

Essayism and Crisis

“A Sort of Introduction”

An ethical-aesthetic middle-ground between science and spirit, objective truth and subjective experience, essayism is an idea central to Robert Musil's work. His magnum opus, *The Man without Qualities*, unfolds predominantly in the essayistic mode: a combination of perspicacious psychological investigation and rumination on “the right way to live,” it seeks a confluence of precision and soul through the reorganization of inner experience. Yet the essence of essayism remains elusive—like so many of Musil's ideas, it is woven into a complex web stretching far and wide across the novel. Ulrich's youthful notion of “living hypothetically,” his later idea of living as one reads, his facetious suggestion to form a World Secretariat of Precision and Soul, and his desire to abolish reality all touch on essayism and contribute to an understanding of it. Though essayism seems to answer a great many questions Musil poses, as soon as we expect it to provide a complete solution, another problem arises. Indeed, when first presented in chapter 62, essayism immediately illuminates the life-crisis of the novel's central figure, Ulrich von——.

The Man without Qualities is neither a realist nor a typical modernist narrative. Though it takes place within a definite span of time, the chronology of events is never as important as their thematic arrangement, for “Musil insisted that life was not a sequential narrative of actions or ideas, but a web in which these are inextricably bound up with sensations and emotions.” (Pike, SW, xvii) Musil's characters, treated with scathing irony, sometimes seem hardly more than figures—not mere allegorical straw men yet not the type of creatures populating, say, the works of Hemingway. His characters converse in prolix philosophical passages—miniature essays—frequently interrupted or amended by the narrator. Every moment is subject to rigorous analysis

and each character to intense psychological “vivisection.”¹ For Musil, fiction is a place to work out complex ideas.

Because *The Man without Qualities* progresses essayistically, scenes proceed not by narrative logic but according to the flow of an argument. Paraphrasing passages without losing the subtlety of Musil’s thought is difficult; thus quoting is often more efficient and accurate. Furthermore, it is impossible to distill a distinct philosophy from the novel since its method and intended effect are decidedly against final answers.² It will be valuable, however, to gather the far-flung constitutive elements of essayism and apply them to the four parts of Ulrich’s definition of it in chapter 62. It will also be useful to refer to Musil’s “On the Essay” (1914?) to clarify the purpose and effect of this mode of thought. Afterwards it will be possible to investigate the crisis essayism inspires in *The Man without Qualities*.

But before discussing essayism, let us first look at the type of man capable of practicing it and the conditions its practice entails.

Ulrich

“But if there is a sense of reality,” Musil writes, “and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we call a sense of possibility.” (11) Elaborating on the meaning of possibility, he says: “A possible experience or truth is not the same as actual experience or truth minus its ‘reality value’ but has—according to its partisans, at least—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, something yet to be invented.” (11) There is a mystical aspect to possibility, and a utopianism: things which are not

¹ In his early diaries, Musil even refers to himself as “*monsieur le vivisecteur*.”

² “But exegesis itself is risky, at best, with a writer like Musil; and we might do well to read him with an ear for the substratum of mystery in his stories and in ourselves rather than attempt to decipher a code that dissolves on inspection.” (Agee, SW, xiv)

but which could or ought to be are the “as yet unawakened intentions of God” and the full potential of the world has yet to be born. (11)

Ulrich is a man whose sense of possibility is stronger than his sense of reality. He lives primarily in the subjunctive mood, meaning he has an “ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.” (11) Even as a child, he had considered it likely “that God Himself probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of possibility (*hic dixerit quispiam*—“here someone might object that...”), for God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently.” (14) The consequences of Ulrich’s acute sense of possibility “often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or, also, make both a matter of indifference.” (11) In one of many curious and highly essayistic metaphors, Musil attempts to impart a sense of what constitutes the possibilist: “Putting it another and perhaps better way, the man with an ordinary sense of reality is like a fish that nibbles at the hook but is unaware of the line, while the 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.” (12) He is eccentric, impractical, unpredictable, unreliable, and inconsistent, “but he is at peace with himself about everything as long as he can make it all come together in a fine idea.” (12) One never knows how the possibilist will react to a situation. He may take a slap impersonally or if someone steals away his love he might simply accept the loss. Or perhaps he will lash out first, and only later reconsider. His attitude affects him “as a weakness as much as a strength.” (12)

In chapter 17, Ulrich’s childhood friend Walter goes on a tirade about how “He’s a man without qualities!”—the “human type produced by our time!” (62-63) He goes on to explain

how precisely Ulrich can be without qualities. He “looks like nothing at all—that is, he is likely to look intelligent in such a general way that there isn’t a specific thing to pin him down!” (63)

“He is gifted, strong-willed, open-minded, fearless, tenacious, dashing, circumspect—yet he is none of them! They’ve made him what he is, they’ve set his course for him, and yet they don’t belong to him. When’s he’s angry, something in him laughs. When he is sad, he is up to something. When something moves him, he turns against it. He’ll always see a good side to every bad action. What he thinks of anything will always depend on some possible context—nothing is, to him, what it is; everything is subject to change, in flux, part of a whole, of an infinite number of wholes presumably adding up to a superwhole that, however, he knows nothing about. So every answer he gives is only a partial answer, every feeling only an opinion, and he never cares *what* something is, only ‘how’ it is—some extraneous seasoning that somehow goes along with it, that’s what interests him. [...]” (63-64)

Walter concludes dramatically that “Such a man is not really a human being!” (64)

There is good reason for Walter to describe Ulrich as un-human. Human beings define themselves by relating to their qualities and taking them on as their own, as the word *Eigenschaft* itself suggests. Each person, Musil says, has at least nine characters constituting his identity—and a tenth, an empty part that prevents complete fulfillment, which serves as a sort of basin through which the others trickle in and back out. That is, in the words of a possibilist, “a man’s possibilities must first be hedged in by prejudices, traditions, obstacles, and barriers of all sorts, like a lunatic in his straitjacket, and only then can whatever he is capable of doing have perhaps some value, substance, and staying power.” (15) The limitations of reality, for he who believes in it, define his identity. “And since the possession of qualities assumes a certain pleasure in their reality, we can see how a man who cannot summon up a sense of reality even in relation to himself may suddenly, one day, come to see himself as a man without qualities.” (12)

Ulrich feels he has “all the abilities and qualities favored by his time [...] but he had lost the capacity to apply them.” (44) In fact, his talents seem to have no corresponding application, a fact that tinges with aversion everything he does or experiences and fills him with “impotence and loneliness, and all-encompassing distaste for which he could not find the complementary inclination.” (58) His strong sense of possibility overwhelms him: he can find no real relation

between himself and his qualities or take pleasure in any stable associations. “That sense of having firm ground underfoot and a firm skin all around, which appears so natural to most people, is not very developed in me,” he tells his cousin Diotima. (312) While recognizing his lack of “course” or “thread of a story” is debilitating for him, he finds himself unable to look upon his life as a linear narrative the way most people do.³ (708-709)

When the novel opens, Ulrich has already tried to define himself through three careers. His first attempt to become a great man in the military ended after he insulted an archduke, but he found he was in any case not interested in continuing along that path. Engineering introduced him to a new way of thinking, but he was disappointed by his impression that the engineer is unable “to adapt the daring and innovative soul of his technology to his private soul.” (35) This the mathematician could do, and Ulrich proved brilliant in this field. But even this career he abandons at the beginning of the novel because he cannot find ultimate value in it. There “was something in Ulrich’s nature that in a haphazard, paralyzing, disarming way resisted all logical systematizing, the single-minded will, the specifically directed drives of ambition...” (273) He has a keen, strong mind and feels “he could do everything with it or nothing, become a savior of mankind or a criminal.” (43) His inability to find a fulfilling role for himself leads him to taking year off from his life to search for something that might satisfy him.

Society, Science, and the Soul

The Man without Qualities takes place in Vienna in 1913 and spans the year before the outbreak of the First World War. The first book is in large part a critique of Austria-Hungary and its Imperial-Royal/Imperial and Royal government. Musil dubs the empire—a conflicted

³ This attitude, reflective of Musil’s suspicion of grand narratives culture and history, imbues the entire novel. Musil’s is “a narrative novel which is emphatically non-narrative, which gives the reader possible scenarios and takes them back again, which plays with plot and time-frame as if an infinite number of other possible arrangements were equally likely to occur.” (Genese Grill, quoted by Mirsky, Introduction, *Diaries*, LI.)

farrago of nationalities, languages, and interests—“Kakania,” after the initials emblazoned on all things official (k.k. = *kaiserlich-königlich* and k.u.k. = *kaiserlich und königlich*—“which institutions and which persons were to be designated by “k.k.” and which by “k.&k.” required the mastery of a secret science.” (29)) and with the not so subtle implication that, as a social organization, it is a “shitty” mess. Early in Part II, Ulrich becomes involved with the *Parallelaktion*, a committee dedicated to organizing a year’s worth of celebration for Emperor Franz Josef’s 70th year on the throne and to counter the jubilee celebration of Kaiser Wilhelm planned in Germany, both in 1918. The overarching irony of the book is, of course, that the outbreak of WWI in 1914 will preclude all celebrations and will result in the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire 1918.

Musil also critiques the cultural climate of the late-Hapsburg era (and by extension the post-WWI era during which he wrote the novel). Amid the conflict between old-world ideas and dogmas and the new capitalist-industrial modes of life coming to the fore in the early 20th century, something seems to have been lost, and life without it has become unbearable. “There is just something missing in everything, though you can’t put your finger on it, as if there had been a change in the blood or in the air; a mysterious disease has eaten away all the previous period’s seeds of genius, but everything sparkles with novelty, and finally one has no way of knowing whether the world has really grown worse, or oneself merely older. At this point a new era has definitely arrived.” (56) Newness and efficiency are everywhere to be seen, and the predominant fantasy of the future is as an ultra-industrious “super-American city where everyone rushes about, or stands still, with a stopwatch in hand.” (26-27) And even if we feel this is not the place we would like to live, we see little turning away from it. “It is exactly as though the old, inefficient breed of humanity had fallen asleep on an anthill and found, when the new breed

awoke, that the ants had crawled into its bloodstream, making it move frantically ever since, unable to shake off that rotten feeling of antlike industry.” (36) Though “we would like to think of ourselves as having a hand in making our time what it is,” (28) “mathematics has taken possession, like a demon, of every aspect of our lives.” (36) The spirit of genius in German culture, along with values and the soul, has somehow been misplaced, and many believe it is a cold scientific outlook that emptied life of its meaning. From all corners, people complain “that pure knowledge tore apart every sublime achievement of mankind without ever being able to put it back together, and they demanded a new humane faith, a return to inner primal values, a spiritual revival, and all sorts of things of that kind.” (267-278)

Musil’s negative treatment of science is, however, mostly ironic. Throughout Part I, he defends science and mathematics against the illusion that they are the work of an evil intelligence that renders humanity soulless. He acknowledges the “inner drought, the dreadful blend of acuity in matters of detail and indifference toward the whole, man’s monstrous abandonment in a desert of details, his restlessness, malice, unsurpassed callousness, money-grubbing, coldness, and violence, all so characteristic of our times...” (36) But he is firmly against the notion that everything that has gone sour in modernity is “the consequence of damage done to the soul by keen logical thinking!” (36) Rather he sees great potential in the mode of thinking that drives science and mathematics.

From the start, a division is set up between science and spirituality, and it is the ethical gap between them that essayism attempts to span. Ulrich prizes science’s “concept of hard, sober intelligence that makes the old metaphysical and moral ideas of the human race simply impossible, even though all it has to put in their place is the hope that a distant day will come when a race of intellectual conquerors will descend into the valleys of spiritual fruitfulness.” (43)

He lauds its strength and usefulness while pointing to what it lacks. Science leaves only a promise of what is to come (which in most people's minds is the super-American city of dehumanizing efficiency). It often misses the forest for the trees, leaving us lost in a sea of seemingly undifferentiated details. As Clarisse says, "All that finally remains is formulas. What they mean in human terms is hard to say; that's all there is." To which Walter responds:

First, four elements are turned into several dozen, and finally we're left floating around on relationships, processes, on the dirty dishwater of processes and formulas, on something we can't even recognize as a thing, a process, a ghost of an idea, of a God-knows-what. Leaving no difference anymore between the sun and a kitchen match, or between you mouth at one end of the digestive tract and its other end either. Every thing has a hundred aspects, every aspect a hundred connections, and different feelings are attached to every one of them. The human brain as happily split things apart, but things have split the human heart too. (65)

All the same, Ulrich sees a great potential in mathematical thought. The loss of values, he thinks, is certainly not solved by the idealism of weak-willed spiritualists longing for an idyllic past. Science, properly applied, promises as well the expansion of the realm of possibilities. Ulrich seeks to apply logical precision to matters of the spirit in order to come to deeper objective answers about the inner experience.

Implicit in Ulrich's regard for science is a spiritual longing that often leads him to the verge of saying "God" before leaving the word unuttered. There is more soul in science than commonly appreciated—in fact, the scientific outlook is perhaps "holier" than even the aesthetic. "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." (276) Science's eagerness to uncover the secrets of God serves as the impetus for accomplishments bordering on the magical. It alone can realize the dreams of mankind—yet it rarely accomplishes its feats

without sacrificing some ineffable aspect of the original idea. “We have gained reality and lost dream.” (36) Precision, too, like the highfalutin idealism of some spiritualists can be too dogmatically applied—rendering the mathematicians Ulrich has known the mere “public prosecutors and security chiefs of logic.” (44) This, though, does not preclude the possibility of a science that is every bit as “strong and carefree and glorious as a fairy tale. And Ulrich felt: People simply don’t realize it, they have no idea how much new thinking can be done already; if they could be taught to think a new way, they would change their lives.” (37) His appreciation of science is founded on humanism, and the life-changing potential of the scientific outlook is what he wishes to hone and apply to matters of the soul. “He was in love with science not so much on scientific as on human grounds. [...] If we translate ‘scientific outlook’ into ‘view of life,’ ‘hypothesis’ into ‘attempt,’ and ‘truth’ into ‘action,’ then there would be no notable scientist or mathematician whose life’s work, in courage and revolutionary impact, did not far outmatch the greatest deeds in history.” (37) Here the words “view of life,” “attempt,” and “action,” already point to the goals and problems of essayism.

The Definition of Essayism

1.

The accepted translation of “essay” as “attempt” contains only vaguely the essential allusion to the literary model, for an essay is not a provisional or incidental expression of a conviction capable of being exposed as an error (the only ones of that kind are those articles or treatises, chips from the scholar’s workbench, with which the learned entertain their special public); an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man’s inner life in a decisive thought. (273)

The essay is different from a scientific treatise, whose audience expects irrefutable proofs about reality. It is rather a manner of ordering one’s inner life—a mode of thinking and being. Or, as Musil defines it in “On the Essay,” it is “the strictest form attainable in an area where one *cannot* work precisely.” (PS, 48) It is a method of investigating with all the rigor of a scientific treatise the realm of possibilities, that which lies in between facts and subjective experience.

“Examples of what lies in between can be found in every moral precept, such as the well-known and simple: Thou shalt not kill.” (272) Such a precept cannot be defined as fact or subjective experience—instead it is, Musil says, what we call an imperative. “The feeling of most people for this precept is a mixture of wooden obedience [...] and a mindless paddling about in a wave of possibilities.” (272) Imperatives are typically mired in religious or legal dogma, handed down in traditions disguised as deduced truth. “But the novelists tell us about the exceptions, from Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac to the most recent beauty who shot her lover, and dissolve it again into something subjective.” In facing a moral act, we are forced to swing between the poles of dogma and subjectivity.

The fact that two contrary modes of thought, the scientific and the spiritual, coexist side by side contributes to the problem. “The one is satisfied to be precise and stick to the facts, while the other is not, but always looks at the whole picture and derives its insights from so-called great and eternal truths. The first achieves success, the other scope and prestige.” (278) Science fails to say anything meaningful or useful about moral events while religion complacently relates them to an outmoded dogma (and, by attaching its prescriptions to the “noble pedigree” (275) of tradition, casts them speciously as universal and objectively valid). Therefore, in matters of the inner life, the results of science are worthless, and those of religion false. But each approach contains an essential element: one can ignore neither the details nor the whole picture, for meaning is impossible if details are not taken into account and details are remain meaningless if they cannot be added up.

Ulrich seeks a compromise (tempered by his sense of possibility) between the modes of science and religion:

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. The value of an action or quality, and indeed its meaning and nature, seemed to him 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. (270)

The essay is a delicate balancing act between discovering an objective truth about a moral even and preventing the ossification of that truth into a concept that fails to encompass the matter.

To Ulrich, moral events are mathematical relations whose significance is a function of the events surrounding them: they exist “in a field of energy whose constellation charges them with meaning.” (270) These constellations tend “toward an average value and average condition, toward compromise and inertia.” (271) Throughout history, mankind has built up various and vast systems of relations, frameworks which it allows to dissolve again after only a few generations. Vices become virtues and virtues vices unpredictably, preventing any upward trend in the development of morals. The system remains forever open and porous, and independent meanings (those assumed by moral dogmatism) no longer exist. The events themselves are mere symbols of what they are supposed to mean, making themselves felt through their symbolization.

If ever there were a place where one could not work precisely! Even within a seemingly consistent system, it is sometimes acceptable to kill, sometimes not. Now “Ulrich regarded morality as it is commonly understood as nothing more than the senile form of a system of energies that cannot be confused with what it originally was without losing ethical force.” (271) The old morality does not fit with the facts of modern life and following it is meaningless. He might be happy killing or not killing someone, but he could never indifferently fulfill a commandment, for this would undermine the moral sense of his act. For this reason, he demands a reorganization of inner experience.

The inherent utopianism of essayism consists in Ulrich’s expectation that “a conscious human essayism would face the task of transforming the world’s haphazard awareness into a

will.” (271) The attempt of reorganization aims to give a person a choice they can enact wholeheartedly. But the essay is not only an act or mode—one viewing his actions perspicaciously and without presumptions—it is also a kind of “region” where all seems clear.

What he felt at this moment was not a commandment; it was a region he had entered. Here, he realized, everything was already decided, and soothed the mind like mother’s milk. But what gave him this insight was no longer thinking, nor was it feeling in the usual coherent way; it was a “total insight” and yet again only a message carried to him from far away by the wind, and it seemed to him neither true nor false, neither rational nor irrational; it seized him like a faint, blissful hyperbole dropped into his heart. (275)

Yet, however firm the truth—for even if he does not reach a truth, he reaches something like it—discovered through the essay, it cannot be reduced to a universal conviction from this condition of clarity, “at least not without abandoning the condition, as a lover has to abandon love in order to describe it.” (275)

2.

Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism. Terms like true and false, wise and unwise, are equally inapplicable, and yet the essay is subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing to be delicate and ineffable. (273)

The truth of the essay is in no way subjective, as the definitions above make clear. Its truth may seem “delicate and ineffable” because of the way in which it reaches its reader (which will be discussed in the section 4). The subjectivism Ulrich is attacking here is that of a “weak subspecies [of idealists], those who cannot comprehend reality or who, in their melancholic condition, avoid it.” (11) Those who lack the spiritual strength to apply a hard scientific outlook to morality, a strength the essay demands.

[Ulrich] had for years gladly endured spiritual hardship. He despised those who could not follow Nietzsche’s dictum to “let the soul starve for the truth’s sake,” those who turn back, the fainthearted, the softheaded who comfort their souls with spiritual nonsense and feed it—because reason allegedly gives it stones instead of bread—on religious, metaphysical, and fictitious pap, like rolls soaked in milk. (43)

Threatened by the relativism of science, the soft-headed spiritualists indulge in their dogmatic illusions. And Musil argues that they fail to see the potential usefulness of science as a

means to find an inner order which both respects the facts and does not fall back on false universals.

Ulrich's mathematical model of moral precepts depersonalizes the realm of inner experience by exposing them as the function of a field of relations within a community. He fully recognizes the depersonalizing tendency of his outlook but finds that it in fact opens up the realm of possibility even further.

We are beginning to recognize as too limiting the tendency to ascribe involuntarily acquired habits of repetitiveness to a man as his character, and then to make his character responsible for the repetitions. We are learning to recognize the interplay between inner and outer, and it is precisely our understanding of the impersonal elements in man that has given us new clues to the personal ones, to certain simple patterns of behavior, to an ego-building instinct that, like the nest-building instinct of birds, uses a few techniques to build an ego out of many various materials. (272)

This is again another instance of regarding oneself and the world from a single perspective to the exclusion of all others. We are all too fond of envisioning the "I" as the gatherer of sense impressions and experiences, as the producer of thoughts and feelings. But in fact it is the case that this "I" is only a collection of those sense impression, experiences, and thoughts—and it can hardly be said to be the originator or owner of them. Though this blasts the romantic notion of the individual as the well-spring of the soul, it simultaneously frees us from being too hedged in by reality. The old model favors appreciation of the "inner" to the diminishment of the "outer"—"total insight," that region one enters through the essay, demands we examine both. "One will observe that this would be the end of most of our inner life, but that might not be such a painful loss." (265)

It is clear that Musil's own work, being a synthesis of aesthetic and scientific treatment of invented scenarios, attempts essayistically to gain insights in this way. Literature was for him a place to give free range to his investigations into all things human.

In the line of Emerson and William James, as well as Nietzsche, Musil came to literature as an experimental moralist. He wrote in his diary on November 14 or 15, 1910, that "literature is a bolder, more logical recombination of life. A calling into life or analyzing out of possibilities... It

is a zeal which starves the skin off one's bones for the sake of an intellectually emotional goal."
(Burton Pike, Introduction to *Selected Writings*, xvii)

His constant irony is a reflection of his willingness to "starve the soul for the truth's sake," for he was a harsh critic not only of his society but of himself.

3.

There have been more than a few such essayists, masters of the inner hovering life, but there would be no point in naming them.⁴ Their domain lies between religion and knowledge, between example and doctrine, between *amor intellectualis* and poetry; they are saints with and without religion, and sometimes they are also simply men on an adventure who have gone astray. (273)

The notion of living hypothetically, a precursor to Ulrich's more mature conception of essayism, reflects an inner desire for postponement. During his youth, an idea seemed to be in the air that one could live precisely; that is, so "the individual's capacity for achievement is intensified to its highest degree. It would more or less come down to keeping silent when one has nothing to say, doing only the necessary where one has nothing special to do, and, most important, remaining indifferent unless one has that ineffable sense of spreading one's arms wide, borne aloft on a wave of creation." (265)

As a young man, Ulrich found that in his inner life there was nothing he could accept without questioning. He entirely disbelieved in any kind of finality and completeness within himself, despite the seeming finality and completeness of things outside him, and a need for constant development reinforced his overwhelming sense of the possible. To him "the present is nothing but a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted"—a very scientific outlook yet one which recognizes that even the results of science may yet be overcome by new ideas. This fostered within him the notion of patient detachment: "What better can he do than hold himself apart from the world, in the good sense exemplified by the scientist's guarded attitude toward facts that might be tempting him to premature conclusions?" (269) It also led to an uncommon

⁴ Though Musil does not provide a list of names here, he does cite several essayists in "On the Essay": Emerson, Nietzsche, Maeterlinck, Epicurus, the Stoics, Dilthey, and Taine. One might add Kierkegaard and Buber, as well as numerous mystical writers.

open-mindedness, accepting of “everything that might enrich him inwardly, even if it should be morally or intellectually taboo...” (270)

The “inner hovering life” recalls Ulrich’s many meditations on training and waiting. Throughout *The Man without Qualities*, Ulrich constantly hones his body and practices a sort of intellectual asceticism (“Ulrich had regarded science as a preparation, a toughening, and a kind of training” (43)) despite a recognition that his habits ready him for experiences which he hardly needs to be prepared for. “One hour [of physical exercise] daily is a twelfth of a day’s conscious life, enough to keep a trained body in the condition of a panther alert for any adventure; but this hour is sacrificed for a senseless expectation, because the adventures worthy of such preparation never come along.” (43) When the moment of action does come, the preparation leads to an ecstatic response.

Which is why, as every athlete knows, training must stop several days before a contest, for no other reason than that the muscles and nerves must be given time to work out the final coordination amongst themselves, leaving the will, purpose, and consciousness out of it and without any say in the matter. Then, at the moment of action, Ulrich went on, muscles and nerves leap and fence with the “I”; but this “I”—the whole body, the soul, the will, the central and entire person as legally distinguished from all others—is swept along by his muscles and nerves like Europa riding the Bull.⁵ Whenever it does not work this way, if by some unlucky chance the merest ray of reflection hits the darkness, the whole effort is invariably doomed. (24)

Waiting between training and action is essential, so that the inner order springs forward automatically. Any interference of the will could be fatal. Sports “that organize this principle into a rational system are therefore a species of theology...” (24) By connecting sports to intellectual activities, Musil suggests that such a system can exist as well for thought. “A psychotechnical analysis of a great thinker and a champion boxer would probably show their cunning, courage, precision and technique, and the speed of their reactions in their respective

⁵ The metaphor suggests a negative example of such ecstatic action: the explosion of the WWI in 1914, which will sweep Europe off her feet and carry her off to unimaginable change.

fields to be the same.” (42) The only disadvantage for thought is that it is not open to objective comparative measurement.

The life-practice of essayism implies a holding back similar to the mystical notion of *kairos* (the intuitive recognition of the proper moment of action) or the Zen moment of automatic release. Musil goes so far as to make an overt connection to mystical experience: “this experience of almost total ecstasy or transcendence of the conscious mind is akin to experiences now lost but known in the past to the mystics of all religions, which makes it a kind of contemporary substitution for an eternal human need.” (24)

Essayism’s similarity to mysticism, however, should not be overestimated. In “On the Essay” Musil clarifies that essayism, though similar to intuitive knowledge, should be applied not to metaphysical but human matters. “We are confronting a new division of intellectual activity. That which is directed at knowledge, and that which is directed at a transformation of man.” (PS, 51) Indeed, by Ulrich’s definition the essayist may be a saint “with and without religion.” More than a belief in God, it is his willingness to accept a mission requiring him to “cut off all useless questions with a ‘not yet’” and conduct his life “on a provisional basis, but with awareness of the goal to be reached by those who will come after,” (43) that makes him “holy.”

Holiness is a moral economy defined by holding back with circumspect reservation:

It would be a useful experiment to try to cut down to the minimum the moral expenditure (of whatever kind) that accompanies all our actions, to satisfy ourselves with being moral only in those exceptional cases where it really counts, but otherwise not to think differently from the way we do about standardizing pencils or screws. Perhaps not much good would be done that way, but some things would be done better; there would be no talent left, only genius; the washed-out prints that develop from the pallid resemblance of actions to virtues would disappear from the image of life; in their place we would have these virtues’ intoxicating fusion in holiness.

An economy of morals results in an intensification of the inner life. Instead of acting according to deduced truths, one should say “not yet” to the majority of events and act with an enhanced

moral consciousness in moments when it “really counts.” This economy extends beyond morality in Ulrich’s dictum that we should live life as literature, expunging all extraneous elements—which amounts to living with exceptional precision.

4.

Nothing is more revealing, by the way, than one’s involuntary experience of learned and sensible efforts to interpret such essayists, to turn their living wisdom into knowledge to live by and thus extract some “content” from the motion of those who were moved: but about as much remains of this as of the delicately opalescent body of a jellyfish when one lifts it out of the water and lays it on the sand.⁶ The rationality of the uninspired will make the teachings of the inspired crumble into dust, contradiction, and nonsense, and yet one has no right to call them frail an unviable unless one would also call an elephant too frail to survive in an airless environment unsuited to its needs. (273-4)

The experience of reading and being affected by an essay leaves one unable to say what he has come away with. All systems of thought, scientific or religious, Musil says, are also modes of living—one not only thinks stoically, one is stoical. Depending on the temperament of the individual (that part of him that at least seems to be his stable character) the reader will either be struck by the truth of an essay or he will not. The content of an essay is somehow inapplicable to real situations—it is objective, yet it works through feeling and possibility rather than pure logic and reality. The person who does not hear the call of the essay may see through it entirely or find it nonsensical, and will remain unaffected. He who is carried off by it finds there is nothing to do but feel inspired. Musil clarifies this in “On the Essay”:

Now a rational course of thought can be true or false, as can an affective one, but aside from that it “speaks to us” or doesn’t speak to us. And there are trains of thought that really work only through the mode of feelings. For a person who has no ear for them they are completely confusing and incomprehensible. (PS, 50)

⁶ Compare this to the epigraph to *Young Törless*: “In some strange way we devalue things as soon as we give utterance to them. We believe we have dived to the uttermost depths of the abyss, and yet when we return to the surface the drop of water on our pallid finger-tips no longer resembles the sea from which it came. We think we have discovered a hoard of wonderful treasure-trove, yet when we emerge again into the light of day we see that all we have brought back with us is false stones and chips of glass. But for all this, the treasure goes on glimmering in the darkness, unchanged.” —Maeterlinck (SW, 2)

This is not to say that nothing happens when the essay manages to inspire a person. Vast transformations, incomprehensible to the uninspired, occur within the one ignited by the spark of the essay's truth.

The sudden coming alive of an idea, this lightninglike reforging of a great complex of feeling (most penetratingly imaged in Saul's becoming Paul) by means of the idea, so that one suddenly understands the world and oneself different: this is intuitive knowledge in the mystical sense.

On a smaller scale it is the constant movement of essayistic thought. (PS, 50)

The reordering of the inner world cannot be reduced to a dogmatic proposition or applied as a universal rule because the truth of an essay occurs only in the web of relative functions produced by it. Essay exists only within the realm of possibility, yet it is only within this realm that a meaningful ordering of the inner life occurs.

Crisis... and "A Kind of End"

The movement of Ulrich's thoughts toward the notion of essayism arouses a conflict within him. He comes to realize that even his career as a mathematician and his scientific outlook work against the true grain of his life, whose only worthwhile question is that of the right way to live. Though essayism supplies a method of evaluating one's actions, he must eventually act. It allows for an ethical holding back and an exploration of possibilities, but those possibilities must eventually become real. Musil compares the suspension of an imperative to the holding up of one's arms—ideas eventually become exhausted during the long wait.

He was waiting: all the time, he was letting himself be pushed this way or that in the insignificant and silly activity he had taken on, talking, gladly talking too much, living with the desperate tenacity of a fisherman casting his nets into an empty river, while he was doing nothing that had anything to do with the person he after all signified; deliberately doing nothing: he was waiting. He waited hiding behind his person, insofar as this word characterizes that part of a human being formed by the world and the course of life, and his quiet desperation, dammed up behind that façade, rose higher everyday. He felt himself to be in the worst crisis of his life and despised himself for what he had left undone. (276)

Nowhere else in the novel do we glimpse Ulrich in such a moment of anguish. Here—amid "He was waiting... he was doing nothing... deliberately doing nothing... he was waiting...

he waited”—we find him driven nearly to the point of tears with self-condemnation and a desperate need to act. When he leaves his house and walks out onto his lawn to stand in the square of light emanating from his study window, he thinks he could easily be mistaken for a lunatic.

The “boundless emotion” essayism inspires in Ulrich has run up against the wall of “the urge to act,” which by its nature implies a concretization of the will and a hedging in of the self by the limits and forms of reality. And so practicing it makes Ulrich feel in his moment of crisis “like a man busily getting equipment together while losing interest in what it is meant for” (275)—another echo of his ascetic training. The possibilist, whether trawling a line or casting a net, is suddenly aware that the river is empty, and “He wished something unforeseen would happen to him, for when he took what he somewhat wryly called his ‘holiday from life’ he had nothing, in one direction or another, that gave him peace.” (276)

The unforeseen does occur, but much later, with the death of Ulrich’s father and his reunion with his sister, Agathe. But even in Book 2, Musil never arrives at a solution to the problem of turning essayism’s realm of possibility into reality. To do so would mean the foundation of a utopia.

Utopias are much the same as possibilities; that a possibility is not a reality means nothing more than that the circumstances in which it is for the moment entangled prevent it from being realized—otherwise it would be only an impossibility. If this possibility is disentangled from its restraints and allowed to develop, a utopia arises. (265)

Ulrich is drawn by circumstances out of Vienna, and in the country he feels as though such a utopia were on the verge of coming into being. Yet the only sense we get of what it will be is in the acts of transgression he and his sister commit. Whether transgression is the sort of action Ulrich is longing for is never entirely clear, and we are still left to wonder whether the “disentanglement” of possibilities required to give rise to utopia could ever happen in Vienna, or

in reality. All we know with certainty (or at least as much as can reasonably be expected) is that the practice of essayism as a way of living more precisely allows for a possibility of utopia, fettered though it may be.

Is the missing piece, the proper solution faith? But faith in—what? In the region of essayism that is like mother’s milk, a place where everything is already decided? Or the “primordial fire of goodness” instilled in a person when he is bold enough to take up precision as “an intellectual habit and way of life”? (266) Is Ulrich’s training then similar to Pascal’s “Bend down in prayer, move your lips, and you will believe...”—is this faith in the automatic, selfless responsiveness of the Zen monk or the mystic? Or a kind of gnosticism, forever coaxing new and potentially illuminating interpretations out of an old story? Musil’s language points to any of these things, yet he seems never to make the leap. Maybe there is no solution, as many critics have suggested: the end of the novel was never completed and the parts Musil did write suggest he was having trouble getting to one. Or maybe, as Genese Grill says, the lack of satisfying answer is “a function of the mystical *Eigenschaftlosigkeit*, which does not allow for closure.” (D, LI)

Reading *The Man without Qualities*, if we happen to be of the proper temperament, we are often impressed with an ineffable sense of what Musil means. We come away inspired—but indescribably. And we are left with the Ulrich’s problem of applying essayistic truths meaningfully to real life. That this is all we are given (which is, in fact, a lot) should be no surprise: Musil warned this would be the case.

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