

Emotions and Literature in Musil

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ABSTRACT

The question of how literature can evoke emotions is a familiar one, as is the idea that a good work of literature arouses the right emotion in the right place through our capacity for sympathy. However, there is no consensus on how this works, partly because there is no agreement on the nature of emotions. One figure that contributes to both of these topics is Robert Musil. As a thinker and as a novelist, he had both a theory of emotions and a novelistic treatment of them. His novels are notable, however, for the way in which they do not appeal to the reader's capacity for sympathy, owing partly to the formlessness of his characters. Yet it is precisely the gap he creates between fiction and emotional reality that allows for a richer investigation of the relationship between emotions and literature.

Introduction

There is a story that everyone from my generation probably read or had read to them when they were children: the story of a lion cub who is much loved and who happily jumps about in the desert with his beloved father. One day, though, the father has to go to war and dies there and the cub is thrown out of the desert. The story alone was traumatic for little kids, but there was also a song to go with it. Sung by the TRT (Turkish national radio and television) children's chorus, it was shown on the TRT channel at the weekends in 1980s Turkey. Sadly, I recently found out that even the children of today know the story, and when I checked it, the song had been viewed more than 4 million times on YouTube.

Each time I read this story or when my parents read it to me, I would burst into tears. I was old enough to know that lions do not go to war and that they do in fact leave their cubs to fend for themselves when the time comes, and that this is just nature. But seeing their little girl that upset, my parents repeatedly had to tell me so. In vain. I knew that it was not real, but this did not

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staunch the flow of tears; it continued to haunt my dreams, years later. I now want to ask how it is that when we read fiction, despite knowing that it is *just* a fiction, we feel upset, or angry, or fearful. Some thinkers say that the emotions aroused by reading a novel are essential to a proper understanding of it. So, I must have understood how a little child can/could feel when he/she is left alone; how it must have felt like to lose a parent or both of them; what it means to be happy or unhappy. And the question remains: Does a novel or a story arouse such emotions (“the paradox of fiction”) or does it draw them out? Or does it do neither?

Scholars have given various answers: the capacity of identification or sympathy, similar possibilities, “simulation theory” etc. The answers are varied partly because there is no agreement on the nature of “real life” emotions. In other words, the well-established debate between feeling and cognitive (evaluative judgments) traditions in the literature on emotions has been repeated in examining how literature arouses emotions. For instance, Martha Nussbaum, a proponent of the cognitive theory, claims that emotions are constructed and/or structured by evaluative judgments. In novels, she says, we recognise similar possibilities between us and the characters, and in doing so we also recognise our being vulnerable and needy (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 243). Jennifer Robinson, however, challenges this argument and asks: if I *know* that it is just a fiction – which itself is a cognitive activity – how can I still be affected emotionally? She claims that the theory of pre-cognitive affective appraisals which “do not discriminate between real and imagined scenarios” (Robinson, 2010, p. 85) solves the paradox.

In the first part, I will give an overview of the affective appraisal theory and cognitive theory and show various problems in both approaches. In the second part I will discuss various theories and ideas about how fiction may evoke emotions. One familiar idea is that a good work of literature arouses the right emotion in the right place through sympathy, meaning not our capacity to sympathise with another person, but what Scruton refers to as “responding *sympathetically* to an *imagined* situation” (Scruton, 2010, p. 100). Then I turn to a particular work of literature, Robert Musil’s novella, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*, 1906), and suggest that here and in Musil’s fiction as a whole the capacity we call sympathy can appear to be blocked or frustrated in significant ways, not least because of the way Musil sets up his central characters, and because he himself had a theory of emotions which itself implies a distinctive approach to the relationship between

reality and fiction. Whether his overtly philosophical novels achieve a kind of emotional education remains an open question.

2. Feeling Tradition vs. Cognitive Theories

On her affective appraisals model, Robinson argues that emotion is a process through which an instinctive, automatic and non-cognitive affective appraisal activates a set of bodily responses. Thus, she says, “the (angry) affective appraisal OFFENSE! is registered in bodily changes such as increased heart rate, sweating, fist-clenching, and so on, and these very bodily changes themselves help to keep attention fixed on the perceived offense” (Robinson, 2010, p. 73). Only after an affective appraisal of, say, Threat!, a cognitive appraisal confirms or denies the affective appraisal. If a cognitive appraisal denies the affective appraisal, then the physiological changes stop or it can give way to a new affective appraisal, i.e., he is not a threat, on the contrary, he is a friend, and a new sequence of physiological changes occur (Robinson, 2010, p. 73).

This in fact is a not new model, and it goes all the way back to Aristotle’s analysis of emotions (passions) which begins with a distinction between *pathe* (passions) and *praxis* (actions). Actions are things we do, whereas passions are things that we undergo, that happen to us (1106a4-5). This legacy of Aristotelianism,¹ which can still be seen in many metaphors used such as “falling in love,” “consumed by envy,” “paralysed by fear,” (Scarantino, 2016, p. 6) and which Richard Lazarus and Bernice Lazarus call a “myth” (Lazarus and Lazarus, 2014, p. 3) according to which emotions belong to the irrational part of our *psyche* and as such are independent of thinking and reasoning (the dichotomy between being active and passive), inspired early modern accounts of emotions.² In Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul*, for instance, while the acts of thinking,

¹ Though Scarantino calls Aristotle the founder of “the feeling tradition” (as opposed to “the cognitive or evaluative theory” (e.g. Nussbaum and Solomon)), *Nicomachean Ethics* does not give us the complete picture of his account of emotions (2016, p. 5). In order to get this, we need to look elsewhere, namely, his *de Anima* and *Rhetoric*. In *de Anima*, “beliefs, bodily motions, and physiological changes are inseparable elements of emotion...similarly he avoids treating emotions as irrational, uncontrolled responses to situations” (Solomon, 2003, p. 5). In *Rhetoric* Aristotle says: “passions [are] those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments and that are also attended by pain and pleasure” (1378a19-21). By saying this in fact he also adopts an evaluative attitude.

² For the relationship between language and emotions, see Lakoff, 2016, pp. 269-273 and Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp. 453-486.

willing, imagining etc. are regarded as the actions of the soul, passions (emotions) are attributed to the body's acting upon the soul (Descartes, 1989, pp. 28-30). Later William James, whose account is still widely respected, says: "the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion" (James, 1884, pp. 189-190). This means, emotions are caused by our interpretation of bodily reactions, and the state of consciousness of, for instance, joy, anger etc. is nothing but the consciousness of physiological manifestations. In other words, we do not cry because we feel upset, it is the other way around: we feel upset because we cry.³

It would be a crude conclusion to say that Robinson is simply repeating James' account; not least because there is an alternative interpretation of what James' view is anyway.⁴ That aside, thanks to recent studies in neurobiology, hormonal, musculoskeletal and neural changes were also added to James' list of bodily changes.⁵ Moreover, in the arousal of emotions we are not that passive, since after all there is also the cognitive component in the approval or the denial of the affective appraisal. However, the slogan remains: "emotion precedes cognition."

How might all that help us understand what happens to us when we read a novel? Robinson says: "we respond emotionally to people and events in novels in just the same way as we respond to people and events in real life" (Robinson, 2010, p. 73). In other words: since emotional responses are bodily responses, we respond in a bodily way to what is going on in a novel; since emotional

³ Around the same time James was developing his theory on emotions, C. G. Lange, a Danish psychologist was working on similar ideas, and thus the theory is often referred to as James-Lange theory. James and Lange published a book called *The Emotions* in 1885. John Dewey published his "The Theory of Emotions" in 1894 (See Solomon, 2003, p. 84).

⁴ See John Deigh, 2009, pp. 17-41.

⁵ Perhaps James' main mistake was his identification of emotions with feelings. In his *Descartes' Error* the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio claims that emotions and feelings have different functions: "If an emotion is a collection of changes in body state connected to particular mental images that have activated a specific brain system, *the essence of feeling an emotion is the experience of such changes in juxtaposition to the mental images that initiated the cycle* (Damasio, 1994, p. 145). He also argues that the Cartesian myth of a disembodied *cogito* ignored the role of the body which provides a ground reference for the mind. In his *Looking for Spinoza* (2003) Damasio has found a precedent ("the protobiologist") for his ideas: Baruch de Spinoza (Damasio, 2003, p. 14). However, in Damasio's account we still encounter the idea that "emotion precedes cognition," while in Spinoza whatever happens in the body happens in the mind at the same time (Spinoza, 1996, Book II).

appraisals are instinctive, automatic, non-cognitive and pre-cognitive, our responses while reading a novel are also instinctive, automatic, non-cognitive and pre-cognitive; emotions focus attention in a bodily way, thus bodily changes help us to concentrate on important events in a novel; emotional situations are stored in emotional memory, thanks to which the characters and people in a novel can evoke some bodily responses based on similar events and people. Then upon the ill-treatment of Oliver Twist I feel upset and compassion towards him because my automatic and instinctive bodily responses, which are non-cognitive or pre-cognitive, cause me to regard his situation as “painful.” This emotion of mine – compassion – can also be strengthened or at least supported by the instinctive and automatic affective appraisal of hatred or disgust I feel towards those, like Mr. Bumble, Noah Claypole, Fagin, and Monks, who are the sources of Oliver Twist’s suffering and pain. This is also a way of understanding, or in fact an essential feature of understanding a novel: “if I laugh and cry, shiver, tense and relax in all the ‘right’ places, then I have in some sense understood the story” (Robinson, 2010, p. 77).

Robinson argues that if we accept the affective appraisals theory, we then easily conclude that there is no such thing as the paradox of fiction, because, as recent studies show, pre-cognitive affective appraisals do not make a distinction between real and fictive events and people. However, her model does not give a satisfactory answer to the question of why different people react differently to the same situation, whether be it in real life or in a novel; or why the same person reacts differently to the same event or a similar event at different times; or why a person might react differently to a real situation and to one in a novel.

Consider now Nussbaum’s Neo-Stoic cognitive or judgmental approach. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum emphasises the cognitive aspects of emotions, claiming that emotions are structured and/or constructed by evaluative judgments.⁶ She accepts the Stoic theory, that “behind our

⁶ The proponents of cognitive tradition are mostly criticised for neglecting the role of the bodily reactions in their analysis. Such a critique is raised partly because of the misleading use of the word “cognitive.” Robert Solomon, another proponent of the cognitive theory, claims that if cognition here is understood as conscious and articulate thinking, then bodily feelings seem to have been left out of the cognitive account. But, he adds, “I also believe that ‘cognition’ or ‘judgment’ properly construed captures that missing ingredient. The analogy with kinesthetic judgments suggests the possibility of bringing feelings of the body back into the analysis of emotion in a straightforward way” (Solomon, 2004, p. 86). Jesse Prinz, on the other hand, prefers to use

emotions, there are judgments” while rejecting their normative ethical formula, *apathcia*, that is, only an emotionless state brings about happiness. What does she mean by “emotions are structured by evaluative judgments”?

As we saw earlier, although Aristotle can be said to be the founder of the feeling tradition, his reflections on these matters have affinities with the cognitive tradition. For instance, in *Rhetoric* Aristotle defines pity, or compassion as “a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon” (1385b13-15). The cognitive elements involved in Aristotle’s definition are as follows: First, the pitier believes that the pain that the pitied is suffering from is not trivial, on the contrary, it is caused by an evil or unfortunate event; second the pitier believes that the pitied does not deserve such pain, in other words, it is not his fault; third the pitier believes that the same thing or something similar may happen to them as well. In a nutshell, Nussbaum claims that the *size* of the suffering, the *undeservingness* of it which appeals to our sense of *justice*, and an awareness of *similar possibilities* (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 306-315) are necessary reasons to have compassion towards someone.

Now, while outlining her theory of emotions in general, or of compassion in particular, Nussbaum does not discuss whether the same mechanism operates while reading a novel, yet from the beginning she assumes that it does. Following Aristotle’s well-known idea that poetry is more philosophical than history, Nussbaum claims that if history tells us what has happened at one time, poetry, or literary works in general, shows us general patterns of action. By recognising and understanding these patterns, we also grasp our own possibilities, our being needy and limited creatures (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 243). Perhaps “showing” rather than “saying” is what makes literature, or at least some literary works, more powerful than philosophical works.

Think of Job in the Old Testament: A righteous, faithful and benevolent man, he is God’s favourite creature, blessed with wealth, children and a happy marriage. One day, though, Satan accuses Job before God: behind Job’s so-

“appraisal,” rather than “cognitive” and amending James-Lange theory, he calls his theory as “embodied appraisal theory.” In his account emotions are embodied, as James and Lange argued, but they are also appraisals. He says: “My suggestion is that certain bodily perceptions. . . represent roughly the same thing that explicit evaluative judgments represent, but they do it by figuring into the right causal relations, not by deploying concepts or providing descriptions” (Prinz, 2004, p. 57).

called uprightness and blamelessness lies not his faith but his fear of losing his possessions. Satan believes that if Job loses everything, he would surely curse God and to illustrate this Satan wants permission to test his piety. Satan the accuser is allowed to do so, and misfortune befalls Job: he loses his wealth, his happiness, his children. No compassion comes from his once beloved friends nor from his wife. Why? Because they believe that Job must have sinned, and all these sufferings must be his punishment. They recognise that it is a big suffering (*size*); but Job must have *deserved* it; something similar would not happen to them, because they think, whatever Job must have done, what sin he must have committed cannot be and could not have been performed by these pitiless friends (*similar possibilities*). In other words, with all these “wrong” evaluative judgments it was very easy for Job’s friends not to pity their once beloved friend. Or a strong belief, such as “you must have done some evil towards God,” prevents Job’s friends from considering any other possibility for his pains, despite Job’s insisting on his being innocent. Perhaps Aristotle is right when he said in *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Any one can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy” (1109a.27). It is indeed not an easy task, after all, our beliefs and judgments about someone are not detached from other beliefs and judgments that we hold, and in this case a strongly held belief (“you must have done something wrong, because God does not punish for no reason”) prevents Job’s friends to fully understand their friend and develop compassion accordingly.

If nothing else, this illustrates the difficulty of examining emotions in relationship to judgments when judgment itself may be impaired or restricted by the power of belief. There is another problem with the claim that emotions are structured and/or constructed by evaluative judgments. For it implies a relationship of priority between judgments and emotions, such that once I have a judgment or a series of judgments about someone or something, then I easily feel compassion or develop any other emotion towards a person or an object. This time, then, the slogan of “emotion precedes cognition” (e.g. Robinson), is replaced with “cognition precedes emotion.” Though I believe that there is an intrinsic relationship between the two, the cause-effect formulation misses the proper understanding of the phenomenon. A particular emotion may also have the power to suspend or even to change our judgments about someone, or a group of people or even about an idea. This, I think, is what Aristotle means by saying that “passions [are] those feelings that so change men as to affect their

judgments and that are also attended by pain and pleasure” in *Rhetoric* (1378a19-21). For instance, someone who is in love may perceive things in a completely new way than he/she would otherwise do, and as such, his/her judgments might be suspended. Nietzsche draws our attention to such a state: “imagine a man seized by a vehement passion for a woman or for a great idea: how different the world has become to him! Looking behind him he seems to himself as though blind, listening around him he hears only a dull, meaningless noise; whatever he does perceive, however, he perceives as he has never perceived before” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 64). Coming back to Job’s friends’ attitude: should had there been a strong compassionate love towards Job, his friends’ and wife’s strongly held belief, that is, “you must have sinned, because otherwise you would not be punished that severely” could have been suspended, or at least questioned.

Or think of the actions of a couple who rescued Jews during the Nazi period but who also helped a German soldier who was bleeding to death. They are labelled as “heroes” or “Righteous Gentile” by many but at the same time as “traitors” by some friends and people who were hiding in their house. In an interview the woman explains why she rejects all the titles:

We are now called “Righteous Gentiles” or even sometimes “heroes.” We very much object to this title, and I can tell you why. One day there was an air raid on the German barracks near our house. . . My husband happened to be there. . . When it was over, the barracks were badly hit. A German soldier came out with his head practically destroyed. . . My husband saw that within minutes he would fall down and bleed to death. So my husband put him on his bicycle – without thinking about it – and brought him to the commandment’s house. . . Later some of our friends and people who were hiding with us heard about it and said: “You are a traitor because you helped the enemy.” My husband replied: “No, the moment the man was badly wounded, he was not an enemy anymore but simply a human being in need” (Quoted in Taylor, 1999, p. 73).

For Taylor this couple acted simply because they were “moved by the suffering of another” (Taylor, 1999, p. 73). This couple is labelled as “traitor” because they “had already been acting as part of some larger group with a specific commitment to fighting Nazism – a commitment that the woman’s husband

betrayed in helping the wounded soldier” (Taylor, 1999, p. 74). However, her explanation shows that, in helping someone who is suffering and in need, she suspends her judgments about ill-doings of the Nazis who in fact are the source of a great suffering, or even if a suspension of judgment may not be involved in it, their action illustrates that, compassion felt towards this soldier transcends any kind of judgment: the wounded soldier is there lying before their eyes “simply as a human being in need.”

Some encounters in life can strike us, and force us to question and reconsider our ideas, judgments and beliefs, or at least suspend them. Think of Levinas’ Bobby, the dog whom he encounters in a Nazi labour camp and whom he calls “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany” (Levinas, 1997, p. 153). Bobby, Levinas says, who “would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned” (Levinas, 1997, p. 153), recognises the prisoners as human beings. Though this encounter does not make a fundamental difference to Levinas’ ethics, where the face of the other is always the face of a human being, it makes him write this short essay which begins with a verse about eating meat (Exodus 22:31) and which makes Levinas horrified at the “butchery that every day claims our ‘consecrated’ mouth” (Levinas, 1997, p. 151). Upon reading the verse, Levinas remembers Bobby, their brief encounter and the way it reminded him of the vulnerability of animals. Bobby, by recognising the prisoners as human beings, also reminded them of their being vulnerable. This encounter makes Levinas see the *commonness* between human-animals and animals, which depends not on the capacity to think or to have *logos* or whether they are created in the image of God (the Face of the other), but on “whether they can suffer” (Bentham).

Perhaps Spinoza is right in saying that we need to be open to new encounters and new interactions with other bodies which leave traces on the body as well as in the mind (Spinoza, 1996, p. 96). Whether it be a person, or an idea, these encounters, with the right ethical attitude (“a good encounter”),⁷ result in the improvement of the intellect and enhancement of our power of acting. Now, the question is whether reading fiction can possibly come close to Levinas’ experience with Bobby. Can it help us to maintain, and also develop, our capacity to respond to these encounters when they occur? Clearly it cannot be the same because reading is a voluntary act rather than a stark existential experience. However, when we do decide to read fiction, we open ourselves to a

⁷ See Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, pp. 17-30.

range of possible encounters with other beings and some of these encounters may be more like those exemplified by Levinas' encounter with Bobby than others are.

3. Literature and Emotions

The question of how literature can evoke emotions has been answered by many through various theories and claims. Gregory Currie's "simulation theory" claims that when we simulate someone else's state of mind, her beliefs and desires operate on me, i.e. in imagining someone noticing a huge snake before his eyes, I start to feel the visceral sensations of fear and wish to flee; however these beliefs and desires are of a different kind from the real ones: not only they are temporary and cancellable, but also, and more importantly, they run off-line, "disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs," thus the desire to flee is not put into action (Currie, 1995, p. 253). Or, as we have seen, Robinson claims that pre-cognitive affective appraisals do not make a distinction between real and imagined scenarios, but the distinction occurs at the cognitive level which, coming after the affective appraisal, approves or denies the primary reaction. And *knowing* that it is *just* a fiction, we do not attempt to act upon the emotion aroused by a fiction. However, neither Currie's nor Robinson's approaches can explain the considerable number of suicides after the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Roger Scruton, on the other hand, distancing himself from both Currie's and Robinson's accounts, argues that our capacity for imagination should be the starting point: imagination is a cognitive capacity which is subject to the will, and as such is different from belief or desire. This does not mean that imagination is detached from belief, but the relation between the two can be understood via the active and passive mental states, the former being the states that are subject to the will: "when someone imagines that *p*, and when he believes that *p*, he is in one case imagining exactly what in the other case he is believing" (Scruton, 2010, p. 96). Scruton concludes that works of fiction are explicitly directed to the imagination and they call up thoughts without asserting them as true. However, since our "real" emotional life is a response to what we believe and also "real" emotions involve actions, we cannot assert that we respond to fictions in the same way we respond to real life situations. Thus, imagination alone cannot solve the problem, but the idea of imitation, whose precondition is imagination, and its relation to sympathy, can.

Referring to Aristotle's theory of imitation in the *Rhetoric*, Scruton claims that, "Motives are bound up with the actions that express them; and by imitating those actions we rehearse the motives. We equip ourselves with the ability to act from anger, remorse, pity or whatever, by imitating the outward expressions of those passions in dancing, marching, or play-acting" (Scruton, 2010, p. 97). This means, for instance, even though we admire courage, admiration itself does not necessarily result in courageous actions, however, the desire to do honourable deeds, which is also *imagining* ourselves as doing such deeds, can produce them. The motive itself, that is the desire to do the rightful thing in this case, can be realised gradually and eventually through imitating and/or performing its outward expressions (Scruton, 2010, p. 98). Scruton comes to the conclusion that through a work of literature, we can rehearse various emotions, and gradually possess them in real life and also in our actions. However, imitation here does not mean the character's roles and actions are displayed or his/her emotions are rehearsed directly; rather he says: "In responding to literature we are responding *sympathetically* to an *imagined* situation, and we do this by 'imitating' or, more properly, *rehearsing* the motives that would lead us to sympathise towards the real-life version of the characters and feelings described" (Scruton, 2010, p. 100). A significant feature of sympathetic responses is that they can be directed to past and present events as well as to real and imagined scenarios. And he continues: "the true work of art is the one that *teaches* us what to feel. . ." (Scruton, 2010, p. 100).

Before we proceed further, in order to avoid misunderstanding, some clarification of Scruton's use of the term sympathy. Etymologically the Greek sympathy and the Latin compassion derive from the same root: suffering with, together, and some philosophers such as Nussbaum do use them interchangeably: thus, compassion or sympathy are "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 301). However, Scruton uses the term sympathy ("feeling with," rather than "suffering with") to suggest a capacity rather than an emotion because he says, we may respond sympathetically to a situation, and even when we sympathise with a character, we neither suffer that character's pain nor experience his or her pleasure. My aim here is not to start a conceptual discussion and investigate whether compassion and sympathy should be used interchangeably or not, but just to show that for Scruton sympathy is a capacity that we all have and also can enhance through the reading of fiction: we sympathise with the imagined situations and characters' feelings; and as a result

our capacity to respond with sympathy to real versions of these characters' fates is enhanced. Sympathising with a character, in Scruton's account, is not the same as identifying with him: we do not have to identify with Raskolnikov in order to understand the psychology of the criminal. Thus, a good work of art can help us both develop this capacity and enrich our ethical engagements in life.

Let us turn to some fiction to investigate the phenomenon better. In the following section I concentrate on Robert Musil's first novella *Young Törless* (1906) where *sympathising with* a character seems to be rather difficult.

4. Musil's *Young Törless*

Törless, the only child of a wealthy family, attends a boarding military school in the provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where he befriends two boys, slightly older than himself: Beineberg and Reiting. One day, upon discovering that another student, Basini, has been stealing money from Beineberg and perhaps from other students, Reiting comes up with an idea: Basini needs to be punished, not by being reported to the school authorities, but, thanks to their "extraordinary mercifulness" by being turned into their servant and slave, so much so that he should be forced to do in blind obedience whatever they ask from him. This means physical and psychological torture, including rape. Törless observes all these in a semi-active way, semi-active because even though he does not approve Beineberg's and Reiting's ill-treatments, he does not do anything to stop them either.

Beineberg is an egoistic boy who claims that he is leading a life following Indian mysticism, while, in fact, he is only repeating what he hears from his father who as a young officer had been in India in British service. The father, upon his return home from India, had brought back not only the various souvenirs, but also "something of a feeling, which he had never lost, for the mysterious, bizarre glimmerings of esoteric Buddhism" (Musil, 1979, p. 26). Reiting, who loves power for the sake of itself, is an admirer of Napoleon; he is "a tyrant, inexorable in his treatment of anyone who opposed him" (Musil, 1979, p. 54). Unlike Beineberg, he does not attempt to "rationalise" his will to power by appealing to some metaphysical and mystical justifications. While Reiting sees Basini as an opportunity that will enable him to test his power, Beineberg sees him as a means to test his mystical theories: all the cruel things, he says, done by Indian ascetics are done with one aim, that is, "to kill the miserable desires directed towards the external world, which, whether they are vanity or

hunger, joy or pity, only take away something from the fire that everyone can kindle in himself” (Musil, 1979, p. 79).

Törless’ attitude to Basini is one of ambivalence: he is quite indifferent towards his friends’ deeds. Even when he learnt that both Beineberg and Reiting raped Basini many times, he does not feel compassion towards Basini. We can think of some reasons for this: he himself might be afraid of attracting his friends’ anger and sadistic desires, he might be afraid of exclusion, or he might simply be an adolescent boy who is not emotionally mature enough. But Törless’ attitude is more complicated: he sees Basini as the epitome of the double nature of things: things as they appear to us and invisible powers behind things.

He felt as though torn between two worlds: one was the solid everyday world of respectable citizens, in which all that went on was well regulated and rational, and which he knew from home, and the other was a world of adventure, full of darkness, mystery, blood, and undreamt-of surprises (Musil, 1979, p. 55).

Now, in *Young Törless* Musil’s subject matter is the adolescent boy; while in *The Man without Qualities* it is a man with no qualities. This is important because Törless is neither a child nor an adult. It is as if Törless does not have a form. Even though the other characters are described physically in the novel, we do not know what Törless looks like. The reader is free to imagine his appearance, as she wishes. As we have seen, Scruton claims that “we can rehearse our sympathies through our encounter with fictions, and so come to ‘know what to feel’ in situations that we have not previously encountered” (Scruton, 2010, p. 102). The difficulty however, with both Törless and Ulrich is that they do not themselves seem fully to encounter the situations in which they find themselves; neither do they have very determinate characters, and in so far as they do they are deeply sceptical. Do Musil’s own musings on emotions help us?

5. Emotions and actions; emotions and moods

Opposing James’ idea that emotions are mere translations of bodily reactions, Musil defends a notion somewhat similar to judgmental (cognitive) theories of emotions. I say somewhat, because Döring has summarised Musil’s account thus: “the evaluative qualities that cognitivists [such as Nussbaum and Solomon] associate with the different emotion types are instantiated as the Gestalt-organisation of the emotion’s first-order components, and not as qualities of the

emotion's object" (Döring, 2013, p. 48). In order to understand this, we need to look at: 1) the relationship between emotions and actions; 2) the relationship between emotions and moods.

As opposed to the cause-effect relationship between an emotion and behaviour, that is, to the idea that "an emotion brings about a behaviour, and the behaviour reacts on the emotion", Musil says:

. . . this crude observation easily allows a better one to counter it, that between both there is, rather, a relationship of mutual reinforcement and resonance, a rampant swelling into each other, which also, to be sure, brings about mutual change in both components. The emotion is translated into the language of the action, and the action into the language of the emotion. As with every translation, something new is added and some things are lost in the process. (Musil, 1995, p. 1269).

There is, Musil thinks, a process of "shaping and consolidating" between emotions and actions: ". . . an emotion changes not just as a consequence of the action it evokes, but already within the action by which it is assimilated in a particular way, repeated, and changed, in the course of which both the emotion and the action mutually shape and consolidate themselves" (Musil, 1995, p. 1270). In Musil's account, Döring says: "emotion and action are conceptually connected because emotion always involves components – needs, but also 'desire[s]' and 'intention[s]' – which provide goals for action. It is thus the goal-directedness of central first-order components that links emotions conceptually to actions" (Döring, 2013, p. 54). Then, compassion, for instance, does not only involve a painful emotion caused by the suffering of another person's undeserved misfortune (Nussbaum), but it is also closely – conceptually – linked to an action, for instance, helping the sufferer, and the action itself or the consequence of it may both; 1) transform our understanding of compassion; and 2) lead to some other emotions, and correspondingly to actions. And more importantly, the whole process establishes an engagement with ourselves, with others, in other words, with the world. Musil says: ". . . we only truly recognise it [emotion] after it has had some effect in the world and has been shaped by the world; we do not know what we feel before our action has made that decision" (Musil, 1995, p. 1277).

However, even though Musil presents us with a dynamic relationship between emotions and actions, an individual's relationship with the world is not

that dynamic, since “an individual’s worldview is shaped by his emotions in that it is shaped by the things that have valence to him” (Döring, 2013, p. 56). This is also a process of fixation, that is, attending the world in a particular and selective way. Musil says: “. . . every emotion, if it attains a certain strength and duration, creates its own world, a selective and personal world, and this plays no small role in human relations!” (Musil, 1995, p. 1262). Just like the senses, Musil thinks, emotional experiences are intellectual, that is, as we hear or see or smell what we already know, our emotional experiences are shaped or structured through a particular framework we already have: “. . . one may say without exception that the form they [emotional experiences] assume in different people is that of the picture these people had already formed beforehand” (Musil, 1990, p. 201). But there is more to it.

First of all, when we talk about, say, the fear of a dog and the fear of darkness, we obviously are not talking about the same fear; in other words, it is the specific object that qualifies the type of the fear we have. However, even though the fear of a dog seems to be directed at a specific object, it is never limited to it, for in the absence of the very same object, I am still afraid of dogs, or darkness etc., and thus, when we experience fear “we experience directly, *as a whole*, . . . fearsomeness” (Döring, 2013, p. 56). As Goldie says, even though specific emotions “die in action” they “can live on in spirit,” in your psyche, “continuing to colour your way of thinking and feeling towards the world” (Goldie, 2002, p. 148). In other words, I construct a particular worldview; this, however, is *my* worldview, which involves a particular participation into the world, or an apprehension of the world, which in turn means a particular relationship with myself. And this world of mine is different from others’ worlds. There is still more to it: in this fearsome world, I, consciously or not, may limit my encounters (in a Spinozistic sense) in life, may live in a fixed pattern; because of my fear, I may deprive myself from the long walks in nature where Rousseau “encounters” the “feeling of existence” (Rousseau, 1979, p. 89). Is this a problem? For Musil yes, because in such a world there is no place for openness towards new encounters, new associations, more importantly, to otherness; in such a world one can easily live without realising his/her potentialities and possibilities, i.e. without becoming other than himself/herself, which is a precondition for welcoming the other in his/her/its otherness. What is to be done? For Musil this fixation can be dissolved, and it is in fact “resolvable, which happens when an emotion does not develop into a specific one, but into an *unspecific mood*” (Döring, 2013, p. 57). An emotion that is not satisfied or

discharged, in other words, when it does not end up in an action, may turn into a mood which “merely allows us to participate from behind a colourful window” (Musil, 1995, p. 1305).

In attempting to show the relationship between emotions and moods, Musil suggests that it is possible to reverse the whole mechanism: a *certain* mood, that is, however, a *certain* Love, can also, in turn, affect the specific emotions, correspondingly, my beliefs, intentions, desires and actions, that frame my normal condition (“the nonspecific emotion changes the world in the same way the sky changes its colours, without desire or self, and in this form objects and actions change like the clouds”). How?

Musil believes that human existence unfolds within two distinct domains of experiences, within *ratioid* and *non-ratioid* as he calls them. Scientific precision attempts to relate the ideas to each other within a cause-effect structure, and as such, aims to reach generalizations. Whereas things that are experienced in the realm of *non-ratioid* are unique and cannot be conceptualised; they are ineffable (just like Törless’ experiences).⁸ If the realm of *ratioid* enables us to establish “the rules with exceptions” (Musil, 1990, p. 63) the realm of the *non-ratioid* is defined by a “dominance of the exceptions over the rules” (Musil, 1990, p. 63). He also calls these two realms “the normal condition” and “the other condition” and says: “. . . even though they have influenced each other in many ways and entered into compromises, have nonetheless never properly mixed with each other” (Musil, 1990, p. 198). The question for Musil is, how can these two realms, which cannot be associated with one particular faculty (one with emotion and the other with intellect), communicate with each other *appropriately*? How can the unique and singular ethical and aesthetical experiences that belong to the realm of *non-ratioid* or “the other condition” illuminate the experiences occur in the realm of *ratioid*, in the average and ordinary condition, in which events, people and objects are perceived in their relations to other things, and are evaluated under the economy of generalisations and universal values? How can new connections between

⁸ This distinction reminds us of the distinction that Henri Bergson made between two different ways of knowing a thing: the way of analysis and the way of intuition. Analysis “is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, common to that object and to others.” By intuition, Bergson means the kind of intellectual sympathy “by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it” (Bergson, 1946, pp. 161-162). Analysis is a way to understand something by comparing it with other things, and by putting something under universal concepts while intuition leads us “to the very inwardness of life” (Bergson, 1983, p. 176), as well as to the “deeper” self.

things and/or new encounters be established? In the normal condition, we engage in a world which has been shaped through “the emotions’ fixation” (Döring, 2013, p. 61) but this is not the only possible world for us. In “the other condition,” which one always experiences as a certain mood (unspecific emotion) and which there is no action, or conceptualisation or fixation, one feels a kind of Love, or ecstasy: “To have some notion of this one does not even need to study the literature of mysticism, for almost every person has experienced this at some time as “the rupture of love” (as opposed to the “love flame” of desire”) (Musil, 1990, p. 208). Recall Nietzsche’s statement about a man who is in such a state (“seized by a vehement passion for a woman or for a great idea”): taken-for-granted structures, beliefs, judgments dissolve for him, “whatever he does perceive, however, he perceives as he has never perceived before” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 64). Similarly, Musil says: “As long as one loves the other, and because one loves the other, everything is enchanting” (Musil, 1995, p. 1314).

What is all this to do with Törless or the man without qualities?

Firstly, *The Man without Qualities* is a “sort of novel” which combines fairly realistic scenarios with numerous chapters that consist mostly of essays. There is of course a plot in it and in *Törless*, however the continuity of the story is constantly disrupted with the author’s and the protagonists’ rather philosophical discussions. This can mean that the act of reading is different from that of many novels where, forgetting that he is reading a fiction, one may be guided by the characters’ emotional experiences, events etc. Probably while reading Dickens, Austen or the Brontës one easily *forgets* herself and just goes along with the flow of the story, and as such the border between fiction and reality is blurred, or even dissolved. In Musil, however, the reader cannot forget her “real” position easily or once she is about to forget, she is pushed back to reality once the “chapters” or essays that involve philosophical discussions begin. In these chapters we are not invited into the characters’ emotional life but encounter sophisticated discussions that seem to be detached from any character. As we have seen Scruton argues that “the true work of art is the one that *teaches* us what to feel. . .” (Scruton, 2010, p. 100), but, it does so via making us imagine being in the position of the character and in doing so sympathising with his situation. But in Musil’s work, it seems that such sympathy never really flows.

This observation suggests another: Törless is an adolescent, at a transitional stage after which he can become anything: “If at that period one could bring a boy to see the ridiculousness of himself, the ground would give

way under him, or he would plunge headlong like a somnambulist who, suddenly, awaking, sees nothing but emptiness around him” (Musil, 1979, p. 18).

However, it is also such a period where one’s worldview is not fixed or structured through stabilised emotions. “Compared with that of a young child” says Döring, “the region of valences of an adult is extraordinarily narrowed down” (Döring, 2013, p. 55). The reader is not asked to sympathise in Scruton’s sense with such a character, it is not easy anyway; rather she is invited to imagine, or maybe she is even forced to think, how Törless might behave in such a difficult state. This, however, occurs via being invited to suspend our own worldview (“the normal condition”) and to attempt to understand how an existence at a larval period would feel, a period which the reader himself/herself must have left so long ago. And perhaps here there is (contra Scruton) *imagination* without *sympathy*, where the imagination involved is the imagination not of oneself as someone else in a certain situation, but oneself *being in a certain state*. Surely imagining oneself in a state where there is constant confusion or dividedness or compartmentalisation, is not the same as being in the state of “the other condition,” but rather than stable meanings, beliefs and desires, and emotions, there is the suspension and/or problematisation of them. If in the world of adulthood emotional experiences are recognised and classified according to the emotions’ fixation to certain objects, in the world of adolescence precisely because connections between things and events are blurred and fluid, we are reminded that things (“the fixation process”) could have been different, as it can be experienced in the mood of Love (“the other condition”) where all the familiar connections dissolve.

Now, let me try to connect these two observations. The movement between reality and fiction during the act of reading is not simply as being now in “reality” and then in “fiction.” It is more like, when the flow of the story is distracted via the philosophical discussions, the reader is invited to imagine herself being in a *state* where all the familiar judgments, beliefs and also connections between things are questioned and problematised. One may argue that there is still sympathy here, because after all imagining oneself being in the character’s state, even if this state is one of confusion or ambiguity, is still sympathy. However, both in reality and in fiction we get to know people or characters through their ideas, thoughts, judgments, emotions etc., in short, stretched across time we construct a narrative about them. Yet in Musil’s novels precisely because the ideas seem to be detached from the character (and surely this is how Musil “constructs” these “formless” characters), we are left only with

the state itself, a fictitious state through the imagination of which the reader is invited to re-value his/her own “reality” in a more direct way. This does not mean that there is no questioning in novels where the story flows. However, by not letting us sympathise with a character, Musil’s novels are more demanding, sometimes impossibly so.

It should be noted that Musil’s novels have one foot in realism and one in modernism, have one foot in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth century. Musil, as a thinker, seems to have more insight into emotions than many other nineteenth century novelists, however, his novels, as compared to Dickens, or Austin, or the Brontës, do not seem to teach us what to feel in the way that these influential novelists do. If as Milan Kundera says in *Testaments Betrayed*, Nietzsche brings philosophy nearer to the novel, then Musil as a novelist brings the novel nearer to philosophy (Kundera, 1995, p. 176). This is why perhaps we hear many people say that they start to read *The Man without Qualities* but do not advance much. With his “characterless” characters, the capacity of sympathy does not seem to be operating on us in his work, nor, then, does our feeling compassion towards a character in the novel. The *size* of the suffering he witnesses, the *undeservingness* of it, and an awareness of *similar possibilities* do not seem to be acknowledged by Törless either. The reader is placed in an ambivalent position, and not only because Törless is ambivalent, but also because Basini himself seems to lack a concrete form.

6. Conclusion

Musil says he had always been interested in ethics rather than psychology.⁹ But here ethics is to be understood as being engaged with unique and unprecedented experiences as they can be lived in “the other condition” or in a larval stage like adolescence, where these experiences cannot and should not be conceptualised and expressed either in the language of everydayness, or in philosophical language. However, Musil is aware that “the other condition” cannot be a permanent state; just like the state of adolescence, it can only be a transitional period:

This condition is never of long duration except in pathological form; it is a hypothetical borderline case, which one approaches only to fall back repeatedly into the normal condition, and precisely this distinguishes

⁹ Robert Musil, *Diaries* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), p. 442

art from mysticism, that art never entirely loses its connection with the ordinary attitude (Musil, 1990, p. 208).

The distinction between art and mysticism is made clear in the title of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* which echoes the 14th Century mystic Meister Eckhart's phrase "*áne eigenschaft*" ("without qualities") and which was used "to designate the condition of being 'empty and free' for a mystical union with God" (Crooke, 2008, p. 15, 78). In Eckhart's mysticism such a union requires one to become timeless and spaceless, as well as free from any agency or subjectivity. However, while for Eckhart being without qualities means a mystical readiness to unite with God, and as such withdrawing from "the normal condition" so much that "the other condition" becomes a permanent state, in Musil's investigation it refers to Ulrich's not conditioning himself with any fixed worldview. As opposed to mystical experience, art, Musil thinks, "has the task of ceaselessly reforming and renewing the image of the world and of our behaviour in it" and "through art's unique experiences [*Erlebnisse*] it breaks out of the rigid formulas of ordinary experience [*Erfahrung*]" (Musil, 1990, p. 206). Just like the artist, or the composer, Musil thinks, the task of the author is to establish the appropriate connection between the two realms, hence the rigid structures of everydayness can be shattered and the ossified values and judgments which might be governing one's everyday life (The Book of Job) can be suspended and/or put into question. A good work of art, or of literature, Musil says, "offers not merely an immediate experience but an experience that can never be completely repeated, that cannot be fixed but is individual, even anarchic" (Musil, 1990, p. 205). Musil's ethical task, as a writer, was to explore the ineffable characteristics of aesthetical experiences along with how these experiences, lived within and through "the other condition" can be related to "the normal condition."

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