VIII

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Pray for Brother Alexander.

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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 graved 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. Pythagorianism 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 were 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 deploiring, 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.

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