

## Literature as ethics: Stanley Cavell, Robert Musil, and the scope of moral perfectionism

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“But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?”<sup>1</sup> With this pointed question the American philosopher Stanley Cavell famously ended his monumental work *The Claim of Reason* (1979), thereby expressing his vision for the relation between philosophy and literature. At the very beginning of that work he also, almost as famously, said that he had “wished to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts”.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one has to be familiar with the analytical tradition of philosophy to fully appreciate just how provocative utterances like these were at the time. Cavell himself was educated in this tradition and took his point of departure in ordinary language philosophy as developed by Wittgenstein and Austin, but already in his first book of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), he turned to unorthodox philosophical themes and launched perceptive readings of Shakespeare and Beckett along with essays on music and aesthetics more generally. Since then, that is for almost fifty years, Cavell has been working in the field between philosophy and literature, writing what is neither exactly philosophy nor exactly literary criticism as we know them, but expanding our understanding of both. His work is notoriously difficult to summarize because it always consists of meticulous close readings, regardless of whether he turns to a canonical philosophical text by Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, or Heidegger or to his American forefathers Thoreau and Emerson, to Shakespeare and the romanticists or to film comedy and melodrama. It could be said, however, that two interrelated main concerns have inspired his work from the beginning to the present: One is his persistent attempt to show that philosophical skepticism, understood as the doubting of the existence of the external world and other minds, cannot and should not be refuted because it is only the intellectualization

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell: *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p. 496.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of a much more fundamental uneasiness in the relation between self and world and self and others, a relation that he tries to capture with the dual concepts of avoidance and acknowledgment.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Cavell could be said to understand epistemological skepticism as part of a broader existential or ethical problematic which he traces in his readings of Shakespeare, the romanticists, and film melodrama. The other main concern is Cavell's attempt, from the 1990s onwards, to develop what he calls moral or Emersonian perfectionism, a dimension of moral thinking having to do with the education of the human soul which he finds represented primarily in Emerson but also in a host of other philosophers, writers, poets, and film-makers. Moral perfectionism is not an ethical theory according to Cavell because it does not exist apart from the readings he undertakes of specific works, and these works are as often literary or filmic as they are philosophical (of course, Cavell does not regard this distinction as settled). From this it should be clear that Cavell's work, at least from *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* with the subtitle *The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990) onwards, is highly relevant to the philosophical discussion of the relation between philosophy and literature or, more specifically, ethics and literature, and also to the literary discussion of what has come to be called 'the ethical turn' in literary theory. I believe it could be argued that Cavell's early work is just as relevant to these discussions, so that his work on skepticism must also be seen as a contribution to literary ethics, but it is not my aim to argue that here.

Knowing full well that this short introduction to Cavell does not capture the pertinence of his writings, it still gives me reason to wonder why Cavell is not more widely read or if read, why his work is not more widely received and applied in the philosophy of literature and in literary criticism and/or theory. If Richard Eldridge is right that "arguably no other living philosopher has done as much as Cavell to show the common cause shared by literature and philosophy, where both only stand to lose by failing to acknowledge and

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<sup>3</sup> Encapsulating the word "knowledge", the concept of acknowledgment is intended to imply that our fundamental relation to the world is not one of knowledge; as Cavell says, the world has to be *accepted*. Avoidance is the opposite of acknowledgment.

embrace the claims of the other”,<sup>4</sup> then the tendency to disregard Stanley Cavell is strange indeed. In Cavell scholarship this has itself been thematized, giving rise to essays with titles like “The Avoidance of Stanley Cavell”<sup>5</sup> or “Acknowledging Stanley Cavell”<sup>6</sup> and prompting people to speculate if his humanism, his stressing of the human voice, and his understanding of the self as always to be attained, or as always becoming, in short his “strange aura of untimeliness”,<sup>7</sup> has hindered a broader reception. Generally, the field ‘philosophy and literature’ has actually been growing during the past two or three decades, and in the subfield ‘ethics and literature’ Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Wayne Booth have been prominent voices. Nussbaum and Rorty have made strong cases that literature should play a central role in ethics, arguing that fiction, and especially novels, work on our emotions and moral sensibilities with the potential of turning us into more empathic and thereby better human beings.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Nussbaum to some critics seems only to illustrate her Aristotelian ethical outlook with literary examples, Rorty is famously willing to go so far as to substitute philosophy with literature, but they coincide in having an overall instrumental approach to literature, or so the critique goes. From a more literary perspective, Wayne Booth has argued that reading fiction is per se an ethical activity, and that we stand in the same relation to literary works as we do to friends, so that they can be our moral examples.<sup>9</sup> Now, while it is clear that Cavell’s literary philosophy has affinities with these approaches, it is also clear that his is a less reductionist or instrumentalist position. Though originally coming from a philosophical background, Cavell has always tried to expand the philosophical canon, to make room for literature within philosophy, whether he argues that Shakespearean tragedy is the form

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (eds.): *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies. Consequences of Skepticism*, Continuum, New York 2011, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Garrett Stewart, in Russell B. Goodman (ed.): *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 140-156.

<sup>6</sup> Olaf Hansen, in Andrew Taylor and Áine Kelly (eds.): *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Film. The Idea of America*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 8-25.

<sup>7</sup> Eldridge and Rhie, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Martha Nussbaum: *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990 and Richard Rorty: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

<sup>9</sup> See Wayne C. Booth: *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1988.

philosophical skepticism takes in public life, or that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a moral perfectionist work. Not knowing himself whether he addresses himself primarily to "addicts of philosophy or to adepts of literature",<sup>10</sup> and speaking in his highly personal and complicated diction, Cavell treats literary texts as if they were dealing with the same problems as philosophers, not in order to reduce literature to philosophy or vice versa, but in order to show that they are on a common mission, differences notwithstanding. It is no coincidence that Cavell has been called the last romantic; his treatment of Emerson's writings as "a fair realization"<sup>11</sup> of romanticism, that is, of the unification of philosophy and poetry, also encapsulates his own ambition for philosophy. Accordingly, Cavell is as keen as one could be to avoid an instrumental approach to literature, i.e. "impressing texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance",<sup>12</sup> or, as he expands in *Must We Mean What We Say?:* "In appealing from philosophy to, for example, literature, I am not seeking illustrations for truths philosophy already knows, but illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped – as though an essential part of its task must work behind its back. I do not understand such appeals as 'going outside' philosophy."<sup>13</sup>

Although Cavell does not have a theory of fiction or a theory of ethics apart from the exemplary readings he conducts of his chosen texts, the question arises how far his literary treatment of skepticism and moral perfectionism will take us, what their potential scope or fruitfulness is. Cavell's model of reading is centered around a handful of ethically loaded concepts, most of which I have already mentioned, namely skepticism, avoidance, acknowledgment, the ordinary, the voice, and, of course, perfectionism. The question is how he understands these concepts and how encompassing they are. While he sometimes links skepticism to Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, thereby underscoring its breadth, it is clear that not every tragedy or every melodrama

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Cavell: *Disowning Knowledge. In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cavell: *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, p. xii.

<sup>12</sup> *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Cavell: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. xxiv-xxv.

has a problematic of skepticism. Likewise, even though he formulates his perfectionism quite broadly as having to do with the self's realization of its inherent potential, and even though he, in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, presents an open list with more than sixty alleged perfectionist works, it is just as clear that not every work of fiction is open to a perfectionist reading.<sup>14</sup> So to me the interesting question becomes if it is possible to determine more generally which works are open to such readings. How does Cavell choose his texts? It is worth noticing that he has tended towards works of poetry, romanticist and modernist, and tragedy, not towards novels. Here, I think a case could be made that modernist novels often invite perfectionist readings, and to show an example of this I will sketch a perfectionist reading of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1930-32). But first I will briefly introduce to Cavell's concept of moral perfectionism.

Even though Cavell does not understand his moral perfectionism as a theory of ethics on a par with, for instance, Kantianism or utilitarianism, but rather as a dimension of moral thinking also to be found in Kant and John Stuart Mill, he does formulate it in opposition to these theories by saying that while they focus on the concepts of the right and the good, respectively, moral perfectionism focuses on an idea of being true to oneself or to the humanity in oneself. It thus has to do with the state of one's soul and with the whole of one's life rather than with particular moral choices or actions and the reasons for them; it takes up the old Socratic question of how one should live and stresses the importance of personal relationships – traditionally called friendship, in Cavell often called marriage – and the willingness to transform oneself and one's society. This idea of transformation of the self does not entail that there is a final or perfected state the self should arrive at but rather that the self is, as it were, on a journey to itself, that it must work on itself or care for itself so as not to fall back into conformity or inauthenticity (to borrow a term from Heidegger that Cavell sometimes uses). With a focus like this it is perhaps not surprising that Cavell's examples of perfectionist texts are as often literary as they are philosophical; while he finds perfectionist features in the works of

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<sup>14</sup> See Stanley Cavell: *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, p. 5.

traditional philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, he also finds them in authors as diverse as Shakespeare, Goethe, Kleist, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Henry James, and George Bernard Shaw, to name only a few. And as if this diversity of texts and genres were not enough, Cavell identifies two genres of Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s, which he calls ‘the comedy of remarriage’ and ‘the melodrama of the unknown woman’, where he also traces perfectionist aspirations and failings. How is it even possible to begin saying what all these works have in common?

Cavell is not especially interested in defining his moral perfectionism, and just as it is not settled in advance if a work should count as perfectionist or not, it is not settled what features of a perfectionist work amount to its perfectionism. Cavell does provide a list of tentatively defining features at two places in his oeuvre, however, namely in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and in *Cities of Words* (2004).<sup>15</sup> In both places he takes as his point of departure the perfectionist features he identifies in Plato’s *Republic*; while these are not exhaustive, they can be seen as exemplary of what moral perfectionism at least can include. I’ll quote at length from *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*: “Obvious candidate features are its ideas of a mode of conversation between (older and younger) friends, one of whom is intellectually authoritative because his life is somehow exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to and in the attraction of which the self recognizes itself as enchained, fixated, and feels itself removed from reality, whereupon the self finds that it can turn (convert, revolutionize itself) and a process of education is undertaken, in part through a discussion of education, in which each self is drawn on a journey of ascent to a further state of that self, where the higher is determined not by natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do; it is a transformation of the self which finds expression in the imagination of a transformation of society into something like an aristocracy where what is best for society is a model for and is modeled on what is best for the individual soul, a best arrived at in the view

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<sup>15</sup> See *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 6-7 and *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 445-447.

of a new reality, a realm beyond, the true world, that of the Good, sustainer of the good city, of Utopia.”<sup>16</sup> These are some of the perfectionist features that Cavell finds in Plato’s *Republic*. Now, while it is clear that a work can count as perfectionist, according to Cavell, without having all of these features, part of my reason for quoting them here is that I was surprised to find that every single one of them applies to Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*. I’m not going to go slavishly through all of them in what follows, as if to show that they fit one to one with the plot and the themes in Musil’s novel (although I think they do), but just want to note my initial intuition that *The Man without Qualities* is obviously a moral perfectionist work in Cavell’s sense.

Before turning to Musil, I would like to say a few words about one of Cavell’s key perfectionist texts, one to which he returns repeatedly and which he also links to his readings of the Hollywood films, namely Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879). This is especially relevant for my purposes, since Ibsen’s play and Musil’s novel share many concepts and themes; in fact, Musil’s female protagonist, Agathe, could be said to provide an answer to the question so often asked about Ibsen’s Nora, the question as to where she went when she left her husband. (Agathe moves in with her brother Ulrich, the male protagonist, and falls in love with him!) According to Cavell, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* discusses a wide range of perfectionist concepts, among them “the concepts of conversation, education, happiness, becoming human, fathers and husbands, brother and sister, scandal, becoming strangers, fitness for teaching, playtime, honor, the miracle of change, journey or departure, the bond of marriage.”<sup>17</sup> (Again I note how well all of these concepts fit *The Man without Qualities*.) In *A Doll’s House*, what Nora discovers and what causes her outrage and her shame is that her marriage is only legally a marriage, not genuinely; she realizes that she has been living a doll’s life or a child’s life, not the life of a grown-up woman, let alone her own life, and this brings her to leave her husband and her children to seek an education for herself, that is, to seek herself. This is at one and the same time a criticism of her husband, of the institution of marriage, and of society, a criticism so harsh that it would, according to Nora, call for a miracle

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<sup>16</sup> *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 109. See also *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 22.

of change or transformation if she were to come to live in a genuine marriage with her husband. Perhaps this also makes it clearer why the concept of marriage is so important to Cavellian perfectionism; apart from invoking the philosophical tradition of thinking about friendship and love, and certainly invoking the extensive treatment of marriage in the writings of Kierkegaard, for Cavell marriage is the acute point where the most intimate and personal of relationships meets society and its institutions, so that one could paraphrase Cavell as saying that if genuine marriage succeeds, then there is hope for society. As a matter of fact, the question of marriage also plays a central role in *The Man without Qualities*. To sum up, what the case of Nora in *A Doll's House* shows is that even when morality has had its say and no specific wrong is claimable, there are still ethical or perfectionist considerations left to discuss, or, if conversation is not possible, to act upon.<sup>18</sup>

I now come to Musil and *The Man without Qualities*. This huge modernist novel, similar in scope and radicality only to the novels of Proust and Joyce, is rarely treated extensively by philosophers of literature, so I can hardly blame Cavell for not taking it up, but I may be allowed to express my regret that he has not done so. As a trained philosopher, Musil was deeply influenced by Nietzsche and Emerson (although the influence of Emerson is not yet as well established as that of Nietzsche); he was a contemporary of Wittgenstein's, breathing the same empiricist or positivist air of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vienna and reacting similarly against it by leaving philosophy and turning to literature; some of his most important concepts in *The Man without Qualities*, for instance the very idea of being without qualities and the idea of 'seinesgleichen' or 'the like of it', show striking similarities with some of Heidegger's concepts in *Being and Time* (most notably, with the concepts of 'Eigentlichkeit'/'Uneigentlichkeit' and 'das Man'), and last but not least, there is an unacknowledged debt on Musil's part to Kierkegaard's treatment of subjectivity, ethics, and religion.<sup>19</sup> I drop all these names in order to say that Musil has affinities and similarities with many of the thinkers important to Cavell's formulation of his moral perfectionism, so that

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> Though Musil did not read much of Kierkegaard, and explicitly stated that he did not like *Either/Or*, his way of dismissing morality in favor of a higher ethics or religiosity has striking similarities with Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" in *Fear and Trembling*.



*The Man without Qualities* also in this respect would fit easily into a growing canon of perfectionist works. Musil himself stated on several occasions, in his journals and in interviews, that the intent of the book was ethical; he even said that he wanted it to “deliver material for a new morality”,<sup>20</sup> and he never tired of stressing the link between literature and ethics, seeing literature as the right medium for describing genuine ethical experience and aspiration, as opposed to modern philosophy’s traditional focus on universal moral rules and principles.

Apart from this overt declaration of ethical intention, *The Man without Qualities* shows an abundance of ethical themes and subplots, from the protagonist Ulrich, who is in search of an answer to the Socratic question of how one should live, over the psychopathic murderer Moosbrugger, who violates the fifth commandment but is nonetheless innocently sentenced to death, and to the incestuous relationship between Ulrich and Agathe and their forgery of their father’s will (here is another parallel with Ibsen which is hardly accidental). In fact, almost all the characters in *The Man without Qualities* can be said to be at some point in conflict with prevailing morality, one way or another, but at the same time they are often shown to be justified from an ethical or, we could say, perfectionist perspective, or if not justified, then at least psychologically understandable and thus halfway excused. The novel is divided into two very different volumes, the first of which is called “The like of it happens” (or at least this is how I prefer to translate the German “Seinesgleichen geschieht”). I think it can be argued that this volume constitutes the negative part of Musil’s literary ethics, in the sense that it is mainly a critique of society and its morality; it is centered around the so called “parallel campaign”, an initiative by some of the leading figures of bourgeois Vienna to plan the celebration of the Austrian emperor in 1918 (little do they know that the emperor will be dead and the empire dissolved by that time), but unfortunately the “campaign” is completely unable to make a decision and take action and is instead exhibited in all its fake idealism and moral hypocrisy. Incidentally, this is perfectly in line with Cavellian perfectionism, which stresses

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<sup>20</sup> In an interview with Oskar Maurus Fontana from 1926.

the critique of prevailing morality and every kind of moralism as one of its central aims.

The second part of *The Man without Qualities* is called “Into the Millennium” and has the subtitle “The Criminals”. As I interpret the novel, this second volume is where Musil sets forth his positive ethical alternative to the morality he has criticized in the first volume (and continues to criticize here). At the beginning of this second book, Ulrich is united with his forgotten sister Agathe at their father’s funeral, and the novel now turns into an unusual love story, giving Musil the opportunity to describe the ethical experience of love as if for the first time, that is, without banality, because of the reader’s acute awareness that what he or she is witnessing borders on incest. From a perfectionist perspective, this second book is probably the most interesting of the two; it consists to a great extent of dialogues between Ulrich and Agathe, seemingly endless conversations on morality, religion, love, education, marriage, childhood, and many other ethically relevant themes. Part of the interest is of course due to the fact that Ulrich and Agathe are the novel’s obvious heroes; they are the man and the woman without qualities, persons of possibility rather than reality who are willing to experiment and change themselves and their lives in order to grow as human beings. This is just another way of saying that the second book constitutes the positive part of Musil’s literary ethics. But to see how Ulrich transforms in the course of the novel, how he develops from an ironic skepticist into a romantic with religious aspirations, it is worth going back to the beginning of the novel.

When we first meet Ulrich, he is a disillusioned mathematician with strong philosophical inclinations and a mistress who is really a prostitute. We are told that he has made three attempts to become an important man, namely in the military, as an engineer, and now as a mathematician, but that none of them has been successful, mainly because Ulrich has been unable to identify with the occupation in question. Musil is clearly playing with the genre of the ‘Bildungsroman’ here; already on page 47 he lets Ulrich give up the idea of becoming an important man and decide to “take a year’s holiday from his life”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Musil: *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1995, p. 44.

in order to find out what, or rather who, he really wants to be. In the first book Ulrich is in a more or less permanent crisis as to what direction his life should take (I merely note here that the concept of crisis is also defining for Cavellian perfectionism); he has erotic relationships, or at least *potentially* erotic relationships, with all the important female characters of the novel, so that the prostitute Leona is followed by the married nymphomaniac Bonadea, while he considers marriage with the frigid Gerda, is attracted to the close friend and Nietzsche-follower Clarisse, and flirts with his cousin, the beautiful idealist Diotima.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of all these relationships is to prepare and set up a contrast to his later relationship with Agathe; paradoxically, the life with Agathe, his sister and therefore similar other, is the closest Ulrich gets to a marriage, or rather, after describing all his erotic adventures and Agathe's humiliating marriage with her husband Hagauer, Musil postulates their relationship as an example of what genuine marriage is.

Interestingly, the core concept of the novel, namely the concept of being without qualities, also has strong affinities with Cavellian perfectionist concerns. Cavell sometimes refers to Heidegger when explaining that human beings and their actions cannot be reduced to their qualities and their deeds; he even talks about the power of subjectivity being absorbed by ones qualities or deeds.<sup>23</sup> In Musil scholarship references are usually made to Meister Eckhart, but the idea is basically the same: What I am does not equal who I am or, as Cavell puts it, "I am not exhausted by all the definitions or descriptions the world gives of me to me".<sup>24</sup> Ulrich's and Agathe's being without qualities does not mean that they do not have any qualities; it means that they do not identify with the qualities they obviously have, that they know they are more than or beyond their qualities. This is related to another important concept of the novel, the concept of possibility or potentiality. Ulrich is said to have a sense of possibility as opposed to a sense of reality – what this means is simply that he is able to imagine that he himself and the world around him could be different,

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<sup>22</sup> Proper names are important in Musil, as is the fact of their origin. 'Leona', 'Bonadea', and 'Diotima' are names Ulrich has invented for his mistresses, the last one ironically referring to Plato's *Symposium*. Contrariwise, 'Agathe' is his sister's real name which suggests that we should take its Greek meaning (agathós = good) seriously.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Cities of Words*, p. 258.

<sup>24</sup> *The Claim of Reason*, p. 390.

and indeed better, that is, that change is possible. Consequently, along with his critique of the prevailing order of society, Ulrich proposes a series of utopias (another perfectionist concept!) which correspond to his own development. The first of these is called “the utopia of precision” and is modeled on the natural sciences in a rather positivist spirit; the next is called “the utopia of essayism” and is modeled on the genre of the essay with its mixture of subjectivity and objectivity and its tendency towards experimentation, whereas the last one is called “the utopia of the other condition” and is concerned with some sort of ecstatic, religious experience. In the second volume of the novel this ‘other condition’ gains increasing importance as Ulrich and Agathe set out to explore it systematically, in order to see if it is possible to live in it permanently. As I read the novel, this is to be taken seriously as a genuine openness to religious experience, so that it is legitimate to talk about something very similar to a conversion on the part of Ulrich and Agathe; even though ‘the other condition’ turns out not to be permanent, it is still shown to be the ultimate beginning and end of both morality and ethics, very much like religiosity is the ultimate way of life in Kierkegaard.

It should be clear by now that Musil distinguishes between three different dimensions or orders of life, namely the moral, the ethical, and the religious, in a way congenial to Cavellian perfectionism. Morality for Musil is social, impersonal, and universal, it is rule-based and allows for repetition, whereas ethics is individual, personal, and has to do with the exceptions from the rules. Like in Cavell, the ethical dimension is brought into play when morality falls short of grasping the situation in question. This can lead to conflicts between morality and ethics such as in the cases of Nora in *A Doll's House* and Moosbrugger and Ulrich and Agathe in *The Man without Qualities*. I think it can be argued that these characters stand in the tradition of ‘good criminals’ (remember that the subtitle of the second book was exactly “The Criminals”, referring undoubtedly to Ulrich and Agathe); their actions are definitely wrong from the perspective of morality, but justified or at least forgivable from an ethical perspective. Like in Cavell, and before him in Emerson, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, the idea is that there is something higher than morality; Musil even lets Ulrich quote Emerson to Agathe, saying that “The virtues of society are

vices of the saint”.<sup>25</sup> As I understand it, this means that morality is not required if the ethical state has been attained, and that ethics is not required if the religious state has been attained – each further state or order encompasses the former one.

Finally, a word about the love of Ulrich and Agathe. This is certainly a violation of the law from the perspective of morality, but from an ethical or metaphorical perspective it is an image of spiritual, non-appetitive love with clear religious undertones. The kinship and so the affinity between Ulrich and Agathe is shown to be the condition of possibility for their love, so that Musil could be said to introduce a new ethical category, that of ‘the similar other’. In this way, on the one hand he avoids that their love ends in narcissism (a common reading), and on the other hand that ‘the other’ is conceived as radically other, like for instance in Levinas. Furthermore, Musil shows how love of the self in the Aristotelian sense of ‘philautia’, or care for the self, is a precondition for love of others in the Christian sense of ‘charity’. Even though Cavell does not invoke the concept of ‘philautia’, as far as I know, he does invoke Foucault’s care for the self, so that this line of thought in Musil also seems very congenial to Cavellian moral perfectionism.<sup>26</sup>

I have promised to elaborate on the scope of Cavell’s perfectionism, so let me do that briefly now. This is no easy task because Cavell’s work so strongly resists systematization. Looking again at the list of perfectionist works in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, with its juxtaposition of philosophy and literature, and taking into account the diversity of the works Cavell has treated extensively over his 50 year career, it can seem almost impossible to say anything general about it. The sheer temporal span of the texts, from antiquity to high modernism, and the variety of disciplines, genres, and media, from philosophy to psychoanalysis, from treatise to poetry, and from tragedy to film, seems to exclude unification or categorization. It is true that there is a predominance of romanticist and modernist texts (though, as I said, not of modernist novels), but then again there is the intense focus on Shakespeare, the late interest in realist and naturalist authors like Austen, Dickens, and James,

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<sup>25</sup> *The Man without Qualities*, p. 756. The quotation is from Emerson’s essay *Circles*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 120.

and, in philosophy, the occupation with such unromantic thinkers as Kant and Mill. So perhaps it is better to think of perfectionism as a genre or a theme, as Cavell himself in fact does. What is this theme? I would say that one very important aspect of it is what the Germans call 'Bildung', hence also my reference to the 'Bildungsroman', so that works written within this tradition or under this headline will be perfectionist in Cavell's sense. This is hardly anything new, but it does keep the scope of perfectionism open, since 'Bildungsromane', and films in this genre, are still written today. Another very important aspect of perfectionism is its necessity as a criticism of morality. As Cavell notes, morality always runs the danger of stagnating and turning into moralism, and therefore perfectionism is always potentially relevant as an alternative and more encompassing perspective. Similarly, every time old moral values are left behind and new ones are called for, perfectionist thinking is activated. (This seems to be where modernist novels come in – think, apart from Musil, of Hermann Broch, Kafka, and Rilke, to name only a few writing in German.) And finally, perfectionism seems to be the opposite of nihilism and skepticism; it is a way of thinking insisting on hope even in the midst of crisis or, paradoxically, insisting on hope because of crisis, so that, in Cavell's own work, his treatment of skepticism and perfectionism, respectively, could be considered as two sides of the same coin. This, of course, would have to be shown on another occasion.

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