

From Concept to Analogy: An Investigation into Singularity

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Abstract

What would ‘a man without qualities’ be? Obviously, we always resort to some properties to describe someone’s identity, and these attributes seem to feature someone’s character. Thanks to these qualities, we are able to recognise each individual, who appears as a gathering of properties. This concept of the identity, which eventually confounds the identity and the similarity, is the target of the satiric tone in Musil’s novel *The Man without qualities*. The article aims to show how the satiric tone devaluates this ‘identity-similarity’ and how it also constitutes the starting point of an investigation of the singularity. The satiric tone manages to express the voice of the singularity and to turn from a general point of view to a peculiar one.

The article focuses on the ethical dimension of this quest of identity, since the issue of the identity is particularly sharp in ethics. It seems that we need to know who we are to make up our mind and to know how to live. It demonstrates how satire is a key to a double passage. First, the satiric deflation reveals that the identity-similarity is neither believable nor respectable and that we need to think of identity in another way, in order to account for the singularity. Secondly, the satiric voice tackles the generality of the concept, which is unable to deal with peculiar situations or to express the Self. The passage from the concept to the analogy should help us improvise and find the right attitude or behaviour in each given context.

The hypothesis of the article is that satire reveals the inadequacies and the limits of the identity-similarity and that it could be a plausible candidate to bring about an alternative concept of the identity, centered on the singularity. Moreover, satire could provide a kind of literary experiment which would be able to give ethical indications: the satiric tone in moral communication has the power to make us feel concern. From the reading of Musil’s novel, the article suggests that satire, as an expression of the voice of the singularity, plays an invaluable role in moral communication, in so far as it conveys a non-conceptual analogical use of language.

Keywords:



What would ‘a man without qualities’ be like? We always resort to properties to describe someone’s identity, and these attributes seem to feature someone’s character. Thanks to these qualities, we are able to recognise each individual, who appears as a gathering of properties. These properties play a decisive role in many philosophical conceptions of the individual. For instance, Leibniz considers individuality as a substance enveloping all its properties, both monadic and relational. Properties are also predicates which are inherent in the subject, according to the principle of inherence. But even if the notion of a substantial individual is abandoned, properties remain, as in Russel’s *Human knowledge*, where this notion of substance is reduced to a body of physical repetitive qualities, a particular complex of co-presence. I suggest that we refer to such conceptions which involve repetitive properties in order to determine the individual as conceptions of identity-similarity. In fact, it is the repetition of the same properties in a certain organization which allows someone to recognise an individual in duration, no matter if the properties are inherent in a substance or are organised in a complex. This conception of identity, which confounds the individual with a sum of stable properties, is the target of the satiric tone in Musil’s novel *The Man without qualities*. I will try to show how the satiric tone devaluates the concept of ‘identity-similarity’ and instigates an investigation into singularity. The satiric tone manages to express the voice of singularity and to turn from a general point of view to a peculiar one. In fact, satire is a key to a double passage: first, the satiric deflation reveals that the ‘identity-similarity’ is neither believable nor respectable and that we need to consider identity differently in order to account for singularity. Then, the satiric voice tackles the generality of the concept, which is unable to deal with peculiar situations or to express the particular

I shall point out the fact that the recognition of someone — and therefore someone’s identity — presupposes the idea of self-knowledge. We should be able to know exactly who we are and establish a determined acquaintance with ourselves in order to understand our own identity. My hypothesis is that this self-knowledge is a phantasm, which is responsible for the reduction of identity to similarity. It imprisons the self in a stable configuration of determinations and it conveys the syndrome that Musil diagnosed as ‘a lack of inner substance’. If the conceptual use of language fails to grasp identity, an alternative should be to resort to analogy in order to give a picture of ourselves. The purpose of analogy is to grasp subjectivity, to deal with things which define the individual and its singularity, and can’t be explained in a conceptual way.

On the one hand, Musil is very critical of the intuitive uses of analogy. For instance, he disapproves of Spengler's use of dubious analogies and calls for a 'truce' concerning the hypertrophied reference to intuition in German literature. But he also admires Spengler's attempt to deal with the world of motivation instead of the logical world of causality, with the 'non-rational' instead of the 'rational'. The concept is powerless in front of this affective and emotional field, so that analogy is needed:

There is also a kind of purely rational intuition. Even there, however methodical the presentation might have been, the decisive idea appears suddenly before consciousness, as if it came from outside. The purely rational thought which seems to be completely unrelated to sentiment, can also be stimulated by more intense feelings. How far especially the thought we call here non-rational, whose strong penetration and internal velocity of propagation depend precisely on words' vitality, on this kind of cloud of thought and feelings which envelops the insignificant conceptual nucleus.¹

Musil's ambition is to try a rational use of analogy in order to grasp extra-conceptual experience and contents. As he had already said in his study on Mach's epistemology, the objective description of the observed things must be completed with hypothetical or analogical elements. I think that this point is very interesting, since Musil tries to distinguish between conceptual and extra-conceptual contents, and at the same time show how it is possible to rationally understand the latter. The main idea is that there are two different kinds of meaning: a conceptual or logical one, which can be easily grasped by understanding, and an analogical or moral one, which needs a specific form in order to be understood and expressed. The first one relies on the fact that some of the observable facts comply with the logical categories, whereas the second one blurs or resists this rationalization.

1. The satiric devaluation of the 'identity-similarity'

Satire is a literary genre defined by Quintilian and Roman poets, but I will not study this classical satiric form, rather I will focus on a tone which is ironical and aggressive. I will also look at satire as an art of contrast, underlining the dissimilarity between speech and reality. We can get a general definition of satirical work from the following quotation: '[The satirist] pictures the inflated, the fragmented, the jumbled; he shows us men whose language is indecorous and whose pretensions to decency and honor are as much a sham as their speech.'²

Hence, satire uses particular devices: it can use irony; it can use exaggeration, in order to underline a shortcoming or to ridicule a behavior; deflation, which is a devaluation of something considered to be great; juxtaposition, which consists in putting on the same level a great thing

¹ Robert Musil, 'Esprit et expérience', in *Essais: conférences-critique aphorismes et réflexions / textes choisis*, translated by Philippe Jaccottet (Paris: Seuil, 1978). My translation.

² Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 32.

and a low one, in order to operate a devaluation again. Furthermore, satire has a specific purpose, which is presented by Jacques Bouveresse in these terms: '[satire should be] the will at least to sort some things out because they do not appear believable or respectable, without thinking that it is necessary to put something else instead.'³

Following the work of Bouveresse on Karl Kraus,⁴ I shall suggest that this struggle concerns philosophical conceptions or systems as well as individual attitudes and claims. Indeed, the satiric text always appears aggressive and impertinent since it often attacks something; it tries to unveil things or persons that claim or are claimed to be something or someone else than what or who they really are. Satire also has a privileged target: *it aims at spotting imposture*.

In fact, I think that one of the greatest interests of a satirical piece is its ability to remain vigilant and to maintain rational control over our speeches, and over the relationship between speeches and behaviours. It seems to me that Musil, following the tradition of the moralists, chose to use satire in order to express his criticism, and peculiarly, in order to criticise the notion of identity-similarity. I would like to show how he ridicules 'the men with qualities', pointing out that the moral consequences of such a conception of identity are that one is brought to indifference. In the 88th chapter of the first volume of Musil's novel entitled 'On being involved with matters of consequence', we find a perfect specimen of the deflationist activity of the satiric tone. After an ironic description of the romantic passage from the intimacy of the self and personal experiments to a general noble and rational point of view, the satirist concludes that 'Those of us who prefer to live with greatness — first and foremost among whom will be found those great souls for whom little things simply don't exist — find their inward life drawn out of them involuntarily and stretched into an extended superficiality.'⁵ This passage from a deep verticality of the self to a pure horizontal surface is a metaphor of several impostures: (1) the tendency to conceive the Self as a kind of vacuum inside us. This interiority is presented by the satiric text as 'a lack of inner substance', 'a big, vacuous, round O'; (2) the idea that Great Things should bring a kind of plenitude and elevation to human beings. The satiric text insists on the danger of adopting this view, in that it creates a propensity to make abusive generalizations, and the gain of generality is proportional to the lack of personality. The

³ Jacques Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe et le Réel. Entretien avec Jean-Jacques Rosat* (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 1998), p. 17: 'la volonté de régler au moins leur compte à des choses qui ne paraissent pas crédibles ni respectables, sans se croire nécessairement obligé de les remplacer par autre chose.' My translation.

⁴ For instance, Jacques Bouveresse, *Satire et prophétie, Les voix de Karl Kraus* (Marseille: Agone, 2007). He shows how Kraus used satire in order to attack his contemporaries, for instance political leaders or journalists.

⁵ Robert Musil, *The Man without qualities*, tr. by Sophie Wilkins (London: Picador, 1995), p. 432.

individual is torn between two extremities: the general extremity of the world and the personal one; i.e. a perfectly objective attitude towards the world and a subjective one.

The first imposture relates to our conception of identity, especially our idea of the self. The text provides an impressive and ironic image of the vacuity of the substantialist conception of the self, which considers the self as an internal entity characterised by several stable properties. The title of the novel itself already suggests that identity cannot be thought of in terms of qualities or properties anymore. This statement results from an experiment made by Ulrich himself while reading the newspaper: in the thirteenth section of the book, Ulrich realises that he possesses the same properties as a horse. Wondering about a paper presenting a 'racehorse of genius', he realises that the combination of qualities that claim to define everyone fails to grasp what is individual and unique in everyone. We can draw up an inventory of the qualities that constitute our personality and compare it with those of a racehorse: strength, rapidity, boldness or caution, impatience or placidity and so on. Consequently, according to this substantialist view, our identity seems to be a particular, stable combination of general properties. Furthermore, we share these properties with other beings, humans as well as animals. Some of these properties are innate, others are acquired, and the sum of them sketches the lines of our individuality and can be summarised in a precise report that explains our ways of acting and reacting.

Thereby, in this case, identity is thought as similarity: the person is identified by a set of properties that remain similar in the course of time. What, then, is the principle that unifies these disparate properties? And is similarity the key to identity? The unity of all properties requires an unchanging entity that possesses these attributes and is also predicated by them: it is the essence of the individual, the Self considered as an immaterial and invisible substance. Indeed, idealism will be the privileged target for the satiric attacks, since it works hand in hand with the mythology of the substantial Self. The problem is that this conception refers to an unobservable entity, for instance, the Soul or the Essence of the individual.

Musil is not embarrassed by the idea of the soul, but by the pretension to deal with this idea as a physical object, ignoring the problems that such a notion involves and lacking the precision such an investigation requires. He notices that most of his contemporaries take the liberty of saying anything about the Soul and subjectivity, invoking intuition or internal visions regardless of precision, truth or rationality. As a result, the notion of individuality and identity loses its content and spreads out, until people don't know who they are or how to live. This second consequence is a recurrent motif in Musil's works and justifies the urgency to resort to satire.

The satiric tone operates an anti-metaphysical deflation of all the beautiful and noble ideas, especially that of the soul. When serious philosophers, metaphysicians and romantics agree to bend on their knees in front of the Soul, Ulrich compares the possession of the latter with that of a bank account, mysticism with kickboxing and morals with a system of individual tricks. The satirist reveals the contrast between the way most people speak about identity, passionately claiming that they have an intuitive knowledge of their soul and that they're elevating it, with the way they really behave: replacing generosity with personal accumulation of wealth, mystic ecstasy with the sportive loss of consciousness and the universal laws of morals with personal arrangements that follow one's own interests.

The aim of the satiric text is not to replace identity (considered as similarity) with something more believable, but to reveal our fondness of representing an interior space that has to be filled and the conviction that we can bring together all our objective determinations in order to elaborate a self-knowledge. The fact is not that some ideas are particularly valuable, but that we consider as eminent thoughts that would be ridiculous or uninteresting if they were not accompanied with so much respect. So satire asks the question: why do we give so much respect to any thought connected with things we consider as 'Great'? What determines the fact that we consider a particular kind of things as 'Great'? Many of these things are metaphysical: God, the Soul, the Heart, Duty, and so on. I think that there is a tendency to use metaphysical concepts as if they were ordinary notions or scientific concepts, but without enough precision. The fact that these ideas are metaphysical seems to *excuse* people from dealing with these ideas more accurately. If I do believe that I must do my duty, it does not tell me concretely how I should live. If I believe that I possess a soul which is unique and distinguishes me from other individuals, it does not tell me who I am. And the consequence of this vagueness in our use of these notions finally is, according to Musil, an indifference to our identity and our behaviors; why should I be this rather than that? Why should I do this rather than that? The lack of precision in our conception of identity leads to a lack of motivation in our actions.

I read the symptom of the 'lack of inner substance' as a sign that one should not feel concerned by what happens to oneself, or to another. It expresses the impossibility to give a personal meaning to things or statements. In front of too general and abstract things, we tend to lose our personal connection with them and to adopt a mere conformist attitude. Ulrich, the main character of the novel, experiences this lack of inner substance himself in the first volume: he feels unfamiliar to himself! Since his character disappears in the flow of general properties, he's no longer able to grasp his own identity and he cannot find a sufficient reason, for instance,

to help the murderer Moosbrugger rather than condemn him. He has lost the motivation to act. One can understand a moral statement in a certain way, because it is said or written in one's language and one can identify the words, the structure of the complete statement and so on. But the statement has no resonance for them; it does not arouse anything in them. We should therefore wonder what understanding a statement means. If it merely means that we recognise the language, that we can develop an answer, is it sufficient? Certainly not. When we talk about understanding a statement, especially in ethics, we mean something different, something that supposes a recognition that is close to complicity; an ability to say 'Yes! That is exactly what it is! I know what you mean, I experienced it!' What is at stake is our life, and we feel concerned because it is our business.

2. Singularity, attitude, self-estimation

I now propose to compare Ulrich's adventures with the following remark extracted from the conversations between Wittgenstein and Bouwsma: 'No account of himself can stand before his own attitude towards it. He is at the end without any character at all, as far as his own estimate or inspection is concerned.'⁶ This remark is a reminder of the distinction between knowledge, especially self-knowledge, and attitude. In fact, the first volume of Musil's novel tells Ulrich's experiment of the impossibility of a self-knowledge. This impossibility is linked to the fact that one's life is not a phenomenon, that there is something extra-factual in our identity. We cannot describe who we are with concepts. First, we are not imprisoned by a constant unchanging character. The fiction of the character comes up against the experiment of introspection. The analysis of the properties which constitute a character reveals the non-coincidence between someone and their own character. There is a rip in identity and a kind of split between the subject of enunciation and the person who should be described by a list of properties. Ulrich's own evolution during the novel enlightens this point: he was a kind of modern cynic trying to live according to a certain abstention, since he was unable to motivate any choice. But from the meeting of his sister Agathe, he becomes an activist, finding new motivations, even if they are not rational, to leave with Agathe to the sea and to help Moosbrugger escape from his asylum. Nevertheless, there is a kind of continuity in his experiences, which is the will not to remain imprisoned by a fixed character. In the second part of the volume, he is often confronted with the perplexity of the members of the group 'Parallel

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, O.K. Bouwsma, *Conversations 1949-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), p. 70.

Action'. They continue to see him as a cynic mathematician, indifferent, passive and sometimes cruel. But it is no more the case.

The conception of the identity-similarity presupposes that our personality should be described as a phenomenon, by identifying regularities and constant features. It is a static conception of identity which appears as a state, or a fact: the observable fact 'to be someone'. Therefore Ulrich, as a scientist, is peculiarly attentive to facts and his attention is also linked to an epistemological requirement of the adjustment of statements to facts. This is probably a resurgence of Mach's principle of economy, since we know that the young Musil studied philosophy at the university and wrote his PhD dissertation, a criticism of Mach's theory, with Carl Stumpf. The demand of precision is important in the quest of identity: the description of identity should be scientific and as exact as a physical description. Ulrich is clearly motivated by a strong desire of objectivity and he would like to know himself with perfect objectivity in order to find the concept of himself. But he is disappointed because his choice of following a general point of view in every case, of living in an impersonal and indifferent way is not satisfying. His lack of satisfaction comes from his lack of inner unity and motivation. He finally envies the murderer Moosbrugger because he possesses something Ulrich needs: purposes, motivations, and concerns.

Ulrich's voice entails a distance between the object of the description and the subject of enunciation. But what happens when the subject and the object are the same? Is it possible to conceive an objective description of someone's identity? In a way, this description is possible, and we can find such descriptions of the individuals in literature. The author or an omniscient narrator presents the other characters and has an external point of view which grasps the others. Think about *Mme Bovary*. Externality secures objectivity, but the problem is that, in our personal case, we are not satisfied by such a description which conveys again an identity-similarity. The determinations or the self-determinations of a character are not sufficient to give the feeling that her identity has been surrounded. We need something more in order to grasp our identity: a description of the 'internal' world.

Hence, Ulrich's self-observation and criticism leads him to eliminate all his properties, since he cannot decide why he should be rather this or that. When he tries to report who he is, he's always disappointed, because his properties don't have the element of necessity that he's looking for. There is no necessary reason to be a soldier rather than a mathematician, to be sweet than to be rough, to act according to the law or to be a criminal. In his attempt to elaborate a self-knowledge, Ulrich eventually discovers the Principle of Insufficient Reason. Whereas

scientific laws rely on necessary reasons, so that when we throw an object in our world, it must fall on the earth, there is nothing necessary in our singular constitution. In other words, Ulrich discovers that our identity is neither a fact, nor a phenomenon, and that he cannot grasp it by choosing the right properties, the right attributes.

Here are also the limits of Mach's inheritance: the principle of economy does not apply to the Self, and it is not possible to build a description of ourselves which fits with who we are. In fact, according to Mach, science should be considered as a 'question of minimum',⁷ and should aim at describing the facts with the least expenditure of intellectual energy. The scientific language is economic since it consists in direct descriptions of facts, in 'a purely conceptual apprehension of the facts which contain nothing more unessential.'⁸ The principle of economy is a demand of exactitude and correspondence to the facts, so that each of our statements should get rid of what is unproved. The unessential elements are those which are not guaranteed by experiment and observation. But if psychology is devoted to such an economic description of the 'non-ratioïd', Musil wants to take account of these unessential elements. There is an inversion between the two fields of the ratioïd and the non-ratioïd: what is insignificant in the first one becomes the most important in the second one. The conceptual description won't grasp these elements, but analogy will.

Ulrich's attempt to describe himself cannot resist the introspective attitude. When he wonders who he is, he cannot be satisfied with an objective description of his properties. Here I shall make two remarks, first on the importance of self-estimation, then on the dissociation between the factual features of a character and the description of interiority. In fact, self-estimation has nothing to do with self-knowledge; on the contrary, estimation entails the idea of an evaluation, which tackles the traditional dichotomy of facts and values. This dichotomy claims that there are two aspects in our statements: a factual one, which is behind controversy, and an evaluative one, which is neither true nor false and cannot lead to a universal agreement.⁹ The phantasm of self-knowledge is directly connected to this dichotomy, since in Ulrich's mind, it refers to a purely factual knowledge and therefore, it involves the reduction of identity to a group of facts. The demand of objectivity becomes the objectivation of the person. Everyone should be summarised in a sum of determinations and external events. Here is the 'lack of inner

⁷ Ernst Mach, *La Mécanique, exposé historique et critique de son développement*, translated by E. Bertrand (Paris: Librairie scientifique Hermann, 1904), p. 457; cited in Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach*, Etude Préface 'Musil, lecteur de Mach', P.-L. Assoun (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 27.

⁸ Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach*, p. 90.

⁹ For a criticism of this dichotomy, see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

substance'. In fact, if our personal identity and actions have no values for us, if we are not able to judge them, how could we escape to Ulrich's first indifference? Contemporary epistemology showed that even sciences involved a part of evaluation, linked to the common preference for one or another theory. It is even more so the case for our relationship to ourselves. So, the description of our identity implies both factual features and evaluative contents.

I think that this lack of inner substance emerges from the absence of a personal point of view and self-estimation. This point of view is not an epistemic one: there is a relationship to the self which precedes the epistemic requirement. The failure of the identity-similarity reveals this pre-epistemic attitude to oneself. Ulrich is not short of knowledge but he experiments that the grasp of his identity implies a pre-epistemic attitude. At the end of the first volume, the turning chapter describes Ulrich's change of attitude from a general objective point of view to a peculiar and personal one which includes all his feelings and internal emotions. A previous chapter already presented this distinction: the general point of view considers that every event and every action receive its meaning from its place in the causal chain of phenomena. This point of view is described as 'a challenge to one's intellectual power', and I suggest that it corresponds to the 'epistemic attitude', the demand of knowledge. In the thirty-ninth chapter, the narrator describes this point of view as 'a self-examination', and later, he's saying that the difference between the man who feels as a stranger to his own identity and properties and the man who experienced his determinations and has a personal relationship to himself is 'only a difference in attitude', a difference in 'the degree to which one saw one's life as a general manifestation or an individual one.'¹⁰

This leads me to my second observation: the change of attitude is linked to the discovery of the duality of the subject. I said that the conception of identity-similarity succeeded in understanding the factual aspect of a person, but was blind to their singularity. The concept of singularity is very difficult and romantic, since it might convey esoteric references to intuition and interiority. Now, the attempt to grasp singularity entails the risk to succumb again to the metaphysical temptation and to create a 'Great' idea of singularity or a mythic interiority. In order to avoid this risk, let's come back to the novel itself; as a reader, I can experience the discovery of singularity. Indeed, even if Ulrich's properties disappear, even if his identity-similarity breaks up, I can nevertheless recognise him since I keep hearing his voice, the expression of his point of view. If the subject is not reduced to a mysterious silent subjectivity, I can recognise him without knowing him. Even if I cannot describe him with the right

¹⁰ Musil, *Ibid.*, p. 157.

properties, and give an objective report on Ulrich because he changes during the novel, I can follow his word. His singularity, his personal attitude is given in his speeches. Ulrich experiences the difficulty to express his singularity, but this singularity is already present in the existence of the subject of enunciation, more precisely, of his voice and words. As far as Ulrich speaks or thinks, as far as I can read his words, I can recognise him.

Singularity should not mean something substantial, and neither a mysterious and unchanging nucleus or interiority in everyone. Singularity seems rather to be a point of view, the personal attitude to the world which entails that I'm concerned by what happens to me and what I am doing. It is more an ethical attitude since we do not need reasons to deal with the others and the world this or that way, we simply do it, for instance with a subjective conviction, or merely without being convinced at all. As Musil said, it refers to the fact that I can perceive the same event as a suffering, or an insult, or in a sporting sense, as an obstacle, and so on. The investigation into singularity requires this change of attitude and the novel relates this change, since in the second volume, Ulrich will focus on his experiment and concentrate on the question 'How to live?' Then, the quest of his singularity will be mediated by the meeting with his sister, and this event opens to a dialogical approach that should be commented on.

3. Sacred conversations and analogies

Ulrich's indifference towards who he is or how to behave ends with the meeting of his sister Agathe. I think that it is not a complete breaking, as Ulrich had always been crossed by contradictory aspirations; on the one hand, as a man of his time, he followed the excessive positivism which considers everything with the curiosity and sometimes the cruelty of the scientist, wishing to get rid of what he called 'the waste of feelings', applying the principle of economy in the organization of the concepts as in his way of life. On the other hand, Ulrich had always been skeptical to this 'positivist' attitude and his satirical remarks about the scientists, who are so precise in their restrained technical field but unable to deal with essential, i.e. ethical questions, prove that from the beginning he was very sensitive to moral issues and unsatisfied by the contemporary response.

I propose to distinguish two aspects in Ulrich's attitude: the first one is a reaction to an unbearable irrationalism becoming more and more seductive in the beginning of the 20th century. Does Musil have a premonition about the European tragedy to come? It is sure then that he couldn't bear fallacious uses of language, especially Spengler's analogies, and that he was extremely wary of the resort to intuition without precision and the lack of exactitude in the new irrationalism of the 'philosophy of life'. That's why he peculiarly recommends writers to

be as precise in literature and philosophy as mathematicians in mathematics. Even if moral issues do not belong to the purely rational field as far as they involve feelings and emotions, it is not sufficient to abandon reason and leave morals to subjectivism. That's why Ulrich seems to take part in the pervading positivism, for instance when he wishes scientists to have mystical experiences so that mystical reports might be more precise. Ulrich never abandons the demand for rationality and exactitude. Hence, Musil reproaches contemporary writer's expression of 'mere impulses', who 'give rise only to vague thoughts and vague mind's shakings.'¹¹

Therefore, we must understand Musil's resort to analogy as a way to express as precisely as possible non-conceptual contents. That is the second aspect of Ulrich's attitude, which doesn't find sufficient expression in the first volume but can finally arise through the conversations with Agathe. It corresponds to what Musil already theorised in his essays, for instance in *Elements for a new aesthetics*, when he distinguishes two states which characterise the human condition: the normal one and the 'other' one. The normal state refers to a kind of positivism, based on interest, entertainment, measure, efficiency, power, domination and nihilism. In this case, reason is the instrument of an aggressive human domination of the natural world and of other human beings. It is also submitted to a technical purpose and the idea of the progression of humanity. On the contrary, the other state is exceptional, and refers to love, feelings, contemplation and mysticism, involving a refusal of the world and a scorn of power. I suggest that Ulrich's scepticism was not an expression of nihilism but of scorn for the race towards power and profit. Ulrich does not discover the possibility of another state at the end of the first volume, but he realises that he needs someone else to achieve it.

Therefore, Agathe's role is directly linked to this 'other state'. In fact, the change of attitude, from indifference and abstention to the 'other state', supposes a dialogical approach and moral imagination. This aspect is very important since the experience of the 'other state' is the only one which is able to grasp singularity and give ethical orientations, and since analogies are the only way to express statements about singularity. As Musil wrote in his essay entitled *Mind and Experience*: 'The rigid concept is replaced by the breathing representation, equation by analogy, truth by probability: the fundamental structure is no more systematic, but creative.'¹²

In fact, there are two major ways of expression: concepts and analogies. Musil's argumentation relies on the hypothesis that there is a non-conceptual content which cannot be

¹¹ Robert Musil, 'Mind and Experience', *Essays*. My translation.

¹² Robert Musil, 'Mind and Experience', *Essays*. My translation.

grasped through scientific experiments and logical categories, and which corresponds, as far as I am concerned, to what Aristotle called the field of probability. In fact, Aristotle distinguished between the field of exactitude, which is explored successfully by natural sciences and mathematics, and the field of probability, which is characterised by different degrees of certainty, and is investigated by dialectic. Musil seems to inherit this concept and defends the distinction between a 'ratioïd' and a non 'ratioïd' area and, as a result, between two means of expression: concept and analogy. Analogy has to find as much precision as possible in the second field in order to express probable thoughts.

In order to answer both fundamental issues which are linked: 'Who am I?' and 'How to live?' Musil follows this distinction between two states and suggests that the other state is the only way to become aware of our singularity, since it involves self-estimation. It is a personal experience through which anyone can find a personal meaning for his relationship to the world and to other people, what Musil calls 'the personal point of view', and through which anyone feels concerned about what happens to him and to other people. The normal state works as a normalization of our behaviours and therefore, of our identity, i.e. we are characterised by general features and properties so that we become transparent and with a stable character which should explain why we act such or such a way. The 'other state' tries to catch our attention to particular experiments, to singularity and subjectivity. In my opinion, Musil's originality relies, on the one hand, in the demand of precision in order to describe this subjective world and the role of subjectivity in moral life and, on the other hand, in the resort to analogy in order to describe singularity.

We can find such an example of Musil's use of analogy in the 12th chapter of the second volume, 'Sacred conversations'. I shall refer to the famous example of the vision of the cattle, when Ulrich tries to describe how the aesthetic experience of the 'other state' leads to a new attention to the world, which is paradoxically purged of any selfish element and included in subjectivity, taking part in interiority. The picturesque vision of the cattle is interrupted as if a curtain has torn, and is replaced by an 'emotional swaying', as if 'everything has lost its limits and has become part of you.'¹³ There is no scientific description of these experiences since they are not externally or physically observable. Analogy is devoted to describing internal, intimate and emotional experience.

That's why Agathe's presence is needed. In fact, analogy increases moral imagination so that the individual is able to take his subjective experience into account and to elaborate ethical

¹³ Robert Musil, *L'Homme sans qualités*, t. II, p. 117. My translation.

orientation in particular contexts. In other words, singularity is linked to moral communication: the ability to express what we feel involves a pre-epistemic relation to ourselves and a bond to others, in order to share our experiment and also to show who we are. The narrative should not offer an objective description of our identity, but it should give an idea of our attitude to the world through the use of analogy. It may be an attempt to be understood by others, and in this sense the understanding is not a kind of knowledge, but requires a capacity of empathy. The resort to analogy provides an image of who we are, of the way we are trying to live, and not an anatomic report of ourselves.

We could wonder why the analogical use of language develops only in the dialogical configuration. I shall finish on this point, suggesting four elements. First, I think that the meeting with Agathe awakens Ulrich's forgotten feelings. He never had such intimacy with anyone since his romantic passion with the chief warrant officer's wife. If we are surprised by Ulrich's distance towards his mistresses, like Leone, we can be all the more astonished by the immediate proximity with Agathe. Blood relationship allows this intimacy and spares many social constraints, so that the scene of the meeting is fascinating: Ulrich and his sister are both dressed in Harlequin-style clothes and they appear as twins, each of them regarding the other as their own double. The world of feelings is vivid again, and it changes Ulrich's perceptions. I would like to refer to Iris Murdoch's concept of attention: in fact, Ulrich seems to experience the passage from an egoist point of view, blind to otherness and to the world and to an open, altruistic point of view. Paradoxically he's more able to care about his own feelings, the world and others, than when he was only paying attention to his interests and to facts. He abandons self-interest for love and this loss opens to a new perception of his own subjectivity. Listening to his feelings, he tries to behave differently. The discovery of singularity through the attention to feelings breaks Ulrich's indifference and leads to another way to behave, based on the agreement of perception, feelings and reason.

The second point is the will to avoid the confusion of the feelings by expressing them as precisely as possible. And this is the task of analogy: it has to create a vivid image of our feelings, of thoughts which have not the same degree of certainty as in sciences. If our moral statements, for instance, are merely personal and probable opinions, nevertheless they have to be clear and justified. In fact, Musil mistrusts people who behave irrationally and claim that they do it according to their feelings. It leads to irrationalism and relativism. He is convinced that even the expression of our feelings can be regulated by reason, and I suggest that this point of view is close to the Aristotelian idea of practical reason. The constraint of communication

involves clarity and precision: if I want to express my feelings, I am compelled to deal with language, words and it should bring some clarity to the internal confusion. In order to be understood by the other one, I have to make an effort of clarification.

That's why moral communication is so important: it allows Ulrich and Agathe to share their feelings and their experiences and to give one another particular examples of behavior in concrete situations. For instance, Ulrich refers to his relationship with the chief warrant officer's wife in order to warn his sister about passionate love and its consequences and Agathe refers to her first marriage in order to arouse moral imagination and to reflect on happiness. These conversations induce empathy and appear as moral experiences themselves. The mere act of speaking with each other involves a use of imagination and increases our own experience, our number of examples of particular actions and possibilities in particular contexts. The dialogical approach brings ethical 'solutions'.

These four elements: attention of a high quality, precise analogical expressions of feelings, conversation as an exchange of particular examples of behaviours and ethical solutions, and conversation as a moral experience involving empathy, all justify Musil's approach and his resort to analogy. The quest of identity leads to ethical concerns, since attention to singularity through awareness of feelings brings new motivations to act and suppresses indifference. In this perspective, the presence of the other is not only the condition of empathic experiment, but also the guarantee of a clarification of subjective thoughts and of a high precision in the description of the emotional sphere.

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