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CONTEMPLATION AND LEADERSHIP
Stewardship in the Millennium

Striking for the gentle, striking for the kind
Striking for the guardians and protectors of the mind
An 'the unpawned painter behind beyond his rightful time
An 'we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing
Bob Dylan,
Chimes of Freedom

Nietzsche, I suppose, meant to shock a herd-like humanity out of somnambulance when he stridently pronounced the death of God toward the end of the 19th century. Hyperbole, it may be noted, was one of the philosopher's strong suits. But Nietzsche's truer message to those within hearing distance was that we up-and-coming mortals could do better—both in our conceptions of divinity and in becoming more nearly our higher selves. There are deities (and, no doubt, daemons) within us that the architects of platforms and systems, be they political or religious, tend not to sufficiently fathom or see. Integrating myriad inward elements while embracing the radical complexities without, we might plausibly improve both our selves and conjoined mortal lot. As we take stock of where we and the world precariously stand, it is imperative that we try.

"I would only believe in a god who could dance," proclaims Nietzsche's mouthpiece Zarathustra, the Persian prophet's moral Manichaeism now turned irrevocably on its head. Nietzsche was justly proud of having embedded his essential philosophy in a fictional work; an affinity with the arts is not extracurricular. He published, at times at his own expense, the four parts comprising *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in installments; only a few paltry copies were initially sold. *I will be born posthumously*," the philosopher wrote; he seemed to know his work would transcend the challenges of fashion and compromised understandings. Innumerable 20th century writers and artist-types eventually took up a nexus of intertwining paths forward that Nietzsche had been one of the first to traverse.

Into the millennium

One of the more remarkable novels in this regard must surely have been Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil was among the legion literary misfits and geniuses

to fall under Nietzsche's vast spell during the dawning years of the 20th century. His uncompleted masterpiece, set in the twelve months preceding the outbreak of the First World War, was written, he wrote, in order "to provide help in understanding and coming to terms with the world"—an attempt at "dissolving the existing world and pointing toward a new synthesis of elements and ethics." Unlike the vast majority of his contemporaries, Musil understood that sleepwalking one's way toward apocalypse was not a viable option.

Ulrich, Musil's alter-ego and protagonist, a highly intelligent man at the very top of his game, switches gears abruptly one day in order to declare a sort of moratorium on life—an unlikely urban analogue, we may say, of Thoreau's retreat to Walden some years before. Ulrich, like the New England transcendentalist, is more contemplative than defeatist in his self-declared "Urlaub vom Leben," an indeterminate "leave from life." He is haunted by a "sense of possibilities" and seeks a "dynamic morality," a striving for awareness through a union of dialectical perspectives and aspects. He rejects the modern-day ethos with its predilection for diametrical extremes along with an equally offensive dalliance with eclecticism, a "mania for cutting things down to size." "We have gained reality," muses the man without qualities, "and lost dream."

Amid the reigning banalities and surfeit of prosaic ideals, Ulrich's personal quest for integrity becomes, simultaneously, an attempt at thinking through the modern world's abiding malaise. It is some sort of merging of precision and soul that is needed, as Musil finds himself contemplating an approach to self and planetary awareness he calls "essayism":

It was more or less the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept—that he believed he could most rightly survey and handle the world and his own life. The value of an action or a quality, and indeed its meaning and nature, seemed to him to depend on its surrounding circumstances, on the aims it served; in short, on the whole—constituted now one way, now another—to which it belonged . . . Ulrich regarded morality as it is commonly understood as nothing more than the senile form of a system of energies that cannot be confused with what it originally was without losing ethical force.

Ulrich's "essayism" evokes "a possible person," "a possible image of the world"—a free-spirited yet circumspect merging of disparate elements beyond schema or sterility and unbounded flights of fancy as well. The romantic's retreat from intellect in the service of the hyper-inflated soul can only compound the disturbance. Rather, Ulrich envisions a morality grounded in presence, one premised upon a delicate art of integration encompassing both self and the world and honoring the moment at hand. Life cannot be deduced all at once, pinned down for all time, or otherwise set in concrete or stone. How to contend with "the uninterrupted onslaught of experience," giving expression to the loftiest aspects of human endeavor while remaining faithful to the earth?

Der andere Zustand

So much of Musil's great novel has to do with an inquiry into what he calls "der andere Zustand," or the "Other Condition"—a state of being in which the dividing lines between self, other, and world are less distinct than is ordinarily the case. Here one encounters the non-rational aspects of nature and consciousness to be found, for example, in music, mysticism, eros, and art. "Whereas normally the self masters the world, in the Other Condition the world flows into the self, or mingles with it or bears it, and the like." We apprehend the prospect of an individual who rises, perhaps only slightly, above "the transactions of the world," proceeding with newfound dexterity and grace. Such a possibility unfolds, as Musil had said of the poet Rilke, without "leaning up against the wall of some ideology, humanity, or world experience," without "support or hold from any side as something left over, free and hovering." "You take thinking too seriously," Ulrich tells a colleague. Have you heard the final recordings of Holiday or Coltrane or Johnny Cash? This, I think, is what Ulrich meant to convey.

Musil advocates, essentially, on behalf of a Buddhistic 'middle way' updated. perhaps, for radically complex times. The novelist clearly discerned as he wrote his masterwork that Europe was heading toward disaster for the second time in less than a quarter century. He was painfully aware of the emotional disturbances that lurked beneath the banners of nationalism and unrestrained sentimentality as well. Something new would be requisite and character was inextricably involved.

In Part II of Musil's novel, "Pseudoreality Prevails," the narrator inveighs against moral platitudes while considering ethics not as "a set of rigid commandments but rather as

a mobile equilibrium that at every moment requires continual efforts toward renewal.” As Ulrich recoils from what he calls the “utopia of precision,” so he rejects the panegyrics of the romantic, “unfocused” type who would create a cult of the soul. He muses wisely: “Morality is imagination . . . and . . . imagination is not arbitrary. Once the imagination is left to caprice, there is a price to pay.” Asked by his cousin Diotima what he would do if he were to rule the world for a day, Ulrich responds cryptically, ironically: “I would probably be forced abolish reality!” It would, Ulrich implies, by no means be an easy assignment.

Pseudoreality prevails

Tolling for the searching ones, on their speechless, seeking trail
For the lonesome-hearted lovers with too personal a tale
An 'for each unharmful, gentle soul misplaced inside a jail
An 'we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing
Bob Dylan,
Chimes of Freedom

There is a criminal in Musil's great novel. His name is Moosbrugger and he has murdered a prostitute. The trial becomes something of a cause célèbre amid the backdrop of the frantic daily round of Viennese life. Many are held captive by trial proceedings that become increasingly byzantine as they unfold. Ulrich finds himself drawn to the case and begins to feel a strange identification with the itinerant laborer whose behavior, certainly bizarre, seems no more aberrant or unthinkable than that of anyone else that the man without qualities meets or observes. Ulrich's Nietzsche-immersed and genius-obsessed friend Clarisse, disappointed that her husband Walter will never become the great man she had once longed for, turns her own thoughts increasingly to Moosbrugger. And, to be sure, the madman's crime is by no means the cold-hearted, calculated act that the prosecutors and newspapers claim. “Something must be done for Moosbrugger,” Clarisse implores at last; “This murderer is musical!”

There can be no doubt that Moosbrugger thinks and lives in a way that is outside the confines of society. Yet to claim that he is materially less sane than anyone else or that his actions can be reduced to neat diagnosis or linear analysis is a step Ulrich is unwilling to make. Moosbrugger, a troubled man who uses “all his enormous strength to hold the

world together,” becomes for Musil yet another device with which to contemplate the wayward nature of modernity and mind, morality and merit, no less than an illustration of the price one must pay for living outside established confines and codes.

The psychiatrists are called in, predictably, to exhibit their prowess and render opinions. Yet none seems able to apprehend the mind of the murderer with anywhere near the acuity or depth of the engineer-turned-author who is telling his story to begin with! Each is careful not to overstep professional protocols and bounds or otherwise risk vulnerability or exposure. And each, in the end, really misses the mark, fails to realize, for example, that Moosbrugger’s reflections about not “singling out” because “things hang together” are of a piece with avant-garde philosophy and science that, even now, do not sufficiently inform our approaches to psychology or mind and what has been called, too self-assuredly, the code of the soul. There are depths within Moosbrugger that the experts cannot plumb, impulses and narratives that counterpose the globe’s preoccupation with propriety and the New, its mania for classifications, compartments, standards, and rules. “If mankind could dream collectively,” reflects Ulrich, “it would dream Moosbrugger.”

Let us cultivate our garden

The German psychiatrist/philosopher Karl Jaspers writes perceptively about the indispensable place of the misfit:

The very root of philosophizing is seen in children and in the mental ill. Sometimes it is . . . as if the fetters of general illusions were loosed and the individual were seized by truth. At the onset of some mental illnesses a person is shaken by metaphysical revelations . . . anyone looking on is overwhelmed by the impression that here a kind of covering under which we normally live out our lives . . . is being taken away. There is a profound meaning in the words ‘Children and fools speak the truth.’

By the end of Musil’s never-ending novel, Ulrich retreats increasingly from the machinations of world into the simple beauty of his garden and a rediscovered kinship with his sister Agatha as the two move their lawn chairs about during the course of a summer afternoon in concert with the sky path of the sun. It is as if the man without qualities, unable to impress his message upon those who wield power, has found meaning closer to home and

become a follower of natural rhythms, trajectory, and the Tao. ("All that is very well," concludes Voltaire's *Candide* in the end, "but let us cultivate our garden." In the final diary entry before his death, Musil jots down a note to himself to inquire further into Sufism and Lao-tzu.) Alternatively, unpublished later fragments of the novel suggest a more emphatic reengagement with human affairs as Ulrich reconsiders his leave from life and returns to the world. There can be no true morality, narrator and protagonist now concur, without engagement.

Into the millennium again

Tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed
For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an 'worse
An 'for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe
An 'we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing

Bob Dylan,
Chimes of Freedom

Leadership as I imagine it would be typified by especial feeling for life at extreme limits. A simpatico with the strung out and frankly dispossessed—something Dylan intuited early on. Attunement to the subtle tensions and concordances between breakdown and revelation, as William James and Anne Sexton (who professed to loving faith while possessing none of it and whose unlikely muse later in life was a monk with whom she shared a moving epistolary relationship) insisted. Think about Martin Luther King in Memphis on the eve of his death—authentic stewardship that rises above the agony of being to achieve a visage of uncommon luminosity, courage, dignity, and grace. By way of contrast, the acculturated woman or man inhabiting conventional political hallways seems wayward and effete.

Guides toward our collective future ought strive to remain, at least for moments during the course of their busy days, as open-hearted as a Dylan anthem. Compassion and toleration, vision and focus of purpose emerging out of darkened nights of the soul—these are some of the qualities for which I mean especially to be lobbying. Obeisant, ongoing dialogues with self and others, world and cosmos that, finding no fixed abode, return from regular forays into that "other condition" with renewed insight, humility, and ontologically-derived energies that might allow our (too often self-) anointed leaders to more reverently keep their appointments while mindfully doing their things.

"These are moral and spiritual issues," observes Cornel West in skeptical commentary upon the recent Democratic National Convention, "—not tribal, not just about identity and group politics." Like Musil, West points to the abiding places of imagination and care in invoking matters of spirit or "geist": "By spirituality . . . I mean . . . the use of empathy and imagination to envision another future, a better future." Musil encapsulates: "Instead of the rigid concept comes the pulsing representation, instead of equations come analogies, instead of truth probability, the essential structure is no longer systematic but creative!"

Personally, I am, a bit like Ulrich, given increasingly to honoring my "private station" in life, the more so as I age. Still, I feel a simpatico with Musil's notions concerning the "Dichter"—the creative writer or poet who concerns herself with more than notoriety or fashion, dealing, rather, in the realms of contemplative and, at unforeseen moments, visionary insights and ideas. "The 'Dichter'," observes Philip Payne, is "not only Apollo, lighting the world with the critical sun of intellect, but Dionysos, caught up in unadulterated, un-self-conscious feeling." An ongoing balancing of "ratioid," or rational, with "nicht-ratioid," or non-rational, aspects of existence. We recall Robert Kennedy spontaneously quoting Aeschylus on suffering and wisdom as he receives word of King's murder in the midst of a campaign speech of his own: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

This, it seems to me, is leadership, indeed. As Nietzsche put it directly, "I can only remind you; more I cannot do."

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