CHAPTER 1

Life and Career

In this chapter I hope to present a short biographical guide that will allow the reader to enter directly into Musil’s published work. Biography can be only the beginning of understanding a writer’s work, and my interpretations of Musil’s work also depend on placing his life into a meaningful historical context. I will draw on his biography when it seems useful for interpretation, but my thesis in this and subsequent chapters is that Musil’s work can best be understood by situating his life in the history of the culture and the literature from which the works derive. Musil’s works are reactions to the major events in the history of Europe that he personally experienced, which is to say, the First World War, the decline and fall of the Austrian empire, the advent of fascism, and, more generally, the all-embracing development of modernity. This historical framework is present, implicitly and explicitly, throughout this study of Musil’s fiction, plays, and essays.

Musil was a writer’s writer, who drew widely on the history of European culture in his quest to create meaning in his fictional works and essays. He self-consciously saw himself as a writer who might help to give new direction to European culture at a time of permanent unresolved crisis. Musil’s recurrent stance was to view the history of European culture without nostalgia as he experimented with ways by which that culture might be inflected in new directions. His works are thus intentionally complex in the way they interact with the increasingly catastrophic historical context in which he found himself. If most modernists were self-conscious about the cultural inheritance that determined their work, few were as self-conscious as Musil of being immersed in a history that they wanted to transform.

Robert Musil was born in peaceful times, on November 6, 1880, in the city of Klagenfurt in southern Austria in the province of Carinthia. He grew up knowing the bourgeois prosperity of a German-language family living in what was one of the major European powers, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Alfred, was an engineer, and his mother, Hermine, née Bergauer, came from a bourgeois family. In 1881 his family moved to Komotau in Bohemia, then a year later to Steyr in Upper Austria, where Alfred took a position as
director of a technical school. Apparently Musil’s mother and father began in Komotau a ménage à trois that existed throughout Musil’s childhood; Hermine began a relation with another engineer, who moved in with the family. This arrangement continued even after the family moved in 1891 to Brünn in Moravia, when Musil was eleven, after his father took a position as a professor at the Deutsche Technische Hochschule, the equivalent of a university for science and engineering. The ambiguities about eroticism that play a significant role in Musil’s work may well have found a first source in his early family life.

The fact that Komotau and Brünn, now Brno, are both in today’s Czech Republic underscores that Musil was born into a multicultural and multilingual empire. To be sure, the German-speaking aristocracy and middle class held most of the key positions of power and authority in that part of the empire not reserved for Hungary. Shaken by the nationalist uprisings of 1848, and by its defeat by the new German Reich in 1866, Austria at the time of Musil’s birth was still the center of power in an amalgamation of states and ethnic groups that, as an empire, was one of the last major repositories of traditional aristocratic and military values in Europe. In spite of the rise of a liberal middle class after 1848, aristocratic absolutism was the ideological glue that held this doddering empire together, and perhaps even more so as the nineteenth century came to an end. It was an antiquated state in which a German professor’s son such as Robert Musil might consider a career as a military officer to be a crowning achievement—before deciding to become an engineer by studying at the university at which his father held a professorship. Austria was, moreover, an empire in which a professor such as Musil’s father could be ennobled for his service. Military and aristocratic values were of supreme significance in the empire, even though its capital, Vienna, was the home of avant-garde modernity.

Musil was trained to become a military officer. From 1892 to 1894 he was a student at a Militär-Unterrealschule in Eisenstadt and then from 1894 to 1897 at a Militär-Oberrealschule in Mährisch-Weisskirchen, the latter offering the equivalent of a secondary education at a military academy. The military academy provided him with the material he transformed into his first novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (*Young Törless*), published in 1906. His experience there first gave him insight into the kind of minds that kept the empire together, and moreover, it acquainted him, without his knowing it at the time, with those who would opt for fascism in a not-so-distant future. After study at these junior and senior military academies, the seventeen-year-old Musil spent a few fall months in 1897 in the Technische Militärakademie in Vienna. The course of study at this military school, leading to a military career,
was not to his taste, and he decided to return home to study engineering at Brünn in 1898.

Henceforth Musil would lead a life of intense and varied intellectual activity: preparing for engineering examinations; making his first attempts at writing; reading a wide range of authors, from Friedrich Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Knut Hamsun to Maurice Maeterlinck, Gabriele D’Annunzio, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky; and engaging in sports. This list suggests what a complex young man Musil was: at once initiated into military and aristocratic values but rejecting them as a way of life, he found himself drawn to technology, science, philosophy, and, above all, literature.

Completing his engineering examinations in 1901, Musil did military service from October of that year until September 1902. It was during this year of volunteer service that he began writing *Young Törless*. He then spent the academic year 1902–3 as a laboratory assistant in mechanical engineering at the Technical University of Stuttgart, or so Musil said in a curriculum vitae published in 1908.² By all accounts he was unhappy with the provincialism of Stuttgart; and in 1903 Musil left for Berlin to begin a doctorate in psychology at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University. This decision may seem rather surprising after his study of engineering. However, his graduate studies in Berlin were, by contemporary standards, as much in philosophy as in the study of psychology. Moreover, they also included secondary fields in physics and mathematics, fields for which his studies in Brünn had prepared him well. However, his scientific studies in Austria had not included Greek and Latin, and he was obliged to prepare for the German secondary school exit examination so as to be able to continue his studies in Berlin. He successfully passed the examination in June 1904, but the preparation, on top of his other studies, left him exhausted. As his diaries show, he retained an interest in classical studies that seems to have grown as he got older.

Musil was convinced throughout his life that no intellectual activity that did not take science into account could be relevant to the modern world. Yet he became a writer, not a scientist, though one bent on reconciling literature with science. With his professional training in the sciences, he was equipped to understand well the difficulty involved in relating science to humanistic learning. As his career unfolded, he became increasingly convinced that it was imperative to meld literature and ethics with science in order to create some kind of meaningful whole. As *The Man without Qualities* demonstrates, this became one the major goals of Musil’s writing. In retrospect it might thus appear that he had set out to educate himself precisely for this task. However, it would not be accurate to think that Musil was systematically as a young man
mastering the areas of expertise necessary to understand the relationships of science, morality, and art. Rather, his was an intense but tentative process of education in which he groped about and experimented continually to find the mix that might satisfy him while he worried at the same time about how he might earn a living.

In going to Berlin in 1903 Musil had decided to pursue his intellectual and creative goals by leaving the provincialism he found in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He wanted to pursue science and literature in what undoubtedly appeared to him to be the leading center of German modernity. Interestingly enough, most modern historians would probably accord this leading role to Vienna—but not Musil. He was far from embracing Austrian nationalism or from feeling any closeness to the parochialism he so well portrays in his fictional work and essays. However, after finishing his studies in Berlin, he found himself obliged by finances to return to Vienna in 1910. His father did not want to continue supporting Musil. Therefore, he took a position in a library that his father had arranged for him. One gets a sense of what his return to Vienna meant at the time to Musil from his diaries. Shortly after his return he described to himself his “opposition” to Austria. He writes that he walked among the people as if they were foreigners to him (TB 1:239). His distance from, and disdain for, Vienna—“Wittgenstein’s Vienna,” as it has been called in celebration of its creativity—is an aspect of Musil that one may find strange, at least until reading The Man without Qualities. The novel, which portrays a society hollow at the core, shows why he did not want to be considered an Austrian writer. He undoubtedly would have savored the paradox that, from our present viewpoint, he is one of the most important figures of a generation of intellectuals and writers, artists and scientists, who made Vienna a central place for the elaboration of modernity.

In 1906, still a student, Musil met his future wife, Martha Marcovaldi (who was at that time already married), and published his first novel, Young Törless. A little more than a year later after Törless’s publication, he handed in his dissertation, Beitrag zur Beurteilung der Lehren Machs (literally, “A Contribution to an Evaluation of Mach’s Doctrines”; translated as On Mach’s Theories). A reader accustomed to today’s academic specialization may be puzzled that Musil, studying psychology, should write a dissertation claiming to be a “contribution to a judgment of Mach’s theories.” Ernst Mach was a leading figure in the world of physics as well as the dominant positivist epistemologist in Europe at the time. However, his epistemology, as we will see, involves claims about the nature of the psyche, which meant Mach was also considered a serious theorist on psychology. In this regard I would suggest that academic fields
were not so narrowly regimented in the early twentieth century as is now the case. Musil moved from one field to another with relative ease, and thus recalls other Viennese intellectuals of the time. For example, after his study of engineering in Berlin and Manchester, Ludwig Wittgenstein turned to work in philosophy at Cambridge that also led him to investigations in psychology and mathematics; or, equally noteworthy, the Viennese physicist Erwin Schrödinger, after establishing wave mechanics as an alternative description for quantum mechanics, could later write *What Is Life?* (1944), one of the important books for the development of modern biology. Of course, this was hardly limited to Vienna: Carl Stumpf, who was the director of Musil’s dissertation in Berlin, was himself a philosopher-psychologist who worked on the physics of audition.

Stumpf apparently was not happy with Musil’s dissertation, and one may wonder why. Stumpf was no positivist, was quite critical of Mach, and, moreover, was instrumental in the founding of the school of Gestalt psychology that directly rejects Mach’s psychological impressionism, or the doctrine that the psyche consists only in a collection of sensations. As we will see in dealing with Musil’s thesis, Musil was critical of the basic axioms of Mach’s theory of the nature of knowledge. Perhaps Stumpf’s discontent was due to the fact that Musil was spending time writing a novel rather than a dissertation dealing with the research in perception for which Stumpf was famous.

Musil’s dissertation is in fact a cogent critique of Mach’s thought and of the dominant positivist doctrine that is at the heart of much scientific epistemology, then and now. The dissertation established him as an insightful philosophical thinker, and if Musil had pursued academic research, it would have opened the way to an academic career. This is not just a supposition, for in fact, after completing the dissertation, Musil was offered in early 1909 an academic position in Graz by Alexius Meinong, a leading philosopher-psychologist with an international reputation at the time—Bertrand Russell was among those who were influenced by him. However, nothing suggests that Musil ever really seriously considered entering the academic arena after finishing the dissertation. He was already busy writing short prose pieces and essays, sketching out plans for a novel, and writing some criticism and essays. The last category was partly a necessity; it provided some income for the young writer, who could not continue to depend upon his father for support.

Musil needed money, a constant problem in 1909 and for the rest of his life. Thus, to placate his father and to get a regular salary, he took a job as a librarian, an experience that, after three weeks, he described in his diaries as “Unerträglich, mörderisch”—“unbearable, murderous” (*TB* 1:236). To be
sure, the time spent as a librarian was an experience he would put to use, with vengeance, in the mordant satire in *The Man without Qualities* of libraries and of the modern organization of knowledge. Writing and frequent travel around central Europe took up the time when he was not working at the library. (Interestingly, at a time when many European writers were visiting every corner of the globe, Musil seems never to have desired to leave Europe.) During these years before the First World War Musil began to write and publish criticism as well as essays centered on politics, cultural criticism, and ethics. He also began planning a series of novels, all of which today appear to be preparatory sketches for what would eventually become *The Man without Qualities*. Musil’s essays are not sketches, however, and I will argue in subsequent chapters that, though not well known to nonspecialists, they are among some of the most significant political and philosophical writing of the time.

In 1911 he published his second volume of fiction, a collection of two stories, *Vereinigungen: Zwei Erzählungen* (literally, *Unions: Two Stories*, translated as part of the collection *Five Women*). In the same year he married Martha, who was divorced from her first husband. In 1913 he seems to have had a serious health crisis, the first in a series that Musil suffered in his life. Some of these illnesses may have been psychosomatic, for it is likely that he was at times on the brink of severe depression. Notably, he consulted the psychiatrist Dr. Otto Pötzl for what was called at the time severe cardiac neurosis (neurosis resulting in, if not due to, heart palpitations). The crisis in 1913 got him some much desired relief in the form of leave from the work he detested. Things seemed to be looking up when, in the catastrophic year of 1914, he got what might well have been an ideal position for him: a job as an editor in Berlin for the prestigious literary journal *Die Neue Rundschau*. However, the First World War broke out in August only a few months after he accepted this position. Musil soon found himself as the commanding officer of an infantry company on the Tyrolean front, where units of the Austro-Hungarian army faced Italian troops. Readers familiar with Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) will recall that this was a mountain front, characterized by fierce fighting and frequent artillery duels. He was not constantly involved in this combat, however. Illness compelled him to travel from the front, and in 1916 he met Max Brod and Franz Kafka in Prague. In the same year he was given a position editing an army journal, the *Tiroler Soldaten-Zeitung*. In 1918, a few months before the war’s end, he was assigned to work for a new military journal, *Heimat*, apparently conceived to work against subversive influences in the army such as the growing communist movement.
The Great War was a central experience in Musil’s life, as it was in the lives of millions of others. He experienced some of it on the front line, as an officer who seems to have accepted that he was defending at once the place of German culture in the world and an empire whose imperial dominion over a variety of ethnic groups was justified. After, and probably during, the war Musil recognized that the war had been an outburst of irrationality that defied understanding. However, immediately before the war he accepted, as did many German intellectuals, the belief that the war was justified as a defense, not just of the two German-language empires, but also of the very existence of German culture and, specifically, German values. His thinking was similar to notions held at the time by Thomas Mann, for example, as one sees in the essay Musil wrote for Die Neue Rundschau immediately after the declaration of war in 1914, “Europäertum, Krieg, Deutschum” (“Europeanness, War, Germaness”). In quirky lines published before leaving for the front, he claimed that the German-speaking world was surrounded by enemies, indeed that a conspiracy existed whose goal was to exterminate German culture. Facing this danger, Musil felt a “new feeling” born in him as a German (8:1021). With all the panache of a departing warrior, he went on to claim that fearlessness in the face of death had become a general condition. With this declaration the reader encounters something unique in Musil’s writing: an unthinking acceptance of the moment’s hysteria and a century’s growth of nationalism.

To say the least, the essay endorsing the war is testimony to the power of mass movements to activate in even the most critical thinkers a moment of blindness. Musil was to reflect on this experience at length, for his bellicose feelings were clearly a challenge to his own rationality. But he never questioned the need to do his duty on the Tyrolean front, which involved more than simple military duty. As editor of the army newspaper he was involved in work devoted, in part, to the task of eliminating irrendentism—the refusal of the largely Italian native populations to accept Austrian political dominance in the region. In short, throughout the war Musil remained largely and perhaps unquestioningly committed to the idea of an empire. From the viewpoint of today’s postcolonial mentality, his attitude may seem suspect. However, as we shall later see, Musil’s attitude was motivated largely by a belief that an empire better serves democratic values than did the nationalisms that, in fact, dictated the creation of new nation-states after the end of the war.

We can also anticipate The Man without Qualities and note that the novel is written from an ironic perspective presupposing the outbreak of the First World War and, with it, the undoing of all that Viennese society is doing to
preserve itself in 1913. The novel’s critical perspective is opposed to the enthusiastic acceptance of the war Musil expressed in 1914. His perspective on the war changed radically; as he later put it, enthusiasm for the war was like a sickness from which he later recovered. Musil’s enthusiasm for the war began to wane even as he experienced it. He recognized that patriotism can be a form of homicidal psychosis and that war can take on aspects of a religious experience. This latter idea was perhaps first revealed in a crucial experience Musil underwent during the war on the front lines. One can infer this from an anecdote, found in several posthumously published fragments (GW 7:751–59), that is also narrated in the published story “Die Amsel” (“The Blackbird”). In these different narratives Musil recounts that he, or his fictional double, was nearly hit by a falling air dart—a Fliegerpfeil—a sharp-pointed sliver of metal that was dropped from airplanes on the heads of the enemy below. The narrator of one of the fragments describes the ringing sound made by the dart’s approach to earth as the song of death. In his close call with the arrow and a perforated head, the narrator undergoes a kind of double negative epiphany in which the absence of God, in whom he does not believe, reveals itself. Paradoxically God is present as an absence in war. God’s absence is a constant motif in Musil’s writing. In the posthumous text under consideration, the narrator’s ironic meditation takes the shape of a final pirouette undermining the epiphany revealing God’s presence; at the end he muses with self-directed irony that he now has an idea he never had before: of God . . . or was it of astrology? Another text, “Der Gesang des Todes” (“The Song of Death”; also called “Der Singende Tod,” or “The Singing Death”), seems less ironic when the quasi-fictional narrator, notably an engineer who will become a painter, notes that before the war he was an unbeliever who saw life as a bit of sunshine between two dark holes (GW 7:757). War, however, dissolves his intelligence, like meat from a knucklebone (7:758), which meant that he came to discover, in war, something bordering on the religious.

This experience of the closeness of death led Musil to believe that war was not a metaphor for religion but rather a form of religious experience itself. Later, shortly after the war, in mulling over his experience he states this idea quite squarely in his diaries. He means that one may understand religious experience through war, not the other way around (TB 1:544). But Musil also compares enthusiasm for war to a form of mental disequilibrium. He does so in a passage in the diaries in which he describes the war’s beginning in Berlin. (The passage was probably written during the war, but the dating of diary passages is often uncertain.) As in the type of expressionist collage that painters such as George Grosz and Otto Dix created, in this diary passage he places in
rapid juxtaposition “deracinated intellectuals,” the possibility of an “inner enemy,” and the jam of people trying to get the latest special edition of the news, all this while a lunatic screams in the street. In this pandemonium, Musil suggests, psychotics are in their element (TB 1:298–99). Indeed, this may be his most telling judgment upon his own state of mind in 1914.

In spite of the fact that Musil came to question the very basis for the war and that he had always rejected nationalism as a meaningful basis for political activity, he never in any sense repudiated his military service. On the contrary, in spite of the war’s carnage he retained an aristocratic sense of duty, not unlike what the French aristocrat Henry de Montherlant called, in describing his own military service, “service inutile.” With the idea of useless duty Montherlant described his own sense of the moral obligation to serve in the First World War. Moreover, Musil’s pride continued to resonate some eighteen years after the war’s end, as one sees in a 1936 letter describing his services to the Austrian state, written when he needed support for his request for a state pension that might alleviate his persistent financial difficulties. In his letter he described his military service, in fact, in terms that suggest he expected recompense for years of service to the state that bordered on the heroic. In this curious letter he cites his library experience in the same terms as his military activity and the medals he received while a soldier—the Order of Franz-Joseph Knightly Cross (Ritterkreuz) for distinguished service, the Military Service Medal with swords for bravery before the enemy, and the Emperor Charles Soldier’s Cross (Truppenkreuz) (Briefe 736). Musil goes on to cite examples of his service to the state after the war’s end: as a writer in the foreign ministry and, from the fall of 1920 until 1922, as a newspaper journalist in the war ministry.

After the war Musil’s life was committed to writing, though his work was interrupted at times by ill health and psychological problems. In 1921 he took an apartment in Vienna’s third district, at Rasumofskygasse 20, that would be his base of operations for the next seventeen years. Revealingly, he never gave up the apartment, even after the success of The Man without Qualities allowed him to spend much time in Berlin in the early thirties and after he went into exile in 1938. The apartment was a point of stability in a life spent frequently traveling, often to Berlin but also to central Europe and Italy. Berlin and Vienna were the two fixed poles of his life, and Musil had friends in both cities. They were by and large writers and intellectuals, artists and professors. He had contacts with writers such as Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, and Bertolt Brecht. He knew Brecht, for example, in conjunction with the founding in Berlin of a political association of writers called Gruppe 1925. This group of politically committed writers included, in addition to Brecht, well-known
figures such as Johannes Becher, Ernst Bloch, Max Brod, Döblin, Willy Haas, Walter Hasenclever, Ludwig Marcuse, Erwin Piscator, and Joseph Roth. In Vienna from 1922 on he was active in the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller in Österreich (the Protective Association of German Writers in Austria), and apparently he had some contacts with the Vienna Circle, those positivist philosophers who at the time were trying to make sense of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. In short, Musil knew, though it cannot be said that he was close to, many of the major German-language writers of his time.

Most notably, he became acquainted in Berlin with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke toward the end of the poet’s life. In the fall of 1924 Musil wrote a letter of self-presentation to the poet who had been a major influence on him. In it Musil belittled himself in describing to Rilke what he had accomplished, saying that after Young Törless and Unions, he had written little, naming only the play Die Schwärmer (The Enthusiasts); another volume of stories, Drei Frauen (Three Women); and a farce, Vinzenz oder die Freundin bedeutender Männer “Vinzenz and the Woman Friend of Important Men.” Musil offered to send any of these to Rilke and added that The Enthusiasts would probably never be performed despite its recognized literary value. The farce he had written simply for amusement, and he added that he was writing a novel that should appear in spring (Briefe 364). What Musil considered to be his opus in 1924—Young Törless, two volumes of short fiction, two plays, and a novel in progress—largely comprises the output of his entire life, though he did not in the letter mention his essays and criticism, or a number of short texts that were starting to accumulate. With the reference at the end of the letter to a novel Musil was undoubtedly talking about some early form of The Man without Qualities, a title would become publicly known three years later in 1927, when Musil read on Berlin radio from the work in progress. In his letter to Rilke, Musil was overly optimistic, to say the least, about when he might have something ready for publication.

This was hardly the first time Musil was wrong about when he would finish The Man without Qualities. He spent the rest of his life, in fact, planning to finish the novel at some predicted time, but never did so. In the letter to Rilke this prediction was in error by some six years, and that simply for the first part of the novel. Also of great interest in this letter to the greatest living German poet at the time is the deprecatory tone Musil takes vis-à-vis his own work, for he seems to think that he has not done the work that, for whatever reason, might have been expected from him. In a sense he was his own harshest critic, as is shown not only in his manic rewriting, but also in his

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self-condemnation for not producing books as prolifically as Mann, a comparison that distressed Musil throughout his life.

The letter to Rilke was written some three years before Musil delivered one of his most famous addresses, in Berlin in 1927, a commemorative speech in honor of Rilke after the poet’s death at the end of 1926. This was the same year in which Musil also sought professional therapeutic help from Dr. Hugo Lukáš to find a remedy for the writer’s block that apparently kept him from continuing the novel for some time. A passage from the “Rilke Rede,” as the speech is called, may shed some light on that block, for it seems that Musil was, perhaps unwittingly, speaking indirectly of himself. It certainly can be argued that he wanted to be, in writing fiction, what he saw Rilke to be as a poet—quite simply, the greatest German writer of the time. Of Rilke Musil said that he was in a certain sense the most religious poet since Novalis, though he was not certain if Rilke had any religion at all. Rather, Musil thought Rilke had a different way of seeing: a new and inner way. And so, as Musil foresees, Rilke will have become not only a great poet, but also a great guide on a path that leads from the worldwide religious feeling of the Middle Ages and goes beyond the humanist cultural ideal, heading toward a forthcoming worldview (GW 8:1240). With this encomium Musil attributes to Rilke the same high stakes for writing that he had come to conceive for the novel he had described in his letter to the poet. The stakes were the creation of works facilitating the advent of a new worldview, one that in some sense would transcend the medieval religious viewpoint and humanist idealism, the beliefs that were (and perhaps still are) the mainstays of European culture. Perhaps there is little wonder that Musil experienced writers’ block, for he had set for himself a probably impossibly high hurdle—to use a rather pedestrian sports metaphor that Musil himself might have employed. In honoring Rilke by describing a path of writing leading to a new worldview, Musil was talking more about himself than Rilke, for it seems unlikely that Rilke would have considered himself a leader in any sense. In any case Musil’s attribution of this role to Rilke reflects back on a role that Musil had conceived for literature in its social function.

This attribution may well be a case, too, of the “anxiety of influence” that, according to Harold Bloom, leads strong writers into psychic conflict with those predecessors who influence them. For some time Musil was incapacitated as a writer by some kind of psychic conflict. He believed that the therapeutic help from Dr. Lukáš in 1927 and 1928 helped him overcome his writer’s block, for he was able to publish some pieces of short fiction, essays, and criticism...
and then, presumably, to continue work on the novel. In 1929 he appears again to have had heart problems, this some three months before the first performance, in Berlin on April 3, of a truncated version of his play *The Enthusiasts* on the stage of the Theatre in der Kommandantenstrasse. The production was not a success: the public literally jeered it. Nonetheless, Alfred Kerr, perhaps the most important critic of the time, gave it a laudatory review. In 1930 Musil published next to nothing in the way of short texts. He read much, went to the cinema, and then finally brought forth the first volume of *The Man without Qualities*, consisting of parts 1 and 2. The novel went on sale toward the end of the year and was an immediate critical success. However, this success granted no financial security to the writer, who, turning fifty in 1931, had little else to count on for income. Moreover, the novel was not a certain source of income, since his publisher, Rowohlt, who had been advancing Musil money, was having great trouble paying his debts. In late 1932 Musil handed a second volume of the novel to his publisher, this containing the first thirty-eight chapters of part 3; it too was well received by critics and other writers.

Musil’s success was short-lived. The second volume of the novel was published some six weeks before the end of the Weimar Republic. Hitler took power on January 30, 1933, on the very day that the Prussian Academy of the Arts awarded Musil a subsidy. The Nazi seizure of power undoubtedly resulted in Musil’s not receiving the Goethe Prize for literature that year and, more grievously, in the dissolution of a recently formed Musil-Gesellschaft, a society set up to provide financial support for him. Many of its members were of Jewish origin. Musil now felt he could not stay in Germany, for reasons of conscience, as well as for his and especially for his wife’s personal safety. She had Jewish origins, and the aggressive acts of the storm troopers against Jews in Berlin showed they were already in danger there. Therefore, Musil and his wife returned to live in their apartment in Vienna, with hopes of mustering financial support so that he could continue writing his novel, which would soon be banned in Germany. Musil believed that he was healthy enough to continue writing for a long time. In fact, he had less than ten years to live when he left Berlin.

It is hard to evaluate what kind of a shock the Nazi seizure of power had upon Musil. His musings on this catastrophe show him trying to maintain mental equilibrium and emotional composure by keeping an intellectual distance with regard to the various collectivisms he saw as the dominant ideologies of the time. From this perspective he viewed National Socialism, fascism, and communism as manifestations of the same antiliberal drive that was taking over a large part of the world. It is clear that he did not believe that the
reaction to these movements should be “activism” as it is ordinarily understood, however much Musil condemned totalitarian politics and however much he had given his support to liberal and social democratic causes. In this regard, with uncompromising logic he rejected any totalitarian demand that culture be submitted to politics. Minimally, this meant he was committed to noncollaboration with what he saw as an evil regime.

Specifically, to understand his personal reaction to the Nazis, one can turn to an unpublished and unfinished essay written in 1933, “Bedenken eines Langsamen” (“Ruminations of a Slow-Witted Mind”). Musil sought to understand the Nazis by trying to take seriously the premises of their “movement” (GW 8:1413). Facing the absurdities of the Nazi ideology, he formulated the idea that the writer must maintain autonomy of mind, or \textit{Geist} (8:1425). He cannot endorse political activism, for the writer’s allegiance is to culture. He must work with a sense of the history of that culture, which transcends politics. He further developed these thoughts in a lecture he gave in late 1934 to the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller in Österreich. In this lecture, called “Der Dichter in dieser Zeit” (translated as “The Serious Writer in Our Time”), Musil proclaimed that only the individual writer could develop culture. In the era of collectivist totalitarian states, the writer must hope, as Musil put it, for a return of better times, which a proper historical perspective showed to be not unreasonable. His lecture was apparently well received in Vienna, since he was invited to give it again a year later in Basel.

By 1935 Musil had an international reputation among writers and intellectuals, and his belief that modern capitalist society might be coming to an end was not a secret. As Annette Daigger points out in her essay on Musil’s political stance, Musil had in 1918 signed a fairly radical left-wing resolution of the Politische Rat geistiger Arbeiter Berlin, or the Political Council (or Soviet) of the Berlin Intellectual Workers. And as mentioned earlier, though no active revolutionary, he had nonetheless been part of the group of mainly communist and socialist writers who founded the Gruppe 1925. In 1930 he had politely filled out a questionnaire for the Soviet journal \textit{Novy Mir} in which he had expressed hope that the Russian Revolution might give intellectual or spiritual support to all those who hoped that something good might yet come of humanity (Briefe 472). For these reasons, not to mention the critical stance of \textit{The Man without Qualities}, it is not surprising that in 1935 Musil was invited to Paris to participate in Le Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture. The congress was organized largely for left-wing propaganda purposes, and communist writers such as Louis Aragon, Henri Barbusse, and Brecht, as well as a number of sympathetic noncommunists, were also invited.
to it. The congress failed, however, to produce a show of solidarity for the Communist International. Notably, on this occasion the leading French surrealist writer André Breton broke with the movement, and other writers were unwilling to play the role of spokesmen for the Communists. In this charged atmosphere Musil read a paper that rejected almost all the tenets calling for activist political mobilization of writers in the face of Nazi Germany. Musil made enemies at this congress, with some of the participants excoriating him for his individualism.

Having left Nazi Germany to take up permanent residence in Vienna, Musil found himself relying from 1933 until 1938 on strictly Austrian resources for survival. These resources included support from another society set up to help him financially while he completed the novel. He also had some revenue from sales of his books by the publisher Bermann-Fischer, which, having set up a branch in Vienna, took over Musil’s contract from Rowohlt. In his lively book on Musil, Wilfried Berghahn thinks that, all in all, Musil’s financial situation was, for a year or so in Vienna, not too bad. One may doubt that Musil would have shared that opinion, for as Berghahn also points out, he expected to have a lifestyle that included the best clothes and the finest food.5 In any case, along with some sales of The Man without Qualities, Musil also had a new publication with the publishing house Humanitas in Zurich, which, in 1935, brought a collection of assorted short texts called, with acerbic irony, Nachlass zu Lebzeiten (translated as Posthumous Papers of a Living Author). With this title Musil proposed that the German writer, both himself and in general, was a moribund creature.

In 1937 Musil gave in Vienna another marvelous, but difficult, lecture that can be taken as his public statement about the Nazis. Published later as a book, it is laconically called Über die Dummheit (On Stupidity), a title whose concision suggests Musil’s affinities with classical moral analysis. In the lecture Musil, perhaps to avoid incitement to violence, never overtly names the Nazis. Of course, there can be no doubt that in analyzing stupidity, he wanted to come to grips with a political movement that had already gained wide acceptance in Austria. On Stupidity is about the seemingly incomprehensible politics that had turned Germany into a land of barbarous irrationality that was now threatening Austria, which itself had become an “Austro-fascist” state in response to the Nazi threat to take it over. There have, of course, been many analyses of the roots of the Nazi movement, though perhaps none are more insightful than Musil’s subtle analysis of how stupidity is at once a defect of the understanding and of the emotions. As such, stupidity is a dangerous phenomenon, having political ramifications, which can take the form of a collective movement. This lecture was probably Musil’s last intervention in the public political arena.
Under pressure from Bermann-Fischer to produce some more pages of *The Man without Qualities*, in 1938 Musil gave the publisher twenty more chapters. His timing was characterized by his usual bad luck: these chapters were in galleys to be corrected virtually at the moment the Nazis annexed Austria. It appears, in fact, that the galleys were set up shortly before Hitler rode victoriously into a cheering Vienna in order to welcome his native Austria into the Third Reich. Thereupon, Gottfried Bermann-Fischer, a Jew, fled for his life; his firm was confiscated, and Musil took back his galley sheets. Then he, too, was on the road to exile. He briefly went to Italy and then took up residence in Switzerland, alleging to the Nazi authorities in Vienna that his health demanded a period of recuperation. Musil kept up this legal pretense until he died, since he wanted to get back some copies of his books while demanding a justification for their being banned. This fiction also probably eased his delicate situation vis-à-vis the Swiss authorities, who, in their position as “neutrals,” wanted no trouble with the Germans, who kept sharp watch over the lists of immigrants in Switzerland trying to escape them.

Musil’s correspondence documents that the last years of his life in Switzerland were not happy. He worked sporadically on his novel while worrying constantly about finishing it. He was also kept busy complying with the bureaucratic requirements to retain residency in Switzerland, first in Zurich, then in Geneva. He took some steps toward emigrating to the United States, though one may doubt that he really wanted to go to a country in which Mann, Adorno, Brecht, and other German writers might be well received but where nobody, he thought, had ever heard of Robert Musil. Although he had, through his wife, relatives in the United States, his sporadic attempts at emigration came to naught, in spite of support from various quarters, including the most famous living émigré, Albert Einstein.

In these final years Musil’s foremost desire was to finish the novel, and thus he probably found it most expedient to sit tight where he was, where he had freedom to pursue this task. He seems to have feared that moving to an unknown country whose language he could not speak might mean the end of his work. After much difficulty in finding a proper work environment, he finally settled in a house in Geneva in which noise was not a major impediment to his work. However, throughout these exile years life was mean. He had little money, he virtually had to beg for support, and he lived with the constant worry that the Swiss authorities might decide not to renew the periodic permission required for residence. Psychologically and materially, conditions for work on the novel were always less than ideal, and sometimes the admittedly temperamental Musil found that his surroundings simply prevented him from thinking. It is also difficult to explain why, when he could work, he wrote and
rewrote chapters multiple times in ways that do not suggest he wanted to finish the novel with any great dispatch. His writer’s block may have transformed itself into a kind of self-defeating perfectionism that assured, moreover, that Musil would be able to live out his novel as he wrote it, day by day, page by page, thought by thought.

Death came unexpectedly. In the early afternoon of April 15, 1942, Martha Musil found her husband dead on the floor, victim of a stroke. Musil reportedly thought he had many years ahead to finish the novel. Of course he had health problems, but nothing made him or others suppose that he would die before reaching the age of sixty-two. His relative isolation in exile was underscored by the fact that only eight people attended his funeral on April 17. In the context of the war raging about him, his death was not a newsworthy event, and few knew that a man who would be considered one of the great writers of the twentieth century was cremated that day in Geneva.

Martha’s concern with her husband and his work did not end with his death. She found a publisher in Lausanne for a third volume of *The Man without Qualities* that she patched together from manuscripts in 1943. Moreover, she managed to save thousands of pages of diaries, letters, and unfinished manuscripts, carrying them heroically from Europe to the United States and back. One must salute her for her devotion in keeping Musil’s work alive. She was responsible for the fact that a new edition of the novel and the first edition of unpublished writings could be undertaken, beginning in 1952, the year in which it was said that Musil was rediscovered. Actually, one had to wait until 1978 for an edition of Musil’s collected works, the edition that made known the scope of his oeuvre, especially the essays and criticism as well as variant sketched-out possibilities for an ending of *The Man without Qualities*. However, I doubt that we can speak of a final version of Musil’s work even at the date of this writing, or that one will ever be able to do so. The fact that the thousands of pages of manuscript, many of them unpublished, are now available on CD-ROM, makes a definitive oeuvre an unlikely proposition. That a CD-ROM allows critics and readers to go through the manuscripts via a search engine seems a strange fate for these fragile testimonies to the perfectionist Musil’s desire to find the ideal final formulation for his life’s work. His great novel is unfinished, and I will deal with it as such. Of course, he wrote much besides *The Man without Qualities*—fiction, plays, and essays—and in the following chapters we will deal in detail first with these texts, the published texts, before concluding with the novel he didn’t finish.