

# The New Criterion

## Features

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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 Bewilderment ...*

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