

Puberty crisis and ego-split: Robert Musil's novel *The Bewilderment of Törless the Boarder*

RAINER J. KAUS (*)

An art whose means is language will always bring forth a high degree of critical creativity because language itself is a critique of life: it names, it hits the target, it designates and judges by bringing things to life.

(Thomas Mann)

Almost 125 years ago, in 1880, the Austrian writer, Robert Musil, was born in Klagenfurt. He died in 1942 after having emigrated to Switzerland, without having completed his great novel, *The Man Without Qualities*. In 1906, exactly one hundred years ago, his first work was published, *The Bewilderment of Törless the Boarder*, a novel of puberty in which the various stages of adolescent development are described in extreme exaggerations of emotional life. It is worth mentioning Musil's own experiences in a military education institution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Törless's sufferings of puberty become the excuse to leave the usual reality of everyday life and to escape into a second reality, an alien, confusing layer of his soul that is against morality. At about the same time, around the turn of the twentieth century, the psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, began to explore the unconscious. His famous dream-book had already been published (*Interpretation of Dreams* 1900).

Musil's novel begins at the railway station of a small provincial town near the route leading to Russia. All the colours are faded and sad, which lends a melancholy touch to the whole scene. Frau Hofrat Törless, a lady of about forty, and her husband take leave of her son who is to attend, for the next few years, a military academy where the sons of the best families in the country receive their education. In the first few weeks he writes letters to his parents full of home-sickness in which he describes life at the boarding school. Later on, a certain emptiness takes hold, an emptiness which could also be a depressive reaction to the loss of his home. Dissatisfied, he seeks an experience which could help him to cope with this new phase of his life.

(*) Philosophische Fakultät der Universität zu Köln, Institut für deutsche Sprache und Literatur, Gronewaldstr. 2, 50931 Koeln, Germany.

It is also the time when sexual maturity begins, “slowly and darkly, to well up within him”. (Musil, p. 9¹) At the boarding school, after a short friendship with a prince, which however breaks down because of an argument about religious questions, he seeks a relationship to two boys, Reiting and Beineberg, the most impertinent and challenging pupils of their year, “wild and unruly to the point of brutality”. (Musil, p. 9) For his own part “it seemed at the time as though he had no character whatsoever”. (Musil, p. 10) He therefore seeks a relationship with friends who impress him with their unruliness and licentiousness. Törless senses within himself a “dull, chilly melancholy” and a “terrible apathy”. (Musil, p. 20)

“He was waiting for something (...) For what...? Something surprising, something he had never seen, (...) something with a terrible, animal sensuality, (...) it’s something quite mute – a choking in the throat, a barely perceptible thought – and only if one really wanted to say it with words would it come out like that. But even then it bears only a remote resemblance, as though in a vast enlargement, in which one not only sees everything more clearly, but even things that aren’t there ... and yet it was something to be ashamed of.” (Musil, p. 15f)

He loves moods of solitude, has sexual fantasies when he observes Beineberg, sees something indecent in his awkward movements and feels a kind of shame as if there really had been something between them.

Together with Beineberg he visits Bozena, an ageing, degraded prostitute who, originally a peasant girl, got a position in town as a lady’s maid and waitress. Although his first passion is not enduring, it already brings parts of his inner life to the surface, and his visits to the prostitute increasingly become a secret joy. He cannot help but think of his mother.

“This woman is, for me, a tangle of everything that is sexually desirable; and my mother is a creature who has until now walked through my life at a cloudless distance, clear and without depth, like a star beyond all desire.” (Musil, p. 34)

An experience with a prostitute is not infrequently the first object-choice for an adolescent boy. Later on, Bozena also mentions Basini, a fellow pupil of the two, who visits her almost every Sunday and boasts of women even though he is completely inexperienced.

The pupils usually stored their money, letters and valuables in long boxes called play-boxes. Once when money is missing, Reiting suspects Basini. In the upper part of the school there is a kind of attic filled with a jumble of old stage backdrops. From there stairs lead to a secret storeroom for equipment, the so-called Red Chamber whose walls are completely covered with blood-red flag material. Apart from the three friends, scarcely anyone knows of the existence of this cubby-hole. Törless does not like this small room, but frequently climbs up there with the other two because he wants to keep up with his comrades’ exploits. Sometimes he

“was afraid that there was more truth behind their fantasies than he was able to see. In a sense he felt torn between two worlds, one that was solidly respectable, in which everything took place in regular and rational ways, the world to which he was accustomed at home, and a world of adventure, full of darkness, mystery, blood and unimagined surprises.” (Musil, p. 44)

Reiting tells of Basini’s financial dependency on him and that he places ‘conditions’ upon him, that he always has to be of service to him. Basini confesses his theft tearfully and begs for mercy. All this frightens Törless, but it is also seductive for him. He says that Basini must be reported and punished, but the other two want to keep him in dependency and at first desist from reporting him. In return, Basini has to obey them and do their bidding. Basini is taller than Törless, but a weakling, with soft, slow movements and girlish facial features. Already his Italian-sounding name hints at beauty, softness and a

¹ Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London: Penguin, 2001. Here the translation of the title as *The Bewilderment of Törless the Boarder* is preferred. All page references are to the Penguin edition.

certain unbridled temperament. Törless avoids Basini and asks for advice from his parents in a letter. They approve of the decision to give Basini one more chance to improve.

One night, Beineberg tells Törless of Reiting's sexual relationship with Basini while Reiting himself is present. The three are still discussing whether to report Basini, but decide instead to torment him and keep him in dependency. Törless, however, sees in him also the human being who now is to be made into a victim. He senses the danger, is afraid of the limitlessness, of going on to "infinity" (Musil, p. 69), a concept which he knows about from his mathematics lessons. He is torn between fascination and disquiet.

"It came upon Törless like a madness, experiencing objects, processes and people as things with ambiguous meanings. As something fettered by some inventor's power to a harmless, explanatory word, and as something wholly alien that seemed at every moment to threaten to break its bonds." (Musil, p. 70)

They get Basini to come to the Red Chamber in the attic. Beineberg recounts his disgraceful actions. Then they strip him and start to whip him. Here Törless experiences how the fantasy of a dull inkling intensifies into a sensuous desire and finally expresses itself as a sadistic perversion. He, too, himself feels

"a bestial desire to leap in with the others and deliver the beating". (Musil, p. 98),

but something paralyses him. To his astonishment he finds himself in a state of sexual excitation. The two friends disappear with Basini into the darkness and when they return he feels an "exciting shudder". (Musil, p. 79)

Törless himself now begins to participate in the torment and calls on Basini to confess that he is a thief and "a beast, a thieving beast, *your* thieving, swinish beast". (Musil, p. 80) Later on in the mathematics class the thought of infinity returns. He talks to Beineberg about it and he visits the mathematics teacher at home. The teacher argues "that such mathematical concepts are purely mathematical logical necessities" (Musil, p. 86) and gives him a philosophical book by Kant containing the "defining aspects of our actions". (Musil, p. 86) All this unsettles Törless and he gets out his earlier attempts at poetry and tears them up.

"He flicked through one volume after another, then tore each one very slowly into very small pieces and threw them all, one by one, into the fire, each time relishing the tender emotion of farewell." (Musil, p. 88)

The next morning he tells Beineberg of his meeting with the mathematics teacher and both are affected by the idea of the irrational, the imaginary and the parallels which meet at infinity. Törless seems to be confused by the fact, but when Beineberg wants to talk about this matter with Basini once again, he refuses and emphasizes he has sought more something within himself. He recalls his childhood when he felt himself to be a small girl and already, half asleep, he feels a

"pleasant, tepid warmth – like a bath and a sensual stirring – which, although he was not at all aware of it being so, was in some enticingly unrecognizable but very emphatic way, associated with Basini." (Musil, p. 98)

One evening, alone in the classroom with Basini, he feels an astonishment in view of everything and believes that this has something to do with Basini. He looks over to Basini and feels a giddiness which increases in the next few minutes.

"Then Basini seemed to exude a physical influence, a fascination, like that which comes when one is sleeping near a woman and could at any moment pull the covers from her." (Musil, p. 105)

When he goes to bed, he is plagued by vague fantasies about Reiting and Beineberg with Basini.

On two holidays, only Basini and Törless remain in the school. At night, a strong intensification of Törless's feelings takes place.

“That night Törless came close to attacking Basini, such a murderous sensuality had awoken in him after the pain of the unthinking, dull-witted day.” (Musil, p. 108)

The next evening, the two go up to the attic chamber. Suddenly, Basini is standing naked before Törless.

“Basini had a beautiful physique; his body, almost entirely lacking in masculine forms, was as chastely slender as that of a young girl. And Törless felt the image of that nakedness lighting up in his nerves like hot, white flames. He could not escape the power of that beauty. He had never known before what beauty was.” (Musil, p. 110f)

He then barks at Basini who confesses that Beineberg’s and Reiting’s torments obviously have something to do with sexual actions and beatings. Törless wants to know everything exactly, how they prick him with needles, how they order him to bark like an animal and grunt like a pig. All this is unpleasant for him, above all, because it is supposed to happen on command. But otherwise it is not so bad at all. Here we see a clear denial in the sense of a split before us. Basini sees reality, but does not perceive it emotionally.

Törless now also wants to take part in tormenting Basini, but then pauses and says he does not want to after all. Basini weeps and says he cannot explain anything. He says that Törless would act the same way in his position. Apart from contempt, Törless now also feels pain, senses the danger also for himself. He sees a border between the life which is lived and the life which is felt.

“And between the life that is lived and the life that is felt, sensed and seen from a long way off, that invisible frontier lies like a narrow door, through which the images of events must cram themselves together in order to enter the human being.” (Musil, p. 120)

Later on, when he is lying in bed, Basini actually seduces him and says to him that he is different from his friends, not so coarse and boastful as them. After this incident, Törless meets Basini often.

“It was the secret, unspecific, melancholy sensuality, free of any human object, of the maturing boy, which is like the damp, black, seed-bearing earth in the spring and like dark, subterranean waters that need only an arbitrary cause to rise and break their walls.” (Musil, p. 124)

All this, however, seems to be like love for Törless. A passing choice of homosexual object is frequently a sign of the wavering, not yet firm choice of partner in adolescence. In search of extraordinary discoveries, Törless had pursued sensuousness, “not because he was perverse, but because his spiritual situation was temporarily aimless”. (Musil, p. 129)

Beineberg and Reiting are disturbed by Basini’s cheeky familiarity and they decide to keep on tormenting and whipping him. In his new situation, Törless’s feelings for Basini go completely cold. He now has a clear revulsion for him. Beineberg and Reiting threaten Basini with a revolver, hypnotize him and have him swing back and forth on a balcony like a pendulum. He falls and is whipped by Beineberg. Törless remains completely calm and is simply disgusted. A few days later, Basini asks him for help and tries once again to seduce him, but Törless feels only revulsion. Reiting threatens Basini with new torments, but Törless does not want to have anything more to do with it. He feels only a yearning for peace and quiet and for books. He reads his parents’ letter once again as an answer to his reports about his peculiar psychic state before the sensuous encounter with Basini.

“Once again it had been a very homespun reply, filled with tired and respectable ethics” (Musil, p. 147)

with the recommendation that Basini should report himself, which Törless also advises him to do.

The next day, the entire class gathers in the attic. Basini has to strip, letters from his mother are read out and he is pushed back and forth brutally among the others. Törless shudders because Basini is threatened with even a worse fate.

But the next morning, the headmaster puts an end to everything with a speech in which he accuses

the class of its brutality. Basini had reported himself and is expelled from the institution. Life now opens up for Törless.

“A stage of development had reached its conclusion, the soul had begun a new ring like a young tree, and that silent, overwhelming feeling excused everything that had happened.” (Musil, p. 150)

His inner excuse for all this was:

“Because I was interested in a process in my brain, something which, in spite of everything, I still don’t really understand, and something that makes what I think about it seem quite unimportant in comparison.” (Musil, p. 150f)

Afterwards, he first flees from an interrogation in the school, and then speaks before a commission somewhat confusedly about imaginary numbers, but then he becomes clearer.

“Any great realization is only half completed in the brain’s pool of light; the other half is formed in the dark soil of our innermost being, and above all it is a state of the soul on whose furthest tip the thought sits perched, like a flower.” (Musil, p. 156)

He sees everything, including thoughts, in two forms and speaks of a “second, secret, unnoticed life of things” (Musil, p. 157) which is barely accessible to understanding. It is decided that Törless should be educated privately. He himself asks his parents to be dismissed from the boarding school. When his mother picks him up, he seems cool and relaxed to her.

Musil shows in a portrayal which at first seems confusing to us, mainly through the eyes of Törless, the world of an adolescent. The story is embedded in the social structure of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy around the turn of the twentieth century. There are individual crises, just as politically a precarious situation is announcing itself. From the time when the novel was published up to the outbreak of the First World War, eight years will pass, but it must not be overlooked that the multi-ethnic state is already riven by numerous ethnic tensions. Against this background, the novel can be understood as the description of various characters, desires, feelings and fantasies on a personal level which push toward clarification in the stage of adolescence.

Törless is educated in a very protected, rather passive, feminine attitude and desires nothing other than to be able to attend this famous boarding school. Finally his parents give in to his persistent urging. But, as often happens in life, the hotly desired object becomes devalued after it is attained and the wish is inserted into its opposite. Perhaps here lies also the key to a psychic event of larger significance, the making-invisible of the real desires underlying a conscious wish.

Thus, Törless, too, discovers that behind his wish to attend this famous military academy there is a much deeper desire and destiny of his instincts. Without relating the various situations in which he gets involved at the boarding school once more, it is important to note that his friendship with the prince is probably the most tender and most moving relationship for him. His compensatory attempts with Reiting, Beineberg and Basini are not enrichments for his soul, but painful experiences which are entirely contrary to his ego.

The experience of the new savagery and brutality in his life at first satisfies only his desire for admiration and recognition. He does not yet inkle, however, the affective, psychic and mental price for this: the loss of his behavioural security and his hold in a network of norms.

Törless is driven by his emergent, sensuous life-world and the attempt to bring these discoveries into a form he can accept. Seduced by his comrades, Reiting and Beineberg, and by the sycophancy (to the point of self-denial) of his fellow pupil, Basini, his senses and his intellect are stimulated. At first he looks for a solution to this emergency in mathematics, but, disenchanted, he has to take cognisance of the fact that mathematics does not have anything to do with Kant’s transcendence and does not provide any instructions for how to act in his present, problematic situation.

He is therefore all the more receptive for sensuous attempted solutions. On the one hand, he denies his own wishes when he is almost outraged over Basini’s sudden nakedness in the Red Chamber, but

at the same time, he becomes captive to his momentary presence and power of seduction. Thus, neither in pure rationality, nor in pure sensuousness can Törless find a solution.

The exaggeration of sadism by Törless's comrades escalates into a collective hysteria of the class as a whole. In being pushed back and forth by his classmates, Basini falls to the ground like some sacrificial animal. Almost at the climax of the story, a turning takes place in Törless, a turning back to everyday reality.

During his time at the boarding school, his own feminine aspects also become obvious which he at first feels only as weakness and tries to fend off. He still cannot imagine any integration of this side into himself. Nevertheless, he does not persist statically in this position, but recalls that he already had similar feelings at a much earlier age, e.g. when passive feminine desires arose in him already as a child. The dialectical intertwining of feminine and masculine aspects and their balancing takes place finally, through all the confusion and commotion, in the coach from the boarding school to the railway station. He observes his mother secretly from the side:

“And he breathed in the faintly perfumed fragrance rising from his mother's waist.” (Musil, p. 160)

After a process of maturation, Törless can perceive his own masculinity, and his earlier desire for his own mother, which he experienced as shocking, can be transformed into a relaxed, sensuous perception of her femininity.

For the reader, the question concerning what will become of Törless remains open. If we follow the authorial narrator, he imagines Törless's future as that of an aesthetically sensitive person.

“Later, (...) Törless became a young man with a very fine and sensitive mind. He became one of those aesthetic and intellectual characters upon whom respect for the law and, to some extent, for public morals, has a calming effect, relieving them of the need to think about anything coarse and remote from the finer things of the soul; but who, when asked to declare a more personal interest in the objects of morality and the law, bring to their grandiose outward show of correctness, with its hint of irony, a certain bored insensitivity.” (Musil, p. 126)

But Törless's adolescent steps toward maturity alone do not provide any guarantee that he will be able to cope with everyday life and master life's challenges. Between the lines, so to speak, of the novel which on the surface seems to be a novel of adolescence, a second, provocative text is established which shows us in Musil's subtle, ironic mode of presentation, that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy comes to grief not only on the conglomerate of the multiethnic empire, but suffers also under an over-cultivated world of forms whose facade is not borne by any vital contents. Unconscious and hidden fantasies, sadistic affects and impulses to destructive actions therefore cannot be worked through in relation and have to seek a path of discharge in uncontrolled eruptions.