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Cultural Nationalism and the Experience of History: Robert Musil's Imagi-Nation

This essay offers a reading of Robert Musil's political essays, "Der Anschluss an Deutschland" (1919) and "Die Nation als Ideal und Wirklichkeit" (1921), tracing the author's transformation from a supporter of Austrian *Anschluss* and enthusiastic proponent of German cultural nationalism into a seemingly disillusioned but skeptical writer who declared the nation to be an illusion and product of the imagination. Focusing on the author's reaction to historical events—in particular, the emergence of the nation as the dominant form of political organization—and his reflections on the future possibilities of cultural and political communities in Austria and Germany, the essay attempts to situate Musil's identity and self-understanding as a writer in the nexus between his experience of history and his imagination. By reading Musil's essays as both *historical and imaginative narratives*, I seek to examine the complex relationality that the imagination assumes in the formation of communities and the making of (Austrian) histories and national identities.

While the link between the shaping of national identities and the imagination has become a commonplace since the first publication of Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*, studies that have appeared since then—notably, work by Homi Bhabha and Prasenjit Duara—have shown that the isolation of the imagination as the major driving force behind the birth of nations can be reductive and that there might be cases in which it would be more conducive to analysis to regard it as a *relational* phenomenon. Prasenjit Duara has pointed out that studies of nations and nationalism have tended to de-historicize national identity or treat history epiphenomenally. For Duara, this de-historicization is itself the result of a tendency to regard national identity as a purely novel, modern form of consciousness, and to undifferentiatedly reject a nationalist historiography that assumes the ancient history of the nation. This effacement of history tends to obscure the *ambivalence* of national identity: while nationalists wish to represent their nation as atemporal and infinite (in short, modern) and, in that sense, seek to master history, the narratives they produce for this purpose also force them to confront the "many histories" and consequently the multiplicity of co-existent alternative historical and political identities. The ambivalence of national identity ultimately suggests that the narration of the nation is always inscribed in a complex field in which *history* and *historicity*—the experience of the becoming-history of events—and *imagination* contest each other.

This ambivalence of national identity also characterizes the essayistic work of Robert Musil, in particular, his attempts at self-definition during a time of radical political transformations: while Musil rejected the idea of an independent Austrian literature or culture throughout his life, seeing himself instead as a member of a German cultural tradition, in a conversation with a friend in 1936 he nevertheless declared himself, unhesitatingly, to be an "Austrian" writer. How did Musil negotiate his self-understanding as an "Austrian" with his chosen cultural affiliation with the German nation? What, in particular, led him to imagine

himself an “Austrian” writer? Viewing Musil’s essays as textual sites where history and the imagination contest each other, I intend to show how the historical and the imaginative elements in Musil’s essays combine to narrate the heterogeneous historical, cultural and political identities of a modern “Austrian” writer. My aim is thereby not to “deconstruct” Musil’s essays (by simply stressing the irreducibility of the identities inscribed in it), but to show how they expose the complex relationality—historical and other—of the (Austrian) imagination.