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The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity (Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies)

Patrizia McBride

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In a pluralistic society without absolute standards of judgment, how can an individual live a moral life? This is the question Robert Musil (1880-1942), an Austrian-born engineer and mathematician turned writer, asked in essays, plays, and fiction that grapple with the moral ambivalence of modern life. Though unfinished, his monumental novel of Vienna in the febrile days before World War I, *The Man without Qualities*, is identified by German scholars as the most important literary work of the twentieth century.

In a fresh examination of his essays, notebooks, and fiction, Patrizia McBride reconstructs Musil's understanding of ethics as a realm of experience that eludes language and thought. After situating Musil's work within its contemporary cultural-philosophical horizon, as well as the historical background of rising National Socialism, McBride shows how the writer's notion of ethics as a void can be understood as a coherent and innovative response to the crises haunting Europe after World War I. She explores how Musil rejected the outdated, rationalistic morality of humanism, while simultaneously critiquing the irrationalism of contemporary art movements, including symbolism, impressionism, and expressionism. Her work reveals Musil's remarkable relevance today-particularly those aspects of his thought that made him unfashionable in his own time: a commitment to fighting ethical fundamentalism and a literary imagination that validates the pluralistic character of modern life.

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