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-

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* “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?”

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* 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.