Pray for Brother Alexander

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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!