

THE CONFUSIONS
OF YOUNG TÖRLESS

ROBERT MUSIL

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY SHAUN WHITESIDE
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY J. M. COETZEE



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Robert Musil was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, in 1880. After abandoning military school he trained as a mathematician, behavioural psychologist, engineer and philosopher. His first novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, an early example of expressionistic writing drawing on his experience of military school, appeared in 1906. During the First World War he served as an officer in the Austrian Army on the Italian front. Having distinguished himself as a soldier, Musil forsook brilliant opportunities and chose, instead, to retire into his writing. His other works include the short stories of *Three Women* (1924) and a play, *The Enthusiasts* (1921). He is perhaps best known for his great novel, *The Man without Qualities* (1930-43), which established Musil as one of the great German writers of the twentieth century, whose work has been compared to Rilke and the Expressionists. This reputation, however, eluded him during his lifetime. His small private income was lost in the German inflation and he emigrated from Berlin, and then Vienna, in order to escape Nazism. He died exiled and impoverished in Switzerland in 1942.

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J. M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940, and educated in South Africa and the United States. His highly acclaimed books include *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), winner of the 1983 Booker Prize and the 1985 Prix Etranger Femina; *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), which was awarded the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, and *Disgrace* (1999), winner of the 1999 Booker Prize.

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Introduction

Robert Musil was born in 1880 in Klagenfurt, capital of the Austrian province of Carinthia. His mother, who came from the upper bourgeoisie, was a highly strung woman with an interest in the arts. His father was an engineer in the imperial administration who in his later years would be rewarded for a career of faithful service with elevation to the minor nobility. Musil Senior accepted without protest a liaison between his wife and a younger man, Heinrich Reiter, that began soon after his son's birth. Reiter later settled in with the Musils, in a *ménage à trois* that endured for a quarter of a century.

Musil himself was an only child. Younger and smaller than his classmates at school, he cultivated a physical toughness that lasted all his life. His home life seems to have been tempestuous; at the demand of his mother - and, it must be said, with the boy's enthusiastic agreement — he was sent at the age of eleven to board at a military *Unterrealschule* outside Vienna. From there he moved in 1891 to the *Oberrealschule* in Mährisch-Weisskirchen near Brno, capital of Moravia, where he spent a further three years. This school became the model for 'W.' in *Young Törless*.

Rather than follow a military career, Musil decided to study engineering, and at the age of seventeen enrolled in the *Technische Hochschule* in Brno, where his father now taught. Here he plunged into his scientific studies, disdaining the humanities and the kind of student attracted to the humanities. His diaries reveal him as preoccupied with matters of sex, but in unusually thoughtful ways. He found it difficult to accept the sexual role prescribed for him as a young man by the mores of his class, sowing his wild oats with prostitutes and working girls until it was time to make a bourgeois marriage. He began a relationship with a Czech girl named Herma Dietz who had worked in his grandmother's house; against the resistance of his mother and at the risk of losing his friends, he lived with Herma in Brno and later in Berlin. Choosing Herma constituted a major step in breaking the erotic spell his mother had over him. For some years Herma was the focus of his emotional life. The relationship — straightforward on Herma's side, more complex and ambivalent on Robert's — became the basis of the story 'Tonka', collected in *Three Women*.

In intellectual content, the education Musil had received at his military schools was decidedly inferior to the education offered by the classical *Gymnasia*. In Brno he began attending lectures on literature and going to concerts. What began as a project in catching up with his better-educated contemporaries soon turned into an absorbing intellectual adventure. The years 1898 to 1902 mark the first phase of Musil's literary apprenticeship. He identified particularly with the writers and intellectuals of the generation that flowered in the 1890s, active in various strands of the Modernist movement. He fell under the spell of Mallarmé and Maeterlinck; he rejected the naturalist premise that artwork should reflect a pre-existing reality. For philosophic support he turned to Kant, Schopenhauer and (particularly) Nietzsche. In his diaries he developed the artistic persona 'Monsieur le vivisecteur', exploring states of consciousness and emotional relations with his intellectual scalpel, practising his skills impartially on himself, his family and his friends.

Continuing, despite his literary aspirations, to plan for a career in engineering, he passed his examinations with distinction and moved to Stuttgart as a research assistant at the prestigious *Technische Hochschule*. But his work there bored him. While still writing technical papers, and inventing an instrument for use in optical experiments (he patented the device, hoping, rather unrealistically, that it would provide him with enough money to live on), he embarked on a novel, *The*

Confusions of Young Törless. He also began to lay the ground for a change in academic direction; in 1903 he finally abandoned engineering and left for Berlin to study philosophy and psychology.

Young Törless was completed in early 1905. After it had been turned down by three publishers, Musil sent it to Alfred Kerr, a respected Berlin critic. Kerr lent Musil his support, suggested revisions, and reviewed the book in glowing terms when it appeared in print in 1906. Despite the success of *Young Törless*, however, and despite the mark he was beginning to make in Berlin artistic circles, Musil felt too unsure of his talent to commit himself to a life of writing. He continued with his philosophical studies, taking his doctorate in 1908.

By this time he had met Martha Marcovaldi, a woman of Jewish descent seven years his senior, who had separated from her second husband. With Martha - an artist and intellectual in her own right, *au fait* with contemporary feminism - Musil established an intimate and intensely sexual relationship that lasted for the rest of his life. They were married in 1911, and took up residence in Vienna, where Musil had accepted the position of archivist at the *Technische Hochschule*.

In the same year Musil published his second book, *Unions*, consisting of the novellas 'The Perfecting of a Love' and 'The Temptation of Quiet Veronika'. These short pieces were composed in a state of obsessiveness whose basis was obscure to him; writing and revision occupied him day and night for two and a half years.

When war came, Musil served with distinction on the Italian front. After the war, troubled by a sense that the best years of his creative life were slipping away, he sketched out no fewer than twenty new works, including a series of satirical novels. A play, *The Visionaries* (1921), and a set of stories, *Three Women* (1924), won awards. He was elected vice-president of the Austrian branch of the International Organization of German Writers. Though not widely read, he was on the literary map.

Before long the projected satirical novels had been abandoned or absorbed into a master project: a novel in which the upper crust of Viennese society, oblivious of the dark clouds gathering on the horizon, discusses at length what form its next festival of self-congratulation should take. The novel was intended to give a 'grotesque' (Musil's word) vision of Austria on the eve of the World War. Supported financially by his publisher and by a society of admirers, he gave all his energies to *The Man without Qualities*.

The first volume came out in 1930, to so enthusiastic a reception in both Austria and Germany that Musil — a modest man in other respects — thought he might win the Nobel Prize. The continuation proved more intractable. Cajoled by his publisher, yet full of misgivings, he allowed an extended fragment to appear as the second volume in 1933. He began to fear he would never complete the work.

A move back to the livelier intellectual environment of Berlin was cut short by the coming to power of the Nazis. He and his wife returned to the ominous atmosphere of Vienna; he began to suffer from depression and poor health. In 1938 Austria was absorbed into the Third Reich. The couple moved to Switzerland. Switzerland was meant to be a staging-post *en route* to a home offered by Martha's daughter in the United States, but the entry of the United States into the war put paid to that plan. Along with tens of thousands of other exiles, they found themselves trapped.

'Switzerland is renowned for the freedom you can enjoy there,' observed Bertolt Brecht. 'The catch is, you have to be a tourist.' The myth of Switzerland as a land of asylum was badly damaged by its treatment of refugees during World War Two, when its first priority, overriding all humanitarian considerations, was not to antagonize Germany. Pointing out that his writings were banned in Germany and Austria, Musil pleaded for asylum on the grounds that he could earn a living as a writer nowhere else in the German-speaking world. Though allowed to stay, he never felt at home in Switzerland. He was little known there; he had no talent for self-promotion; the Swiss patronage

network disdained him. He and his wife survived on handouts. 'Today they ignore us. But once we are dead they will boast that they gave us asylum,' remarked Musil bitterly to Ignazio Silone. Depressed, he could make no headway with the novel. In 1942, at the age of sixty-one, after a bout of vigorous exercise on the trampoline, he had a stroke and died.

'He thought he had a long life before him,' said his widow. 'The worst is, an unbelievable body of material — sketches, notes, aphorisms, novel chapters, diaries - is left behind, of which only he could have made sense.' Turned away by commercial publishers, she privately published a third and final volume of the novel, consisting of fragments in no hard and fast order.

Musil belonged to a generation of German intellectuals who experienced the successive phases of the breakdown of the European order between 1890 and 1945 with particular immediacy: first, the premonitory crisis in the arts, giving rise to the various Modernist reactions; then the war and the revolutions spawned by the war, which destroyed both traditional and liberal institutions; and finally the rudderless post-war years, culminating in the Fascist seizure of power. *The Man without Qualities* — a book to some extent overtaken by history during its writing — set out to diagnose this breakdown, which Musil more and more came to see as originating in the failure of Europe's liberal elite since the 1870s to recognize that the social and political doctrines inherited from the Enlightenment were not adequate to the new mass civilization growing up in the cities.

To Musil, the most stubbornly retrogressive feature of German culture (of which Austrian culture was a part - he did not take seriously the idea of an autonomous Austrian culture) was its tendency to compartmentalize intellect from feeling, to favour an unreflective stupidity of the emotions. He saw this split most clearly among the scientists with whom he worked, men of intellect living coarse emotional lives. The education of the senses through a refining of erotic life seemed to him to hold the most immediate promise of lifting society to a higher ethical plane. He deplored the rigid sexual roles that bourgeois mores laid down for women and men. 'Whole countries of the soul have been lost and submerged as a consequence,' he wrote.

Because of the concentration in his work, from *Young Törless* onwards, on the obscurer workings of sexual desire, Musil is often thought of as a Freudian. But he himself acknowledged no such debt. He disliked the cultishness of psychoanalysis, disapproved of its sweeping claims and its unscientific standards of proof. He preferred a psychology of what he ironically called the 'shallow' — that is, experimental - variety.

Both Musil and Freud were in fact part of a larger movement in European thought. Both were sceptical of the power of reason to guide human conduct; both were diagnosticians of *fin de siècle* Central European civilization and its discontents; and both assumed the dark continent of the feminine psyche as theirs to explore. To Musil, Freud was a rival rather than a source.

His preferred guide in the realm of the unconscious was Nietzsche ('master of the floating life within', as he called him). In Nietzsche Musil found an approach to questions of morality that went beyond a simple polarity of good and evil; a recognition that art can in itself be a form of intellectual exploration; and a mode of philosophizing, aphoristic rather than systematic, that suited his own sceptical temperament. The tradition of fictional realism had never been strong in Germany; as Musil developed as a writer, his fiction became increasingly essayistic in structure, with only perfunctory gestures in the direction of realistic narrative

Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless (*Verwirrungen* are perplexities, troubled states of mind)

Zögling is a rather formal term, with upper-class overtones, for a boarder at a school) is built around history of sadistic victimization at an elite boys' academy. More specifically, it is an account of crisis that one of the boys, Törless (his first name is never given), experiences as a result of participating in the deliberate humiliation and breaking down of a fellow student, Basini, who is caught stealing. The exploration of this inner crisis, moral, psychological, and ultimately epistemological, rendered largely from within Törless's own consciousness, makes up the substance of the novel.

In the end Törless has his own breakdown and is discreetly removed from the school. Törless's sense is that he has weathered the storm and come through. But it is not clear how far we are intended to trust his newfound confidence, since it seems to be based on a decision that the only way of getting along in the world is not to peer too closely into the abysses opened up in us by extreme experience, particularly sexual experience. The single glimpse we are allowed of Törless in later life suggests that he has become not necessarily a wiser or a better man, merely a more prudent one.

In later life Musil denied that *Young Törless* was about youthful experiences of his own, or even about adolescence in general. 'The reality one is describing is always only a pretext,' he said, meaning (one presumes) that the action of the novel was simply a vehicle to allow him to explore a certain state of mind. Nevertheless, the originals of Basini and of his tormentors Beineberg and Reiting can easily be identified among the boys Musil knew at Mährisch-Weiskirchen, while one of Törless's deeper confusions - about the nature of his feelings towards his mother — is mirrored in Musil's own early diaries. The gap between Törless's own outward sang-froid and the seething forces within him, between the well-regulated daily life at school and the eerie nocturnal floggings in the attic, has its parallel in the gap between the orderly bourgeois front presented by Törless's parents and what he darkly knows must go on in the privacy of their bedroom.

The master metaphor that Musil uses for all these incommensurabilities comes from Törless's studies in mathematics. Living side by side with the real numbers, and somehow made to interlock with them by the operations of mathematical reasoning, are the imaginary numbers, numbers which have no referent in the real world. Adults, led by Törless's teachers, seem to have no trouble in bringing together the domains of the real and the imaginary (to Törless the vertiginous and unimaginable). In the euphoric speech he makes to the assembled teachers at the end of the book Törless claims to have resolved this confusion in his mind ('I know that I was indeed mistaken') and to have emerged safely into young adulthood ('I'm not afraid of anything any more. I know: things are things and will remain so for ever'). His teachers understand nothing of what he says: they have either never had experiences like his, or have tightly repressed them. Törless is unusual in the thoroughness with which he has faced - or been driven to face - the darkness within; whether or not we regard his self-betrayal his later adoption of the pose of what Musil as narrator calls the 'aesthetically inclined intellectual', he is certainly, in his confused youth ('confusion', *Verwirrung*, is a word Musil uses with continual irony), the figure of the artist in the modern world, exploring the remoter shores of experience and bringing back his reports.

Despite the amorality that makes *Young Törless* so much a product of its age, the moral questions raised by the story will not go away. Beineberg, the more intellectually inclined of Törless's comrades, has a vulgar-Nietzschean, proto-Fascist justification for what they do to Basini: the three of them belong to a new generation to which the old rules do not apply ('the soul has changed'); as for pity, pity is one of the lower impulses and must be conquered. Törless is not Beineberg. Nevertheless his own particular perversity — making Basini talk about what has been done to him - is morally no better than the whippings the other two carry out; while in his own homosexual acts with Basini he

at pains to show the boy no tenderness.

~~In a world in which there are no more God-given rules, in which it has fallen to the philosopher~~ artist to give the lead, should the artist's explorations include acting out his own darker impulses, seeing where they will take him? Does art always trump morality? This early work of Musil's offers the question, but answers it in only in the most uncertain way.

Musil did not disown *Young Törless*. On the contrary, he continued to look back with surprise at what he had been able to achieve, even at a technical level, at so early an age. The master metaphor of the book, with its implication that the foundations of our real, reasonable, everyday world have no real, reasonable existence, continues to be explored in *The Man without Qualities*, though in a spirit more of paradox and irony than of anguish. 'A person must believe he is something more in order to be capable of being what he is,' suggests Ulrich, the central character. 'The present is nothing but a hypothesis that one has not yet finished with.' Musil's work, from beginning to end, is of a piece: the evolving record of a confrontation between a man of supremely intelligent sensibility and the times that gave birth to him, times he would justly call 'accursed'.

'As soon as we put something into words, we devalue it in a strange way. We think we have plunged into the depths of the abyss, and when we return to the surface the drop of water on our pale fingertips no longer resembles the sea from which it comes. We delude ourselves that we have discovered a wonderful treasure trove, and when we return to the light of day we find that we have brought back only false stones and shards of glass; and yet the treasure goes on glimmering in the dark, unaltered.'

-Maeterlinck

A little station on the stretch leading towards Russia.

Infinitely straight, four parallel iron tracks ran in both directions, between the yellow gravel of the wide track. Alongside each, like a dirty shadow, was the dark line burned into the ground by the exhaust.

Behind the low, oil-painted station building a wide, rutted road led down to the ramp. Its edge faded into the flat-trodden ground all around it, and could only be identified by two rows of acacia trees standing on either side, their parched leaves asphyxiated by dust and soot.

Whether it was these sad colours, or whether it was the wan, faint light of the afternoon sun, exhausted by the haze: there was something indifferent, lifeless, mechanical about both objects and people, as though they had been taken from the stage of a puppet theatre. From time to time, at regular intervals, the station manager stepped out of his office and, each time with an identical turn of his head, looked up the broad stretch of track to the signals of the guard's hut, which still failed to announce the approach of the express train that had been subject to a long delay at the border; then with the same movement of his arm he drew out his pocket watch, shook his head and disappeared again; like the coming and going of the figures that step out of old church clocks to announce the hour.

On the wide, well-trodden strip between the rails and the buildings a cheerful party of young people was taking a stroll, walking on either side of an elderly couple who formed the centre of the rather loud conversation. But even the merriment of the group was not genuine; the sound of hearty laughter seemed to fall silent after a few paces, sinking to the ground as though it had encountered some stubborn and invisible obstacle.

Behind her dense veil, Frau Törless - this was the lady of about forty - hid eyes that were sad and red from crying. She was saying goodbye. And once again it was hard for her to leave her only child among strangers for so long, unable to watch over her darling herself.

For the little town was a long way from their home, in the eastern part of the Empire, in the midst of dry and sparsely populated farm land.

The reason why Frau Törless had to bear the fact of her son being in such remote and inhospitable foreign parts was that the town was home to a famous boarding-school built the previous century on the site of a religious foundation. Since that time it had been left where it was, probably to protect the growing adolescents from the corrupting influences of a big city.

For it was here that the sons of the country's best families received their education, to go on to university after they left the institute, or to join the army or the civil service. For all of these purposes as well as for social contact in the circles of respectable society, it was thought to be a particular advantage to have been educated at the seminary in W.

Four years previously these considerations had led Herr and Frau Törless to yield to their son's ambitious urgings and arrange for him to receive a place at the school.

This decision had later cost many tears. Because almost since the moment when the door of the institute had shut irrevocably behind him, little Törless suffered from terrible, passionate homesickness. Neither lessons, nor games in the lush, spacious meadows of the park, nor the other distractions offered by the school, held his attention; he barely took part in them. He saw everything as though through a veil, and during the day he often had trouble choking back a persistent sob; but at night he always cried himself to sleep.

He wrote letters home, almost every day, and he lived only in those letters; everything else that he did seemed to him only a shadowy, meaningless set of events, indifferent stages like the marks on

clock face. But when he wrote he felt something distinctive, exclusive within him; like an island full of wonderful suns and colours, something surged up within him out of the sea of grey sensations that crowded around him with cold indifference day after day. And if by day, at games or in class, he remembered that he would write his letter in the evening, he felt as though he was wearing, hidden on his back, an invisible chain, a golden key with which, if no one was looking, he would be able to open a gate into the most wonderful gardens.

The strange thing about it was that he found something new and alarming in this sudden, consuming affection for his parents. He had never previously been aware of it, he had happily gone to the institute of his own free will, indeed he had laughed when his mother had been unable to contain her tears at their first farewell, and only after he had been alone for a few days and felt comparatively at ease did it suddenly surface in him with elemental force.

He thought it was homesickness, a longing for his parents. But actually it was something much more vague and complex. Because in fact it no longer contained the 'object of that longing', the image of his parents. I mean that three-dimensional memory, not merely mental but physical as well, of a loved one, which addresses all the senses and is stored in all the senses, in such a way that one can do nothing without feeling the other person's presence, silent and invisible, at one's side. This memory soon died away like an echo that has gone on reverberating for only a short while. Törless could no longer, for example, call up the image of his 'dear, dear parents' - as he usually thought of them before his mind's eye. Whenever he tried to do so, a boundless pain welled up within him in its place, torturing him with its yearning and yet holding him under its spell, because its hot flames both pained and delighted him. More and more, the thought of his parents became a mere pretext for generating within himself that egoistic suffering which enfolded him in its voluptuous pride as though he were in a secluded chapel where, surrounded by hundreds of flaming candles and hundreds of eyes of holy images, incense is strewn among the flagellants intent on their self-inflicted torture.

Then, when his 'homesickness' became less violent and gradually faded away, this trait of his greatness was quite apparent. The disappearance of his yearning did not bring with it any long-awaited contentment but left a void in the soul of young Törless. And in that nothingness, that incompleteness, he recognized that what he had lost was not merely longing but something positive, a spiritual strength, something that had blossomed and faded within him under the cover of pain.

But now it was over, and that source of a first superior bliss had made itself known to him only by running dry.

Now the passionate traces of his awakening soul vanished once more from his letters, to make way for detailed descriptions of life in the institute and the new friends he had made.

He himself felt impoverished and bare, like a tree experiencing its first winter after a fruitless blossoming.

But his parents were contented. They loved him with a strong, unthinking, animal tenderness. Whenever he had holidays from the boarding-school, his mother felt the house was empty and deserted again after he left, and she would walk through the rooms with tears in her eyes for days after those visits, here and there caressing an object on which the boy's eyes had rested, or which his fingers had held. And both of his parents would each have allowed themselves to be torn to pieces for his sake.

The clumsy emotion and passionate, defiant grief in his first letters painfully preoccupied them and sent them into a state of fraught hypersensitivity; the cheerful, contented thoughtlessness that followed made them happy again as well, and, feeling that a crisis had been averted, they supported him to the best of their abilities.

In neither of these states did they recognize the symptom of a particular spiritual development. Instead they had seen both their son's pain and its abatement as being more or less a natural consequence of the prevailing conditions in the school. They failed to see that this was their son's first unsuccessful attempt, thrown upon his own devices, to develop his own inner strength.

Törless was very discontented now, and groped around in vain for something he might use as support.

One episode from this time was characteristic of what was being prepared within Törless, to develop further at a later stage.

One day young Prince H., a member of one of the most influential, oldest and most conservative aristocratic families in the Empire, joined the school.

Everyone else found his gentle eyes sentimental and affected; they mocked as effeminate the way he jutted one hip out when he stood, and played slowly with his fingers when he talked. But they particularly derided him for having been brought to the boarding-school not by his parents, but by his former teacher, a doctor of theology and a member of a religious order.

But he had made a very strong impression on Törless from the first. Perhaps the fact that he was prince and thus presentable at court had something to do with it. At any rate Törless was now meeting a very different kind of person.

The aura of devotional practices and the silence of an old aristocratic castle seemed somehow to linger around the prince. When he walked, it was with soft, lithe movements, with that contraction of the body that goes together with the habit of walking erect through a suite of empty halls, where anyone else would seem to bump into unseen corners in the empty space.

Keeping company with the prince thus became a source of refined psychological pleasure for Törless. Dawning within him was the kind of knowledge of human nature that teaches us to know and appreciate another person by the fall of his voice, the way he picks something up, even the timbre of his silence and the expression of the physical posture with which he occupies a space; in short, by the agile way, barely tangible and yet the only truly complete way, of being something spiritual and human, which is layered around the tangible, effable core as around a bare skeleton, and by means of that appreciation to anticipate his mental personality.

During this brief time Törless lived as though in an idyll. He did not take exception to his new friend's religious nature, which was actually something quite alien to him, coming as he did from a free-thinking, bourgeois family. Instead he accepted it without further ado, indeed he even considered it a peculiar distinction on the prince's part, because it intensified that person's essence, which he felt to be so dissimilar to his own as to be beyond comparison.

In the prince's company he felt as though he were in a chapel some distance from the beaten track where the idea that he didn't really belong there vanished in the face of the pleasure of seeing daylight through stained-glass windows and letting his eye glide over the useless, gilded decoration that had accumulated in the boy's soul until he had a vague picture of that soul, as though he were drawing with his finger a beautiful arabesque which made no sense to him but which looped according to unknown rules.

Then the two boys suddenly fell out.

It had been a blunder, as Törless would later have to admit.

They had been arguing about religious matters. And that moment had been the end of everything.

Because, as though it was quite independent of him, Törless's intellect had lashed out at the gentle prince. He heaped upon him the ridicule of the rationalist, like a barbarian he smashed the filigree structure in which the boy's soul was housed, and they parted in anger.

Since that time they had not spoken a word to one another. Törless was dimly aware that he had done something idiotic, and a vague, emotional insight told him that the wooden ruler of rationalism had shattered something fine and delightful at an untimely moment. But that was something entirely outside his power. A kind of longing for the past remained with him, and probably would for ever, but he seemed to have entered a different stream, which was carrying him further and further away from it.

And then, after a while, the prince, who had not been happy there, left the school.

Now Törless's world became very empty and boring. But he had grown older in the meantime, and the first signs of sexual maturity were beginning, slowly and darkly, to well up within him. During this stage of his development he formed some new friendships commensurate with his age, which would later be of very great importance to him. With Beineberg and Reiting, with Mote and Hofmeier, the very same young people with whom he was today accompanying his parents to the railway station.

Curiously, they were the worst of his year, talented and, obviously, of good family, but sometimes wild and unruly to the point of brutality. And if it was their company that now held Törless enthralled, this was probably due to his own lack of independence, which had grown very severe since his break with the prince. It could even be seen as a direct continuation of that changed direction, because, like it, it signified a fear of excessively subtle sentimentalities; and with such feelings the nature of his other classmates formed a healthy, sturdy, life-embracing contrast.

Törless yielded entirely to their influence, because his intellectual situation was more or less that of a child by his age, at a Gymnasium, one will have read Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare, perhaps even the modern authors. That reading re-emerges, half-digested, through the fingertips. Roman tragedies are produced, or terribly sensitive lyrical effusions which stride across whole pages, as though dressed in the finest and most delicate lace: things which are inherently ridiculous, but which have an inestimable value for the soundness of a young person's development. For these associations and borrowed emotions, coming as they do from outside, carry young people over the dangerously spongy spiritual ground of the years during which one must signify something to oneself, while one is still too incomplete really to signify anything at all. It is of no consequence whether anything remains of this or whether it does not; for each of us comes to terms with himself, and the only danger lies in this transitional age. If one were to make a young person aware of how ridiculous he was, the ground would swallow him up, or else he would plummet like a sleepwalker who has been awoken, and who suddenly sees nothing but the void.

That illusion, that trick favouring personal development, was missing from the institute. For although the library contained the classics, these were thought to be boring, and otherwise it held nothing but volumes of sentimental short stories and supposedly humorous tales of the military life.

Young Törless had read his way through the lot in his greed for books, and some tritely tender notion from one short story or another would sometimes linger with him for a while, but it had no influence, no real influence, on his character.

It seemed at the time as though he had no character whatsoever.

Under the influence of this reading, for example, he himself wrote the occasional little story or began the occasional romantic epic. So excited was he about the amorous sufferings of his heroes that

his cheeks blushed, his pulse quickened and his eyes gleamed.

~~But when he set aside his pen it was all over; in a sense his mind lived only in motion. So he was~~ also able to jot down a poem or a story at any time, in response to any stimulus. It excited him, but he never took it entirely seriously, and the activity did not strike him as important. Nothing of it entered his character, and it did not spring from it either. It was only in response to some external compulsion that he had any sensations beyond indifference, just as an actor needs the compulsion that a role imposes upon him.

These were cerebral reactions. But that which we take to be a person's character or soul, his inner line or colour, compared to which his thoughts, decisions and actions, being of little significance, appear random and interchangeable — that which had, for example, brought Törless together with the prince in the face of all rational judgement - that fixed, final backdrop, was entirely lacking in Törless at this time.

In his classmates it was the enjoyment of sport, an animal quality, that meant they had no need of such a thing, a gap filled, in the Gymnasium, by play with literature.

But Törless was too intellectual for the former, and for the latter, life in the institute, which required that its pupils be constantly ready to engage in quarrels and fist-fights, made him too sensitive to the absurdity of such borrowed emotions. Thus his nature assumed a certain vagueness, an inner helplessness, which meant that he could not find out where he was.

He attached himself to his new friends because he was impressed by their wildness. Since he was ambitious he tried every now and again to outdo them. But each time he stopped half-way, and suffered a certain amount of ridicule as a consequence. He would then feel intimidated again. His whole life during that critical period really consisted only in his repeated attempts to emulate his rough, more masculine friends, and at the same time in a deep and inward indifference towards his own efforts.

Now, when his parents visited him, he was quiet and shy while they were on their own. He drew away from his mother's tender caresses, always under a different pretext. He would really have loved to yield to them, but he was ashamed, as though his classmates' eyes were upon him.

His parents took it as the awkwardness of the developing years. In the afternoon the whole noisy horde would turn up. They played cards, ate, drank, told anecdotes about the teachers and smoked the cigarettes that the Hofrat¹ had brought from the capital.

This merriment pleased the couple and put their minds at rest.

They did not know that times could sometimes be different for Törless. And, recently, that was true more and more often. There were moments when life in the institute left him utterly indifferent. The putty of all of his day-to-day worries dissolved, and the hours of his life fell apart with no internal connection.

Often he sat for a long time - in gloomy reflection — hunched over himself, so to speak.

This time, as usual, the visit had lasted two days. They had eaten, smoked and gone on an outing, and now the express train was to bring the couple back to the capital.

A quiet rumble in the rails announced its approach, and the signals of the bell on the roof of the station building rang relentlessly in the ear of Frau Törless.

'Isn't that right, my dear Beineberg? You will look out for my boy for me?' Hofrat Törless turned towards young Baron Beineberg, a tall, bony lad with sticking-out ears, but with expressive, clever eyes.

Little Törless pulled a face at such presumption, and Beineberg grinned, both flattered and enjoying his friend's discomfort.

'Generally speaking,' — the Hofrat turned to the others — 'I should like to ask you all to let me know if anything were to happen to my son.'

This drew from young Törless an infinitely bored: 'But, Papa, what could happen to me?' But he was used to letting this excess of concern wash over him every time they said goodbye.

The others, in the meantime, clicked their heels, drawing their elegant swords stiffly to their sides, and the Hofrat added, 'You can never know what lies ahead, and the idea of being immediately informed of anything would be a great consolation to me; after all, my son, you might not be in a position to write.'

Then the train pulled in. Hofrat Törless embraced his son, Frau von Törless pressed her veil tightly to her face to hide her tears, the friends took their leave one by one, and then the guard shut the coach door.

For one last time the couple saw the high, bare rear façade of the institute building - the massive long wall surrounding the grounds, and then on both sides there were only greyish-brown fields and the occasional solitary fruit tree.

In the meantime the young people had left the station and were walking two abreast on either side of the road — in that way they avoided at least the densest and harshest of the dust - towards the town without saying a great deal to one another.

It was past five o'clock, and a cold, grave atmosphere was falling across the fields, a harbinger of evening.

Törless became very sad.

Perhaps it was down to his parents' departure, although perhaps it might only have been the dull, chilly melancholy that now lay heavily upon the whole of the surrounding landscape, and even as little as a few paces away blurred the shapes of objects with heavy, lacklustre colours.

The same terrible apathy that had lain upon everything all afternoon now crept towards him over the plain, and behind it, like a slimy trail, the mist that clung to the newly ploughed land and lead-grey turnip fields.

Törless looked neither right nor left, but he could feel it. Step after step he placed his feet in the tracks that the boy ahead of him had made in the dust - and that was how he felt things were: as if that was how they had to be: a stony compulsion that captured and compressed the whole of his life in this movement - one step after the other — along this single line, along this narrow strip running through the dust.

When they stopped at a crossing, where a second path met their own in a circular patch of firm, trodden earth, and when a ramshackle signpost loomed crookedly into the air, that line, forming such a contrast with its surroundings, had the effect on Törless of a cry of desperation.

Again they walked on. Törless thought of his parents, of acquaintances, of life. At that time of day people were dressing for a party or deciding to go to the theatre. And afterwards they would go to the restaurant, listen to a band, visit a café. One would meet an interesting person. A romantic adventure would keep one in a state of expectation until the morning. Life keeps rolling out new and unexpected things like some marvellous wheel ...

Törless sighed at this thought, and with each step that brought him closer to the confinement of the institute something inside him twisted tighter and tighter.

Now the bell was ringing in his ears. He feared nothing as much as that bell, which announced the end of the day once and for all — like a brutal knife slash.

He wasn't having any experiences, he reflected, and his life was fading away in perpetual apathy but that bell added a note of mockery, and made him tremble with impotent fury about himself, his fate, the buried day.

From this point on you can experience nothing at all, for twelve hours you will experience nothing for twelve hours you are dead .. That was what the bell meant.

When the party of young people reached the first low, hut-like houses, that dull brooding fled from Törless. As if seized by sudden interest, he raised his head and strained to see into the hazy interior of the dirty little buildings they were passing.

At the doors of most of them stood women, in aprons and coarse shirts, with broad, dirty feet and bare brown arms.

If they were young and sturdy, they called out some coarse Slavic jibe, nudged each other and giggled about the 'young gentlemen'. Sometimes one of the girls cried out, if someone had brushed her breast too hard in passing, or replied with a laughing insult to a slap on the thigh. Some of them only watched after the rushing boys with serious and angry expressions; and if he happened to have joined them, the farmer would smile in embarrassment, half unsure of himself, half good-natured.

Törless didn't join in with the high-spirited, precocious manliness of his friends.

The reason for that probably lay partly in a certain shyness where sexual matters were concerned common to almost all only children, but it lay more in his particular kind of sensual temperament which was more hidden, more powerful and darker in tone than that of his friends, more severe in its expression.

While the others pretended to be shameless with the women, almost more in order to appear 'smarter' than out of any real desire, the soul of silent little Törless was churned up and lashed by genuine shamelessness.

He looked through the little windows and warped, narrow doorways into the interiors of the houses with such a burning gaze that it was as though a fine net was constantly dancing before his eyes.

Nearly naked children rolled about in the mud of the farmyards, here and there the skirt of a working woman revealed the backs of her knees, or a heavy breast pressed stiffly into the canvas folds of her shirt. And, as though all of this was taking place in a quite different, animal, oppressive atmosphere, there flowed from the hallways of the houses a sluggish, heavy air, which Törless greedily inhaled.

He thought of old paintings he had seen in museums without really understanding them. He was waiting for something, just as he had always waited, when looking at such paintings, for something that had never happened. For what ...?... Something surprising, something he had never seen; a terrible sight that he could not even imagine; something with a terrible, animal sensuality, something that would grip him as though with claws and tear him to pieces beginning with his eyes; an experience that must have something to do, in a way that was still far from clear to him, with the dirty pinafore of the women, with their rough hands, with their low-ceilinged rooms, with ... with the farmyard filth ... No, no ... the only thing he could feel now was the fiery net before his eyes; the words didn't capture it; it isn't nearly as bad as words make it seem; it's something quite mute - a choking in the throat, a barely perceptible thought — and only if one really wanted to say it with words would it come out like that. But even then it bears only a remote resemblance, as though in a vast enlargement

in which one not only sees everything more clearly, but even things that aren't there ... And yet it was something to be ashamed of.

'Is the little one homesick?' The sudden, mocking question came from von Reiting, tall and two years older, who had noticed Törless's silence and gloomy eyes. Törless gave a false and embarrassed smile and he felt as though the malicious Reiting had been listening in to what had been going on with him.

He didn't reply. But by now they had reached the little town's cobbled church square, where they parted.

Törless and Beineberg did not yet want to go back to the institute, while the others had no permit to stay out any longer and went home.

The two of them had stopped off at the café.

There they sat at a little round-topped table beside a window looking out on to the garden, beneath a gas chandelier whose lights hummed quietly behind their milky glass spheres.

They had made themselves comfortable, they had their glasses filled with different kinds of schnapps, smoked cigarettes, ate some pastries in between and enjoyed the contentment of being the only guests. For if there was anyone else there at all, it was someone sitting on his own over a glass of wine in one of the back rooms; here at the front it was quiet, and even the fat, elderly owner seemed to have fallen asleep behind her counter.

Törless looked — just vaguely - through the window - out into the empty garden, which was gradually getting darker.

Beineberg was telling stories. About India, as usual. Because his father, who was a general, had been there as a young officer in the service of the English. And he had not only, like other Europeans, brought back carvings, weavings and little manufactured idols, he had also sensed and retained something of the bizarre and mysterious half-sleep of esoteric Buddhism. Whatever he had learned there and later added to by reading he had passed on to his son, from his childhood onwards.

His way of reading was peculiar. He was a cavalry officer and had no great love of books in general, holding novels and philosophy equally in contempt. If he read, he did not want to read about opinions and contentious issues; rather, when he opened books he wanted to step as if through a secret port into the midst of the rarest insights. They had to be books the mere possession of which was like the secret sign of an order, and like a guarantee of unearthly revelations. And that he found only in books of Indian philosophy, which did not seem mere books to him, but revelations, reality — key words like the alchemical texts and the magic books of the Middle Ages.

This healthy and active man, who carried out his duties to the letter and also managed to ride his three horses almost every day, locked himself in with those books, usually towards evening.

Then he would select a passage at random and ponder whether its most secret meaning might at some time be revealed to him. And he had never been disappointed, however often he had to concede that he had penetrated no further than the forecourt of the consecrated temple.

So something like an aura of solemn mystery floated around this wiry, tanned, outdoor man. His conviction that he was on the threshold of a shatteringly great revelation early each evening gave him a reserved superiority. His eyes were not dreamy, but calm and hard. Their expression had been formed by his habit of reading books in which not a single word could be displaced without disturbing its esoteric significance, by carefully and attentively reading each sentence for its meaning and doubt

meaning.

Only every now and again did his thoughts lose themselves in a half-sleep of benevolent melancholy. That happened whenever he thought of the secret cult devoted to the originals of the writings before him, and the miracles that had issued from them and moved thousands of people. And those people, because of the great distance separating him from them, now appeared to him as brothers, while he despised those who surrounded him, and whom he saw down to their smallest details. At such times he became ill-tempered. He was oppressed by the thought that his life was condemned to run its course far from the wellsprings of the holy powers, his efforts condemned perhaps to wane through adverse conditions. But when he had spent a while sitting sadly over his books, a strange thing happened to his mood. His melancholy lost nothing of its heaviness; on the contrary, its sadness intensified, but it no longer oppressed him. He felt more forlorn and isolated than ever, but in his melancholy there was a refined pleasure, a pride in doing something strange, serving a deity that no one understood. And then, even fleetingly, something might gleam in his eyes that recalled the madness of religious ecstasy.

Beineberg had talked himself out. The image of his eccentric father lived on in him in a kind of distorting enlargement. Each trait was preserved; but what might originally have been merely a mood in his father, one that was nurtured and intensified for the sake of its exclusiveness, had burgeoned in his son into a fantastic hope. His father's peculiarity, which might originally have meant only the last refuge of his individuality, which each of us must create for himself even if only in his choice of clothes, so as to have something that distinguishes him from others, had, in his son, become a firm conviction that he could achieve domination through unusual spiritual powers.

Törless was familiar enough with these conversations. They passed him by and barely touched him. He had now half turned away from the window and was studying Beineberg, who was rolling himself a cigarette. And again he felt that curious disgust for Beineberg that sometimes surged up within him. But those slender, dark hands, which were skilfully rolling the tobacco in the paper, were actually beautiful. Thin fingers, oval, beautifully arched nails: there was a certain elegance to them. And in the dark brown eyes. And there was elegance, too, in the elongated slenderness of the boy's whole body. Of course - his ears did stick out a great deal, his face was small and irregular, and the overall impression of his head was like a bat's. However - and Törless felt this very clearly as he weighed up the details against each other - it was not the ugly details so much as the more attractive ones that unsettled him so peculiarly.

The gauntness of his body - Beineberg himself was forever praising the steely, slim legs of Homer's athletes which he took as his model. Törless had not yet made up his mind about this, and no satisfactory comparison occurred to him now. He wanted to stare keenly at Beineberg, but Beineberg would have noticed, and he would have had to start some conversation or other. But precisely in that way — only half looking at him and half completing the picture in his imagination — the difference struck him. If he imagined the clothes away from Beineberg's body, it was almost impossible to maintain the idea of a tranquil slenderness; instead images momentarily came to him of twisting movements, a distortion of the limbs and contortion of the spine, such as one sees in ancient representations of martyrdom or in the grotesque displays of fairground artistes.

Beineberg's hands, too, which he could equally well have visualized in some shapely gesture, he could only imagine in a fiddling agitation. And it was upon those hands, actually the most beautiful thing about Beineberg, that his greatest disgust was focused. There was something indecent about

them. That was probably the right word. And there was also something indecent in the impression of dislocation that his body produced. In a sense it only appeared to collect in his hands, and it seemed to radiate from them like the presentiment of a touch, which sent a twinge of nausea over Törless's skin. He himself was amazed by this idea, and a little shocked. Because this was the second time that day that something sexual had forced its way, unsuspected and without any real relevance, between his thoughts.

Beineberg had picked up a newspaper, and Törless was now able to take a good look at him.

In fact he could hardly find anything that might have served even partly as an excuse for the sudden appearance of such a stream of thoughts.

And yet his discomfort, unfounded though it was, became increasingly vivid. Not ten minutes of silence had passed between the two of them, and yet Törless felt that his disgust had already intensified to an extreme. It seemed for the first time to express an underlying mood, an underlying relationship between himself and Beineberg; a suspicion which had always been present, lying in wait, and seemed all of a sudden to have risen to the surface and become a conscious sensation.

The situation between them became ever more intense. Insults for which he knew no words sprang into Törless's mind. He was unsettled by a kind of shame, as though something had actually happened between him and Beineberg. His fingers began to drum uneasily on the tabletop.

Finally, to rid himself of that strange state of mind, he looked out of the window again.

Now Beineberg looked up from the newspaper; then he read out some passage or other, set the paper aside and yawned.

Once the silence was broken, the compulsion that had been weighing upon Törless was broken as well. Now casual words swept that moment away and erased it. It had been a sudden moment of alertness, which now made way for the old indifference ...

'How much time do we have left?' asked Törless.

'Two and a half hours.'

Then, with a shiver, he hunched his shoulders. Once again he felt the paralysing force of the confinement that awaited him. The timetable, daily association with his friends. Even that disgust for Beineberg, which seemed for a moment to have created a new situation, would cease to be.

'... What's for dinner tonight?'

'I don't know.'

'What subjects do we have tomorrow?'

'Maths.'

'Oh? Did we have any homework?'

'Yes, a few new theorems in trigonometry; but you'll manage, they're nothing special.'

'And then?'

'Divinity.'

'Divinity? Oh yes. That's going to be interesting again ... When I get into my stride I think I could just as easily prove that twice two is five as that there can be only one God ...'

Beineberg looked mockingly up at Törless. 'You're really funny about that; it almost seems to me that it even gives you pleasure. Anyway, there's a flash of eagerness shining in your eyes -'

'Why not? Isn't it great? There always comes a point where you don't know whether you're lying or whether what you've invented is more truthful than you are yourself.'

'How's that?'

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