

Alessio Musio  
(Milan)

*The crisis of substance and the difficulty of decision  
Musil's subject*

Abstract

The crisis of substance and the difficulty of making decisions are fundamental cores in Musil's conception of the subject. In *The Man Without Qualities* subjectivity is the consequence of a precise ontology which deconstructs, in the manner of Mach, the very structure of reality. But Musil is not Mach, and he does not merely translate his categories into literature. There is a philosophical originality in his thought revealing a design in which the dissolution of substance and the unsaveability of the ego turn into the development of a paralysing "sense of possibility". This essay restores an image of Musil fascinated by the theme of the undecidable, but also an acute critic of all the forms of ethical-political decisionism.

*1. Metaphysical dissolution, sense of possibility and indifference of qualities*

The aim of this paper is to highlight the fundamental cores of Musil's philosophical thought following the literary deconstruction of the metaphysics of the transcendental portrayed in *The Man without Qualities*<sup>1</sup>: the crisis of substance and the difficulty of decision. Development of the theoretical link between these two themes proceeds in Musil through metaphors and literary figures, but the connection is philosophically undeniable. In a context that has no substance – or only relative substantiality – deciding becomes difficult. Reality is reduced to a series of possibles, creating a situation in which decision is always lacking in support, lacking anything which can make it somehow definitive.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Reinbeck-Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1952), hsg. Adolf Frisé, translated by Sophie Williams and Burton Pike: Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (Picador, 2011). From now on we will refer to this text by the abbreviation: *Der Mann*. We will always indicate first the page number of the original German edition, and in square brackets the page number of the English edition. If there is no indication in square brackets, this means that the passage does not appear in the English edition.

The most synthetic way to explain this germinal point in Musil's thought is to be found in the figure of Bonadea, one of the characters in whom Musil's irony becomes the most successful mirror of philosophy. If we know that «she was not lustful; she was sensual, as other people have other afflictions, for instance suffering from sweaty hands or blushing too readily» (*Der Mann*, p. 42 [39]), the decisive element in her profile concerns her worth as a witness to the sudden loss of meaning of traditional *metaphysical discourse*. Musil states that this strange mistress, among her other features, «could utter the words “truth, goodness, and beauty” as often and as casually as someone else might say “Thursday”» (*Der Mann*, p. 42 [39]). Coming from the lips of this young woman, the *three transcendental properties* of being, which represent the very image of a reality that is understandable because it is created, and as such is *thought of* rather than *merely wished for* by God, become the expression of an empty discourse, a slogan. The aforementioned properties have an extraordinary metaphysical significance within themselves, capable of reducing the chance to a defect in human consciousness as well as denouncing the purely parasitic nature of evil; however, this becomes nothing more than a collection of words unable to describe reality and, perhaps, reassure the person uttering them<sup>2</sup>.

Onto the “void” left by this deconstruction Musil grafts the fundamental contents of the philosophy of Ernst Mach<sup>3</sup>, “filling it up” with the dissolution of substance and the unsaveability of the ego, which translates into the development of a “sense of possibility” that is so final as to make any decision impossible. But if making a decision appears to Musil to become an extreme gesture, we will attempt to show how in his thought the theme of the impracticability of deciding has no “decisionistic” significance (as in the case of Musil's acquaintance, Carl Schmitt). If anything, Musil's *ambivalent* attitude towards the Machian criticism of the *notion of substance* becomes

---

<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to show that Bonadea's metaphysical system no longer had any relevance to the concrete lives of his Viennese contemporaries, Musil in fact portrays the exact significance which, rightly or wrongly, the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had for those who were part of it: the direct transition from the great philosophical synthesis of the Middle Ages to the abyssal thinking of the twentieth century, in other words from overall stability to the restless precariousness of every single being and every single movement.

<sup>3</sup> Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* would not in fact be possible without the fragile image of reality as portrayed by Mach, whose thinking was the subject of Musil's doctoral thesis in philosophy in the early twentieth century: Robert Musil, *Beitrag zur Beurteilung der Lehren Machs* (Berlin Wilmesdorf: Dissertationsverlag Carl Arnold, 1908), Robert Musil, *On Mach's theories* (Washington Dc: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

the core for a *solipsistic* understanding of human relations which ultimately makes *love* impossible.

The starting point for all this is in any case Mach's dissolution of substance, followed by that of the ego: the subject as a conscious translation of substance does not exist. «*Das Ich ist unrettbar*», the ego is unsaveable<sup>4</sup>. This is the message that Musil receives from Mach, a message which renders *normal and without any possible* alternative the situation of unease that we feel with regard to those people whose identity appears in fact to be extremely fragile, decided by the course of events, undergone rather than wanted, so much so that it only takes a change in circumstances, in the people around them, to see them in effect as totally different and unrecognisable. That which in our experience appears to us as something exceptional and not, fortunately, as a characteristic of all men, in Mach becomes, *unilaterally*, the measure of every ego, reduced to a crossroads where new events are constantly emerging.

There could have been no more fertile ground for Musil's thought. The reality which Mach describes, therefore, as a mere collection of *Empfindungen*, of *elements* and *sensations* devoid of any stability, becomes the source of the actual conceptual core of Musil's novel: the sense of possibility.

[...] if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility. Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as

---

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1896, 1922) p. 19, translated by C. M. Williams and Sydney Waterlow: Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychical* (New York: Dover Edition, 1959), p. 24. Mach in effect also provides an "existential" explanation for his position, which is still understandable today to anyone who starts to reflect on the slowness with which, in normal, non-exceptional, circumstances, things (i.e. our experiences, expectations and labours) change during our lives; in fact – says Mach – it is above all the environment in which we live that pushes us towards continuity, subsistence, permanence, since it almost abhors dynamism: «The apparent permanency of the ego consists chiefly in the single fact of its continuity, in the slowness of its changes. The many thoughts and plans of yesterday that are continued today, and of which our environment in waking hours incessantly reminds us [...], and the little habits that are unconsciously and involuntarily kept up for long periods of time, constitute the groundwork of the ego» (E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, p. 3).

well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.  
(*Der Mann*, p. 16 [10-11])

In *The Man without Qualities* reality breaks up into pieces, inasmuch as every objective thing is merely the casual and rigid realisation of its infinite potential possibilities. How the subject fits into a world conceived in this manner is made clear in the description of Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel, whose profile is so uncertain as to be inconsistent: «So without much exaggeration he was able to say of his life that everything in it had fulfilled itself as if it belonged together more than it belonged to him. B had always followed A, whether in battle or in love. Therefore he had to suppose that the personal qualities he had achieved in this way had more to do with one another than with him; that every one of them, in fact, looked at closely, was no more intimately bound up with him than with anyone else who also happened to possess them. Nevertheless, one is undoubtedly conditioned by one's qualities and is made up of them, even if one is not identical with them, and so one can sometimes seem just as much a stranger to oneself at rest as in motion» (*Der Mann*, p. 148 [157]).

Therefore radical inconsistency, contingency and accidentality become the ciphers of Musil's subjectivity. These words, however, cannot be read as if they were a straightforward literary transposition of Mach's thesis, for two distinct but significantly linked reasons. Firstly because Musil displays speculative originality with regard to Mach, so much so that he is even one of his critics. The second reason is that the point which interests Musil is the effect on human relations of this understanding of reality. So the interrelation between these two issues needs to be shown.

## 2. Musil as a critic of Mach

Indeed, if we follow Musil's discourse, at a certain point we find an outcome that is inconsistent with the motive of unquestioning agreement with Mach. The interpretation of Mach's arguments undergoes an evolution. Slowly but surely Musil distances himself from his original agreement as he undergoes two fundamental theoretical influences: Husserl's thinking about Machian empirio-criticism and the psychology of *Gestalt* in relation to the ability to perceive forms, in the data of the senses, which have some stability<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> C. Monti, "La dissertazione su Mach: una ristampa italiana", in Istituto Italiano di Cultura (a cura di), *Robert Musil nel primo centenario della nascita* (Innsbruck-Vienna, 1980), pp. 92-101.

The outcome of this meditation becomes, as has been observed, the possibility of understanding «the isolated entity (the ego, the thing, etc.) at least as a function based on experience and perhaps no longer even a fiction, if one is prepared to consider its isolation and its “substantiality” in relative terms»<sup>6</sup>.

In actual fact this is not an insignificant change. On the contrary, it is a fundamental one, and traces of it can be found in paragraph 39 of *Der Mann*, which opens with the statement contained in the title: «A man without qualities consists of qualities without a man». In fact this thesis, which is the true thesis of the novel, is completely Machian in flavour: Ulrich, the thirty-year-old protagonist, is not so much a man without qualities as a combination «of qualities without a man» (p. 148 [156]), without a subject, without substance one might say. However, since qualities, in order to exist, need someone to possess them (to use Aristotelian language: on the ontological plane they are still accidents), Musil's real thesis (the pure amalgam) translates into the image which gives the work its title (the pure man). So in the choice of the novel's title, a “substantialist” view, which Musil does not avoid, can still be perceived. This is a change of course, so to speak, which is an invitation to take a direct look at the doctoral thesis on Mach, a work which has not always been as well received as it deserves by the critics, who have tended to see it as a merely compilative and in a sense heteronomous contribution. While this may be true, Musil does show that he is an original reader of the father of empirio-criticism, so much so that he highlights a theoretically decisive aspect which is capable of destabilising its system and is rich in existential implications.

Musil in fact sees very well in his book on Mach how Mach describes relationships involving substances as reciprocal and simultaneous functional relationships which make it possible to express «dependence» on substance only in logical-mathematical, therefore unreal, terms<sup>7</sup>. And in effect this is the heart of Mach's destruction of substance, which can be achieved, as Musil again shrewdly observes, only if substantial dependence can be expressed as the permanence «of a group of functional dependences, of reactions which occur “here and there”», and not the permanence «of a spatio-temporally individuated unity»<sup>8</sup>. Now Musil renounces precisely this point, and his criticism of Mach consists of achieving a concept of *dependence* that is much stronger than that of Mach, in the awareness (which is the theme of *The Man without Qualities*) of the extent to which the environment can

---

<sup>6</sup> C. Monti, p. 99, our italics.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Musil, *On Mach's Theories*, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

affect, in real terms and not just functionally, the subject's life (to the point of annihilating the subject's qualities). At the end of his analysis Musil writes that criticism of Mach cannot be considered complete if it is not understood that «mathematical dependence» is called upon to «give way to the real dependence on which it is founded»<sup>9</sup>. The readmission of substance, in no matter how relative a sense it is to be understood<sup>10</sup>, is therefore a readmission of true dependence: this is the reason for the mathematical and functional dependence, and not the other way around, and it cannot be avoided by logical-formal sublimation. The significance of the statement of the impossibility of what we have called a true «sublimation» cannot be trivialised, since Musil is aware of its precise extent. If we read what he argued in his essay *The Mathematical Man* (1913), we find the argument that mathematics has a specificity that is unique in the whole panorama of human disciplines: it is «a marvellous spiritual apparatus designed to think of all possible cases in advance»<sup>11</sup>. Translated into existential terms, this means that mathematics is believed to constitute a way of knowing the course of events in advance and therefore of governing dependence upon reality and the unpredictable nature of human action. The reaffirmation of the primacy of real dependence and of what takes place in space-time is not therefore an unimportant move – it means stressing once again the weight of what is real, stating the impossibility of the subject having control over experience, and making decision impossible.

This is the second reason why Musil does not merely translate Mach's philosophy into literature: stressing the non-eliminability of real dependence is decisive in the economy of his thinking, including reflecting about the significance of relationships. For what happens to relationships if the theme of the *fragility* of the ego is combined with the awareness of the *strength* of dependence which not even Machian economicism is able to reduce to a convenient mathematical-functional field that can be known (and dominated) *a priori*?

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> If the critics agree in viewing Musil's rejection of the radicality with which Mach had seen in the category of substance «the illusory operation of linking one unintelligibility to another unintelligibility» – according to A. Gargani, *Freud, Wittgenstein, Musil* (Milano: Shakespeare and Company, 1982), p. 41 – it remains an open question whether the title chosen in any case by Musil for his novel is itself after all so weak and relative, and not, on the contrary, a very strong title (a substance without qualities is in fact *pure* substance!).

<sup>11</sup> This passage is quoted by Fabrizio Cambi to explain Ulrich's love of mathematics, in the text: F. Cambi, «Sintassi delle sensazioni e costruzione dell'io», in Robert Musil, *I turbamenti dell'allievo Törless*, trad. it. di F. Cambi, pp. 9-30, note 22, p. 387.

3. *The failure of love: singularity as a rejection of diversity*

In order to answer this question we must examine the love affair between Ulrich and his «forgotten» sister Agathe, the incestuous sexual relationship which is one of the key points in *The Man*. Relationships are always also dynamics of dependence, and what Musil portrays is the thesis of the impossibility of love, inasmuch as every subject has to depend on a subjectivity which is irreversibly different from his/her own. If this is seen as the starting point for a solipsistic approach that has been kept carefully concealed, it has to be noted that it originates precisely from Musil's criticism of Mach: ultimately dependence cannot be eliminated.

Musil presents incest as the quest for (and in a sense the pretence of) a more real dimension of the subject, in which the meeting with the other, instead of destabilising him, strengthens him, inasmuch as it is the result of «a lover who will be the same as yourself and yet someone else, a magical figure that is oneself, [...] and yet with the advantage over something we merely imagine of having the breath of autonomy and independence» (*Der Mann*, p. 905 [982]). If the otherness of the other person (or one's own otherness in relation to the other) is always the reason for the possibility of the failure of the relationship, Musil portrays in Agathe a double of the protagonist who is able to overcome that failure: «But you see, even if you want to love someone as yourself, and no matter how great your love for that person, this love still remains a deception [...] because you cannot feel, it is simply not possible to feel how his head or his finger ache» (*Der Mann*, p. 1200, our translation). «*Die unbeeinflussbare Beschaffenheit der Körper*», «The unquestionable structure of bodies» (*Der Mann*, p. 1060, our translation) – an expression worthy of study in terms of philosophical anthropology –, and the otherness which it manifests, means the defeat of love. And it is this defeat that Musil wants to overcome by eliminating the distance between the other and the subject – thus anticipating in one fell swoop the Lacanian theses that were to identify the failure of love with its eminently egotistic nature (inasmuch as in Lacan's view man's desire is, as is well known, to see his own desire loved, rather than to love the other – hence egotism is the universal enemy of human relationships).

If, as we have tried to show, Musil is ambivalent about the notion of substance, it is precisely at this point that his ambivalence emerges very clearly. The persistence in Musil of the category of substance is made clear precisely in relation to what he himself refers to as the «unquestionable structure of bodies». Meeting the other does not mean meeting relationships, a mere series of sensations and elements, but rather the undeniable

consistency of a body which acts by causing resistance and dependence in the subject. That is why, ultimately, substantiality is not eliminated in Musil – even though his statement remains ambiguous.

What happens in fact if dependence on the other coincides basically with dependence on oneself, because the other is me and his/her otherness is, in conclusion, more illusion than reality? Musil's answer is that it is to be "assumed that every agitation in one soul would also be felt by the other, even though whatever evoked it was going on in a body that was not, in the main, one's own. An embrace, for instance – you are embraced by way of the other body. [...] You may not even want it, but your other self floods you with an overwhelming wave of acceptance» (*Der Mann*, pp. 908-909 [986]). Now, if the theme of excitement and the embrace requires precisely the consistency and substantiality of another body, Musil's position remains ambivalent, half-way between *Mach* and his rejection. Indeed, as has been demonstrated<sup>12</sup>, incest between brother and sister is the literary metaphor for an ethical-anthropological form of solipsism which attempts to eliminate otherness in order to ensure the consistency of subjectivity, in a context that is so explicit as to lead Musil to the extreme hypothesis<sup>13</sup> that his forgotten sister is a total invention and not a real character at all<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> A. Rendi, *Robert Musil*, a cura di F. Cambi (Trento: Editrice Università degli Studi di Trento, 1999), p. 115; the text is a reprint of the 1963 edition by Edizioni di Comunità – Milano.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118. «In some existences the *unreal, invented* sister is nothing other than the ineffable youthful form of a need for love [...]. In the lives of some others it is solitude [...], an imaginary double full of acrobatic grace which reduces the anguish of solitude to the tenderness of a solitary cohabitation. And the only thing to be said about some natures is that this imagination [...] is nothing but the most distilled egoism and self-love; a desire beyond measure to be loved, which has formed a shrewd alliance with gentle altruism [...]. It [the image of the sister] purely and simply represents love and is always the sign of a tense and unsatisfactory relationship with the world» (*Der Mann*, quoted by Rendi p. 118).

<sup>14</sup> Though it is not improbable «that in a final version of this chapter and of the passage in which Ulrich denies that Agathe has any corporeal reality, this ruthless sincerity would have been either veiled or eliminated» (*Ibidem*), the fact remains that in Musil's intention Agathe is ultimately not even real. The origin of the solipsistic choice thus becomes clear: the dependence of freedom on reality is also the reason for the danger to which the subject is exposed in his quest for realisation, in his demand for consistency. Hence the need to make the subject, through solipsism, independent of reality, so that it can cease to be the source but above all the sum of the problems of human initiative. It is that particular form of solipsism which is also present in an author such as Weininger, a form which is disturbing in philosophical terms not only because it is not primarily gnoseological (but ethical-anthropological) in nature, but also because it represents a paradoxical desirability of solipsism itself, by distancing it from the image of a sceptical nightmare which makes it so

So Musil stages the typically contemporary drama of the inability to valorize the otherness with its burden of ambivalent dependence, as if the very modern stress on subjectivity had been compelled to end – although in fact this outcome is not mandatory – by closing in on itself, in a fragility of relationships, and the discovery of singularity could only lead to the rejection of diversity.

And so we come to the final point in our work: the link between the sense of the possibility and that of the impossibility of deciding. For a man, such as the man without qualities, permanently in thrall to the contrasting sense of alternative possibilities, deciding becomes impossible, inasmuch as – as the Latin etymology (*decaedere*) and the German etymology (*entscheiden*) both remind us – decision is called upon in any case to make a cut, to exclude, to cut out, to give a complete and definite shape to the numerous different possible courses of action. Although in this way decision tends to become an extreme gesture, in Musil, however, all this in no way entails an ethical, or worse a political, theory of a decisionist nature. In conclusion, therefore, let us look at this final point, which cannot be outlined without mentioning the name and the work of Carl Schmitt.

#### *4. Criticism of decisionism despite the inability to decide*

As we have said, Musil and Schmitt knew and respected each other, to the extent that Musil granted Schmitt the really significant privilege of reading the draft of his novel. Schmitt himself announced this in a letter dated 8th April 1975, to Frisé, the editor of Musil's *Tagebücher*: «my personal meeting with Musil in Berlin came about solely as a result of my exclusive interest at that time (1930) in the figure of Walther Rathenau<sup>15</sup>» – the man on whom Musil based the figure of the second *man without qualities* in the novel, Paul Arnheim, the personification of a pathological inability to decide – «it was only on the basis of this perspective (which for Musil was restrictive) that I was also able to read at that time the draft of the novel, which I obtained through Franz Blei»<sup>16</sup>.

Now although this is not the appropriate time for a systematic examination of the relationship between Musil and Schmitt, at least one aspect of

---

familiar in philosophical literature. Cf. on this point A. Musio (2010), “Il solipsismo della libertà. Da Musil a Weininger”, *Studia austriaca*, XVIII: 97-123.

<sup>15</sup> To whom Schmitt dedicated a review in 1912 entitled “Zur Kritik der Zeit”, *Die Rheinlande*: 323-324.

<sup>16</sup> The text of the letter is quoted by Frisé in Robert Musil, *Tagebücher* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976), 2 voll., hsg. Adolf Frisé, vol. II, p. 1200, our translation.

its philosophical significance needs to be mentioned. What Musil and Schmitt have in common, as we have said, is the theme of *decision* or, rather, of the *crisis of decision*. All Musil's characters suffer from the inability to decide, and the only decisions they make are, at best, those of an *action parallel* to reality, or a *year of leave from life*: «at no time has the difference between the expert's experience and that of the layman been as great as it is now [...]. It is only on the problems of being human that everyone feels called upon to *decide* [«zur Entscheidung berufen»], and there's an ancient prejudice to the effect that one is born and dies a human being!» (*Der Mann*, pp. 214-215 [231, our translation]).

As is well known, the question of decision is the quintessence of Schmitt's political philosophy, which identifies sovereignty with the ability to decide on the state of exception<sup>17</sup> and from that point on hands over to politics the burden of *decisionism*, naming it for the first time. However we judge it, Schmitt's thought is not easy to manage because with it politics loses any ideal guise of constructing the *common good* and becomes – if we may be permitted to synthesise it in little more than a single line – the brutal task of distinguishing between friend and enemy which assigns to power the role of deciding what is normal and what is not, with the final claim to determine legitimately who is homogeneous and who is a danger<sup>18</sup>.

And yet decisionism itself cannot be interpreted as an inescapable destiny. Indeed, the comparison with Musil reveals that it is nothing more than decision becoming problematic<sup>19</sup>: deciding is in fact something absolutely normal and customary in everyday life, not at first sight a moral or legal-political theory. If decision becomes decisionism, it is because there has been a transition from a perfectly everyday experience, practised and practicable by everybody, to something exceptional which a fragile, or even totally missing, subjectivity is unable to bear. It is not without significance to

---

<sup>17</sup> «Sovereign is he who decides on the exceptions», this is the famous striking opening line of C. Schmitt's 1922 volume, *Political Theology. Four chapters on the concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1<sup>o</sup> ed. 1985, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> In actual fact we have never really been relieved of this burden. Not only did it survive the whole of the 20th century, but it still emerges today with the primacy – predicted by Schmitt – of finance, economics and technology over the reduced power of states and the crisis of politics in general.

<sup>19</sup> And it needs to be stressed how ultimately in Schmitt, in perfect analogy with the inverse relationship between qualities and subject in Musil, it is precisely the decision that constitutes the sovereign subject, and not the latter that exists before the decision. Cf. on this point A. Musio, *Etica della sovranità. Questioni antropologiche in Kelsen e Schmitt* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2011), chapter 2.

mention on this topic the aphorism that “decision is simply the art of being cruel in time” (H. Becque) – a form of cruelty (assuming that is what it is)<sup>20</sup>, which Musil’s subjects are unable to practise.

Therefore, if it is true that in the passages where Musil describes the pathological inability to bring a decision to its conclusion, in the background there is an interweaving that links Musil to Schmitt and takes us back once again to Mach – since the elements dissolve the unitarian and something is always missing for the decision<sup>21</sup> – the differences have to be noted. Musil and Schmitt do not belong in the same way to the German conservative ideology of the 1920s and 1930s. Although “the urgency of decision” is one of the «vital components of the conservative belief in the primacy of the political and in the need to distinguish between friend and enemy»<sup>22</sup>, Musil, does not in fact go down this path. Musil’s arguments on politics in his *Tagebücher*, which really do run counter to Schmitt, in fact provide valuable testimony to the fact that «Musil does not deny the experiences underlying» the theory of Schmittian decisionism – the difficulty of making a decision, the lack of direction in a disorientated cultural and social context – «he simply regards them as unilateral»<sup>23</sup>. If the theme of the inability to decide is present in Musil himself, in him «the extreme situation, to which the decision is the response, does not appear in itself to be a criterion for defining the political, since if anything it reveals or realises its “error”»<sup>24</sup>. Decisionism in fact presupposes an anthropology which Musil finds reductive<sup>25</sup> and a function, through the declaration of the dangerous nature of man, of the political aggressiveness of the nationalism<sup>26</sup> which he rejects. Musil, in other words, does not make decision a gesture so extreme as to stake everything on homogeneity and on the political definition of normality and of the enemy, even if it is true that Schmitt could not fail to feel at

---

<sup>20</sup> This argument is unhesitatingly supported by Derrida, for whom decision is what makes justice impossible both personally and politically. Cf. on this point J. Derrida, *L'autre cap* (Paris: Minuit, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> G. Tihanov, “Robert Musil in the Garden of Conservatorism”, in P. Payne, G. Bartram, G. Tihanov (eds.), *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil* (New York: Rochester, 2007), pp. 117-148, p. 145.

<sup>22</sup> Tihanov, p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> F. Maier-Solgek (1991), “Musil und die problematische Politik Zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Politik bei Robert Musil, insbesondere zu einer Auseinandersetzung mit Carl Schmitt”, *Orbis Litterarum* 46/3: 340-363, p. 355, our traslation.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 355-356, our traslation.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 356, our traslation.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 358, our traslation.

ease in the presence of a mass of pages, such as that which constitutes the structure of *Der Mann*, devoted to the description of the abyss of decision.

Therefore the attempt by Musil to make a distinction between the anthropological experience of the difficulty of deciding and ethical-political decisionism is one of the fundamental keys to thinking even about the current western *Lebensform* in philosophical-moral terms. For Musil, crisis of decision and crisis of responsibility go hand in hand, by virtue of a connection which is in some way institutionalised in our civilisation through technology and the “social division of labour”. For Musil, both of them are at the origin of that phenomenon which he referred to with an apt expression as «*Indirektheits*»<sup>27</sup>, in other words that configuration of relationships whereby it is possible to give «the signal for war with the clearest conscience in the world», even if the person giving the signal «as a man may be incapable of shooting down an old dog ... This system of indirection [“indirect responsibility”] elevated to an art is what nowadays enables the individual and society as a whole to function with a clear conscience; *the button to be pressed is always clean and shiny, and what happens at the other end of the line is the business of others, who for their part don't press the button*» (*Der Mann*, p. 938 [696]).

Musil cannot have imagined how topical these words of his were to become in the era of nuclear weapons, when it only takes the press of a button to unleash the most massive destruction that has ever been possible (and the words just quoted above can only be read today with this understanding in mind). But the invitation to reflect on the conditions of possibility of decision, in a global context – in which responsibility is divided and dispersed into a thousand apparently self-referential streams, and in which technology with its own logic radically changes people's lives before they can even realise it – is one of the tasks that Musil's philosophical thinking has assigned to the contemporary world. It is only in this way that the world can avoid becoming a “world of qualities without man”.

---

<sup>27</sup> In fact we have to speak of “indirect responsibility” because Musil means “*eine Erscheinung in hohem Grad unabhängig vom Persönlichen*” (*Der Mann*, p. 638), in other words the emergence of a form of action almost wholly independent of any personal dimension.