

Sebastian, Thomas. *The Intersection of Science and Literature in Robert Musil's The Man without Qualities.* Rochester NY: Camden House, 2005. 146 pp. \$65.00 hardcover.

Studies of Musil are a thriving industry in Germany and continental Europe, and there is deepening interest in Musil in the English-speaking world. Following the appearance of translations of Musil's works—each with a different publisher—enough scholarly work in English is beginning to appear, in books, articles, and dissertations, to provide a serious foundation for understanding and appreciating this complex author. This book is an excellent contribution to this endeavor. (Others are Patrizia McBride's *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*, Northwestern University Press (2006), and *A Musil Companion*, an anthology of essays being prepared for Camden House by Philip Payne.) Professor Sebastian is thoroughly grounded in Musil and the secondary literature. He has a sophisticated command of a range of philosophical and scientific traditions, bringing into play ideas from Kant, Hegel, Mach, Freud, de Man, Foucault, and others, which he deploys effectively. His thinking and writing are clear-eyed. This short but profound study should greatly further scholarly and critical work on Musil in English.

Musil constructed a new kind of literature, but his formation was in science—experimental psychology and engineering—and in philosophy, not in literature. Science when he was young had rejected positivistic determinism. It was embarking on a tentative groping for moral and ethical values in a world no longer defined by enduring basic principles, but seen to consist of constantly changing functional relationships. Uncertainty replaced certainty. Given these conditions, Musil explores how one might arrive at an aesthetics for the novel appropriate for a conception of the world that is based on possibility rather than determinism. Professor Sebastian writes: "Michel Foucault fancied that the demise of the author function would bring about a kind of literature whose central metaphor guiding its production and reception would no longer be the author but the experiment. This is precisely the situation we find ourselves in vis-à-vis *The Man without Qualities*. Musil's novel understands itself as a 'construction' of a narrative. Being under construction, the novel substitutes the experiment for the referent" (133).

In his discussion of the construction of a hypothetical narrative, the author ingeniously traces the origins of the Parallel Campaign in a series of fumbled-for words that eventually lead to its coming about: "The campaign is shown to originally exist only in the form of a vague idea manifesting itself first in loose verbal associations, then in a circular letter, and finally in a press release. It is thus an allegory of what one can do with words. The campaign only exists because people start to speak about it. From the start then, the novel's main plot has the peculiar qualities of being merely the possibility of becoming a plot; it has the potential of a plot because it is spoken and written about. . . . Accordingly, the novel's own progress depends in a peculiar way on the creation of a story that relates how stories are made" (93).

This book consists of six chapters: "Experimental Psychology: Musil's Academic Apprenticeship"; "Figure and *Gestalt*"; "Indeterminacy, Chance, and Singularity"; "Multiple Subjects: The Construction of a Hypothetical Narrative," and "Moosbrugger, *Frauenzimmer*, and the Law." As these headings indicate, the focus is on the *intersection* of

science and literature in Musil's novel, and thus deals almost exclusively with the first part of the novel, from which almost all the quotations are taken. However, Musil's novel as a "whole torso" cannot be encompassed without also taking into account its second part, in which the basis shifts from science and the external world to mysticism and the subjective world. Here, too, language remains the central problematic node, but it is the language of the ineffable, not the language of philosophy, science, or everyday affairs that comes into play, and this shift would involve a changed stance for the critic, as well as a book far longer than this one's 137 pages. However, the author is not to be faulted for limiting his scope. His study is admirably informed, and the intersection of science and literature is surely where any understanding of Musil must begin.

BURTON PIKE

CUNY Graduate School

White, John J. *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004. 348 pp. \$90.00 hardcover.

There has been no dearth of English-language studies on Brecht's work and life, but there has been no comprehensive introduction to his theoretical writings. This can be explained by inaccessibility and incoherent editorial practices. John Willett's translations—*Brecht on Theatre* (1964) and *Messingkauf Dialogues* (1965, out of print)—provided crucial texts early on, but only in 2003 did the companion volume *Brecht on Art and Politics* see the light of day. Moreover, the five volumes of *Schriften* in Suhrkamp's new Brecht edition were completed only in 1994. John J. White's erudite commentary draws on both this material and the comprehensive German-language scholarship of the past four decades, including the detailed notes in volume 4 of the *Brecht-Handbuch* (Metzler, 2003) devoted to the *Schriften*.

White's presentation excels in close readings of strategically chosen texts in five chronologically arranged chapters. Perhaps his single most original contribution is the sustained, documented argument that these theoretical texts, like the plays, must be seen as "Versuche," as experiments that do not "explain" discrete concepts but rather elaborate contradictions dialectically. Moreover, White's analyses show how these texts implement epic strategies such as titles, montage techniques, and defamiliarizing devices that subvert conventional discourse formats of dramatic theory. Chapter 1 focuses on the canonical "Anmerkungen zu Mahagonny" (originally published in 1930), in particular on the one-page "Schema" that contrasts dramatic with epic theater by means of a series of binaries. White's careful contextualization of the various versions of the "Schema" emphasizes not the antithetical binaries in a "horizontal" reading but rather the dialectical tendency of a vertical reading as Brecht rearranges the order and syntax of the binaries. Chapter 2 traces a shift in Brecht's theoretical interests from the apparatus or institutions of cultural production to the audience in a series of texts on "Verfremdung" and its relationship to "Historisierung" and non-Aristotelian theater. White argues compellingly that Brecht's stress on V-effects and anti-illusionism in the mid 1930s had less to do with his trip to Moscow and the encounter with the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang, as frequently argued, than with the failed production in New York

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of horizontal segments in shades of yellow and orange, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: [The Intersection of Science and Literature in Robert
Musil's The Man without Qualities]

SOURCE: Ger Q 79 no1 Wint 2006

WN: 0634903110024

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.aatg.org/>

Copyright 1982-2006 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.