Pray for Brother Alexander

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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 some-
thing 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, be-
cause 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 re-
cent 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.