



Pray for Brother Alexander

Constantin Noica

Translated by Octavian Gabor



PRAY FOR BROTHER ALEXANDER

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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

After the end of World War II, the Communist Party took over power in Romania. The social and political changes transformed the life of philosopher Constantin Noica as well. Considered an “anti-revolutionary” thinker (the files of his trial reveal that his writings on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* were considered anti-revolutionary), Noica was placed under house arrest in Câmpulung-Muscel between 1949 and 1958. In 1958, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison. He was freed after 6 years; *Pray for Brother Alexander* covers his experiences during this time. For more on his life and philosophy, see my article, “Constantin Noica’s Becoming within Being and Meno’s Paradox.”†

This is the third volume by Noica published in English. The previous two were both published in 2009, both translated by Alistair Ian Blyth: *Becoming within Being* (Marquette University Press) and *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit* (University of Plymouth Press).

For this edition, all footnotes belong to me, unless otherwise noted. At times, I have chosen to keep Romanian terms, explaining their meaning in a footnote. The register of Noica’s writing varies throughout the book. At times, it reads as a diary, while at other times as a philosophical treatise.

I remain indebted to Dana Munteanu for her continual support during the translation of this volume and for reading and

* See *Prigoana: Documente ale procesului C. Noica*, C. Pillat, S. Lăzărescu, A. Acterian, Vl. Streinu, Al. Paleologu, N. Steinhardt, T. Enescu, S. Al-George, Al. O. Teodoreanu și alții (Bucharest: Vremea, 2010).

† In Zara Martirosova Torlone, Dana Lacourse Munteanu, and Dorota Deutsch (eds.), *A Handbook to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 300–311.

offering helpful suggestions. My wife, Elena, and my son, Andrei, have often suggested the right word whenever I could not find it. For this and for sharing their lives with me, I am forever grateful.

ROMANIAN PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book was written by Noica after his release from political prison, in 1964, but it remained unpublished until 1990. Its chapters were sent to England starting in 1971, as letters addressed by the author to his first wife, Wendy Muston, with the idea that Wendy would translate them and publish them abroad. One version of the manuscript was kept in the author's archive; this version was at the basis of the edition published by Humanitas in 1990. As will be seen, that version was incomplete.

The present volume contains four new chapters compared to the 1990 and 2008 editions: XIII, which was present in the previous versions in the form of a summary written by the author (we maintained this summary within brackets), XVI, XVII, and XVIII.

These texts were found in the archives of the former Securitate,* and were returned to Mariana Noica, the widow of the author, by Virgil Măgureanu, the chief of the Romanian Intelligence Service, in 1994. Marin Diaconu published them in *Viața românească*,† year LXXXIX, November–December 1994, nos. 11–12, and we have taken them from there. We thank Marin Diaconu for his help and kindness.

* The secret police during communism.

† Romanian literary journal.

PREFACE

Toward the end of World War II, a nunnary from Moldova* was occupied by the conquering Soviet troops. The nuns left and looked for refuge in other places. When they returned, they found a note on the altar: “The commander of the troops that occupied the monastery declares that he left it untouched and asks you to pray for his soul.” Beginning with that moment, the name of Alexander is mentioned at every religious service.

Pray for brother Alexander! You too, reader, pray, because this name does not concern only the commander of the victorious troops (But what have you done, brother Alexander, in the meantime? Have you spent your days in prison or have you become a conformist? Have you slaved on the fields like the others, or have you written books and sent them abroad?†), but it also concerns all the other brothers Alexander, the insecure victors. Pray for brother Alexander from China, but do not forget brother Alexander in the United States; pray for the strong everywhere, for those who *know*, physicists, mathematicians, and super-technicians, but who no longer know well what they know and what they do, for all those who possess and give orders, together with their economists; pray for the triumphant wanderers through life without culture, but also for the wander-

* Moldova was a province of Romania. Since the monastery was occupied by the Soviet troops, Noica probably refers to the part of Moldova which was annexed by the Soviet Union first in 1940 and then also of the end of WWII: Bessarabia, the current Republic of Moldova.

† Due to censorship during Communism, writers from the Eastern bloc sent their manuscripts to the West with the help of acquaintances. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, for example, was first published in the West.

ers within culture; for the European man who triumphed over material needs, for the modern man who triumphed over nature and over the good God. Pray for brother Alexander!

**Pray for
Brother
Alexander**

When a victor asks you to pray for him, it means that he offers you his victory. “Can you do anything with this victory?” he seems to say. It is true, not anyone can triumph over his own victory and feel as deep as brother Alexander that he has nothing to do with it. At his own level, however, a common man offers various victories on the market, victories that he cannot always use, so that today’s world seems to be one in which victories are suspended, are for sale. At every step, there is a victory of the modern world, having no master, being certain of itself.

Being certain of their deed, some say, “Take, eat, this is my victory, which spills over the world for you and your happiness.” Others, more uncertain about what they have to do, say, “Here is my victory; see what can come out of it.” A few get angry: “Don’t you see what I accomplished?” As good mercenaries, the scientists, the politicians, the technicians, all of them won the battle, receiving their money and glory. The rest of the people are, with or without their will, for sale.

But don’t we find a human miracle and a blessing even in this situation? The conditions for a deeper solidarity among the people of today have been created through it; a solidarity between unequal people. It would have been such a spiritual disaster if victory remained in the hands of victors, if the physicists, the biologists, the sociologists, and the politicians knew what to do until the end, or if the super-technicians became better manag-

* During the Orthodox Liturgy, at the moment of the Eucharist, the priest intones the words of institution at the moment of the consecration of the Eucharist: “Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you for the remission of sins.” See also Matthew 26:26.

ers! It would have been such a disaster if brother Alexander had the conscience of a victor when he entered the monastery! The world would have been separated between human subjects and human objects or, rather, between privileged humans, the victors, and the sub-humans. The human miracle is that victory can be shared.

And it is shared even on a political level, where the victor thinks that he maintains victory with power. The one who has lived attentively and especially serenely during communism realizes that an apparently odd result is reached: this revolution is, after all, for the benefit of the rich, not of the poor; the poor people's wealth now comes from the rich, which is no big deal; but the poor is given *the ideal* of enrichment. But a man frustrated by the ideal — and at this level this means “meaning of life” — is in a way destroyed. In the meantime, anyone who possessed something and was alienated by possession can at times feel that he is reinvested as human, reestablished. Some people from the upper classes, who no longer knew their human measure because of their easy lives, discovered when they were dispossessed of their goods and privileges that they *knew* something and that they *could do* something; they even discovered that they *wanted* something and that they *could do* something, and even that they *wanted* something with all their hearts. In a sense, they discovered their own necessity. Today, they no longer aspire to regain liberties, in plural, but only that liberty which fulfills their interior necessity.

After all, it should not be surprising; if someone was alienated by his possession, this was the possessor; instead, the man who lived *under* the level of possession was in sub-humanity. The revolution just raised the latter to the condition of a human being. Doesn't he risk his humanity only beginning from here? The victory of communism in a large part of the world is not for *him* at the end. Who can do something with this victory? The true surprise could be that one day we would see that those who defend the menaced revolutions are not their supposed beneficiaries — just like in the chapter from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where the generosity of the one who wants to help the oppressed

encounters the opposition of their solidarity with their oppressors.

If, however, communism, which wanted strongly to obtain a certain thing, has a chance to obtain *something else*, then capitalism, which does not want almost anything, has even more chances to obtain something completely different. There is something else beyond the two worlds opposed today. It's not the two of them which are still interesting, but rather a subtler thing, a third human condition different from these two. A child is a *third* starting from a certain moment: it is no longer important what the parents want from him and what they invest in him. It is not important what the tree bringing forth the seed wants. From a certain moment, it is no longer important what the states and the governments want regarding a *person*, whom they fostered directly or indirectly; this person entered another growing process, under another law. From a certain moment, it is no longer important what happens *to us* externally. Very serious things can happen to us, but they no longer mean anything, in a sense...

II

“It is of no importance,” I tell him.

He is 22 years old. We are both imprisoned in a cell for two people, with a shower and the water closet under the shower. When he takes a shower in the morning, I can see how well built he is, with long muscles. Sometimes, when the guard does not watch through the peephole in the door, my young man jumps and touches the ceiling. He used to be in the national volleyball team. They played in East Berlin, and a girl asked him if he wanted to see the other Berlin. He did not like it so much in the West because the authorities bored him with various interrogations. When he came back to East Berlin, he was well received at the beginning. Then, as he was returning back home... Now we are both under investigation.



“It is of no importance,” I tell him.

“For you, perhaps,” he bursts out. “You are over 50. But for me it is! You see that ‘this thing’ puts you in prison. And then you say that it is of no importance?”

“It is very serious, but of no importance.”

“Look, you kind of bore me, sir! According to you...”

The door’s latch is moving.

“Take this and come,” the guard tells me while entering.

He gives me opaque glasses, made out of metal; we must put them on any time we come out of the cell. The bloke takes you by the arm and, at times, seeing that you wobble, makes fun of

you: "Careful, don't step into water." You hesitate to put your foot down, and he laughs. But what a gentle thing to walk like that, *guided* in the unknown! It is like in a ritual of initiation or like in a dream...

I return after two hours. The guard takes off my opaque glasses and closes the door loudly, locking it up. For a moment, I remain confused in the middle of the cell. I feel my cheeks slightly swollen, and my young man must have seen something as well, since he asks me, "They have beaten you, haven't they?"

"Yes," I finally consent after a hesitation, "but..."

"But it is of no importance, I know," he completes the sentence. "Nevertheless, why did they beat you?"

"That's what I wanted to say: they beat me without a reason."

"How so, without a reason? That's what they do?"

My young man is worried. The idea of being hit without being able to react probably offended his pride of a sportsman. Or perhaps he would react... I have to better explain to him the non-sense of everything that happens in our situation.

"I was beaten because I did not want to take a cigarette."

"Are you mocking me?"

"But I assure you it was because of this. The guy who was interrogating me started by asking to whom I gave a book that I had received from abroad. I replied that the work had nothing problematic for the regime. 'Scoundrel,' he said, 'you will see how things are with this book. Now tell me to *whom* you gave it.' 'I am not obligated to tell you,' I said, 'since this cannot be a criminal charge.'"

The young man interrupted my story: "This is the moment when he hit you."

"No," I answer, "the guy was more skillful. He took from his pocket the list with the names of the five or six friends who really had the book in their hands (the informant I feared had done his work fairly well). Then all of a sudden I had the idea that I could save my friends by paralyzing my interrogators with a cloud of names. 'Ah,' I said, 'you were referring to these people? But there are tens of other people to whom *I could* have lent the book, or to whom I actually lent it.' I was reckoning that

they could not arrest eighty or one hundred people who had a perfectly innocent book in their hands. So I say,* ‘You have taken my agenda with addresses and phone numbers. Give it back to me for a moment, please, so that I could remember.’

“They give me the agenda and I read absolutely all names from it. From time to time, the interrogator stops and says with satisfaction the first name of the person who is mentioned; at other times, he asks me who that person is. I follow how he puts down on paper name after name methodically, for around 45 minutes (They have a good stomach, I tell myself; they can handle any quantities). At the end, he offers me a cigarette.

“At that moment I realized† what an idiot I had been, perhaps even criminal, for I had put under his eyes so many names from which he could have chosen whomever he wanted. I refused the cigarette. ‘Take it,’ he said. ‘No,’ I replied. ‘Take the cigarette!’ he shouted. ‘I won’t.’ ‘Take it or I’ll dislocate your jaw!’ he yelled, as if peeved.

“I was afraid, of course, but a kind of ‘no’ came out from my lips. The next moment, I was surprised by a strong blow on the neck, with the side of the right palm (I had not known of such special blows), and then some slaps that shook my head quite seriously. I felt how my left eye was trying to come out of its socket. I thought of two things at the same time. First: so there is a concrete meaning for the expression ‘he hit him so hard that his eyes popped out.’ The second thought was totally different in kind: he hits me—I told myself—in order to check my strength in resisting. He probably wants to be sure that he can obtain from me whatever he wants, and in any case that I am not able to hide anything from him. The pretext with the cigarette is as good as any other; or, precisely because he has no other occasion to verify from the beginning my capacity to hide something, he uses this one. It is a simple question of technical skill or virtuosity—on my part or his part. What if I *gave up*,

* The switch from past tense to present tense takes place in the original here, and I decided to maintain this change.

† At this moment, the author changes back to past tense.

all of a sudden? It would be the best assurance for him that he dominates me totally, while for me it would be a chance to hide something from him another time...

“Take the cigarette,” he shouts after he hits me.

“I took it.”

“Oh,” my young cellmate sighs.

“You see,” I try to explain to him or to justify myself, “it can be a tactic to show that you are weak...”

“But I would have *never* done this,” he exclaims disapprovingly. “After he hit me? Never...”

He looks at me. I probably have an uneasy air, in my incapacity to clarify the subtleties of my game; after all I am not certain about it either. His indignation stops all of a sudden, and the young man turns things around, changing his tone. He does not want to offend me, at least not entirely, in the conditions in which we find ourselves.

“You know why you took the cigarette?” he asks me.

“Why?”

“Because you felt like smoking,” he said.

My young sportsman is not stupid at all. In a way, he was right. The slaps I got had brought me to reality: nothing made any sense in that moment. I could smoke a cigarette.

III

I wake up the second day before the sound of the prison's bell, and I see Alec sleeping calmly, his hands outside, according to the rules here, on his back, under the light that must be on all night.* (My young cellmate is named Alec, from Alexander. He could be a brother Alexander as well, a victor for whom you must pray. But aren't all young people this way?) He has already learned to sleep according to the rules in prison, and he's been here only for four days. Poor young man... I am more and more overtaken by a feeling of responsibility for him. Could I do anything good at all for him?

But I realize all of a sudden how ridiculous this pedagogical temptation is. On the contrary, I run the risk of irritating him and of making him reluctant, as it happens with those who are very close to you or those who make it a point to make others happy. After all, perhaps they, these communists, also want our good — perhaps the improvement of our human condition, the overcoming of alienation, welfare for all, or at least welfare without the feeling that you are privileged if you have it — but they create such resistance in us! Nothing from what they offer has taste, and the world is so ungrateful for their trouble to make us happy that I wonder at times if we are not a little unfair to them. But they came too close to people; they installed themselves in the people's storerooms, in their shelters, in their drawers, and, as much as possible, in their consciences (“say this,” “make your

* According to the testimony of many who suffered in communist political prisons, this was one method of torture: to force the inmates to sleep in one position only for the entire night, and always with the hands in sight, above the covers.

own critique”). They make you uncomfortable just by using their simple voice, just with their newspaper or *speaker*.^{*}

In fact, they are too demonstrative. They have no discretion. Imagine that someone would take, or would imagine that he takes, the responsibility of food digestion and would speak in this way: “Now the food comes into your mouth. The teeth should do their duty and crush it; the salivary glands should attack it from all sides. Behold, new juices are waiting in the esophagus, well prepared, to hurry its decomposition, and the stomach must be ready not only with its acids, but also with its ferments and especially its pepsins. But where is the trypsin? The trypsin should not be late! I tell you food passes well by the duodenum at this very moment, where the pancreas and the liver send their subtle juices to accomplish the work. In a moment, the intestine with its complex organization, concentrated economically in a small place, will absorb the water, the salts, the sugars, the fats, and the proteins, and even some vitamins from the food in order to nourish the all-nourishing blood. The plan has been accomplished!”

I should not be like them with Alec. Life is a problem of digestion. I have to let him digest alone everything that happens to him. Everyone has his own stomach. Do I know what the good is? Perhaps he does not know it himself. I want for him the *better*—how to pass through this event more easily—but not necessarily the good. And perhaps if I say it this way, I do not fall into platitude, *le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*.[†] I think I want to say, *le mieux est l'ignorance du bien*.[‡]

After all, this is how all politicians, of one kind or another, behave with us: they want our “better” and think that they want our good. In large part, the dirtiness of our modern political life is a grammatical problem: people confuse the comparative with the positive, and they even no longer think of the positive. (The Americans no longer consider even the comparative, but direct-

* “Speaker,” in English in the original.

† “The better is the enemy of the good,” in French in the original.

‡ “The better is the ignorance of the good,” in French in the original.

ly the superlative: “the best”). The politicians come and tell us, “Wouldn’t it be better if you all have an apartment each?” “Yes,” we answer in a choir, “it would be better.” “Wouldn’t it be better to have longer vacations?” “Yes, it would be much better.” “You see,” they say then, “we want your good and you have to vote for us, to fight with us. And if you are not aware of your interest, we have to take the responsibility to fulfill it for you, running the risk to encounter your misunderstanding, your inertia, even at times your evil disposition.”

I actually indisposed Alec a little. I only realized it yesterday morning, when I was doing my two gymnastics movements, precisely for digestion. He told me, “I have been here for three days, and I see you doing the same two movements. Don’t you know any other one? Let me teach you.” I also got angry a little myself, and I did not ask him to teach me a third movement. I am as childish as he is.

“How did the fellow from yesterday look like, the guy who got on you about the cigarette?” he asks me after he stands up.

“To be honest, I did not really look at him,” I answer. “We do not have to register and remember all things. I decided to not remember their names, so I would not recognize them on the street when I will be free one day. They do not matter. They are not themselves.”

Alec looked at me with pity.

“Perhaps your eyes darkened because he slapped you.”

“No, my dear, honestly, I am not interested in how he looked. They are not *themselves*, I repeat; there is something else or someone else behind them.”

He shakes his head at what he takes to be my platitude.

“You mean the Russians...”

I wait for him to wash, and we sit on the blankets, waiting for the poor substitute for morning coffee to come. I then try to explain.

“After all, it is not about the Russians; I think there is something else in place, which transforms all of them into objects.”

“Ah, the system!”

“If it were only this! But our entire Time, time with a capital T, pushes them to do what they do.”

“But you, is it still the time with a capital T that threw you in here?”

“Of course, and also those who must guard us. In fact, our time has already been described almost to the letter. Goethe did it, in the second part of *Faust*. If I told you the story, you would see...”

“Well, culture! You explain everything with it perfectly, even when you do not know anything. If you were so clear with *Faust II* about time, then how come did you get here?”

“Such things cannot be avoided; you cannot evade your own time. They’ are victims as well, just like us.”

“What, isn’t it going well for them?”

“I could not say that it is going so well for them.. Consider these guards: they have to look at us through the peephole every five minutes, to see whether we are not plotting something or trying to take our own lives. If they have five cells to oversee, this means that they look through a peephole every minute. Is this a human job? They are like the dogs, running from door to door.”

“I see you pity them. Perhaps you pity the investigators as well...”

I sense how he is about to boil. I try to avoid being too categorical and provocative in my judgments, and I tell him:

“My dear, regardless of the situation in which one finds oneself, it is good to ponder on the situation that may follow.”

“Should I have pity on them because they run the risk to be judged one day?”

“This does not even cross my mind. I pity them (if I can talk this way in our situation) because I see that they are not placed in the condition of being humans, beings who do something and find out something from life. There are so many things they could learn about man from this entire gallery of human specimens that go before them! But how could they learn? They must

* “They” could refer here to the investigators or more generally to the communists.

reach a pre-established result; they have to make people recognize what they want. They do not want to learn even new words or new ways to speak. You will see that they do not allow you to write your declaration alone, but they write it, in their terms and with their clichés, and you are only to sign it, if you cannot refuse and resist. I often thought that it would be interesting to investigate an investigator, that is to cross-examine him about the human types he has encountered. But in fact, he is trained to precisely destroy different human types and even man as moral being. They do not realize that, with people, if you destroy the other, you annul yourself. What will they do in life when this story is finished?”

He listened to me until the end, but when I raise my eyes toward him I see that he is suffocated by revolt. Coffee came in the meantime. After he drinks it, Alec recovers a little. It feels as if a demon makes him to continue to put traps for me.

“And those in power, the bigwigs, are they also not doing well?”

I breathe deeply. What can I do but tell him my thought, even if I really attenuate it?

“There was a French writer, Montherlant,” I answer, “who had the courage to write in a book published during the German occupation: *‘pitié pour les forts!’*” I let aside the fact that the communists, after they dreamed, fought, and crushed all adversity, they have to do simple work of administration. This is the misery of any political delirium. But what’s the curse that makes them, the materialists, who spume of anger against idealism, to practice the worse idealism, the type that deforms reality by their idea instead of forming it by the idea taken from reality? Everything is disfigured, starting with them, the materialists, just like in *Faust II*. Someone told me that the most painful thing is to watch one of their parties: they are afraid to drop an

* “Mercy on the strong!” in French in the original.

inappropriate word, they or their wives.* They can't even party anymore! They are not interesting..."

"As if it were about this?" Alec bursts out. "About this? You don't believe yourself an iota of what you say! They hold us in their claws, don't you see? They hold us in their claws. It is as if you would say that the lion that caught you is not really interesting because its manes are too short or its eyes too yellow!"

I watch how he stood up. He is furious, and I truly feel like I am in a cage with him. There is a feeling of animality coming from him. I would deserve to be crushed since I provoked him like this. If something took place... Anything...

Then the miracle comes. The door opens widely, and the guard brings a bucket with dirty water and two large rags. "Wash the floor," he commands. I jump to take one of the rags and I begin to feverishly scrub the concrete. Alec became calm all of a sudden. The idea that he has something to do restores him to order. He recovers even the strength to be ironical: "This too is in *Faust II*, isn't it?"

* Noica probably refers to the fear one would experience during a communist regime. People avoided to express any opinions that may be construed as opposing the regime because such opinions could send you straight to prison. The Securitate, the secret police, had informants among all people, especially among the Communists themselves, and one could never know how his or her conversations would be reported.

IIU

I do not say anything and I ponder while I continue scrubbing the floor: where does this scene or a similar one appear in *Faust*? It should be somewhere in Goethe's work, for this is about something profoundly human: the work of a slave...

However, to wash the floor of your own cell does not seem to really be the work of a slave. This is work as well, and it has something good in it, regenerating. In the lack of meaning in which they threw us (and in which they threw *themselves*, because of the excessive power that they assumed), any useful work is a blessing. Alec fully feels it too, and he gets more and more on my half of the floor, until he decides to take the bucket with water to him, not allowing me to do anything else. Perhaps he wants to spare me. He does not realize that *I* take pleasure as well in washing the floor.

"I was afraid that you would not have cleaned the floor well," he tells me so as to give an explanation. "For you, all things seem without importance, while for me the cleanliness of the cell is important."

"This is more important than the great historical events," I answer.

He sits on the bed. He is content that he did good work, but after one moment he remembers my previous reflection and he revolts again.

"How can you make such cheap paradoxes?"

I am afraid to say the littlest thing. In fact, I don't even think that he would find a meaning in what I am tempted to say now. He is too young to know of the *vacuum* of many of the so-called "historical" events. I remember some events from the more recent past that seemed historic to their contemporaries and to

the media. “The historic meeting in Bermuda.” Who remembers this? Churchill met there with some American president, and some president of a French council could not come because he had a cold. How historic would the meeting have been if the latter had not had a cold... Making order and cleaning around you have a positive meaning for both you and the society, while some great events can be a simple stammer of history.

In fact, if it could be said about nature that it stammers, then this can be said even more about history, since it is done the way it is done by this approximate being, the human. Perhaps we live now during a stammer of history, an organized one — this is what I would like to tell Alec. It is terrible or it is stupid, however you want to take it. It is like in the English proverb: the dog barks, but it barks up the wrong tree (where the cat is not).

You often have the impression that the people of public life bark up the wrong tree, even if you do not know which tree the cat is in, either. (The unbelievable thing is that these people, the communists, ask you to bark like them, up their tree. “If you don’t bark, I will bite you.” And they really bite.)

Alec cannot know that two generations, those before him, were troubled by two world wars generated — at least on the continent — by something incredible today: the French–German conflict. It is as if the left hand would fight the right. In all of Europe, people were divided in public life but also in private life on this theme: are you with the French or with the Germans? Parents were fighting their children. I do not want to say that we can delete these wars from history, started by Teutonic blindness, or the communist revolution that came between them. How could they be deleted, since they had so many consequences? But anyone can see today that the Europeans barked up the wrong tree. Three great nations in Europe were fighting one another so that two other greater nations from the margins of Europe, the Americans and the Russians, could take the foreground faster than even they could desire it. And even behind

* Noica probably refers to the 1953 meeting between Churchill and us President Eisenhower.

these two and their unnatural and forced antagonism there was something else: the fact that Europe, together with the Americans and the Russians, was destined to wake up Asia from its sleep and Africa from its animality. By its civilization — historically the first one that was established on exclusively rational values and perfectly transmissible to any human mind — Europe, this peninsula of Asia, was about to wake up the whole globe to life. It almost did it in a different fashion, through colonialism, but this was more abusive and too slow. It quickened, and now things happen too fast. But it is *this* waking up to life of the globe that is important, or something of this kind (the demographic explosion, the indirect and direct pressure of the Third World), and not the barks of the first half of the 20th century. Someone said, “the stupid 19th century.” You could rather say, “the stupid first half of the 20th century.” At least some art was done during it. Otherwise, it would have been a perfect stupidity of history.

“Tell me something. Tell me about a movie,” says Alec.

He cannot stand this prolonged silence, even though he would stand my rattle about history even less. I have to do what he asks of me. But I do not like movies too much, or I don't like those with a “subject.” The absurdity of the movie with a subject is that it wants to fixate the imagination of the spectator with a few images. But it should, I do not know how, *free* it. Perhaps giving the same scene two or three times, in different fashions. But, behold, I act like someone wise when I do not know to narrate a simple movie.

“You see,” I tell him, “I do not think I could describe one as you would like, with details, especially an action movie.”

“How so? You are telling me that you can narrate entire books, and you are not able to tell me a movie? Then tell me something else, a story.

“Yes,” I say, “yes, of course.”

I try hard to remember a story.

“You won't say that you don't know a story?”

“No... yes... of course yes; who doesn't know any story?”

I feel worse than under investigation, and I try to invent something. I begin, “Once upon a time... there was... there was

a village which had only one well, and that well did not have a lot of water either. (It's an idea, I'm telling myself; it's an idea). The women had to come very, very early to find the water accumulated during the night. One morning (*now* I have to invent something, now is the moment), one morning when they came to get water, the woman found at the well... an outlaw with his saber in his hand, an outlaw who told them, 'Nobody gets water unless I allow her.' (I breathe, relieved: now I have a subject, one with a possible conflict). The women began crying, saying that children are waiting at home; one even said that her child was sick, but the outlaw did not have pity. The elders of the village came to implore the outlaw, even promising anything to him, just so that he would go. But the outlaw enjoyed showing how powerful he was and, as any other earthly powerful man, he began to believe that he was also wise. He took out a bucket with water, placed it on the edge of the well, rather to provoke them, and began to give them advice: 'Just look: do you call this water? You should dig a well there, in the valley, a deeper one, so that you could find better and more water. I'll teach you.' Saying this, he really enjoyed seeing how they listened to him obediently. 'You are right, and we thank you,' one of the elders said, 'but, for now, let people take from this water too.' At that moment, a blackbird descended from the air to the bucket, dipped its beak into the water twice, and flew away. 'You see, not even the birds like your water,' the outlaw said. 'Actually, I suspect that you do not have good order, and some people take more water, others less. I am certain that the *chiaburi* of the village come and take water by the barrel. We must do things right, as I will teach you.' And time passed this way, with well pondered words, as taken from a book, until evening, when the outlaw took pity on some more troubled women, but he left all of the others thirsty...

"Next day early morning, the entire village was lined nicely around the well, men on one side and women on the other, waiting obediently for the decisions of the outlaw. 'This is how I like

* The *chiaburi* were wealthy peasants who owned land. In Russia, they were called *kulaks*, which is the term that is also often used in English.

it,' he said. 'Now we can work well.' He gave to some the right to take water, but not to all, but all of them thanked him and praised him, so that they would not upset him for future days. And the outlaw did the same thing for a few days, proving his power and right judgment, until he thought that the only thing he got out of it was the empty rule over people. He then said to them, 'If you continue doing as I told you to do and if you give me what I need as payment for the good I did to you, I will leave. But know well that I can return anytime.' People rushed to give him even more than he requested, vowed submission even in his absence, and accompanied him to the forest.

"The outlaw went into the forest, being content with the work he had done, and he went on until he became thirsty. He was loaded with goods, and it was warm. He headed toward the spring that he knew was there, but the spring was no more. He went toward the creek in the middle of the forest, but the creek had drained. An uncertain fear took hold of him, as if nature and the forest were punishing him for the power that he had assumed over the people. Exhausted, he sat down on the bed of the creek. At that moment, a child came close to him. He had been sent by the people in the village to make sure that the outlaw had indeed left. 'I'm thirsty,' the outlaw said. 'Bring me a pail of water.' The child went back to the village in a hurry to bring the news. Some said, 'We should not give him water.' The woman who had a sick child said, 'Give him water.' And the young man went back, carrying the pail on his head. When he went down to the bed of the creek, where the outlaw was waiting, he stumbled, the pail broke, and the dry bed engulfed all the water. The child was terrified, thinking that the outlaw would kill him; but the outlaw had understood that it was not the child's fault. As he was staying there..."

I stop, happy that I succeeded in inventing at least those things.

* The change between "child" and "young man" takes place in the original. It was a story invented on the spot, so we should not be surprised by the lack of accuracy.

“As he was staying there...,” Alec continues.

“Yes,” I say to him, “we can continue the story together.”

For a moment, Alec is caught in the fairytale:

“As he was staying there, the blackbird who had drunk from the bucket comes to him and places two drops of water on his lips. Then, the outlaw...”

But he stops abruptly.

“What did you mean with this story?”

“How so, what I meant? I just told you a story...”

“Is this story not *true*? I mean, a story that others tell?” he asks in a harsh voice

“I no longer know. It just came to my mind. Perhaps I invented it.”

He looks at me with a sharp look. One of the veins at his temple swells, and he shouts:

“*I know* what you wanted to say. You wanted to say *the same* thing, the lesson you have been giving me; you wanted to say that those who cut off the springs of people cut off their own springs; that if somebody takes away the life-giving water, he takes it away from himself; that these people who torture us, the communists, should not be hated, but rather pitied, pitied. Aren't you ashamed to repeat yourself that much?”

“I swear, Alec,” I say, “that I didn't think of anything when I began...”

But a wave of shame takes hold of me indeed. How didn't I realize what I was saying? And how did things get so connected to end up in a homily? He, the young man, wanted to dream; he needed air, gratuity...

“You are... you are just an educator,” he shouts. “*Educator!*” he thunders again and turns his head from me. (He says it as a true insult, as if he said, “Demagogue! Mystagogue!”)

The guard shows his face at the peephole: “Where do you think you are that you yell that loudly? Stand for an hour facing the wall in the back!”

I look at Alec, who doesn't even wink. He would not talk to me for two days.

U

We both stood for an hour, facing the wall in the back, without exchanging looks or words. No one is in harmony with anyone else any longer, and the relations between people are no longer natural in these socialist regimes. I do not know how these regimes move everything out of place, dislocating even people's souls. You would think that only the public life is changed and that you can take refuge in your private life; for a moment you are even delighted that you no longer have public responsibilities and that you are restituted to your personal life. But even here everything is vitiated. You no longer get along with your wife ("you no longer bring home enough money and you are not worth anything in society"); you no longer get along with your child ("your truths are no longer in agreement with those of the school"); with your friends, it is even worse: if you complain, you risk being politically inappropriate or even dangerous; if you do not complain, you offend them.

Something does not "click" any longer. The relationships among people, just as the relations humans have with objects, have in general something of the complexity of a mechanism which, once established, must "click" and begin functioning. In this socialist world, the ultimate adjustment of things disappeared. Everything moves forward, I don't exactly know how, but without making the "click."

It is like this in *Faust*, at least in Goethe's version. Faust, the hero, no longer "clicks" with anything. This is what he says to the devil when he declares that the devil cannot make him exclaim, "just a moment, stay a while": he tells him that he will not make him feel the "click." He is *der Unbehauste*, as he calls himself, the man without dwelling, without being in agreement

with anyone and anything. In fact, he no longer wants anything after he wanted everything at once, thoughtlessly, and so he allows himself to be dragged by the devil here and there. In the scene with the drinkers from Auerbach's tavern, where Mephistopheles has terrible fun at the expense of the others, Faust says only one thing: "Let us leave!" (This would be the first "Faustian" work, according to interpreters.) In the love story with Gretchen, all poetry is poisoned by falsity, by the crookedness of the situation. It is true, Gretchen falls in love with her whole heart with the "sage of the four Universities," who was artificially rejuvenated by the devil and the sorcerers. She dreams of bringing everything to a final "click," which would have been the religious wedding; but she feels, with her feminine intuition, that Faust cannot do things properly with her because he is not properly in order with himself (he does not have the right faith, he does not "click" with the good God). She, who is the victim in all things, will have to have mercy on him sometime.

What a typical brother Alexander is this Faust: a conqueror for whom you need to have mercy! However, he is a complete victor. He has overcome ignorance, he has overcome human weakness and helplessness, and, after all, he has conquered any religious sentimentalism or illusionism, allying himself with the devil absolutely and without any fear. He is in the situation of being able to do anything, due to the means and allies that are at his disposal, but *he does not know what to do*. You must pray not only for his soul, as Gretchen does at the end, but for his deeds as well, for the risk he runs to do things that are not to be done, like modern man. How could one claim that Faust is representative of modern man due to his *aspiration* or his "creativity" and that our world is Faustian because it wants and it knows what it wants? Our world is Faustian because it *doesn't* know what it wants, just like Goethe's hero; because it has prepared its means and victories with which it has nothing to do.

However, when you do not know what to do with the means you have at your disposal, they begin working by themselves. This is why, just like in *Faust*, the possible has precedence over the real in our world. This is what I wanted to tell Alec, in my

conviction that I was helping him understand what is happening to him, that is that we live in a world in which the possible, from the possibility of technology to that of politics, has precedence over any reality. But he is confused when faced with his own time, just like Gretchen with Faust.

This girl — just like my young man — embodies the world of the real, while Faust brings with himself the world of the possible. His youth is “possible,” not real, and even this being with whom he fell in love is, for him, “a possible Helen” (just like the devil had prepared him to feel, when they were in *Hexenbüche* and he made him see beauty in a mirror). Something crooked has appeared in the world, substituting the real, and now it takes being, with its false sound. Everything is a question of sound, after all. There is something that Gretchen does not like, just as the story that I improvised did not sound well to Alec. He felt that it was a possible story, not a real one.

The devil interfered between us, just as he interfered between Faust and Gretchen. After all, what does the devil mean? It means the unending possibility, but a *bare* possibility. In itself, the world of possibilities represents something good and human, just as the technology of the modern world is something good and human in principle. Due to technology, our world has moved from the harsh or indifferent real into the kindness of the possible, and we no longer live among realities, but among the admirable realized possibilities. An automobile is a realized possibility and is something good. But when science or technology comes to make, as it has tried, some sort of insect to correspond to the idea of “chimera” from Antiquity, then it is about an empty possibility and it is no longer something good. Or when an ideologist comes to make a state...

When we go directly from the possible to the real, with a deeper necessity, and when, for example, we make up states that do not match the souls or we want to make (just like “engineers,” in this tender matter) souls that do not match people, then it means that the devil somehow interfered. The entire *Faust II* is — at times it is even acknowledged to be so — a fit of the devil, reprised over five acts. But the strange thing is that everything

that takes place there also happens in our time. And this time of ours is no longer always the work of the devil, or *it is possible* for it not to be so.

I would have told Alec that *Faust II* is, act after act, the realization of the empty possible, of the possible deprived of any necessity. After all, the empty possible reigned in the first part of *Faust* as well, beginning with the devil entering the play; but the emptiness of the devil is not seen there because there were still real people in play. In the second part, though, there are almost no people. You look for them with a candle and you only find specters. There is no real human in Act I, and even less so in Act II, the act of the homunculus. Only in Act III does the face of a real man, Lynceus, the guardian of the Faustian city gate, appear timidly. He remains mute with admiration when the beautiful Helen appears in the city and brings to him, later, his gifts of a poor man. Then again, there is no human during the entire Act IV, the act of the diabolic war, but, in Act V, we finally find two poor real men, the old Philemon and Baucis, who resist against forced agricultural collectivization, just like now. Other than that, only specters, specters...

In such a spectral world, the empty possible is, of course, at home. I would have liked to tell Alec how, in Act I, Goethe unleashes over the real world of some state the empty possible of *money* without coverage, the banknote, when Mephistopheles suggests to issue banknotes on the basis of possible treasures buried under ground; then, in Act II, how a small man comes out of the tube — again as empty possibility, unrequired by any need — so how a technical-scientific revolution is made and what science-fictional consequences (the return in time) it can have. After these typical Mephistophelic exploits, you have in Act III the empty possible in terms of culture: the marriage of Faust with the beautiful Helen, the marriage of the modern spirit with the Greek one, as a true anticipated movie, directed by Mephistopheles. No commentary is needed any longer for Act IV, the act of the war led with devilish means, as today. The last act brings into play the *political* possible, which is the un-

leashing of ordering and planning reason, and Alec and I find ourselves now under its hysteria.

However, it would be worth saying now, when faced with our time, that you can no longer exclaim as you did about the happenings in Goethe's work: this is the work of the devil! Even Goethe's work no longer appears like this today, since the 20th century made it true, so it came on man's account, in a way. In any case, things may be different with us. For us, the issue of banknotes is not an empty game of financial magic; science is not the projection of a singular genius or a form of exasperation, like for Faust, but rather a slow accumulation, often anonymous, for centuries; the myth of the beautiful Helen has been democratized, with her image (or the image of her sisters, the stars*) multiplied on our screens, leaving us free for another encounter with the Greek spirit; war has become so devilish that the god Ares must be really expelled from the skies and from the earth, if man still has judgment; and the political delirium, which comes into our world as well, like in Act v, to colonize a new humanity on a new and renewed earth, to the level of suffocating it, the political delirium, then, is hit steadfastly not only by some old people like Philemon and Baucis, but also by a strange challenging young generation.

Are we, the moderns, distorted or not? Goethe anticipated us with some repulsion. But the problem is whether we are or not in order, even us, who got thrown into prisons. Is there something deprived of necessity, perfectly arbitrary, and, after all, without importance, as I think and say, in everything that is done above our heads, as from the surplus of the possible over the real? Would this be an organized stammering, something fabricated and revocable, just as these communist parties continue to return to their orientation, making their self-critique periodically, like in a chess match in which they would take back their moves? Or is the good and human possible at stake, which comes into the world in whatever way and by whomever it can? If Napoleon could tell Goethe that, from him onward, *le destin*

* Noica refers to today's stars, the stars of cinema, music, or television.

*c'est la politique** and that the destiny of the ancients is done for, it was not only about the self and about his politics. But about *which* politics? The politics of the poor electoral agents from one part of the world? Or the politics of the poor “central committees” from the other part?†

As I stay in prison with this young man, taken out of the reality of life or perhaps separated from a frieze of its temple, as we both stay like this, innocent with a *possible* guilt, I feel the full primacy of the possible over the real and I think that I also understand why we are here and why they‡ will have to take us out. They need the real, they need our testimony! Without the consent of Philemon and Baucis, Faust’s work is “impure.” The great reformer is disturbed by some trees, those real limes of the elders, from the patch of land that they did not want to leave. The bell of the small church exasperates him. But when Mephistopheles comes to tell him that he has destroyed everything from the face of the earth, Faust withdraws in horror. (The horror of the despots and dictators!)

Now, the old Ladies come around him: Lack, Debt, Care, Need. Goethe makes only one of them, Care, speak to Faust and tell him, in the name of all four, that he has been blind his whole life. Won’t these old ladies come around the communists as well? Don’t they also need us, just like Faust? I feel like telling them, “Beware, so that you don’t fall one day under the investigation of the old Ladies!” To avoid it, they need our mercy and our testimony. They need Alec’s joy and youth.

* “Destiny is politics,” in French in the original.

† The part of the world with the electoral agents is formed by the Western democracies, while the one with the central committees (the leading organs of the Communist party) by the Eastern communist states.

‡ “They” refers to the Communists. During Communism, people often referred to the Communists with this impersonal “they.” “They” were giving potatoes at the grocery, “they” were interrupting electricity in the evening, etc.

UI

During the following days, I no longer do the two morning exercises, to avoid irritating Alec. When the meal comes, I pretend that I have something to do and I let him eat by himself. The third day he is taken to interrogations. What do they have to impute to him? He crossed from East Berlin, where his team had a game, to West Berlin; he got bored by the Americans' interrogations, and he came back willingly. They will hold him for a while, and then they will free him, letting him finish his degree in architecture (he's a senior) or making him a volleyball coach, as so many others.

When he returns to the cell, he is pale with rage. He forgot any anger he had with me, and he tells me directly:

"They will try me for 'treason against the state.'"

"Treason against the state?" I shout.

"That's what they told me. Between 8 and 15 years of prison."

It is awkward to think that, after all, it had to be this way, according to my own explanations: he was also a *possible* traitor for them.

"I no longer care about anything," he says. "If I get out one day, I won't finish Architecture and I'll go someplace to the countryside. Perhaps I'll find a young girl in a mountain village, with two cows as dowry. Can you imagine what this is? Living simply, in nature..."

He sinks into that shattering silence of an injured young being. After an hour, he looks at me with a gentle smile. It seems that life made him mature all of a sudden!

"Don't you want me to tell you a story?" I suggest this so that I can make him think of something else. "I can tell you a love story."

“But is it a true one?”

“Yes, it is from Plato’s *Symposium*,” I say quite imprudently.

He frowns for a moment and then relaxes.

“After all, if it’s a good one...”

At that moment, the guard’s face appears in the peephole. He orders me: “Get your luggage ready in two minutes.”

He closes the peephole, and while I start gathering the few things I have, Alec becomes agitated.

“I’m sorry you’re leaving, I am so sorry! What do you need? What can I give you? I want to *give* you something.”

He only has two shirts and three pairs of socks; he wanted to patch up one of them the first day when we would receive needle and thread. Helpless, he frets.

“I want to give you a memory,” he says, being emotional.

“Give me the third exercise movement,” I suggest.

He’s happy that I’ve asked something from him.

“Yes, look, this is how you do it: with your arms on your hips, you raise your knees rhythmically, touching your chest with them if you can.”

He shows me the movement, which he executes so supply.

“I’ll do this exercise, Alec, and I will think of you.”

“Quiet!” the guard says coming in, and he drags me to him, dumps the metal glasses on my head, and leaves me holding out my hand, but I no longer find Alec’s.

I am taken through all sorts of corridors. It could be just the same one, as this is the guards’ habit, to confuse you, so that you don’t know where you are taken. I may have arrived in the neighboring cell or some completely different place. Even if I were next to Alec, I would be in another galaxy. When the door slams behind me, I hear knocks on the wall, more and more persistent, from three sides. Poor guys, I tell myself, they want to hear news. It’s good that I don’t know Morse code at all; otherwise, I would not be able to resist the temptation to answer.

After one or two days of desperate attempts to get in contact with me, my neighbors calm down. I calm down as well. All of a sudden, a quite curious thing comes to mind: what an interesting problem of communication appears especially when you do

not know Morse or some other alphabet. The person next to you is just like a rational being from another planetary system. How do you communicate with him? This is probably, at this time, one of the greatest problems of man: how to communicate with other rational beings of the cosmos. We have no common code, and everything must be invented, both language and concepts. It is fascinating. You must be thrown into a place such as this to realize that the real problems of the mind are not to be found in books. How is it that people don't think of such pure situations when they are free? How stupidly they get mixed up into tangential situations. The situation here may even be ideal.

In this particular case, my neighbor is a rational being, just like me; this is the only presupposition. Everything else can be invented. But no, there is one more difficulty here: I must first convince my neighbor that I do not know any code and that I ask him to not know one either, so that we would invent one together. It will be difficult, but I must try. If I succeed, then everything is just like an encounter between a human being and another rational being in the cosmos.

I wonder which of the neighbors I should choose, so in which wall to knock. I decide for the wall on the right, because the colleague from that cell knocked the most. In my walk of 6 steps that I can make on the diagonal of the room, I stop every time at the wall and I knock. At the second signal, my neighbor responds to me. I knock again, intently erratic. He answers with still too regular signals. I knock with my fist. He still answers with signals. How come he does not understand that I do not know any code and that I would want him to not use one either? I stop for a longer time next to the wall and I knock in all possible ways, rhythmically, non-rhythmically, hastily, slowly.

“What are you doing there?”

I turn around and I find myself before two guards that had opened the door's latch silently and come stealthily in the room.

“What are you doing? You're knocking Morse!”

“I am not knocking Morse.”

“How come you don't? Haven't we seen you?”

“I give you my word of honor that I do not know Morse.”

“Look at this bourgeois, how he gives his word of honor! Aren’t you ashamed to lie, when we caught you in the act?”

In despair, an inspired idea takes voice within me:

“Please take me to Mr. Commander, because I have something to report.”

The guards look at one another. Perhaps they imagine that I found out something from a neighbor and I want to denounce him. After all, they had to ask for permission to punish me for my offence anyway, so they grab me by my arms, one of them puts the metallic glasses that he had in his hands on my eyes, and they both take me to the commander.

“We caught this scoundrel knocking Morse, but he says he wants to report something.”

“Leave him here.”

“Mr. Commandant,” I begin, “I confess that I knocked on the wall, but I didn’t do it to communicate with my neighbor, because I do not know Morse, but rather to establish a code for communication in the cosmos.”

“What?”

I try to justify everything, calmly and as persuasively as possible. I show that, next to the technical problem, which has already been solved by humanity, the extraterrestrial communication is a question of imagination and sustained meditation; I add that I fell upon an idea that authorizes me to believe that I am able to bring a contribution to adding a code. I would place everything at the authorities’ disposal, without any claim, not even a claim to improve the conditions of the regime in prison. I only ask for paper and pencil.

“You, buffoon,” the commander says, after he listens to me with a vague smile, “do you think that someone like you can solve this problem? We have academicians...”

“I do not contest that there are more competent people,” I insist, “but they do not have time to consider such a problem and the idea may not have come to them. You see, this is something special; you need a flashing, crazy idea...”

I become enthusiastic, I sense that my eyes stare as in a vision, and I enter a trance. It no longer matters what the com-

mander thinks, but I have something to say; I have something to say... The commander calls for the guard.

“Take him back.”

I cannot avoid a pathetic gesture, of despondency. At the moment we are at the door, the commander says, “Here, give him these sheets of paper and a pencil. If he lied, I’ll show him.”

I return to the cell happy. The guard counts the sheets: there are 22. He gave me a pencil later. I begin to meditate impassionedly, but confidently. Thus, let us assume that the technical means of communication are given: the radio waves or any other waves that carry messages. It is true that transmission of data takes years or dozens of years at the speed of light. But it does not matter. As Pascal says, the whole humanity is just like a human being. So, what does this human being transmit so that he makes himself understood by another being of a similar level in rationality?

Something curious comes to mind from the beginning: any signal or *regular* group of signals risks appearing to the other being in cosmos as stemming from the processes of dead matter. After all, today, we also register various emissions of waves from the cosmos, but it is precisely their regularity that makes them seem uncertain, and we attribute them rather to material processes taking place there. If you want to show that you are a rational being, you must first prove that you are *not* under a mechanical necessity. The first affirmation of rationality is, then, the freedom to not be rational; or the first manifestation of logic would be coming out of the strict logic of mechanisms, so fantasy and, in a way, the lack of logic. The dialogue of two rational consciences would thus begin with each indicating that he *is* a rational being: he can signal arbitrarily. You must show that you have spontaneity; that you are a rational *subject*, not an object of natural laws.

This is a beginning, too. Perhaps it is the only beginning. We want, then, to show that here, on this celestial body, there is reason. Thus, we reveal reason on earth by its capacity to deny itself, just as the laws of dead things *cannot* do. We start, then, by bringing the rational chaos, by bringing chaos purely and sim-

ply, the one from which all things begin. (This is what I could not do with my cell neighbor, for whom I was knocking chaotically on the wall: I could not make him begin from chaos as well.) You can *surprise* your interlocutor and make him pay attention and be interested in speaking to you only in this way. You prove to him that there is a rational being here, because, if this being wants to, it can decide not to transmit anything. Just as you erase the board or the magnetic tape so that you can record something new on them, you must begin here by non-transmission as well, by a zero-transmission, so that you could later transmit something intelligible to the other rational being. Faced with a clearly affirmed chaos, with a categorical zero-communication, this person will be filled with wonder, and wonder is the beginning of knowledge and of contact with things and other beings.

The guard throws me a well-sharpened pencil through the peephole. It falls on my bed. I rush to take it, because it has been years since I held one in my hand. What an admirable zero a pencil is, a positive zero, just like the white sheet of paper from where I consider beginning the cosmic dialogue. Anything can come out from the use of a pencil: communication, non-communication... I write on the first sheet of paper, beginning with a large title: *COSMIC DAYS*. I'm thinking that the signal sent by humans, together with the answer received over years, could represent a unity, a day of conversation. "Cosmic Days," then. Let their emergence among people be blessed!

When I wake up the second day, I feel as on a cosmic day. I do what I need to do in my cell as if sleepwalking, and I begin writing down the results I had achieved. The first cosmic day came this way: I established contact with the extraterrestrial being and the possibility of communication precisely because we did not communicate at all. We thus gained two things: first, we recognized each other as rational beings, capable of communication; second, we agreed that we have not communicated anything yet.

We have obtained all of this by a manifestation of spontaneity as rational beings. Now, we have to come out of spontaneity or to control it, still as rational beings. I let you know that I am

rational because I say, “tra la la,” or “bum, bum, bum,” but now I have to transmit something. Since the first day was with free signals, the second day must have connected and ordered signals. Everything begins *now*.

I stop for a while. After the exaltation that had overtaken me, this is the first time when I begin to have doubt. I was convinced that it was sufficient to put the problem well — according to the principle that a problem asked well is half solved — in order to get a result. But what if nothing comes out of this? I shudder for a moment, but not out of fear for the commander, but out of shame before myself. Still, let us not give up. Let’s see. I have obtained the attention of the other cosmic being. Perfect; I should not tell him something; it will be something still indeterminate, but *regular* this time, like a signal that is repeated at infinity. (If he answers with the same repeated signal, it means he’s not stupid.) In fact, I can begin even better, with a group of repeated signals instead of a simple signal that I would repeat. This will help me to isolate the group later and, since the other knows it, to make out of it an announcement-signal: that I exist, that it is I, the one on Terra; or that I *begin* transmission. I prepare then a first concept: the beginning. We will be able to begin every emission with that group of signals, but we will also say “beginning” by it, anytime we would wish so. Similarly, we could end every emission in the same fashion, and then we will detach the word “end.”

Is it possible to compose an entire language with two words, beginning and end? I could introduce a few others as well. I can, let’s say, invent a kind of negation: I could reverse one of mine or one of his structured succession of signals. It is not really free negation, or logical complement, as it is called in logic, but it still is *one* way of negating or canceling something. I can declare that it is *not* so; thus, I communicate something. I also can — what? I can introduce some notions of quantity: “much” and “little”; or notions of intensity: “rapidly” and “slowly”; or even the idea of unity (for example, with a regular group between two irregular emissions), the idea of plurality, and perhaps some mathematical operations. I would still have to find an abstract formula for

them, namely that I shouldn't have to indicate every time that *this* is a unity, *here* is a relation. But let's grant that I find a kind of language for mathematical notions. What do I communicate with them? As some mathematician says, mathematics is the only science that does not know what it refers to. We should however communicate something: that there are trees on Terra, that there is hydrogen in the cosmos, or that everything can be reduced to electromagnetic fields. How do I get to this point?

I only need a few days to realize that I cannot obtain "cosmic days." There is no place for any excuse: that I don't have the means to experiment by communicating with my neighbor, that I don't have books, that, after all, everything depends on the answer of the other from cosmos. There is no space for "let me explain." I am worthless. I have nothing to say to humanity and, after all, I do not deserve to be free. Yes, I don't deserve my freedom. I feel that, if I *had known* how to solve the problem, the gates of prison would have opened; even if it had not been about the commitment, or the service done to humanity, etc., etc., the gates would still have opened. When somebody has some essential thing to say, the walls do not resist.

It's true, though, that there may have been some people who had some essential thing to say in Auschwitz or in the Soviet camps, and the walls did not fall, or they fell on them. But *now*, they would have fallen aside. Or let me say it this way: it is not always true that a human who knows or can do some essential thing comes necessarily to light, but the one who does not know or cannot do some essential thing deserves to stay in darkness. I deserve it. They* can go ahead and condemn me for ridiculous reasons, as they want to do, for having declared that socialism is for the rich, not for the poor, for example. They are right. They judge badly but condemn well.

I have filled almost half of the sheets of paper, and I should ask to have my pencil sharpened. But I am not asking it. I remember a dear boy, who once told me how he received a passing grade at the exam in mathematics, although he was not good at

* The Communists.

it. He tried to solve the problem in all possible ways; he filled four sheets of a notebook, and at the end he wrote, "I do not know how to solve the problem." The teacher gave him a passing grade because he was honest. I have to do the same thing.

The next morning I push the button to be called to report. At my third signal, the door is open, and the guard and the officer on duty come in.

"Get your luggage ready."

"But I want to report to Mr. Commander," I say.

"Let it go and get your luggage."

"But I have these papers," I insist; "it is a rather important problem."

The officer takes the sheets of paper that I hand to him, looks over them for a moment, and then shouts, "ah, it's about that story!" He tears up the papers, saying, "do it!"

I am suffocated by a wave of revolt: what if I had written something valuable? And why did they give me this chance to say something? But then I understand all of a sudden: they had been afraid that, in my exaltation, I could have fallen into a crisis, into folly. That was all.

UII

They shoved me in a jeep with curtains. While they take me to I do not know what destination, I think of the whole human sadness that is comprised in “I do not know how to solve the problem,” which you must utter not before a professor, but before life itself. We do not know how to solve even the small problems — they take care of themselves, after all — and we have no clue how to solve the equation of our lives. How uninteresting are we, psychologically, intellectually, and morally, each one of us...

To me, it seems incomprehensible how people gave so much importance to the inscription on the temple in Delphi, “know thyself.” To know myself. Who? I, Hans Castorp? Not to say Thersites, that wretch from the *Iliad*? Or I, Smerdyakov, that villain from *The Brothers Karamazov*? But anyone, on any human level, senses how limited and uninteresting he is as object of knowledge. It is interesting to know nature, it is interesting to know the good God or the Great All, as the Indians say, to know people in their variety and how anyone bears an infinity within themselves, but to know yourself? Taken at face value, this incentive represents one of the great stupid sayings of humanity — there are others as well —, and it is difficult to accept that it was uttered fully by the Greeks. This saying could seem of great value only to the moderns, with their interest for the human subject and person. For the ancients, it is surprising to see the importance (perhaps an importance of argumentation) that Plato gives to it, and, if we are to give it full meaning, we

* Character from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

can only give the Socratic understanding: search yourself so that you see that you know absolutely nothing.

The interpretations that attempt to save this saying do not go that far, though, and the way in which they attempt to give a meaning to it provoke pity. The majority of the commentators say that by “know thyself” man is encouraged to see his limits before god, and, practically, the same thing would be said by the second inscription, “nothing too much.” Others who are less sophisticated say that it is about a warning for common man, who must acknowledge his subordination to the others: “shoemaker, stick to your job.” But there are really exquisitely sophisticated people, who claim, no more, no less, that, given that man’s soul has several incarnations, according to ancient traditions, knowing yourself would be the encouragement to “remember” the successive reincarnations. This is where people have arrived in despair! Can someone know one’s “previous lives”? And, granting that one may, would it be that fascinating to know that I was a shoemaker, then a not so courageous soldier, and then a wine merchant?...

If I remember correctly, a crazy Englishman was the only one who said something meaningful regarding this problem. He began noticing that there were several inscriptions on the frontispiece of Delphi; among them, there was this mysterious letter E, which certainly had a deeper, perhaps religious, meaning. Then, there was the inscription, “surety, then ruin.” However, it is curious that all ancient and modern interpreters speak gravely about the first two inscriptions, without mentioning the third. This is the one that gives the key for interpretation! It shows the main clientele of the oracle: the world of Greek merchants, entrepreneurs, and businessmen.

Of course, from time to time, during more special historical times, states or potentates from Asia Minor, Africa, Sicily came to consult the oracle. The regular income, though, for the one and a half million years of the temple’s existence, could only be provided by the inexhaustible requests of common people who needed an advice or solution. The inscriptions could only be for those people. “Know thyself” has no meaning for a state

or for a colonizing expedition, but it has complete meaning for a ship owner or a merchant, who must know how far he can go. “Nothing too much,” so do not get into too great adventures; and especially be careful and don’t give surety to others, because you risk getting hurt. This is the extent to which a “great” saying of humanity is reduced if you consider not its possible meaning, but its object, so yourself...

The jeep had stopped for some time now, and the driver had come out of it; the officer who was staying next to me was about to get out as well. He was probably the one leading me to the next destination.

“Don’t you dare come out of the car,” he says. “Take a cigarette.”

“I would prefer the newspaper you were just reading,” I dare. “Forget about it!” he replies.

How ridiculous they* are! They are afraid that we may find out what happens in the world. But we do not need newspapers to realize that there is a calming of politics in the world and that, as long as they have it better, we, the detainees, have it better too. It is certain that, at this hour, some generous people from all over the world intervene for the freedom of those who are in our situation in all communist countries. I imagine that they invoke the UN Charter and Human Rights, even if some of us, the victims, pretend like me (how sincere is it?) that they do *not* have a right to freedom. Humanity gives credit to the individual. In every individual, it sees a human chance, and it may hope precisely from us, the victims of the times, to get a deeper human reaction.

However, in reality it is not us, the ones imprisoned, who are interesting today, as human specimens; it is not us who give that “knowledge of man at a limit,” by which a human being has always been defined. We are only the last wave — let us hope that

* They, the Communists. As before, I left this general “they” unspecified because it was so prevalently used in Communism. For a short discussion of this, see my essay, “Birth-Givers of Beauty: An Excursion into Finding One’s Given Place within a Constellation,” in Aspazia Otel Petrescu, *With Christ in Prison* (Citrus Heights: Reflection Publishing, 2014), 5–18.

it is indeed the last — of an evil that came in the first half of the century. But there is something more interesting that takes place with the human person in the world: according to what even we, in our prisons, find out, a first wave of humanity is confronted with “wellbeing” on a large scale, without historical precedent, in the developed countries of Europe and America. There have been some encounters with material wellbeing in history for some groups, casts, or clans, but wellbeing maintained something perverted and perverting, especially since it was not about goods of civilization (radio, museums, etc.), but rather about delectation and gorging.* Now, for the first time, wellbeing has become something common and educational, at least in one part of the world and for one historical moment. It may be a form of health for humans. What will it produce? In any case, it could be a deciding exam for the European man, who has believed so earnestly in materialistic values.

All of a sudden, *half* of the communist ideal is degrading if the full satisfaction of material needs does not bring about happiness to man by itself. And the *entire* capitalist ideal is degrading. The fact that capitalism succeeded to arrive first at this point, and not communism, is less relevant. Today, something takes place *beyond* them: it is the exam that the materialist ideal of the European man must take and, together with his ideal, man himself.

The European man has eliminated everything. “Leave me alone, you god, you philosophical doctrines, you church or traditions. I know better what I need.” Beginning with the 18th century and until today, *the individual* has gained rights that he had never possessed in history. The totalitarian regimes that survive are ashamed by the audacity that they have taken, for a moment, toward the individual, not only oppressing him directly, but also transforming him into an object, as they had wanted. For the last two hundred years, all revolutions, and especially all materialist transformations, no longer serve narrow and privileged

* Both terms have a Biblical overtone, reminding one of Dante's *Inferno*.

casts, but the individual in general. The brother *I* has won; even if it is menaced, from time to time, by some *WE* — some true collectivism, going even to Teilhard de Chardin's odd idea that we might arrive to the association of consciences in some superior brain — the brother *I* still is, for the moment, the great beneficiary. The individual has succeeded in being and continues to be (until the encounter with the Asians, who are completely lacking individualism) that for which everything is done. For — as Goethe says — what is the good of all this squandering of suns and planets (of historical revolutions and technic-scientific revolutions, we will say), if, after all, a human being is not happy?

So, after all, humans do not feel happy, according to the news we receive even here, in prison. Pray for the satiated modern man... He has, in his consumer society, something of the psychology of a socialite woman: "I don't like this champagne; do something to entertain me..."

I do not know if we, those who are deprived of the most elementary joys, could have a better encounter with joy. But we experience here something that other people, in their plentiful society, do not realize: it is the *first* encounter of humanity with a more generally spread wellbeing, and it may be that a second one will not exist too soon! In principle, an "era of respites" should follow; but it is not at all sure, in fact, that today's idyllic moment in both Europe and the United States will continue.

A terrible exam for the individual is then played — the individual as it is conceived and respected by Europeans, as opposed to Indians and Chinese. It is an exam for the universe of the individual ego, so for the small idiot that each one of us is. This restricted individual — for whom the encouragement from Delphi to know oneself had a shadow of meaning, if anything — has won the game. The small idiot is driving his car and leaves behind the boredom of the workdays to go to the boredom of the weekend. Pray for him.

And we, those people thirsty for all the goods of the earth, from our daily cigarette to the freedom to take a walk without a

* "I" in the sense of the *ego*.

sentinel, we shout to that humanity that lives so idyllically: “Pay attention to what you do, for *you* are responsible, with your joy or disgust, for the European man and for humankind.”

When our jeep finally stops and I am ordered to come out of the car, I address humanity in my mind once again: “Pay attention,” and I make my first step, concerned.

“Pay attention, idiot,” the guard tells me, seeing that I stumble and fall. “We don’t need broken heads here!”

As fast as I can, I gather my things from the small suitcase that was opened, and I get a foot in my back, with the order, “to the wall, and wait there for me to take you!”

I go toward the wall, somehow ashamed by everything that happens to me, to a large extent because of me. The oracle was right: know thyself!

VIII

The guards no longer give me glasses, so I see the fort well.* There are so many lives that drag along in its belly. This time, I will be with more people in the cell. But will I find someone who would be as dear to me as Alec? I carry with me, as in an envelope, the third exercise that I learned from him. I will begin doing it one day, in his memory. Who knows, I may even meet him again...

In the high basement to which I am taken, I see all of a sudden that there is *no* Alec. Twenty-five or thirty heads raise up from their wooden bunk beds, on three lines, to see the newcomer. It is late in the evening. A voice tells me, "Come up here, I know you." Then, toward the others, "We now have another one who can deliver lectures." I climb to the third bed, where my friend is, a doctor who had met me on the occasion of a conference I had once delivered. When I begin to take off my clothes, I realize that it is cold: there is only one window, at the level of the ground, but it is big, and it is largely open even though it is cold outside.

"Don't you close it during the night?" I ask timidly.

"We spent the whole evening discussing whether we should close it or not. But a swallow came in, there it is (I see it on the glass cover of the light that is above the entry door, as if it were looking for a place to make a nest), and then nobody said anything else."

* Noica is taken to Fort 13, the Jilava Prison. It is one of the most famous political prisons because it was built underground. The darkness and the humidity of the environment added to the lugubrious aspect of the prison.

I am no longer cold either. I place my clothes at my feet, and I begin to talk to the doctor, whispering. He is not yet 40 years old, and he did not get to profess medicine because they* found out, some years earlier, during his college, that he had vaguely participated in a beginning of a “counter-revolutionary” movement. He became embittered during the years he has spent here. Communism? For him, the only thing of interest is what happens in Russia, and nothing takes place there. Today’s world? A biological failure. The sudden growth of the youth’s size is morbid; the defense of free eros is a sign of the degeneration of the species; the malady ascends to the nervous system, and there is no more healing there.

The following day, I witness the household activity of the cell. (Any newcomer is given one day to adapt.) Then, the “lessons” begin. People study anything, with passion: elementary anatomy, physics, history, theology, and especially languages. What strikes me is the need for accuracy of those in our situation. People who still did not know to connect two words in English knew perfectly not only the 11 nouns that form the plural differently, but also almost the entire list of English irregular verbs. It was not surprising that people knew exactly the seven wonders of Antiquity. But the people here learned scrupulously the list with the Roman emperors by heart, or the names and residency of the main families of the Renaissance, as well as the succession of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church. Someone has produced sensation in the cell when he recited the Chinese dynasties.

This need for exactness, not only for them, but also for the mentality of modern man, seemed so significant to me that, when the hour for conferences came and I was asked, as a newcomer, to also say something, I could not help but talk about Exactness and Truth in the contemporary world, a theme that has obsessed me for a long time. (“I’m glad Alec does not hear me,” I thought.)

* The same impersonal “they” that has already been used.

“Just as it happens to us here, in prison, it also happens to the contemporary world. Everything has been undermined around us: here, we no longer know anything of family, we have no profession or activity, we don’t even have an identity, except an elementary one, the one of our weakened body and of our ultimate moral nature, as much as it can hold. Some of us do not even know whether we were right in what we did, if we defended good causes and if we are here innocent or still with a touch of guilt. In this chaos in which we are all thrown, we want certainty, any certainty. Just like a man who grabs a pillar to avoid losing his balance, we are also looking for pillars, certitudes, and they are the exact pieces of knowledge. We want to know something that *is* and that does not change, something that does not depend on the whims of people or of masters, something as the grammar which even poor Stalin recognized as unquestionable toward the end of his life. The list of the Roman emperors is graven in stone. We and our lives are, though — at least for the moment — simple names written on sand.

“But this is how the world today feels everywhere. And the world is in prison. It no longer has heavens and relatives in heavens, it no longer has nature and divinities of nature around it, but it is alone, in a cosmic captivity, attempting to evade from Terra or at least to communicate with a neighbor in the cosmos, whom it cannot find. It has given up myths a long time ago, be they religious, philosophical, or uncontrolled dogmas of tradition. Instead, it has so many small local truths that it feels as chaos. And so it wants *exactness*.

“It wasn’t always like this. Up to a certain moment in the past, cultures were only of Truth, not of exactness also. They placed man in a state of drunkenness, in a sacred ecstasy. Not only the mythic and religious cults were this way, but also the profane orientations. Pythagoreanism is a form of sacred delirium; the pre-Socratic thinkers are as in a trance when they say that all things are water, all are air, or all are fire; and Plato requires enthusiasm for Ideas, which you recover *now* because “you have contemplated them in another existence.” Everything is ecstatic under the magic of truth — until Aristotle, who is the

first thinker who is awake, sober, oriented toward exactness, in the European culture. (Other cultures continue to be under the sacred drunkenness even today).

“Just like us, Aristotle no longer gets drunk with ‘truths,’ and he would feel at home in our world. He would like to see that, finally, the world wants exactness everywhere, just as he wanted it. More than half of his work is a collection of data from zoology and botany of this sort, ‘the cicadas sing by the friction of a thin membrane that insects with a longer life have in the dent below the diaphragm.’ The same Aristotle was composing a list with the tens of constitutions from the world of Greek cities, and even — this is a peak of the spirit of exactness — the list of the winners in Olympics. Do you realize what this was? There had been centuries of Olympic games, and he wanted to record the thousands of names of winners, as simple as that.

“It is not surprising that so much exactness — beginning, of course, with the list of the ten Aristotelian categories, with the list of syllogistic rules, and the list of virtues — filled the eras. But it is also not surprising that Christianity, as any religion, attempted to bring back the sacred ecstasy and, to do so, it even adopted Aristotelian exactitudes to transform them into Truth. The result was what we all know in the Middle Ages. Man really woke up, or he was detoxified so radically by the Enlightenment that he did no longer bear any alcohol or elixir of truth. Then, the methods of exactness came into play, which the ancients did not have: the empirical sciences and mathematics. The ecstasies were done for.

“But the spirit of exactness was not content. Mathematics is the most exact thing we have on earth, and it is as solid as the pyramids, about which people say that they would last until the end of Terra. Now, imagine that someone would consider *consolidating* the pyramids. Well, if we exaggerate a little, this is what happened in our culture: thinkers questioned how to make

* To my knowledge, Aristotle does not say this. Noica’s point is to illustrate this philosopher’s kind of discourse. Using his terminology, I would say that the statement about Aristotle is true, although it is not exact.

exactness more exact, how to ensure something that is certain, so in this case how to substantiate mathematics. This is what so-called ‘mathematical logic’ attempted. It is true that it stumbled upon some paradoxes, but the spirit of exactness did not give up and it cannot give up.

“In fact, the spirit of exactness is active everywhere, not only in the exact sciences. History, for example, can no longer be done without exactness. Man cannot bear to not know exactly what and how it happened. A French historian from last century, Ernest Renan, wanted to see exactly where and how Jesus Christ lived. He went to the holy places and proceeded scientifically to the reconstitution of the Event.* You know what happened to him? He found the traces of Jesus from Nazareth, but he no longer found the traces of Jesus Christ.

“If this is how things are in culture, it could not be otherwise in life and in lived history. There is no more space for utopias, modern man said to himself, with the risk of finding them just as the logician found paradoxes. We have nothing to do with utopic socialism; we need a scientific socialism. This is where we are, in a culture of exactitude.

“But I should not continue to speak about this version of the spirit of exactness. All of us, those who live under communism, know what planning means, how controlled everyone’s life is, the level of “exactness” all processes have, including elections or meetings, and how precisely the destinies of our children are programmed or want to be programmed by the ‘engineers of souls,’ as Stalin said. Toward what? Nobody knows it any longer, because this belongs to Truth — or to myth. For the moment, we need exactness in experienced history, just as we can no longer afford to lack it in the science of history and in all sciences. Even these latter disciplines do not know where they send us. A great physicist of our time said, ‘We now know that we do not know where science leads us.’

“However, scientists must go forward. We cannot continue without exactness, but empty exactness is blind. We have seen

* Capitalized in the original.

genuine communists cry: after the terror and the sacrifices that were imposed to one generation, and now to a second one, the result is bitter. We know that Ernest Renan cried, in his own way, at the end of his life: in his autobiography, he confessed that *ces petites sciences conjecturales*,^{*} the historical sciences, did not take him anywhere. The experts know that the logician Frege also cried, at the end of his labors, when a younger logician, Bertrand Russell, showed him that his entire construction was flawed due to a paradox. Modern man proved to be extraordinary, with his spirit of exactness. However, in a way, he cries, and you must pray for him.

“It is true that, instead of admiring and deploring, at the same time, modern man, who replaced truth with exactness, we could consider the English solution. The English know what they are doing: they gave up exactness for the machine (which was invented by them also) and for the natural sciences, and they maintained for life and politics the ‘seeing and doing’ attitude, so the approximation. London, with its crooked streets, was projected by a ‘drunken architect,’ the English themselves say... But not all have the virtue to behave in a disciplined fashion in the middle of disorder. This is why English values survive, while the others were ruined by exactness.

“One cannot live without values and without an idea of truth. But people nowadays no longer want to get drunk. Or, if you want, they are also drunk: with lucidity. Let us pray for them.”

“For the communists as well?” a voice asks.

I am unsettled, all of a sudden. They do not want to *forget* either. I had thought that Alec was not there, but he appears before me all of a sudden, in twenty-five or thirty human specimens.

* “These small conjectural sciences,” in French in the original.

IX

Starting the second day, my roommates give me the task to pour the water for washing, because they see I am not strong enough to carry the buckets or do other tasks. From the beginning, I am surprised to see how differently each man washes his hands or face, and I only needed a few days to recognize, just by looking at their hands, *who* was the one who washed himself, and even his character. One can “guess” by the washing of the hands.

When work is done, some people in the room begin to corner me with questions regarding what I said the previous day. “What is truth if not exactness?” “How can you say that being locked up and being free is the same thing?” (I had no intention to say this!) Only the doctor with whom I share a bed seems to be content with what I said. “It’s bad for everybody, so it’s good, all in order.” Other than him, I receive the approval of a young man without studies, on whose face you can see the wisdom of peasants. He declares that he does not understand too well what I said, but he feels that this is how things are.

I am saved from the duty of giving explanations only because it is “search” day. We are all taken out, in the corridor, and we are made to stay in a line, our faces to the wall, while our beds and belongings are checked. This scene, with the face to the wall, in the corridor, reminds me of something from a book. It’s just impossible to remember which one exactly; only after a quarter of hour, when we are back in the cell, I remember the book, and I smile.

“Why do you laugh, you there?” one of the guards asks me. He had remained by the door, to see how we put our beds and luggage back together.

“I don’t laugh, I smile,” I say, stupidly.

“But you laughed.”

“I only smiled.”

“You laughed!” he thunders and wins the game, since I realize how absurd my resistance is on such a topic.

He starts again:

“Why did you laugh?”

I think I should avoid the risk of involving a colleague in this lamentable situation, and I say the truth.

“I remembered a similar scene from a book.”

“Which book?”

“*Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler.”

“By whom?”

I repeat the name, which of course does not tell him anything.

“And what was in this book?”

I swallow and I sense that I cannot go back, nor invent something.

“It was a scene like the one before, with prisoners who had to face the wall, in the corridor.”

“So? What’s to laugh about this?”

“Nothing, just that the scene ends differently in the book.”

“How?”

This idiot bores me with his insistence. Let me tell him the truth and be done with it.

“In the book, the prisoners get a pistol in the back of their necks.”

The whole room froze. For a moment, the guard seems to be paralyzed as well. Then he lets out a howl: “Instigator!” and he jumps on me, pulling me by the coat until he gets it off me. Then he grabs me by the neck, yelling: “To the isolation with you!”

The “isolation” is a dark cell, which has some sort of table or stone bed and a hole for a wc. When you are in isolation, one day you do not get food, but only a bowl with warm water at noon, and one day you get half of the portion. As I am only in

* Noica mentions the title as it was translated into French: *The Zero and the Infinite*.

my shirt, I begin to do some exercises, to warm up. After half an hour, somebody else is thrown in, also in a shirt only.

“Now you can laugh together,” the guard says and locks us up.

I look at my suffering companion, and I see that he smiles indeed.

“It happens,” he says friendly.

“Why did they punish you?” I whisper.

“They found a pearl button during the search.”

“And?”

“You don’t know? With a pearl button on a string, you can produce a spark, and then you can light a cigarette or the fire in the stove, if it is quenched.”

He is already an expert, and he teaches me to sit on the stone bed, back to back, to warm up. He begins to tell me:

“I’ve been here for two years, and I still have three reasons for joy. We had meetings at my job — I was an economist — and we were getting bored, of course. We could not laugh even at the jokes told by the speaker coming from human resources — as you know, they had received the order to sprinkle the sandwiches* they read with a joke. So I taught 2–3 colleagues to laugh heavily three times: ha-ha-ha, at every joke. Our laughter caught on, and the whole room adopted it. For a while, it was all good, but in the third or the fourth meeting, the *politruk*† took notice. He investigated the case and ended up getting to me, since I was known as someone who enjoyed making jokes. Realizing that they wanted to arrest me, I ran away from home. I didn’t want to hide at a friend’s place because I did not want to get him into trouble, so I traveled by train all over the country for a couple of years. I got used to no longer pay for a ticket, and I felt at home in the train. Then I got bored, so I turned myself in. I was condemned as instigator and enemy of the popular order.

* In the context, the term “sandwiches” refers to speeches.

† The person responsible with political education. Every institution had such a person with this role.

“In reality, I don’t only like to laugh, but I am also interested in the problem of laughter. I had begun to look into it even before prison. It’s quite something, laughter in humans. Reading and meditating about laughter, I noticed an aspect that we don’t always consider: man laughs especially, if not exclusively, about man. Laughter is social. But it is also something extremely personal, and I was particularly interested in this line, so that I could understand people. How does each laugh? I had begun keeping a list: there is Homeric laughter, out of all your heart laughter, laughing out loud, laughing from the tip of your lips, ironical or sardonic, sour, bitter, or yellow laughter; laughing in his beard, and laughing at someone’s beard,^{*} hysterical, idiotic, or intelligent laughter, clear or stuffy laughter, and so many more that deserve to be catalogued.”

“Of course,” he continues, “just as it is interesting to see about what people laugh, it is also interesting to see *why*. One can even arrange historical eras on this theme. The medieval man, as well as the ancient man, laughed at things different from us. When I began studying the problem, I fell upon the case of the ancient sage Parmeniskos, who realized at a certain moment that he could no longer laugh. He then went to the oracle to get back his laughter, but he did not. Only upon his return, seeing a clumsy wooden statue of Apollo’s great mother, he burst into laughter. I don’t even mention the goddess Demeter who, after the kidnapping of her daughter, Persephone, to Hades, wandered and no longer laughed, until she saw Baubo, the wife of her host, raising up her dress. There must be something in these legends, just as it remains a problem why yellow people laugh less than white people. But I did not go too far with my investigation; after all, the question of what people and eras laugh at is a problem of the history of human culture and nature, and it is beyond me.

“I am only interested in *how* people laugh. And not how they laugh in general, but each in particular. Since I imitate others well, I was making people laugh imitating the laughter of hu-

* The Romanian expression *a râde cuiva în barbă* is used for situations in which one fools you.

man types — the star, the idiot, the boss — or of colleagues and people of the day. Then I looked into how the main characters of books laugh, and I want to read again, when I am set free, Dickens or Balzac, to see how their heroes were laughing. This is how I got to the laughter of historical figures. I wondered how Napoleon or the Duke of Wellington laughed, or Henry VIII, or Philippo Nerri, that saint of whom people say he was joyful. I could imagine the laughter of Francis of Assisi, because it certainly was the natural laughter of the man pure at heart. But when I wondered how Jesus may have laughed, I stopped.”

We were both silent for a while. There was something interesting in this easiness that ended in gravity. The man I was next to seemed to be a “free” man. In any case, he seemed to be detached from all things.

“How could you bear wandering on trains for so long?” I ask him.

“At the beginning it was wonderful. Just think about it, to have no roots, no fixed point, no home, job, nor any destination — such freedom! I felt that all people are just plants around me. I had saved a small sum of money, so I could leave in any direction, with the overcoat on one hand and the suitcase in another. Of course, I was choosing the trains with a long and cheap route. I was like a spirit flowing freely among the other travelers, who were heavy with matter, worries, and purpose, as they were. I noticed only then the full stupidity of the traveler, the stupidity of a boulder thrown into a running river. ‘Is this the train that goes to...?’ ‘Haven’t I missed the direction?’ ‘Where should I put my suitcase?’ He doesn’t know anything, he doesn’t understand anything, and his only human reaction is fear. Then, the boulder gets lighter, and it begins to roll as well, but it remains a boulder.* I was talking to people, finding out what was happening in the world and, at times, interesting things about them, but, after all, I was defying them with my freedom. They wanted to and had to arrive some place. They had a dependency; they were

* In Romanian, there is the expression “being as stupid as a boulder,” in the sense that a boulder does not move and does not have flexibility in thought.

Greeks.* How terrified they were when the train was late, which was a blessing for me! I felt as if I had a personal airplane. I truly believe that man will not travel happily unless he has a personal airplane, just like the birds, and not in cages, as now, on railways, roads, or airways previously given.

“However, I cannot hide the fact that I was *participating* in the life of these non-flying animals that lack any gratuity: human beings. When there was some serious delay, I was making comments, gathering info, and ending by protesting with a greater indignation than that of the others. I had all the interest to delay; still, at times, I also felt the need to arrive *precisely* nowhere. At the end of the line, I was coming off the train, looking for a room close to the train station, recovering, and then going back on the road. Money was getting scarce. After a year or so, I started to travel without paying, *pe blat*,† as one says.”

“How do you travel *pe blat*?”

“There are two kinds of *blat*: one is arranged with the conductors, the other one at your own risk. If you want to risk it, without any arrangement, you can only do it on short distances. I had to prefer the arrangement. At the beginning of the trip, before departing, I was walking on the platform, carefully watching the conductors. Depending on their human type, I would decide whether I could try it or not. I used to travel in second class, which was filled with people. But sometimes, a conductor would let me sleep in first class for a small amount of money. He took tickets from those who were coming off the train and put one into my pocket. If there was an inspection, I could say that I fell asleep and forgot to get down at my stop. Others took my identity card with them, so that they could say to an inspector that they were about to write me a report. It was good when there were overcrowded trains, but this could not take place all the time. When we were many travelers, especially students, it was

* The ancient Greeks.

† I left here the Romanian expression, *pe blat*. When one travels *pe blat*, one does so without paying. Due to the explanation in the next paragraph, I considered that leaving the original may be more helpful.

calmer: the conductor let us know when the inspection came. If there was only one inspector, I could avoid it. It was harder when there was an inspection ‘in pincers,’ with two inspectors from each end of the train, who caught you in the middle. You would hear them ticketing, and you would run from one to the other. In despair, you would get up on the roof of the train car and get down further in the back. One time, someone caught me by the hand, when the train was about to leave. It was the inspector. Another time, I was next to a group of Soviet tourists. I pretended I was also a tourist, speaking with them in Russian as well as I could. They realized what I wanted, and they saved me. They told me that people were practicing this sport in their country as well, and they call the clandestine travelers ‘rabbits.’

“And, indeed, this is the bad aspect, that you feel like a rabbit. You need to have great awareness, and you cannot join longer conversations with anyone, you cannot read a book, you cannot lose yourself in thoughts. Even independently of the risks associated with traveling *pe blat*, my life had become a rabbit life. What did I still have of the freedom I have assumed? I only had the run. That’s all: I could run anywhere. After two years, I started to miss chairs, carpets, and people, other kinds of people than the spectral ones I was meeting in train. I was missing trees that would not move and grass. I gave myself in.”

“I don’t think you found many carpets here, in prison,” I say.

“No,” he answered (and I sensed he was doing it with a smile), “but I kept a magic carpet, the taste for flying. Even here, among people so heavy with so many troubles, I feel like a light being. I try to make people talk, dream. Haven’t you sensed how much and how well one can dream here?”

In three days, we were separated.

“Look for me when you get out,” he said. “My name is Ernest. Ask for Ernest at the City Hall, the Economic Services department; all know me.”

“How do you know they would take you back?”

“I’m sure of it. They need people like me; I am happy and I make people laugh. *Their* world is so sad...”

X

Everyone in the cell receives me with affection when I return among them. They had pitied me for my naivety with Arthur Koestler's book, and now they had a bit more confidence in me. I surprise myself by asking the doctor what happened to the swallow. "It gave up making a nest here," he tells me. Too bad — it would have been a proof that it was not bad here either, I tell myself.

The doctor tells me that, having run out of speakers, he had to give a talk. He talked about the demographic explosion, and he succeeded to unite everyone against him.

"How so?" I ask.

"I spoke openly, without humanitarian prejudices. I showed that, most likely, two demographic explosions will take place, not only one, and that, if the first will be bearable for humanity, the second one will be unbearable on all counts."

"Which one is the second?" I ask.

"I will tell you in a moment. We all heard something of the first demographic explosion and, even here, every newcomer who is more informed tells us about the worries that the Westerners have. Even under the hypothesis of limiting births from now on, the increase in population will become problematic by the end of century. This is what I thought: if this sudden increase in population risks being an evil for humanity, let us remember its cause. Everybody knows it: the decrease of infant mortality. What is more logical, then, than to suspend medical care for newborns for two, three, or five years? And natural selection would kick in."

"But it is criminal," I say.

"This is what our colleagues said too."

“Let me remind you what a contemporary scientist said, showing that all progress of humanity was done *against* natural selection.”

“I returned to this problem,” the doctor resumes, “and I acknowledged that, after all, it is about billions of *young* people who will know, with their energy, to find solutions. But what do we do with the second demographic explosion, that of the old people?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, until now, the population increased rather from the outside, by the appearance of new beings. Now it will grow from the inside as well, since the old beings no longer disappear. It is almost certain that man’s life will be prolonged until 120–140 years old. But doubling the age means doubling the population. Unfortunately, life will be prolonged — for the moment, at least — as old age. I was telling our colleagues that this looks like the story from the antiquity with one of Priam’s brothers, who had obtained from a goddess eternal life, but forgot to also ask for youth, and so he remained an old man into eternity. Let us ask ourselves: three billion young people can be supported by humanity, but can humanity support three other billions, especially billions of old people?”

“You see, medicine, with its entire cortege of auxiliary or neighboring sciences, has triumphed. In a way, it has obtained its revenge against the ironies it suffered so many times (just as meteorology today) at the hands of a Molière, for example, or of those who could not forget that the ancestor of the surgeon was the barber. Now, medicine has triumphed; but hasn’t it triumphed *too well*, tending to prolong life beyond its natural limits? Something must be done, then. After all, by a consensus in the interest of humanity, medicine might *not* apply its means to extend life. Not all progresses are immediately uncovered: it seems, for example, that there are one-person aircrafts, but the army keeps them secret; or artificial rain, and so many other things. But the physicians, just like the physicists, do not keep any secret. If they can extend life, they will do it. Something must be done, then, to prevent them from doing so.

“Someone asked me, ‘Do you want to put old people up in the tree and then shake it?’

“This irritated me a little,” the doctor continued, “so I said: ‘No, we only have to make them get up in the tree by themselves. After all, the problem will become relevant only after 20 or 30 years, when we will also be old. What I say is this: we must understand that we will be overpopulated and that we will pollute our spiritual, political, and cultural life, our public taste, and our history. Until we also find the solution to prolong *active* life, old people, in their wisdom, will have to take some measures themselves. For a period of time, it would be good to find some noble justifications or who knows what ethical and religious significations for the right to suicide after a certain age. But this problem can be raised in a different way as well: for centuries, youth has been urged to be ready to give its life for one thing or other, for the “country” most of the times but also for much more debatable ideals or purposes. Wars have been waged with hecatombs of young people. Can’t we ask for some “heroism” from the old people as well? In the meantime, as I heard that some Japanese do, they can do competitive sport, but en masse and mandatorily. This could speed up their infarcts.’

“All people in the room stopped me at this point,” the doctor admits. “The theologian over there, who now speaks with that guy, who seems a bit agitated, told me, ‘We don’t need to become beasts if we stay in prison.’ He was right, in a way, I grant it. But you tell me: don’t we have to call things as they are?”

I look at him and try to see beyond this surface of cruelty.

“Do you know what I would do to you when they release you and would have to give you a job?” I would send you to a geriatric clinic. I am sure you would be fully devoted to all people.”

“Perhaps, out of my scientific interest in the problem of old age,” the doctor answers smiling.

* Under Communism, all people had to have a job. Officially, there was no unemployment. After graduating college, for example, students were assigned to different positions depending on grades, their party connections, and their propagandistic activities while in college.

“What is that, ‘geriatric?’” asked the young guy from the country, Matei, who had listened to my speech on exactness and who had listened to our discussion.

He seemed to desire to learn as much as possible. I translate the word so that he could understand it. I even start talking to him, being glad to be able to relax a bit after the conversation with the doctor. Matei has not been embittered by prison. On the contrary, he tells me that, being imprisoned for the second time, he came back here with some joy: he was coming to the “University”! He had not found out about so many books, movies, sciences, and languages at any other place. Now, he was learning 4–5 languages at the same time, badly, of course, but he was learning them.

“Why don’t you learn just one or two, but well?”

“I could not, because I am not schooled well enough. But I want to be able to communicate with anyone, just like those sailors who used to travel much. I like people and their variety. Maybe I’ll get to travel the world. But you can travel even if you stay put, as a merchant, for example. I fully experienced the joy of commerce, and this is why I got here twice. I cannot work in the factory or in the office; I’d do anything to work in freedom. I left home to the city when I was 14; at the outskirts of the city, on a field, a group of young guys were forming two soccer teams that were playing for money. I joined one of them, I lost half of the money I had on me, and I ended up at one of my teammates’ father, who had a shoemaking workshop.

“At the beginning, when I saw that a simple shoe is made of 24 pieces with 24 different names, I got scared. Then it became monotonous. I could no longer stand the sedentary life at the shop. I tried something more special: to go on my own, with a minimum of tools and fabrics, in search for clients, as the buyers of old clothes do. I purposely followed one of these people for a full day. I think he yelled ‘buying old clooooothes’ a thousand times, but nobody called him to sell him anything. I suspect he was walking too fast, or he was just beating the air, having who knows what other purposes in mind. I began differently: I was walking slowly, starting conversations with some child or some

woman standing by the gate, asking them if they have any shoes to repair, and so I was beginning to have some results. You must *invent* your clients, create a need for them: this is the art of trade. At times, I was invited to lunch. In any case, I was talking to all sorts of people while I was repairing their shoes. All went well until I fell upon a shoemaker's family and I asked if they have something to repair. I ended up at the police and then condemned for illegal practice and vagrancy. When I came out after a short detention, I was sent to the factory.

"In the factory," Matei continues his story, "I think I understood why today's world, everywhere, is not good. I would not have stayed there for a long time if my work in the factory had not given me the right to take some evening courses and thus learn something. But, after all, I did not regret the factory. I first learned one thing: in a factory, in any factory, you cannot work with joy. This is something serious, I thought, for today's world; it is like a heavy curse on a factory. Joy is, I don't know, a bit crooked, and in a factory everything is in straight lines. It's not just the shoe factories, where nobody works any longer on a full shoe, but only for one of the 24 parts; but, as I said, it's bad in any factory. Man starts the machine, and then the machine moves man. Well, if the machine is so great, I thought, why wouldn't it do the job by itself?"

"This is what happens today," I interrupt him. "We have arrived at automatized industries."

"I heard this, too. I even think that this is when the benefit as well as the wickedness of the machine will be revealed. First, it makes you work without joy (my shoemaker master was at times whistling when he hammered a nail; here, nobody sings); then, the machine breathes differently than man, who may take a rest, sigh, or have a chat. But there is something else, some kind of pollution, as they say today, but not only of the atmosphere or the surrounding world (it's their business how they take care of it), but a pollution of the souls. I have never seen more envy than in factories, among workers. They do this much, make that much money; everything is measured. Why would others make money freely, they say. They began with the merchants, they

continued with the physicians, and ended with the waiters and the barbers. Why should they receive a tip? They, the workers in factories, remained persecuted by fate, and this is how they will remain as long as there are factories in the world.”

“Don’t worry,” the doctor steps in, “the numbers of workers in factories will diminish more and more, just as the number of plowmen in the country. Someone who was passing through our room said that, in the United States, more than 50% of the workforce does *not* produce goods, but rather ‘provides services,’ so in schools, hospitals, banks, and stores. But I want to tell you that people are not pleased there either.”

“Perhaps the spirit of the factory entered them,” Matei replies.

I wonder: how could the communists throw into prison people so pure of heart? Why didn’t they try to transform them into followers? Matei tells me that the prosecutor called him a class traitor at the trial. “What will you do when you get out?” I ask him. “I will continue to be a traitor, if they don’t leave me alone. Nobody gives them any trouble anymore. Why do they fight everyone else?”

I get up to move a little. While I walk between the bunk beds, I hear fragments of conversation between the theologian and the guy next to him, who had seemed a little agitated. After a few years of staying in the cell by myself or just with one other person, now, that I rediscover a group of people, I cannot avoid feeling attracted by the variety of human specimens: Ernest, the doctor, Matei, of course Alec... I walk a few times through the corridor of beds, but the theologian senses that something makes me slow down every time I pass by them, and I listen.

“Look,” he tells me at one of these stops, “come here to meet a totally special man, engineer Goldstein. He discusses theology with me because he wants to become a Christian. Perhaps you

* After the Communists came to power, many people were fighting against them by forming armed groups in the mountains. By the time Noica is imprisoned, almost all of these resistance groups were annihilated. It’s possible that Matei refers to this kind of resistance when he says that nobody troubles them anymore.

can help me to understand him, because I don't really understand what he wants with this."

The engineer offers me his hand; for a moment, he does not look into my eyes, as if ashamed, and then his warm look embraces me.

"How could he understand what I want," he says, "if I don't know well what I should say? I would become a Christian out of my love for the Jewish people."

The theologian looks at me as if saying, you figure out what this means. I sit down next to them and I listen...

How strange these meetings in prison are: you don't sit next to a man, but next to an entire life. But there is something upside-down in time and upside-down with regard to life itself, as in the vision of the Prophet from the Old Testament, where houses begin to take on life. At the beginning, here, in a room as this one, a skeleton sits next to a skeleton. The first skeleton says something: it thus gives itself a voice. The second skeleton turns its skull toward it: it gives itself sight. The first one invents a hand, the second one, another hand. One skeleton brings in the world a mother, the other a brother. At times, the two skeletons begin to quarrel, they get fists, muscles, and they invent the fight. Life seems to be rebuilt here, piece by piece. You shake one skeleton a bit, and you see coming out of it, like from a mechanical box, love, a job, two children, a gun forgotten in the attic, capital punishment transformed into hard work for life. You shake another one, and, like under a magic eye, there are other things coming out of it, great cities of the world, images from a dream, then the beginning of a counterrevolution, a fateful hunting dog, and a defiance before the communists. Flesh and life slowly get attached to these skeletons, as in a game of cubes,* bringing buttons, mouths, steps, or attitudes. At times, there are not enough cubes, and the skeleton remains with uncovered parts: without a nose, without a way of walking, without tics, or

* Noica refers to a game with several cubes which had sides of different colors. Children used them to construct various figures, by placing them on top of each other.

without a life goal; other times, there are too many pieces, and so, after you finished remaking one real life, you must attached to it one, two, or three possible lives, with their deliriums and the fullness of their “non-living.” A shadow, like the skeletons here, takes in its hand the entire history of the world and throws it as in a game.

Engineer Goldstein cannot come out of the fascination with the condition of being a Jew, and he feels *responsible* for the destiny of his people. It is the only people that has transformed its most catastrophic defeats in victories, but also the only one — he says — which transforms a victory into a defeat. For him, it is unbelievable how a people that gave the Universal to the world can withdraw so much in its particular. It gave all goods to the world, and it kept for itself what is most bitter. The engineer doesn’t “understand” his own people, and this fascinates him. All nations have a stable space, a history, their own creations, joy, and fatigue. His nation has nothing of these. It gave to all, but it only has a book as great creation, the Old Testament, which has been confiscated by other people, to make marvelous works of art, history, and wisdom out of it, as his people did not know to do. It built a Temple, and it was immediately destroyed. It had no full joy, but it does not labor to want anything, to hope, or to fight — for what?

“It gave,” engineer Goldstein continues, “the two great religions of this decisive half of 2,000 years of the world; it gave Christianity and, indirectly but by itself, Islam. Let us leave aside Islam, which seems to have adopted everything that was fanatical in Judaism. But what a splendid gift has it given to the world with Christianity, in which it did not want to see itself in the beginning, when it could place its seal on it — instead of the Greek Jews, like Paul, or the Greeks themselves later — nor later, when Christianity was accepted by Rome and the Jewish people could have priority, as chosen people, by accepting it. It did not want to be the *first* people of the world; this is unbelievable. Did it want to be the only one? The only saved one?”

“Then something else appeared. After it gave the religious Universal to our humanity, it has prepared the secular Universal

for 2,000 years. What is this Universal? Being in diaspora, but home everywhere; engaging in trade, and not in agriculture; using money, and not goods; making calculations, and not value judgments; being rational, and not emotional; doing mathematics, having abstract thought, wanting an open humanity, through reason and masonry, and not one closed by religious fanaticism; translating in all languages, interpreting anything, bringing nations closer, creating 'Internationals'; perceiving the machinist era as a humanistic school, and not as a defeat and sublimation of nature; being done with nature on all levels: economical, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical; saying, *Deus sive humanitas*, and not *Deus sive natura*, as the heretical Jew Spinoza!

"All these have been obtained in 2,000 years. In 1945, after the huge sacrifices suffered under the outburst of the beastly nature against the rational man, my Jews have again conquered primacy in the world, giving to the secular Universal its purest version: the fellowship of humans as rational beings. There is the version of Marxist International, given by the Jewish spirit as well; it could have taken it in its hand, enlightening it. But there is also the less annoying version for the rest of the world of a supra-historical rational community. I am not saying that the president of UN should have been a Jew every year; but its permanent secretary should have been a Jew. It cannot be otherwise, if the Jew is the 'binder' of the world and if he is the only one able to interpret this new Testament.

"And what did my nation do?," engineer Goldstein concludes. "It made a nation state, it revived a local religion and a local language; it wants to reinvent a local nature; even more, after it had obtained a type of human liberated from animality, with a brain closest to the electronic brain, now wants to reintegrate Judaic humanity in animality, vigor, force, and combative spirit.

"I do not know whether, in this way, the Jewish are maybe planning a *third* Universal for humanity, in 2,000 other years. But I return to the first Universal it has given to the world, and I ask to become Christian so that I could pray for the soul of my people..."

XI

This morning they gave us 125 grams of bread instead of 100 grams. All morning lessons prior to going out to the solar (a small court surrounded by tall fences) are suspended in order to discuss the event together. The 25 grams extra do not mean freedom, not even enough calories, but they are 25 grams *extra*. Together with some other extras, infinitesimal as well, the 25 grams weigh heavily and feed us well.

There's something enchanting about the good in these communist regimes: it comes slowly, in pieces, but irresistibly, when it comes (unfortunately, only to a certain level). Every day brings its own increase: a weaker shove from the guard, a few beans in the soup, a newspaper forgotten as if by mistake, a "what do you think, that I like it?" (Toward the end of my stay, an investigator would do something unbelievable: shaking hands with me.) All these things were accumulated, great pleasure after great pleasure. It's happiness in installments. It's true that the evil comes similarly in communism, in installments, and it is infernal. Every day begins with its privation and interdiction, but you also sense for months in advance that you will be arrested. You see how the rock rolls slowly toward you, and you look at it hypnotized. Everyone says that they would have preferred the evil to have come fully from the beginning, not in small portions, and they may be right. But they also want the good to come abruptly, and thus, in their lack of patience, they disregard the admirable chain reaction of the good. Such a restrained eruption is a real school of attention to small things; it is an initiation into life. What price does life have if you do not have access to its infinitesimal?

When we are taken for the walk, they do not take us in the usual solar, but in a larger court, with some grass. Grass! It is a beautiful day and, to our surprise, we are asked to take off our tunics and shirts. They have never allowed this in the solar. Our livid bodies are now an offense to the light. While we look at one another astonished, some officers with a lady show up. She is a doctor who checks our blood pressure. Somebody heard that they would ask us if we want to go to work. It is clear that they do not force us, and this gives us good hopes. Nevertheless, almost all of us would like to go. Matei is the only one who rejects the idea: "I prefer to stay at the University. Such work makes people stupid. There, *I* am smarter than my colleagues, and I do not like that."

When it is my turn, I find out that my pressure is 9 over 6. The doctor shakes her head. I hear her telling an officer, "They should all be allowed to recover for one–two months."

These sad figures and beings that we are wanted to fight not a revolution, for this is dreamlike, but the regime brought by the largest army in the world at that time. They would continue to do it, but just like Don Quixote who, when he was standing before the portrait of St. George or St. Martin, felt that they *knew* what they had to conquer, but he did not know, just as we no longer know well. We only know one thing: that we do not like *this*. It's possible that the entire world, the communists included, may fight to change or at least correct the regime, just because it uglifies life and the world. The others regimes follow it in its steps. Some people here reproach the free world that it has not applied communism within its conditions. But its fault is more serious: it has no model to offer, but only some temptations. Everywhere the world is enchanted by ugliness today. Dulcinea, whom Sancho, exasperated, shows to Don Quixote under the face of a country girl encountered on the road, truly

* Communist political prisons were filled with intellectuals from all fields. There are other testimonies that refer to the prison as to a university, precisely because people could listen to various lectures given by others, as Noica mentions as well.

exists, but she is bewitched in ugliness. Only now, when the fight no longer has meaning, when the free world also revealed its ugliness, a counterrevolution in the name of freedom would have grandeur: you would fight for liberating the world everywhere from the spell of ugliness.

"I would like to tell you the story of *Don Quixote*," I said after the meal in our cell, when I am asked to speak.

"Look," the theologian intervenes, "we are sick of books and movies."

"But this book is about *us*," I insist.

"We are tired of us too, with our DonQuixotisms!"

The theologian is the one among us who truly fought against the regime. He has an extra certainty and authority in everything he says: "We would like to know what is to be done. We want practical solutions. We know well that Don Quixote has deep words—I remember the advice he gives to Sancho when he is named governor—but, if he were the one to govern during those three days, he would have been worse than Sancho. This is the problem: what do we do, not what we are and what we say. How can someone create a good state?"

How miraculously do man's resources get recovered! They just gave us 25 grams of bread extra, and these convinced fighters already consider that they may have the responsibilities of victors one day. A state? A good state?

I turn toward the theologian: "I know only one stupidity greater than the ideal state: the ideal army. If the state and the army are *ideal*, we are done for. There still are Germans today who tell themselves that it was something extraordinary that their army resisted before the entire world twice. So what? If an army is so good that it instills every ecstasy, then it becomes a curse. If a state functions too well as a state, it is a plague for an individual. But all utopias about a state want this. Humanity was lucky that nobody tried to accomplish Plato's *Republic*: the totalitarianisms of our century are nothing compared to it. Any time I hear somebody complaining that he does not get a passport, I tell him that, in Plato's state, a man cannot get out of the city until he is fifty, and even then only on a special mission. The

good thing is that the state will disappear one day, as the communists say. Unfortunately, no one knows when.”

“This is precisely why we must create *bearable* states in the meantime,” the theologian responds. “There is something incomprehensible regarding our states: we have all seen people going to war joyously, but we haven’t seen anyone going to pay taxes with joy. Why? After all, it’s about the same thing, the city, the state.”

I find the theologian’s observation interesting. I attempt an explanation: “After all, in war you feel you are a super-citizen, while you are a simple citizen when you pay taxes. The state should create super-citizens during peace as well. Or I should say it this way: the state is forced to limit the individual, but it should liberate the ‘person.’”

“These are just words,” the theologian says. “It is as Nietzsche said, that the state must be a nursery for geniuses. Very beautiful, but how? Let’s say something concrete, not just in general what should be done.”

I feel cornered. In fact, I have an idea, but I was ashamed to ever share it with anyone else, because of its naivety. My utopia, however, has a merit: it does not involve a coup it is applicable everywhere, and it only requires a few checkbooks and an administrative disposition.

“I have imagined a way,” I begin, “and I must tell you about it, regardless of how fanciful it may seem: ‘the unlimited credit.’ I imagine a state with unlimited credit, one in which, at the beginning, a few hundred citizens, then a few thousands, anyway, God knows how many, will have the right to a checkbook.”

“What do you mean a checkbook?”

“A checkbook, like a rich person who can pay any sum anywhere; just that, in our case, the sum would *not* be limited, as it still is in the case of a billionaire.”

“But this is crazy. How can you give to a citizen the possibility to spend more than a billionaire?”

“He will spend less than one or two salaries, but he will have the *unlimited* on his side and will shame the poor billionaire.”

“Still, he does not dispose of the money like him, you say.”

“He does not, because this man doesn’t need much; it is sufficient for him to know that he *can* dispose of anything, so that he has no worries and takes care of his job.”

“And what does society gain out of this?”

“This is where the problem comes: society begins to define itself, or to get some balance and backbone by those it credits. It begins to know what kind of people it wants to bring forward. Don’t you find it curious that we elect Miss Austria or Miss Europe, but not the successful specimen of a society? We have beauty prototypes. Couldn’t we have a prototype of human nature? Perhaps one of the works that risked unbalancing American society was the anarchy of the prototypes. To what should we aspire? What success should we obtain? From here, all those idols taken altogether from the ranks of heroes, of adventurers, of the ‘kings’ of shoe polish or of the newspaper sellers who became presidents of a country. But these idols could not be prototypes, because their success was limited and often strictly personal. The only open success there, which is at everyone’s disposal, is that of money, and this is sad. In the old world, the prototype seemed to be given by aristocracy, but it also was limited and, in any case, it was lacking a truly human message. So, if a state has responsibilities beyond the administrative and national ones, it would have the one of producing and supporting chosen people.”

“Pensions for merit or favors have been given at all times,” someone says — everyone was listening to us already.

“But it is not about pensions, but *investments*; not payments, but credits. The selection should be done among young people, between thirty and thirty-five years old, so at an age when their human promise has been affirmed, but unaccomplished. At the beginning, we would choose 200–300 young people who would receive all freedoms together with the material means. We should less prefer young people with exceptional talents — artists, mathematicians, physicians, or poets, people who create their own place by themselves, through their singularity — and instead beings with *complete* human gifts, intellectual, moral, and practically creative. From any field, we would choose people

who would have demonstrated up to that age that they want and they can give a creative meaning to their lives, with dignity. We would authorize them to choose their place, to change it whenever they think it is needed, to travel wherever they feel they should, to capitalize on their thoughts and raise their children as they wish. We would give them the checkbook and tell them, 'decide for yourself and do what you want.'"

From that moment, something extraordinary took place in the cell: my idea stopped belonging to me. I don't know how, but it was transformed into an object for play, for quarrel, for imagination, or for ecstasy of all. Perhaps under the effect of the extra bread or of the sun and of the hopes brought back to life, perhaps under the magic of the "unlimited" credit, people seemed taken by a hunger for this idea like I have not encountered before. They were all making and destroying projects. Something seemed good for my idea: I clearly sensed that *everyone* considered themselves targeted, wondering whether he would deserve or would have deserved a checkbook. This was, of course, the source of their positive or negative reactions.

"I would not accept a checkbook," someone says.

"You will accept it if they give it to you."

"I will not. I want to gain *my own* money."

"What is that, your money? This is the only way in which it would be yours, if you deserved to be credited because of the life you had until you were thirty years old."

"Being credited, so being a guinea pig? I want to be free, sir, I want to do what I like."

"But this is precisely what you are allowed to do with the unlimited credit, to finally do whatever you like."

"I would like to buy a yacht."

"You would *not* like to buy a yacht, but only to go around with it from time to time, which is perfectly honorable."

"No, I would like it to be my yacht, to equip it as I see fit, to stain it as I want."

"Possibly, but then you are not thirty years old yet."

"I'm already forty."

“No, I’m telling you, you are not thirty yet. You would not be thirty even if you said that you wanted a castle according to your taste or paintings by Rembrandt and Turner, which only you, and perhaps a few friends, would admire! Something has changed in the world. We know today that man’s taste, his capacity to delight, and his reason are not limited to a class, and even less by one man; and we know even more, that you don’t like your things *if* others don’t like them as well.”

“It’s true,” Matei intervenes, “I also found that, if the bride is not liked by others, then the groom does not like her either.”

“Okay, but do you realize the anarchy that would result if some people would be allowed, even paid, to do what they like?”

The theologian, who after all had triggered the whole discussion, intervenes here: “I think that our friend, when he dreams a state that would tell a few hundreds people ‘decide for yourself and do what you want,’ recovers — without knowing or without wanting — St. Augustine’s saying, ‘love and do what you want.’ This saying also seemed to be crazy; but we know its meaning, that precisely the one who truly loves no longer does ‘what one wants, but only what one must, because any love is after all love of God. The people whom society would credit unlimitedly would have an unlimited responsibility.”

“But how to choose? Even if there were only three hundred at the beginning, you must know their lives, their promise, to see if they are not badly married — because the wives or, respectively, the husbands of those with checkbooks, can destroy the whole game —, to appreciate if their human gifts truly are of interest to society, etc., etc. Who chooses them and how? By notes, just like the ball’s queen?”

“Allow me to tell you how I think the beginning would be done,” I try to intervene. But, to my joy, somebody takes it from there, for *my* opinions no longer matter.

“Let’s suppose,” he says, “that the choice of the first three hundred was done, regardless of how it was done. Among those, fifty, forty, or thirty were not chosen badly. You see, the *nucleus* for the development of the ‘state with unlimited credit’ would be established. From this point, we know who would credit oth-

ers, who would make those who prove unworthy fall from the condition of credited people, who would control, discreetly but firmly, others, as they control themselves. Actually, public opinion would also have a role...”

“Thank you. Having a star on my chest and being controlled by anyone, whether I eat at a better restaurant, what I eat and what I drink, just because I do it on their account?”

“You don’t need to have a star on your chest, because from *someplace*, from the inside, not from the outside, the sense of measure would appear.”

“I would even enjoy checking annually the accounts of a ‘credited person,’” someone, an accountant by trade, says.

“But then it is not really a privilege to be credited,” the one with the yacht says. “If all people have with eyes on you, and then you also have the internal eye, what kind of a life is this?”

“It is a human life, or we are all worthless,” the doctor, with his categorical judgment, decides. “If we are not able to handle the responsibility of being humans, under the request and with the support of society, then...”

“Then let us do like the existentialists,” someone jumps, “complain about the human condition.”

“No, then we deserve to commit mass suicide,” the doctor decides.

“Well, well, all of these things are beautiful for the individual, or for the person, as you want to call him. But what changes do they bring to the state?”

“What do you mean what changes?” someone says. “They change everything. For a capitalist state, it is a terrible corrective, I would even say a whipping: think of how much people fret to gain what they need, and even more than they need, but never enough, according to them, leaving all the rest — honesty, humanity, culture, creativity — to be secondary or to ‘come by itself,’ while here this *rest* would be the primary and money would come by itself, without struggle and always as much as needed. It would be an even greater corrective for a communist state: here, where people are dispossessed by force, and so, regardless of the level to which their right to possess would be

restored, this right would no longer interest them. Here, then, where man is directed in all ways, like a minor, it would be such a great blessing to give him *unlimited* credit not only at the financial level, but also at that of freedom and human dignity!”

“I consider even another aspect,” a professor says. “Even if the credited ones would not be that great, their educative function would be extraordinary. Parents would raise their children having in mind the purpose of getting the checkbook, if the number of the credited ones is not limited; and I think that many young people, after the excesses of their early youth, would consider how to get qualified when they approach thirty. The society would have princely conditions to aspire to.”

“But, after all, what would these princes do?”

“That’s exactly what I like, that we do not clearly know *what* they would do,” somebody else says. “We do not know what man can give under a request that would not be professionally narrow. The state usually closes people’s lives, as if telling them, ‘*You will do this, you will be that.*’ Now, it would not only tolerate man’s freedom, but it would also support it with its means. Man was free only at the level of the individual. Now he would be free at the level of society.”

“In fact, it would be normal to choose the society’s political leaders from among these elements that are credited by it...”

At this moment, when the game seemed to be won for the “state of unlimited credit,” a subtle and gloomy thought comes to engineer Goldstein’s mind.

“Thus, you build a state that would free people who, in their turn, think of a new state? I grant you that these people are good. But what guarantees that the state which they would create is not evil?”

A shiver goes through my body at the memory of the *tyranny of the good ones* in history. What do we know about man when he is inflamed by the fury of power? I would like to withdraw my project, but it is already too late. The theologian says, “Gentlemen, this state is in any case a good discussion theme. I propose to create committees to research every aspect it has: the mode of its constitution, its administrative problems, the function in

economy and production that such free and mobile specimens would have, their educative role and their leadership, the limits of the unlimited credit, etc.... Don't you think that, not having something else, it is good to discuss it in an organized fashion?"

Engineer Goldstein comes close to me: "They did not allow you to narrate *Don Quixote*, but you still talked about Don Quixote."

XII

Engineer Goldstein is not right: I did not talk about Don Quixote; at the most, I have involuntarily injected Don Quixote into some of the people in the room. But if I think better about it, I did something else, something that seems more valuable to me: a success of the “secretariat” order. By “secretariat” I mean the organized self-affirmation through others, up to losing oneself *in* others. I have no other way to call this than “secretariat.”

All virtues have something too personal within them: goodness, equity, courage, wisdom, or altruism usually involve someone else, but they define you. This is why any virtue is impure: it risks vanity. You remain a person, because *you* are the one who gives, just as you are the author of any deed in general. You do not become dissolved in the Great Everything. Here, though, with the secretariat — so by making others move — you get dissolved in the small everything that you have made possible.

In *Don Quixote* it was unfortunate that a team would never appear. The ideal, though, is the team, as an autonomous creation which would continue to give fruit *without* you. I name the capacity to create such a thing a virtue, because it comprises both offering and renunciation; I see it above the other virtues not only because it defeats, more than any other one, a person’s pride, but also because it is open, like life. There is no longer a moral automatism in play: request — response (here’s the poor, here’s the alms). Here, there is something that is born, grows, and is able to not die if it is a good thing.

The secretariat... People attribute to Stalin an uncanny sense of humor, in a good and in a bad way. There have been three eras in the history of humanity, he apparently said: the matriarchate, the patriarchate, and the secretariat. It’s true, after all, from the

matriarchal agrarian economy to the society of managers, or super-technicians of tomorrow's world. But the perversion of this truth appears when the secretary becomes the leader, when he is *first* secretary: king. In fact, "secretary" must be the one who hides, who gets "segregated," in the sense that he does not come out. Saying *first* secretary is a violation of language and spirit. General secretary, yes, but first? You would have to say *final*, secretary being precisely that diffused energy, that lack of identity of the center, that multiple One, already dreamed by the ancient thinkers and operating now in perfect modesty and submission. What will come out of the work that I have put in movement?, a good general secretary wonders. We live that splendid historical hour of secretaries who, when they do not have the imperitance of being the first, represent the ferment and the cement of today's world.

Thus, in small, I realize I make something cooking here, in the cell, with my idea. I will have a few happy days, and, I would say, morally clean. *Others* will make my "state with unlimited credit." Then, may my thought be done and may it be lost in their will.[†] I remember Alec again: would I have caught him in this work? Through others, perhaps, I may have succeeded what I alone could not obtain from him: making him think at twenty-two years old that he may deserve the unlimited credit one day.

Out of joy, I decide to "bring" Alec among us, in this delirious room, doing the third gymnastic movement, the one he had offered to me as gift at our parting. It is the right hour, immediately after the morning wash.

I head toward the open window, I place my hand on my hips, and I raise my right knee. It does not reach my chest, as Alec wanted. I raise my left leg more firmly, and it touches my chest, but the violence of the movement seems to bring me an internal turbulence. I am overtaken by pain in my stomach, and I sense more and more clearly that something happened to my intes-

* Noica alludes to the leader of the Communist party, whose position was called "first secretary." All local organizations had a first secretary as leader.

† An allusion to the Lord's Prayer.

tines. I sit on the bed; I get up with difficulty when the guards change, and I sit back again, tensed.

“Something happened?” the theologian asks me. “Why didn’t you ask to go to the doctor?”

I ask someone to signal. The guard comes to the peephole, and I say, “please take me to the doctor.”

“Stupid, if you didn’t ask at the guard change... Now stay and suffer until tomorrow!”

I stayed and I suffered indeed until the second day. “It’s probably an intestinal occlusion,” the doctor in the cell says, hearing what I feel.

I am worse and worse, and out of consideration for my suffering, my cellmates do not resume the debates about the state with unlimited credit, although it would have been the only thing that could have risen my spirits. The entire promise of secretarial happiness disappeared all of a sudden. Will they resume the discussion? Will they not?

When I am taken to the prison hospital the next day, I can barely walk. I realize that the surgeon who would operate on me is a fat guy. I do not know why, but I trust fat doctors. Perhaps I suspect that a fat surgeon makes fewer useless movements and operates with more certainty. He palpates my swollen stomach and says from the beginning: “intestinal volvulus.”

“Volvulus,” I think. Such a beautiful name! I remember the high school years: *Volvo-volvi-volutum-volvere*. “Volute” comes from there. How distinguished do physicians speak and what a delight to listen to two young physicians...

“Are you afraid?” the doctor asks me, seeing that I mutter something.

“I was thinking of ‘volvulus,’” I say.

“Yes, it is quite serious. But how the hell did you do it?”

He lowers his head on my chest, as if he wanted to listen to my heart, but he asks me in a whisper, so the guard could not hear: “Did they beat you badly?”

“No,” I say, “I did a more violent gymnastic move.”

“That’s what you needed, when your intestines were failing because of weakness,” the doctor says.

“This is what Alec had taught me,” I say as if for myself.

“Who is Alec, your wife?”

“No,” I answer, “Alec is a man’s name. He is a younger colleague who taught me to do this gymnastics movement.”

“He was not too inspired,” the surgeon says. “Well, let’s see what can be done.”

On the surgery table I am given oxygen to inhale, and this puts me in a good place all of a sudden. The lower half of the body is anesthetized. In the white globe of the lamp under which I am, I see an open abdomen, in which people work; but this happens *there*. I feel better and better under the oxygen and, in a sense, in the clear awareness of being detached from my bodily being. In the meantime, the surgeon, who is assisted by another doctor, says, “You see, it is twisted three times. If he delayed a few more hours...”

Detached as I feel, I wonder about this obsession with *le roi se meurt*? Why this universally human lamentation, which could be filled with meaning only by the extraordinary talent of Ionesco: “we’re dying, we’re dying!”[†] All of us, standard people made on a production line, feel as if we are a king, and the king laments that he dies. Perhaps the disaster would be if the king does *not* die. The disaster would not be for humanity only, as the doctor from my cell was saying about the demographic explosion of old people, but for each one of us.

How come the king doesn’t see that, starting with a certain hour of his life, he has already died in entire regions of his being? It is not grave that we die physically every hour of our lives, as it was said, but rather that we start dying spiritually at a certain moment, so that it would be unbearable for ourselves if we did not have an end. If you are certain of your human talents, content, you realize that your life becomes repetitive after a certain moment, as a broken mechanism, either in one space or

* “The king dies,” in French in the original. Noica refers to Ionesco’s play *Le Roi se meurt*, translated in English as *Exit the King*.

† “We’re dying” renders the Romanian expression *ne stingem*. Noica either refers to a translation with which I am not familiar or he translates directly from Ionesco’s French.

another of your spiritual life. And what is death if not the fall into a repetitive inertia? The poor king in us finds it more unbearable that it repeats than that he is told, from the outside, "stop already!"

If you are Don Juan and make the *same* declaration of love, you are dead. You have the same way of brushing your teeth, of approaching people, of tackling new situations in the world; you give the same advice and you delight in the same sad joy. In some zones of my life, I realized I am no longer capable of novelty. One day, I will feel that I am making the same kind of secretariat and that, in this way, I have died at the same time with what I thought was best in my life.

Besides, "death" is not only the entering into repetition; it seems to me that it also is the retrieval of the same thresholds or limits. You try to understand something in some field of life. You give up because you feel you have reached a threshold. You return later, but you stop at *the same* threshold. There are people, for example, who cannot get over a threshold in learning a language or in the initiation into a science. Their intelligence and memory do not diminish, perhaps, in time, but they do not increase either. I started mathematics three times, but every time I stopped *there*. There is a "there" for each, so a border of his spiritual being, of his capacity of reception and, after all, of his human condition. As someone said, "scientists must die so that science can progress." Otherwise, they would keep it in place, with their authority and limits.

Well, if there are limits, there is death. You do not have the right to live beyond your own limits, which are forms of passivity also, not only forms of your affirmation. For, starting with a certain moment, you are receptive to a limited number of things only, and, regardless of how much you travel, you no longer "see" anything new. There is only one thing that would entitle us to still request the extension of our lives at that moment: poor curiosity. A friend of mine used to say, "You deserve to live so that you can read the newspaper every day." But is it still worth living?

Perhaps things will be different. By this techno-scientific revolution, we will have extra memory and something extra in our faculties for knowledge and assimilation. We will learn languages while sleeping, we will make more and more unexpected associations of ideas, we will register the most diverse sensations due to the machines that are adapted to our organism. *Perfect*, then we will have the right to live longer. But we do not have it now. I defy anyone *today* to produce headlines about a survival over eighty lawful years.

Oh, I know very well how interested Pascal would be to see today's world, the world of calculators, which he first imagined, and the world of moral reflections, illustrated still by him; I know how impassioned Archimedes would be by a book of elementary physics or Faraday and Maxwell by electronics. But I do not feel personally my inner boundlessness and I do not think that anyone senses it, after the precedent of Lord Rutherford, who gave the model of the atom, but who said that the atomic energy will never be released; or Einstein's example, who was also blocked somewhere in physics. As for today's philosophers, historians, or economists — they enter a terribly broken mechanism, a blind repetition starting at one moment in their lives!

I vaguely hear people talking. The surgeon who's operating on me explains to the other doctor: "I think he'll be fine. I had to cut only 12 cm of his intestine. Look, the problem now, when you sew the intestine back, is to make sure that the small veins from one side come in the prolongation of the small veins from the other side. You have to proceed so that the organism would not register that you have made a resection in it."

Isn't the entire civilization, I think, a way of *cheating* nature? "So that it would not register..." I wish I could sleep now, in full euphoria, under the oxygen I inhale, but the nurse does not allow me. Perhaps, in order to cheat nature effectively, you should not put it to sleep because later, when it wakes up, it gets upset because you hacked it. Maybe this is why people's victories today are approximate: they have truly narcotized nature and made it so that it "did not feel it," instead of touching its face

with a finger from time to time, talking friendly to it, just like the nurse does with me, so that I don't fall asleep...

XIII

[This chapter was sent by its author five times out of the country — by mail, just like all the others — but it never reached its destination, and the manuscript that remained in the country was lost as well.*

The author remembers that he was describing here the two years that he spent alone in the cell, first because he was convalescent, after coming out of the prison's hospital, and second because he was too weak to participate in the work of "reeducation"† that was being conducted in prisons during those times, in view of the release of the political detainees which was requested and obtained, in principle, by U Thant, the secretary of the UN at the time.

In the beginning, the total solitude was a delight for the author. But what a curse it becomes when you realize that, by yourself, you cannot give your life a fuller content! Perhaps the spiritual techniques of the East know how to populate solitude — through the forests of India or even the prisons of Eastern Europe — but the author of these pages did not know them. He could not do much with the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola or Descartes' *Meditations*, which he had in mind. Then,

* See explanation about this chapter in the Romanian Publisher's Note of this volume, p. 13.

† The "reeducation" was one of the most terrible tortures that took place in Romanian prisons. Its purpose was to change the souls of human beings, to transform them into machines that follow the precepts of the communist regime. For more information, see Virgil Ierunca, *Fenomenul Pitesti* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011). Fr. George Calciu also speaks of it in his *Interviews, Talks, and Homilies* (Platina: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2010).

with a few straws from the mattress on the concrete bed, which was ripped in a corner, he tried to do geometry, like Pascal when he was a child, or to recover some formula, that he only knew only a little, such as vector calculation, for example. He did not succeed much, again.

At that moment, man asks for forgiveness because he exists. “Lady,” you say, “or Mother Nature, delete me from the civil list of those who exist and give forgiveness to the spermatozoid that made me possible, that it ran to take the place of another spermatozoid, which was destined to have a more worthy life than mine!”

In one of these moments, the guard opened the peephole and gave to the author of these pages the first volume from Marx’s *Complete Works*. He would continue to give him the others too, volume by volume.]*

When I came out from the hospital, even if I was alone in the cell, it was clear that something had changed in the world and that the change was toward the good. I was given paper and pencil, in the beginning in order to write my biography. (Perhaps there was something else to find out!†) I hastened to write it, but I soon saw how empty our lives are. Even if many write their memories with pleasure and with a secret vanity, it is a terrible torture to remake your life in your mind, with its lost occasions and stupidities. How interesting is one’s own life! Describing it, I suffered more than when I was beaten.

I remembered even with pleasure one of those beatings, which had been administered so that I tell “everything,” just like now — but with different means, while I unfolded a dull life of an intellectual on two hundred large sheets. I had been laid on the floor with my face down, they had placed a piece of leather on the soft parts of my back, and a sturdy guy who held a thick whip with knots in his hands was giving me two strokes at a

* Addition by the Romanian editor.

† This phrase is, of course, ironical. Noica was already heavily under investigation.

time. I don't know how, the first one was more bearable, but the second one, which fell around the same place, was very difficult to bear. They had not given me more than eight or ten strokes, but my entire body seemed to revive and — I am almost ashamed to say it — when I returned to the cell I had a better digestion than ever.

The connection between the spirit and the body is strange. Any time I have a better idea, I experience happiness in my whole body, including the stomach. But now, when I was writing my biography, I had such indigestion! The only thing that I wrote with pleasure was the first half of the first page, somewhat provocative in a socialist regime, in which I described how I came into the world. "I was born as a protest: my mother waltzed for a night at a ball in order to lose me, but I was stubborn to come into the world. This is why, perhaps," I added, "I am so stubborn and sometimes impertinent." The rest of the autobiography was prose. I think this is one of the harshest punishments, to make people write their autobiographies — and this is, actually, what happened, in these parts of the world.

Going over my life, I realized then how vain European philosophy is, the only way I studied and in the spirit of which I was writing. It does not teach you anything, even if I still think that, without it, you cannot think anything in an articulated fashion in all cultures of the world, anything that would "belong" to the rational. (Goethe's saying makes sense for anyone: "I cannot do without philosophy, and I have nothing to do with it." Unfortunately for him, he became attached to philosophy after the death of his friend Schiller, and he was going to pay for this. European philosophy does not even teach you to meditate because it does not offer you any spiritual technique.)

With Descartes' *Meditations*, which I knew well, I saw that I had no use of them from the beginning. Then I thought of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, trying, by vague memories, to do the exercises of organized imagination which he expects (seeing Christ concretely, with the sweat on his forehead, bearing his cross, etc.), but they could not take my anywhere either. They were probably good as meditation effort, just for the

fixation of imagination (*le péché de distraction*,* as the French Catholics say) and to avoid letting memory, which is so tyrannical and capricious, throw before you, in your conscience, all its horrors or, I would say, its dirt. There seems to be a devil in us which, when man is alone and not busy, comes to mock all our helplessness. One or other disgusting memory refuses to withdraw in the swamp of the unconscious and, the more you want to *not* think that specific thing, the more you make it resistant, just like today's bacteria with penicillin.

It may be that other European schools of wisdom have given more adequate spiritual techniques: Steinerism, Guénonism... But how poor did they prove to be! If I at least knew yoga. But what has always scared me in Indian thought — which gave the number zero to mathematics — is that it rather annuls than edifies. Well, an opinion, of course...

Here, in Europe, we know almost nothing of spiritual life. We will soon meet Asians, some great, some common, who know something about spirit (not only about intellect) and who, on top of it, can easily assume everything that we believe we have better than others: our mathematics, physics, and technology. Mathematics, what an anti-mystery! It is a religious mystery upside down. All cultures had their mysteries and their initiation, with symbols loaded with meaning and a good ambiguity. We are the only ones who discovered (or capitalized) the symbol emptied of meaning, the pure symbol, a mathematical sign. This play with figures and signs (later with structures) was a simple play at the beginning, as Pascal tells us, who, being invited by a mathematician of his time to meet in I don't know what city in France, replied in this way, "Sure, happily, but we should speak of serious things, not of mathematics."

Something happened afterwards — beyond or even before the application of mathematics to physics and technology — and this probably was the capture of the only mystery that could still operate in this profane world: the capture of *infinity*. Our mathematics were accredited and applied, beyond the Antique

* "The sin of distraction," in French in the original.

geometrism, only because they domesticated the infinity (with the infinitesimal calculus), and then because they cheated with it (Cantor and set theory). The ecstasy of mathematics begins only with the taming of infinity. But, you see, it is an ecstasy that is handy to all, even to the tribal people who have rings through their lips.

Still, it's just a manner of speaking to say that mathematics is "handy to all." When you ask him to go more slowly in his demonstrations so that you can follow him, the mathematician does not understand that you need a certain *animality* in order to do mathematics well: a "bossa," as was said in phrenology, the so-called science of the spirit, or an extra-cranial protuberance, or who knows what wrinkling of the gray matter. You need something like the animality of the pianist or of the painter. The most "rational" thing of a culture requires the most irrational talent. (Woe to the people of Israel — as engineer Goldstein said — who sold this superior animality for the animality of first order. If things continue this way, I can imagine an hour when the Jews — at least those from Israel — no longer know the multiplication table well.)

As for one like me, I can say that I will die with the sadness of not having been a mathematician. I am laboring now, in my solitude and with the rests of sheets of paper I still have after I finished and delivered my autobiography, to do a little mathematics by myself. Doesn't Plato say that divinity, once alone, only geometrizes? I try as well, as a small man, to discover, or at least rediscover (like the child Pascal), a little mathematics. I know, for example, the beginning of vector calculus. I take a few straws from the mattress, because the sheets of paper are done fast, and I cannot hope that I would receive more, even if I would soon be proven wrong, and I begin working. I get stuck on the first theorems. How could Descartes get analytical geom-

* Noica speaks here of how various cultures include a certain animality, the one of the artist. He believes that this animality is necessary for doing mathematics as well. His note about engineer Goldstein refers to what his cellmate said regarding Jewish culture on pages 81–83.

etry out of nothing (just as *dans un poêle*,* as he said himself, in a small room with a stove-oven, where he was quartered for the winter, like an... officer), from nothing, that is from playing with coordinate axes? I resume, because I know perfectly its beginning, but I stop again, even if I still have space to write a few recovered formulas on the margins of a few sheets of paper. I then move to the moderns' "topology." Maybe there's something to try with it. I know that topology is the "science of the rubber" (or it was so until it became an abstract discipline by excellence), so a science of figures which, while twisted in any fashion, still retain some constant relations. But even now something is constantly denied to me — like a greatly coveted beautiful woman. I perfectly know that, after you have "had" mathematics, they are no longer interesting ("Who knows what one plus one is knows everything that the human spirit can know in this regard," Descartes used to say), just like the poor women who are nothing else but beautiful. But what suffering to *not* be able to have them!

One day, as a blessing, I am given the first volume of the edition of Marx and Engels's complete works through the peephole. I gather that I would be given all of them, one after the other, if I want. I soar into lecture — reading, the only form of spiritual life of the European! — and, even if the translation is made from the Russian version, where the pages with the deep ideas from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are missing, I am delighted. Do I really like Marx? Am I in the situation of kissing the hand that hits me? Or is it that inner poverty, my incapacity for doing geometry, meditating, and creating something out of nowhere, makes me experience even this reading as a blessing, as long as it is *printed* paper, so, for me, a European, about truth and life? For centuries, the printed book has said to the European man, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"...

I feverishly read the first volume, and, from its beginning, I understand something that seems to be essential for the success of Marxism and for its lamentable ideological failure with those

* "In a stove," in French in the original.

who are *forced* to learn it. This doctrine can only have sense for those without culture, to whom it gives a few slogans, in our case for the masses of workers in factories and only for them; or it has meaning for those who have stayed too long in culture. It's either something too elementary or something too refined. It does not stand at the middle level. But, after victory, the doctrine is taught precisely at this middle level, and this is why it is a catastrophe in consciences. Instead of allowing people to *end* in it, they begin with it, continue with it, and remain at it, being forced to pass exams and to learn laws (listen to this: laws in philosophy!). Or, at times, believing that they understand something, they explain the dialectical contradiction in the sense that one thing can be and not be: "Here, comrade, the hat is; if I hide it behind me, it is not." I tried to tell such a propagandist that, for the dialectical contradiction, he should rather use the saying of a French humorist, Allais, I think: "How sad it is to know that a glass half full is a glass half empty." He replied that this is a saying for drunks, which does not match the proletarian morality.

XIU

Objectively speaking, and without kissing the hand that hits me, there are bewildering things in Marx's work! I even regret now that this doctrine will disappear by itself in the era of automations, with the disappearance of the workers from factories and of the miners. It was valid only for them for a moment (so for an era); for the others, for the peasant, the clerk, the freelancer, the intellectual, and the merchant, it only represented something in the line of "resentment," as Max Scheler said, so in the line of irrepressible dissatisfaction of seeing someone else and entire classes better equipped than yourself for happiness and comfort.

There are pages where Marx shatters you. How troubling is his notion of "alienation" from the manuscripts of his youth — and I saw it later, because those pages were intentionally taken out from the edition I had received. Today everyone invokes them, but how many of us stand under their direct seduction and, after all, their ambiguity? He describes there the three or even four... no, a cascade of man's alienations, all of them being impressive in the light of living conditions of modern man.

In the phase that capitalism reached, he says, work produces not only goods, but also the worker as a good. The object produced by work opposes it as something foreign, as a force that is independent from the producer. As he produces more, he falls further under the dominion of his own product.

One is tempted to ask, to whom does this happen? Only to the worker or also to the one who gave him work, poor guy? If everything happens as in religion, where, as Marx says, the more man puts into God, the less he keeps for himself, then you could say that the exploited puts into play here only his work, while the exploiter puts his soul. You should probably deplore both,

the slave and the master, as Hegel does; even more, since a “self-alienation in a product” takes place, as we are told, a worker could still shake away the deception if he started to run back into his poverty or wherever in the world. He could return to his dirt (if he is allowed to have it or if it has not been transformed into a golf course in the meantime). The other one has sold his soul completely, as it has been seen in so many cases, for example in so many rich families, where the father is not the only slave to his goods, but the son must also be modeled, rather mutilated, according to the requirements of possessions.

However, Marx has no mercy on the poor possessor. In the historical phase he was in, he had to denounce the exploitation and the alienation of the individual forced to work. Concerning him, Marx shows clearly that there are no less than four kinds of alienation, taking into consideration that the production activity is also at stake, not only the result of the production work. First, he says, the effort brought by the worker is something exterior to him, not having to do with his essence, and it represents the mortification brought about by forced work. Second, the type of work that industrial capitalism established is such that it does not allow any freedom to the worker, except the one for his animalistic functions, or eating, drinking, and procreating. On the other hand, and third, a common man is a universal being, a genus, who considers his entire nature to be his inorganic body; however, his work now alienated him from nature. Similarly, and this is the fourth point, it alienates him from the human genus. Thus, a worker, Marx says, is alienated: in relation to his nature and to his self, and then in relation to nature purely and simply, and finally in relation to other humans.

Perhaps we simplify things or we summarize them imperfectly, but how deep and open this investigation is! This is probably why it was not included from the beginning in this edition of the complete works, which I was given to read in translation. However, even in this version, you fall upon amazing things in the first volume. I would have never read — just as its own adherents don't — the article titled “Debates on the Law of Thefts of Wood.” I find its psalmic beauty here, in prison. When the

author says that you possess the tree, but you do not truly possess its dry branches, when he adds that the poor (who steal wood for winter from others' woods everywhere, not only in Germany) have a certain *kinship* with the dry branches, which gives them a genuine *right* over them, then what will you say that is to be found on this page? Is it something economical, as an impulse to revolt, or is it rather the religious poetry of the psalmist?

Of course, his polemical books, like *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology*, or *The Poverty of Philosophy*, filled with heavy German irony, can no longer be appealing to anyone, if they ever were. There are, however, thoughts and entire pages that remain imprinted in your mind. Today, how true seems to be the affirmation found in the first work cited, that the class of owners and the proletarian class represent man's *same* alienation from the self; the former sees itself satisfied with alienation, while the latter is annihilated by it. In this thought, we almost have the pity for the possessors that I have mentioned. Similarly, from the same work, the idea that "all progress realized by the spirit has so far been to the detriment of humanity, which arrives at a situation that is more and more inhuman" is valid for those well established, but not for the multitudes, if it is about the progress realized by the European spirit in the line of well-being only.

I would not pass easily, as the official commentators do, over deeply significant thoughts, like the one (which, it is true, was deleted by the author) from *The German Ideology* in which he declares courageously, "We know only one science, *the science of history*, which comprises together the history of nature and that of humanity." Isn't this, after all, the novelty of Hegel and then of Marx, that they have placed everything within fluidity? Then, further in the work, if you are not satisfied with the cheap historical-materialist explanations, such as this, "the lack of sugar and of coffee (due to the blockade) raised the Germans against Napoleon," you are impressed, instead, by a few pages long thought to propose that the separation between the city and the village represents the greatest division of labor. He believes it can be overcome by the new system, and that this divi-

sion exists only under the conditions of private property, which leads to the “urban animal” and to the “rural animal”! (But you wonder, hasn’t the new doctrine actually increased the *urban* animality?) I would not just pass over all of these things — for the bad, but also for the good in Marx’s intuitions — just as I would not easily go over the stunning, dark prophecy, so close to confirmation, “There will be a time when individuals (precisely the urban ones, *my note*) will take on themselves also this product of the species, *language*.” I don’t know how, but, of all philosophers, only Marx, as much as he can be called a philosopher, has something of a prophet in him — and this is a novelty. Plato looks too much into eternity, and Hegel too much into past history, which he actually integrates admirably. Nobody has opened the door to the future. Instead, this one, regardless of how modest of a philosopher he is...

But the most surprising thing — leaving aside so many pages and places of first order, starting with the *Manifesto*, which has not been surpassed by any other — is that people easily ignore, almost with compassion and indulgence, the ten years of journalism at the *Tribune* in the United States. It’s true that his articles are not directly edifying for the proposed ideology, but they are fascinating as cultural and historical *documents*. There is something so complete in them, between 1853 and 1863, as they were written weekly, as a report about the situation in Europe for the American reader. Also, there is something so tumultuous and alive in them that you could say that they are about the *Intimate Journal of Europe*, of a Europe that could spread its “imperialist” maneuvers over the body of other continents. Beginning with the Gladstones and the Russells of England, with Napoleon III or the Crimean War, passing on to the poverty and lethargy of India, to the Taiping Rebellion in China, Russia’s absolutism, reactionary Switzerland and the revolutionary United States, deepening then the struggle of Europe to have something unique on Terra, with the industrial revolution, but also bringing great risks together with great hopes — what is the dramatic conscience that this minuscule and incomparable Europe does not have, as if it were a fiery man overwhelmed by the spirit of

adventure! But if continents also have a conscience, then Marx was, at least for ten years, the devilish chronicler and spokesperson of this conscience. Whoever does not read the *Intimate Journal* of the middle of the last century ignores himself as European.

I don't plan on emphasizing everything that I liked in his pre-classical work, from before *Capital*, or on trying to encourage experiencing it with joy, especially in the case of those who study it because they are commanded to do so. I would only mention that the gold in this author is rather found in his small works, in simple manifests, portraits, or clarifications, gold that he himself wastes in the sand of action.

When multiplied, as he liked to be, beyond specialties, but with the vocation of the expert, a fighter for all, but in the name of *his* ideas about all, suffocated in an England which is the only one that stands him and which was, in fact, the only bearable one for him, how could he be gathered together in a well calibrated work? After all, he did not have time to write works and, as Nietzsche later, he wanted to be a fatality, not an author.

But one can see in him great thoughts and formulations even in a trifle of a speech!

In "Speech at the anniversary of *People's Paper*" from 1856, he says, "It seems that the more humanity subjects nature, the more man becomes the slave of another man or of his own vileness." And then, "All of our inventions seem to take us to only one result: to endow material forces with spiritual life and to reduce human life to a simple material force." Hasn't this happened in Marxist states, but also in the consumer society, exactly after a century? And here is, finally, Marx's verdict in this speech-manifest: "The new forces of the society need only one thing: new people, who know how to master them, and these are the workers. Just like the machines, the workers are an invention of our times.... History is the judge, and the proletariat is the executioner of the verdict."

It was not this way, or it *was* this way — I no longer care now, as I am behind bars. But I wonder one more time, faced with the intellectual emotion that his work awakes in me at certain mo-

ments: am I not actually kissing the hand that hits me? But no, I am clearly interested only in something completely unexpected, the prophet in Marx, the prophet as upside-down philosopher, and his monotheism, the man of only one idea, who can still see with it far in the concreteness of history, and who could say to someone like Chekhov, it seems (see the article “Herr Vogt”): “After all, it does not matter whether this pathetic Europe disappears — which will actually take place soon, unless there will be a social revolution — and whether America will exploit, then, the old system on account of Europe.”

Actually, there is something else that interests me. It is the fact that I see in him, in this victorious man for a moment, a true brother Alexander, another one. *Pitié pour les forts!*,* I feel like shouting one more time, from here, where I am. Have mercy on a thinker so great that, in those parts of the world where he is invoked too often and too incorrectly, he has become the laughter of children. Have mercy on the way in which his victory turns against him. Give up cheap mockery, those who feel you are his victims; give up describing him, according to the stories of his neighbors in London, as a poor common man in his relations with his wife of noble origin, or mocking him because he grew a beard in old age (and what a beard), after he had laughed in a letter to Engels of the German prophets from the exile after 1848, who had grown beards. Have mercy because of the curses that will accumulate one day over his head, the unhappy victor.

The Russians will curse him because he blocked their historical affirmation for so many decades, as no absolutist czar had succeeded in the 19th century. The Jews will curse him, his co-religionists, about whom he declared more infernal things than any anti-Semitic man. The workers will curse him because he deceived them for a moment that they are a unitary and supra-national class, that they have a complete human identity, and that they are the only ones who can be the salt of the earth and of history. Even the communists will curse him, because, with his claim of speaking “scientifically,” he forbade them the ac-

* “Mercy for the powerful,” in French in the original.

tive idealism, the power of creation, and the access to novelty. Nature will curse him, because he has ravished it with his furor of industrialization, in the first hour of heavy machinism. The machines will curse him, as refined as they will become and as prepared, as brides, to marry the being of man, instead of being maneuvered by the rough hands of the workers. The gods with their religions will curse him, because he disdained them by portraying them as simple opium for the people, when they were aspiring, and at times succeeding, to bring to the world everything that he had desired, plus something of which he no longer knew or no longer wanted to know.

Then someone will come to say, "Forgive him, he also lived under the folly of the Good. Pray for the soul of brother Karl. Pray for *the Big Brother*."

* "The Big Brother" appears in English and in italics in the Romanian original.

XU

I receive paper and pencil again; I have read seventeen volumes from the complete works of Marx and Engels, and then the five of *The History of Philosophy* published by the Soviets and translated in Romanian (a lamentable page of European culture, pathetic especially for Marxism), and I have written like crazy four works, which I transcribed nicely in pen and gave to the character who was assigned to watch and “reeducate” me. Months and years passed this way. Two? Three?

In the meantime (I would find out later), almost all the other colleagues in detention were undergoing reeducation. On the surface, the reeducation seemed very gentle; in reality, it was very serious for people’s consciences. They were given some books concerning the regime’s accomplishments, they were shown propaganda movies, and they were even, toward the end, taken out in buses, a whole morning, and brought to see the industrial units, the new neighborhoods in cities, or the state co-operatives in the country. As I was to find out, the serious thing was that some detainees, who were converted faster, became propagandists themselves, and thus discussions were forming, in which people were accusing each other and they were getting into a pathetic situation: *either* some were exaggerating and becoming fierce defenders of the regime, *or* others were stubborn in not acknowledging any change toward the good of the country, refused everything out of “dignity,” and were getting ready to come out of the prison more hostile than they were when they came in.

I was exempted from all of this (I was probably left on the side, since I was too weak after the surgery or because I was to be reeducated — who knows? — in a more special way), so I was

enjoying staying alone in the cell, with the Marxist books that I received, paper and pencil, and, toward the end, even some magazines, among which there was one for the popularization of science, which I loved passionately. From it I found out some extraordinary novelties that had come out in the world in the meantime, in the context of the techno-scientific revolution.

I cannot forget, also, my encounter with Russian (an encounter that, to my shame, I had only then), because I had asked for a book for learning Russian from the beginning, in my desire to have a *printed* book, so the right to read something, anything, and so the privilege to exercise my memory. I suspected, and rightly so, that they would not refuse me such a book. But only when I had it in my hands I realized how our stupid — although apparently legitimate, at a certain moment — fear of Russians and of being annexed had made all of us, young and old, not to learn Russian, but also to *not be able* to learn this language. I had seen, when I was free, how even the most eminent students did *not* learn this language (which had been taught for eight years in high school). At the end of high school or college (where Russian was mandatory as well) they were even saying with some pride that “they did not know anything.”

As much as I could learn it by myself, Russian seemed to me extraordinary. I no longer had here the worry I experienced concerning Marxism, that I ran the risk of praising those who beat me. This time, it was about the language of a people, not of a regime, and so I gave way to my linguistic interest for one of the most powerful and grand affirmations of human logos. Everything seemed remarkable and imposing in Russian, beginning with that force of stressing Russian words, which can receive the stress even on the fourth syllable, or even on the fifth before the last (while in classical languages, the stress could fall only on the third before the last, and in French the stress falls invariably on the last, in others on the second, and in others finally on the first, which terribly narrows the phonetic domain of speech, and, in the case of languages with fixed stress, it even narrows the domain of the modern poetical miracle of rhyme); continuing with the quasi-absence of the auxiliary verbs “to be” and “to

have” (the Russian says, “with me gramophone” instead of “I have a gramophone,” which can easily lead to the feeling that the gramophone is “with me” by chance, but it could be with you or with somebody else, and one could infer from here, with some naivety, of course, the easiness of applying communism to a people that speaks and feels this way); going, finally, over so many lexical and grammatical aspects of the language, to end with that splendid “aspect,” literally, the aspect of the verb, with the Russian imperfect, which confers, of course, great beauty for formulating a thought and for narrating facts — everything, as I say, seemed impressive in Russian. Its *good* indetermina- tion (from the absence of some articles to the imperfect) made me feel the infinity of which Gogol, I think, spoke in the *Dead Souls*, describing a troika that was advancing in the endlessness of snows.



After some time, they began to interrogate me approximately once a week, in the interrogation office, where a distinguished and intelligent character, who was dressed as civilian (not knowing how to address him, I called him Mr. Counselor), came at times alone, and other times with his adjutant, a captain — whom he was probably teaching directly how to “handle” people —, and gave me real lectures about the current situation in the country and in the world. I found out that president Kennedy had been assassinated (“a great misfortune for humanity,” the counselor said) and that it was “still us,” so the socialist concentration camp, who were the first to launch a man in the space. It was the hour when the socialist concentration camp still hoped to finally reach the other world in prosperity, and my counselor passionately unfolded the perspectives in that direc- tion.

I was not indisposed by the fact that, according to him, the rapport was reversed in the favor of the East, nor by the pom-

posity with which he brought arguments and proofs for this, but rather by the idea that a man, who seemed remarkably intelligent and informed, was wasting his time with me in order to “indoctrinate” me. Didn’t the regime have something better to do with “chosen” specimens, such as the counselor?

This feeling that the regime continued to use human intelligence badly, while it valued so impatiently all the other “prime matters” of the country was confirmed when the counselor called to ask me how I was feeling, if I had good enough nutrition, and if I wanted, for example, a can with good sardines, “you know,” he said, “the delicious ones,” and he was licking his mouth, believing that he would make me crave them. In reality, I have to say that he rather provoked pity, because I could clearly see how a superiorly gifted man was made to do such a lamentable service of “capturing” victims. Without any ostentation, I answered that I would rather have a jar of yogurt from time to time, since I was literally a *papă lapte** regarding food. (I realized on the spot that there was no virtue, no “strength of character,” in my answer, but the simple fact that a rather anemic nature does not have many appetites. I think that what we may consider “virtue” is often connected with a vital deficiency or insufficiency and that, in general, you must be very content, as a moral being, when your weaker human nature or just your circumstances protect you from temptation. Christianity is perfectly right when it says, “avoid temptation,” don’t search for it so that you can prove to yourself that you are strong. The ascetics knew a few things regarding this, and Nietzsche’s opposite saying, to *look for* temptation, *gefährlich leben*, which I liked so much in my youth, appeared now in all its ridicule. In order to not commit adultery, at least as a man, it’s good to not have a couch — just like in the anecdote with the Jew who, finding his wife with another man on the couch, sold the couch.† Also, not

* “Milk eater.” This is an expression that is also used for someone who is weak, who does not follow his interests, who hasn’t grown.

† I am not familiar with the anecdote. In Eastern Europe, people often tell anecdotes and jokes in which the characters are representatives of “categories”: a Jew, a Russian, an American, a Christian.

having a studio and not seeing too many beautiful women on purpose. Otherwise, *vivere pericolosamente*,* as Mussolini had translated Nietzsche's saying, what happens to you on a small scale is what happened to this dictator on a large scale.)

The counselor did not consider my refusal a defiance — it was done in all modesty, after all — and moved on to the matter at hand: he asked me to write something against my friend C. But how can I write, I asked; here, in prison? The counselor quickly passed over this problem — which indirectly assured me that things are getting better, perhaps ever toward freedom — and added, “he is a great enemy of ours.” I told him that my friend is a man who is detached from all people and all things, even from life, and that I was even afraid for years while I knew him that he would take his own life. “He is a *great* enemy of ours,” the counselor ended, emphasizing it.

I returned to my cell, downcast by the entire scene and, I have to confess, worried that, after my refusal, they would surely take back the books, the paper, and the pencil... The next day, the counselor's adjutant, the captain, called me. I went, being resigned at the thought that I would receive the verdict for my refusal. The captain received me amicably, and he gave me an orange.

It had been years and years, even before I was imprisoned (due to the shortages in my country) since I had *seen* an orange. My hand was shaking when I took it — due to craving? Due to the feeling that they were resorting to such methods, almost Chinese, or to “Scottish showers,”† to force us to give in? I put it into my right pocket, out of shame (rather for them), so that the guard would not feel it when he would take me by my left arm to take me back into the cell, having the glasses on my eyes. I relished the orange in the cell, with the voluptuousness with which the counselor believed I would have relished

* “Living dangerously,” in Italian in original.

† Noica thinks of psychological methods of torture, and he draws a parallel between the event with the orange and the cold showers that were, at times, performed in prisons.

the sardines. When I only had the peel in my hand, I wondered what to do: throw it into the wc in the corner of the cell, or give it to the guard through the peephole? I then remembered that, a long time ago, my mom used to make preserves with orange peel thinly cut, and so I started to bite small pieces from the peel, until I ate all of it.

At the end of these *happy* days, I was called with some solemnity and placed before a significant person, as I was told, who let me wait in the office around half an hour. I was in that splendid state of life when you are indifferent, but in a positive sense, not negative, to anything that may happen to you: it is good if it goes this way, it is good if it goes another way.

This person was a colonel, actually the chief of the interrogators who had taken me in custody years ago. The circle was closing: I was coming back before him.

“What would you do if you were free?” he asks me abruptly. For a moment, a thought crossed my mind: “I would read the 18th volume from Marx and Engels.” I was afraid, though, that he would consider me defiant. In fact, the question had brought me into a state of real emotion, so that I asked for a cigarette from his younger subordinate, who accompanied the colonel and was smoking. He gave me the cigarette immediately, and I started saying that, of course, as any other detainee, I had the illusion that I would be free one day, despite the long conviction that I had received, and that I asked myself what I would do. I would do anything, I answered, from a very modest position as a substitute for elementary mathematics or foreign languages, in a small, forgotten village, to a higher intellectual use.

Since the cigarette started to give me courage, I began developing the idea that I could even be used as a “coach” — I dared to say — of Marxism. After all, I pointed out, nobody is interested in who the coach is: what matters is performance. Just as in sports, there is need of some instructing in philosophy as well. Being in the field to some extent, I knew well that one couldn’t do Marxism well without Hegel, Kant, Aristotle, and the others. I could instruct someone in all of these — I praised myself — as I could also open his appetite for mathematics or some science,

preparing him in this way to be truly receptive, at an adequate level, to Marx's philosophical message.

The colonel listened to me, registered my answer positively, and told me, "you will be free tomorrow." He added, "Do you want to remain connected with us? Or is it against your conscience?"

I remained dumbfounded for a moment. So, they had not changed: on the one hand, they had the generosity to free us, on the other hand they were asking us to become their agents. How could these two match?

I could easily use the door that he had kindly offered me, "it is against my conscience." I preferred to tell him something equally true, that I was not planning on having any social life. My family had left a long time ago, perhaps they went to Australia, and I could no longer have friends, since I harmed the close ones. "I no longer have a country, colonel," I answered. "I am detached from all."

The colonel went out, but his subordinate remained another moment. "How can you say you have no country? We make so many efforts to bring this country to another level, we even defy the Soviets when they ask things that are not convenient to the country, and you say that you have no country?" I had a weak moment — probably because of the stress to which I had been submitted — and I burst into crying. In fact, weren't *they* the ones who had detached me from anything, even from my country?

I returned to the cell with the refrain "you will be free tomorrow" singing in me. The next day, nothing happened; they only came to take my books, paper, and pencil. I remained this way another day, two more, four days. The fifth day, I thought, "they mocked me; they are using the Scottish showers again." The morning of the sixth day, I asked to be taken to the prison's commander. I wanted to ask him to give me back paper and pencil, trying, in fact, to see what my situation was. After some time, I am called to the commander, but I don't get to formulate my request when a civilian approaches me and begins taking all possible measurements. The next day, I am taken out again, and

I am given a new suit and a pair of shoes. When I am taken from there, after a last night in the cell, now dressed in new clothes, to see my luggage in the deposit (everything was worn out, and this is why they had retained me longer, because I had no presentable clothes), I take almost nothing from the suitcase, and I leave it there as well, because it was broken, and I keep only the coat, also worn, although it was still summer. With the coat on my arm and with a small bundle of laundry, I come before the commander, who hands me a banknote, the equivalent of around ten bus tickets. I look at the prison commander before I come out of the door. We are both caught in a smile, and I remember William Blake's verses:*

*There is a smile of Love
And there is a smile of Deceit,
And there is a smile of smiles
In which these two smiles meet.*[†]

* The verses appear in English in the original.

† [Romanian editor's note] In the preceding editions, the text ended here with the note "1965."

XUI

Whoever did not have the luck to be imprisoned between immediately after 1950 and immediately after 1960 (of course, as long as he also came out from there with sane body and mind) could not have had the shock of the change that had taken place in the world during that interval and did not fully enjoy the triumph of our era, even if it was risky or evanescent. It was something without equivalent in known history, something unique not only regarding the *generalized* prosperity in one part of the world (a prosperity that consisted not only in food, drinking, and sumptuous living, as other times, but also in radio, television, electricity, with the entire cortege of benefits of the “red fire,” or in tourism, museums, and culture), but also something unique, especially regarding the technical-scientific revolution.

There was something that seemed enchanting, as I was coming out of the darkness of the prison, which was still somehow lit. I was surprised to see that the people I encountered, or those in the West about whom I was hearing, were not overtaken by any drunkenness coming from the victory of our era. On the contrary, they often met such success in the wrong way. They succeeded in consumption or entertainment, but not in *contemplation*.

What a thing to say, that there would be an opposition between contemplation and action! I would include it among the great solemn platitudes of humanity. There is, of course, an opposition between passivity — the passivity of the spectator or of the receiver of unexpected gifts — and action, but there is no opposition between *contemplation* and action. It's true that the opposition seems to come from the ancients, with their *bios the-*

oretikos.^{*} However, understood simply, it is another great stupid saying, as I said, just like “know yourself” or “self-love,” so the love of the self which would command all things, as the French moralists and not only they pretended. (How much self-love can you have? If a smiling Brigitte Bardot were to come toward me, I would be delighted for a moment, but then I would set aside any self-love and I would call someone young and handsome, like Alec, to take care of her.)

For six months after coming out of prison, I couldn't read any book from my field (not even Marx's volume 18), but only books and magazines about the technical-scientific successes from the middle of the 20th century. In a few years, the world had changed or was opening toward extraordinary changes; however, those who had not had the privilege to be locked up did not realize this, as a child does not realize that it has grown.

What seemed to me unbelievable and terrifically engaging was that the technical-scientific revolution *had succeeded*, and beyond all expectations or imagination (even those of Jules Verne's kind). Until this revolution, man had succeeded in nothing. The humanist culture especially, but the scientific one as well, had not succeeded.

In the case of humanist culture, what had *philology* promised around 1800–1820 (the finding of an original language!), and what did it obtain; what had *history* promised, when it became aware that it is a science; or what ordering had *philosophy* promised, not only with German idealism but also with the French ideologists, and what did it succeed? For man and for the spirit, this failure would be truly a scandal if it were not somehow grandiose and if it did not leave man *open* to continue to pose the problem of the word, of society, and of thought.

What about positive sciences? Of course, they have brought some results, laws, and knowledge without equal in the history of the world. However, unfortunately — or fortunately! — they, even physics, did not succeed in giving the complete and certain inventory of all knowledge, as they had promised. Around

* Contemplative life.

1900, the great physicist Lord Kelvin said that there would not be much to find in physics (and he even deplored the physicists of the 20th century), except “perhaps” some aspect of the problem of X-rays and of radiation. Around 1920, another great physicist, Rutherford, said that nuclear energy could never be liberated. And now, the physicists no longer know where their heads are from so many novelties, so that someone like Heisenberg asked at a philosophical congress that others also make an effort of imagining the new because the physicists are no longer able to do so.

What is left to say about sciences like astronomy, with its quasars and pulsars, great dark stellar masses, which decide, however, by density and attraction the fate of the rest of the world (so that the astronomers Hoyle and Narlikar showed that Einstein’s theory of relativity is too *narrow*, since it does not take into account the rest of the universe). And what could we say about biology, “the science of the 20th century,” where, on the one hand, the new devices for detection, such as electronic microscopes, and, on the other hand, the new theories and notions, such as those regarding the genetic code, have resulted into grandiose answers=questions, so extraordinary open notions for humanity.

However, beyond or parallel with everything that has been and has not been hoped for, the specter of a sad failure appeared, just as these admirable mathematics that place everything in order are a kind of failure, or at least are so to you. When they place at their basis a crass but extremely fecund “theory of sets” (actually, a kind of theory of heaps), they get to give account to all mathematical disciplines, to finally get confused themselves, no longer being able to explain anything. When the same admirable mathematics (the revealed mystery of our world, our God without beard and rod) attempt to place logic at their basis and to ensure, by axiomatization and logicalization, that they have order within themselves (so they don’t only *place* order among things), they fall upon paradoxes, such as the ones which, as I showed, made logician Frege cry last century, or which made logician Quine today say that, after all, it is better that the logi-

cization of mathematics did not succeed, because mathematics would have destroyed mathematicians and, perhaps, with the perfect machines and devices, all of us...

Thus, everything is a "failure" in our culture; or, if you prefer, nothing kept its promise. Only *technology* has kept it, even more than it had been asked. It's true that it also gave some stupidities, small machines and devices that you don't really need (the over twenty devices for cutting the tips of cigars), or some which *create* artificial needs, and so they disturb your human nature, but this is something else. Technology has given miracles, and not so much for consumption (as another physician said: around 1900, humanity had everything it needed to be happy materially), but for contemplation, *that is* for the action of thought, as for a deeper vibration of our spiritual being.

We have registered the amount of light that has appeared in the world after the coming out of darkness with such an intellectual voluptuousness. Light allowed itself to be concentrated in so-called "lasers," in order to favor all sorts of possible activities, such as transmitting information at a distance, transporting energy (with the risk of transporting explosive energy as well), surgeries of the eye's retina, etc. But at the same time, we saw well, only now, that light is no more than a narrow band on the register of electromagnetic waves, where so many other waves, and in the first place radio waves, came to transmit not only suave or hoarse voices, songs and thoughts, or political discourses filled with anger and madness, like those from the 1930s up to the years of my going to prison, but also transmitted messages toward unknown worlds from the cosmos, or perhaps brought messages, from extraterrestrial beings, about which we begin to wonder whether they "look for us" in space with their waves, with a language that we do not yet understand. I felt as if I were intoxicated by so many novelties, mechanisms, and devices, which, if we don't spoil our entire success, may lead one day to directly capturing solar energy, and thus solving for good the problem of the need for energy on earth, just as, using pho-

* In English and in italics in the original.

tosynthesis, we would also solve the problem of nourishment once and for all.

There are admirable things brought into being by cybernetics, this strange mixture of mechanism (as a final and subtle effort of mechanistic conception of solving all problems with only two values, with *yes* and *no*, with 0 and 1, reducing at times the noblest chapters in mathematics to a simple question of addition done vertiginously, with millions of operation on a second, thanks to the electronic flux) and “systems theory.” Consider the very evocative structures of any “cybernetic system,” which represent something of the order of monads, “closed and without windows,” of which Leibniz, the god invoked by Norbert Wiener, the inventor of cybernetics, spoke.

What is left to say about the ecstasy that had taken hold of me? When I saw that man could literally implant himself in machinery by the refinement and the miniaturization of machines — he would obtain an eye that could see infrared, so in darkness, an electronic ear, an electronic nose — that man would perceive unquantifiably more than today, just as in Antiquity man dreamt to implant himself into animality, with the sphinx and the centaur, but not obtaining an expansion of his being, unless we consider his simple nature. I then realized that poor Nietzsche did not know well what he was talking about when he invoked the “supermen” and when he admired the intelligent and gifted beasts of the Renaissance as superior specimens. There was a new humanity — finally new, after 7,000 years — that was about to be born. And it was not a humanity created artificially, in a tube, like the human embryo of Daniele Petrucci, about whose attempt to create man *in vitro* I heard back then with emotion, but a perfectly natural humanity, which would only use the conquests already obtained by technology, in order to give man, with some extra amino acids, a surplus of memory, of intelligence, and perhaps of creativity.

But this is no longer science or technology, I thought. This is theology. While Byzantium was under siege, some theologians were discussing the problem of the sex of angels, and history laughed at them. Today, however, it is revealed that the problem

of the sex of angels is one of the most extraordinarily current problems for humanity. Indeed, what kinds of people will we colonize on other planets or artificial planets: pairs of people, like in Noah's Ark, simple men, as could be perfectly possible, only women (and Joliot Curie says that this could be possible too, by so-called "parthenogenesis"), or androgens, angels, asexual beings?

I dream about all of this and I read about the experiments with the Planarian worms while I live at my cousin, being happy again, in a small room 2×2 .*

"You see," I tell my cousin's, "we arrived at the point where we could make a Planarian worm which was submitted to some electric influences to obtain a 'conditioned reflex,' just like Pavlov's dogs. But this is not all. It is extraordinary that if another Planarian worm eats the first, it also gets that conditioned reflex. Do you understand what this means?..."

"Leave me alone with your ideas," my cousin responds, still with affection. "I am fighting with the bedbugs brought by the tenant imposed on me by the tenancy office, and you're telling me about the Planarian worms and other scientific follies."

He's right, of course. All of those who, outside,[†] are still fighting the long lines,[‡] shortages, a place to live, or adding up years for retirement are right. But I feel that I no longer get along with him. I will have to search for my prison colleagues, the only ones with whom I could still talk—the only ones who have maintained, I hope, a door toward dreams.

* 2×2 meters, approximately 6×6 feet.

† Noica means "outside of prison," those who did not have the experience of being imprisoned.

‡ Since resources were scarce, people waited in long lines to buy their food supplies.

XVII

“Why don’t you get new teeth?” my cousin, who takes care of me like a brother, asks me. (I started giving private lessons, I found some translations second-hand, so I fare well; I can pay for my 2×2 room in which I am sheltered and I continue contemplating — having good news from my family, which left long ago, and being forgiven by my friends who had been imprisoned because of me, but against my will — the miracle of the world in the middle of the 20th century, with its promises.)

“You see,” I say, “there will be a time when man will have fewer teeth, perhaps even none at all. Even now, wisdom teeth, which had a great importance for the primitive people, no longer matter. We can even accelerate vital processes. Everything has changed since we gathered the genetic code. I’ll give you to read Jean Rostand’s study, *Génies sur commande*? He is a great biologist, popularizing, but still good. He shows that with “twenty words,” with the twenty aminoacids, one can fabricate a being. Man’s memory and intellectual faculties will depend, it seems, on the quantity of RNA. Man will be able to transform living beings according to his will, and he will transform himself as well.”

“If he wants to!” my cousin exclaims.

“Of course, there are many reasons to waver, but, in general, what man can do, he does not delay doing, regardless of the risks. In fact, I read someone’s study about the so-called ‘inductive substances.’ You know that people talk now about transplants; those with a kidney have already succeeded. Let’s see if they will succeed with the others as well, especially with heart transplants. We don’t need to speak of those for the brain, because they are very distant and also absurd. If you change a human’s brain, with his memory and intellectual faculties, then

he is *another* human for sure. However, something great was discovered with the inductive substances: the cells taken from the patient *himself* and cultivated in the laboratory can give all the necessary organs. So there is no more need to take organs from others or from donators. It was even said," I continue, "that all moral problems, as well as problems of physiological incompatibility, with the rejection of the organ by the organism, would be solved. A certain doctor, Gurdon, made an experiment to confirm this, and a frog was born from a frog skin. This thing made someone say, 'Any human is virtually composed by some milliards of specimens of himself.' Isn't this beautiful?"

"It's great," my cousin answers, "but there also are some atomic bombs, somewhere, in deposits, and, in fact, even with these biological experiments there are some risks that are terribly similar to what is said in the Bible."

"My dear," I tell him, "I am the last one to contest the wisdom of the Bible, let alone its beauty; however, humanity cannot be stopped from taking a step forward."

"To stagger..."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," I answer, "but let me vividly participate for the moment, at least as a sports fan, in the festival that we all experience now. You know that I work with philosophy. Well, I have never believed that one can think and speculate more fantastically than philosophy has done. But I now see—and not only in pure science and in technology—how unexpectedly one can think. You heard, for example, how much people have discussed in philosophy the subject of analysis and synthesis: with analysis you decompose something, with synthesis you compose something. Do you know what I find out from the physicists now? That there are particles which decompose in sub-particles out of which they have never been composed! That the new particles are born only at the moment of disintegration. Isn't this crazy? Which philosopher even thought of something like this? What should I say about isotopes? That a great part of chemical elements are composed of a compound of two or several isotopes? So, that you are not *you* unless there are

more 'you' like you! But have you heard of *breeders*? They are some devices or atomic piles, which, consuming energy, end by producing more energy than they consumed, which makes dead matter become *also* fertile! In fact, this is also the cosmogonic theory of the English Hoyle with the Indian Narlikar: they claim that there is a 'C-field' that permanently replaces the energy that is lost in the universe by expansion. And what can I say about..."

"À propos," my cousin interrupts me, "since you speak of the English... Have you read Orwell's book, 1984?"

"I had looked for it earnestly 'before,' but I didn't find it..."

"Here, I'll give it to you," he tells me. "We'll talk afterwards."

I give him back the book the next day.

"I could not read more than one or two hours from it. It's suffocating."

"It's suffocating with truth, isn't it?" he asks me.

"Rather with *falsity*," I answer. "I would argue this way: either Orwell is not right, so it will never happen in the world, in the year 1984, as he says, and this means that he uglified the world's face with his book and awoke useless fears, *or* it will truly be so, let's say even here, in our country — where it began to be this way — and then, with my small experience and with what I heard from others, I can tell you that the splendid thing about man is that, *some place*,[†] he survives even to such pressures. And *this* is the important thing, not man's disfiguration! It is important what remains out of freedom — not only for the one from whom it was taken, but also for the one who took it from him. What remains human in those hours of complete dissolution of the human matters, just as it matters what man still has as property when all was taken from him. After all, regarding man, it is as it was said about culture — you know it — that it would be 'what remains after you have forgotten everything'... This is what seemed extraordinary to me: that *something* still remains for man. And it may be that the thing that remains to man is *es-*

* "Breeders" appears in English in the original.

† Noica's point is that man can survive in some *interior* place.

sential; and in this case, Orwell's book will have to be burned in the public square in 1984."

"No one can talk to you," my cousin answers. "You know one thing only, even after everything that happened to you, that 'the bad is not that bad,' even that the bad reveals who knows what good thing, hidden until then. I will ask you, though, what you think about Solzhenitsyn; you said you were reading him a few days go."

"Yes, it was for Solzhenitsyn that I interrupted my readings regarding the technical-scientific revolution, because I had heard good things about him and I did not dislike it, as *material*—at least his first book, the one about Ivan's day. Denisov, or something like this."

"Well, and then, did you still like him?"

"In a way, I liked him, I liked him very much, because this writer has something from the class of the great Russians; but, in another way, he depressed me, *for his sake*, I would say, and for the destiny of culture. He consumes his genius to denounce, just as simple as that! He somehow remained a physicist and a positivist."

"You mean you didn't like *The Cancer Ward*?"

"I liked it very much: there are extraordinary characters and situations there. But the author seems to be unable, or rather he *does not want* to make out of them a great work of art, a great fresco. He is embittered. He has to say *something* and to denounce something with his work, just like in the other book, *In the First Circle*, where he strives to see the last thoughts of Stalin, and with details for which he certainly had extensive investigations."

"Do you want to say that he is wrong to denounce?"

"For himself, yes, because he lowers his talent, if not also his genius. For the others, perhaps not. I have heard that he is called 'the good man' by his people. Probably their better conscience. But I wonder if he serves them and their cause to the end, the

* Noica speaks of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

cause of any just and good man. You see, culture is done with a little gratuity, a little detachment.”

“But this man wants to say the truth. What can culture do without truth? Literature should leave me alone, if it does not fight for the values of truth and human justice under the pretense that it is interested only in beauty!”

“It’s not that simple,” I try to explain to him and also to myself. “When you are interested *only in beauty*, as a final piety to beauty, I don’t know how it happens that you end up — just like the Ancient Greeks — with good and truth also. But when you absolutely want the truth and especially exactness...”

“What, do you make a difference between them?”

“Of course I do, even in Solzhenitsyn’s case. I am worried that, being a physicist, as I mentioned, and also embittered, as I also said, this man with so much literary genius looked too much for exactness rather than truth. For if truth, at least for modern man, cannot be without exactness, exactness is not by itself truth.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand too well either,” I confess sincerely, “but I *realize* it is this way. Look, we also have an ancient author, a prince who said, ‘The one who has no stubbornness sees God.’ I am afraid that Solzhenitsyn does not see God precisely because he has stubbornness and looks for exactness. Even more, something else may happen to him due to exactness: he may lose the entire truth, and thus harm not only his work — and, as it is right now, I don’t think it will still be read in 20–30 years — but also those he wants to defend.”

“What do you mean by this?”

“I would tell you this way. What if a good Christian today, in his desire to clarify *all* the episodes of Christ’s life, wanted to know ‘exactly’ how Judas Iscariot’s treason took place? What if he studied all documents of the time and looked objectively at things, on both sides? What if he arrived at the conclusion that Judas, denouncing Christ, did it out of love for Him, to save Him from crucifixion, hoping that he would save Him? So, if this Christian were stubborn about ‘truth’ and said to the whole

world, particularly to the Church, that Judas was not really a traitor, what would you say then?”

“You would never convince me that this contemporary man does not fight heroically, and delightfully from a literary perspective, for freedom. And even for all people’s freedom, even yours, if you want to know!”

“I believe this and I am, in a way, obligated to him for this, but it may be that he fights more for freedoms, plural, for his, my, and his people’s freedoms, rather than for freedom.”

“What is this?” my cousin says, exasperated.

“There are many freedoms,” I answer, “and I am surprised that, in a country like Norway, where you have all freedoms, you do not have the freedom to drink alcohol, for example. There are many freedoms, but not all are significant. In any case, I sense that here, in our country, we have a deeper notion of freedom, that of *neatârnaire* (*indépendance*).^{*} This means two things at the same time: first, to not depend on another, and second, to not depend purely and simply (*not to be pendent*[†]), to not be too attached to the immediate things, to not be fixed into an idea, to have wings, so ‘to see God.’”

“Listen, dear, I’ll lose the train with your talking.”

My cousin was about to leave for a vacation. Even if he was retired, he had received a “ticket for the baths” from someone who was still employed,[‡] and he was to leave that day, taking advantage of favorable conditions to take a treatment.

The luggage for three weeks is already prepared, so in fifteen minutes we leave together for Gara de Nord,[§] taking a trolleybus. On the way, I relate to him what I had read in Arthur C.

* “Independence” in English. I kept the Romanian term and the French translation in the text (they both appear in the original). In Romanian, there is also the word *independentă*, but the literal translation *neatârnaire* has some flavor to it.

† In English in the original.

‡ During Communism, people could receive tickets from work to various treatment places in the country.

§ North Station, main train station in Bucharest.

Clarke's book, *Profiles of the Future*.^{*} The author writes about how travel will be done in the future, focusing on vehicles on "air cushions." The wheel will be done for, he says, once what he calls in English *Ground Effect Machines* will come into being. People will create vehicles that will compete with the automobile as well as with the plane. Roads and highways, which occupy so much space and for which so much money was spent, will be obsolete, the author says. The new vehicles will be very useful, he adds, especially for the continents that do not have a good network of roads. In any case, it is about a real "road emancipation." We will travel smoothly on earth and on sea, above the waves. The harbors and the channels, such as Suez and Panama, will be outdated. The delightful thing will be, the author says, that there will be a perfect *continuity* between ground travel and water travel...

Our trolleybus stops abruptly, with a small explosion. It broke. We must wait for another, at the next station. Of course, the second trolleybus is overcrowded. Cramped among travelers, holding one suitcase (I hold another one in my hands), my cousin asks me:

"How is it going with traveling on air cushions?"

I take him to the platform. When he gets into the train, my cousin tells me:

"When I come back, I want to find you with new teeth!"

I smile and I leave, walking slowly on the platform of the station. On the other platform, which was for arrivals, not departures, I see an electrical engine, a new type, at least for me. I remember all of a sudden that, in high school, I had a colleague who liked to be here, at Gara de Nord, the main station of the city, to see the engines which were very varied back then. He liked them just like someone else would like racing horses. I remember that there were some engines called Pacific, with great wheels and fine spokes, like the legs of a beautiful girl. On the lateral plaque of the engine, it was written, "126 km/h maximum speed." I always wondered why 126 and not 125.

* In English in the original.

Someone grabs me by the shoulders and shouts, “Professor!” I turn around: it was Alec. A wave of joy builds within me. We hug, but I do not realize whether he has tears in his eyes, too.

XVIII

“How are you, professor?” Alec asks me warmly.

“Well, I got out, I live, I am content.”

“I was sure of it,” he responds ironically but with love at the same time.

We continue on the platform, arm in arm, and I ask him [what he’s doing there].*

“I am going for an ‘exchange experience,’ as they say here. I came out of *the prison*† probably before you, I was reaccepted at the university, I graduated from the department of architecture, and now I am sent to East Germany for an exchange with the specialists in the field.”

“Do you remember what you told me the day they told you that you would be accused of treason[?]<‡ You claimed that, after liberation, you would go into a mountain village to find a girl with two cows.”

“That’s what I actually did at the beginning,” Alec attempts to tell me. “I found the girl, but...”

“I know,” I say finishing his thought, “you did not find the combination girl plus two cows. The latter are at the collective farms.§ In Switzerland you may still find them.”

Alec does not smile. He becomes serious all of a sudden. He holds me strongly by my arm and whispers:

* Addition of the Romanian editor.

† In English in the original.

‡ Addition of the Romanian editor.

§ The kolkhoz.

"I'm telling this only to you. I haven't even told it to my parents. I want to get to the other side,* and I will stay there for good. I cannot live here."

"But I understand they allowed you to finish your studies. You probably have a job and will buy a car one day."

"Professor, understand that I cannot. There is nothing from my past for which I reproach them, not even the condemnation, but there is something unbreathable here, don't you feel it? I want to travel, to be free, to have the life I like. I don't think I will call for my parents. They are too attached to the country and to their friends."

He turns toward me:

"I'll get you out too! Yes, I'll get you out, I'll buy you from them. Don't you wish to? I need an older friend. I will keep you as a parent. You don't refuse me, do you?"

He takes me by hands without waiting for an answer, he hugs me, and then he turns and sees that people have begun getting into the train. He then drags me to his train car, shakes my hands one more time, and gets up into the train. He then appears through the opening of a window.

"Good. But tell me, did you do the third gymnastics exercise?" he asks me, thus showing me that he also remembers all of the situations from the cell.

I nod my head, smiling at the memory of the exercise that had provoked the intestinal volvulus.

"It was good, wasn't it?" he insists.

I hesitate whether to answer him, but the train begins to move at that moment, and so I shout sincerely, from the bottom of my heart: "Very good! Very good!"

The emotion rooted me into the platform of the station for some time, even after the train had been swallowed into nothingness, or in another galaxy, holding something dear to me heart. Why did I love Alec? Perhaps because he had the strength to not accept anything of what I was telling him — and still cred-

* Alec means West Germany, which equaled the free world.

it me. I had felt from the beginning, in the cell, that he needed me and, at the same time, he had no use for my advice.

There is something without parallel in the affection of such a young man who challenges you: it is a call to be better and deeper than you are. He looks at you over his shoulder, but you're not offended,* for he still looks to you. In turn, you search for something in him besides what he shows you. After all, these young people are those who truly enrich the world, because they do not leave it into the satisfied wisdom of late years, nor into the satisfied indifference of the early years.

I needed him, just as he needed me. Of course, I could replace him; but could he also replace me? In fact, he did not even know my address and he assumed me into his life only symbolically, on a platform at a train station. I had to look for him in other versions, since I loved this free and daring young man,† this brother Alexander who, precisely because he provokes you, also bows before what *you should* be and seems to ask you to pray for him.

"Don't you see that it is unbreathable?" he had told me. The atmosphere here began to seem unbreathable to me as well, but not so much because the regime was suffocating our spirits, but rather because these people around me allowed themselves to be suffocated. A society that has been oppressed for more than twenty years should be able to come out of the fear of oppression, just as the people in prisons had liberated themselves of fear. But it bored me to see that people continued to be fearful.

I wonder what Ernest is doing, that joyful economist with whom I spent three days, back to back, in "isolation." I realize now, after I saw Alec for a moment, that I can feel well only with those who had obtained that detachment brought about by the

* The Romanian here could mean, "he does not offend you" or "you're not offended." I chose the second version.

† The relationship between a mentor and a disciple often appears in Noica's work. One of the most remarkable relationships between a master and a disciple in the Romanian culture is known as the School from Paltinis. See Gabriel Liiceanu, *The Paltinis Diary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

years of detention. Something irresistible sends me from the station straight to looking for Ernest.

He had told me that he had a job at the City Hall and that he was certain he would be retaken there. I go toward the City Hall without any hope. Of course, at the gate, nobody knows anything about comrade Ernest. I ask to be taken to the economic department. One clerk knows nothing about him, but another one says, “Comrade director Ernest? He is in a different department, CDPCC.”

What strange names, I tell myself.

I notice the use of “director.” So, not only was he taken back, but also appointed a director. He may have accepted to be “reeducated” and may have made concessions. I would regret it, for he was such an independent spirit. Anyway, I must look him up, and I go to the address of the mentioned department. I find out that Ernest is “in the field,” and I leave my name for him with the note, “the one to whom you once communicated your theory of laughter.” I would come back the next day.

“But my dear,” Ernest tells me when he receives me the next day, giving me a hug in his directorial office, “there was no need to specify who you are. I knew it well, not so much in isolation — because I remember that I was the one who spoke more — but rather from the others. Just imagine, after a while, I happened to be taken in the cell where you had been.”

“What,” I exclaim, “with engineer Goldstein? And with the theologian?”

“Yes,” he answers. “And with Matei, with the doctor, with...”

“I wonder how the doctor is doing. He was embittered against all people and all things.”

“But he’s here, in my department, I brought him here as ‘anthropologist.’”

“Unbelievable!” I exclaim. “I must see him. But what do you do? How could you become a director?”

“Do you have any suspicions about me?” Ernest asks jokingly. “Well, I’ll tell you...”

He pushes a button and tells his secretary who was coming in, "I'm not here for anyone for an hour. I have to make a report with the professor for the Government's Department of Health."

And then he begins:

"I came out early. You know, I had no real guilt, nor a political past. However, they did not take me back to the Economic Department, where I used to work, because they had 'secrets' and, anyway, I had been a 'hostile element.' At the beginning, they assigned me as a simple administrator at the medical service of the City Hall. There, I found something that attracted me: a hygienist doctor had been recently assigned to take care of the city's pollution problems. He did not know where to begin, and so I gave him a few ideas. I told him he had to begin from odors. Since I have sharp senses, I offered my help, and we became friends. Anytime I smelled a pestilential odor, we both got into a City Hall car and went in the direction of the odor."

"How so, against the odor?" I ask, confused and amused.

"Yes, against it, to find out from which factory it came or which dump site at the outskirts of the city emanated it."

"And could you find it?"

"Most of the time, we could not. But why is that important? I liked to look for the not-found, just as I told you 'there' that I liked to go nowhere by train."

"It is admirable," I say enthusiastically. "Going against the odor! It is like in the ancient legends, when they went to the chambers of the wind and the cave of Aeolus, or like in the story where the prince goes against the dragon. I think it is splendid to find in the concrete, in a contemporary urban agglomeration, the myths of man."

"Isn't it so?" Ernest says, becoming passionate. "Now, when you tell me this, I realize why I liked it. Our civilization is not as deprived of poetry as it seems. With little imagination, our life would look differently. Today's writers continue to tell us about the great voids of humans, or about abstraction and nothingness. But I see all around us a plethora of things or of concrete situations. After all, just as we are surrounded by odors, we are also surrounded by electrical fluids, ideologies, traditions, or

futurological anticipations. I sense that we do not live among inert things — and I did not like to find simple things, industrial units from where the odors started, or dump sites. I realized that the odors and the air pollution are made, I don't know how, out of nothing determinate, or out of countless small causes which, accumulated, make the air be pestilential. But, of course, when I come back from the 'mission,' I gave the report that we found the cause of pollution or that we were about to detect it.

"Then," he continues, "I got the idea to make a report, showing the importance and the complexity of the problem. Basing it on the data accumulated in my car expeditions, I added the points of infection and the possible *trajectories* to a map of the city with, and so the possible fronts of pollution (as one speaks of 'wave fronts'). My map made an impression, especially because the menacing arrows were colored in red. In the report, I asked that they hire meteorologists who would study air currents in the atmosphere of the capital in order to take measures for the present state, but also to determine where to place future industries.

"To be brief, the leadership became convinced that the problem was extremely serious — especially because it was also unclear — and I was assigned to recruit qualified personnel to begin the investigation. Later, I showed that there was need for other specialists as well — geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists — and when I made a new report, which I began with long quotes from the early writings of Engels about the pollution of Manchester around 1840, due to the establishment of the first textile factories, all were convinced of the Marxist character of the problem. The CDPCC was created, and I was named director."

"I actually wanted to ask you: what is this, CDPCC?"

"It is the Center for the Detection of Pollution and the Control of its Causes."

"Impressive," I say. "And do you believe in its efficacy?"

"My dear," Ernest answers, "I have no choice, I must believe. I set in motion so many people — around twenty collaborators, plus the external ones, plus the relationships with diverse re-

search institutes — and I awoke so many hopes in the leaders that I have to take things seriously. You know, after all, if it is taken seriously by others, even a joke becomes serious. Why wouldn't we find something if we look for it like this?"

"But there are devices to detect pollution, I suppose, aren't there?"

"Of course there are," Ernest responds promptly, knowing the lesson well. "For the air pollutants, you use 'chromatography in gaseous stage'; for the diverse pollutants, you use an electronic detector, the 'mass spectroscop'; to detect substances in general, based on fluorescence, the so-called 'spectrofluorimeter' was invented, which does spectrofluorescent analyses."

"That's enough," I say, having a beginning of dizziness, faced with this technical ecstasy.

"You can also use scintigraphy," Ernest continues mercilessly, "for which some devices with radioactive isotopes were invented. They indicate the number of alpha, beta, and gamma pulsations on the second, respectively the quantity of radioactivity..."

I take out a soft groan and I rush to stop him, asking:

"But have you bought all of these machines and devices?"

"No," Ernest replies, "this is where I had the brilliant inspiration. If we bought them, these and others that I won't mention to spare you, it would have meant cutting my own carcass: our department would have been cut down to two–three technicians, and I would not have counted anymore. I proceeded differently. At a meeting with my superiors, I enumerated all of these technical means of detecting pollution, but I added: they impose great expenses, ultra-specialized people, which means other expenses, and they lead to incomplete or inconclusive results. Every city, I added, has specific conditions: certain currants, a special regime of rains, a proper ecological system, etc., etc. The devices can indicate no more than the actual situation of pollution, but a city in development requires information about its atmospheric, urban, economic, and human environment. If it could be said that there are no diseases, but rather sick people, I added during the meeting, that much more it must be said that there are no pollutions, but polluted things. Just like every

human breaks his shoe in a certain way, a city breaks its air in a specific way. We should not spend large sums to make general investigations, but rather to get the *complete* picture of the situation of our patient, which would allow us to make him well and also to prescribe him the regime for his future life.

"I was congratulated," Ernest continues, "for the savings I so obtained and they also gave me, of course, the credits to put together the scientific group which, from meteorologists to psychologists, would study the special conditions here."

"Don't you think it would be more expensive?" I ask.

"At the end, yes, but this is how they like it, to do things indirectly, not directly. After all, I also like it this way, not because I have a good position, but rather because I do something out of the ordinary and which gives me, I don't hide it from you, some power over people. I told you 'there' that I liked to make people laugh. I evolved: now I like to make them be afraid. In this case, I bring upon them *possible* dangers. You should see them come timidly to consult me: should we plant a factory? Should we make a residential neighborhood?"

"Just like an ancient soothsayer, who told the army commander whether to begin the battle or not, I keep some squareheads and their decisions in suspension. In this world, the one who counts is the one who knows or seems to know what others ignore. I would never exchange this life here for the one from the 'free' world. This is not because imposture would not be possible there — in fact, I don't feel at all that I'm an impostor; I'm telling you again: I may accomplish something. But I say this because there, with their system of measuring everything in terms of 'advantageousness,' there is no longer place for a sweet irresponsibility, like here. I am grateful to these regimes for making gratuity possible for man."

"I understand what you're saying. The game counts, not the problem. When I listened to you speaking, I was thinking about the story with the French bishop who, when he was asked whether God exists, replied, He exists since I am a bishop."

"I see you got it," Ernest says. "And since you got into the problem, I will ask you to tell me once what philosophy is. I

know that you also are involved in very vague things. We may hire you here.”

[1965]



Noica, Constantin

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