Humanity without Itself: Robert Musil, Giorgio Agamben and Posthumanism

Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter

What are the affinities between two works with seemingly related titles, Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man without Qualities* (1930-42)] and Giorgio Agamben's *L'Uomo senza contenuto* [*The Man without Content* (1999)]? What might be their contribution to that rethinking of humanism which posthumanism warrants? And what might be made of the fact that both these works, each of which strains at the boundaries of the discourse to which it is affiliated—fiction in the case of Musil, aesthetics in Agamben's—diagnose a (post)human condition that becomes evident in a *lack*, one designated in their titles through the preposition *without*?

This essay will attempt a response to those questions. First, however, some context. It is over ten years since the publication of N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). During that time *posthumanism*, a term which may have been tendentiously sensationalising on its first deployments, has come to mark reoriented priorities within the humanities. Among the major studies that have driven the exploration of two extreme prospects that emerge from the term—the waning of humanism (*post-humanism*) and the exceeding of the human itself (*post-human-ism*)—are Hayles's other major study, *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005), R. L.

Rutsky's *High Technē* (1999), Elaine Graham's *Representations of the post/human* (2002), Bruce Clarke's *Posthuman Metamorphoses* (2008), and Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), as well as the monographs within Minnesota's *Posthumanities* series. To these should be added an extensive host of studies that, even if they do not invoke the words *posthuman* or *posthumanism* directly in their title, address the impact on the integrity and survivability of the human, and on what has traditionally been the province of the humanities, of a number of concerns that contribute to posthumanism's range and repertoires. Among those concerns are the ubiquity of digital technologies; the potential and reach of biomedia and bioengineering; the re-explored ontology of 'humanness' in the face of prosthetic technology and 'human enhancement'; the awareness of how robotics' progress and a cultural imaginary increasingly 'peopled' by cyborgs, hybrid humans and 'post-bodied' minds renders the contrastingly organic 'question of the animal' both pressing and nostalgic; the autopoietic dynamic of the systems with which we are surrounded and within which we are embedded; and, most accessibly to media-driven sensibilities, the wagers re-laid daily on the apocalyptic propensities of humanity and of the planet itself. Within the humanities all this tends to have greater intuitive reach than, say, 'inaesthetics' or 'dis-enclosure' (Badiou, 2005; Nancy, 2008). Indeed *posthumanism* probably names current sensibilities at least as economically as any other term designating the contemporary cultural and critical imaginary. If and when the term is not applied—which may occur because, quite simply, it does not please, or possibly because of awareness of the refracted temporalities suggested by the *post-*prefix explored by figures like Jean-François Lyotard or Bruno Latour, such that posthumanism is recognised as not necessarily specific to our time but as an achronological condition of the human—there nevertheless remains the irrepressible

sense that *posthumanism* has matured into a label that is more reality-responsive than it is sensationalising. It is therefore arguable that posthumanism's agendas have led routine reports on humanism's or literature's or philosophy's crises to seem just a little *un*exaggerated to readerships who might be convinced, by the accumulated evidence of which the examples cited above form only a small proportion, that something different really is alive—or post-life as we knew it and read it—in the humanities.

The above preamble cues our consideration of Musil and Agamben, who can otherwise seem incongruous in posthumanist contexts. In question, here, are the revised canons focused on by 'post/human genealogies', as Elaine Graham has it:

> Where once the ancients told tales of centaurs and *djinns*, demons and angels, contemporary popular genres entertain androids, cyborgs and extraterrestrials. Is the enduring popularity of such creatures a way of exploring what is fascinating and frightening, of testing the limits of our own humanity against 'the Different, the Alien, the Monstrous, the Uncanny, the Marginal and the Other' …?

As Graham indicates, there is a strong tradition in myth and science for 'exploring the blurring and interpenetration of boundaries', so that it is 'those contemporary products of fictional and technoscientific worlds who inhabit the uncharted extremities of humanity, nature and artifice' that attract her attention (Graham 2002, 55). The 'products' she reads are not typically drawn from literature, or from the ranks of Modernism or High Modernism to which Musil is affiliated. In the posthumanist canon that emerges once it becomes possible to observe who is being recurrently cited in posthumanism's standard works, it immediately becomes apparent that literature is not privileged. Hence, for instance, in the literary genealogies of the posthuman that she recognises Graham reserves some incisively used chapter space for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818); other literature, however, comes in for incidental

rather than formative mention. The main field of reference continues to take in, instead, science fiction and popular culture in their diverse mediations.

Fredric Jameson, no less, reinforces this development. In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005)—the genealogical focus on prefigurations of posthumanism is foregrounded by the title—the future-minded imagination is identified with science fiction and its political unconscious. This, for Jameson, is the discourse that understands that 'closure or the narrative ending is the mark of that boundary or limit beyond which thought cannot go' (Jameson 2005, 283). His range of reference when demonstrating 'the new post-human lifestyles designed to replace the older natural ones' (Jameson 2005,164) takes in canons of science fiction, not literature. Indeed, he is very specific about science fiction's standing in that regard:

> It would in my opinion be a mistake to make the 'apologia' for SF in terms of specifically 'high' literary values—to try, in other words, to recuperate this or that text as exceptional, in much the same way as some literary critics have tried to recuperate Hammett or Chandler for the lineage of Dostoevsky, say, or Faulkner. SF is a sub-genre with a complex and interesting formal history of its own, and with its own dynamic, which is not that of high culture, but which stands in a complementary and dialectical relationship to high culture or modernism as such. (Jameson 2005, 283)

Jameson, whose understanding of Modernism is scarcely mean, as indicated by *A Singular Modernity* (2002) or *The Modernist Papers* (2007), sees it as self-evident that science fiction is not straightforwardly amenable to the protocols of the literary aesthetic, for which Modernism provides a touchstone (hence, no doubt, its invocation in the passage quoted). And as science fiction is a genre of choice for the posthuman imagination, it must follow that posthumanism itself must be relatively unconcerned by high literary values or the texts sustaining them. Henceforth there will be other agendas to push, and Musil is unlikely to be among them.

Nevertheless, there is something distinctly odd in Musil's absence from posthumanist studies. Musil's interest in what he will call 'the subjunctive of possibility' (Musil 1997, 14) is not entirely distant from science fiction's experience of a limit beyond which thought cannot go. In addition, his exploration of self-voided humanity itself has some bearing on prefigurations of the posthuman. Admittedly, it is hard not to concede that *The Man without Qualities*, which exceeds 1000 pages and nonetheless contrives to be unfinished, is scarcely an obvious focus for posthumanist inquiry, not least when one could instead be speaking of Philip K. Dick or *Avatar* (2009), biotechnology or 'the world without us' (Weisman 2007). So what are the reasons for considering Musil's exclusion from posthumanist studies to be anomalous?

The reasons are in fact related to the question of the world (or, at any rate, life) without us (or, at any rate, without humanity—whatever life and humanity may be). To humanity without itself. Before we explain this, however, it is as well to declare our programme of exploring the possibilities of 'a posthumanism without technology': that is, a posthumanism not solely driven by technological considerations. This is not, of course, to downplay the trenchancy of technoculture for contemporary discourse in the humanities. What posthumanism envisages and critiques in terms of the diverse impacts of digital culture and of the 'technological/postbiological sublime' on 'the many meanings of being human' is vital for a rethinking of what it is that the 'post-humanities' might involve (Jameson 2005, 234). None of that is in question for us. Rather, the main thrust of any posthumanism without technology would be to supplement those many viable and necessary posthumanisms with a careful thinking through of what it is within literary culture and within the theoretical humanities that might be worth revisiting by

mainstream, technology-minded posthumanism. This may prove particularly intriguing with works that yield some productive reflections on how the 'high' literary imagination might both prefigure and refigure as well as trouble and be disturbed, in turn, by the repertoires of posthumanist discourse.

What, then, does Musil offer the posthuman? We suggest below that *The Man without Qualities* intriguingly allegorises some of the tensions within posthumanism. But in the first place, of course, there is the richness of Musil's title, and the question of whether the novel's protagonist, Ulrich, is sufficiently human. The novel, in fact, explores 'the abiding question of what it is to be human' (Graham, *passim*) at the onset of the Modern. Ulrich's progressive disaffiliation from the human helps us glimpse the scope inherent in calling him post-human(ist). A man without qualities is a man without state, of a dehumanised sort if he is of any sort at all, and deprived of any natural or accrued nobility. He would be an affront, in other words, to the humanistic idea that is at least as old as Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528): namely, that man (within humanism it was, for a long time, class-privileged man rather than generalised humanity that is at stake) should work for self-betterment and the cultivation of better qualities—and for *sprezzatura*, 'courtly gracefulness, the quality which makes the courtier seem a natural nobleman' (see Castiglione 1967, 66ff). This graciously blasé acquisition of a *blason* of refined attributes is, therefore, a staple of humanism. It coheres reasonably with Enlightenment projects for modernity. Any counter-impulse must seem unnatural, ungracious, unrefined, inhuman, dark, regressive. Yet this is precisely the post-humanistic rationale that drives the all too refined Ulrich, the protagonist of Musil's novel. Ulrich reverses the *bildungsroman* dynamic to a process of self-divestiture, of a willed shedding of his distinctive talents and qualities: 'And one day Ulrich stopped wanting to be promising' (Musil 1997,

41). There cannot be much *sprezzatura* there: 'He had expected to find himself on a stage of world-shaking adventures with himself as hero, but now saw nothing but a drunken young man shouting on a wide, empty square, answered only by the paving stones' (Musil 1997, 31).

Before we go further, let us acknowledge a degree of tiresomeness in all this. There is something in Musil's novel that is a little too jejune (even if, or because, Ulrich is thirty-two, and has sterilely progressed from the army to civil engineering to mathematics). His is an irresolvable, enervated sensibility that finds itself circumstanced in the 'pseudoreality' played out against the backdrop of Kakania—'a country for geniuses; which is probably what brought it to its ruin' (Musil 1997, 31). The novel restages all the 'the maddening disorders, confusions, vertigos' that George Steiner discerns in *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* [*Young Torless* (1906)], Musil's earlier novel (see Steiner 1995). The compulsive soul-searching Ulrich indulges in is mirrored in a passage describing his friend Walter, who is the one who will actually term him a man without qualities:

> Such people exercise an unusual attraction, because the moral flaw in which they incessantly live communicates itself to others. Everything in their conversation takes on a personal significance, and one feels free in their company to be constantly preoccupied with oneself, so that they provide a pleasure otherwise obtainable only from an analyst or a therapist for a fee … (Musil 1997, 59)

It is not surprising, then, that it is Musil whom Georg Lukács dubiously credits in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957) with 'introduc[ing] the problem, central to all modernist literature, of the significance of psychopathology'. Ulrich exemplifies the 'abstract potentiality' that worries Lukács. '[I]t belongs wholly to the realm of subjectivity', as distinct from the 'concrete potentiality …concerned with the dialectic

between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality' (Lukács 1963, 23-24).

Potentiality, for Lukács, becomes responsibility:

> Innumerable possibilities for man's development are imaginable, only a small percentage of which will be realised. Modern subjectivism, taking these imagined possibilities for actual complexity of life, oscillates between melancholy and fascination. When the world declines to realize these possibilities, this melancholy becomes tinged with contempt. (Lukács 1963, 21-22)

The responsibility arises because 'if man's inwardness is identified with an abstract subjectivity, human personality must necessarily disintegrate'. Lukács, significantly, quotes T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' in support:

> Shape without form, shade without colour
> Paralysed force, gesture without motion.   (Lukács 1963, 25)

It is this predicament that Ulrich exemplifies, disinclined as he is, despite all his consorting with diplomats like Arnheim and his dabbling with abortive political projects, to participate in 'a concrete *terminus ad quem*; the establishment of a new order':

> How different the protest of writers like Musil! The *terminus a quo* (the corrupt society of our time) is inevitably the main source of energy, since the *terminus ad quem* (the escape into psychopathology) is mere abstraction. The rejection of modern reality is purely subjective. Considered in terms of man's relation with his environment, it lacks both content and direction. And this lack is exaggerated still further by the character of the *terminus ad quem*. For the protest is an empty gesture, expressing nausea, or discomfort, or longing. Its content—or rather lack of content—derives from the fact that such a view of life cannot impart a sense of direction. (Lukács 1963, 30)

Lukács here anticipates the hollowness, the 'without content', that we shall witness Agamben developing. Meanwhile, and interestingly, all this takes place in the context of Ulrich's own awareness of 'possibilism' and the 'delicate medium of the

subjunctive mood' (Musil 1997, 11). In one of the 'secular sermons' (Kermode 1971, 189) that characterise the novel, Musil writes that

> It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it. Even so, it will always be the same possibilities, in sum or on the average, that go on repeating themselves until a man comes along who does not value the actuality above the idea. It is he who first gives the new possibilities their meaning, their direction, and he awakens them. (Musil 1997, 12)

Perhaps even more than Hamlet, however, Ulrich, who might have been such a 'possibilitarian', is indecisive. He is overtaken by the 'obsession with morbidity' to which Lukács keeps returning: 'With Musil—and with many other modernist writers—psychopathology becomes the goal, the *terminus ad quem*, of their artistic intention' (Lukács 1963, 29). It drives an abdication from facing up to *Geworfenheit* that is replaced by 'an abstract polarity of the eccentric and the socially-average' (Lukács 1963, 31). In the case of Ulrich, who estranges himself from himself, this is almost willed:

> And since the possession of qualities assumes a certain pleasure in their reality, we can see how a man who cannot summon up a sense of reality even in relation to himself may suddenly, one day, come to see himself as a man without qualities. (Musil 1997, 13)

Musil here offers posthumanism an emblematic staging of how the human shrinks from the immensity of both abstract and concrete potentials instantiated by a new technocultural order. Ulrich's predicament is that of not knowing how and what to desire in the face of his foresight that he will never be *avant la lettre* because he is now forever *avant le nombre*. This enigma is opened up below. For the moment, let us note that it suggests that Ulrich is potentially as evocative and alienated a figure as Victor Frankenstein's monster, Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, or William Gibson's Henry

Dorsett Case in terms of the mythography of prefigurations of the posthuman. He shares their anomie before the beguilements, menace, energies and entropies of re-engineered humanity and/or an autopoietic technoculture. Indeed Ulrich finds that his foresight, like his qualities, is unavailing. If he dispenses with the latter it is surely because he cannot quite restyle himself to his time, whose demands he otherwise reads well: 'Time was making a new start just then (it does so all the time), and a new time needs a new style' (Musil 1997, 15). Central to this point, and to any defence of Musil's novel from Lukácsian attacks, is the fact that Ulrich's crisis is brought about precisely because of the situatedness of his enervated rationality before technology, system and the order of the number. One of the best known scenes of *The Man without Qualities*, the one in which Ulrich studies and measures traffic, that simple symbol of modernity, is emblematic in this respect, not least as 'he toyed with calculating the incalculable' and with 'estimat[ing] the enormous undertaking it takes nowadays merely to be a person who does nothing at all' (Musil 1997, 7). So is his view that 'science had developed a concept of hard, sober intelligence that makes the old metaphysical and moral ideas of the human race simply intolerable' (Musil 1997, 43).

Let us see how these points are played out in the commentaries, before moving on to considering some related passages in Agamben. In a 1995 article in the *New Yorker* that asserts the high literary values that Jameson downplays in *Archaeologies*, George Steiner values Musil as an author who stands for 'the highest art' and who alone, together with Proust, exemplifies 'the writers of fiction who are also major systematic intellects', whose work is shaped at 'depths that are inaccessible to the rest of us' (Steiner 1995, 101). He then reminds us that

Musil was a highly trained and qualified mechanical engineer with a keen grasp of mathematics and mathematical logic. His thesis bore on the technical aspects of Ernst Mach's philosophy of physics. … From 1903 to 1908 Musil was also occupied with the study of experimental clinical psychology and of theories of behavior. There is hardly a page in his immense oeuvre … that does not argue, by precept and example, for the radical unison of the philosophical and the poetic … For Musil, thought – be it mathematical, analytic, discursive or aesthetic – is form. To think rigorously is to shape rigorously: the concordance between genre and content should be as logical and as inevitable in a novella or a play as it is in the blueprint of a machine tool or in an algebraic proof. There is nothing cold or mandarin about this heroic conviction. It gives to Musil's stories and to *The Man without Qualities*, a subtle lustre, a summons to adult response, an imaginative authority of the rarest force. (Steiner 1995)

We also know from David S. Luft, in his introduction to Musil's *Precision and Soul*, that Musil's mentor, Carl Stumpf, 'set the tone for the positive treatment of science and empiricism in Austrian universities', and that Musil was interested in experimental psychology and that he worked as an archivist in the Technical Institute at Vienna (Luft 1990, vi). On the analogy that our knowledge of Auguste Comte having influenced George Eliot makes positivism discoverable in the latter's pages, is all this enough to make Musil amenable to posthumanist appropriation? In other words, is *The Man without Qualities* interesting in these contexts because it is one of the few novels that is, somehow, informed by science and technology? Perhaps. But the focus should instead surely be on how Musil's novel may offer the most complete dramatisation we have of the psychology of human(ist) qualities suspending themselves before the prospect of pervasive technoculture. Steiner attends to the significance of that dramatisation:

It is a rendering that omits crucial connotations of selfness, of singular appropriation to oneself, almost of 'self-possession', with all its philosophical-moral-economic attributes. 'Qualities' lets drop the decisive analogies with the ontological-psychological investigations into the ego not only in Freud but in Husserl and Heidegger. 'The Man Whose "I" Is in Search of His "Me"' would be an absurdly awkward paraphrase, but it might be more exact.

The 'me', here, is still very humanist. It confirms that for Ulrich, in the midst of unfamiliar and accelerated realities, the reflex of thinking the self and personality according to familiar and unhurried categories is insuppressible. Steiner further describes how Musil 'sets out to chronicle, to elucidate critically, the death of Europe and its culture' (Steiner 1995, 106). This accords with Luft's view that Musil 'craft[s] a way of thinking that encompasses order and disorder, the elasticity of humanity and culture, and the enormous complexity of modern life' (Luft 1990, xviii). *The Man without Qualities* is assuredly *posthumanist* in its understanding that humanism is exhausted if it cannot inspire an intellectual response to such complexity.

Hence, if we are to bring out the posthumanist affinities of Musil's novel it is not enough to acknowledge that 'Musil felt strong affinities with German classical humanism (with Goethe, Schiller, and the late eighteenth century)', or that 'he also looked forward to a second beginning for this tradition after the defeats of the 1930s' (Luft 1990, xviii-xix). We may need to see also how Musil understood, in essays like 'The Religious Spirit, Modernism, and Metaphysics', that in the scenarios of modernity what was desired was truths that might set 'new and bold directions to the feelings, even if these distinctions were to remain mere possibilities; a rationality, in other words, for which thinking would exist only to *give an intellectual armature to some still problematic way of being human: such a rationality is incomprehensible today even as a need*' (quoted in Luft 1990, xviii; emphasis added). Being human 'today', as Musil realises, requires a different rationality. A different scope for the human, for human-ism, is called for. So it is that Ulrich understands this challenge but, before it, quails, fails: 'With wonderful clarity he saw in himself all the abilities and qualities favored by his time … but he had lost the capacity to apply them' (Musil 1997, 44). Ulrich's abdication of the responsibility of/to the human, of the suspension of

'qualities', is not quite the rationality required. As Walter tells Clarisse of him, 'the strength you marvel at in him is pure emptiness'. Whereupon he 'burst[s] out' with the diagnosis that 'He's a man without qualities!' … 'It's the human type produced by our time!' (Musil 1997, 62-63).

Clearly Musil understood what it was like to be living in a time like ours that was on the cusp of a new technological order. The idea of possibilism in that context, and the view that the human itself thereby changes, offers to the posthuman the glimpse of what a work of literature can do in offering a re-imaginative and psychologically acute diagnosis of the conditions of its time and of those conditions' effect upon subjectivity. Luft, who understands that Musil 'emphasized the transformations of modern life that make it difficult for individuals to find sense in their experience, to feel themselves part of a meaningful community, to balance their thinking and feeling, and to adjust to constant changes in their way of living', and that 'the sheer scale of modern life had transformed the individual's relation to culture, … [such] that science and technology created new conditions for human experience' (Luft 1990, xxiii), is exactly right to identify this passage from the essay 'Mind and Experience' as a key focus:

> What characterizes and defines our intellectual situation is precisely the wealth of contents that can no longer be mastered, the swollen facticity of knowledge (including moral facts), the spilling out of experience over the surfaces of nature, the impossibility of achieving an overview, the chaos of things that cannot be denied. We will perish from this, or overcome it by becoming a stronger type of being. (Luft 1990, xxii-xxiii)

This is what Ulrich, in the novel, is attempting, so that his trajectory becomes an interesting test of whether a stronger type of posthuman being can be configured through an act of will, through 'a spirituality commensurate with the conditions of life in modern civilization' (Luft 1990, xxiii). Luft further shows how in his essays Musil developed a distinction between the *ratioid* and the *nonratioid*, the former linked with

testable scientific knowledge amenable to articulation through laws and rules, the latter associable with the more personalized literary intellect. Musil wished for a workable relation between them, such that 'the life of the mind' would not be antagonistic to 'intellect' and science' if moved 'from academic philosophy in the direction of art and science' (Luft 1990, xxvi-xxvii). This other relation might bear upon what Musil called 'the other condition', in which 'the routine of everyday life' is related to 'heightened conditions of the ethical-aesthetic self' (Luft 1990, xxvii). Ulrich, we would suggest, attempts all this, and fails. In regard to his commitment to engineering, for instance, 'Ulrich's … attempt to become a man of stature, through technology, came quickly to an end' (Musil 1997, 35). And he later 'refuse[s] to be a human being' because 'it has an unpleasant feeling of dilettantism about it' (Musil 1997, 231). But the allegory implied there is one in which contemporaneity's routines, as much as modernity's, are co-involved. It is an early exploration of an imperative occasioned by the affordances of the 'post-natal plasticity' of our time, in which the '"phenomenological horizon" still exists but not through the reflexive turn that amounts to repetition … but as the endless profileration of provisional drafts that interact and supersede each other as cognitions with material relations and effects' (Smith and Jenks 2006, 258). For that writing, Musil's Ulrich, given to 'living hypothetically' (Musil 1997, 269), provides one draft.

Agamben provides another. In *The Man without Content*, published more than fifty years after Musil's death, Agamben describes a process of alienation very similar to Ulrich's:

> [W]hen a culture loses its means of transmission, man is deprived of reference points and finds himself wedged between, on the one hand, a past that incessantly accumulates behind him and oppresses him with the multiplicity of its now-indecipherable contents, and on the other hand a future that he does

not yet possess and that does not throw any light on his struggle with the past. (Agamben 1999, 108)

This occurs because art, which Ulrich cannot commit to, is unable to resolve what, for Agamben, only it can achieve: that is, 'transforming man's inability to exit his historical status, perennially suspended in the inter-world between old and new, past and future, into the very space in which he can take the original measure of his dwelling in the present and recover each time the meaning of his action' (Agamben 1999, 114). Instead, what takes place is all too unsatisfactory, as the only passage where Musil is invoked makes clear:

> Today, however, it seems that this irritating yet irreplaceable instrument of our aesthetic apprehension of art is undergoing a crisis that could lead to its eclipse. In one of the 'Unfriendly Observations' collected by Robert Musil in his *Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten* (*Posthumous papers of a living author*), Musil jokingly asked 'whether kitsch, increased by one and then two dimensions of kitsch, would not become increasingly bearable and increasingly less kitsch', and trying to discover the relationship between kitsch and art by means of a curious mathematical calculation, concluded that they appear to be the very same thing. After aesthetic judgment taught us to distinguish art from its shadow and authenticity from inauthenticity, our experience, on the contrary, forces us to face the embarrassing truth that it is precisely to non-art that we owe, today, our most original aesthetic emotions. (Agamben 1999, 49)

The experience leads, for Agamben, to a lack of 'content'. It is, indeed, the artist who is 'the man without content'. He is without himself, possibly even without humanity in an age where art 'has completed the circle of its metaphysical destiny and has reentered the dawn of an origin in which only its destiny but the very destiny of man could be put in question in an initial manner' (Agamben 1999, 54). In this very different conception of the posthuman, 'content' is linked to the fortunes of art and the human itself (54). 'Artistic subjectivity without content', Agamben explains,

> is now the pure force of negation that everywhere and at all times affirms only itself as absolute freedom that mirrors itself in pure self-consciousness. And,

just as every content goes under in it, so the concrete space of the work disappears in it, the space in which once man's action and the world both found their reality in the image of the divine, and in which man's dwelling on earth used to take its diametrical measurement. (Agamben 1999, 56-57)

The experience is all the more voiding because the artist knows that 'artistic subjectivity is absolute essence, for which all subject matter is indifferent', such that 'the pure creative-formal principle, split from any content, is the absolute abstract inessence, which annihilates and dissolves every content in its continuous effort to transcend and actualize itself' (54).

There is more, of course. But perhaps the salient point will have emerged. The figure of the artist in our time is the one that, for Agamben, stands for the man without content. To this view, the artist is always already posthuman. He is always without himself. He is always split:

> If the artist now seeks his certainty in a particular content or faith, he is lying, because he knows that pure artistic subjectivity is the essence of everything; but if he seeks his reality in pure artistic subjectivity, he finds himself in the paradoxical condition of having to find his own essence precisely in the inessential, his content in what is mere form. His condition, then, is that of a radical split; and outside of this split, everything is a lie. (Agamben 1999, 54)

And, in one final thrust that drives the point home:

> The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on this side of himself. (Agamben 1999, 55)

It is as well to pull back from this rarefied idiom at this stage, and ask: how does all this help us understand *The Man without Qualities*, this novel based on a 'Baroque of the Void' (Musil 1997, 286) better? How can it complement a rethinking of posthumanism? Let us recall that the posthuman as Musil constructs it for Ulrich is an

experience of aimlessness—as if one were an artist, or genius, without content not for the reasons adduced by Agamben, but because apprehension of pure essence is untethered to any purpose. In the process, Ulrich becomes a man suavely at the end of his tether. That experience of dissociation is felt as a split, as disaffiliation from the human itself. Ulrich is the literary character who, well before Agamben's formulation of the man without content, lives Agamben's view that the 'crisis of art in our time' is in reality, a crisis of poetry, of ποίησιζ. That is because

> ποίησιζ does not designate here an art among others, but is the very name of man's *doing*, of that productive action of which artistic *doing* is only a privileged example, and which appears, today, to be unfolding its power on a planetary scale in the operation of technology and industrial production.' (Agamben 1999, 59)

Ulrich, as is well known, is un-productive, unengaged in doing (whether artistic or otherwise), and hence fully in the midst of the crisis diagnosed here. Without content, without qualities, he performs the disorienting coming together of a sterile will-to-poetry, unable to respond to the spirit of a fragment of Schelling's that expresses the spirit of humanism itself: 'Humanity is so to speak the higher meaning of our planet, the eye that it raises to the sky, the nerve that links this limb to the higher world' (quoted in Agamben 1999, 78). Musil sets up the same idea: 'Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view, which for such a long time considered man to be at the center of the universe but which has been fading away for centuries, has finally arrived at the "I" itself …' (Musil 1997, 159). Granted, both of these posthumanist experiences—that of Agamben's man without content and that of Musil's man without qualities—are extreme representations of contemporary predicaments. One is occasioned by the overweeningly felt encounter with 'the pure creative-formal principle' of art, the other by the pathological dismay occasioned by the

overwhelming experiencing of contemporary instantiations of technoscience and politics that appear entirely autonomous of any intervention Ulrich might bring to bear. In both the outcome is a dis-composing encounter with the posthuman, if by this we can now also infer, supplementary to all the term's extensions, the prospect of the exceeding of the measure of the human—to a degree where *doing* appears futile, and where neither departing from nor arriving at 'the I' appears viable. The old reassurances, including the timelessness of human nature (see Habermas 2003), are overcome by the awareness of the potential for a reengineering and retooling of *Dasein* itself and of those integrities of the human determined by body, place, and time. In regard to this it is significant that Agamben, who without invoking Musil very directly has to all intents and purposes glossed Ulrich's experience of alienation, is surprisingly close to rephrasing Lukács on the same author:

> Availability-toward-nothingness ... constitutes the most urgent critical appeal that the artistic consciousness of our time has expressed toward the alienated essence of the work of art. The split in the productive activity of man, the 'degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual work', is not overcome here but rather made extreme. Yet it is also starting from this self-suppression of the privileged status of 'artistic work', which now gathers the two sides of the halved apple of human pro-duction in their irreconcilable opposition, that it will be possible to exit the swamp of aesthetics and technics and restore to the poetic status of man on earth its original dimension. (Agamben 1999, 67)

In other words, we are up against the paradox that art, that human(ist) quality, may need to go unindulged for (post)human poetry to take root again.

What we have tried to show in this essay, in conclusion, is that these kinds of searching engagements with the posthuman are at least as readily (some might say more readily) encountered in literary and theoretical texts as in the counter-literary canons of posthumanism that we pointed to earlier. This is important, as it can motivate a resistance, if that were needed, to the field's orthodoxies being

overdetermined by technocultural considerations or by familiar tropes in science fiction and popular culture. It is actually possible to read posthumanism otherwise and (counter-)textually, through mediations of the very literary texts and aesthetics-referenced approaches that appear exceeded by the ubiquitous technological turn. In this respect, it is emblematic that the first time we encounter Ulrich is when we see him in 'the elegant serenity of a scholar's study with book-lined walls' (Musil 1997, 6). Ironically, we do so in a novel that '[n]obody is ashamed, yet, of not having read' (Kermode 1971, 182). This is not to suggest an opposition between the order of the lettered and the order of the digital. It is, rather, to promote awareness that recalling the prefigurations and explorations of the posthuman in literature and theoretical discourse, exemplified here through Musil and Agamben, amplifies and deepens posthumanism. It is Musil, after all, who notes early that most posthuman of scenarios: an age of disembodiment, in which 'a world of qualities without a man has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them' (Musil 1997, 158). In his novel it 'led directly to the barbaric fragmentation of the very self that was what made Ulrich a man without qualities, or qualities without a man' (Musil 1997, 666). To that world, to such characters, 'humanity is a mere buzzword' (Musil 1997, 521). There is a warning, there, and a psychology, which perhaps only literature can sound so acutely. The question then, of course, and the challenge to the instincts of literary culture, is whether reading Musil and Agamben is in fact an excuse for not reading the specific qualities and content of that posthuman condition whose immanence/imminence somehow becomes obscured by the reinscription of familiar operations within the humanities.