

100. GENERAL STUMM INVADES THE STATE LIBRARY AND LEARNS ABOUT THE WORLD OF BOOKS, THE LIBRARIANS GUARDING IT, AND INTELLECTUAL ORDER

A close reading of Robert Musil
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In Robert Musil's book *The Man without Qualities*, General Stumm is in the Royal and Imperial Army while serving as a Council member of the Parallel Campaign, a group charged in 1913 with planning the celebration of the 70th jubilee of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria five years later. The Austrians have decided to celebrate this particular event because of a similar celebration being planned by the Prussians, honoring the 30th year of their Kaiser Wilhelm II's reign,

also in 1918. Neither empire would see its celebration come to be. By 1914, Gavrilo Princip would assassinate the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Europe would be plunged into WWI. By 1918, both empires would be reformed precariously as republics poised for collapse by 1939 in the build-up to WWII.

None of this, of course, is anything that General Stumm or his fellow Council members could possibly know. Not Count Leinsdorf, the Campaign's indecisive chairman; nor Paul



Arnheim, a wealthy industrialist; nor Diotima, the wife of a prominent civil servant whom both Arnheim and Stumm desire; not even by Ulrich, the book's titular 'man without qualities,' a lapsed soldier/engineer/mathematician, who was having a midlife crisis at 32 when his pushy father decided to draft him into diplomatic service on the Campaign opposite his cousin Diotima. It is Diotima's idea that the Campaign's output should result in 'human unity': a futile quest for a futile Campaign. And it is in pursuit of this unifying idea that Stumm, the orderly General, 'invades' the State Library.

The 100th chapter of Musil's book opens as Stumm speaks in a Council meeting about his adventure in the library:

General Stumm had noticed the rebuff to his 'comrade in arms' and undertook to comfort him. 'What a lot of useless palaver,' he said in indignant dismissal of Council members; then, without any encouragement from Ulrich, he started to talk about himself, with a certain excitement mixed with self-satisfaction:

'You remember don't you,' he said, 'that I'd made up my mind to find that great redeeming idea Diotima wants and lay it at



her feet. It turns out that there are lots of great ideas, but only one of them can be the greatest—that's only logical, isn't it?—so it's a matter of putting them in order. You said yourself that this is a resolve worthy of a Napoleon, right? You even gave me a number of excellent suggestions, as was to be expected of you, but I never got the point of using them. In short, I have to go about it my own way.'

Stumm's will, unlike most of his fellow Council members, is a will to make order. If they are seeking a great unifying idea, it must, in Stumm's eyes, also be the greatest idea, the top of the heap—a simple ordering would dictate as much.

For the General, ideas fall in line like a phalanx of warring soldiers on the battlefield. His invocation of Napoleon is not accidental, nor is it accidental that this comment is addressed to Ulrich. As readers, we know early in the story that Ulrich's desire to become a 'great man' was first inspired by Napoleon, 'partly because of a boy's natural admiration for the criminal and partly because his teachers had made a point of calling this tyrant, who had tried to turn Europe upside down, the greatest evildoer in history.' But, as Ulrich himself, later decides, it is from the order of the military that the historical figure of Napoleon was born: 'Napoleon's genius began to develop only after he became a General.'

He took his horn-rimmed glasses out of his pocket and put them on in place of the *pince-nez*, a sign that he wanted to look closely at someone or something.

It's valuable to pause here and note that Stumm's change of glasses constitutes a change of vision, a shift from looking across at his colleagues in order to more 'look closely at someone or something.' The viewing position of this chapter is a close viewing; a close reading. The text that follows is almost entirely an extended quotation of Stumm's experience in the library. It is a transcription of his comments at the meeting, and Musil's story swallows it whole. To read something closely is on the one hand to inspect elements of it with the greatest care; on the other it is to consider it as a bounded whole. Just this chapter, this poem, this song, not the entirety of the whole. So reading this chapter closely challenges us. Here is the General's story in its entirety, unprocessed. But here is just a small, secondary fragment of the whole.

Musil's whole book works this way, as a novel of linked essays. He had found his way to writing through science, and at some point had swapped textbooks in theoretical physics for writings by Nietzsche and others. With these readings, Musil his own way to 'a form of philosophizing that is essayistic rather than systematic; a recognition of art as a form of intellectual exploration,' writes the novelist J.M. Coetzee in an essay on Musil.

Musil himself agrees, writing 'the essay takes its form and method from science, and its matter from art.' We get the word essay from the French 'essayer', or 'to try', but, in naming it so, it's the attempt we emphasise, rather than the conclusion. In chapter 62, devoted to unpacking his homespun philosophy of 'essayism,' Musil

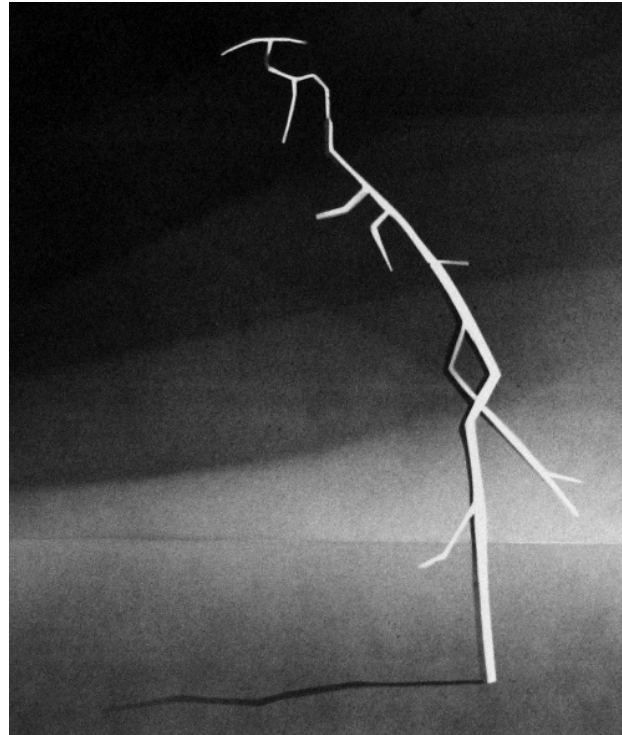
observes, 'an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in decisive thought. Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism. Terms like true and false, wise and unwise, are equally inapplicable, and yet the essay is subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing to be delicate and ineffable. There have been more than a few such essayists, masters of the inner hovering life, but there would be no point in naming them. [...] 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?'

This idea of the 'hovering life', later adopted by writer William Gass as the title for his essay on Musil, is a potent one. Sometimes it's expressed literally, as in Musil's discussion of that weightless, tasteless, odorless substance known as thought. And sometimes it's made metaphorical, through a substance like air or water. In chapter 28 these two fronts collide, and we find Ulrich at his desk literally thinking about water: 'Wasn't I just telling Clarisse something about water?' he mused, but could not recall the particulars. But it didn't really matter, his thoughts roamed idly. Unfortunately, nothing is so hard to achieve as a literary representation of a man thinking.' This is exactly the point: thinking is just like water. Both are utterly without the kinds of specific, graspable qualities that would make them compelling things for someone to try to describe. It's in considering the two together that we see the connection between them. That's where the art of the essay is, surrounding this 'hovering life,' this life without qualities, and making it somehow known to us.

'One of the foremost rules for a good General is to find the enemy's strength,' he said. 'So I asked them to get me a card to our world-famous Imperial Library, and with the help of a librarian who very charmingly put himself at my disposal when I told him who I was, I have now penetrated the enemy's lines. We marked down the ranks in that colossal storehouse of books, and I don't mind telling you I was not particularly overwhelmed; those rows of books are no worse than a garrison on parade.'

Here the General makes my suggestion explicit, comparing the books to enemy soldiers. His true enemy, however, is not the books themselves but the disorder they represent.

Still, after a while I couldn't help starting to do some figuring in my head, and I got an unexpected answer. You see, I had been thinking that if I read a book a day, it would naturally be exhausting, but I would be bound to get to the end sometime and then, even if I had to skip a few, I could claim a certain position in the world of the intellect. But what d'you suppose that librarian said to me, as we walked on and on, without an end in sight, and I asked him how many books they had in this crazy library? Three and a half million, he tells me. We had just got to the seven hundred thousands or so, but I kept on doing these figures in my head; I'll spare you the

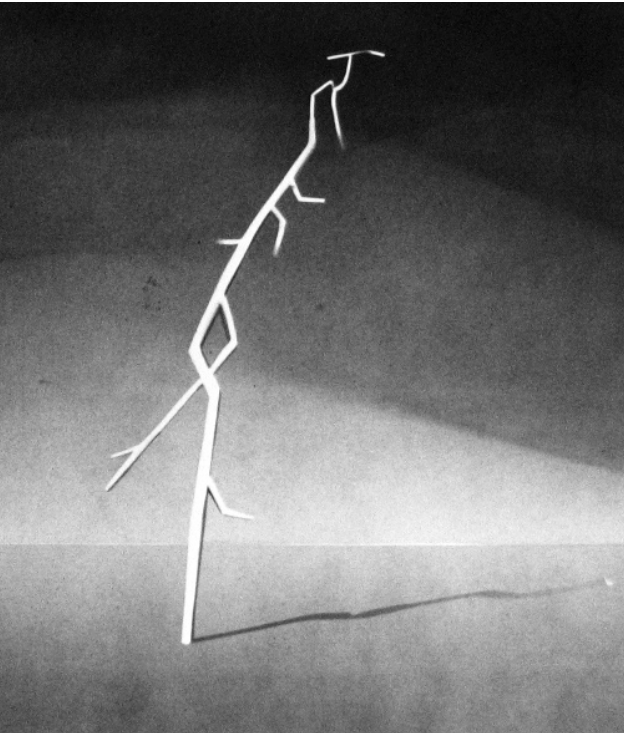


details, but I checked it out later at the office, with pencil and paper: it would take me ten thousand years to carry out my plan.

In *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance*, poet and cultural critic Gabriel Zaid suggests, as a representation of all the world's books, that the 3.5 million housed in the State Library is tragically low. In fact, by the time Robert Musil was born, that many books were being published around the world each year. Nowadays, we produce a book every 30 seconds, and the General's plan would be more than a losing battle: today's reader reads

a book a day at the neglect of 4,000 others.

The problem of 'too many books' is not a modern one, however; it has been with since at least the Old Testament, a book which itself led to the production of many, many other books. In 1751 none other than that orderer of words Samuel Johnson commented that 'No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library; for who can see the wall crowded on every side by mighty volumes, the works of laborious meditations and accurate inquiry, now scarcely known but by



the catalogue ...' We shall soon see that Musil, writing many years later, was inclined to agree. Zaid sees in this fact an absurd parable of the human will to order: 'Progress has ordered things so that all citizens, not just the prophets, may give themselves the luxury of preaching in the desert.'

'I felt nailed to the spot—the whole world seemed to be one enormous practical joke! And I'm telling you, even though I'm feeling a bit calmer about it, there's something radically wrong somewhere!

'You may say it isn't necessary to read every last book. Well it's also true that in war

you don't have to kill every last soldier, but we still need every one of them. You may say to me that every book is needed too. But there, you see, you wouldn't be quite right, because that isn't so, I asked the librarian.

'It occurred to me, you see, that the fellow lives among these millions of books, he knows each one, he knows where to find them, he ought to be able to help me. Of course I wasn't going to ask him point-blank: Where do I find the finest idea in the world? That sounds too much like the opening of a fairy tale, even though I know that much; besides, I never liked fairy tales, even as a child.

Stumm makes a curious statement here, as if even he knows the answer he seeks a fantasy, like 'the opening of a fairy tale.' As a rationalist, we can understand why Stumm never got much pleasure from such things.

But what to do? I had to ask him something of the sort in the end anyway. But I never told him why I wanted to know, not a word about our Campaign and having to find the most inspiring aim for it—discretion, you know; I didn't feel I was authorised to go that far. So I finally tried a little stratagem. 'By the way,' I said casually, 'how on earth do you go about finding the right book somewhere in this immense collection ...?' I tried to say it as I imagined Diotima might, and I dropped a few pennies' worth of admiration into my voice, and sure enough, he started to purr and fell all over himself with helpfulness, and what was the Herr General interested in finding out?

The joke here, of course, is on Stumm: the librarian is just doing his job. It's also funny, though in a different way, that the General guards the Campaign's mission like a military secret—after all, the goal of the Campaign is not only to find an idea that will promote human unity, but to publicise it. For Stumm to be guarded is certainly in his nature, but I think it goes beyond that: Stumm, whose name in German means 'mute,' doesn't quite want to admit to the librarian that he has no idea what he's looking for.

The dialogue that follows springs from this attempt to dance around saying the unsayable:

'Oh, all sorts of things,' I said, as if he were prying into state secrets; I was playing for time.

'I only meant what subject or what author,' he asked, 'Is it military history?'

'Oh no,' I said, 'more on the lines of the history of peace.'

'History as such? Or current pacifist literature?'

'No, I said, it wasn't that simple. 'Might there be, for instance, something like a

compendium of all the great humanitarian ideas or anything like that?' You remember how much research I've already got my people to do along those lines. He didn't say a word. 'Or a book on realizing the most important aims of all?' I say to him.

'Something in theological ethics?' he suggests.

This exchange of self-definition between the librarian and Stumm serves, in a way, as a microcosm of the Parallel Campaign's entire purpose, both in the world of *The Man without Qualities* and as part of Musil's outlook on the nature of writing. Thomas Sebastian, a Musil scholar, explains in his book "The Intersection of Science and Literature in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*" that "The [Parallel] Campaign is shown to originally exist only in the form of a vague idea manifesting itself first in loose verbal associations, then in a circular letter, and finally in a press release. It is thus an allegory of what one can do with words. The campaign only exists because people start to speak about it. From the start then, the novel's main plot has the peculiar qualities of being merely the possibility of becoming a plot; it has the potential of a plot because it is spoken about and written about. Accordingly, the novel's own progress depends in a peculiar way on the creation of a story that relates to how stories are made.' This revelation, as Coetzee, Gass, and Musil himself might all suggest, is tied to the unideological ideology of essayism: in writing around the knowledge we seek, we discover it.

'Theological ethics too,' I said, 'but it would have to include something about our old Austrian culture and a bit about Grillparzer,' I specified.

Franz Grillparzer, an Austrian dramatic poet who died before Musil was born, might seem like an unusual and casual reference here, but he is not. The poet's first job was working in the court library, and he later became a government official like Musil himself. Grillparzer worked in the Hofkammer, or exchequer, where he was the director of archives. A popular Austrian anecdote, retold by art historian E.H. Gombrich, has the aged Grillparzer chatting in his office with a young scientist when there is a knock at the door. A timid office worker appeared and asked Grillparzer if he might have a certain file in his office. The director dismissed him with a 'no.' Half an hour later, the office worker appeared again. They could not find the file, might the

director just glance over his desk for a moment? 'I have not got it,' growled Grillparzer. A third knock and request, and the director explodes, 'Out with you!' he shouts. As Grillparzer glances down, he sees the file, and grins. 'Here it is,' he says in Gombrich's retelling, 'but I won't be plagued.'

Musil, we learn from Gombrich, was fond of this story. No accident, then, that Musil alludes to it in an archive not dissimilar to the one in the story, where something's being looked for, in a situation that's defined, as Gombrich notes, by 'the maltreatment and persecution of an underdog by a superior.' These precise power dynamics are at play with the General and his librarian.

My eyes must have been blazing with such a thirst for knowledge that the fellow suddenly took fright, as if I was about to suck him dry altogether. I went on a little longer about needing a kind of timetable that would enable me to make connections among all kinds of ideas in every direction—at which point he turns so polite it's absolutely unholy, and offers to take me into the catalogue room and let me do my own searching, even though it's against the rules, because it's only for the use of the librarians. So I actually found myself inside the holy of holies. It felt like being inside an enormous brain.

Here again we have Musil grasping at making the intangible tangible. Like that 'greatest idea' the General seeks, how do we describe the 'holiest of holies'? If thought is weightless, tasteless, and odorless as I've described before, what must the experience of being 'inside an enormous brain' feel like. I wonder if it isn't wholly an experience without qualities, as if the solid, rational forms of the world have dissolved our eyes and each thing as we consider it becomes re-enmeshed in the network of ideas that constitutes our ability to perceive those things in the first place. The German word translated as 'qualities' in the book's title is 'eigenschaften,' a compound word. 'Eigen' are owners. 'Schaften' are links or ties. Thus 'eigenschaften' are owned ties, the properties that a thing possesses that link it to other things in the world. To be without 'eigenschaften' is to surrender that ownership of linkage. It is to become both unmoored and uninvested. Alone and unattached.

Ulrich's boyhood friend Walter is the first character in the book to utter the phrase 'man without qualities.' He agitatedly describes Ulrich to his wife Clarisse this way: 'His appearance gives no clue to what his profession might be, and yet

he doesn't look like a man without a profession either. [...] When he is 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 the 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.'

Anyway, back to the library:

Imagine being totally surrounded by those shelves, full of books in their compartments, ladders all over the place, all those book stands and library tables piled high with catalogs and bibliographies, the concentrate of all knowledge, don't you know, and not one sensible book to read, only books about books. It positively reeked of brain phosphorous, and I felt that I must have really got somewhere. But of course a funny feeling came over me when the man was going to leave me there on my own—I felt both awestruck and uneasy as hell. Up the ladder he scoots, like a monkey, aiming straight at a book from below, fetches it down, and says: 'Here it is, General, a bibliography of bibliographies for you'—you know about that? In short, the alphabetical list of alphabetical lists of the titles of all the books and papers of the last five years dealing with ethical problems, exclusive of moral theology and literature, or however he put it, and he tries to slip away. I barely had time to grab his lapel and hang on to him.

'Just a moment, sir,' I cried, 'you can't leave me here without telling me your secret, how you manage to...' I'm afraid I let slip the word 'madhouse,' because that's how I suddenly felt about it. 'How do you find your way in this madhouse of books?' He must have got the wrong impression—it occurred to me later that crazy people are given to calling others crazy—anyway, he just kept staring at my saber, and I could hardly keep hold of him. And then he gave me a real shock. When I didn't let go of him he suddenly pulled himself up, rearing up in those wobbly pants of his, and said in a slow, very emphatic way, as though the time had come to give away the ultimate secret: 'General,' he said, 'if you want to know how I know about every book here, I can tell you: Because I never read any of them.'

'A superwhole that, however, he knows nothing about' seems an apt description not just for Ulrich's point of view, as Walter suggests, but also for the librarian's point of view, at least in the event recounted by the General above.

This event forms the basis for the introduction of French literature professor Pierre Bayard's book *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*. Bayard's initial view of this event echoes the sentiments voiced by Zaid earlier: 'Reading is first and foremost non-reading. Even in the case of the most passionate lifelong readers, the act of picking up and opening a book masks the countergesture that occurs at the same time: the involuntary act of not picking up and not opening all the other books in the universe.'

As Bayard continues, he extends this idea to become even more meaningful. Not only does every act of reading carry with it a requisite act of nonreading, but each act of partial reading, or even ordering, carries with it a positioning of ourselves with respect to the knowledge we receive as a result. Every act of reading, partial reading, skimming, sorting, and even nonreading, somehow gives us qualities in the German sense: these acts invest us in a network that's partly our own and partly beyond ownership, because it is infinite.

This amounts to both an argument against the close readings that the General (and I) display here, and for a more integrated, networked, and interdisciplinary kind of intelligence. Bayard explains, 'Rather than any particular book, it is indeed these connections and correlations that should be the focus of the cultivated individual, [...] [a]nd Musil's image of the brain powerfully underscores this theory that relations among ideas are far more important than the ideas themselves. You could quibble with the librarian's claim not to read any books, since he takes a close interest in the books about books known as catalogues. But these have a rather particular status and in fact amount to no more than lists. They are also a visual manifestation of the relations among books—relations that should be of keen interest to anyone who truly cares about books, who loves them enough to want to master all of them at once.'

'It was almost too much, I tell you! But when he saw how stunned I was, he explained himself. The secret of a good librarian is that he never reads anything more of the literature in his charge than the titles and tables of contents. 'Anyone who lets himself go and starts reading a book is lost as a librarian,' he explained. 'He's bound to lose perspective.'

'So,' I said, trying to catch my breath, 'you never read a single book?'

'Never. Only the catalogues.'

'But aren't you a Ph.D.?'

'Certainly I am. I teach at the university, as a special lecturer in Library Science. Library Science is a special field leading to a degree, you know,' he explained. 'How many systems do you suppose there are, General, for the arrangement and preservation of books, cataloging of titles, correcting misprints and misinformation on title pages, and the like?'

This revelation, that to exist in a such a total system of knowledge the librarian has devoted himself to learning the system rather than the knowledge, is precisely the point of Musil's chapter. Methods of organizing and providing patrons access to a collection of shared knowledge have been with us dating back to 1200 B.C. were flourishing by around 300 B.C. at the Library of Alexandria. Classification systems like those used by the Han Dynasty in 200 B.C. and were similar to those used by Thomas Jefferson for his personal library at Montecello in 1770 and remained in place when Jefferson donated his vast collection to the newly rebuilt Library of Congress in 1814 following its destruction in the war of 1812.

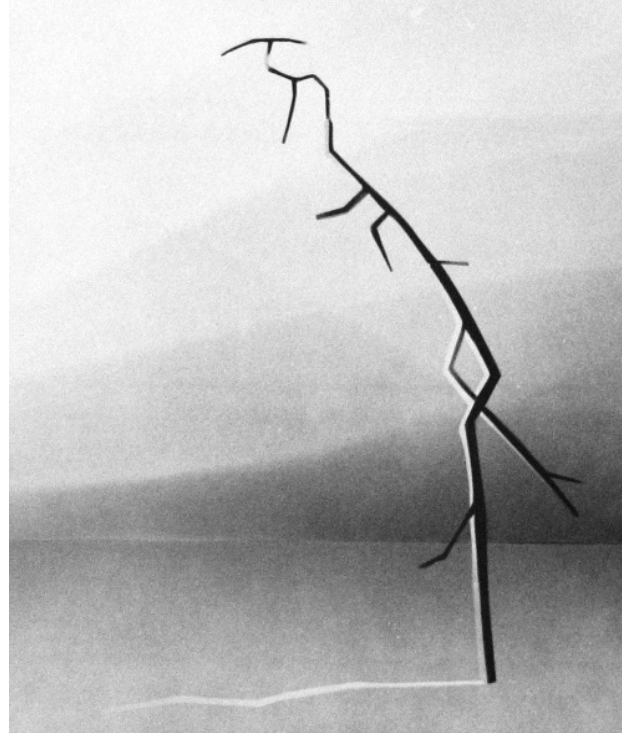
By 1931, when Musil was writing *The Man without Qualities* full time, the term 'library science' made its first appearance, introduced by the Indian mathematician S.R. Ranganathan, who had by then spent eight years as University Librarian at Madras. Ranganathan's book, *The Five Laws of Library Science*, is a pillar of the field. Its five simple laws, which structure the text, are as follows:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his or her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

There is now a widespread feeling among library scientists that Ranganathan's laws may be applied seamlessly to the World Wide Web.

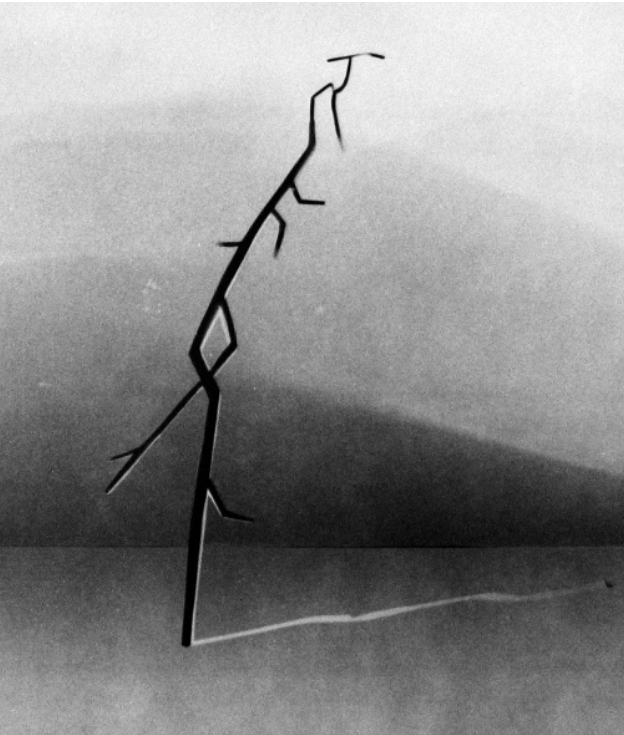
I must admit that when he left me there alone, after that, I felt like doing one of two things: bursting into tears, or lighting a cigarette—neither of which I was allowed to do there. But what do you think happened? As I'm standing there, totally at a loss, an old attendant who must have been watching us all along pads around me respectfully a few times, then he stops, looks me in the face, and starts speaking to me in a voice quite velvety, from either the dust on the books or the foretaste of a tip: 'Is there anything in particular, sir, you are looking for?' he asks me. I try to shake

my head, but the old fellow goes on: 'We get lots of gentlemen from the Staff College in here. If you'll just tell me, sir, what subject you're interested in at the moment sir ... Julius Caesar, Prince Eugene of Savoy, Count Daun? Or is it something contemporary? Military statues? The budget?' I swear the man sound-ed so sensible and knew so much about what was inside these books that I gave him a tip and asked how he did it. And what do you think? He tells me again that the students at the Staff College come to him when they have a paper to write, 'And when I bring the books,' he goes on, 'they often cuss a bit, and gripe about all the nonsense they have to



learn, and that's how the likes of us pick up all sorts of things. Or else it's the Deputy who has to draw up the budget for the Department of Education, and he asks me what material was used by the Deputy the year before. Or it might be the Bishop, who's been writing about certain types of beetles for the last fifteen years, or one of the university professors, who complains that he's been waiting three weeks to get a certain book, and we have to look for it on all the adjoining shelves, in case it's been misplaced, and then it turns out he's had it at home for the last two years. That's the way it's been, sir, for nigh on forty years: you develop an instinct for what people want, and then they read for it.'

The old attendant's story is virtually identical to Grillparzer's episode of the missing file buried right beneath Grillparzer's nose in his own office. Having read something does not necessarily constitute knowledge about it, just as facts do not necessarily constitute truths, and this bit of contradictory wisdom reverberates both in Walter's description of Ulrich as a 'man without qualities' and in Bayard's response to a question from Deborah Solomon in the *New York Times Magazine* in October 2007 when his book was released in the U.S. Solomon asks,



'What's wrong with the traditional method of starting a book on the first page and reading through to the end?' Bayard replies, 'It's important to know how to read from the first line to the last line, but there are also other ways of reading. You can skim books, you can just have heard about them, you can have read them and forgotten them.'

To define reading by suggesting that 'books you haven't read' are also—in some way—readable is to suggest a definition of reading without qualities, a definition that is nothing if not relative. This relativism is essayistic in its nature,

and William Gass suggests that Musil's training as a librarian at the Technical University of Vienna may have left him with a life locked inside his own relational database.

In this way, *The Man without Qualities* could be seen as an output method for that database. Ulrich, as the author's proxy/hero, shares much with his creator, who was first a soldier, then an engineer, and then a man of academic science. When Musil was Ulrich's age at the time the book begins, he had just started work at the library. Our first meeting Ulrich, then, comes at the point in Ulrich's life when his creator first discovered the power of archives. It is not difficult, knowing this, to see Ulrich as the embodiment of an archive, both in belief and in backstory? What qualities does an archive have other than the relationships produced by the objects it stores? Libraries are social places, and so are the novels they shelve. Bayard tells Solomon that he reads, in part, to 'feel an end to my loneliness, of course, just as you.'

'Well,' I said, 'be that as it may, my friend, it still isn't so simple for me to tell you what I'm looking for.'

'And what do you think he comes back with? He gives me a quiet look, nods, and says: "That happens all the time too, General, if I may say so. There was a lady who came in, not so long ago, who said exactly the same thing to me. Perhaps you know her, sir, she's the wife of Section Chief Tuzzi, of the Foreign Office?"'

'Now, what do you think of that? You could have knocked me over like a feather. And when the old fellow caught on, he just went and fetched all the books Diotima has on reserve there, so now, when I come to the library, it's practically like a secret mystical marriage; now and then I make a discreet pencil mark in the margin, or I write a word in, and I know she'll see it the very next day, and she won't have a clue who it is that's there inside her own head, when she wonders what's going on.'

As we know by now, the General is infatuated with Diotima, to the degree that even poring over her reserve books at the State Library is tantamount to reading her diary. His comment about the 'secret mystical marriage' is almost comic, and in describing the pencil marks he leaves behind we almost mistake his description of writing for the description of a lover's caress.

This idea of writing in the margins, of books carrying on conversations, is a fascinating and ancient one. Certainly his image is Talmudic: the classic book of Jewish Oral Law is marginally

surrounded by rabbinic discussions of that law. But the idea also both recalls and refutes Socrates. In the Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells a story about the Egyptian god Theuth, 'the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters.' When Theuth presented his invention of letters to King Thamus, Theuth explained that his invention would 'make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories.' In response, Thamus told Theuth, 'this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. [...] [Your letters are] an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.'

But while Socrates's discussion of language privileges speech over writing because writing makes people forgetful of what they know, his dialogue with *Phaedrus* has been discussed, debated, refuted, and republished for nearly two dozen centuries. Through writing, that speech has endured and enriched us, and it is here that Socrates got it very wrong: 'Thanks to books, we know Socrates distrusted books,' writes Zaid. 'Culture is conversation,' he continues, 'Writing, reading, editing, printing, distributing, cataloging, reviewing, can be fuel for that conversation, ways of keeping it lively. It could even be said that to publish a book is to insert it into the middle of that conversation, that to establish a publishing house, bookstore, or library is to start a conversation—a conversation that springs, as it should, from local debate, but that opens up, as it should, to all places and times.'

The General paused blissfully. But then he pulled himself together, his face took on a look of grim seriousness, and he continued: 'Now brace yourself and give me your full attention, because I'm going to ask you something. We're all convinced—aren't we?—that we're living in the best-ordered times the world has ever seen. I know I once said in *Diotima's* presence that it's a prejudice, but it's a prejudice I naturally share. And now I have to face the fact that the only people with a really reliable intellectual order are the library attendants, and I ask you—no, I don't ask you; after all

we've talked about this before, and naturally I've thought over again in light of my recent experiences. So let me put it this way: Suppose you're drinking brandy, right? A good thing to do in some circumstances. But you keep on, and on, and on, drinking brandy—are you with me?—and the first thing is, you get drunk; next you get the d.t.'s; and finally, you get conducted with military honors to your last resting place, where the chaplain testifies to your unflinching devotion to duty and so on. Do you get the picture? Good, you've got it, nothing to it. Now let's take water. Imagine drinking water till you drown in it. Or imagine eating until your intestines are tied in knots.



Or you go on taking drugs—quinine, arsenic, opium. What for? you ask. Well, my friend, I'm coming to the most extraordinary proposition: Take order. Or rather, start imagining a great idea, and then another still greater, and then another even greater than that one, and so on; and in the same style, try to increase the concept of order in your head. At first it's as neat and tidy as an old maid's room and as clean as a Horse Guards stable. Then it's as splendid as a brigade in battle formation. Next it's crazy, like coming out of the casino late at night and commanding the stars: 'Universe, 'tenshun, eyes right!' Or let's put it this way: At first order is like the new recruit still falling over his own feet, and you straighten him out.

Then it's like dreaming you've suddenly been promoted, over everybody's head, to Minister of War. Next, just imagine a total universal order embracing all mankind—in short, the perfect civilian state of order: that, I say, is death by freezing, it's rigor mortis, a moonscape, a geometric plague!

The General's parable about order in Musil's book precedes Michel Foucault's introduction to *The Order of Things* by more than a quarter century, but it's impossible to resist bringing the two writers into conversation with one another



here. Foucault's essays are so similar to Musil's, owing, as they do, much to art and to science yet existing somewhere specifically outside both spheres. Foucault suggests that the history of order, unlike the history of madness, is 'the history of the Same—of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities.' In this observation is the key to understanding the General's parable. We lose ourselves in drink, in drugs, in death; we find ourselves in order. To identify a thing is to place it in relation to oneself and to strengthen

the sense of one's precise placement as a result.

Like fantasies told and repeated, these relationships between things bring us comfort within our surroundings. But, like fantasies, these relationships are illusory, for every fantasy contains both an acknowledgment of truth and a willful escape from that truth. Foucault reminds us that order works the same way. There is order that exists and order that's made by our description of it. He writes, 'Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.'

I discussed that with my library attendant. He suggested I read Kant or somebody, all about the limits of ideas and perceptions. But frankly, I don't want to go on reading. I have a funny feeling that I now understand why those of us in the army, where we have the highest degree of order, also have to be prepared to lay down our lives at any moment. I can't exactly explain why. Somehow or other, order, once it reaches a certain stage, calls for bloodshed. And now I am honestly worried that your cousin is carrying all her efforts too far, to the point where she is likely to go and do something that might do her a lot of harm—and I'll be less able than ever to help her! Do you see what I mean?

Diotima's pursuit of an idea that will bring about human unity is a paradox of order. In unifying all, you identify none. The Parallel Campaign's mission results in either paralysis or laughter. We're either ordered rigid, as the General describes, or we're smiling at the futility of the effort, as Musil suggests. That's the truth of bringing order to all—it can't be done. But the human desire for it is neither stiff nor funny—it's violent. In our quest for a more unifying order, we silence those who've ordered against us. The deeper and more secure our identities become, the clearer and less secure those with whom we do not identify appear. Writing in the midst of two World Wars, Musil may have sensed this. The General's concern that the outcome of a political action group searching for a totalizing order will be bloodshed is not misguided.

As for the arts and sciences and all they can offer in terms of great and admirable ideas, of course I have nothing but the greatest respect for all that; I wouldn't dream of saying anything against it.'

As Musil wrote of the General's respect and admiration for the arts and sciences, it's possible he felt a twinge of jealousy. Like so many writers, Musil did not have the opportunity to witness the impact his book would make in his own lifetime. Part of the problem, of course, was that the novel became his life: Musil couldn't complete it. The author joked with a friend that he'd thought of ending his sprawling 1700-page book mid-sentence, with a comma. He ended it just as abruptly: on a crisp Swiss morning in April 1942, Musil dropped dead from a cerebral hemorrhage during his vigorous morning gymnastics routine. He was 62.

By then, Musil and his wife Martha, a Jew, had been on the run from the Nazis for four years. They had also been running from the watchful eye of Musil's foolhardy publisher Ernest Rowohlt, who'd been advancing the author money to finish his book for more than a decade. After Musil had a mental breakdown upon the publication of Part 1 of his novel in 1929, concerned friends formed a Musil Society to support their ailing colleague. But several years later he suffered a stroke, and, following that, the cerebral hemorrhage that killed him.

As WWII raged on, the initial support of Musil's friends would not return. Eight people attended his cremation. His grave in Geneva is unmarked. No one would attempt to republish *The Man without Qualities* for ten years, and few would agree on Musil's status as a major European novelist for almost a quarter century more. In the end, it took longer for people to recognise *The Man without Qualities* than Musil spent writing it, a task to which he dedicated nearly a third of his largely unhealthy life.

Maybe all the smoking finally caught up to him: Musil was a legendary addict. 'I treat life as something unpleasant that one can get through by smoking,' he wrote. 'I live in order to smoke!' It certainly didn't make his life easier. Coetzee suggests that while working at the library in 1914, Musil had such trouble kicking the habit that he got kicked out of the library instead.