

Robert Munn.



UNIONS

Our union is our strength and life.



UNIONS

TWO STORIES

ROBERT MUSIL



Translated with an introduction by GENESE GRILL



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Translation of *Vereinigungen*

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

For my sister(s)



IN A DRAFT PREFACE for this duet of novellas, Musil writes about the levels of character development explored by various writers, noting that he was attempting to reach an even deeper level — one where “humans dissolve into nothingness.” This sphere, he continues, “where one breaks off in the middle of an eruption of passion, is the sphere wherein the novellas take place.” By no means a celebration of a nihilistic void, Musil is interested here in the literary exploration of an undiscovered psychic country — referred to by one sympathetic reviewer as *Neu-Seel-land* (New-soul-land)¹ — where the temporary experience of loss of self is a means to an existentially meaningful union of opposites in metaphor. Dissolution into nothingness is thus really a dissolution into everything, an ecstatic merging of the dis-individuated self with all of nature and civilization. The exploration of this sphere is an early foray into the concept of being “without qualities” explored in Musil’s great unfinished novel, *The Man without Qualities* — a realm of possibility that is the only foundation from

1. Ernst Blass, in a review in the literary journal, *Pan*, quoted in Karl Corino’s *Robert Musil: Eine Biographie* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2003) 39.

which one might live the “motivated life” sought by the sibling protagonists, Ulrich and Agathe. Adulterous lovers, explains Musil in this draft preface, dissolve in this realm “into things that could just as easily be other things, where the individual is only the receptacle for reflections — reflections that hold good for everyone.” In the same way that Musil would later defend his depiction of sibling love in the novel by affirming that incest is itself a metaphor for metaphor, here he suggests that adultery and bestiality are analogies for a metaphoric process whereby one similar image unites with another similar, but different, image — both signifiers, both like and almost like — resulting, paradoxically, in the closest possible approach to the original (signified) person, idea, or object. This process results in the completion (or perfection) of love through adultery in the first story, and the union of the highest spirituality and the basest bestiality in the other. Not only do humans become animalistic and animals human-like, but objects — things — become animated, while subjects — people — temporarily lose the delineating boundaries of their human selves through mystical participation in objecthood.

In these novellas, which feature a sympathetic glance at a sexual predator, a loving *and* adulterous wife who had enjoyed being dominated in her pre-marital sexual adventures, and a woman inhibited from full engagement with life due to the trauma caused by a repressed childhood memory of animal sexuality, Musil uses the

allegorical realm of love and sexuality to explore the way that one sometimes gives one's self up, one's individuality, gender, even species — not only in the mystical-erotic moment, but in other spiritual and creative states of consciousness. In these realms of what Musil elsewhere calls the “other condition,” one's own individuated sense of self and world is dissolved in a Dionysian merger with the undifferentiated “all” and, thus, one also strips the usually-differentiated other of his or her individual qualities in an archetypal timeless-spaceless union of like and unlike. Although remaining in this realm of undifferentiated Dionysian union would lead to both madness and an inability to act ethically, temporary forays there, thought Musil, were not only healthy and “normal,” but necessary for revitalizing understanding and vision, and for the cultivation of an awareness of the complex self. As Rainer J. Hanshe notes, such sojourning

is a tonic antidote to solipsism, a ritual that propels one out of narcissistic conditions and more into external ones, into *the other*, and thereby into the world, even into anorganic realms. In our current epoch, where solipsism is so maximal it is akin to a medieval epidemic (I'd rather have the St. Vitus dance ...), cultivating Musil's notion of the “other condition” could not be more emancipatory, a praxis similar to Keats's notion of Negative Capability, “the ability to negate or lose one's identity

THE COMPLETION OF LOVE

Robert Murray.



"You really can't come along?"

"It's impossible: you know I have to work now to come quickly to an end."

"But Lilli would be so glad...."

"Of course, of course, but it cannot be."

"But I have no desire to travel without you...." His wife said this while she poured the tea, and she looked over at him, as he sat in the corner of the room in a brightly-flowered armchair and smoked a cigarette. It was evening and the dark green blinds looked out toward the street, in a long row of other dark green blinds, from which nothing distinguished them. Like a pair of dark and serenely closed eyelids, they hid the radiance of this room, in which the tea poured now from out of a tarnished silver pot into the cups, touching their bottoms with a soft ring, and then seemed to grow still in its own lustrous streaming, like a twisting, transparent shaft made of tawny, light topaz.... In the slightly dented surfaces of the pot were shadows of green and grey hues, also blue and yellow; they lay quite still, as if they had flowed there together, but could not continue on. From the woman's arm rising from the teapot, to the look with which she gazed at her husband, a transfixing, rigid triangle was drawn about them.

Indeed, it was a triangle, as one could see; but something else too, something almost physical could be felt by these two people alone inside of it; to them it seemed as if its trajectory spanned between them like a brace made of the hardest metal, holding them fast in their places and yet binding them together, even though they were so far apart, into a unit, which one could practically feel with one's senses... it buttressed itself in the pits of their stomachs and they felt the pressure there... it lifted them upright from the armrests of their chairs, with unmoving faces and unwavering glances, and yet they felt a tender emotion there — something quite light it was — as though their hearts were fluttering in and out of each other like two swarms of tiny butterflies....

The whole room hung on this thin, barely real, and yet so apparent feeling, as on a softly trembling axis, and then on the two people upon whom it depended: the surrounding objects held their breath, the light on the wall froze into golden lace... everything was silent and waited and was there only for them;... time, which ran through the world like an endlessly glittering thread, seemed to move through the middle of this room, and seemed to move through the middle of these people and seemed to suddenly pause and become rigid and still and glittering... and the objects moved a little closer to each other. It was that stillness and then soft kind of sinking, as when surfaces suddenly arrange themselves to create a crystal... and these two people, through whose

midst it ran, suddenly saw each other through this holding of breath and this curving and leaning of everything all around them, as if through thousands of mirroring surfaces, and saw each other again, as if they were seeing each other for the first time....

The woman put down the tea, laid her hand on the table; as if exhausted by the weight of their happiness, each of them sank back into their pillows, and while they held each other fast with their eyes, smiled like people who are lost and who needed to say nothing out loud. They spoke of the sick man again, a sick man in a book that they had read, and they began immediately at the same point and question, as if they had been thinking about it, although that was not true at all, since they simply were continuing a conversation that had carried on over many days in a strange way, as if it had just been averting its face; and while the conversation about the book continued, it looked elsewhere; after a while their thoughts returned rather markedly from this unconscious pretext back to themselves.

"How must a man like this G. see himself?" asked the woman and continued to speak — as if sunk in reflections, almost as if to herself alone. "He abducts children, he induces young women to disgrace themselves; and then he stands there and smiles and stares entranced at the bit of eroticism faintly flickering somewhere inside him like a weak stroke of lightning. Do you believe that he thinks he is doing wrong?"

"Whether he thinks so? Perhaps; perhaps not," answered the man; "perhaps one dare not ask in this way when it comes to such feelings."

"But I believe," said the woman, and now she revealed that she was not just speaking about a random person, but about something else in particular, which already glimmered for her behind him, "I believe he thinks he is doing good."

Their thoughts continued side by side silently, then they surfaced — far above in the words again; but even so, it was as if they still held each other silently by the hand and everything had already been said. "... He does his victims harm, hurts them; he must know that he demoralizes them, unsettles their sensuality, agitates it so much that it can never again rest in one desire; ... and yet, it is as if one could see him smiling while doing it... fully soft and pale of face, fully melancholy, yet still determined, full of tenderness... with a smile, filled with tenderness, which hovers over him and his victims... like a rainy day over the countryside — the sky sends it and it cannot be grasped; in his melancholy lies all forgiveness, in the feeling that accompanies the disturbance ... isn't every mind a lonely and isolated thing?"

"Yes, isn't every mind a lonely thing?" These two people, who now were silent again, thought together about that third, unknown person, about this one of the many third persons, as if they walked together through a landscape: ... trees, fields, a sky, and suddenly an incompre-

hension about why everything here is blue, but there filled with clouds; ... they felt all of these third persons standing around them, like that great globe that contains us and sometimes watches us distantly and glassily and makes us cold when the flight of a bird rips an incomprehensible tumbling line through its surface. In the twilight room there was suddenly a cold, vast, afternoon-bright loneliness.

Then one of them said, and it was as when someone lightly strokes a violin: "... He is like a house with closed doors. What he has done is within him, perhaps like some soft music, but who can hear it? Perhaps because of this music, everything becomes a gentle melancholy...."

And the other one answered: "... perhaps he has gone through himself over and over with groping hands, to find a door, and finally stands still and just lays his face on the compressed window panes and sees, from a distance, the beloved victim and smiles"

Other than this, they said nothing, but in their blissfully-entwined silence something rang higher and higher. "Only this smile captures them and hovers over them and then it weaves a thin-stemmed bouquet out of the convulsive ugliness of their profusely bleeding gestures.... And hesitates tenderly, wondering whether they feel it, and lets it fall and then it climbs determinedly, carried by the mystery of its loneliness with trembling wings, like a strange animal, into the marvelous emptiness of space."

They felt the mystery of their two-ness rest upon this loneliness. It was an obscure feeling of the world surrounding them, which pressed them closer together; it was a dreamlike feeling of coldness, coming from all sides but one, the side where they leaned upon each other, unburdened themselves, covered themselves, like two marvelously fitting halves, which reduced the borders to the outside when brought together, while their interior space increased as they flowed more and more into each other. Sometimes they were unhappy that they could not do every last thing together, with each other.

“Do you remember,” said the woman suddenly, “when you were embracing me a few nights ago, did you know that there was something between us? I had thought of something at that very moment, something utterly unimportant, but it was not you; and suddenly it hurt me that it was not you. And I couldn’t tell you and had to smile, because you did not know and you thought you were very close to me, and then I really didn’t want to tell you and became angry at you, because you didn’t feel it yourself and your tenderness couldn’t reach me anymore. And I did not dare ask you to leave me, since in reality it was nothing at all; in reality, I was near to you, but still it was there, like a vague shadow, the idea that I could be far from you and without you. Do you know this feeling, when all things are standing doubled before you, fully and clearly, the way one knows them, and then at the

same time, pale, twilit and frightened, as if they were already being looked at eerily and distantly by the other? I could have taken you and pulled you inside me... and then pushed you away again... and thrown myself onto the ground, because it was possible”

“Was that when...?”

“Yes, the time when I suddenly began to cry; you thought it was from an excess of longing to merge my feelings more deeply into yours. Don’t be angry with me, I had to tell you, but I don’t know why; it was only a delusion, but it hurt me so much; I think this is the only reason why I keep thinking of this G.... Darling...”

The man in the armchair put down his cigarette and stood up. Their gazes held each other’s fast, with that suspended swaying of two people’s bodies standing on a tightrope side by side. Then they said nothing, instead pulled up the blinds and looked at the street outside; they felt like they were hearkening to the crackling of tensions inside themselves, a crackling that was making something new inside them and then smoothing it back down into composure. They felt that they could not live without each other, and only together, like an artificially-sustained interrelated system, which could bear anything they wished. When they thought of each other, it seemed almost sick and painful; the tender and perilous and untouchable way that their relationship, in its vulnerability, defended itself against the smallest uncertainty that arose.

THE TEMPTATION OF QUIET VERONICA

Robert Munz.



Somewhere one must hear two voices. Perhaps they are just lying there, as if they were mute, upon the pages of a diary, side by side and enclosed within each other: the mysterious, deep voice of the woman, suddenly springing into self-possession, embraced — where one page merges with the other — by the soft, broad, strained voice of the man, by this diffuse, unfinished, abandoned voice. From the spaces in between, something that has not yet had time to hide peers out. Or maybe it's not this way at all. Or maybe, somewhere in the world, there is a point toward which these two voices — that everywhere else hardly raise themselves above the dim confusion of everyday noises — shoot like two rays of light and wrap themselves around each other. Somewhere. Maybe one should try to find this point, although its approach is only palpable here from a feeling of restlessness, like the kind effected by a music that, although it is not yet audible, is already making its first impressions on the heavy, vague folds of distance's impenetrable veil. Maybe one should look for it so that these two parts could spring together, away from their sickness and weakness, into clarity, everyday certainty, uprightness.



"Spinning!" Later, in days full of a terrifying choice between a fantasy — spun like a thin ribbon from an invisible certainty — and familiar reality, in those days of a despairing last effort to drag that ungraspable essence into this reality — and then the release — throwing one's self into simply living, as if into a jumbled heap of warm feathers — only then did he speak to it as if it were a person. He spoke to himself too, hourly, in those days, and spoke out loud, because he was afraid. Something had burrowed itself in him, with a kind of incomprehensible stubbornness, the way that a pain intensifies in an inflamed tissue somewhere in the body and then actually grows, first into reality and then into an illness; the kind of pain that begins, with the mild, ambiguous smile of a torturer, to become master of one's body.

"Spinning!," pleaded Johannes, "if only you were outside of me, too." And: "If only you had a gown, whose folds I could hold onto. If I could speak with you. If I could say: You are God. If only I could keep a little pebble under my tongue when I spoke of you, for reality's sake! If I were able to say: I entrust myself to you, you will help me, watch over me, no matter what I do — there is a part of me that remains motionless and still, like a hub, and that part is you."

But he just lay there with his mouth in the dust and with a heart like a child, grasping for it. And all that he knew was that he needed it because he was cowardly; this he knew. But it also happened that it seemed to be gathering strength from out of his weakness, and he sensed this and it led him onward, as it had led him in his youth sometimes, like a powerful, still-entirely faceless head, the head of some vague force. One felt one's shoulders beneath it, growing into it, and felt that one could set it upon one's head and penetrate it with one's own face.

And one time he had said to Veronica: it is God. He was fearful and pious; it was long ago and it was his first attempt to grasp the indeterminate something that they both felt. They glided past each other in the dark house; upstairs, downstairs, past each other. But when he said it, it became a worthless expression and communicated nothing of what he meant.

Perhaps though, what he had meant in those days was just something like those designs that one sometimes sees in stones — no one knows where they come from, what they mean, and how they could even exist in reality — designs on walls, in clouds, in swirling water. Perhaps what he meant was nothing but the ungraspable source of something that had not yet arrived, like those rare expressions in faces that don't fit with them at all, that fit instead some suddenly-imagined *other* faces, surpassing anything that one has previously seen. There were small melodies in the midst of sounds, feelings in

people; yes, there were feelings in him that, when his words searched for them, were not yet feelings at all. Rather, it was as if something in him had stretched itself out, with its tips already immersing themselves, moistening themselves, his fear, his stillness, his silence, the way things sometimes reach out on fever-bright spring days, when their shadows creep out of them quietly and are pulled in one direction, like reflections in a brook.

And he often said to Veronica that this thing inside him was not really fear or weakness; it was more like the way terror sometimes is only the rustle around an experience not yet seen or conceptualized, or like when one sometimes knows, quite firmly but quite incomprehensibly, that the feeling has something womanly about it, or that weakness is like a morning in a country house, around which the birds shrill. When he was in this strange state, such partial, inexpressible conceptions rose up in him.

But once Veronica looked at him, with her large, quiet, bristling eyes — they were completely alone in one of the half-darkened rooms — and asked: “So, is there something inside of you, too? Something that you can’t feel or understand clearly, and you just name it God, conceived of as outside of you and as real, different from you, as if it could take you by the hand? And perhaps it’s that thing you never want to call cowardice or weakness; conceived as a being, who could take you under the folds of its gown? And you simply resort to words like God

as one or another explanation, right off, without any orientation, or to one or another movement, without any conviction, as an explanation of faces that never appear in your real life, but just move along in their dark clothes from another world with the confidence of strangers from a large, well-ordered nation, as if they were living beings? Admit it. Because they are like living beings and because you would like, at any price, to believe that they are real?"

"They are things," he reflected, "behind the horizon of consciousness, things that glide by behind the horizon of our consciousness, or really there is nothing but a taut, strange, unexplorable, possible new horizon of consciousness, suddenly hinted at, where no things even exist yet." They are ideals, he had said, already at that time, not hazy things or symptoms of some spiritual sickness, but rather foreshadowings of a wholeness that already exists somewhere prematurely. And were it possible to merge all its parts together, something would appear there, as if it had been suddenly struck, illuminated from its most delicate thought branches to the treetops, and would be, in the slightest movements, like wind in sails. And he sprung up and made a vast gesture of almost physical longing.

And in reply she said nothing for a long time, but then she answered: "There is something in me, too... you see: Demeter" And she hesitated. And after this came the first time that they had spoken about Demeter together.

At first, Johannes did not understand why it even happened that they did. She said that she had stood once at a window above a chicken yard and had looked at the rooster, had looked and thought about nothing. And then Johannes gradually understood that she meant the chicken yard in their house. Then Demeter came and positioned himself next to her. And she began to notice that she had been thinking, the whole time, about something, but utterly obscurely, and only now had she begun to recall it. And Demeter's nearness, she explained, — he would understand it well — she had begun, at first quite obscurely, to recall it all again — Demeter's nearness both helped her and inhibited her. And after a while she knew that it was the rooster she had thought about. Or perhaps she had not thought about anything, but had just watched all along, and what she saw was like a strange hard body that remained inside of her; remained, because it was not dissolved by any other thought. And it seemed to vaguely remind her of something, something else that she could not find. And the longer Demeter stood next to her, the more clearly and more oddly frightened she was to feel the empty, present outline of this image in herself. And Veronica looked questioningly at Johannes, to see if he understood. "Once again, it was that unspeakably indifferent way the animal had of slipping off," she said. She still saw what she saw then, as if it were happening today, saw something just going along by itself, very simply,

something that nevertheless cannot be grasped in the least, this unspeakably indifferent sliding off, suddenly to be free of all arousal and to just stand there a while, as if daft and insensible and with one's thoughts somehow far away, in a vapid, fading light. Then she suggested: "Sometimes, on dead afternoons, when I walked with my aunt, the same kind of light fell like that over all of life. I thought I could feel it and it seemed to me as if the mere thought of this nauseating light were radiating out from my stomach."

Then there was a pause, Veronica gulped for words.

But she returned to the same subject. "But afterwards I already saw, from far away, from over there, the same kind of wave coming," she added, "coming over it and casting it upward and then letting it go again."

And there was silence once more.

But suddenly, as she kneeled down very close to Johannes's face, her words slipped through, as if they wanted to hide themselves mysteriously in the large, dark room. "In a moment like one of these, Demeter took my head and pushed it against his chest, facing downwards; said nothing and pressed it downwards, hard," whispered Veronica; and then, after, there was this silence again.

But Johannes felt as if a secret hand had touched him in the darkness, and he trembled, as Veronica continued: "I don't know what to call it, what happened to me in this moment. I had a presentiment: Demeter must

be like that rooster, living in a terrible, vast emptiness, an emptiness he just sprang out of." Johannes felt that she was looking at him. It embarrassed him that they were speaking about Demeter, when he vaguely felt that they spoke at the same time of things that had to do with himself. An ungraspably fearful suspicion arose in him, that what was for him an abstract connection with God — like a repeating pattern of his own face, stretched across the uncertainty of sleepless nights — was for Veronica some action that she might want him to take. And it appeared to him, without his being able to resist the idea, that her voice took on something cruel and pitying and lascivious, as she continued: "I cried out at the time: Johannes would never do something like that!" but Demeter just said, 'Bah, Johannes,' and put his hands in his pockets. And then — do you remember? — when you first came back to us again, the way Demeter began to speak to you? 'Veronica says that you are better than me.' He mocked you, 'But you are just a coward!' And at that time, you were still the kind of person who could not just take that without a response, and you gave it back to him: 'Is that so? Let's see about that.' And in answer, he punched you in the face. And then — isn't it true? — you wanted to hit him back, but when you saw his threatening face, and that the pain got worse, you felt a terrible fear of him — oh, I know, almost a respectful, friendly fear — and all of a sudden you smiled, isn't it true, you didn't know why, but you smiled and smiled,



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In 1911, following his 1906 debut, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Robert Musil published the two experimental stories that make up *Unions*. “The Completion of Love” and “The Temptation of Quiet Veronica” were some of Musil’s earliest forays into what would become a life-long exploration of the life, adventures, and psychological processes of his fiancé, Martha Marcovaldi — the future Martha Musil.

When Musil later wrote of the “two authors” of his great unfinished work, *The Man without Qualities*, the co-author referred to was no other than Martha. The stories in *Unions*, drawn from Martha’s life, explode conventional morality; explore questions of self, union, and dissolution of self; and approximate exceptional sensations of erotic and intellectual perception in a shimmering and exceedingly dense proliferation of metaphors. The images, Musil tells us in a note, are the bone, not just the skin, of these carefully crafted stories. Each word is as motivated as the internal and external moments it attempts to embody in language. Although Musil did not continue to work in this experimental style in his later writing, in a late note he affirmed that *Unions*, the fruit of much artistic struggle and deep personal engagement, was the only one of his books that he sometimes still read from.

This is a new English-language translation of the two stories and the first one to appear — in the form of Musil’s original publication — as *Unions*. A scholarly introduction by the translator, Genese Grill, explains the provenance of the stories and the need for a new approach to this book so central to his œuvre.



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