Anna Dijkstra

Epistemological Violence between Affect and Aesthetic: Rationalist Rhetoric in the Novel of Ideas

Abstract: Robert Musil's modernist epic *The Man Without Qualities* is a novel written against a background of fascist uprisings in Europe, as well as a quintessentially Viennese text written in the wake of the emergence of the Wiener Kreis and their logical positivism. These two factors make it a suitable novel for analyzing the intersection between rationality and fascism, in a way that sheds new light on how rationality is aestheticized, naturalized, and romanticized. These processes support and reinforce each other. By exploring the functioning of rationality and highlighting the novel's implicit affectivity, this paper sheds light on the importance of extra-rational ways of knowledge-making, making it possible to consider fascist practices of self-fashioning and aestheticizing rationality through a critical affective lens.

Keywords: Self-Fashioning; Musil; Logical Positivism; Fascism; Personal Identity.

Anna Dijkstra
University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
Huygens Institute, the Netherlands
annakjh@hotmail.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2024.47.03

> "I admit that these days, rationality – it's something I struggle with, both as a [woman] and as a Pisces Moon."[1]

Fascist Specters and Aesthetic Façades

A specter is haunting Europe[2]. Unfortunately, this time, as has been the case many times before, it is the specter of the far-right. And, even more disappointingly, our contemporary occurrence shares its moment with, and is largely indebted to, recent alter(c)ations in the mediated area of knowledge distribution. Whether through straightforward social media platforms or through websites masquerading as "alternative news" sources but implicitly maintaining a socio-epistemic division, contemporary subjects enter their social environments through a highly segregated cyberspace. And once a subject has started on its path, this spatial arrangement becomes a self-perpetuating machine. While this experience is one frequently marked by the isolation of marred connections between loved ones and groups of people standing radically at odds with each other,

understanding this phenomenon does not itself have to be an isolating experience; the epistemological impact of ideological conflict has been felt before, after all.

An author who bore witness to our ideological specter's previous apparition is the Viennese novelist, philosopher, and fervent diarist Robert Musil, whose writing of the encyclopedic novel *The Man Without Qualities* accompanied him through the first half of the twentieth century. The context of fascism against the background of which this novel was written is one as prevalent on the page as off it. Most straightforward are various passages following what sociologist Peter L. Berger describes as "a proto-Nazi romantic nationalism"[3]: the relationship between the Jewish girl Gerda and her boyfriend Hans Sepp with strong national-socialist leanings – a relationship of which Gerda's father, unsurprisingly, does not approve. However, the primary goings-on – calling it a plot would be too optimistic – of this novel, which spans over 1100 pages, are concerned with "The Parallel Campaign": a project that seeks to organize celebrations for the 70-year anniversary of the reign of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph in 1918. Seeking to grasp the true essence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in one event, the project's futility is immanent (not to speak of the impending fall of this realm that only the reader knows, attributing the tale with a prophetic quality). This project gives direction to the general attitude emerging from the novel: Stefan Jonsson points out that while this concept clearly calls forth a so-called "community of destiny," a concept coined by leftist thinker and contemporary to Musil Otto Bauer to describe the central nationalist impulse, Kakania (the novel's name for the Empire) was discussed as "a country having lost interest in its destiny. Its nationalities no longer agreed on which future they were supposed to share, and many of them foresaw destinies of their own"[4]. For Jonsson, this particular attitude points towards a rejection of realist and nationalist convention. I would like to add to that, that it gestures towards Musil's novel as, among many other things, an anti-fascist project; after all, the eponymous lack of qualities of the narrator central to the novel is one inextricably tied to his search for and inability to find meaning in the context of the Parallel Campaign, the difficulties with which are, in its turn, a result of modernity's multiplicity of individual interests and envisioned destinies. And it is such crisis of destiny, exemplified by the failure of the Parallel Campaign, that can often pull someone towards adopting fascist predilections[5].

While much can be said about the historical contexts of *The Man Without Qualities*'s treatment of fascism, this has indeed been done by literary historians aplenty. Its anti-fascist inclinations, however, can also be fruitful to consider in the context of its aesthetics as an experimental modernist novel. After all, as Walter Benjamin has taught us, aesthetic subversion is the traditionally administered antidote against fascism's self-aestheticization, and here manage to lay bare a similarly-oriented project of intellectualist taste[6]. The way in which Musil's novel's subversive aesthetics – an ironization of the rationalist post-Enlightenment novels of the realist period – rely on an affective doubling can provide a helpful new perspective for approaching contemporary alt-right and even neo-fascist rhetoric. This angle is one

supported by Musil's explicit interests in reason and affect, both individually and in relation to each other, and often in response to fascist circumstances[7]. Following his focus on these concepts can prove useful for considering contemporary issues in addition to historical ones; the speech of current far-right ideology often relies heavily on an appeal to rationality, a sentiment characteristically and, frankly, caricaturistically captured by the far-right figure Ben Shapiro's catchphrase: "facts don't care about your feelings"[8].

An aesthetic of rationality, complemented by a distaste for feelings, is then central to much far-right thought, and unsurprisingly so. Against the background of a destabilized universe, they reinvoke Enlightenment values as a return to structure and to a stably circumscribed notion of the individual, one who *could* plan an event like the Parallel Campaign. This return presents a self-fashioning of the subject through rationality in an attempted reclamation of modernity, and causes the value and aesthetic of rationality to be naturalized. Exposing this naturalization highlights how rationality can easily enter into the role of an aesthetic choice, echoing Susan Sontag's claim that "[i]ntelligence … is really a kind of taste: a taste in ideas"[9]. Ideas become aesthetic flavors, laid out like decorative flowers masking decaying ideologies.

This process is especially on the surface of the modernist novel of ideas, which prioritizes intelligence as essential to its genre. Ideas are central to the functioning of such a text: the novel of ideas does not "incidentally [*illustrate*] ideas but … uses them in default of characterization and other qualities of the traditional narrative"[10]. The primary focus lies on ideas, rather than plot or characterization, and these latter two exist, *if* they are even really present, in favor of the ideas the novel wishes to put forward. Consequently, it is a useful medium through which to consider the status of ideas and rationality: is a rational way the only correct way, the one infallible way, of representing reality?

By offering a trans-historical lens, I hope to highlight how speech like Shapiro's, symptomatic of a search for stability, is precisely what Musil's novel ridicules; its appeal to Enlightenment authority acts as an aesthetic façade that strangely parallels realist novel aesthetics. Ultimately, my analysis will suggest how the subversive novel that is characteristic of the modernist moment provides a central role to the interaction between epistemology and affect, which can be seen as a direct consequence of its anti-humanist decentering of 17th and 18th-century values of the supposed universality of knowledge. By presenting knowledge as affectively mediated, *The Man Without Qualities* rejects its universality. And it is this that underpins the text's striking critique of fascist rhetoric.

Commencing the Tasting

A characteristic aspect of *The Man Without Qualities* is the essayistic style which it invented. As the name suggests, this style allows the novel to try out many different ideas, positing them in variously playful manners and contexts. Where at some points Nietzschean philosophy is taken to a humorous extreme, other parts reflect on politics, self-realization, the nature of emotion, mathematics and similar scientific matters, as well as a plethora of other themes. Testing,

naturally, is a central part to the scientific method and its practice. The playful undercurrent to its essayistic practice, however, arguably embodies a turn away from a classical scientific approach. After all, it invokes a sense of pluralism (though one ultimately ascending to philosophical thought as an essential guide, at least when following Musil's novel), suggesting that the *discussion* of whether to relate to the world scientifically is not scientific in itself, but rather philosophical in nature. Exemplifying this is one of the threads of thought making up *The Man Without Qualities* that concerns the concept of essayism itself – a concept that transcended the boundaries of the novel into general literary discourse – which it introduces in relation to the eponymous Ulrich's way of thinking about the world:

> when he sometimes thinks he has found the right idea, he perceives that a drop of indescribable incandescence has fallen into the world, with a glow that makes the whole earth look different.
>
> Later, when Ulrich's intellectual capacity was more highly developed, this became an idea no longer connected with the vague word "hypothesis" but with a concept he oddly termed, for certain reasons, "essay." 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.[11]

By substituting the scientific hypothesis with the essay form, Ulrich's orientation towards the world becomes playful, less structured, and less straightforwardly rational, critiquing a singularly scientific worldview and still, but more overtly, using the human as its point of departure: "all this happens in succession instead of as a single, homogeneous experience, and the chain of mankind's experiments shows no upward trend. By contrast, a conscious human essayism would face the task of transforming the world's haphazard awareness into a will"[12]. Essayism, therefore, proposes a pluralistic epistemological attitude towards the world, ironizing the singular pretense of the views it presents; after all, there are many possible sequences of reasoning, many molds for the world respective of subjective wills. There are as many sequences as there are people, and no one perspective ought to be seen as final, essential and providing its subject with an identity – hence, the man without qualities.

Crucial to this understanding of thought, then, is that it is not just Ulrich who relates to the world in this way. Rather, the novel as a whole is written to prioritize a phenomenological idea of knowledge, a subject-world relationality, and consequently allows its reader freedom in shaping this relationality, engaging with it in a way that is primarily playful, tentative, and unstructured. Its potential usefulness for breaking reified patterns of thinking then follows; experimenting with threads of thought and ideologies by taking them to the extreme, juxtaposing them with other ideas, or slightly adapting their contexts makes it possible to recontextualize ideas. Such disruption becomes very useful when considering rationality. There

is an anti-rationality inherent to the novel's essayistic approach, and so to its engagement with rationality itself; after all, trying out various ways to give expression to what it means to be human is not a process that itself prioritizes rationality. It is also not without its dangers, as the novel explains:

> 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. 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 and unviable unless one would also call an elephant too frail to survive in an airless environment unsuited to its needs.[13]

Rationalist attitudes will make sure that the value of "the teachings of the inspired," irrational attitudes engaged with within essayism, but, significantly, also the anti-rationalism of the framework itself, is diminished and remains unacknowledged. By viewing the novel as an essayistic endeavor, it becomes obvious how it embodies the methodological tension between rationality and anti-rationality; specifically, it camouflages its anti-rationality with an over-intellectualism that on first glance seems mostly genuine, and only through extensive engagement with the text starts to acquire its full ironic status – simultaneously endowing the novel with the humorous tone for which it is frequently applauded. It relies on an almost grotesque excessiveness of its ideas, overdoing rationality to the point of achieving a comedic point of unsettling the normative.

This grotesque comedy is effectively affective: it influences the reader in their subjectivity, and makes them *experience* the ridiculous character of the novel's intellectualism. The nature of experience, and how it stands at odds with rationality, is constantly on the novel's mind. As previously nodded towards, Stefan Jonsson understood their relation as Musil's response to fascism. He notes that

> The novel should instead be situated among a series of other projects of the same period that sought to explain the political role of affections and the suggestive power of nationalism and fascism. […] – they all examined the subject's affective bindings to mass movements, the profound appeal of collective ideologies, and the origins of political passions. After the burning of the German parliament in 1933, Musil notes that he wants to write an essay on reason and affection (*Vernunft und Affekt*) in politics. In the same period, he writes the chapters where Ulrich analyzes the world of emotions.[14]

Crucially, Musil's chapter on essayism also makes sure to incorporate discussion of emotion into this almost formalist context. "[B]oundless emotion" becomes associated with the conviction one gains from the essayistic condition, though, crucially,

it did not activate Ulrich, "[contradicting] his urge to act, which insisted on limits and forms"[15]. An incapacity to act is famously quite central to the novel of ideas, evidenced by similar novels like *The Magic Mountain*, infamous for its seven-year inactivity, as well as by our aforementioned Parallel Campaign. It is the affective element that facilitates the essayistic, anti-rational turn inward, but it is rationality that, in this theoretical context, spurs on action. And in practice, it can be seen that rationality is *made* for this: for causing and influencing. It is then unsurprising that it becomes a favored dress for those who hope to do exactly that. This brings us to the question of how the ideological dressing-up, that the novel engages with and tries to caricature and ironize, actually works.

Modernity's Ideological Shambles

The way in which *The Man Without Qualities* presents its ideas creates an impression of them as confused and misdirected: there seems to be an unending number of ideas included in the novel, scrambling for the reader's attention, but none of them really appear to be of much help when trying to understand the world in light of modernism's cultural crisis, which underlies the novel entirely:

> Confronted by a world in which rapid modernisation had brought with it a profusion of conflicting belief-systems and ideologies, in which the positivistic "rationality" of mathematics and the physical sciences was increasingly divorced from the "irrationality" not only of the human emotions but of any kind of metaphysical thought, [Musil and Broch] each set themselves the goal of achieving an understanding of their fragmented culture that would point a way beyond such sterile dichotomies.[16]

Bartram and Payne, then, too point towards the synthetic nature of the understanding *The Man Without Qualities* seeks to provide, highlighting that this project emerged against a background of modernization. Particularly crucial for close consideration, here, is its mention of "the positivistic 'rationality' of mathematics and the physical sciences," because of the background out of which the novel arose: Vienna in the early twentieth century – the domain of the Wiener Kreis. While no unified theory emerged from their endeavors into logical empiricism and logical explorations of mathematics[17], the philosophers of the Wiener Kreis remained crucial in paving the way for contemporary analytic philosophy, and thus played a large role in the philosophical tradition that kept rationality and logic in high regard. Consequently, the novel's questioning of this value is quite striking, though not entirely unsurprising in light of Gödel's incompleteness theorems, which formally proved the impossibility of a formal system being both consistent and complete[18], and had been a subject of discussion from 1928 onwards[19] – two years before Musil published the first part of his novel. It should be noted, though, that Musil already remarked in a 1913 essay on mathematics that "the mathematicians […] came upon something wrong in the fundamentals of the whole thing that absolutely could not be put right. They actually looked all the way to the bottom and

found that the whole building was standing in midair. But the machines worked!"[20] This passage presciently echoes the same problem for which Gödel would over a decade later provide his mathematical proof, and also highlights something further: the industrial character of rational thought.

As I wrote in the opening of this essay, paths of thought mediated by separated online spheres function mechanically, continually perpetuating their own processes. Rationality is especially suitable for this, as it transforms everything into either successes or failures under its own system. By doing so, it reinforces itself as epistemology's final answer. One just has to imagine putting something else forward – for instance, an affective angle; rationality reflexively tries to explain the scenario in its own terms, and refuses to accept anything else. Arguably, this is unique to rationality; affect does not, for instance, hold this universal principle itself. Including rationality under the umbrella of "Enlightenment thought," Horkheimer and Adorno put this self-perpetuating impulse as follows: for Enlightenment thought, "[e]very spiritual resistance it encounters serves merely to increase its strength. Whatever myths the resistance may appeal to, by virtue of the very fact that they become arguments in the process of opposition, they acknowledge the principle of dissolvent rationality for which they reproach the Enlightenment. Enlightenment is totalitarian"[21]. Enlightenment thought, and rationality in particular, has therefore been construed in a way that makes it perpetually self-affirming, and, as a consequence, incredibly difficult to critique. Or rather, impossible to effectively reject without stepping completely outside the grasp of the Enlightenment. However, Musil's irony-laden essayism provides an arguably successful nudge in this direction. After all, he turns rationality into only one among many ideas. But because of how rationality functions, the many views in the novel that appeal to rationality, do so by appearing in contrast with other views, deemed irrational by implication. It is in this specific quality that the novel makes rationality visible as an aesthetic.

As mentioned before, this aestheticization relies on the discrepancy between the dualist nature of the novel – the two levels on which its engagement with rationality works, and the irony resulting from the second-level distribution of first-level ideas throughout the novel. At this point, it becomes possible to contextualize this process in the context of modernity. Mark Freed argues that *The Man without Qualities* works in the space between two discourses of modernity: a discourse that *belongs to* modernity, and one that is *about* modernity. On the one hand, it is concerned with how "Enlightenment reason attempts to overcome its own limitations" – the Dialectic of Enlightenment – but on the other hand it presents "the effort to come to terms with the thinking that organizes a present no longer seeking to legitimate itself with reference to the past"[22]. The former presents the level of ideas themselves, and the latter the essayistic revision of thinking about thought: essayism as epistemological method. In engaging with both of these, *The Man Without Qualities* "makes theoretical contributions to the effort to grasp modernity in any kind of writing about modernity"[23]. With regard to rationality, it then can both be seen to engage with it directly, as well as to reflect on it. It

is precisely this dynamic that occurs here. However, it must be acknowledged that what Freed leaves undiscussed here is the affective dimension of epistemology, of this essayistic approach. It is this that makes it so effective, and that allows the reader to reconsider.

But not only readers can become affected in such a manner. The intellectual superfluity and decadence is felt by some of the characters in the novel, too, as is probably most clear from Walter's frustrated, though exaggerated, claim that "Today it's all decadence! A bottomless pit of intelligence!"[24] Comedy often has its root in a semblance of truth, and what Walter is actually complaining of is, arguably, the aesthetic behind which Ulrich hides: "[h]e is intelligent, I grant you that, but he knows nothing at all about the power of a soul in full possession of itself. What Goethe calls personality, what Goethe calls mobile order – those are things he doesn't have a clue about!" Again, this borders on the ridiculous – if not passing into its realm altogether – but is simultaneously bound to hit a nerve with Ulrich, who strikingly echoes some of these sentiments in his later exposé of essayism.

Crucially, it is in this context that Walter first calls Ulrich "a man without qualities": he "stood for nothing but this state of dissolution that all present-day phenomena have"[25]. Equating intelligence and a focus on ideas with a "state of dissolution" leads the underlying idea to emerge that intelligence, or, more specifically, rationality (after all, Ulrich is a mathematician), is, among other things, an aesthetic choice, although it is one of the most invisible ones: "[a] mathematician looks like nothing at all – that is, he is likely to look intelligent in such a general way that there isn't a single specific thing to pin him down!"[26] A mathematician looks like nothing, and that is exactly the issue: rationality is an invisible aesthetic. The novel's excessive presentation of ideas, however, works to make it visible.

A Reasonable Fashion

This invisible aesthetic of rationality stands in immediate relation to Ulrich's lack of qualities. Such a lack is characteristic of the present-day: because of the decentering of the universe that marks the modernist state of crisis, both epistemological certainty and a coherent sense of self become theoretical impossibilities – not meaning that they are possible in practice, but meaning that these impossibilities are theoretical in nature. There is, after all, no meta-narrative to structure aspirational units of epistemology and selfhood coherently and absolutely. Epistemological and autonomous unified certainties are inextricably connected to one another in the context of modernism's post-Enlightenment condition, something also described by Lukács in his essay "The Ideology of Modernism." He proposes the view that modernist literature presents a human condition marked by an insurmountable solitariness. And it is this that highlights our previously-mentioned connection: central to this solitariness is the subject's disconnected state from the world around them. To further explore this idea, Lukács draws on Heidegger's phenomenological notion of *Geworfenheit ins Dasein*: "man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself [and] it is impossible to determine

theoretically the origin and goal of human existence"[27]. Concretely, this impossibility takes two forms, both of which can be recognized in Musil's novel:

> First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him – and apparently not for his creator – any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is "thrown-into-the-world": meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only "development" in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be. The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static.[28]

The first-mentioned philosophical idealism underlines the radical character of the phenomenology following it. And this phenomenological presentation of the subject as thrown-into-the-world clearly grasps the relation between epistemological crisis and crisis of selfhood: the subject does not form in relation to the world, because of their inability to find meaning within it, and this, in turn, is the case because the subject is not formed in connection with the world. Both element, subject and world, make each other impossible, while also maintaining each other. In ways underpinned by Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment, this equilibrium of the inward turn, viewed as a turn away from an epistemologically changing reality, works to maintain rationality.

The lack of qualities that plays such a central part in *The Man Without Qualities* may then be considered as directly related to the epistemological crisis at play, which is evident in light of the connection between the novel's presented ideas about the world and everything in it on the one hand, and the ways the characters present themselves on the other. The specific way in which this happens is elucidated by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who, in his proposition of the concept of narrative identity, wrote that "[w]ith Robert Musil, 'the man without qualities,' or rather without properties, becomes, at the limit, unidentifiable. The anchorage of a proper name becomes ridiculous to the point of becoming superfluous"[29]. His lack of a coherent narrative identity makes him epistemologically unidentifiable. These factors are reflected in the novel's structure, which shows "the inadequacy of [the standard] 'straight-line' narrative".[30] Instead, Musil's narrative tries to disrupt the standard by creating a form allowing for excursus into various fields and topics, proposing a kind of knowledge that unifies many different domains. Such a unification of knowledge is, after all, the aim of essayism: the domain of the essayist "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"[31]. In other words, the essayist presents the answer to the question: "[a] man who wants the truth becomes a scholar; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man

do who wants something in between?"[32] As Jacques Kruithof points out, this essayistic attitude towards life and thought that *The Man Without Qualities* presents highlights that there is never a clear-cut solution for man's problems, because there is no universal measure by which to understand the world. Consequently, the question becomes: "waar houdt het zelfstandige denken op en begint het achteloos achter een vaandel aan lopen?" ["Where does independent thought end and the careless following of others begin?"][33]. This is ultimately an epistemological sentiment, though formulated through an image of political populism. Ulrich, then, is not the only "man without qualities" – rather, he is the only one whose condition is recognized as such. He is the only one who truly realizes that there is "no bedrock of selfhood, no moral tablets of stone to provide absolute guidance. There is, in this modern world, no consensus of what it means to be human, no common code to govern behaviour, no single substratum of belief"[34]. One's existence is there before any sort of essence manages to settle down.

On top of merely maintaining rationality, the inward turn central to this phenomenon highlights a crucial aspect of rationality as an aesthetic: namely, as a form of self-fashioning. It is inevitable that *some* degree of self-fashioning will occur when a subject is so absolutely fixed on themselves; in *The Man Without Qualities*, some of the characters identify with specific beliefs – whether these be Nietzschean, Goethian, or anything else – while Ulrich attempts to circumvent this process. In attempting to achieve an authentic identity, he, paradoxically, fashions himself in accordance with qualitylessness. While Walter equates this to his status as a mathematician, naturalizing rationality by equating it to a lack of qualities, Ulrich himself embraces the label precisely because he does not identify himself with any particular category, deeming it impossible to do so authentically. However, his lack of qualities is in itself a way of shaping oneself. And, of course, all this still has elaborate epistemological ramifications – after all, the way in which they try to shape his identity is through affiliation with a set of beliefs or ideas.

Self-fashioning is an especially useful term through which to conceptualize this kind of epistemological identity-creation, because it necessarily indicates opposing values against which a subject fashions themselves: the literary historian Stephen Greenblatt defines it as a "self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process"[35], that stands in service not primarily to autonomy, but to "the perception […] that there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities. This change is […] not only complex but resolutely dialectical"[36]. While he discusses the early modern period specifically, his epistemological point holds up strikingly well – possibly even better – all those centuries later; while the early modern subject faced a radical transition of its intellectual culture, witnessing the emergence of a completely new system, the modernist subject is only faced with an old system's decay. There is no new system, and so there also is no respite to be found from the looming voids of identity and episteme. The only source of comfort lies in the old system's denial of any change. In other words, rationality. It is in contrast

to a modern world that does not have any universal values or truths any more, that cannot be univocally made sense of, that subjects fashion themselves with rationality: an especially effective form of self-fashioning when trying to control the world, because of its self-affirming quality.

Greenblatt, and many with him, argue for self-fashioning as a way to give artistic expression to one's own identity. While definitely offering a partial explanation of the situation at hand, here it is accompanied by another form of expression: expression of an ethical kind, or rather, a purposeful restraint thereof. In her book *The Void of Ethics*, Patrizia McBride argues that central to *The Man Without Qualities* there is a presentation of ethical experience, "the ineffable promise of unconditional happiness and a fulfilled life glimpsed in fleeting moments of illumination"[37], as a condition that is always an unachievable other. Consequently, "[t]he inner core of human existence, its very center and substance, becomes a void, an unpresentable idea"[38], This is the irrational masked, but ultimately revealed, by the rational: it tries to hide this inner core, but such a core always keeps asserting itself. The particular form of rational self-fashioning encountered in *The Man Without Qualities* gains such a post-ethical status. We saw before that the novel is constantly haunted by the potential of affect, and, ultimately, it is this core that is the reason for this lurking persistence. It perpetually serves as a reminder of the inadequacy of the rationalist system, one that is felt by the novel's unconscious, but that it does not dare to admit to itself.

.On the surface, the self-fashioning at play becomes something that is done for its own sake: it is necessary to maintain stability in a collapsing world. This reflexive character invites a fairly common criticism put forward against self-fashioning: it exhibits a focus on the self that prevents a subject from considering their obligations to others[39]. Such views definitely risk sidelining the benefits self-fashioning can have for establishing a (group) identity in the face of a world that seems to invite nihilism and individualism, but are important in themselves. Longford writes: "[a] n aestheticist approach to ethics and the self, so the argument goes, encourages a deficit of care for others and threatens, by privileging the criterion of beauty above all other considerations, to underwrite violence and cruelty in the name of aesthetic self-perfection"[40]. The relevancy of this "criterion of beauty" to the epistemological self-fashioning at hand becomes obvious when remembering Susan Sontag's claim that intelligence is a taste of ideas, so that the notion of some ideas being more beautiful than others becomes quite intuitive. And while self-fashioning is traditionally prone to the danger of self-absorption, the elitism, naturalization and self-assertion inherent to epistemological endeavors often cause us to forget such concerns entirely, paving even smoother ways for "violence and cruelty in the name of aesthetic self-perfection," particularly as it takes the shape of the totalitarianism of rationality.

However, this is only on the surface. Another level is at play – the so-called ethical level, and it is this level that actually offers the antidote in this doubled novel. The persistence of unrepresentable, extra-rational ideas underlying a rational surface is precisely what the literary scholar Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé explores in her book *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after*

Wittgenstein. This text reads various prominent anglophone modernist texts in the context of her interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, sometimes seen as the quintessential text of logical positivism. Wittgenstein's short philosophical work is made up of seven main statements, the first six of which are divided up in many smaller statements, many of which in their turn are divided up, too. Together, all these statements give the impression of a complete, closed philosophical system, built purely on a foundation of rationality. It is only upon the mystical and the ethical making their entrance in Wittgenstein's system – even if it is as things that cannot be discussed in any kind of meaningful way – that the machine's wheels start to creak. The problems quickly start asserting themselves in Wittgenstein's final two propositions: 6.54 and 7. These are as follows:

> 6.54 Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, daß sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie – auf ihnen – über sie hinausgestiegen ist. (Er muß sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufergestiegen ist.)
> Er muß diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig.
> 7. Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.[41]

It is here that Wittgenstein's rational system falls apart: it contradicts itself, and contradiction is the ultimate weakness of reason – the one thing it cannot overcome; a building standing in mid-air. But arguably, this is also the text's power.

Zumhagen-Yekplé uses a sentence Wittgenstein wrote to his friend Ludwig von Ficker as her starting point to discuss the second, unwritten part of his *Tractatus*. She argues that the text affectively plays on readers who expect a rational kind of difficulty, instead confronting them with an ineffable extrarational epistemological break that, through affecting the readers, transforms their epistemological identity. Arguably, *The Man Without Qualities* does precisely the same thing, engaging with the empty center McBride also pointed out. There are two paths when faced with rationality's crisis in the antihumanist world of modernism: the path of embracing it through a constantly affirming self-fashioning, creating an identity for yourself, and the path of letting yourself be affected by rationality's failings, moving towards other ideas and possibilities and *letting* your own subjectivity be altered. It requires a degree of giving up the values modernity attaches so much value to – autonomy, individuality, and self-directedness – but in turn shows what can happen when truly giving up your autonomy in order to fully learn from the other.

The Rational and the Affective

What, then, has come of the far-right? While this article is primarily one dealing with modernism, I do hope to have made it evident how the underlying engagement with rationality in the novel speaks to that with which we are currently faced politically. Ultimately, the novel attunes its readers to Rational discussions in such an overtly serious way that it starts affecting its readers: on the surface through instilling a comedic effect, but in a more subtle way by making them *feel* rationality's inadequacy. And

this allows for a transformative effect on readers, who start to see that rationality is not the one and only solution: it is one of many, and not always adequate. Furthermore, the rational self-fashioning so prevalent in both the novel and in our contemporary moment only emphasizes this point further, and suggests to not be an affectively-rooted means of self-expression, but rather a way of holding on to rationality in spite of affective knowledge trying to assert itself. Facts *do* care about our feelings, but more than that, facts are not everything there is – to know, and for knowing. Facts *care*. Shapiro may not have meant to hint at the affective character of rationality, but, unconsciously, he might have done just that.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming, New York, Verso, 2016.

Bartram, Graham, Philip Payne, "Apocalypse and Utopia in the Austrian Novel of the 1930s: Hermann Broch and Robert Musil", in Graham Bartram (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 93-109.

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London, The Bodley Head, 2015, p. 211-44.

Berger, Peter L., "The Problem of Multiple Realities: Alfred Schutz and Robert Musil", in Maurice Natanson (ed.), *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, p. 213-33.

Bhatt, Chetan, "White Extinction: Metaphysical Elements of Contemporary Western Fascism", in *Theory, Culture & Society,* vol. 38, no. 1, 2020, p. 27-52.

Freed, Mark M., "Musil's Ontology of the Present: Lessons on the Hermeneutics of Modernity", in *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, p. 311-27.

Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Hoffman, Frederick J., "Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas", in *College English*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1946, p. 129-137.

Jonsson, Stefan, *Subject Without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000.

Kruithof, Jacques, *De rijkdom van het onvoltooide: 'een soort inleiding' bij Robert Musil en* De man zonder eigenschappen, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff Nederland bv., 1988.

Longford, Graham, "'Sensitive Killers, Cruel Aesthetes, and Pitiless Poets': Foucault, Rorty and the Ethics of Self-Fashioning", in *Polity*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2001, p. 569-92.

Lukács, Georg, "The Ideology of Modernism", in *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1964, p. 17-46.

McBride, Patrizia C., *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2006.

Musil, Robert, *The Man Without Qualities*, Translated by Sophie Wilkins, London, Picador, 2017.

Musil, Robert, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, Translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Raatikainen, Panu, "Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed on 21 March 2022, Available at plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/goedel-incompleteness/.

Ricoeur, Paul, "Narrative Identity", in *Philosophy Today*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1991, p. 73-81.

Shapiro, Ben, *Facts Don't Care About Your Feelings*, Hermosa Beach, Creators Publishing, 2019.

Sontag, Susan, "Notes on 'Camp'", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London, Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 275-92.
Uebel, Thomas, "Vienna Circle," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed on 21 September 2021, Available at plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/vienna-circle/.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Translated by W. F. Hermans, Amsterdam, Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2015.
Wynn, Natalie, "Men", Youtube, uploaded by Contrapoints, Accessed on 24 August 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1xxcKCGljY.
Zumhagen-Yekplé, Karen, *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Notes

1. Natalie Wynn, "Men", Youtube, uploaded by Contrapoints, Accessed on 24 August 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1xxcKCGljY, 0:02:04-0:02:11.
2. As well as many other parts of the world.
3. Peter L. Berger, "The Problem of Multiple Realities: Alfred Schutz and Robert Musil", in Maurice Natanson (ed.) *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, p. 213-33., p. 231.
4. Stefan Jonsson, *Subject Without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 241.
5. For an exploration of the role that ideas of destiny play in contemporary fascist ideologies, see Chetan Bhatt, whose 2020 paper explores the relation between "white extinction" and an idea of "cosmic destiny" that is associated with action. This emphasis on action stands at striking odds with the inaction central to the novel of ideas, once again embodied by the Parallel Campaign. Chetan Bhatt, "White Extinction: Metaphysical Elements of Contemporary Western Fascism", in *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020, p. 27-52.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London, The Bodley Head, 2015, p. 211-44, p. 235.
7. Stefan Jonsson, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
8. See, for instance, Shapiro's essay collection of the same title. Ben Shapiro, *Facts Don't Care About Your Feelings*, Hermosa Beach, Creators Publishing, 2019.
9. "Notes on 'Camp'", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 275-92, p. 276.
10. Frederick J. Hoffman, "Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas", in *College English*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1946, p. 129-137, p. 129, emphasis in original.
11. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Translated by Sophie Wilkins, London, Picador, 2017, p. 270.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 271.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 273-274.
14. Stefan Jonsson, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
15. Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 275.
16. Bartram and Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
17. Thomas Uebel, "Vienna Circle", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed on 21 September 2021, Available at plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/vienna-circle/, §0.
18. Panu Raatikainen, "Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed on 21 March 2022, Available at plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/goedel-incompleteness/, §1.1.

19. *Ibidem*, §5.
20. Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, Translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 42.
21. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Translated by John Cumming, New York, Verso, 2016, p. 6.
22. Mark M. Freed, "Musil's Ontology of the Present: Lessons on the Hermeneutics of Modernity", in *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, p. 311-27, 311.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 312.
24. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p. 62.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 64.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 63.
27. Georg Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism", in *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1964, p. 17-46, p. 20-21.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 21.
29. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity", in *Philosophy Today*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1991, p. 73-81, 78.
30. Bartram and Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
31. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p. 273.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 274.
33. Jacques Kruithof, *De rijkdom van het onvoltooide: 'een soort inleiding' bij Robert Musil en* De man zonder eigenschappen, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff Nederland bv., 1988, p. 53 (own translation).
34. Bartram and Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
35. Stephen Greenblatt, *Rennaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 2.
36. *Ibidem*, p. 1.
37. Patrizia C. McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 4.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
39. Graham Longford, "'Sensitive Killers, Cruel Aesthetes, and Pitiless Poets': Foucault, Rorty and the Ethics of Self-Fashioning", in *Polity*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2001, p. 569-92, 570.
40. *Ibidem*, p. 570-1.
41. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "6.54 My statements are elucidating because they who understand me will ultimately acknowledge them as meaningless, after they – *on* them – have ascended above these statements. (He should, to say so, throw away the ladder, after having climbed up on it.) He should triumph *over* these statements; then, he will see the world correctly (own translation).