

Robert Musil *The Man without Qualities*

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At the age when one still attaches great importance to everything connected with tailors and barbers and enjoys looking in the mirror, one often imagines a place where one would like to spend one's life, or at least a place where it would be smart to stay, even though one may not feel any particular inclination to be there. For some time now such a social *idée fixe* has been a kind of super-American city where everyone rushes about, or stands still, with a stop-watch in his hand. Air and earth form an ant-hill, veined by channels of traffic, rising storey upon storey. Overhead-trains, overground-trains, underground-trains, pneumatic express-mails carrying consignments of human beings, chains of motor-vehicles all racing along horizontally, express lifts vertically pumping crowds from one traffic level to another At the junctions one leaps from one means of transport. To another, is instantly sucked in and snatched away by the rhythm of it, which makes a syncope, a pause, a little gap of twenty seconds between two roaring outbursts of speed, and in these intervals in the general rhythm one hastily exchanges a few words with others. Questions and answers click into each other like cogs of a machine. Each person has nothing but quite definite tasks. The various professions are concentrated at definite places. One eats while in motion. Amusements are concentrated in other parts of the city. And elsewhere again are the towers to which one returns and finds wife, family, gramophone, and soul. Tension and relaxation, activity and love are meticulously kept separate in time and are weighed out according to formulae arrived at in extensive laboratory work. If during any of these activities one runs up against a difficulty, one simply drops the whole thing; for one will find another thing or perhaps, later on, a better way, or someone else will find the way that one has missed. It does not matter in the least, but nothing wastes so much communal energy as the presumption that one is called upon not to let go of a definite personal aim. In a community with energies constantly flowing through it, every road leads to a good goal, if one does not spend too much time hesitating and thinking it over. The targets are set up at a short distance, but life is short too, and in this way one gets a maximum of achievement out of it. And man needs no more for his happiness; for what one achieves is what moulds the spirit, whereas what one wants, without fulfillment, only warps it. So far as happiness is concerned it matters very little what one wants; the main thing

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is that one should get it. Besides, zoology makes it clear that a sum of reduced individuals may very well form a totality of genius.

It is by no means certain that things must turn out this way, but such imaginings are among the travel-fantasies that mirror our awareness of the unrelenting motion in which we are borne along. These fantasies are superficial, uneasy and short. God only knows how things are really going to turn out. One might think that we have the beginning in our hands at every instant and therefore ought to be making a plan for us all. If we don't like the high-speed thing, all right, then let's
10 have something else! Something, for instance, in slow-motion, in a gauzily billowing, sea-sluggishly mysterious happiness and with that deep cow-eyed gaze that long ago so enraptured the Greeks. But that is far from being the way of it: we are in the hands of the thing. We travel in it day and night, and do everything else in it too: shaving, eating, making love, reading books, carrying out our professional duties, as though the four walls were standing still; and the uncanny thing about it is merely that the walls are traveling without our noticing it, throwing their rails out ahead like long, gropingly curving antennae, without our knowing where it is all going. And for all that, we
20 like it impossible to think of ourselves as being part of the forces controlling the train of events. That is a very vague role to play, and it sometimes happens, when one looks out of the window after a longish interval, that one sees the scene has changed. What is flying past flies past because it can't be otherwise but for all our resignation we become more and more aware of an unpleasant feeling that we may have overshot our destination or have got on to the wrong line. And one day one suddenly has a wild craving: Get out! Jump clear! It is a nostalgic yearning to be brought to a standstill, to cease evolving, to get stuck, to turn back to a point that lies before the wrong fork. And
30 in the good old days when there was still such a place as Imperial Austria, one could leave the train of events; get into an ordinary train on an ordinary railway-line, and travel back home.

There, in Kakania, that misunderstood State that has since vanished, which was in so many things a model, though all unacknowledged, there was speed too, of course; but not too much speed. Whenever one thought of that country from some place abroad, the memory that hovered before the eyes was of wide, white, prosperous roads dating from the age of foot-travelers and mail-coaches, roads leading in all directions like rivers of established order, streaking the country-

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side like of bright military twin, the paper-white arm of government holding the provinces in firm embrace. And what provinces! There were glaciers and the sea, the Carso and the cornfields of Bohemia nights by the Adriatic restless with the chirping of cicadas, and Slovakian villages where the smoke rose from the chimneys as from up-turned nostrils, the village curled up between two little hills as though the earth had parted its lips to warm its child between them. Of course cars also drove along those roads-- but not too many cars! The conquest of the air had begun here too; but not too intensively.

10 Now and then a ship was sent off to South America or the Far East; but not too often. There was no ambition to have world markets and world power. Here one was in the centre of Europe, at the focal point of world's old axes; the words 'colony' and 'overseas' had the ring of something as yet utterly untried and remote. There was some display of luxury; but it was not, of course, as over-sophisticated as that of the French. One went in for sport; but not in madly Anglo-Saxon fashion. One spent tremendous sums on the army; but only just enough to assure one of remaining the second weakest among the great powers. The capital, too, was somewhat smaller than all the

20 rest of the world's largest cities, but nevertheless quite considerably larger than a mere ordinary large city. And the administration of this country was carried out in an enlightened, hardly perceptible manner, with a cautious clipping of all sharp points, by the best bureaucracy in Europe, which could be accused of only one defect: it could not help regarding genius and enterprise of genius in private persons, unless privileged by high birth or State appointment, as ostentation, indeed presumption. But who would want unqualified persons putting their oar in, anyway? And besides, in Kakania it was only that a genius was always regarded as a lout, but never, as sometimes happened else-

30 where, that a mere lout was regarded as a genius.

All in all, how many remarkable things might be said about that vanished Kakania! For instance, it was *kaiserlich-königlich* (Imperial-Royal) and it was *kaiserlich und königlich* (Imperial and Royal); one of the two abbreviations applied to every thing and person, but esoteric lore was nevertheless required in order to be sure of distinguishing which institutions and persons were to be referred to as *k. k.* and which as *k. & k.* On paper it called itself the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; in speaking, however, one referred to it as Austria, that is to say, it was known by a name that it had, as a State, solemnly renounced by oath,

40 while preserving it in all matters of sentiment, as a sign that feelings

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are just as important as constitutional law and that regulations are not the really serious thing in life. By its constitution it was liberal, but its system of government was clerical. The system of government was clerical, but the general attitude to life was liberal. Before the law all citizens were equal, but not everyone, of course, was a citizen. There was a parliament, which made such vigorous use of its liberty that it was usually kept shut; but there was also an emergency powers act by means of which it was possible to manage without Parliament, and every time when everyone was just beginning to rejoice in absolutism, 10 the Crown decreed that there must now again be a return to parliamentary government. Many such things happened in this State, and among them were those national struggles that justifiably aroused Europe's curiosity and are today completely misrepresented. They were so violent that they several times a year caused the machinery of State to jam and come to a dead stop. But between whiles, in the breathing-spaces between government and government, everyone got on excellently with everyone else and behaved as though nothing had ever been the matter. Nor had anything real ever been the matter. It was nothing more than the fact that every human being's dislike of 20 every other human being's attempts to get on- a dislike in which today we are all agreed-in that country crystallized earlier, assuming the form of a sublimated ceremonial that might have become of great importance if its evolution had not been prematurely cut short by a catastrophe.

For it was not only dislike of one's fellow-citizens that was intensified into a strong sense of community; even mistrust of oneself and of one's own destiny here assumed the character of profound self-certainty. In this country one acted-sometimes indeed to the extreme limits of passion and its consequences--differently from the way one 30 thought, or one thought differently from the way one acted. Uninformed observers have mistaken this for charm, or even for a weakness in what they thought was the Austrian character. But that was wrong. It is always wrong to explain the phenomena of a country simply by the character of its inhabitants. For the inhabitant of a country has at least nine characters: a professional one, a national one, a civic one, a class one, a geographical one, a sex one, a conscious, an unconscious and perhaps even too a private one; he combines them all in himself; but they dissolve him, and he is really nothing but a little channel washed out by all these trickling streams, 40 which flow into it and drain out of it again in order to join other little

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streams filling another channel Hence every dweller on earth also has a tenth character, which is nothing more or less than the passive illusion of spaces unfilled; it permits a man everything, with one exception: he may not take seriously what his at least nine other characters do and what happens to them, in other words, the very thing that ought to be the filling of him. This interior space-which is, it must be admitted, difficult to describe-is of a different shade and shape in Italy from what it is in England, because everything that stands out in relief against it is of a different shade and shape; and yet both here
10 and there it is the same, merely an empty, invisible space with reality standing in the middle of it like a little toy brick town, abandoned by the imagination.

In so far as this can at all become apparent to every eye, it had done so in Kakania, and in this Kakania was, without the world's knowing it, the most progressive State of all; it was the State that was by now only just, as it were, acquiescing in its own existence. In it one was negatively free, constantly aware of the inadequate grounds for one's own existence and lapped by the great fantasy of all that had not
20 happened, or at least had not yet irrevocably happened, as by the foam of the oceans from which mankind arose.

Es ist passiert, 'it just sort of happened', people said there when other 'people in other places thought heaven knows what had occurred. It was a peculiar phrase, not known in this sense to the Germans and with no equivalent in other languages, the very breath of it transforming facts and the bludgeonings of fate into something light as eiderdown, as thought itself. Yes, in spite of much that seems to point the other way, Kakania was perhaps a home for genius after all; and that, probably, was the ruin of it.