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Robert Musil's "Die Portugiesin": The Psychology of the Modern Fairy Tale

Leon L. Titche, Jr.

In the novellas which comprise the collection *Drei Frauen*¹, of which "Die Portugiesin" is one, one can see in the early works Musil's groundwork for his epic novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. And the novel, especially the latter half, contains themes which seem excised from essays by Jung. It is interesting to read the letter Jung wrote to James Joyce, enclosing a copy of his review of *Ulysses*. In the letter Jung says: "Your book as a whole has given me no end of trouble and I was brooding over it for about three years until I succeeded to put myself into it."² Jung no doubt would have made the same remark about Musil's no less difficult novella, for it presents the reader with the enigmatic world of the unconscious in the guise of a fairy tale. Musil, in setting his tale in a remote region in Europe during the Middle Ages, recalls for the reader the mysterious atmosphere of Ludwig Tieck's "Der blonde Eckbert." In this region the family of delle Catene, or von Ketten as they were also called, built a huge castle, a fortress. For generations the delle Catenes have waged war with the neighboring bishops, and after each battle they have had to yield to the superior forces of the princes of the church. As the story opens, von Ketten suddenly breaks a long silence and asks his new wife to return to her home. He is apparently fearful to let her into the fortress because of an impending battle. She, however, has her way, and they continue to ride on through a forest populated with wolves, unicorns and dragons. Her only expression of amazement is of the fortress itself, which looms before her. It seem to her that:

So wie noch keiner den Fuss des Regenbogens erreicht hat, sollte es auch noch nie einem gelungen sein, über die grossen Steinmauern zuschaun; immer waren neue Mauern dahinter. . . es war eine Welt, die eigentlich keine Welt war. . . Oft hatte sie sich in Träumen dieses Land. . . vorgestellt. . . (PDsB, 250)

Not only are the fairy-tale aspects depicted in an image-laden manner but, most important for our consideration, is that dreams now find their realization almost by chance. The milieu also gives the impression, via the woman, that we are dealing with a visionary world, a world which exists only in the unconscious of von Ketten and which she comprehends because she represents his feminine nature. Jung gives a simple explanation of this phenomenon in "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales:"

. . . to the degree that a man is overpowered by the (collective) unconscious there is not only a more unbridled intrusion of the instinctual sphere, but also the appearance of a certain feminine character, which I have suggested should be called "anima."³

The statement is, of course, a rudimentary one. The animal is developed by Jung in much more detail in other writings,⁴ but the emphasis here is on von Ketten's immersion into the labyrinthine maze of his unconscious, symbolically portrayed by the fortress which is almost impenetrable and, to his opponents, invulnerable.

Two days after their arrival, von Ketten leaves for battle and stays away for eleven years, returning once to stay with his wife for a day, because of a wound he has received. In the meantime, his Portuguese wife raises a young wolf which serves as a chthonic reminder of her husband because of its sinewy appearance, brown hair, "schweigende Wildheit und die Kraft der Augen" (PDsB, 255). The wolf, as well as the later unexplained appearance of the cat, increases the romantic fairy-tale aspect of the story. In fact theriomorphic symbolism is practically a prerequisite of the psychological fairy-tale. According to Jung, "the animal form shows that the contents and functions. . . [of a character in a fairy-tale] are still in the extrahuman sphere, i.e., on a plane beyond human consciousness. . ." (*Phenom.*, 86).

After the sudden sickness and eventual death of the bishop and the subsequent cessation of battle, von Ketten is bitten by a fly on his way home, a seemingly "unerhörte Begebenheit." That a fly could find a small opening in his armor and bite his hand, brings the story to an ironic turning point. Musil gives the incident a mere sentence which he raises to importance by making it an isolated paragraph: "Da stach ihn, als er heimritt, eine Fliege" (PDsB, 255). The intrusion of the fly is not only romantic irony, because of the usual insignificance of the insect, but also because it is never mentioned again. While the wolf, and eventually the cat, continue to play a prominent role in the story, the fly simply disappears. In this way the animal symbolism in the story continues displaying its Jungian employment by being, as Jung says, both "daemonically superhuman and...bestially subhuman" (*Phenom.*, 86).

Von Ketten's resulting illness totally incapacitates him: "Seltsam waren diese Schmerzen, gegen die er sich nicht wehren durfte" (PDsB, 256). The pain, the fever, the weakness all combine to debilitate the once vibrant and active man, thus reducing him physically as well as mentally. When he returns home, he submits to the care of his wife. In her ministrations to her husband, she reveals her mythic role: "Nur die Portugiesin brachte ausserdem noch geheime Zeichen an Tür und Bett an" (PDsB, 256). In his conscious state von Ketten is aware that his body as well as his soul is not his; it is as though he ". . . war mit einem Teil seines Wesens vorangestorben und hatte sich aufgelöst wie ein Zug Wanderer" (PDsB, 256). Von Ketten, because of his illness, now is susceptible to mythic intrusions of an archetypal nature. The pattern of the story, in fact, follows the development of the hero, as outlined by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.⁵

Von Ketten in fact has embarked on the rites of passage, whose conclusion be-

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At this point that von Ketten's journey, his rites of passage, entails a journey through the unconscious in his contact with his wife (his anima) and in association with the animals.

The first stage of his recovery begins when he realizes that he will die, "wenn er nicht allen Willen zusammennahm, um leben zu bleiben" (PDSB, 257). It is important to note that this is merely a realization — that the realization must be translated into actuality has not entered his conscious mind yet. What he sees but does not comprehend, is the meaning of the wolf that accompanies his wife. His failure to recognize his surrogate self is emphasized when he gives the order to shoot the animal. Its death initially shocks the Portuguese woman but, as she approaches her husband's bed, she laughs and says: "Ich werde mir eine Haube aus dem Fell machen lassen und dir nachts das Blut aussaugen" (PDSB, 257). "Haube" is associated with magic and, combined with her wish to let her husband's blood, the cap made from the wolf's pelt gives the woman the guise of the shaman or pharmakos. She then appears in as ambiguous a form as the wolf itself — as healer and as destroyer; and precisely because of the ambiguity, von Ketten is unable to distinguish and choose. Has she become the predator who will suck out his blood at night to kill him, or, by taking on the pelt (which after all is the symbol of her husband's lost vitality), will she restore her husband's vigor? The enigma is addressed by Jung, where he states that: "the primitive medicine man is a healer and helper and also the dreaded concocter of poisons. The very word *pharmakos* means 'poison' as well as 'antidote,' and poison can in fact be both" (*Phenom.*, 83). The role of pharmakos becomes fused with that of anima in the story solidifying the Portuguese woman's role to the point that: ...not only in fairy tales but in life generally, the objective intervention of the archetype is needed, which checks the purely affective reactions with a chain of inner confrontations and realizations (*Phenom.*, 76).

It is important to note that in myth, woman never appears as a shaman. Musil's departure from the traditional representation, however, is used to elevate the significance of the Portuguese woman to such an extent that not only does she merge with her husband's "alter ego," the wolf, as healer, but she also reinforces her position as anima, as a guide into the recesses of his unconscious and back again. Against this recognition von Ketten still struggles; for although he has regained his will to live, he has not attained the second stage of recovery which a soothsayer has foretold and which entails the accomplishment of some deed — exactly what, the soothsayer refuses to reveal. It is at this point in the story (where further development is halted and where his wife recedes somewhat as a formidable power) that the cat, the central animal figure, appears. Its appearance is in a situation where "insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc., are needed but cannot be mustered on one's own resources" (*Phenom.*, 71).

The cat's role differs from that of the wolf's; the cat's function is to assume the "sins of the world," and thus it becomes the metaphor of Christ. Its appearance, although clouded in mystery, seems expected: "Eines Tages. . . war oben vor

dem Tor die University of Dayton Review, Vol. 14, No. 2 [1980], Art. 9
 dem Tor die *prima materia* of von Ketten's unconscious (and thus to a certain degree its negative aspect), for "so long as consciousness refrains from acting, the opposites will remain dormant in the unconscious" (*Psychology*, 338); that phenomenon is why the wolf grows strong as von Ketten grows weak. He takes over von Ketten's vitality and prevents his consciousness from acting. The cat, on the other hand, symbolizes redemption as it assumes the role of savior, thus cancelling the effect of the *prima materia* and elevating gradually von Ketten's consciousness to the point of total awareness. The way the cat functions as savior in this story is expressed perhaps best by one of the leading German romantic poets, Novalis, where he writes:

Wenn Gott Mensch werden konnte, kann er auch Stein, Pflanze[.]
 Thier und Element werden, und vielleicht giebt es auf
 diese Art eine fortwährende Erlösung in der Natur.⁷

This statement is echoed by Musil in the concluding paragraph of the story, firmly placing the animal in a mythical context.

The cat is not presented in a subtle fashion. Its manifestation, sudden yet expected, is described by Musil in increasingly more human terms, beginning with the statement that the cat wished to enter the castle not like a cat, but "nach Menschenart" (*PDsB*, 260). The following quotation illuminates both Musil's symbolic representation of the animal and his use of the fairy-tale motif:

Die kleine Katze hatte inzwischen einen Namen aus einem der Märchenbücher erhalten. Sie war noch sanfter und duldsamer geworden. Jetzt konnte man auch schon bemerken, dass sie krank und fast leuchtend schwach wurde. Sie ruhte immer länger aus im Schoss von den Geschäften der Welt, und ihr kleinen Krallen hielten sich mit zärtlicher Angst fest. Sie begann jetzt zuch einen um den andren anzusehn . . . Sie sah sie an, als wollte sie um Vergebung dafür bitten, dass es hässlich sein werde, was sie in *geheimer Vertretung für alle litt. Und dann begann ihr Martyrium.* (*PDsB*, 261), italics mine)

We are never told the cat's name — it, too, is shrouded in mystery, as though to know it and speak it, the divine tetragrammaton, would be not only blasphemy, but the revelation of the secret of God to man as well. That it is taken from an unnamed fairy-tale book implants the name in the mythopoetic realm of archetypal imagery at the time when von Ketten is continuing through the rites of passage toward recovery and individuation. The seriousness with which the animal is described does not prevent occasional irony, however; for, as Campbell states:

It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and "unreal"; they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs. (*Hero*, 29)

As a consequence of its sickness and death, the cat fulfills two functions which have an etymological basis: there is a linkage in Latin between *feles* and

Tithe, Robert Musil's "Die Portugiesin": The Psychology of the Modern Fa
felix to mean "fertile" and later Latin defines it as "happy" and "blessed." By its sacrificial death for von Ketten, the cat performs an act of regeneration, thus highlighting its first definition. Then, his regeneration culminates in psychological wholeness, the transformed state of *felicitas*:

"The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth...is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man. The objective world remains what it was, but, because of a shift of emphasis within the subject, is beheld as though transformed."
(*Hero*, 28)

The cat's death parallels in fact von Ketten's sickness. Sick and mangy, the animal suffers its horrible agony in silence in such a way that "...an dem Tier war es wie eine Menschwerdung" (*PDsB*, 262); and all thought that "es sein eigenes Schicksal sei, das in diese vom Irdischen schon halb gelöste kleine Katze übergegangen sei." (*PDsB*, 262). On the third day, the cat is killed, for which action everyone feels tremendous guilt. The redemptive sacrifice, while not following exactly the Christian paradigm, is unmistakable nevertheless: the cat suffered and was put to death, atoning for von Ketten and releasing him from his bondage. The bondage is von Ketten's inability to bring to conscious recognition all the dark forces of his unconscious. The sickness from which he suffers is only an external manifestation of his inner soulsickness. The cat enables him to attain the third and last stage in his rites of passage, the return. This return goes hand-in-hand with the soothsayer's prediction that not only will von Ketten return to his wife, but return to conscious awareness and recognize her as his anima. Because she represents his anima, she is the only one who understands the meaning of the cat. Von Ketten's return is the negation of his previous state of *mens mala in corpore malo*. He scales the castle wall and uncovers his former vitality in keeping with the soothsayer's prophecy that he will accomplish some deed, and verifying Jung's statement that:

To the man of enlightened intellect it seems like the correction of a fallacy when he recognizes that what he took to be spirits is simply the human spirit and ultimately his own spirit. All the superhuman things...are reduced to "reasonable" proportions as though they were pure exaggeration, and everything seems to be in the best possible order. (*Phenom*, 110-111)

The wall, the barrier to consciousness, has been surmounted; and the shackles which have made his entire existence so meaningless in the futile search for conquest appear to fall by the way. The rites of passage, through which the protagonist had to travel, have been completed, and the Portuguese woman now reveals to him the mystery of the cat when she says: "Wenn Gott Mensch werden konnte, kann er auch Katze werden..." (*PDsB*, 264). Thus she echoes the fairy-tale mystique of the pagan-Christian Middle Ages, solidifying the elements of the fairy-tale in the mythic niveau of archetypal imagery. Such artificially created dualities as the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict of intellect and reason versus instinct and will blend in the harmony of the consciousness of the "man of enlightened intellect." Motific configurations of *daimonia*, which have plagued von Ketten for so long, merge at the conclusion as the individuation

The fairy-tale, therefore, functions as a therapeutic vehicle. If it is true that "man's whole history consists from the very beginning in a conflict between his feelings of inferiority and his arrogance" (*Spirit*, 87), then, this genre resolves that conflict without resorting to the more classical extremes of dealing with hubris. The use of this kind of ancient tale can, if written effectively, bring to the fore the primal, chthonic residua of the unconscious, then unleash the mysterious forces upon the individual until the final catharsis is reached. Musil has not written a primer for psychology; nonetheless his novella provides a detailed view and examination of the human psyche.

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NOTES

¹Robert Musil, *Prosa Dramen, späte Briefe* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957). References to this volume will be cited as *PDsB*, followed by page number.

²C. G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971). References to this volume will be cited as *Spirit*, followed by page number.

³C. G. Jung, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales," from *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo, (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 105. Further reference to this volume will be cited as *Phenom.*, followed by page number.

⁴With Jung, of course, the concept of the anima has a rather complex development. For the scope of this article, however, one can say that the anima emerges in myth and dreams. In both cases, the male unconscious is its repository, and, depending on the relative psychic constitution of the male, the anima appears in many guises. In Jung's collaboration with C. Kerényi, which resulted in a series of articles published under the title *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), the anima's mythic genesis is shown in relation to a goddess, an animal, etc.: "...the anima is bipolar and can therefore appear positive one moment and negative the next; now young, now old; now mother, now maiden; now a good fairy, now a witch; now a saint, now a whore" (173); further on, Jung states that the anima may possess some "theriomorphic variations" (173); further on, Jung states that the anima may possess some "theriomorphic variations" (176). Thus, the Portuguese woman in the story emerges at this point as an anima in the shadows, slowly assuming a more forceful and decisive role in relation to her husband. Her natural affinity to animals, her manifestation as a protean, "bipolar" figure throughout the novella relative to von Ketten's unconscious, align her with Jung's description and definition of anima throughout the corpus of his writings. Suffice to say that, "for a man, anima experiences are always of immense and abiding significance" (177).

⁵Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 30. Further references will be cited as *Hero* followed by page number.

⁶C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1968), pp. 338, 412.

⁷Novalis, *Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel, Bd. III, *Das philosophische Werk II* (Darmstadt: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1968), p. 664.