

Excerpt from Robert Musil's
Man Without Qualities

Volume One Translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser Picador (1979)

28 A chapter that can be skipped by anyone who has no very high opinion of thinking as an occupation

MEANWHILE Ulrich was at home, sitting at his desk, working. He had got out the analysis that he had broken off short some weeks earlier when he had made his decision to return from abroad. He did not intend finishing it; it merely pleased him that he was still capable of doing this sort of thing. The weather was fine, but in the last few days he had only left the house on brief errands and did not even go into the garden. He had drawn the curtains and was working by shaded light, like an acrobat in the semi-darkness of a circus, performing dangerous new leaps in front of a gathering of experts before the public are let in. The precision, vigour and sureness of this kind of thinking, which has not its equal anywhere in life, filled him with something like melancholy. He now pushed away the paper, covered with formulae and symbols, on which the last thing he has written was an equation of state of water, as a physical example, in order to apply a new mathematical operation that he was describing. But his thoughts must have strayed some time before that. 'Wasn't I talking to Clarisse about something to do with water?' he wondered, but could not clearly recollect. Still, it did not matter. His thoughts wandered on, idly. Unfortunately nothing is so difficult to represent by literary means as a man thinking. A great scientist, when he was once asked how he managed to hit upon so much that was new, replied: "By keeping on thinking about it." And indeed it may safely be said that unexpected inspirations are produced by no other means than by the expectation of them. To no small extent they are a success due to character, permanent inclinations, unflagging ambition and persistent work. How boring such persistence must be! And then again, from another aspect, the solution of an intellectual problem comes about in a way not very different from what happens when a dog carrying a stick in its mouth tries to get through a narrow door: it will go on turning its head left and right until the stick slips through. We do pretty much the same, only with the difference that we do not go at it quite indiscriminately, but from experience know more or less how it should be done. And although of course a head with brains in it has far more skill and experience in these turnings and twistings than an empty one, yet even for it the slipping through comes as a surprise, it is something that just suddenly happens; and one can quite distinctly perceive in oneself a faintly nonplussed feeling that one's thoughts have created themselves instead of waiting for their originator. This nonplussed feeling refers to something that many people nowadays call intuition, whereas formerly it used to be called inspiration, and they think they must see something supra-personal in it; but it is only something non-personal, namely the affinity and kinship of the things themselves that meet inside one's head. The better the head, the less perceptible it is in all this. Hence thinking,

solong as it is not completed, is really a thoroughly wretched condition to be in, notunlike a colic affecting all the convolutions of the brain; and when it is complete, itno longer has the shape of thought, and this unfortunately is a non-personal shape,for the thought is then extraverted and adjusted for communication to the world.One cannot, so to speak, catch hold, when a man is thinking, of the momentbetween the personal and the non-personal. And for this reason thinking isobviously such a source of embarrassment to writers that they prefer to avoid it.However, the Man Without Qualities was now thinking. From this theconclusion may be drawn that it was at least partly not a personal matter. Whatthen was it? The world going in and out, aspects of the world falling into shapeinside a head . . . Nothing in the least important has occurred to him. After he hadbeen dealing with water by way of example, nothing else occurred to him but thatwater is something as three times as great as land, even if one takes into accountonly what everyone recognizes as water – rivers, seas, lakes and springs. It waslong believed to be akin to air. The great Newton believed this, and most of hisideas are nevertheless still quite up to date. In the Greek view the world and lifeoriginated from water. It was a god, Okeanos. Later water-sprites, elves, mermaidsand nymphs were invented. Temples and oracles were founded on its banks andshores. But were the not the cathedrals of Hildesheim, Padeborn and Bremenbuilt over springs? – and here these cathedrals were to this day. And was notwater still used for baptism? And were there not water-lovers and apostles of nature-cures whose souls had a touch of peculiarly sepulchral health? So there wassomewhere in the world something like a blurred spot, or grass trodden flat. Andof course the Man Without Qualities also had modern knowledge somewhere inhis consciousness, whether he happened to be thinking about it or not. And therenow was water, a colourless liquid, blue only in dense layers, odourless andtasteless (as one had repeated in school so often that one could never forget itagain), although physiologically it also included bacteria, vegetable matter, air,iron, calcium sulphate and calcium bicarbonate, and this archetype of all liquidswas, physically speaking, fundamentally not a liquid at all but, according tocircumstances, a slid body, a liquid or a gas. Ultimately the whole thing dissolvedinto systems of formulae that were all somehow connected with each other, and inthe whole wide world there were only a few dozen people who thought alikeabout even as simple thing as water; all the rest talked about it in languages thatwere ate home somewhere between today and several thousands of years ago. Soit must be said that if a man just starts thinking a bit he gets into what one mightcall pretty disorderly company.And now Ulrich remembered too that he had actually said all this toClarisse. She was as ignorant as a little animal, but in spite of all the superstitionof which she was made up, one vaguely felt a sense of community with her. Itgave him a prick like a hot needle.He felt annoyed.The well-known capacity that thoughts have – as doctors have discovered –for dissolving and dispersing those hard lumps of deep, ingrowing, morbidlyentangled conflict that arise out of gloomy regions of the self probably rests onnothing other than their social and worldly nature, which links the individual beingwith other people and things; but unfortunately what gives them their power ofhealing seems to be the same as what diminishes the quality of personalexperience in them. The casual mention of a hair on a nose weighs more than themost significant

thought; and acts, feelings and sensations when repeated convey the impression that one has been present at an occurrence, a more or less great personal event, however ordinary and non-personal they may have been. 'Silly,' Ulrich thought, 'but there it is.' It reminded him of that stupidly profound, exciting sensation, touching immediately on the self, that one has when sniffing at one's own skin. He stood up and pulled the curtains back from the window. The bark of the trees was still moist with morning dew. Outside in the street there lay a violet-blue haze of petrol vapour. The sun was shining into it and people were moving briskly. It was like spring hovering over the tarmac, an out-of-season spring day in autumn, a day such as only cities conjure forth.