

# The New Criterion

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## The qualities of Robert Musil

by [Roger Kimball](#)

*“Why, then, aren’t we realists?” Ulrich asked himself. Neither of them was, neither he nor she: their ideas and their conduct had long left no doubt of that; but they were nihilists and activists, sometimes one and sometimes the other, whichever happened to come up.*

—Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*

*In the realm of the aesthetic ... even imperfection and lack of completion have their value.*

—Robert Musil, “Address at the Memorial Service for Rilke in Berlin” (1927)

The Austrian novelist Robert Musil (1880–1942) occupies a peculiar position in the pantheon of great twentieth-century writers. He is admired by literati for a handful of astringent modernist fictions, especially for his first novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (*The Bewilderments of the Schoolboy Törless*). This brutal yet seductively introspective tale of adolescent cruelty and sexual exploitation at a German military boarding school was published to instant critical acclaim in 1906, when Musil was only twenty-six. (Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, *Törless* was hailed as a prescient allegory of the spiritual deformations of the Nazi era.)

Musil’s play *Die Schwärmer* (1921, *The Enthusiasts*) explores that favored modern topic, the collapse of traditional bourgeois ideals; its taut language and intense dramatization won it the Kleist Prize in 1923 and, eventually, a regular spot in the German theatrical repertory. *Drei Frauen* (1924, *Three Women*), a celebrated suite of three novellas, plumbs the relationship between eroticism (generally unhappy) and transcendence—one of Musil’s staple themes.

Then there are Musil’s essays, some of which are masterpieces of ironic cultural commentary. “Über die Dummheit” (“On Stupidity”), a lecture that Musil delivered in Vienna in 1937, deserves special mention for its signal contemporary relevance. Particularly pertinent is its withering analysis of “the higher, pretentious form of stupidity” —the “real disease of culture,” in Musil’s opinion, which infiltrates even “the highest intellectual sphere” and has repercussions throughout society. “The examples,” he dryly notes, “are pretty blatant.” As indeed they are. Finally, some of Musil’s short prose pieces, collected in *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten* (1936, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*), rival Kafka’s fables in their vertiginous humor and enigmatic creepiness.

All of Musil’s works (the German edition of which runs to nine volumes) have their partisans and admirers. But for most of us, Robert Musil is first and foremost the author of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*), a book in which the major themes of his earlier works coalesce to form a novelistic tapestry of extraordinary wit, complexity, and intelligence.

It is worth stressing the wit. *The Man Without Qualities*, the book upon which Musil’s claim to greatness chiefly rests, is regularly cited alongside Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Proust’s *A la recherche du temps*

*perdu*, Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, and Hermann Broch's *Die Schlafwandler* as a triumph of high modernism. Like those other novels, *The Man Without Qualities* is a book of weighty seriousness and deep erudition. It is also, in parts, an exceptionally funny book. Few readers with any sympathy for Musil's writing will be able to read far without laughing aloud, at least as they make their way through the first volume. Whatever else one can say about it, *The Man Without Qualities* stands as one of the great modern works of satire.

Set in Vienna in 1913, it depicts a world on the edge of a precipice—the moral, cultural, political precipice that was to give way to the abyss of World War I the following year. But it turns out that, in Musil's hands, peregrinations at the brink of disaster are as amusing as they are poignant; and Musil's man without qualities—a gifted, amoral, concupiscent mathematician of good family named Ulrich—is one of the most engaging comic anti-heroes in modern fiction.

It almost goes without saying that *The Man Without Qualities* is a peculiar book, or set of books. Like the other great novels just mentioned, it is monumental—in its literary ambition, its intellectual sophistication, and, not least, in its length. Certainly, as Dr. Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, “none ever wished it longer than it is.” Musil began working on *The Man Without Qualities* in 1924. He published the first volume—some thousand pages—in 1930, and the first part of the second volume in 1933 (for which he was awarded that year's Goethe Prize).

Under pressure from his publisher, who had been steadily advancing him money for years, Musil reluctantly began preparing the second part of the second volume for publication in the late 1930s. By then, Musil and his wife Martha, a painter whose parents were assimilated Jews, were living in penurious exile from the Nazis in Switzerland. An energetic (not to say fanatical) rewriter—a literary perfectionist, really—Musil had retrieved the galleys from the printer and was in the process of extensively reworking them when, in April 1942 at the age of sixty-two, he suddenly collapsed from a cerebral hemorrhage and died. Apparently, he succumbed while performing his morning gymnastics (another activity to which he was fanatically devoted). According to his widow, who found him a short while later, the look on his face was one of “mockery and mild astonishment.”

We really have no idea how Musil intended to end *The Man Without Qualities*. Probably, the last section would have been titled “A Sort of Ending” to mirror the opening sequence, “A Sort of Introduction.” He once said that he wanted to conclude the book in the middle of a sentence, with a comma. Be that as it may, in addition to the twenty chapters in half-corrected galley proof, there exist dozens of draft chapters as well as voluminous notes, character sketches, alternative chapters, and miscellaneous jottings related to the book. Musil's widow published the second part of the second volume in 1943. The “complete” German edition of this incomplete novel was published in 1951.

The first English translation of *The Man Without Qualities* was by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, who also collaborated on translations of *Törless* and some of Musil's stories. Published in three volumes from 1954 to 1960, this edition included all of the novel that Musil published during his lifetime (all of volume one and the first thirty-eight chapters of volume two). A projected fourth volume was to contain the posthumously published chapters and notes. Although incomplete, the Wilkins–Kaiser translation remains a sound introduction to *The Man Without Qualities*: the translation is fluent, and a prefatory essay provides an excellent précis of Musil's career.

The one clear advantage of the new, two-volume translation of *The Man Without Qualities*<sup>[1]</sup> by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike is that it contains Musil's posthumously published chapters. It also contains several hundred pages of Musil's notes, sketches, and alternative versions of chapters. While some of this material will interest readers of the novel (as distinct from those who prefer to dissect it), much of it will command the attention only of Musil specialists. It must be said, too, that shoe-horning all of this material into only two volumes has bloated the second volume to tumid,

phone-book proportions: a pity, not only because it makes the book difficult to handle, but also because it seems unfair to the striking and elegant jacket design that Knopf provided.

In an afterword, Burton Pike tells us that “the translator’s intention was to have the writing startle the reader in English in the same way it startles a reader in German.” In the event, he and his co-translator have produced a version of the novel that is generally a bit more literal than the previous translation; whether it is always quite as readable is another question. It is perhaps an improvement to translate “Haus und Wohnung des Mannes ohne Eigenschaften” as “House and home of the man without qualities” (Wilkins–Pike) instead of “Abode of the Man Without Qualities” (Wilkins–Kaiser); or to render “ein leichter Geruch von verbranntem Pferdehaar” as “a whiff of burnt horsehair” (W–P) rather than “a faint whiff of brimstone” (W–K)—though given the presence of the devil in the previous clause, there is surely something to be said for “brimstone.”

In any event, other decisions in the new translation are more dubious. For example, Wilkins–Kaiser translated the second part of the first volume, “Seinesgleichen geschieht,” as “The Like of It Now Happens.” If nothing else, this does have the advantage of more or less accurately rendering the German. The Wilkins–Pike alternative—“Pseudoreality Prevails”—may indeed fulfill Mr. Pike’s ambition to “startle the reader.” The problem is that it would probably have startled the author as well: presumably, if Musil had wanted “Pseudoreality Prevails” he would have written it.

Not that translating Musil is an easy task. Indeed, nothing about Musil is easy. Writing some years ago about *The Bewilderments of the Schoolboy Törless*, the critic John Simon noted that whatever Musil touched “was or became difficult. Simplicity was not for him: in style, thought, or life.” For readers of an English translation of Musil’s magnum opus, the difficulties begin with the book’s title. For while *Eigenschaften* can indeed mean “qualities,” it carries with it a penumbra of associations that no English word quite captures. “Qualities,” “properties,” “attributes”—*Eigenschaften* can mean any or all of these things. But it suggests something more. *Eigen* is the German word for “own,” as in “for one’s own use.” Hence the *eigen* in *Eigenschaften* insinuates a sense of self-possession that remains inexplicit in the English approximations. To speak of a man without *Eigenschaften* is therefore not so much to deny that he exhibits any definite qualities but rather to suggest that whatever qualities he displays are not really *his*. To be without *Eigenschaften* is in this sense to be without character—that inscribed residuum of identity that makes us who we are—though to be without character is by no means to be anonymous. As Ulrich admits to himself, “he was, after all, a character, even without having one.”

For readers in the habit of opposing the claims of science to those of art, part of what makes Musil difficult is the way that he complicates the Romantic impulse to champion art as a kind of escape or redemption from unpalatable scientific truths. I will have more to say about this subject—a key theme in *The Man Without Qualities*—below. But for now it is enough to note Musil was himself of a scientific bent by temperament and training (or perhaps by temperament because of training). Not for nothing was *Genauigkeit* (“precision,” “accuracy,” “exactness”) one of his favorite words. And Musil was *genau* in everything: dress, speech, manner, and intellectual comportment. As he put it in one essay, “If I want to have a worldview, then I must view the world. That is, I must establish the facts.”

Musil had great respect for facts, and for the procedures science had devised for obtaining them. His education was primarily technical, not literary. The only son of the knighted engineer Hofrat Alfred Edler von Musil, Robert was sent at a young age to military school, first at Eisenstadt and then at Weisskirchen, the latter providing the inspiration for the dismal institution that Musil portrayed in *Törless*. (Asked later whether the school was the original for the “W.” of *Törless*, Musil laughed and said that the fictional school was as nothing compared to the reality.)

In 1897, the year in which he began writing in earnest, Musil went to study civil engineering. He

took a diploma from the Technical University in Brno in 1901, and, after doing his military service, spent a year working in the engineering laboratories in Stuttgart. He then went to Berlin, where he studied psychology, logic, and philosophy (the gloomy Maurice Maeterlinck and, later, Emerson and Nietzsche were particularly important influences). His doctorate, under Karl Stumpf, was on the epistemology of the great Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838–1916), about whom William James once remarked that he appeared to have read and thought about everything. And although Musil decided against pursuing an academic career, he remained deeply interested in empirical science. He was even something of an inventor. Early on, he invented a chromatometer. This device, an earlier version of which was invented by Newton, resolves all the colors of the spectrum into whiteness—an appropriate invention, as one commentator has observed, for the author of a book called *The Man Without Qualities*.

But the portrait of Robert Musil, technician, is not of course the whole story. If Musil was the son of an engineer, he was also the son of a tempestuous, artistically inclined mother, Hermine. As a boy, he was socially withdrawn, often sickly, but also defiant and—in the schoolyard, anyway—effectively pugilistic. Although he was baptized Catholic, his parents were ardent secularists, and Robert was brought up without religious instruction. Nevertheless, Musil later developed an intense “outsider’s” interest in religion. In one place he describes Ulrich as “a religious person who simply happened to believe in nothing at the moment”—not a bad definition of Musil himself—and he lards the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities* with quotations from various classics of mystical literature.

Musil’s early family life was calculated to breed complication. Apparently with the acquiescence of her husband, Hermine maintained what amounted to a *ménage à trois* with one Heinrich Reiter, who met the family in 1881, shortly after Robert was born. As he grew older, Musil quite naturally came to resent Reiter and to despise his father. About his mother he seems to have entertained a mixture of indifference and contempt. In view of her notable accomplishments as an amateur pianist, the contempt no doubt continued to show itself in Musil’s unusual hostility to music when he was an adult; his indifference seems to have been reciprocated by both parents.

The erotic irregularity of the Musil household later had profound echoes in Robert’s fiction—as did an earlier tragedy. Musil’s only sibling, Elsa, died in infancy before he was born. Although he never knew her, the image of this lost sister came to haunt him as the embodiment of an unobtainable unity and wholeness: an alter ego or “other half” such as Aristophanes famously described in his speech about the nature of love in Plato’s *Symposium*. She would come back as Agathe, Ulrich’s “forgotten sister,” in the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities*.

It must also be understood that Musil, born in 1880 in Klagenfurth, southern Austria, was very much a product of the hothouse atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. This was an atmosphere in which, as the historian Carl Schorske put it, “the usual moralistic culture of the European bourgeoisie was ... both overlaid and undermined by an amoral *Gefühlkultur* [sentimental culture].” As Schorske went on to note, this revolution in sensibility amounted to a crisis of morality—Hermann Broch called it a “value vacuum”—that quickly precipitated a crisis in liberal cultural and political life *tout court*. “Narcissism and a hypertrophy of the life of feeling were the consequence,” he continued.

The threat of the political mass movements lent new intensity to this already present trend by weakening the traditional liberal confidence in its own legacy of rationality, moral law, and progress. Art became transformed from an ornament to an essence, from an expression of value to a source of value.

Of course, these transformations were a catalyst for disaster. The resources of civilization—epitomized by the faith in rationality, moral law, and progress that Schorske mentions—were hollowed out from within; weightless, they soon lost the capacity to resist the

barbarism of feeling—aesthetic, sexual, social, political feeling—that rushed in everywhere that a spiritual vacancy was felt. It was, as the Marxists used to say, “no accident” that Nazism and other extreme movements got their start in this narcotic environment. Musil put it in terms of the credit system:

In love as in business, in science as in the long jump, one has to believe before one can win and score, so how can it be otherwise for life as a whole? However well founded an order may be, it always rests in part on a voluntary faith in it, a faith that, in fact, always marks the spot where the new growth begins, as in a plant; once this unaccountable and uninsurable faith is used up, the collapse soon follows; epochs and empires crumble no differently from business concerns when they lose their credit.

Musil’s contemporary Hugo von Hofmannsthal spoke in this context of *das Gleitende*: the slipping away of the world in an access of aestheticized sentimentality. To locate Musil within the folds of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna is not to say that he preferred his spirituality *mit Schlag*, as it were. In many respects, he vigorously rebelled against the *Gefühlskultur* that Schorske evokes; but he also, in other crucial respects, capitulated to it. *The Man Without Qualities* contains a record of both activities.

There was at any rate a great deal in Musil’s background and milieu to complicate and enlarge his “technical” temperament. What he wanted was not *Genauigkeit* alone but rather *Genauigkeit und Seele*, “precision and soul.” The supremely empirical Musil emerges as a champion of spiritual values in the face of the twin threats of desiccating rationalism and enthusiastic irrationalism. Which is to say that Musil was both a partisan of “soul,” and that he was a sharp and exceedingly entertaining critic of “Soul”—upper case and in scare quotes.

It was in fact the union of his commitment to *Genauigkeit* with a thoroughgoing revulsion to what we might call spiritual sentimentality that fueled his most penetrating observations about the modern condition. In this, as in other respects, Musil sought to emulate the thinker who probably most deeply influenced his understanding of cultural matters, Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, *The Man Without Qualities* may be seen as an attempt to continue Nietzsche’s anatomy of nihilism in the form of a novel. Its large ambition is to diagnose and, in its way, to treat the “mysterious” even “imponderable” disease of an age that breeds men without qualities.

In his 1924 essay on Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann observed that “the spiritual essay” or “intellectual novel” was the dominant contemporary form of fiction. His own greatest novels (*The Magic Mountain*, *Doctor Faustus*) certainly answer to that description, as do many other classics of modernism. Broch’s *Sleepwalkers* even has a long essay (“The Disintegration of Values,” a very Musilian topic) distributed throughout it in short sections. Yet *The Man Without Qualities* was probably the most self-consciously essayistic of all these novels.

It’s not simply that the book often reads like a series of essays, with its short, discursive chapters, its many quotations and allusions, and its wry chapter titles: “4. If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility”; “12. The lady whose love Ulrich won after a conversation about sports and mysticism”; “13. A racehorse of genius crystallizes the recognition of being a man without qualities,” etc. Musil mimicked the essay form in order to enjoy something of the *authority* of assertion without incurring all of its responsibilities.

Although potentially disingenuous, this procedure offers the novelist one way to explore that hazy territory between the simple indicative, which outstrips his knowledge, and the frankly fictional, which seems insufficiently urgent. In a 1914 piece on the essay form, Musil defined the genre as “the strictest form attainable in an area where one *cannot* work precisely.” The essay, he wrote, “takes its form and method from science, its matter from art.” In the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities*, the narrator observes that “a man who wants the truth becomes a scholar; a man

who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?" The short answer, no doubt, is that he writes *The Man Without Qualities*.

In Musil's mind, the essay form was deeply connected to a major theme of *The Man Without Qualities*, the aestheticized view of the world that results from an inflated sense of possibility. More so even than most novels, *The Man Without Qualities* was written *sub specie possibilitatis*, under the aspect of possibility; its dominant mood is the subjunctive; Ulrich, the man without qualities, is one in whom the sense of possibility is overdeveloped—or, what amounts to the same thing, one in whom the sense of reality is in abeyance. A man with an ordinary sense of reality, Musil explains, nibbles at the "hook" of life without being aware of the line; but "a man with that sense of reality which can also be called a sense of possibility trawls a line through the water and has no idea whether there's any bait on it. His extraordinary indifference to the life snapping at the bait is matched by the risk he runs of doing utterly eccentric things."

Initially liberating, the triumph of possibility over reality is in the end an invitation to despair—something that Musil himself seems to have discovered along with Ulrich. But the pattern of Ulrich's escapades and interactions with others, especially in the first volume, presupposes the supremacy of possibility, as does the form—and, finally, the ultimate formlessness—of *The Man Without Qualities*.

Although Musil was in the process of veering off in many other directions in the last years he worked on the book, the portions that he actually published center largely around Ulrich. We never learn his last name (one symptom, perhaps, of his lack of qualities), but we do know quite a bit about Ulrich. The only son of a well-to-do lawyer of some scholarly achievement and pronounced pedantic tendencies, Ulrich is an unemployed thirty-two-year-old, who doesn't know what to do with himself. He is capable of great charm, but there is also something a little repulsive, even thuggish about him. He is "no respecter of rights unless he respects the person whose rights they are, which is not very often." In his school days, Ulrich's model was Napoleon, partly because of his "natural admiration for the criminal," partly because his teachers called Napoleon a tyrant. "Passionate and detached at the same time," Ulrich "never needed that overhauling and lubrication that is called probing one's conscience."

Before the story of the novel begins, Ulrich had made three attempts to be a "great man," first through the cavalry, then in civil engineering, and finally in mathematics. He left the army after having been reprimanded for seducing an archduke's wife, quit engineering after concluding that engineers tend to "have that peculiar, stiff, remote, superficial manner that never goes deeper inside than the epiglottis," and was now settled on his own in mathematics, doing respectable but unrewarding work.

Ulrich gave up on greatness the day he happened to see a racehorse described as "a racehorse of genius." If a racehorse can be a "genius," what then? Concluding that "no matter what you do ... it doesn't make the slightest difference," Ulrich decides "to take a year's leave of absence from his life in order to seek an appropriate application for his abilities." *The Man Without Qualities* is an account of that year's holiday from life.

Ulrich's basic sense of confusion is mirrored in his house, a small château that "had something blurred about it, like a double-exposed photograph." Faced with the prospect of redecorating it, he feels paralyzed by the infinite possibilities that yawn open before him. Free to choose any style "from the Assyrians to Cubism,"

he was in that familiar state ... of incoherent ideas spreading outward without a center, so characteristic of the present, and whose strange arithmetic adds up to a random

proliferation of numbers without forming a unit. Finally he dreamed up only impracticable rooms, revolving rooms, kaleidoscopic rooms, adjustable scenery for the soul, and his ideas grew steadily more devoid of content.

Ulrich never really finds his vocation, but chance breaks in when his father helps arrange for him to become honorary secretary of a national campaign to celebrate the seventieth jubilee of the Emperor Franz Josef in 1918. Called the “Parallel Campaign” because of a similar celebration being planned in Germany, this was one of those phony endeavors whose aim is everything and nothing. Construed partly as a way of showing up the Germans (whose emperor would be celebrating merely his thirtieth jubilee), the Parallel Campaign was much more than a way of honoring Franz Josef. It was to be a celebration of Great Ideas—peace, patriotism, culture: a “spontaneous” outpouring of good will from the people that would be orchestrated down to the last detail. In short, the Parallel Campaign was the perfect repository for all manner of frustrated idealism, misguided beneficence, and outright charlatanry.

It was also the perfect repository for Musil’s wicked sense of humor. Who could have foretold that Kakania—Musil’s name for the Austro-Hungarian Empire—would disappear before those celebrations could take place? In 1913, everything was still so *gemütlich*.

Of course cars rolled on these roads too, but not too many! The conquest of the air was being prepared here too, but not too intensively. A ship would now and then be sent off to South America or East Asia, but not too often. There was no ambition for world markets or world power. Here at the very center of Europe ... words such as “colony” and “overseas” sounded like something quite untried and remote. There was some show of luxury, but by no means as in such overrefined ways as the French. People went in for sports, but not as fanatically as the English. Ruinous sums of money were spent on the army, but only just enough to secure its position as the second-weakest among the great powers.

And yet even in Kakania, something strange was happening:

Men who once merely headed minor sects have become aged celebrities; publishers and art dealers have become rich; new movements are constantly being started; everybody attends both the academic and the avant-garde shows, and even the avant-garde of the avant-garde; the family magazines have bobbed their hair; politicians like to sound off on the cultural arts, and newspapers make literary history... . Persons who would before never have been taken seriously became famous. Harshness mellowed, separations fused, intransigents made concessions to popularity, tastes already formed relapsed in uncertainties. Sharp boundaries everywhere became blurred and some new, indefinable ability to form alliances brought new people and new ideas to the top.

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

Throughout the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities*, the Parallel Campaign is the scaffolding upon which Musil hangs his tale and parades his motley cast of characters. There is the Jewish banker Leo Fischel and his daughter Gerda; she takes up with a band of Christian nationalists who “despised capitalism and maintained that no Jew had yet proved capable of serving as a great symbol of humanity. Leo Fischel called them anti-Semitic louts and would have forbidden them his house, but Gerda said, ‘You don’t understand, Papa, they only mean it symbolically.’ ” There are Ulrich’s numerous inamoratas, for example the nymphomaniac he nicknamed Bonadea—“the good goddess”—who we see “stretched out on her back on the divan, her tender maternal belly in white batiste free to breathe unhampered by whalebone and laces. She called this position ‘thinking.’ ”

And then there is Ulrich’s cousin Ermelinda Tuzzi, a prime mover of the Parallel Campaign. Her

real name is Hermine (like Musil's mother), but Ulrich nicknames her Diotima, after the high priestess of love in Plato's *Symposium*. The beautiful, unhappy wife of a high-ranking civil servant, Diotima was drawn to "Maeterlinck's batik-wrapped metaphysics," Novalis, and "most of all ... the ineffable wave of anemic romanticism and yearning for God that, for a while, the machine age squirted out as an expression of its spiritual and artistic misgivings about itself." Her contribution to the Parallel Campaign included such assertions as "true Austria is the whole world" and "any feeling that isn't boundless is worthless."

One of Diotima's many admirers is Dr. Paul Arnheim, an immeasurably rich Prussian industrialist who is half-Jewish and speaks five languages. His chief ambition is to bring "ideas into the spheres of power," and he has written many books and pamphlets declaring the union of "soul and economics." Not that Arnheim is a narrow specialist; on the contrary, he also writes extensively on "algebraic series, benzol rings, the materialist as well as the universalist philosophy of history, bridge supports, the evolution of music, the essence of the automobile, Hata 606, the theory of relativity, Bohr's atomic theory, autogenous welding, the flora of the Himalayas, psychoanalysis ... and all the other achievements that prevent a time so greatly enriched by them from turning out good, wholesome, integral human beings." It seemed to both Arnheim and Diotima that they had been fated by destiny to find true, if unfulfillable, love with each other; but then it turns out that Arnheim's chief interest in the Parallel Campaign had something to do with gaining control of the Galician oil fields.

There are three other characters that deserve to be mentioned. The first two are Ulrich's boyhood friend Walter, a failed pianist, and his young wife of three years, Clarisse, a chilly, neurotic, destructively unnurturing woman. Clarisse "had considered Walter a genius since she was fifteen, because she had always intended to marry only a genius. She would not let him fail her in this." As the daughter of a painter renowned for stage designs, Clarisse rebelled by growing up to hate "everything voluptuary in art." She refuses to sleep with Walter when he plays Wagner, taunting him with his artistic sterility. Walter is a different, more obvious sort of narcissist: "for him, the very act of moving his own arm was fraught with spiritual adventure, or else it was paralyzed in loving contemplation of itself." Walter is one of those people who was full of promise when young but who settled into cruel ordinariness as he got older. His solution to this problem—still a common solution among the terminally disappointed—is to blame his failure on the hopeless decadence of the age.

This tactic has many advantages. "Instead of *his* feeling bad and unable to work, it was now the times that were sick, while he was fine. His life, which had come to nothing, was now, all at once, tremendously accounted for, justified on a world-historical scale." No longer does Walter talk about "contemporary art" and "the art of the future," ideas that Clarisse has associated with him since she was fifteen. Now, he

would draw a line somewhere—in music stopping at, say, Bach, in literature at Stifter, in painting at Ingres—and explain that everything that came later was florid, degenerate, over-sophisticated and on the downward path. And he became increasingly violent in his assertion that in a time so poisoned at its spiritual roots as the present an artist of real integrity must abstain from creation altogether. But the treacherous thing was that although such austere opinions issued from his mouth, what issued from his room, as soon as he had locked himself in, was, more and more often, the sound of Wagner's music, that is to say, a kind of music that in earlier years he had taught Clarisse to despise as the perfect example of a philistine, florid, degenerate era, and to which he himself had now become addicted as to thickly brewed, hot, intoxicating poison.

Finally, some mention must be made of the carpenter Christian Moosbrugger: a huge, physically powerful man who is something of a simpleton. Moosbrugger has "a face blessed by God with every sign of goodness" but also just happens to be a crazed sex murderer whose trial for brutally

slaughtering a prostitute forms one of the many leitmotifs of *The Man Without Qualities*. Whether Moosbrugger is mentally competent to stand trial is a question mooted throughout the book; since he tends to regard his acts as having “perched on him like birds that had flown in from somewhere or other,” perhaps not. Although Musil never resolved Moosbrugger’s fate, or his exact significance for the novel, it is clear that Moosbrugger represents the dark, unconscious viciousness and irrationalism pulsating underneath Kakania’s rancid optimism. “If mankind could dream collectively [*als Ganzes*],” Ulrich reflects, “it would dream Moosbrugger.” Ulrich flirts with trying to get Moosbrugger acquitted, and the increasingly deranged Clarisse becomes obsessed with him: “the murderer,” she exclaims, “is musical!” In Moosbrugger, Clarisse envisions the eruption of a transforming violence that would sweep away the detritus of her frustrated, rudderless existence.

Musil has great fun playing these characters off one another. As V. S. Pritchett noted in an admiring 1962 essay on Musil, one of his great achievements is to have made such exotic characters humanly engaging. Another achievement, in the first volume, anyway, was to have woven his various “essayistic” themes so seamlessly into the novel. As already noted, one of the most important of these themes concerns the Nietzschean question of the value—the human, moral value—of scientific knowledge. Musil ridicules the Romanticism of characters like Diotima who condemn science for disenchanting the world with “facts.” And yet he seems to side with Ulrich when he explains that “knowledge is a mode of conduct, a passion. At bottom, an impermissible mode of conduct: like dipsomania, sex mania, homicidal mania, the compulsion to know forms its own character that is off balance.”

In one pivotal chapter, Musil reflects on the “peculiar predilection of scientific thinking for mechanical, statistical, and physical explanations that have, as it were, the heart cut out of them.” This is the key passage:

The scientific mind sees kindness only as a special form of egotism; brings emotions into line with glandular secretions; notes that eight or nine tenths of a human being consists of water; explains our celebrated moral freedom as an automatic mental by-product of free trade; reduces beauty to good digestion and the proper distribution of fatty tissue; graphs the annual statistical curves of births and suicides to show that our most intimate personal decisions are programmed behavior; sees a connection between ecstasy and mental disease; equates the anus and the mouth as the rectal and the oral openings at either end of the same tube—such ideas, which expose the trick, as it were, behind the magic of human illusions, can always count on a kind of prejudice in their favor as being impeccably scientific.

Scientific rationality in this sense is not merely disillusioning; it is radically dehumanizing. It replaces the living texture of experience with a skeleton of “causes,” “drives,” “impulses,” and the like. The enormous power over nature that science has brought man, Musil suggests, is only part of its attraction. Psychologically just as important is the power it gives one to dispense with the *human* claims of experience. How liberating to know that kindness is just another form of egotism! That beauty is merely a matter of fatty tissues being arranged properly! That every inflection of our emotional life is nothing but the entirely predictable result of glandular activity! *Just another, merely, nothing but ...* How liberating, how dismissive are these instruments of dispensation—but how *untrue*, finally, to our experience.

Musil presents scientific rationality as a *temptation* as well as an accomplishment because he sees that inherent in its view of the world is an invitation to forget one’s humanity. It is this Promethean aspect of science that links it with evil. The feeling that “nothing in life can be relied on unless it is firmly nailed down,” Musil writes, is “a basic feeling embedded in the sobriety of science; and though we are too respectable to call it the Devil, a slight whiff of brimstone still clings to it.”

At the same time, however, Musil is never willing to side wholeheartedly with the Romantic attack on science. A bit earlier, he reminds his readers that

One must not forget that basically the scientific cast of mind is more God-oriented than the aesthetic mind, ready to submit to “Him” the moment “He” deigns to show Himself under the conditions it prescribes for recognizing Him, while our aesthetes, confronted with His manifestation, would find only that His talent was not original and that His view of the world was not sufficiently intelligible to rank Him with really God-given talents.

Musil’s reflections on the moral significance of scientific rationality are exceptionally subtle and illuminating. Especially impressive is the way that he weaves these reflections into his narrative, adjusting their resonance and implication to each character, and, finally, showing how the passion for reason was powerless to save Kakania from the great irrationality that was poised to engulf it.

Volume one concludes after Ulrich’s proposal to establish a General Secretariat for Precision and Soul is (not surprisingly) rebuffed by the organizers of the Parallel Campaign. The machinations of the Campaign now begin to recede and the story of Ulrich and his sister, Agathe, comes to the fore. (Like many of the important female characters, Agathe’s name is of some significance: it comes from the Greek word *agathos*, “the good,” i.e., that to which we all aspire.) Brought together after many years’ separation by the death of their father, the siblings rediscover each other. The mood of the book now changes substantially: gone is the bright, satirical tone of the first volume. This may have been partly due to darkening elements in Musil’s life. Since at least the mid-Twenties, Musil’s financial condition had been precarious; increasingly, his psychological condition followed suit. In 1929, the year before the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities* appeared, he suffered a nervous breakdown. Friends started a Musil Society to help support the novelist, but he was never really to know financial security again for the rest of his life. In 1933, he and Martha left Germany for Vienna when Hitler came to power; in 1938, they left for Switzerland after the Anschluss delivered Austria into Hitler’s hands. In the meantime, in 1936, Musil suffered a stroke, but was able to work again before long.

The later portions of *The Man Without Qualities* have their admirers. But for many they will be slow going. The long conversations between Ulrich and Agathe, and the detailed ruminations on various religious texts, are dramatically static. There are many enlivening episodes and aperçus as the pages accumulate, but accumulate they do; the novel never really recovers its momentum. This is a pity, for Musil clearly invested a great deal in the story of Ulrich and Agathe; there is even some evidence that he regarded the story of their relationship as the centerpiece of the book: when he began working on the novel, in the mid-Twenties, his working title was “The Twin Sister.” It is daunting to think of the thousand pages of the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities* as prolegomenon, but there you are. Unfortunately, this is a case in which aspiration did not match achievement. As Musil himself acknowledged in a note, “Volume One closes approximately at the high point of an arch; on the other side it has no support.”

It has often been pointed out that, at bottom, Musil was a kind of moralist. Like Rilke, his favorite poet, he wanted his work to communicate the imperative “Du mußt dein leben ändern” (“You must change your life”). He hoped that the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe would furnish a model for that imperative. It is here that Musil’s investment in Nietzsche betrays him. The title of the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities* is “Into the Millennium (The Criminals).” The criminals in question were Ulrich and Agathe. Their crime, in the first instance, was to shatter, or attempt to shatter, the traditional bourgeois moral code. Musil signals this by hinting at an incestuous union between them. He hoped that by placing the siblings “beyond good and evil” he could picture a form of life that transcended the many human and cultural deficiencies he had anatomized in the first volume. Musil’s term for this state of transcendence was *der andere Zustand*,

“the other condition,” a species of aestheticized religious experience that Musil summarized in one essay as “the condition of love, of goodness, of renunciation of the world, of contemplation, of vision, of approach to God, of entrancement, of will-lessness, of meditation,” etc. One might dismiss such experiences, he wrote, did they not leave traces everywhere and did they “not constitute the marrow of our morality and idealism.”

One finds again and again the presence of another world, like a solid ocean bottom from which the restless waves of the ordinary world have drawn back; and in the image of this world there is neither measure nor precision, neither purpose nor cause: good and evil simply fall away.

Musil’s evocation of “the other condition” is attractively poetic; but it does not offer the existential transformation he seeks. As one commentator on *The Man Without Qualities* noted, in the relationship between Agathe and Ulrich there is “the repeated implication ... that there might be a way to have a permanent vacation *in reality*.” But reality will always reassert itself, and with reality come all the moral strictures *this side* of good and evil. At one point, Ulrich confides, “I believe that all our moral injunctions are concessions to a society of savages.” In fact, it is only by heeding our moral injunctions that we may be preserved from savagery. Scholars conjecture that the last words Musil wrote the morning he died were those in which Ulrich acknowledges that he and Agathe were “nihilists and activists,” not realists. Perhaps Musil was coming around to that realization as well.

## Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. An English version of this essay appears in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, by Robert Musil, edited and translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft (University of Chicago Press, 301 pages, \$29.95; \$16.95 paper). [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *The Man Without Qualities*, by Robert Musil, translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike; Knopf, 1,774 pages, \$60 (two-volume boxed set). [Go back to the text.](#)

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