“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 incom-
patibility, 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 ter-
ribly 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 par-
ticipate for the moment, at least as a sports fan, in the festival
that we all experience now. You know that I work with philoso-
phy. Well, I have never believed that one can think and spec-
ulate more fantastically than philosophy has done. But I now
see—and not only in pure science and in technology—that
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 syn-
thesis you compose something. Do you know what I find out
from the physicists now? That there are particles which decom-
pose in sub-particles out of which they have never been com-
posed! 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 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-

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* “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 neatârnare (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 trolley-bus. On the way, I relate to him what I had read in Arthur C.

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* “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 neatârnare 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.