

A Kakanian Suit

Schiele, Musil and the Experience of War

A conversation between Jean Pierre Cometti and Carla Carmona

Carla: I have always found very peculiar the traces that World War I left on Egon Schiele's art. He depicted Austrian soldiers and Russian prisoners in a very detached way. In fact, those depictions could serve as good illustrations of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "the perspective from eternity". Both soldiers and prisoners are treated with respect, dressed in their respective uniforms against an empty background. Schiele also portrayed a few military buildings from the outside and store and study rooms which provided the army with all kinds of tools and liquor. He was dreaming of a mausoleum just before he died. His intentions were not completely clear, but it seems that he meant to worship not a particular person but the dead as a whole. He had done several sketches that show that he was planning to put an opened sarcophagus of ivory and gold in the middle, with a mummy inside. Who the mummy was did not matter to him. It was also a temple for art, and for his art. Some of his paintings were supposed to surround it: monument-like paintings.

However, he lived a very different war within himself. He was tormented in a way in the same vein than Wittgenstein. One could say that, above all, Wittgenstein suffered the war within himself and that he used it for his own development as a human being. Do you think that this would also apply to Musil? How are these war times reflected on Musil's writings?

Jean Pierre: The way Musil lived World War I is thoroughly different. Musil was an officer – first, he had been a student in a military school for several years –, but it was not his own choice, and I think that, unlike Wittgenstein, he never took any heroic attitude during the war. He depicts the war in a short story called "Ein Soldat erzählt". The protagonist's lack of involvement in what takes place around him and to him is striking. He tells his story without any kind of exaltation, but rather with a feeling of a sudden cataclysm, even when «flying arrows» arise in the sky and go through his body (the «baptism of fire»).

Carla: That Musilian image of the soldier and the arrows reminds me of Schiele's self-portrait as Saint

Sebastian. There is no exaltation in his self-portrait either, even if there are quite a few flying arrows around the figure. The detachment of the figure is outstanding. It seems to be beyond its circumstances. In fact, it is not clear whether the arrows actually go through the figure or not. But in Schiele's case, this kind of attitude has religious connotations. I mean "religious" in a Wittgensteinian way, it is an attitude that has a very powerful ethical dimension.

Jean-Pierre: I believe that Musil's attitude was quite different. For instance, he never understood the war as an opportunity to «test» himself, in a religious sense, like Wittgenstein did. However, what I believe to be important about that period for his work and worldview is that he began to perceive and understand then what he called "the significance of circumstances" for the so-called «human nature». He held the view that our ways of acting and reacting are unpredictable, and that our substance is «colloidal». There is no life without «form», but that form is not achieved once and for all. That is why there are disturbing proximities between certain states of mind or experiences, like those of madness, sexuality, mysticism, aesthetic experience or criminality. Musil calls our attention to those correspondences all the way through *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. All those states are expressions of the «Other state» and they argue in favor of what he called the «theorem of human amorphism» in his important essay *Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom*, where the idea that the human being is both able to eat human flesh and to build cathedrals plays the role of a leitmotiv.

Carla: The metaphor of our colloidal substance is very useful to understand the concept of "a man without qualities" and that of "the character of the inhabitants of a country". While describing Kakania, Musil writes "For the inhabitant of a country has at least nine characters: a professional, a national, a civic, a class, a geographic, a sexual, a conscious, an unconscious, and possibly even a private character to boot. He unites them in himself, but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets