Robert Musil (1880–1942) achieved fame in Germany and Austria for a few years after 1930 and then disappeared from the public eye until 1949, when an article in the Times Literary Supplement named him as the most important writer in German of his time (Hickman, 1984). “Probably,” David Luft (2003) suggests, Musil is “the equal of anyone since Nietzsche in his intelligence and insight in the realm of the soul” (p. 3). Musil may still be, in the words of Frank Kermode, “the least read of the great twentieth-century novelists” (quoted in Rogowski, 1994, p. 4). Musil is also an exemplary example of a public pedagogue, a public-and-private intellectual, that is, one who draws upon subjective resources to address the pressing issues of the day.¹

Born in Klagenfurt, Musil studied mechanical engineering in Stuttgart, receiving a degree in 1901. After completing his military service and working as an engineer for a year, he began to study philosophy and experimental psychology in Berlin, where he moved in 1903. Musil then took a degree in philosophy at the University of Berlin, training with Carl Stumpf, who (like Freud and Edmund Husserl) had studied with Franz Brentano (Luft, 2003, p. 94). His PhD dissertation (Musil, 1908) examined the epistemology of physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838–1916).² During this time he wrote his first novel, Young Torless, published in 1906 (see Pinar, 2006a). Afterward, he resolved to pursue philosophy through fiction, to live as a writer rather than to become an academic philosopher. In 1911 he was married to Martha Marcovaldi (née Heimann), the daughter of a Jewish businessman and a student of the impressionist painter Lovis Corinth (Appignanesi, 1973; Luft, 2003, p. 106).³

From 1914 to 1918 Musil served as an officer with the Austrian army. After World War I, he worked as a press liaison officer for the Foreign Ministry, then as a scientific adviser to the Ministry of War. From 1922 on he supported himself as a freelance writer, contributing to various literary journals while participating in the rich café and literary life of Vienna during the post-war years. It was during these years he began work on the novel The Man Without Qualities (Musil, 1979/1995), a project that would occupy him for the rest of his life. In December 1930, Musil presented to the reading public the first installment of this his main work. Although two volumes appeared during his lifetime, this classic portrait of “Kakania” remained unfinished at his death.
Like others of his generation, Coetzee (2001) points out, Robert Musil experienced first-hand the successive phases of the collapse of 19th-century European civilization:

first, the premonitory crisis in the arts, giving rise to the various Modernist reactions; then the war and the revolutions spawned by the war, which destroyed both traditional and liberal institutions; and finally the rudderless post-war years, culminating in the Fascist seizure of power. (p. ix)

In *The Man Without Qualities*, Coetzee continues, Musil set out to comprehend this collapse, which he came to understand as the historical inadequacy of the Enlightenment, an inadequacy presciently depicted in *Young Torless* (Musil, 1906/1955). There, in a residential military school, the Austrian compartmentalization of intellect and emotion enables reason to devolve into a device of homosexual subjugation.

To Musil, fascism must be understood as the logical if catastrophic consequence of a fundamentally problematic European civilization. More appropriate pedagogically than a knee-jerk demand for action, Musil offered, was a careful reexamination of European humanistic values. For him, the freedom of the creative individual was the paramount value. In the alarmed atmosphere of 1935, such a contemplative view seemed self-involved and politically reactionary. Against his intentions, Musil maneuvered himself, as Bernd Hüppauf phrased it, into the position of an “outsider among the outsiders” (quoted in Rogowski, 1994, p. 16; see Luft, 2003, p. 126). Even though I have always understood “understanding” as political, in the aftermath of Bush’s re-election, I, too, questioned whether contemplation was ethically adequate (Pinar, 2008, p. 41).

H. Stuart Hughes called Musil’s “the generation of 1905” (quoted in Luft, 1980, p. 13). For the leading intellectuals of this generation, history seemed no longer to hold hope for humankind, as the 19th century (in the shadow of Marx) had believed. Indeed, many took history seriously only in times of crisis, abandoning everyday reality to custom and clichés (Luft, 2003, p. 124). Accepting the uncertainty of experience and knowledge as well as the inadequacy of every form of dogmatism, the intellectuals of Musil’s generation were painfully conscious of the fragility and brevity of human life. Although they often dealt with social and ideological matters after World War I, their central concerns were psychological, ethical, and aesthetic, all focused on the inner crisis of European culture (Luft, 1980).

One of Musil’s notebooks (No. 4) from his early years contains a series of sketches entitled *Monsieur le vivisecteur*. The title is noteworthy: the term *vivisection* is used in that sense of psychological investigation associated with Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Strindberg (whose work Musil knew). The original ambitious plan was for a book showing the figure *M. le vivisecteur* in family and society. In this passage we glimpse possible titles as well as two revealing statements: “To stylize is to see and teach others to see,” and “paradoxes: let us for once turn everything back to front” (quoted in Hickman, 1984, p. 8). Both these statements foreshadow key elements of Musil’s writing. In the first we see an intensifying appreciation for form, and in the second his preference for paradox, evident in all his work (Hickman, 1984). This section of Musil’s *Notebook 4* shows him examining his historical and cultural situation:

The riddle of the age has for each a private solution. If one would study his own time, it must be by this method of taking up in turn each of the leading topics which belong to our scheme of human life, and by firmly stating all that is agreeable to experience on one, and doing the same justice to the opposing facts in the others, the true limitations will appear.... Any excess of emphasis on one part would be corrected, and a just balance would be made. (quoted in Hickman, 1984, p. 14)
Musil’s mixing of Nietzsche with Emerson is not, Hickman suggests, as idiosyncratic as it might appear; there is evidence that Nietzsche, too, was influenced by Emerson. Musil studied Husserl as well. During Musil’s student days in Berlin he came to know several men who became what would be known as Gestalt psychologists. During this time he read widely, concentrating, however, on Nietzsche, Emerson, and Dostoyevsky (Peters, 1978).

After his marriage, Musil returned to Vienna, where he worked as an archivist at the Technical Institute. Just before the war broke out in 1914, the couple returned to Berlin, where he assumed his new post as an editor of Samuel Fischer’s Die neue Rundschau, the most important literary publication in the German-speaking world (Pike & Luft, 1990). While working in Berlin, Musil came into contact with some of the leading artistic and intellectual figures of the period, among them Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka. The war and the ensuing political, economic, and social catastrophes disrupted Musil’s already interrupted literary career. Partly due to history and partly due to his psychology, a gap of ten years punctuated the publication of Musil’s second and third books (Rogowksi, 1994).

In the 1920s, although he lived in Vienna, Berlin was the center of intellectual life for Musil. His sympathy for modern science made him unusual in the intellectual world of the Weimar Republic, where both the Left and Right were critical of liberal rationalism, influenced as they were by German idealism. These were years of intense politicization, economic crisis, and cultural polarization in Germany (Weitz, 2007). Like other writers of his generation, Musil was profoundly affected by the war itself and later by the political, social, and economic crises in Germany and Austria, which began in 1917 and intensified during the 1920s. After the war, many of Musil’s essays addressed contemporary political themes, such as the Treaty of Versailles or Anschluss with Germany, but these were also contextualized in a broader concern for what he regarded as the crisis of European culture and the catastrophe that had been World War I (Pike & Luft, 1990).

Musil emphasized the elasticity and interrelatedness of human nature and culture. He opposed those aspects of liberalism that reflected and supported the bureaucratization of the modern state. It is clear that he found value in the religious atmosphere of prewar intellectual culture. Like Nietzsche, Musil focused on the spiritual value of truth. Knowledge and truth, he thought, ought to give:

new and bold directions to the feelings, even if these distinctions were to remain only mere plausibilities; a rationality, in other words, for which thinking would exist only to give an intellectual armature to some still problematic way of being human: such a rationality is incomprehensible today even as a need. (quoted in Pike & Luft, 1990, xviii)

Close to Musil’s heart was the idiosyncratic individual. Perhaps the appropriate philosophy for his time, he thought, was no philosophy at all. Those who engaged him were mainly modern, mainly empirical, and at the “experiential” margin of academic philosophy, especially Mach, Nietzsche, and Emerson, three diverse but lasting influences on him (Pike & Luft, 1990).

Musil was not convinced by arguments or doctrines. Musil was drawn to those ideas and that thinking embedded in lived experience. It was these orders of thinking he had in mind when he employed the term “essay.” Pike and Luft (1990) explain: “Musil was constantly absorbing the world as we actually live it, and trying to understand a civilization that is just now coming into being” (p. xxi). Musil had no interest in the programmatic or prescriptive. Instead, he aspired to explore what it might be possible for human beings to be. He wanted to participate in renewals and revolutions of thinking, feeling, sexuality, and politics (Pike & Luft, 1990).

Musil believed neither thought nor thinking kept pace with historical reality. Perhaps
important feelings remained the same, he speculated, but he worried that they devolved into ideologies that obfuscated self-understanding. This was the case in 1914, he asserted, when the dominant ideologies—Marxism, Christianity, Liberalism—all collapsed. Each had failed to make sense of the peace or to deflate enthusiasm for war. Why? Musil thought that these ideologies failed because they no longer articulated the inwardness, or lived experience, of most Europeans. They failed to represent the reality people experienced in their daily lives. What was needed, Musil theorized, was a new, more patient way of thinking that overcame rigidity in thought and feeling. He wanted to imagine the possibility of a profoundly committed life. He wanted to imagine a spirituality that acknowledged frankly the conditions of subjective life in modern Europe (Pike & Luft, 1990).

To do so required a new language, Musil knew, in order to articulate the inner life of the emotions. For Musil, the inner life acknowledges the necessity of both reason and religion (understood as mysticism); they are simultaneously operating functions of the human mind in its efforts to apprehend reality. Both poles of experience and perception possess equal validity; one must resist the temptation of positioning only one at the center of one’s life. In practice, however, Musil believed that the process of balancing these poles probably involved a thorough, even dialectical investigation first of the one and then of the other. Their synthesis Musil termed das rechte Leben, the creative or right life. Accordingly, when Musil decided to abandon his career as an engineer in order to study philosophy and psychology at the University of Berlin, his decision did not represent a rejection of science and the scientific attitude. He wanted, rather, to balance his experience by studying those dimensions of human experience that appeared to lie outside the boundaries of strict scientific investigation. For Musil, Peters (1978), asserts, “the synthesis of reason and mysticism had to be regarded as the most urgent task facing mankind in the twentieth century” (p. 12). The new morality that resulted would be based neither upon social prohibitions nor upon God-given commandments, but rather upon those potentialities latent within the individual himself.

Other critics have explored Musil’s interest in bridging reason and emotion, science and literature, appearance and reality. Luft (1980) writes: “The central task of Musil’s work was to mediate his culture’s antagonisms between intellect and feeling, truth and subjectivity, science and art” (p. 2). To do so he explored sexuality, which, in his view, both reflected and precipitated “ecstatic states” (Luft, 2003, p. 104), if only when freed of the social conventions and stereotypes in which sexuality was too often locked (Luft, p. 128). Torless’ participation in homosexual sadistic practices at his school is one provocative portrait in Musil’s art of a crisis of consciousness precipitated by and resolved through sexuality. Through Torless’ sadistic, then amorous, relationship with Basini, he experienced a refinement of his personality that contributed to his evolution as a cosmopolitan person. Musil was more interested, Luft (1980) notes, in the both the psychic sources and biographic functions of sexuality and less in its particular objects. While Luft is right in emphasizing the “biographic functions” of sexuality, he is mistaken to discount altogether the homosexual theme of the novel. The anatomy of the characters is crucial. Had Basini been a female student, the politics and meaning of the situation—including its biographic significance—would have been quite different.

In Young Torless, Musil portrayed the power of “thoughts as moments in the inner life which have not yet frozen into fixed form” (Luft, 1980, p. 60). Musil emphasized the biographic significance of these “living thoughts,” a significance quite apart from their logical value as propositions. Their spiritual significance occurs in lived experience, in their consequences for self-understanding. Luft (1980) writes: “Torless formulates the possibility of a revolt against bourgeois culture which does not produce something equally rigid and pathological, and stakes out a position of isolation and freedom, marked by Musil’s enormous tolerance for ambiguity”
The empiricist in Musil appreciated that we never know with certitude or finality and that a rigorous openness to experience means subjective revolution.

The subtlety of Musil’s art distinguishes *Young Torless* from the genre of “school novels.” The severe atmosphere of the school makes it no place for either caring or self-realization; the pedagogical inadequacies of the instructors are glaring. Critics have observed that there is, however, no attempt to blame the episode on the school or to idealize the values and experience of the students. The threat to civilization comes from Beineberg and Reiting, whose sadism and manipulation point to the world outside the academy (Luft, 1980). But only to the world outside? Are critics too quick to absolve the school? Can the rape and psychological subjugation of Basini not also be decoded as a desublimation of the public pedagogy of this authoritarian school?

Musil was interested, Luft (1980) suggests, in phenomenological method so that he might explore lived experience. Musil’s method was not exclusively phenomenological, however; it was also grounded in experimental science as well as lived experience. Free of the metaphysical certainties espoused by many of his contemporaries, Musil set out to investigate the complexity of love, religion, and the soul as lived. Musil believed that the intellectual despair of his generation had to do with too sharp a distinction drawn between science and mysticism. He regarded the essay as the representational form appropriate to address this polarized situation, a form of the thinking poetically in prose that hovered between science and art, between private and public, what Wang (2004) might describe as curriculum in a third space. Essayism was a representational form that enabled Musil to remain loyal to the precision of the scientist as he undertook an aesthetic search for beauty and ethical values in the midst of cultural and spiritual degradation.7 In literature, sexuality, religion, and politics, Musil fought to free the emotions from archaic and distorting concepts. Essayism supported this search for a new balance—a right distance, as Taubman (1990) might describe it—between concept and the flesh, between intellect and soul, the concrete and the abstract. Luft (1980) points out:

> The characteristic fault of bourgeois reason was its misapplication of the model of natural science; in its drive for uniformity, bourgeois reason had lost track of the capacity to create value and enhance life. In its yearning for truth, concept and abstraction, it had lost respect for the flesh, for the concrete lives of individual human beings. (p. 115)

In demands for “evidence-based” research, “scientific” education research effaces educational experience. Its political agenda is, indeed, uniformity (Pinar, 2009).

Musil’s primary preferences may have been aesthetic, but the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the resulting crisis of European civilization as “the generation of 1905” had known it required political analysis. Georg Lukács (1964) might have had Musil in mind when he wrote: “Many a writer of a basically contemplative type has been driven to participation in the life of the community by the social conditions of his time” (p. 12; quoted in Luft, 1980, p. 121). Musil had grave doubts about the expressionist style of revolutionary politics prominent in 1919. In the call for the New Man, sounded both by Communists and Fascists, he saw a form of pessimism. Revolutionary politics were finally romantic, and, he believed, would only compound the disaster of the old order they aspired to replace (Luft, 1980). In a related fashion, I have argued that resistance reproduces patriarchy (Pinar, 1994, p. 151ff.)

Refusing collectivism and systematicity, Musil explored those spheres (of lived space) wherein and moments (of lived time) when predictability and regularity disappear. He investigated the unique, the individual: what is, finally, incalculable. What was required for his investigation was neither more emotionality nor historicity but a subtle style of thinking which kept concepts in an explicit relation with the lived experience of everyday life, an exploration “of the reason,
connections, limitations, the flowing meanings of human motives and actions—an explanation of life” (quoted in Luft, 1980, p. 157). In a rather Heideggerian statement, Musil once said: “But the struggle of the soul with its isolated solitude is actually nothing other than its outrage against the false connections among human beings in our society” (quoted in Luft, 1980, p. 160). The enemy of creativity was the disappearance of soul from social life, banished by the conventions of bourgeois culture and under the supervision of the mandarinate, conformity compelled by the moralism of bourgeois society. In such circumstances, “immorality” may be a passage to soul, to creativity. Musil said as much: “All my apparently immoral people are ’creative’” (quoted in Luft, 1980, p. 161).

The search for an intensely subjective relationship to reality was by no means otherworldly, as it hardly represented a negation of world as is. As Musil pointed out, ages of religious awakening were characterized not only by “the intense preoccupation of the human being with God, but also with life, a burning factuality of ‘being there.’” After Kierkegaard, Musil knew that it was the religious individual who had the courage to take oneself, one’s actions, and the meaning of one’s experience in earnest. After Kierkegaard, Musil understood that ethical experience—love, presentiment, contemplation, humility—was “entirely personal and almost asocial.” After World War I, what remained of authentic ethics, Musil believed, existed in art, in essayism, and within the sphere of private relations (quoted passages in Luft, 1980, p. 162).

For Musil, Luft (1980) points out, the danger to independence of spirit lay less in specific political, social, or economic forms (such as capitalism or communism) than in their tendency to erase inwardness and, consequently, that freedom the inner life (with its emphasis on lived experience) enabled. From his locations in Vienna and Berlin, it seemed to him that German culture had produced the world’s most powerful forms of academic study and aesthetic feeling. But it also seemed to him that each had been rigidly compartmentalized in German culture. Musil was neither indifferent to politics nor trapped in the historical specificity of 1914 Vienna; indeed, he was trying to think of the meaning of the 20th century for the history and future of European civilization. In doing so, it is clear that, during his final years in exile, living in Geneva in the midst of the calamity that was World War II, he diagnosed the cultural dilemma of European civilization as requiring complementary but self-critical interests in mysticism and politics (Luft, 1980). It was a set of interests to which another great public pedagogue—Pier Paolo Pasolini—would testify, through various literary, visual and filmic arts as well as through journalism (Pinar, 2009).

For much of his career Musil, too, worked as a journalist. He composed serious articles and essays on culture, contributing to the literary feuilletons of newspapers. He reviewed books and plays for various periodicals. As in his fiction, Musil insisted that life is no sequential narrative of discrete actions or ideas but a fluid, multi-momented mosaic. (So-called narrative inquiry in education would strike him as simplistic at best, as Janet L. Miller [2005] has demonstrated.) For Musil, actions and ideas were inseparable from sensation and emotion. He was committed to theorizing an ethical framework for living, working toward what he termed, simply, the “right life.” No standard model was forthcoming, of course, as Musil’s aspiration in language as in thought, evident in all his essays and his fiction, was “precision and soul” (Pike & Luft, 1990). What is soul? In 1912 he wrote: “Soul is a complex interpenetration of feeling and intellect” (Musil, 1990, p. 10). Such “interpenetration” of mind and emotion is materialized in flesh, enacted in a state of being we might term worldliness. The abstraction of these concepts masks the irreducible specificity of their personification in individual lives; Musil was determined to articulate links between the two domains.

Robert Musil lived in Vienna and Berlin during the most catastrophic period of Europe’s 20th-century history. During this cataclysmic time, he wrote about science and mathematics,
capitalism and nationalism, the changing roles of women and writers, sexuality and epistemology, demonstrating a breadth not uncommon to intellectuals in fin de siècle Vienna (Janik & Toulmin, 1973). While the range of his interests may not have been unusual, the scale of his accomplishment was. Indeed, Musil is regarded as one of the great essayists of the 20th century (Pike & Luft, 1990). His conception of the essay traverses the concrete and the abstract, the private and the public; it provides, I suggest, one exemplar for privately animated pedagogical engagement with the complicated conversation that comprises the public sphere in a semiotic society.

Essayism

Essayism epitomizes the movement of an aesthetic imagination that infuses reality with meaning by means of rigorously singular accounts. —Patrizia C. McBride (2006, p. 144)

Musil defined essayism as an intellectual strategy that extended the methodological rigor of the natural sciences into the sphere of singularity, that domain represented by art (especially fiction) and ethics. Rather than looking for laws and regularities, essayism seeks the understanding of lived experience in individual and particularistic ways that rely on metaphor rather than upon nomological relations among numerically represented variables (Luft, 2003, p. 91). Musil’s early devotion to the rigorous examination of lived experience led him to oppose what he discerned as the irrationalism and anti-intellectualism that permeated public discourse on art, evident in various movements of the day, among them Impressionism, Symbolism, and Expressionism (McBride, 2006). While acknowledging the primacy of feeling in aesthetic creation, he declined to abandon rationality. Doing so, he felt sure, rendered art severed from society and history, purloined from purposive human conduct. Retrospectively, Musil believed, this cultural conflagration had helped set the stage for fascism in Germany.

For Musil, McBride (2006) points out, a socially engaged aesthetic and ethical practice “is sustained by art’s ability to trigger the estrangement and rearrangement of shared narratives of reality” (p. 24). Through the artist’s original representation of reality, public perception is challenged. Because this subjectively sourced originality reconstructs social reality, it can trigger dissonance, even instability. Certainly dissonance was triggered by the 1910 London Exhibition of “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” (Stansky, 1996, p. 2) and despite late capitalism’s capacity to incorporate (through commodification) all forms of dissonance, it happened during the 1980s over (U.S.) National Endowment for the Arts funding for Robert Mapplethorpe’s black-male nudes (Dellamora, 1995, p. 152; Mercer, 1994, p. 203). If s/he can get under the public’s skin (as it were), the artist—specifically, the essayist—has a chance to teach through provocation. In this respect, “the critique to which [the essay] subjects reality is inherently immanent and contingent, for it remains inextricably entwined with the social system it seeks to scrutinize” (McBride, 2006, p. 24). Being entwined with social reality (or getting under your skin) means that subjective expression—that originality estrangement sometimes precipitates—can express and result in the reconstruction of “shared narratives of reality.” What Musil appreciated, then, was the privacy of public pedagogy.  

Musil came to appreciate the primacy and fluidity of subjectivity, the latter an affirmation of Nietzsche’s dismissal of any conception of a stable, self-identical subject. Musil’s contemporaries, however, fetishized the epiphanal ecstasy that can accompany self-shattering, decrying the allegedly stifling repression of reason as they extolled the presumably regenerative potential of instinct and sensuality. Reason cannot convey, let alone sustain (they insisted), the Dionysian intoxication accompanying (especially sexualized) self-shattering. It was this view of reason as
only repressive that Musil disputed. The representation of what Musil termed the “other condition” is not obvious; there is no inevitable verisimilitude between signifier and signified. The point of the essay form, Musil asserted, is to rescue this “shadowy side of the individual” (McBride, 2006, p. 47) from ineffability, to articulate the private through engagement with the public. The private life does not disappear into its articulation (as in some poststructuralist ruminations, “multiplying its textual pleasures, aporias, and indeterminacies in an atmosphere of wall-to-wall discourse” [Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 21]). Indeed, Musil’s essay always returns the reader to that private reality representation reconstructs as public.

Like Fanon, Musil called for a new ways of being human, the reinvention of “the inner person” (quoted in McBride, 2006, p. 73), a “‘new human being,’ one who would resist assimilation into imperialist, nationalist, or fascist communities” (Jonsson, 2000, p. x). Like art, the Musilian essay demonstrates an antithetical but explicit relationship to lived experience, enabling one to inhabit a subjective sphere that is at once connected to and yet distanced from everyday reality (McBride, 2006, p. 103). By constituting itself as a foil to lived experience, the Musilian essay becomes the “constitutive other” to social reality itself (McBride, 2006, p. 103). Like the synoptic text today (Pinar, 2006c), the Musilian essay communicates a multiplicity of apparently irreconcilable perspectives (see McBride 2006, p. 93), creating fissures through which intellectual breakthrough becomes possible (Wang, 2004). As apparently paradoxical, the essay bridges incommensurate realities (McBride, 2006, p. 105) via juxtaposition (McBride 2006, p. 111), creating a “cacophony of rivaling perspectives” (McBride 2006, p. 131). “For Musil,” McBride (2006) points out,

the intellectual mindset of essayism enabled the observer to avoid getting too bogged down in any one ideological quibble and instead made it possible to glimpse the strengths and shortcomings shared by antagonistic ideological positions. (p. 94)

Anticipating Pasolini’s insistence on ideological dexterity, Musil affirmed the significance of order without systematicity (see McBride, p. 94). Musil underscored his own situated particularity by juxtaposing competing points of view (McBride, p. 131).

Essayism’s ethical challenge invokes an Apollonian reconstruction of a Dionysian descent into self-shattering otherness into public discourse. This invocation of the private is self-canceling if pragmatic: indeed, for Musil, the contemplation essayism invites occurs only absent instrumental reason. Engaging reality assumes no cohesive thinking subject; it requires a decentered, even democratic, subjectivity embracing “disunity” (McBride, 2006, p. 111), the lived and individuated substratum of a public sphere striated by difference. The subjectively existing individual is, then, no homunculus manipulating Archimedes’ lever. As Musil appreciated: “appeals for decisive action often mask ineptitude, even panic, testifying to their own stupidity” (quoted in McBride, 2006, p. 121). In order to engage in political action, it was imperative (Musil thought) to represent reality not reduced to race or ideology or as a means of achieving utopia but, instead, relying on his graduate training in physics, as “field[s] of force, which are charged with meaning based on the unique constellation of factors within which they are inscribed” (McBride, 2006, p. 143). Musil writes out of as he replies to the “non-repeatable moment” (McBride, 2006, p. 143). It is this precision that enables the public to be reconstructed through the private.11

Musil struggled to come to terms with the crisis of European civilization: the cultural consequences of science, those Dionysian forces elaborated by Nietzsche and embraced by early 20th-century artists, the devastation of World War I, the economic collapse, and the fascist era that followed (see Luft, 1980, p. 297). Few have faced such a cataclysmic time. Musil did not face it alone: other members of the “Generation of 1905” included novelists Kafka, Mann, Broch,
Döblin, Rilke, and Hesse. Philosophers included Wittgenstein, Scheler, and Bloch; theologians Buber and Tillich; literary critics and theorists Lukács, Benjamin, Kassner, and Kahler; among the psychologists were Freud, Jung and Köhler. Like these intellectuals, Musil worked subjectively and creatively to teach Europe and the world what was at stake in the first decades of the 20th century. Robert Musil personifies public pedagogy.

Notes

1. Ida B. Wells is another exemplary example of a public pedagogue. A former schoolteacher, this private person was a heroic individualist who once showed up at a lynching in order to investigate its causes. Denied access to the public sphere in the United States, Wells went to Britain where she mobilized public opinion against lynching, enabling her to finally command the attention of the American public (Pinar, 2004, p. 5; 2001, p. 461ff.). Albeit in very different circumstances, Frantz Fanon (Pinar, 2008), Jane Addams, Laura Bragg, and Pier Paolo Pasolini (Pinar, 2009) also addressed the pressing issues of the day. To become a public pedagogue in our time requires, I am suggesting, becoming a private person first. Corrupted by academic capitalism, we peddlers of our own wares must withdraw from the marketplace and return home (Wang, 2004, pp. 5–6), there to study the past, subjectively, in solitude. What Musil termed “essayism” was a form of life structured by modes of thinking that expressed and supported that inner life that made knowledge of the public world possible. As Radhakrishnan (2008) asks: “Can thinking that is in response to oneself also be realized as a form of accountability to the other and to the without?” (p. 12). Working from within to participate in the education of the public specifies the privacy of public pedagogy.

2. “Seldom,” Janik and Toulmin (1973, p. 133) assert, “has a scientist exerted such an influence upon his culture as has Ernst Mach. From poetry to philosophy of law, from physics to social theory, Mach’s influence was all-pervasive in Austria and elsewhere. Robert Musil, among others, was very much in Mach’s debt.” Probably the most famous of those who came under Mach’s spell was the young physicist Albert Einstein, who acknowledged Mach’s profound influence upon him in his youth. Indeed, Janik and Toulmin suggest that Einstein’s early career was predicated on Mach’s view of the nature of the scientific enterprise. After meeting Mach, a dazzled William James called him, simply, a “pure intellectual genius” (quoted in Janik & Toulmin, p. 133), who had read and was able to discuss nearly everything.

3. Luft (2003) suggests that Marcovaldi inspired Musil to think more carefully about women’s sexuality as well as about his own; she proved “decisive in helping Musil to become himself and to sustain his creativity” (p. 106). A permanent point of reference for his fiction, Luft continues, she personified the significance of Berlin modernism in his life.

4. Musil invented this name; it conveyed a double meaning. On the surface, it is coined from the initials K. K. or K.u.K., standing for “Imperial-royal” or “Imperial and royal,” a couplet that characterized all major institutions of the Habsburg Empire. To anyone familiar with German nursery language, however, it carried a second meaning: “Excrementia” or “Shitland” (Janik & Toulmin, 1973, p. 13). In his portrayal of Kakania, Luft (2003) points out, Musil “was concerned not so much with a particular traditional empire as with general qualities of modernity” (p. 96).

5. As Luft (2003, p. 97) points out, Musil was “perfectly content” for Austria to be annexed to Germany. Although the Anschluss of Austria did not take place until 1938 (and under circumstances Musil abhorred, indeed, which forced him to flee to Switzerland where he died four years later), it had in effect occurred a decade earlier. By the end of the Weimar Republic, Musil observed, so many Viennese lived in Berlin that few creative Austrians remained at home (Luft, p. 97).

6. In early 20th-century Austria, education for individuality was informed by German humanism’s ideal of Bildung. While later associated with class privilege, gender (masculinity specifically), and even national essence (Pinar, 2006b), the 18th-century version of Bildung as self-cultivation conveyed a religious meaning, quite in contrast to later conceptions in which individuality devolved into competitive individualism (see Luft, 2003, p. 15).

7. The point of precision for Musil was the articulation (combining style and substance) of specific situations. He was not alone: Samuel Beckett, too, as Mary Aswell Doll (1988) points out, sought “precision amidst fluidity” (p. 5). Like Musil, Beckett too sought to bridge everyday reality with “the other condition.” “More than any other writer of our time,” Doll (1988, p. 3) asserts, “Beckett makes this other reality the ‘soul’ center of his concern.”

8. Dating from the 15th century, privacy is defined as (a) the quality or state of being apart from company or observation: seclusion, and (b) freedom from unauthorized intrusion, one’s right to privacy and (archaic): a place of seclusion, and (c) secrecy and (d) a private matter: secret. While subjectivity is never separate from sociality, it does require seclusion, understood as solitude and inner freedom. It is a “place” of safety in which subjectivity enjoys “free play” as it takes indirect form through study (Rohdie, 1995, p. 156).

10. Because Pasolini appreciated that every ideology devolves into orthodoxy (Ward, 1999, p. 334), Pasolini’s subjectivism was enacted in the service of resistance to ideological rigidification. The assertion of “I think” challenges objective reality constructed by ideologues, referring the artist to his or her reconstruction of lived experience, expressed (possibly) through montage (Liehm, 1984, p. 188).

11. As the great Polish (if residing in Argentina for 24 years) novelist Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) asserted: “True reality is the one that is peculiar to you” (quoted in Longinovic, 1998, p. 37). It is through reality’s disclosure through subjectivity that the public world can be discerned with precision. “One of the main objects of my writing,” Gombrowicz observed, “is to cut a path through Unreality to Reality” (quoted in Longinovic, 1998, p. 36).

References


