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"Imperialism of the Spirit": Fictions of Totality and the Self in Austrian Modernism^{*}

In Austrian Studies, the debate continues as to whether postcolonial theory is applicable to the Hapsburg monarchy. This article seeks to contribute to this debate by analysing discursive structures common to the continental empires rooted in medieval structures and to modern colonial empires, as well as critically assessing some of their specificities. To this end, I analyse the Utopia of an "Imperialism of the Spirit" present in the essays of two central Viennese modernists, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Robert Müller, demonstrating the discursive construction of a particular kind of imperialism and nationalism based on culture and the arts. I further show, focusing on Robert Müller's and Robert Musil's major novels, how imperialism functions as a fulcrum of the complex relation of modernist literature with the paradigm of modernity. At the same time, imperialism is also the object of critique and rewriting in the context of the resolution of the many crises of modernity, especially that of the Subject.

Keywords: Austrian Modernism; Imperialism; Essayism; Robert Musil; Robert Müller

1. Postcolonial theory and the Austro-Hungarian Empire

Although a growing number of critics analyse the Austro-Hungarian Empire within the theoretical framework of postcolonial studies, controversy continues to dog the issue of whether analytical concepts developed in Anglo-Saxon thought and specifically for overseas colonial empires are applicable in the Austrian context.

According to Edward Said, the concept of "imperialism" applies exclusively to empires characterised by territorial discontinuity between mainland and colonies, which excludes continental European empires, such as the Hapsburg, from the framework of postcolonial studies (Said, 1994: xxv). However, the contradictions of Said's concept of imperialism have been sufficiently highlighted, notably in what concerns his recognition of imperial power relations within Europe itself, as is the case of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland (Müller-Funk, 2001: 4).

Indeed, a comparison of the model of continental empires rooted in medieval structures with the model of overseas colonial empires, characteristic of modernity, reveals common basic features that justify an approach to the Hapsburg Empire within the framework of

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postcolonial concepts, notwithstanding their respective particularities.¹ The advantage of these concepts is mainly that they allow us to unveil the power relations that shaped the coexistence of the peoples of the monarchy, which was often idealised as a harmonic multinational conviviality. Yet, these power relations built hierarchies among these peoples by means of diverse dependencies, and thus determined both their own multiple identities (as representations of Self and Other) and the identities of Austria itself, as a result of multiple contexts and perspectives. *Topoi* such as the “Hapsburg myth” or “multiculturality” cannot conceal, for instance, the establishment of centres and peripheries, or the discursively constructed dualism between savage and exotic peoples, in need of civilization, and the civilising mission of a “superior” minority. These are some of the typical mechanisms of imperialist discourse which emerged in Austrian nationalist rhetoric.

Nonetheless, as far as the Hapsburg Empire is concerned, the following specific issues need more in-depth analysis: 1) the matter of imperialist competition among the major European powers; 2) the fusing of imperialist discourse with nationalist discourse within a multinational empire; 3) the reinforced weight of the symbolic, of culture and of the past in the discourse of imperialist legitimization, as compensation for the lack of real political and economic power.

According to Fredric Jameson, competition among the major powers constituted the overriding feature of early twentieth-century imperialism in Europe. That is to say, both for the ordinary European citizen and for European writers, the “Other” was not first and foremost the colonised, but rather another European power (Jameson, 1990: 46). The efforts expended by each of these countries to affirm hegemony in nationalist and imperialist terms thus presupposed the discursive construction of a position of superiority in relation to the closest competing power. This construction as a rule resorted to material arguments such as the size of the respective empire and the economic, political and military weight of its colonies. However, when these arguments did not apply, as was the case of Austria, the longed-for hegemonic position in the European continent had to be justified in a

¹ This is what Müller-Funk (2001), for example, proposes. Despite underscoring the differences between an empire such as the Austrian as a “continental power,” and the Saidean empires as “maritime powers,” in accordance with the contradistinction established by Carl Schmitt, he does not reject the applicability of postcolonial theory to Austria, but rather argues that it should be used in the critical evaluation of the specificities of each.

totally different way, which involved a withdrawal from the real, and especially from real politics.

For this reason, in early twentieth-century Austrian nationalist rhetoric, the criterion of the dimension of the colonial empire was replaced by a symbolic and ethical discourse, whereby Austria's superiority over the remainder of the European powers rested on a representation of the Hapsburg empire as multicultural, and thus as the embodiment of a purportedly original unity of the European peoples. That is to say, the *topos* of multiculturality was converted into the core and model of a European identity defined as classical, Christian, humanist, and therefore universal. This *topos* also sustained the symbolic identification of Austria ("a world in miniature") with the world, and of Austrians with humanity, presented as being inherently diverse, but in fact reduced to Europe and to Europeans.

Moreover, the presentation of Austria as a synonym for the "Old Continent" rested on identifying the House of Hapsburg with the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, an empire which, under Charles V, had achieved world dimension and which could thus also represent the logic of imperialist expansionism as part of the European identity. With this type of symbolic and ethical codification of its own identity vis-à-vis a European Other, and by resorting to regressive values such as heritage, authenticity and longevity, and to abstract concepts such as the spirit and universality, Austria charted itself discursively at the centre of Europe as the centre of the West and of the world, and built for itself an ethical and cultural legitimization as the most important of the major powers, thus dispensing with the arguments of the colonial empires grounded in political and economic power. In Austrian imperialist discourse, material power was replaced by a heavily symbolic rhetoric, which aimed to bestow on the Hapsburg Empire a transcendental and metaphysical aura and to present its unity as an indisputable dogma.

Additionally, this multiculturality was endowed with nationalist overtones: the foundation of Austria's identification with Europe continued to be the Hapsburg crown as the centre of the centre of the centre, and this was presented as the epitome of the Germanic people or the German essence. The peoples of the monarchy were charted around the Imperial House in concentric circles intersecting each other in a complex manner. Austria's national identity was thus linked, not directly to the nation as a cultural or spiritual community, but rather to the State, personified and mythified by means of diverse symbolic processes which included

the cult of the patriarchal figure of the emperor. The hegemonic affirmation of the German minority explains the discursive construction of the monarchy's national plurality as the enrichment of a common history and memory, which, however, becomes fused with and is symbolically represented by a Germanic emperor. In this narrative, submission to the Hapsburgs becomes the *telos* of the history of each of the monarchy's peoples, contributing to the legitimisation of an Austrian nationalism which superimposed itself on the nationalisms of the many nations gathered under the empire, so as to guarantee its unity and cohesion. Thus, in the Hapsburg State, the narrative of imperialism forms part of, extends and consolidates the narrative of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson), much like that which occurred in the modern overseas colonial powers, according to Said. However, in the case of Austria, this happened indirectly, by means of an intricate artifice which, based on the paradoxical instrument of the discourse of multiculturality, and where the State was concerned, allowed nationalism, as a centrifugal and fracturing dynamic, to be converted into a centripetal and centralising force.

These discursive lines appeared not simply in early twentieth-century political and press discourse but also in the essayistic work of the epoch's relevant writers such as, for instance, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Robert Müller. Both created the utopia of an "Imperialism of the Spirit" which served the patriotic goal of positioning Austria at the forefront of the major powers, resorting to argumentation in the cultural or spiritual domain. These writers' imperialistic and patriotic utopias also appear, however, to respond to individual motivations: they probably constitute a possible solution for the profound crisis of the aesthetic subject in modernism.

2. The "Imperialism of the Spirit" as a utopia of the nation, the world and the self

It would be an exercise in superfluity to reproduce here Hermann Bahr's theses on the crisis of the Subject in modernity, subsumed in the title of one of the programmatic essays by this major force behind Viennese modernism: "The Irretrievably Lost Self." In brief, it should suffice to recall that this Self is perceived as empty, fractured, lacking a centre capable of organising or integrating it, very much as reality itself: a world without meaning, plunged in dissociation, in which "the centre cannot hold" (Yeats). Since, according to Nietzsche, reality is nothing but an aesthetic fiction, thus presupposing the existence of a Subject which creates, the modernist Self adopts, as a precarious solution for its desperate state, the

condition of absolute creator that invents itself and the world. The construction of individual identity therefore implies the concomitant construction of a totality, from which the Self, as a singular entity, is dissociated but with which that same Self can identify in order to overcome its alienation in modernity. Both constructs display aesthetic features.

From this standpoint, the “Imperialism of the Spirit” demands another reading in addition to the ideological nationalist reading: we have here a new narrative of the world as a whole – like most imperialist narratives – whose centre is occupied by the aesthetic Subject and which, originating in that same Subject, seeks to redeem it.² This is the meaning of the utopia of an imperial Self present in Hofmannsthal’s and Müller’s essays, and particularly in Robert Müller’s *Tropen. Der Mythos der Reise. Urkunden eines deutschen Ingenieurs* [Tropics/Tropes. The Myth of the Journey. Testimony of a German Engineer] (1915) and Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [The Man without Qualities] (1930). In these masterworks of Austrian modernism, the construction of the Subject coincides with an alternative narrative of reality as a whole, in keeping with the project of the “Imperialism of the Spirit”: both are structured according to an imperialist model which uses the essay form as an epistemological and aesthetic solution for the textual creation of new fictions of totality. According to Theodor W. Adorno (1958), the “Essay as Form” is able to construct a heterogeneous totality which preserves the particular, or “non-identical,” and which, like every singular identity, is conceived of as non-substantial, relational and negotiated. It is this type of totality and Subject which Müller and Musil seek to construct in their novels.

To be able to analyse these works within the framework of the “Imperialism of the Spirit,” however, it is necessary to take into account a number of other features which demonstrate how imperialism determines the structure of novelistic construction in modernism, and especially the fact that this political and epistemological paradigm is to be found at the centre of the encounter between literary modernism and Enlightenment-rooted modernity,

² This is what Irene Ramalho Santos (2003) finds in Fernando Pessoa, who likewise proclaims an “imperialism of poets.” Here, too, is a nationalist utopia which, on the one hand, seeks to assist the Portuguese empire in recovering its position as a world power, in this case based on a cultural legitimacy that can dispense with the overseas colonies and which, on the other hand, represents an attempt to redeem the modernist subject in crisis. The Pessoaan line “The nothing which is all” admirably expresses this crisis of the subject and suggests a paradoxical solution which coincides with the subjective creation of an aesthetic and poetic totality. According to Ramalho Santos, Pessoa takes up anew the Romantic conception of poetry as an “imperial faculty” (Shelley), seeking to play the Romantic role of the poet as “unacknowledged legislator,” i.e. the role of creator of the world, including the political, as an aesthetic reality. António Sousa Ribeiro in turn relates these theses on Pessoa with Hofmannsthal and Müller (Ribeiro, 2007). On the same subject, see also Martins, 2007.

strongly influencing the search for new solutions for the different crises of the modern paradigm, including the crisis of the literary text itself.

From the point of view of understanding aesthetic modernism as a self-critique of modernity – a paradigm which finds in imperialism a fundamental component of its logic of progress, of (never-ending) expansion and of homogenising universalism – I find it particularly relevant to assess the differences between the modern overseas colonial empires and the continental empires rooted in medieval structures. From the socio-political and epistemological point of view, within the frame of the paradigm of modernity, imperialism constitutes a model of totality, or, at least, the model for a process of creating totality, which is to replace the medieval transcendental unity of the whole. The dynamic of imperialism, similarly to that of knowledge in the rationalist paradigm, is a dynamic of discovery and of appropriation of the object by the cognitive Subject (or of the alien Other by the national Self), which causes the integration of the object into the Subject's homogenous and normative structure, leading to the expansion of the latter as absolute. This logic presupposes constant demarcation between Subject and object, as well as the successive displacement of the frontier between the two, thus pointing to a fundamental aporia in imperialism: the ambition of universalism will never be attained, since total absorption of the object, or the Other, would mean the self-destruction of the Subject.

Fredric Jameson and Edward Said argue, in the context of overseas colonial empires, that there is a close link between the literature of modernism and the imperialist structuring of the world. This structuring has important consequences for the formal configuration of the text – for instance, its continuity/discontinuity – and for categories such as space and time. Taking this view, we must ask ourselves whether there may be a similar link present in the aesthetic options made by modernist writers from a different imperial context, in many respects a pre-modern context that does not have the geographical discontinuity of maritime empires and that is not so strongly shaped by the above logic of progress and expansion, but rather basing its own legitimacy on the past and on history and displaying a regressive pride vis-à-vis a neo-feudal monarchy.

3. Hugo von Hofmannsthal

In his essay “Wir Österreicher und Deutschland” [We Austrians and Germany] (1915), Hugo von Hofmannsthal seeks to define Austrian identity in the context of the onset of World War

I. His aim is primarily to affirm Austria's position as a multinational State in the imperialist competition prevailing among the European powers, as well as with respect to Germany. His avowed aim explains his preference for a discourse revolving around a German "spirit" and not a German "nation":

Austria is the special mission attributed to the German spirit in Europe. It is the territory designated by destiny for a purely spiritual imperialism. Because it does not need the interference of German political power, but rather the constant influence of the German spirit. Austria must be recognised and re-recognised as *the German mission in Europe*. (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 230; emphasis in original)

The "German spirit" seems to be a mental characteristic of the Germans, located beyond language, which finds in Austria its exemplary embodiment and its main agent within the framework of a mode of imperialism inherent to it. Elected for an imperial mission, Austria carries it out by means of a cultural mediation which is indispensable to the unity of Europe, notably as a bridge linking West and North, on the one hand, with South and East, on the other: "To the East and to the South, Austria is a country which gives; to the West and to the North, it is a country which receives" (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 230-1).

Through this task of spiritual mediation, Austria is charted at the centre of the world and functions as the lever of the whole. From the temporal point of view, it possesses a similar centrality and also plays a unifying role: according to Hofmannsthal, his country embodies the Germans' history and memory in a more authentic and original way than Germany, melting together the past and the promise of the future, presented by the writer within the parameters of imperialist discourse: Austria is an "America," the stereotype of a new continent which must be conquered, occupied and explored; in turn, the "German spirit" contains the characteristics of the European conquistadors and colonisers of the New World. The territories and peoples to be colonised spiritually, especially the Slavs, must, in Hofmannsthal's words, be grateful to the colonisers, for it is to the latter that they owe their existence and the sense of that existence, a history, or, in the words of the text, the "essence of life" (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 230).

This "spiritual" discourse appears as a euphemism for the *topos* of the civilising mission, within the framework of a mental paradigm having political imperialism, of a militaristic cast, as its model. In his essay "Worte zum Gedächtnis des Prinzen Eugen" [In Memoriam Prince Eugene] (1914), the description of Prince Eugene as "conquistador and ruler of the future"

(Hofmannsthal, 1964: 193) rests on an imperialist narrative which, although continental, contains the *topoi* of colonialist and discovery discourse, including notably the *topos* of the civilising coloniser who makes virgin land bear fruit and to whom the territories conquered, previously savage and lacking a history, after all owe their very existence (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 211-2).

Thus, the Austrian national poet's "Imperialism of the Spirit" is not too distant from the discourse of political and military imperialism. Hofmannsthal's construction of a national history centred on its imperial character and mission seeks to uphold the idea that Austria's legitimacy as an empire is deeper than that of the other European powers, to the extent that it dispenses with overseas colonies – an idea which can only be understood in the context of the imperialist competition which culminated in World War I. At the same time, within the context of constructing a national identity that, ultimately, is not really multiple, the discourse of Austrian multiculturality is not able to camouflage the defence of German cultural homogenisation and superiority: Austria's multicultural army, the aesthetic oeuvre of the great imperialist Eugene, was the actual pillar of "Germanic" dominion over the Slav peoples, and its foundation was made possible by the "great feat towards the East" (the destruction of the Ottoman empire) (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 229).

When Hofmannsthal describes the tangible manifestations of the Austrian spirit, namely the arts, a unifying conception of multiculturality is equally present. In his essay "Österreich im Spiegel seiner Dichtung" [Austria in the Mirror of her Poetry] (1915), Austrian music appears as an imperial conqueror of the world, embodying "German beingness," although it blends together the spiritual contribution of the monarchy's non-German peoples (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 333). According to the author, the "most profound Germanness" is a type of homogenous and unified medium which absorbs the non-German elements and bestows meaning on them. Austria thus becomes a synonym for synthesis and integration, a poetic idea of totality, valid not simply for the Hapsburg empire, but also for a Europe viewed as a German synthesis:

Whoever says "Austria" says actually a centuries-long struggle for Europe, a centuries-long mission throughout Europe, a centuries-long belief in Europe. For us, who dwell on the soil of two Roman Empires, Germans and Slavs and Latins, chosen to be the bearers of a common destiny and legacy, for us Europe is truly the essential colour of the planet, for us Europe is the colour of the stars, when these begin to shine anew over us, out of the cloudless sky. (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 383)

In his notes for a speech titled “Die Idee Europa” [The Idea of Europe] (1916), the Old Continent appears as a synonym for the Earth and for humanity, in accordance with the premise of Western colonialism which denies the rest of the world its human condition. His premise is sustained by arguments turned towards the past: Austria’s hegemonic demands are legitimised by a purported symbolic concentration of Western thought, of Humanism and Christianity, in the Hapsburg empire, as well as by the fact that the latter was the direct descendant of the Roman Empire and of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. For Hofmannsthal, superiority among the powers does not stem from possessing colonial territories, rather it rests on the exponent of universality which can identify an individual nation with the totality. This universality can, obviously, only be found in Austria. In the Austrian poet’s argumentation there is no lack of expansionist motifs, since, in his own words, Europe, “the fundamental colour of the planet,” must expand within the context of a spiritual mission akin to the civilising mission of colonialist discourse and with which poets are tasked (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 381-2).

Essentially, the idea of totality also explains the reference to the Romantic concept of the nation in “The Idea of Europe.” In this essay, Hofmannsthal cites Novalis’s definition of Germanness, according to whom it corresponds to a “blending of cosmopolitanism and the strongest individuality.” Novalis further states that “no nation can attain our measure of energetic universality” (Hofmannsthal, 1964: 371). “Germanness” means individuality and universality at one and the same time, or rather the possibility of being selfsame and, at the same time, identical to the whole. This corresponds exactly to the yearning of the modernist subject: overcoming alienation through an identity allowing for uniqueness and for identification with everything else.

In this sense, Hofmannsthal’s apparently cosmopolitan utopia is, after all, strongly nationalistic.³ And it could not be otherwise, since the writer’s goal is to find an idea of totality and an idea of centre (the nation, and the Self within it) which will organize and integrate that totality, in a modernity characterised by fragmentation and dissociation. This is why Hofmannsthal resorts to imperialism as a model of the whole, displacing it towards the domain of the spirit, poets and poetry. Despite being empty and “irrevocably lost,” the

³ On this point, I take up António Sousa Ribeiro’s conclusions regarding Hofmannsthal and Fernando Pessoa: “Universalism is inseparable from the symbolic reconstruction of identity in a way that is distinctly national; the intended cosmopolitanism in this way reveals itself as intensely nationalistic in character” (Ribeiro, 2007: 565).

aesthetic modernist Self thus appears as the constructor and as the centre of that imperial whole, finding the unity and identity so desperately sought in the symbolic personification of a nation which itself represents unity within diversity, and which can only be defined as empire.

4. Robert Müller

Just like Hofmannsthal, Robert Müller conceives of a markedly nationalist identity for Austria within the context of an imperialism that, given the actual political weakness of the Austrian monarchy, bases its legitimacy on a spiritual mission. In his essay “Macht. Psychopolitische Grundlagen des gegenwärtigen atlantischen Krieges” [Power. Psycho-political Fundaments of the Present Atlantic War], published in 1915, this nationalist project took on the title “Imperialism of the Spirit.” However, the same concept had appeared for the first time the previous year, in the essay “Was erwartet Österreich von seinem jungen Thronfolger?” [What Can Austria Expect from her Young Successor to the Throne?]. Published shortly after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, the essay addresses the question of the unity and preservation of the Hapsburg Empire, taking as its point of departure the construction of a multicultural identity for Austria. To this end, Robert Müller adapts the Romantic concept of “Kulturnation” to his contradictory nationalist concept of a multinational State. Language remains the core of the definition of national community, but it is now given the status of a secondary system: a kind of unified symbolic and cultural code formed from the gathering of all the peoples of the monarchy and from melting their respective languages together. According to the writer, these ingredients will furnish the basis for a society and a State at once cosmopolitan and national (Müller, 1995: 36, 38-9).

In what Müller is concerned, the Austro-Hungarian State’s capacity for holding a simultaneously individual and multiple identity is important, for different reasons: (1) in view of his deep Austrian patriotism, the writer has to invent an alternative concept of nation as unity in diversity; only thus can he sustain his defence of the preservation of the Hapsburg empire as a multinational State and retain the national principle as the *raison-d’être* of the State, although, in another text, he expressly rejects the “political stigmatism” of nineteenth-century “national impressionism” (Müller, 1995: 36, 31); (2) affirming the hegemonic claims of a continental empire in decline, in the context of imperialist competition among the European colonial powers, depends on a new concept of Europe,

this, too, conceived of in the image of Austria as unity in diversity. Müller operates with a circular logic which moves between Austria and Europe as mirrors of each other: after reinventing Europe in this manner, he is in a position to present his country as a model of the Old Continent, not simply because of its national polychromy, but also because the Hapsburg empire shows that historically it possesses the characteristics which can guarantee the unity and organisation crucial to a supra-State. In Müller's view, this fact is documented by the coincidence of Austria with the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which achieved world expansion under the Hapsburg ruler Charles V. Müller thus situates his country geographically at the centre of Europe and chronologically at the source of this same continent, ascribing to it the values of universality, age and authenticity which legitimise hegemonic claims from the cultural point of view. The Austrian empire is identical to itself and identical to the whole, i.e. it is the imperialist nation par excellence:

At this time, only *the idea of European culture and of the European State* can be a forward-driving force again, *an idea which cannot fail to see in Austria a prior model, resting on the idea of race, inspired by unity, and polychromatic in national terms. Austria can be a powerful point of crystallisation for the whole of Europe*, out of whose Romanic, Teutonic and Slav elements it has built a whole. (Müller, 1995: 36; emphasis in original)

The cosmopolitanism of this theory of a national and European melting pot is merely superficial. In the unitary construct which is Austria, there is a hierarchy made up of the "language and culture of the conquistadors" which incorporates the others. The latter are expressly described as "national pawns sacrificed" to the winners of "the chess game of culture" (Müller, 1995: 36). Ultimately, there is but one language and one culture, not simply in the "Eastern Empire" ["Ost-Reich"] which is Austria, but in all of Europe, and this language and culture is German (Müller, 1995: 38).

Although it revolves exclusively around culture, this conception of Austria and of the world does not conceal its political character. The process of "incorporating" the Other, which will turn into a "national nuance" (or subjugated nation) of a "dominant" culture, is nothing but a cultural mask for the imperial territorial annexations carried out by the Hapsburgs in the East and which, for Müller, should be extended. Furthermore, Müller's discourse displays typical traits of imperialist discourse, for he affords exclusive recognition to Western culture (he denies the rest of the world, especially the East, the capacity of constituting a culture and a language, unless the West confers meaning on them), presenting

it as homogenous under Germanic hegemony: when the writer describes the polychromy of Austria as a model of Europe, this polychromy should in turn be understood as a set of shades of a fundamental colour in the process of expansion (akin to Hofmannsthal's, although with obvious racial connotations in Müller) – the colour or the dogmatic and mythical idea of the Germanic:

And what does Germanising mean? *Germanising means bestowing an Ideal; Germanising means bestowing the defined and precise Idea of a given world order!* The Germanic is Idea. *The Germanic is an act of decision and of creation.*

What is Germanic? Our ethics, our will, our philosophy, our politics. (Müller, 1995: 28; emphasis in original)

In Müller's essay, the Germanic performs a similar function to that of Hofmannsthal's "German spirit," although the former has a tangible symbolic representation: the "Prince," the heir to the throne, is presented as the present personification of the poetic archetype of the Germanic as the noblest race and the true meaning of humanity (Müller, 1995: 8-9). The championing of the Prince does not merely carry with it political motives. It stems above all from the author's seeking a role for artists in Austria's future. Writers and intellectuals will have no role in such a future unless this is played out in the realm of the spirit. The aestheticisation of the Prince as a symbol of the nation is part of the poetic process which bestows on Austria, on Europe and the world a spiritual order, and on poets a social function as agents of that same process. Poets are thus the true heirs to the throne of the empire of the spirit. When Müller rewrites the narrative of the world in the likeness of Austria and reinvents the latter as a spiritual and cultural territory, he is also inventing a new identity for himself as a creative Subject – an imperial Self who takes his place at the centre of the centre of the universe as a source and likeness of the whole. Like Austria, which gives him his indispensable symbolic national substance, this Self also possesses an identity at one and the same time singular and multiple, being identical to itself and to the totality. This is why Müller announces:

There is urgency in coming to a decision on the concept of the world in the most immediate future; may it find the *right man* and the *competent generation*. [...] Herein resides an ethical mission for the coming generation. The discovery of imperialist Man is imminent! *Let us etch the Austrian cultural character, besides the language itself, into art, thought, action! Let us be this character!* When that is done, we will also find the politicians who, trusting in our power throughout the State, will point out to these reflections present in our souls, in a practical way,

the path to Eastern cultures: *Onwards to the Mediterranean!* (Müller, 1995: 47; emphasis in original)

Robert Müller's words leave no room for doubt: Austria's future can only be understood in an imperial context and it depends on a new conception of the world. This differs from the existing one because art and culture in general are front-lined and because the hierarchy of power is determined by a kind of aestheticised ethics. Within this framework, it is up to poets and artists as "imperialist men" to perform the main role in the future ethics of imperialism as a spiritual mission. However, Müller's words do not conceal that this imperialism is not limited to the spirit: it must have a tangible foundation in real politics through the expansion of Austrian dominion to the East and to the Mediterranean.

In his essay "Power. Psycho-political Fundaments of the Present Atlantic War," the real context of the war leads to slight alterations in the Müllerian project of the imperialism of the spirit. The need for a united front with the German ally explains why the author no longer stakes a claim for a specific role for Austria, preferring to construct a common identity for the two German-speaking States. In more markedly ideological terms, Müller seeks to legitimise the war and German hegemonic ambitions from an ethical point of view. According to him, imperialism is an innate feature of the German, whose nature includes the simultaneous process of self-creation and world creation, starting from the soaring fantasy personified by Münchhausen and Faust (Müller, 1995: 93). In this sense, the German empire is but the external form and the equally natural expression of that innate character, a kind of trope or metaphor for the Self which finds its mirror image in it:

A similar symbol for Germans is the German empire, and its political imperialism a symbol of the growing sentiment of the power of the individual. [...] Because Germany, too, has the shape of the German. [...] German imperialism is not an imperialism of empire; on the contrary, it is an imperialism of the individual. (Müller, 1995: 93)

And just as the German empire is created by the Subject in its own image, the world as a whole is also constructed as a reflection of the individual at the end of a spiritual line of mirrors, which progressively becomes universal:

The world as totality, including the Self, is the monstrous shape of an ultimate and extreme formal decision. This primordial consciousness can also be found in the German who lacks any type of metaphysical training, in his melancholy, in his inner music, whose exterior manifestation represents merely a repetition of it, like a reflection mirrored in mirrors. Clearly, such a consciousness stretches out symbolically into the infinite, the *reflections* continue to

quiver in ever-decreasing circles within the larger circle, the world. [...] The German is a conqueror *by virtue of his spirit!* (Müller, 1995: 107; emphasis in original).

Imperialism of the spirit thus means a new narrative of the world as a whole, corresponding to the essence of the German. Müller projects this narrative onto a utopian future and, inspired by the fantastic element of the German character, calls it “Atlantis”: “We want to link all things German with a great bridge, and this great bridge I call Atlantis, not a very geographical concept, but a very wise one” (Müller, 1995: 134).

The “super-real” bridge, which is to create a “continent over the continents” (Müller, 1995: 134-5), legitimises, in the rhetoric of the spirit, German imperialist ambitions under dispute in the war. The designation “Atlantis” concerns the longed-for victory over the Atlantic, which would place the Central European powers more precisely at the geographical centre of an imperialist and colonialist world revolving around that ocean. This “continent of the German spirit” is not, after all, as spiritual as Müller sets out to demonstrate: it even has a territorial definition that is described in detail, “from Kiel to Katanga, from the Vosges to the Caucasus” (Müller, 1995: 136), so much so that the author feels compelled to preempt the critique of those who, faced with the Atlantis project, might accuse the Germans of embodying an aggressive imperialism:

Ah, so that means that we, the Germans, want something to become German? We want to conquer brutally, we want no more, no less than to Germanise an entire continent, we want, hear this, to bridge entire countries under our domination! Where does this leave the imperialism of the spirit which we championed? [...] Imperialism of the spirit means for the German that, first and foremost, he becomes a conqueror *through* the spirit and not through vindictiveness, export reasons, or boredom; secondly, that he merely guides *the* spirit of alien, non-developed peoples, in such a way that they develop towards the exercise of more elevated spiritual functions, akin to those of the German spirit. (Müller, 1995: 134-5; emphasis in original)

The “Imperialism of the Spirit” does indeed lay bare the discourse not just of a cultural imperialism, but also of a political one, using *topoi* similar to those of the discourse of the maritime empires, according to Said’s definition. The *topos* of the civilising mission of a superior nation, contained in the excerpt above, occupies a central position in both Müller’s and Hofmannsthal’s argumentation, and evolves on a parallel course with the *topoi* of conquest and territorial occupation, of the fertilisation of wildernesses and of the patriarchal leading of inferior peoples. Spiritual imperialism proceeds hand in hand with political imperialism and endows it with a kind of legitimisation (Müller, 1995: 137).

This alliance of the two types of imperialism, in which artists are themselves introduced as colonisers, is motivated by the need of finding a mission for intellectuals and writers in the modern colonial enterprise, without losing the singularity of the aesthetic subject. The “irrevocably lost” modernist Self thus constructs, not simply a bridge to totality, but totality itself. The “Imperialism of the spirit” proves to correspond to Müller’s and Hofmannsthal’s attempt, as thinkers and writers, to invent for themselves a social identity and role, resorting to the nation as symbolic substance and to the nationalist mission of imperial affirmation. This narrative of the world in concentric circles around the Self, built by the reciprocal mirroring of the subject, the nation and the world, represents a precarious solution for redeeming the Subject, who thus does not withdraw from the world, but rather absorbs and incorporates it.

5. Imperialism and fictions of totality in the essayistic novel of Modernism. Some notes on Müller and Musil

5.1. Robert Müller, *Tropics/Tropes*

Tropics/Tropes, Robert Müller’s masterpiece, stages the voyage of three treasure hunters to Amazonia in a fictional essay that thematises colonial imperialism through the era’s *topoi*, notably those hingeing on the encounter of Western civilisation with the savage Indians. These *topoi* are, however, partially inverted, suggesting the inferiority of the colonisers vis-à-vis the colonised, which results in a critique of the exploitation and violence of colonialism. The novel thus foregrounds the search for an alternative paradigm, not just to imperialism but to modernity in general. The premise of this search is manifest in the title of the novel itself, under the disguise provided by the scenario of this tropical adventure:

I would have called it “The Tropics/Tropes” [...] because everything that is, is always and solely a poetic method, a *tropos*, and because this strange flora calls to me, bursts forth as a vegetation of pure matter, storeys-high, in elephantiasis, it grows under my feet and changes my point of view, and because its sap is, however, always my own circulating blood and never alien. (Müller, 1993: 303)

In the light of Nietzsche, whose influence in *Tropics/Tropes* is explicit, the above lines would mean that reality is an aesthetic invention brought about by the creating Subject and is nothing but a fiction. Furthermore, reality is synonymous with the “I” which is mirrored onto everything, in the form of metaphor or trope, for the Other does not exist and the voyage is nothing but a myth (the novel’s subtitle states this expressly). For this reason, the

narrator can also proclaim the thesis “The Tropics/Tropes is I” (Müller, 1993: 402), i.e. the aesthetic narrative of the world represents simultaneously the construction of the Subject, which is also made by aesthetic means, metaphors and symbols.

Taken thus, the theme of the novel is, in fact, the construction of a New Man or of a New Self in the realm of the aesthetic. The voyage to the tropics (the primordial act of imperialism) is designed to displace the crisis of the modernist subject to the frontier which separates the Self from the non-Self, or, in Adorno’s terminology, the non-identical from the identical. In this way, dissonance is emancipated, and the paradoxical dialectic that serves as a basis for essayism to create a heterogeneous totality is established (Martins, 2007).

Furthermore, the dualism between the Self and the non-Self, or the Subject and the (alien) Other, lies at the heart of imperialism. As is the case with the imperial paradigm, the cognitive Subject of the rationalist paradigm has a structure of infinite expansion, in which the object (the Other) is constantly absorbed, exploited and redefined. Unceasingly, the Self pushes back the frontier separating it from the non-Self with the aporetic goal of annulling the Other by incorporating it.

Tropics/Tropes unfolds at the crossroads of both logics. The novel is an essay on the Self, which, like the text, unfolds in a network of paradoxical and symbolic relations. This labyrinthine network guarantees both the identity of the Self with regard to itself (i.e. non-identification with the whole) and identity with every new element, progressively absorbed by the potentially universal structure of the Subject. According to Müller, the new Self should constitute a synthesis of every human capacity and of every epistemological principle which distinguish the different cultures. The narrative staging of the encounter with the Other in *Tropics/Tropes* should be understood in this context. Since the voyage is denounced as a myth, the Other cannot be other than a mask with which the Self in search of itself covers its face. Thus, the Subject tries on, in successive mirrors, its infinite identities, interconnecting them with one another. This is why the Indians, especially the women, notably Zana as a symbol of the feminine and of sexual drives, personify characteristics that have to be psychologically and epistemologically absorbed by the synthetic construction which is the totalising New Man. The characters who, in turn, represent diverse features of western Man, should equally be understood as experiments (“essays”) in the process of distilling the New Self.

The redemption of the Self thus occurs in *Tropics/Tropes* by means of a process of expansion which reproduces the logic of imperialism, turning an empty and null Subject into the totality of the real. Like imperialist politics, this New Man's goal is to become universal, to complete and swallow up the Whitmanian *rondure of the world*. The American Slim, global mestizo, is the character who evinces this fact.⁴ The dualism between Self and Other is thus reformulated, since the Other is given a new cartographic position: within the circle of the Self, which has the dimension of the world. Müller's critique of imperialism does not imply a rejection of this paradigm; he simply modifies it in order to give the Subject a central position in a new, heterogeneous map of the world.

However, the New Self is not yet Slim, the universal mestizo. Despite being American, he basically appears to lack a national identity, displaying primarily a Germanophile bent which leads him to develop the Austrian project of an imperialism (not only) of the spirit (Müller, 1993: 13-4). The New Man elected by the author is the German engineer, who is born allegorically from the womb of the primordial woman at the end of the novel. This engineer is the only one of the characters who survives after a series of acts of violence described as successive reflections in mirrors. It is as if he had absorbed Slim, the global man, and the Indians, later to return to himself as a universal Subject who contains everything in the shape of a trope, and is himself a trope for an aesthetic reality:

Whatever Man discovers, he discovers it in himself, and when he emigrates south, he notices with surprise and coldly, that he, the Nordic, is far more of the South in his instincts than the more meridional race, and he learns to understand that Man, in and of himself, represents a northification and that, in truth, he carries the tropics in himself. He is nature's vehicle, in whom the latter preserves the tropics in the process of moving towards extinction. The tropics are the basis of the organism and strength of this Man, who is constructed in accordance with the principle of the tropics; everything is repeated in him on a small scale – it could be said that he himself, Man, is a trope in his relation to the tropics. (Müller, 1993: 402)

The new Müllerian subject should be understood, within the framework of the "Imperialism of the Spirit," as a new aesthetic narrative of totality, in which the Self and its national identity are at the centre of a process of expansion which develops in mirrors and successive reflections. In the essays analysed above, the aim of the "Imperialism of the

⁴The same idea appears in "Manhattan" (1923), a series of short texts of essayistic fiction, in which Müller tries out different syntheses aiming at a totalising construction of the world and of the Self. Just like the genre boundaries between the narrative and the essay, so geographical, cultural, racial and even gender boundaries are annulled in "Manhattan," where differences are fused in unified, hybrid and hermaphrodite visions of totality (Müller, 1992).

“Spirit” was to rescue the aesthetic Self, therefore apostrophising poets as the creators of the new aesthetic totality in close connection with the poetic values of the nation. In the novel, the new imperialist Self is also a poet, and *Tropics/Tropes* is at heart the proclamation of a very precise subject – Müller himself. When at last the German engineer himself encounters “the most ridiculous death,” “[t]hen the poet intervenes, then the poet’s hour chimes, the tragicomedy is right there before him” (Müller, 1993: 402).

5.2. Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

Robert Musil’s novel *The Man without Qualities* is based on the same premise as *Tropics/Tropes*: the immateriality of the real and of the subject as narrative constructions or fictions. This is why Ulrich, the man without qualities, says the following about a world without qualities: “This world is only one among countless possible experiments” (Musil, 2000: 1648-9). Just as the Müllerian novel, this is an essay on the Subject and the reinvention of the world. Both unfold against the background of imperialism as a basic element of the paradigm of modernity, as can be seen in the epigraph to Book One, which foregrounds the Austrian empire’s search for a hegemonic identity and position in the era of imperialism (Musil, 1999: 3).

This, too, is the real topic of the unending meetings to organize the Emperor’s jubilee, in which the representatives of the discourses sustaining the imperial monarchy and society take part. The so-called *Parallel Action* shows that Ulrich is speaking of a new construction of the world system, not simply as a political cartography, but also as an epistemological paradigm, when he refers to the possible experiments of a narrative of the real. Austria’s irrationality, implicitly proclaimed in the title of chapter 43, is opposed to modern rationality, represented by Arnheim, the cosmopolitan Prussian, at the meetings of *Parallel Action*. Thus, there is a clash both between the Enlightenment paradigm and an irrational paradigm, and between the colonial-oriented modern empire (Arnheim brings with him an African servant) and a neo-feudal European empire, which, despite being plunged into a deep crisis of legitimacy, will not go without its place in the sun. This empire’s ambitions rest on a discourse of universality that brings to the fore the symbolic and the cultural, to the detriment of real politics, and the past, to the detriment of the future and progress. For example, according to Diotima, Austria’s claim “to be the whole world” should rest on the arts and on the spirit, two recurrent stereotypes in the nationalist discourse of the time that

play an important role in Hofmannsthal's and Müller's utopias of the "Imperialism of the Spirit" (Musil, 1999: 174).

In the empty verbiage of the *Parallel Action*, the monarchy's official discourse is unmasked as nationalist and imperialist: it defends multiculturality for the purpose of preserving the cohesion of the State and, grounded in it and in the stereotype of arts-loving Austria, for constructing a subjective superiority in relation to the other imperial powers. The characters who eavesdrop on the *Parallel Action* meetings through the keyhole, the servant Rahel and the Moor Soliman, lay bare the real hierarchies camouflaged by the purported unity of Austria. Through a position similar to that of the colonised African, Jews and other non-German peoples under the monarchy are presented as the object of a similar colonial oppression.

Moreover, in Musil's novel, the limits of the paradigm of modernity are denounced by means of another dissonance: that of the Subject. At the moment when Ulrich walks out on a *Parallel Action* meeting, he gives voice to the crisis of the lonely and empty Self in modernity. To save himself from despair, he thereupon immediately proclaims the utopia of essayism as a fiction of totality, with the above cited words (Musil, 1999: 1648-9). The redemption of the Subject is achieved by conceiving the Self and the world as mirrors of each other and as dynamic relational constellations, in which the creating Subject, being absolute, occupies the centre of a new subjective cartography of the world, since, as Musil states, "A man without qualities is made up of qualities without Man." That is to say, the Subject's identity must constantly be created from that selfsame Subject and renegotiated with a successively different construction of the world, in an endless essayistic process which combines dissociated traits, with no integrating structure, a process which the novel reproduces in its self-reflective, spiral and potentially infinite structure.

This conception of identity as a deeply precarious inter-identity contrasts with the Müllerian subject, who is also plunged into crisis, but who is, nevertheless, a more affirmative subject. In the same manner, the Musilian satire of *Kakanien* contrasts with the unconditional championing of Austria in Müller. Whereas the Self in *Tropics/Tropen* succeeds in expressing itself in an expansive structure which absorbs the Other, this is not possible in Musil. However, the imperial nature of both projects of the Subject lies in the absolutist attitude of a profoundly desperate Nothing, which nevertheless does not relinquish its hold on moulding the whole according to its inconstant image. The totalising

and imperial gesture of the Subject never disappears in *A Man without Qualities*, as can be seen in the title of Book Two – a journey to the “Millenary Empire” – where the debate on imperialism as part of the paradigm of modernity is replaced by the essay of a new subjective fiction of totality. Here, the focus is brought to bear on narcissistic love, which annuls alterity, and on a mysticism conceived as a simultaneous unity of the Self with itself and with the world.

Musil’s and Müller’s novels thus prove the thesis I put forward at the beginning of this text: firstly, that concepts of postcolonial theory can and should be used in regard to Austria, provided the differences between two imperial models are taken into account, given that there are discursive patterns of the exercise of power by colonial empires that are also to be found in the Hapsburg empire and that are either described or satirised as such in the novelistic fictions under consideration; secondly, that imperialism as an epistemological paradigm and an aesthetic model which structures totality is grasped as the core of modernity, and thus constitutes a central focus of the critique of this paradigm by literary modernism. However, even if modernist literature reacts to imperialism, it is strongly influenced by it. The alternative conception of the world and of the Self and the essayistic conception of the novel bear out this influence, both because they retain the ambition to produce a unitary construction of the whole and because the fictions of totality, which work as an alternative to modernity, take on, necessarily, an imperialist configuration brought on by the crisis of the Subject.

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