaß*, three sisters are mentioned, referring to the trio of Ulrich, Agathe, and the fictional world they have created, which itself is granted object status. Musil's notes are by this point chaotic and convoluted. The author contemplates Ulrich's and Agathe's respective thoughts of suicide, albeit not without a glimmer of hope. Ulrich vows that they will not kill themselves until all other avenues have been exhausted.

²¹ In fact, Ulrich is annoyed that she is not more assertive in her role as a new woman: "Diese männliche Machtvorstellung von der weiblichen Schwäche ist heute noch recht gewöhnlich, obwohl mir den einander folgenden Wellen der Jugend daneben neuere Auffassungen entstanden sind, und die Natürlichkeit, mit der Agathe ihre Abhängigkeit von Hagauer behandelt, verletzte ihren Bruder" (3, 684). As the novel progresses, Agathe becomes increasingly independent, even straying from Ulrich's sphere of influence and the situation is reversed altogether when, one day, he has no knowledge of her whereabouts. When he finds himself unneeded, Ulrich no longer wants her to embody the new woman. Instead, he behaves like a selfish and jealous husband.

²² Walter Sokel suggests that Musil veers away from his essayist persona in his fictional treatment of women: "Als Essayist und Philosoph neigte Musil dazu, den Mann und Bruder siegen zu lassen. Als Romanschreiber und Erzähler erlaubt er der weiblichen Hauptfigur einen ästhetischen Triumph davonzutragen. Das zeigt, dass Musil seine eigene stereotype Idee von der Frau imstande war zu transzendieren" (1983, 127). Sokel seems here to confuse the issue somewhat. The triumph of the feminine aesthetic may be a victory on the level of cultural values, but it has little to do with the portrayal of Musil's character, Agathe.

²³ Ever since the Attic tragedies of antiquity, Electra has been synonymous with a non-traditional version of womanhood. She is not described in any of the extant versions of Aeschylus, Euripides, or Sophocles as either particularly feminine or beautiful. An outcast in

the Kingdom of Argos, she is often described as a haggard figure dressed in rags. Similarly, her actions do not fit the traditional status of a single woman, be it in antiquity or more recent times. She is fierce, vengeful, courageous, and defiant, full of rage and determination – attributes for which she is condemned and ridiculed. In Musil's immediate literary memory is Hofmannsthal's influential adaptation of Sophocles' *Elektra*, in which he takes these elements to the extreme and portrays his Elektra as a hysterical maniac.

²⁴ Such figurative matricide need not be seen in a negative light. Musil uses Agathe to question and redefine the nature and role of femininity. But, ultimately, he sees her emergence as the "new woman" as one of strength and rejuvenation. In building a bridge of re-gendered ethical relations, Agathe's expression is allowed to extend beyond the confining limits of maternity.

²⁵ Müller, too, borrows from the legend of Isis and Osiris when he has Elektra offer Hamlet her heart as a tasty morsel. The ultimate symbol of a true union of souls has always involved consumption of the flesh.

²⁶ Though Nietzsche's thought offers utopian possibilities for Musil's characters, if left on this course the siblings risk falling victim to a vacuous and apolitical sentimentality. Mach's theories constitute the pragmatic anchor for this ideal couple on the margins of society and lend much-needed leverage to the symbolic silence of their self-imposed exile.

²⁷ Critics (e.g., Schärer, Luserke) have accused Musil of indulging in utopian fantasies, which provide no real political alternative for the corrupt and decrepit society he seeks to undo. Musil counters this criticism with this diary entry: "Das Kontemplative des Anderen Zustandes ist aber etwas anderes als der Trance... Es ist ein europäischer Versuch, ohne Bewußtseinsverlust usw." (*Tagebücher* 786; see Kochs 187). The author prevents his characters from succumbing to the utopian trance by having them tread a thin line between their ideal vision in a self-exiled alternative reality and the threat of their dream imploding in destructive anarchy. In the end, it is the continual encounter with the/one's other that keeps Ulrich and Agathe alive to the challenge of resisting the status quo and attempting to embrace a different version of reality.

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