

# *The Essayistic Novel and Mode of Life: Robert Musil's The Man without Qualities*

---

**Thomas Harrison**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

It was more or less in the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept—that he believed he could most rightly survey and handle the world and his own life.

—Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, chap. 62

**R**OBERT MUSIL'S IMPORTANCE IN THE CONCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF THE ESSAY rests on two remarkable achievements: (1) his transformation of that literary genre or mode into a novel, expanding a traditionally short form into a much more encompassing one, and (2) his existentializing of the form, elevating it to a paradigm for ethical action. Both acts are played out in the magisterial, unfinished novel that occupied the last twenty years of his life: *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), its first two parts published in 1930, the third in 1933, and many additional materials posthumously, after 1942. The authoritative English translation by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike runs to nearly two thousand pages. Most of my essay will be devoted to the first of Musil's achievements: his essayistic novel. Then, from this form of writing and its ontological foundations, where the world itself is seen as an essay, I will extrapolate its striving, utopian, constructive ethics.



Robert Musil (1880–1942) was not only a novelist but was an essayist also in the strict manner of speaking, penning expository pieces about writers, philosophy, and cultural concerns throughout his life. However, he did not master these occasional essays as well as others writing in his language (like Karl Krauss, Georg Simmel, Arnold Schönberg, or Siegfried Kracauer). Musil’s intellect was too mercurial, too expansive and subtle, to remain satisfied by a predominantly ratiocinative treatment of a subject. His thinking was too figurative, imagistic, and analogical to allow him to be content with analytical or conceptual rhetoric. “I am not a philosopher,” he noted. “I am not even an essayist but rather a poet (*Dichter*).”<sup>1</sup> The short form that was most congenial to Musil took its impetus from an imaginative picture, or *Bild*, of a strange, ambiguous situation and resulted in what the critic Andreas Huyssen calls the modernist miniature, considering it a newcomer to writing.<sup>2</sup> Musil collected these *Bilder* into an incisive gallery of allegories and paradoxes titled *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (*Nachlass zu Lebzeiten*, 1936).

Yet even these *Bilder* do not sit comfortably with the nature of their form, making Musil label one section of the *Posthumous Papers* “Stories That Are Not Stories.” If they had to stand naked on their own as dramatic and sensory representations, they would be abandoned to the good graces of a well-intentioned reader. So Musil’s *Bilder* differ from those of his great counterparts Robert Walser and Franz Kafka by interpreting the principles of their own exposition or by tying their images to broader meditations. Here lies the expansionist tendency of Musil’s writing, and it vexes not only the *Bilder* but also his essays. As he prepared to gather the essays into a volume, Musil troubled himself about what these short pieces *had not* brought into the clarity of language: the extended, invisible network holding them together. “[W]hat is important to me is not the way that the ideas and feelings . . . are connected in one person [the author] . . . but only their connection to each other.” The occasions that spurred these essays (funeral orations, theatrical premieres, publications of books) overemphasized certain thoughts that were clandestinely “connected beneath the surface.” Rereading his own essays, Musil regretted that “what for me was essential always accommodated itself to the incidental.”<sup>3</sup>

Musil succeeded in overcoming “the incidental,” and with it the short form, in a series of remarkable stories—novellas really—that he collected into broad intellectual investigations of erotic feeling: *Unions* (*Vereinigungen*, 1911) and *Three Women* (*Drei Frauen*, 1924). These novellas all address a topic that never abandoned Musil throughout his life: the “wonderful dream of a love in which body and soul are entirely one.”<sup>4</sup> *Unions*, especially, is a tour de force of symbolic, analogical, expressionist storytelling, aiming to invent the most daring new idioms of emotional insight. Given Musil’s dissatisfactions with the limitations of literary convention, however, it was inevitable that he would break out of the bounds of the short story too. He wished to make these stories speak to each other, just like the essays. By the 1920s Musil had come to see human understanding itself as a continuously unfurling inquiry, striving always for something it has not

<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976), 1:665; Robert Musil, *Diaries, 1899–1941*, selected and trans. Philip Payne, ed. Mark Mirsky (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 326 (where Payne renders *Dichter* as “creative writer”). Many of Musil’s essays can be sampled in the fine English collection, Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Modernist Miniatures: Literary Snapshots of Urban Spaces,” *PMLA* 122, no. 1 (January 2007): 27–42.

<sup>3</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher*, 1:663–64; Musil, *Diaries*, 325–26, translation slightly revised.

<sup>4</sup> Musil expands on this dream in *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins, editorial consultant Burton Pike (New York: Knopf, 1995), 1:195. Hereafter abbreviated *MWQ*.

quite said, continually reshaping its forms and methods, rethinking its suppositions. The essayistic novel is where Musil's restless trials and reflections took him.

What "idea" of the essay causes it to transmute its form, creating a novel? Certainly it is not one that could be just as well satisfied by the topics of a small, expository prose form (the features of a place, an ideological stance, the presentation of evidence in favor of or against a particular thesis). What calls for an essayistic novel is nothing less than the effort of human beings to understand their place in the circumambient world and what behavior is best suited to it. This challenge resounds already very loudly in Musil's first book, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*, 1906). Twenty years later, in *The Man without Qualities*, it becomes altogether clear to its author no less than to its protagonist Ulrich that ultimately "there was only one question worth thinking about, the question of the right way to live" (*MWQ*, 275). In the years that separated the two novels the Great War had changed the terms of the inquest, appearing even to render all answers futile. Basic certainties about Western society, convictions of right and wrong, the status of the human subject, and belief in freedom, rationality, and the credibility of the intellect seemed suddenly to be as precarious as the great Austro-Hungarian Empire that had imploded overnight in 1918.

*The Man without Qualities* was an essay on all of this, not just on the great question of right living that the war had made so complex. It required a long cast of characters, a careful exposition of an intricate cultural landscape, and an immense breadth of flexible mental reflection marshaled together to "assay"—to test, to try, and to critique—the principles on which such a culture was based, as well as other principles that might hold up better in the future.

Musil was not the only writer of his time to think of the essay as the method and intellectual mode most appropriate to ethical reflection. A predilection for this flexible genre had taken strong root by the end of the nineteenth century, with brilliant standards established by Søren Kierkegaard, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and half a dozen prominent others. Their essays bent "positivistic" accounts of objective phenomena to the purposes of feeling and subjective need, to matters of spiritual and moral import. A loose manner of prose composition without fixed rules of method—incorporating aphorism, lyrical condensation, confession, invective, and satire—the essay straddled a spectrum along which Western metaphysics seemed to have arrayed two components of human experience: head and heart, science and art, truth and fiction, body and soul, law and desire.

By the early twentieth century, writers were intent on getting to the bottom of the *relationship between* these terms, investigating the co-implication of one in the other in a genre of prose that had neither the rigidity of a philosophical treatise nor the freedom of poetic flight. One of Musil's novelistic heirs, Milan Kundera, understood what had changed at this historical juncture and required new forms of intellectual articulation. Human reality, explained the philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger, configures a broad *Lebenswelt*, a dramatic being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) instead of within one's body and the folds of one's skin. "Man does not relate to the world as subject to object, as eye to painting; not even as actor to stage set. Man and the world are together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (*in-der-Welt-sein*) changes as well."<sup>5</sup> This is what Musil himself had seen by 1925. Literature, he wrote, needs to discuss not experience (*Erfahrung*) but *how*

---

<sup>5</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 35.

we experience (*erleben*), the deep border crossing of “subject” and “object.”<sup>6</sup> An essayist—and, even more so, an essayistic novelist—must spell all this out.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the subject of the essay is this in-between world—materially and historically hard as it is subjectively variable and soft. In Musil’s hands the essay aims to rethink how we understand this realm beyond posited “things.” “To articulate feelings through the understanding, to turn the understanding from the insignificant problems of knowledge to those of the feelings, that is the goal of the essayist” (“with the further goal,” he adds, “of increasing human happiness”).<sup>7</sup> To properly “survey and handle the world,” as the epigraph to this article puts it, one needs a flexible, pluralist perspective. One needs to reconcile scientific analyses of objective problems with discourses of desire and imaginative intuition—indeed, to bridge the gap between them.

On these issues Musil stands along a vector extending beyond the positions of Nietzsche and György Lukács.<sup>8</sup> The real concern of the essay, says the latter, is to interpret something that “has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive” (*SF*, 26). Whereas imaginative writing *does* often try to give shape to something that has never existed before, the essay tries to understand the implications of such shape—its latent structure. The essay reaches out “for what lies behind the image” (*SF*, 21). What lies behind an image are its “destiny-relationships,” experiences, or meanings

which cannot be expressed by any gesture and which yet long for expression. From all that has been said you will know what experiences I mean and of what kind they are. I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as spontaneous principle of existence; the worldview in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life. (*SF*, 22)

These are what lie behind the image: “intellectuality,” “conceptuality,” “worldview,” events of the soul, motive forces of life—frameworks *within which* an act, a phenomenon, or a gesture reveals its function. An essayist is a thinker “who glimpses destiny in forms” (*SF*, 23), concerning himself with understanding “that moment at which things become forms” (*SF*, 23)—that “moment” (in a Hegelian sense) when the conceptual or existential “motivation” of a phenomenon comes into the light. We recall Musil claiming that the only things that really matter in his essays are the elements within them “which are connected beneath the surface.” Analogously for Lukács, the ultimate “incident” or “occasion” of an essay is transcendent. It is “the soul-content indirectly and unconsciously concealed within forms themselves” (*SF*, 23). What the essay seeks in a form of living experience would thus be its “destiny-creating principle” (*SF*, 23)—the direction toward which an experience tends or the ethical network it serves.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Musil, “Toward a New Aesthetic” (1925), in *Precision and Soul*, 205–6.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Musil, “Franz Blei” (1918), in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978), 8:1024.

<sup>8</sup> I have not found evidence that Musil read the remarkable essay on the essay by his younger compatriot Lukács (b. 1885), but it is likely. In any event their views converge on a number of points (as do the remarks of T. W. Adorno made in 1958, which clearly derive inspiration from his forerunners). Lukács’s “On the Nature and the Form of the Essay” (1911) is in his *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1–18. This volume is hereafter abbreviated *SF*. Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” (1958) can be found in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 92–111.

The articulation of the soul-content of forms calls for as much comprehension as possible, combining keen observation with intuition, imaginative empathy with empirical rigor. Musil himself invokes similar pairs to describe the hybrid methodology of the essay.<sup>9</sup> Trained in philosophy, science, and engineering, he adopts a skeptical attitude toward the freer, associational, and not epistemologically binding rhetoric of poetry. It can provide only part of the necessary method. Yet from his studies of Nietzsche and Ernst Mach (the philosopher of science on whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation), Musil also learned that even the hard facts of materialist science are interpretive postulations. They may appear more objective, but they are no less fanciful than the claims of painting, dreams, and poetry. This is to say that any truly dispassionate understanding of the world will readily admit that reality “is not as solid as it pretends to be; no thing, no self, no form, no principle, is safe, everything is undergoing an invisible but ceaseless transformation” (*MWQ*, 269). Having its purpose in a reflection on “form,” the essay will thus take as its topic life’s formal complexity and multiplexity. Its *theme* will be the formal determination of this life, the configuration (the shaping) of what a more naive view would see as its “destiny.”

Ultimately for Musil as for Lukács, the epistemology and hermeneutic procedures of the essay are grounded in an ontology of *the world itself as an essay*. This ontology entails a post-Romantic idea of experience as a self-transformative process that achieves states of equilibrium only to run into contingencies out of which new states arise. In this *lebensphilosophische* outlook subscribed to by a wide range of European thinkers from Goethe and Friedrich Schlegel onward, experience is a process of flux and becoming, a subsuming of relatively stable forms (configurations of “being”) that “becoming” breaks down and reconfigures. “Will to power” and “will to survival” are only provisional names for the vitality pulsating in and beneath the seeming equilibrium of life. “Essayism” is an even better name for the process, not envisioning its teleology (power, survival, advancement) so much as its self-testing drive. Living or written, each essay is partially experimental and ultimately inconclusive. Inspired by the Nietzschean notions of the *Versuch* (trial, experiment) and the *Versucher* (the essayist), Musil gives the appellation *Essayismus* to the epistemological and ontological scenario he culls from the German philosopher and from the philosopher of science, Mach.

From the work of both philosophers he elaborates a species of perspectivism: diverse meanings, functions, and uses cling to each “thing” that we envision. Such a thing is nothing more than a crystallization of its possibilities in a given moment of time. In the human realm of historical, economic, and cultural effects, this self-critical and constructive process is even more dramatic. Musil wryly invokes a quasi-Hegelian understanding of what is at work: it is a deployment of *Geist* (spirit or mind), a great cosmic force that

jumbles things up, sorts them out, and forms new combinations. To the mind good and evil, above and below, are not skeptical, relative concepts, but terms of a function, values that depend on the context they find themselves in. The centuries have taught it that vices can turn into virtues and virtues into vices, so the mind concludes that basically only ineptitude prevents the transformation of a criminal into a useful person within the space of a lifetime. . . . [It] regards nothing as binding; everything has the value it has only until the next act of creation, as a face that changes with the words we are speaking to it. (*MWQ*, 162–63)

<sup>9</sup> For his precise descriptions, see, in addition to the extraordinary pages on the essay in *MWQ* (which are by far the best treatments of all), “[On the Essay],” “Sketch of What the Writer Knows,” and “Toward a New Aesthetic,” in *Precision and Soul*, 48–51, 61–65, 193–208.

It is in keeping with the nature of this *Geist* that the protagonist of Musil's novel is a "man without qualities," for himself as well as the narrator. It is not that he *has* no qualities. He possesses all that a person could want, but he just hasn't decided how best to use them (i.e., the "destiny" they should serve). "Obviously, he said to himself, what was keeping him spellbound in this aloof and nameless way of life was nothing other than the compulsion to that loosening and binding of the world that is known by a word we do not care to encounter by itself: *Geist*" (*MWQ*, 162).

Now, why does this essayistic ontology require novelistic articulation, and how is this to be accomplished? As we have seen, the ultimate interest of the essay is not a single phenomenon or a "typical" experience of life. Since all experience is typical, contingent, occasional, and rife with potential, the real topic of the essay is empirical occurrence in its broadest extension. Its theme, correspondingly, is the "soul-content" of such occurrence: the complexes of will and feeling (or their like) embodied within it, the living networks in which it is caught, the aims that it serves or ignores, promotes or oppresses. Both topic and theme require narrative development. To sound out the background and foreground of these "complexes," a written account must engage in an etiological account of their origins, supplemented by philosophical analysis, and it must embed both in a historical context.

An essayistic novel starts with life embodied and goes "behind" it. Behind incidents, places, acts, and persons, it seeks inherent connections and reasons for being. Fictional characters are already concretizations of hypothetical life, articulations of existential possibility. A novel like *The Man without Qualities* explicitly presents them as such. It asks us to ponder these "hypotheses," to reflect on how they arise, the effects that they have, their circuits of influence. The essayistic novel constructs forms to question how they work. A clear example can be seen in a writer I have already mentioned, Milan Kundera, who thinks of his entire novel *Immortality* as a literary-philosophical elaboration of a gesture the author had observed performed by a woman one day at the side of a pool. Behind that gesture (a gesture and a form are one and the same, says Lukács; *SF*, 44), Kundera imagined a character; and behind that character, a story.<sup>10</sup> The function of the essay, Lukács has said, is to unfold meanings and "destiny-relations" that "a gesture cannot express" (*SF*, 7). The gesture is underwritten by a type of person, by a prototypical situation, by a culturally coded intention. In no way can a gesture "be regarded as the expression of an individual, as his creation (because no individual is capable of creating a fully original gesture, belonging to nobody else), nor can it even be regarded as that person's instrument; on the contrary, it is gestures that use us as their instruments, as their bearers and incarnations."<sup>11</sup> As an elaborated essay, the novel strives to spell out the semiotic codes embedded in human behavior, in the world of action and ideas to which the characters themselves belong.

"The *Bildungsroman* of a person, that is one type of novel. The *Bildungsroman* of an idea, that is the novel plain and simple."<sup>12</sup> This novel plain and simple knows that "the comprehension of

<sup>10</sup> Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 3–8. On Kundera's views on the essayistic novel, consult especially his *Art of the Novel*, where, for example, he praises Robert Musil and Hermann Broch for striving to "make of the novel the supreme intellectual synthesis" (16). See also his *Testaments Betrayed*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); and *The Curtain*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Kundera, *Immortality*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Musil, *Briefe, 1901–1942*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 956. An articulate analysis of the essayistic implications of Musil's remark about the *Bildungsroman* (as well as of Lukács's and Adorno's positions on the essay) can be found in Claire De Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). On the difference between the *Bildungsroman* of a person and that of an idea in Musil's *Törless*,

every judgment, the meaning of every concept, is surrounded by a delicate envelope of experience as by an ether.”<sup>13</sup> An idea shorn of its empirical envelope may well suit a philosopher, but the novelist’s idea arises from a world, and this world in turn entails a book. And all readers know that there is no chance of “detaching an idea in a book from its context on the page. It catches our eye like the face of a person looming up in a crowd” (*MWQ*, 626). An essay turns into a novel in order to unravel codes of cultural meaning. The essayistic novel elaborates the internal and external relations of acts and meanings, their causes no less than their unforeseeable consequences.

*The Man without Qualities* activates such practice in numerous ways. Before it relates anything that happens, it scrutinizes each one of its characters and situations, even such actions as thinking, walking, and drinking. It submits each to speculation, investigating historical contexts. It presumes that no happening possesses a self-evident meaning and that no inquisitive reader can be perfectly gratified by the naked unfolding of a “plot.” Both happenings and plots are suffused with questions.

Let us take an example. Two central characters of the book are in love without truly admitting it to themselves or each other. Let us call them, as Musil does, Arnheim and Diotima. At a dramatically critical moment, they have maneuvered things in such a way as to be left alone in a room in Diotima’s apartment. Musil’s narrator addresses this episode over the course of two full chapters and 2,500 words but divulges absolutely nothing that the characters say or do. The title of the first of these chapters already reveals the narrator’s distance from the reported situation. It reads, not “Arnheim and Diotima Are Alone,” but “Silent Encounter between Two Mountain Peaks.” After the very long silence filling the first chapter, the second chapter finally appears ready to relay their interaction. Its first sentence is promising: “Arnheim was the first to shake off the spell.” But again we hear no words, nor are we made privy to the characters’ thoughts and feelings. Instead of giving us the “facts” of the situation, the narrator reveals something very different: the “idea” at work in their behavior—the essayistically elaborated idea that here, in this encounter, a phenomenon was making its appearance that we can only call “soul.” The narrator expatiates quite brilliantly and at length on this soul and stresses how people normally stuff its “big hole” with ideals and moral principles. Then he glides over to a discussion of the nature of love, its hidden mysteries, and the characters’ unfamiliarity with it.

Description of suspended action punctuates these theoretical passages, woven from the most tenuous of imagistic threads. That thread begins with a disarming and suggestive simile in which Diotima is disturbed by the notion that “her empty apartment, in the absence of even her husband, seemed like a pair of trousers Arnheim had just slipped into” (*MWQ*, 195). The drama of this amorous encounter (or absence of drama) proceeds from this simile to a sensory description of Arnheim’s material trousers, concluding only two pages later in a mock-epic picture of the two lovers as actors in a grand and static tableau:

Arnheim had no inkling of this [of Diotima thinking of her apartment as trousers filled by him]. His trousers made an impeccably perpendicular line to the gleaming parquet; his morningcoat, his cravat, his serenely smiling patrician head, said nothing, so perfect were they.... [two pages follow] Rising from the vertical creases of his trousers, Arnheim’s body seemed

---

see Bianca Cetti Marinoni, “Il ‘laboratorio’ del romanzo-saggio Musiliano,” in *Avantgarde, Modernität, Katastrophe: Letteratura, arte e scienza fra Germania e Italia nel primo '900*, ed. Eberhard Lämmert and Giorgio Cusatelli (Florence: Olschki, 1995), 191–99.

<sup>13</sup> Musil, “Sketch of What the Writer Knows,” 64.

to stand there in the godlike solitude of a towering mountain. United with him through the valley between them, Diotima rose on its other side, luminous with solitude, in her fashionable dress of the period with its puffed sleeves on the upper arms, the artful pleats over the bosom widening above the stomach, the skirt narrowing again below the knees to cling to her calves. The glass-bead curtains at the doors cast moving reflections like ponds, the javelins and arrows on the walls trembled with their feathered and deadly passions, and the yellow volumes of Calman-Lévy on the tables were as silent as lemon groves. (*MWQ*, 195–98)

Musil quite properly assumes that the suppressed yearnings of the restrained couple will not provide for a very dramatic novelistic description. So he creates another drama explaining the first one, allowing the realistic rendering of Diotima's clothes at the end of this epic inaction to spill over into a surreal activation of the room's décor. It is precisely this embarrassment and repression—this gaping breach in the existential reality of the characters—that captivates Musil, its wordless emotion. This, in itself, is the love that holds the two subjects captive—love and the encroachments of soul, studied in their generic raw essence, dissociating the two characters from their waxlike, appareled demeanors with which the chapter leaves us.

The dozen important characters of *The Man without Qualities* come across in much the same way, with a leisurely psychobiography unfurled in installments over the course of the novel's first two hundred pages. Shown "doing" something in their initial presentation, they are instantly crumbled into desires and ambitions, rooted in social and moral conditions. Even on the characters' second or third appearances, other commentative essays interrupt the representations, building a composite and in principle interminable picture. In much the same way that "an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it," says our epigraph, so does this novel approach its own characters.

One is Count Leinsdorf. He is first given to us in a grand, epiphanic gesture, his secretary standing next to him in the nobleman's "beautiful, tall-windowed study, amid multiple layers of tranquility, devotion, gold braid, and the solemnity of fame, with a book in his hand from which he was reading aloud to his Grace a passage he had been directed to find" (*MWQ*, 87). The full meaning of Count Leinsdorf and his secretary is obviously no simple narrative matter, incorporating as it does so many strata of human experience. Here we have the count's state of mind ("tranquility"), a ruling moral value ("devotion"), plus a coded element of interior décor ("gold braid"). We also have a social ramification of the overall picture that does not reside within it at all: "fame." As for what the passage calls the "solemnity" of this fame (a curious phrase), it encompasses all of these previous layers (gold braid, devotion, and so on). The portrait of Count Leinsdorf, built out of visual and abstract quantities, eventually makes way for a thought that occurs to the count in an irritated reaction to the words of the philosopher Fichte that his secretary is reading. This thought then leads to the narrator's elaboration of the count's feelings about something he calls the "true Austria." Musil accounts for the thought and the feelings underpinning it in another very layered image of a fundamental characteristic of the nobleman, which the previous indicators have suggested: his strong class consciousness, moderated by an ostensible openness to socialism. The count

was convinced that "the people" were "good." Since not only his many officials, employees, and servants but countless others depended on him for their economic security, he had never known "the people" in any other respect, except on Sundays and holidays, when they poured

out from behind the scenery as a cheerful, colorful throng, like an opera chorus. Anything that did not fit in with this image, he attributed to “subversive elements,” the work of irresponsible, callow, sensation-seeking individuals. (MWQ, 90)

This ironic wit pervades every page of *The Man without Qualities*, creating a distance between an articulated perspective that might otherwise be taken at face value (especially by the character who holds it) and other views that the first occludes. This kind of irony thrives on precisely such divergence and plurality of perspective and is crucial to the essayism of the novel. As Claudio Magris notes after documenting Musil’s career-long disappointments in the failures and limitations of language, the aggressive irony of *The Man without Qualities* ultimately adds up to an unequivocal affirmation of the constructive powers of words.<sup>14</sup> Irony compensates for the failure of discourse by proposing daring new meanings, compounding the ranges of articulation, circling around a thing “from many sides without wholly encompassing it,” in a methodological multiplicity that potentially knows no end.

Here irony counteracts the essay’s tendency to dismantle its components into facets like a cubist painting and approaches analogy, simile, and metaphor, or the unifying tropes of synthesis and correlation, which are equally relevant to an aesthetics of the essay. Audacious as any on paper, Musil’s analogies are in seemingly inexhaustible supply. To convey his impression of the meretricious thinker Arnheim, Ulrich exclaims, “That’s no longer intellect, . . . it is a phenomenon like a rainbow with a foot you can take hold of and actually feel” (MWQ, 203). As the “man without qualities” reflects on his disappointments in his erstwhile soul mate Walter, the narrator remarks, “There is something special about youthful friendships: they are like an egg that senses in its yolk its glorious future as a bird, even while it presents to the world only a rather expressionless egg shape indistinguishable from any other” (MWQ, 54). What makes analogies, similes, and metaphors much more than correlations is that they change the terms of a given understanding. By placing a phenomenon in an unfamiliar discursive context, they provide imaginative grounds for new conceptual interpretations. Sometimes this is only implicit, as with the hypothetical images for desire in the following passage, where Musil is again speaking of Arnheim and Diotima:

---

<sup>14</sup> Claudio Magris, *L’anello di Clarisse: Grande stile e nichilismo nella letteratura moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 227. Many others, of course, comment on the central role of irony in the novel’s composition. Walter Moser also perceives the constructive nature of Musilian irony, which not only questions “established discursive behavior, attitudes, positions and beliefs” but also opens them up “to the possibility of new formations of discourse.” Walter Moser, “The Factual in Fiction: The Case of Robert Musil,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 2 (1984): 411–28 (quotation from 414). Much work has been done on Musil’s pervasively ironic rhetoric, though not always on its constructive nature. In chronological order, the most important works are Beda Allemann, *Ironie und Dichtung* (Pfullingen: G. Neske, 1956); Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); Dieter Bachmann, *Essay und Essayismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969); Marie-Louise Roth, *Robert Musil: Ethik und Aesthetik* (Munich: P. List, 1972); Massimo Cacciari, *Dallo Steinhof* (Milan: Adelphi, 1980); Enrico De Angelis, *Robert Musil: Biografia e profilo critico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982); Claudia Monti, *La metafora della scienza* (Naples: Pironti, 1983); Wladimir Kryszinski, “The Dialectical and Intertextual Function of Irony in the Modern Novel,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12 (March 1985): 1–11; Marike Findlay, *The Potential of Modern Discourse: Musil, Pierce, and Perturbation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jean-Pierre Cometti, *Musil philosophe* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); Gunther Martens, “Literary Modernism, Critical Theory and the Politics of Irony,” in *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), 1:89–105; Kevin Mulligan and Armin Westerhoff, eds., *Robert Musil: Ironie, Satire, falsche Gefühle* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2009); and Mark M. Freed, *Robert Musil and the NonModern* (New York: Continuum International, 2011).

So these two people found themselves in the position of being linked by a splendid bridge with a hole at its center, just a few yards wide, so that they cannot come together. According to [Arnheim], desire strikes and sticks like an arrow, rather than swarming on into ever greater distances like a flock of birds. It impoverishes the soul, just like arithmetic and mechanics and brutality. In this fashion Arnheim spoke with disapproval of desire, even as he felt it struggling like a blinded slave in the cellar. (*MWQ*, 549)

We have three or four similes for desire here, moving swiftly from the image of a bridge with a hole in its middle, to arrows, to a flock of birds, and finally to a blinded slave struggling in a cellar. Each analogy approaches the issue from a different side, raising enough questions to generate an essay of its own. In fact, each figure is already an essay, in the sense of a sally or thought experiment. Similarity and difference, in Musil's novel, are as intimately bound as analysis and synthesis.<sup>15</sup>

Other aspects of the novel's essayistic irony are more extensively binding. Often, for example, the work's embedded reflections, metaphorical bonds, and structural components are reflected, reinforced, or distorted by other parts of the narrative. Even Ulrich's own "conscious essayism" (i.e., his decision to approach life in the manner of an essay, of which more will be said later) is essayed and ironically diminished by his contemporaries' plan to celebrate Austria's "Emperor of Peace" in the year 1918. For, as it turns out, the campaign's manner of proceeding bears negative similarities to Ulrich's self-consciously provisional, preparatory, and hypothetical treatments of problems still awaiting solution. As Count Leinsdorf attempts to decide exactly *what* should be celebrated in this momentous year, he collects ideas from all corners of the country, "reading correspondence, receiving people, discussions, and expeditions," and responding to some petitions by saying, "Excellent, but we can't say yes and we can't say no as long as we have no really firm idea what our central goal is" (*MWQ*, 240). Other recommendations receive the stamp "Filed for later decision." Still others are ennobled with the characterization "tentatively definitive" (*MWQ*, 242–43). It is all a symptom of that same ontological problem that Ulrich tries to master by way of an essayistic method, making this novel a grand parody of the same comprehensive knowledge that it seeks. What lies at the root of the problem is the dissonant, unclassifiable heterogeneity of data. We have seen how it occupies different subjective layers of the character of Count Leinsdorf. It also makes it difficult for the Austrian Foreign Ministry to decide "under what heading" to file its surveillance on Arnheim, who after all is not simply a writer or a businessman but also a diplomat and a philosopher (*MWQ*, 225). The complications are inherent to that "loosening and binding of the world" at work in *Geist*.

One additional type of irony built into the novel's essayistic composition informs the work's reception. No reading of a book whose events take place between 1913 and 1914 can fail to factor in the historical tragedy around the corner: the devastations of World War I, the philosophical "irrationality" unleashed by that event, and the destruction, by war, of the best ideals and thoughts

---

<sup>15</sup> A fundamental study of the analogical aesthetics of *MWQ* is Jörg Kühne, *Das Gleichnis: Studien zur inneren Form von Robert Musils Roman "Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften"* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968). On the simultaneously analytic-synthetic implications of analogical tropes in Musil, see also my own *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 180–88; Findlay, *Potential*, 14–21; Dietrich Hochstätter, *Sprache des Möglichen: Stilistischer Perspektivismus in Robert Musils "Mann ohne Eigenschaften"* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1972), 103–13; and Genese Grill, *The World as Metaphor in Robert Musil's "The Man without Qualities": Possibility as Reality* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012).

represented by the novel itself. Very simply put, the joint ambitions of Ulrich and the Viennese intellectuals seeking the right path for Europe are massively undercut by the continent's actual political history. The ironic hue that this casts on the novel would have been even thicker for its original readers in 1930–40, who, encircled by Nazism and violent intransigence, would have been extra mindful of the utopian futility of Musil's Viennese intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> In such straits, the great intellectual laboratory of *The Man without Qualities* could only have appeared tragic.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Musil did not decide how to end his novel, and may not even have wanted to (for an essay eschews conclusion), did not help the situation. Whatever option he entertained, it would have contradicted the eschatologies propounded in the first half of the novel.

Where do all these ironies leave the utopian notion of essayism? Obviously, it holds up as a manner of writing, producing in this novel a masterpiece of imaginative, intellectual, and literary invention. Despite the tragic historical context in which it is cast, this essayism also names a program for morality, one bent, like the novel itself, on offsetting or reevaluating the spiritual intransigence, the "systems," and the categorical thought at play in the political arena in Europe before the Great War and for many more decades to come. Both the ethical and the writerly dimensions of essayism belong to a paradoxical utopia of indeterminateness (*Utopie der Unbestimmtheit*) that is suspended between an affirmation of what is (historically embodied in a complex place and time, Vienna in 1913) and an aspiring after what is not, or what must or should still come.<sup>18</sup> The "present" of this writing and living consists in a condition of waiting, or expectation, without clarity as to what will come. Despite the intellectual perplexity it entails, this present of preparation entails a deep ethical commitment and perhaps even a "method." Let me end by indicating some behavioral tendencies that Musil and his spokesman Ulrich find appropriate to this interim, essayistic experience of life, marked by a continual "on-the-way-ness" and dynamic freedom.

The move from literature to ethics is intrinsic to the intentionality at the heart of the essay, striving as it does for a still-unachievable goal. It is figured in the parable of living like a character in a book. Two or three times Ulrich proposes that we reject the normal conduct of everyday life, in which we "handle our reality by effecting some sort of compromise with it," resigning ourselves to "an in-between state where the emotions prevent each other from reaching their fullest intensity, graying the colors somewhat" (*MWQ*, 625). Literary, rather than historical, experience has the advantage of being able to leave everything out of the plot that does not enhance

<sup>16</sup> Some implications of this context for the composition and reception of the novel are discussed in Stefan Jonsson, *Subject without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). For a recent and well-reasoned study of Musil's relation to the particulars of his Austrian context, see Malcolm Spencer, *In the Shadow of Empire: Austrian Experiences of Modernity in the Writings of Musil, Roth, and Bachmann* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008). See also Klaus Amann, *Robert Musil: Literatur und Politik* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2009); and Allen Thiher, *Understanding Robert Musil* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Even so, the constructive potentiality of Musil's multiplicitous and experimental Austria-Hungary of the prewar years has caught more attention than anything else in recent years. Dashed apart though it was by the explosions of 1914–18, this utopian Viennese "laboratory" is seen almost consistently in a positive light, as reaching for things not quite impossible. This perspective is shared by Patrizia C. McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006); Jonsson, *Subject without Nation*; Freed, *Robert Musil and the NonModern*; Spencer, *In the Shadow of Empire*; and Grill, *The World as Metaphor*.

<sup>18</sup> I borrow the phrase "utopia of indeterminateness" from a writer who felt herself very close to Musil: Ingeborg Bachmann. See her lecture at the University of Frankfurt, "Literatur als Utopie," in *Werke*, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum, and Clemens Münster (Munich: R. Piper, 1978), 4:255–71.

this intensity, that does not further the spirit of human potential. “So I propose,” says Ulrich to Diotima, “that we try to love each other as if we were characters in a novel who have met in the pages of a book. Let’s in any case leave off all the fatty tissue that plumps up reality” (*MWQ*, 625). The selection and intensification of purpose that are commonly absent in life also take place in reading: every good reader pays closer attention to certain passages of a book than to others and leaves out “whatever doesn’t suit” her (*MWQ*, 625). Art and love heighten this kind of commitment, potentiating action. The common and truly unfortunate alternative is rather to let actions arise merely “out of indifference to ideas” and to “care too little about what is happening and too much about to whom, when, and where it is happening” (*MWQ*, 395–6). That is the syndrome of bad reading and of being content with an insufficiently motivated plot.

The essayistic program of living like a man without qualities thus means

living the history of ideas instead of the history of the world. The difference, he said . . . would have less to do with what was happening than with the interpretation one gave it, with the purpose it was meant to serve, with the system of which the individual events were a part. (*MWQ*, 395)

The prevailing system of “reality” in the lives of most people was rather much more “like a bad play,” not reaching cogent articulations of passions or putting them to lofty and dignified use.

Now, to those who object that the practical impingements of one’s own or of collateral lives do not really let experience be lived this way, Ulrich responds that, whether we realize it or not, this is actually how we already live! We just generally engage in it without much drive or conviction. Even if it seems to aspire to the impossible, utopianism is “wholly the condition of the world in which we live” (*MWQ*, 401). What moves and motivates people most, producing some of the most satisfying events in life, is almost always “an idea that takes us a step farther along,” until after a while “habit, inertia, selfish promptings, and so on take its place, because that’s the way things go” (*MWQ*, 401).

To be sure, the depth of the utopian impulse depends also on the forces of culture. Certain eras and mentalities promote a passionate application of this impulse, while others hold it back. But what is one to do—how is one to live—in a nonheroical age? The “characters in a book” that Ulrich imagines seem to inhabit a passionate romance, a chivalrous epic, a saga of the soul. But what if one’s story is plotted in an essay instead of a grand narrative? In a world not ready for courageous commitments? Where even the decisions are not clear?

This is precisely the setting for *The Man without Qualities* and in many ways is still the setting for Europe and North America. It has the look of a “meantime,” in which the most one can be advised to do is to foster an “entirely open mind, poetically creative and morally experimental” (*MWQ*, 396). Caught between a “real,” embodied life and a fuzzy dream they might like this life to serve, subjects in such a cultural space can only be intent on enhancing their own intentionality. A person who truly and consciously embraces this condition is a possibilitarian, or possibilist (*Möglichkeitens**mensch*). She or he is not interested in saying, “Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen,” but rather, “Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen.” Such an essayist lives in the subjunctive mood, harkening at all times to “the as yet unawakened intentions of God” (*MWQ*, 11). This contempt for the actual in consideration of the possible is neither escapism nor dysfunctional resistance to the reality principle, as crude psychologists may have it; for a “possible experience” or truth is not an actual experience or truth minus its “reality value.”

It seems rather to possess “something quite divine about it, a fire, a soaring, a readiness to build and a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project” (*MWQ*, 11).

The dialectic is more complex than it seems:

It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it. Even so, it will always be the same possibilities, in sum or on average, that go on repeating themselves until a man comes along who does not value the actuality above the idea. It is he who first gives the new possibilities their meaning, their direction, and he awakens them. (*MWQ*, 12)

Musil’s approach to this subject is inspired by Nietzsche and especially by the philosopher’s idea of the “precursor.” Nietzsche, who claimed to be ahead of his time, to be “inactual” or untimely (*unzeitgemäss*), and to walk “among men as among fragments of the future,”<sup>19</sup> characterizes his philosopher of the future as a *Versucher*: a tempter and attempter, setting goals for humanity on the verge of being achieved. The word *Versucher* derives from *Versuch*: “trial,” “test,” “experiment,” “research,” “essay,” making the *Versucher* an “essayist” of possibilities. Like Nietzsche’s *Versucher*, Musil’s essayist is averse to accommodation. At the very least he or she shows “active passivism,” holding back from less-than-ideal options in favor of better ones to come, moving in accordance with a “morality of the next step”—in which each stride receives meaning from the step that comes after, not the one that came before.

All this amounts to a proleptic or propaedeutic approach to experience that finds realization in Musil’s novel, a willingness “to examine all the inner possibilities once again, to invent them anew, and finally to transfer the virtues of an unbiased laboratory technique from natural science to morality.”<sup>20</sup> Applying this precision to matters of feeling and soul is tantamount to “living hypothetically.” Considering that things are always “undergoing an invisible but ceaseless transformation,” and that “the unsettled holds more of the future than the settled,” every historical scenario should be viewed as “a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted” (*MWQ*, 269). Things should be treated as variables in a project that is not yet fully determined. At its most ambitious, this tendency to test, or essay, the potential valences of situations seeks “to discover and systematize truths giving new and bold directions to the feelings”; in this context “thinking would exist only to give an intellectual armature to some still problematic way of being human.”<sup>21</sup>

Abstract though such a program of human essayism might appear to be, critics of Musil have found it to be consonant with, even prescient of, many of the more interesting modes of thought at work in Europe a century later, conceptualized in terms of the postmodern and the nonmodern (Freed), an ethics of misunderstanding (Harrison), a subjectivity unanchored to nation and ideology (Jonsson), the principles of supra- and multiculturalism (De Obaldia, Spencer), the constitutive void underlying moral law (McBride), and dialogism, *différance*, and the end of metaphysics (Hunt).<sup>22</sup> These and related implications of Musil’s essayistic thinking are all contextualized by

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Redemption,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), 161.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Musil, “Political Confessions of a Young Man,” in *Precision and Soul*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Musil, “The Religious Spirit, Modernism, and Metaphysics,” in *Precision and Soul*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> See Freed, *Robert Musil and the NonModern*; Thomas Harrison, *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Jonsson, *Subject without Nation*; De Obaldia, *Essayistic Spirit*; Spencer, *In the Shadow of Empire*; McBride, *The Void of Ethics*; and Alina C. Hunt, “Musil’s Utopian Essayism: The Quest for an ‘Anti-ideological’ Ethics” (PhD diss., New York University, 1993).

his most summary description of essayism, which appears in the paragraph inaugurated by the epigraph to this article. In abbreviated form the passage continues as follows:

The value of an action or quality, and indeed its meaning and nature, seemed to [Ulrich] to depend on its surrounding circumstances, on the aims it served; in short, on the whole—constituted now one way, now another—to which it belonged. . . . [A]ll moral events take place in a field of energy whose constellation charges them with meaning. They contain good and evil the way an atom contains the possibilities of certain chemical combinations. . . . In this way an open-ended system of relationships arises, in which independent meanings, such as are ascribed to actions and qualities by way of a rough first approximation in ordinary life, no longer exist at all . . . and man as the quintessence of his possibilities, potential man, the unwritten poem of his existence, confronts man as recorded fact, as reality, as character. (*MWQ*, 270–71)

The bond this passage forges between literary composition and the realm of action is the clearest of many in *The Man without Qualities*. The point this chapter makes is that a novel cannot truly be essayistic unless it also elevates its literary procedures into principles of ethics. Nor can a reader understand one without the other. The existential extension of the thinking, epistemology, and metaphysics of a novel like *The Man without Qualities* is inevitable. In that sense, the very mode of articulation of the novel, its form, is an embodiment of its theme. The objective of his own investigation into the situation of Europe in 1913, into this history of ideas, says Musil, lies here: the novel “aims to provide materials for . . . a new morality.”<sup>23</sup> It elaborates essayistic strategies in order to allow them to be transposed, appropriated, and adapted by living subjects and institutions. This is the great ambition of the novel. And there is no simpler means to achieve it. A

---

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Oscar Maurus Fontana, “Erinnerungen an Robert Musil,” in *Robert Musil: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Karl Dinklage (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1960), 341.