XVIII

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Noica, Constantin and Octavian Gabor.
Pray for Brother Alexander.

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“How are you, professor?” Alec asks me warmly.

“Well, I got out, I live, I am content.”

“I was sure of it,” he responds ironically but with love at the same time.

We continue on the platform, arm in arm, and I ask him [what he’s doing there].

“I am going for an ‘exchange experience,’ as they say here. I came out of the prison† probably before you, I was reaccepted at the university, I graduated from the department of architecture, and now I am sent to East Germany for an exchange with the specialists in the field.”

“Do you remember what you told me the day they told you that you would be accused of treason[?]‡ You claimed that, after liberation, you would go into a mountain village to find a girl with two cows.”

“That’s what I actually did at the beginning,” Alec attempts to tell me. “I found the girl, but…”

“I know,” I say finishing his thought, “you did not find the combination girl plus two cows. The latter are at the collective farms.§ In Switzerland you may still find them.”

Alec does not smile. He becomes serious all of a sudden. He holds me strongly by my arm and whispers:

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* Addition of the Romanian editor.
† In English in the original.
‡ Addition of the Romanian editor.
§ The kolkhoz.
“I’m telling this only to you. I haven’t even told it to my parents. I want to get to the other side, and I will stay there for good. I cannot live here.”

“But I understand they allowed you to finish your studies. You probably have a job and will buy a car one day.”

“Professor, understand that I cannot. There is nothing from my past for which I reproach them, not even the condemnation, but there is something unbreathable here, don’t you feel it? I want to travel, to be free, to have the life I like. I don’t think I will call for my parents. They are too attached to the country and to their friends.”

He turns toward me:

“I’ll get you out too! Yes, I’ll get you out, I’ll buy you from them. Don’t you wish to? I need an older friend. I will keep you as a parent. You don’t refuse me, do you?”

He takes me by hands without waiting for an answer, he hugs me, and then he turns and sees that people have begun getting into the train. He then drags me to his train car, shakes my hands one more time, and gets up into the train. He then appears through the opening of a window.

“Good. But tell me, did you do the third gymnastics exercise?” he asks me, thus showing me that he also remembers all of the situations from the cell.

I nod my head, smiling at the memory of the exercise that had provoked the intestinal volvulus.

“It was good, wasn’t it?” he insists.

I hesitate whether to answer him, but the train begins to move at that moment, and so I shout sincerely, from the bottom of my heart: “Very good! Very good!”

The emotion rooted me into the platform of the station for some time, even after the train had been swallowed into nothingness, or in another galaxy, holding something dear to me heart. Why did I love Alec? Perhaps because he had the strength to not accept anything of what I was telling him — and still cred-

* Alec means West Germany, which equaled the free world.
it me. I had felt from the beginning, in the cell, that he needed me and, at the same time, he had no use for my advice.

There is something without parallel in the affection of such a young man who challenges you: it is a call to be better and deeper than you are. He looks at you over his shoulder, but you’re not offended,* for he still looks to you. In turn, you search for something in him besides what he shows you. After all, these young people are those who truly enrich the world, because they do not leave it into the satisfied wisdom of late years, nor into the satisfied indifference of the early years.

I needed him, just as he needed me. Of course, I could replace him; but could he also replace me? In fact, he did not even know my address and he assumed me into his life only symbolically, on a platform at a train station. I had to look for him in other versions, since I loved this free and daring young man,† this brother Alexander who, precisely because he provokes you, also bows before what you should be and seems to ask you to pray for him.

“Don’t you see that it is unbreathable?” he had told me. The atmosphere here began to seem unbreathable to me as well, but not so much because the regime was suffocating our spirits, but rather because these people around me allowed themselves to be suffocated. A society that has been oppressed for more than twenty years should be able to come out of the fear of oppression, just as the people in prisons had liberated themselves of fear. But it bored me to see that people continued to be fearful.

I wonder what Ernest is doing, that joyful economist with whom I spent three days, back to back, in “isolation.” I realize now, after I saw Alec for a moment, that I can feel well only with those who had obtained that detachment brought about by the

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* The Romanian here could mean, “he does not offend you” or “you’re not offended.” I chose the second version.
† The relationship between a mentor and a disciple often appears in Noica’s work. One of the most remarkable relationships between a master and a disciple in the Romanian culture is known as the School from Paltinis. See Gabriel Liiceanu, The Paltinis Diary (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).
years of detention. Something irresistible sends me from the station straight to looking for Ernest.

He had told me that he had a job at the City Hall and that he was certain he would be retaken there. I go toward the City Hall without any hope. Of course, at the gate, nobody knows anything about comrade Ernest. I ask to be taken to the economic department. One clerk knows nothing about him, but another one says, “Comrade director Ernest? He is in a different department, CDPCC.”

What strange names, I tell myself.

I notice the use of “director.” So, not only was he taken back, but also appointed a director. He may have accepted to be “reeducated” and may have made concessions. I would regret it, for he was such an independent spirit. Anyway, I must look him up, and I go to the address of the mentioned department. I find out that Ernest is “in the field,” and I leave my name for him with the note, “the one to whom you once communicated your theory of laughter.” I would come back the next day.

“But my dear,” Ernest tells me when he receives me the next day, giving me a hug in his directorial office, “there was no need to specify who you are. I knew it well, not so much in isolation — because I remember that I was the one who spoke more — but rather from the others. Just imagine, after a while, I happened to be taken in the cell where you had been.”

“What,” I exclaim, “with engineer Goldstein? And with the theologian?”

“Yes,” he answers. “And with Matei, with the doctor, with…”

“I wonder how the doctor is doing. He was embittered against all people and all things.”

“But he’s here, in my department, I brought him here as ‘anthropologist.’”

“Unbelievable!” I exclaim. “I must see him. But what do you do? How could you become a director?”

“Do you have any suspicions about me?” Ernest asks jokingly. “Well, I’ll tell you…”
He pushes a button and tells his secretary who was coming in, “I’m not here for anyone for an hour. I have to make a report with the professor for the Government’s Department of Health.”

And then he begins:

“I came out early. You know, I had no real guilt, nor a political past. However, they did not take me back to the Economic Department, where I used to work, because they had ‘secrets’ and, anyway, I had been a ‘hostile element.’ At the beginning, they assigned me as a simple administrator at the medical service of the City Hall. There, I found something that attracted me: a hygienist doctor had been recently assigned to take care of the city’s pollution problems. He did not know where to begin, and so I gave him a few ideas. I told him he had to begin from odors. Since I have sharp senses, I offered my help, and we became friends. Anytime I smelled a pestilential odor, we both got into a City Hall car and went in the direction of the odor.”

“How so, against the odor?” I ask, confused and amused.

“Yes, against it, to find out from which factory it came or which dump site at the outskirts of the city emanated it.”

“And could you find it?”

“Most of the time, we could not. But why is that important? I liked to look for the not-found, just as I told you ‘there’ that I liked to go nowhere by train.”

“It is admirable,” I say enthusiastically. “Going against the odor! It is like in the ancient legends, when they went to the chambers of the wind and the cave of Aeolus, or like in the story where the prince goes against the dragon. I think it is splendid to find in the concrete, in a contemporary urban agglomeration, the myths of man.”

“Isn’t it so?” Ernest says, becoming passionate. “Now, when you tell me this, I realize why I liked it. Our civilization is not as deprived of poetry as it seems. With little imagination, our life would look differently. Today’s writers continue to tell us about the great voids of humans, or about abstraction and nothingness. But I see all around us a plethora of things or of concrete situations. After all, just as we are surrounded by odors, we are also surrounded by electrical fluids, ideologies, traditions, or
futurological anticipations. I sense that we do not live among inert things — and I did not like to find simple things, industrial units from where the odors started, or dump sites. I realized that the odors and the air pollution are made, I don’t know how, out of nothing determinate, or out of countless small causes which, accumulated, make the air be pestilent. But, of course, when I come back from the ‘mission,’ I gave the report that we found the cause of pollution or that we were about to detect it.

“Then,” he continues, “I got the idea to make a report, showing the importance and the complexity of the problem. Basing it on the data accumulated in my car expeditions, I added the points of infection and the possible trajectories to a map of the city with, and so the possible fronts of pollution (as one speaks of ‘wave fronts’). My map made an impression, especially because the menacing arrows were colored in red. In the report, I asked that they hire meteorologists who would study air currents in the atmosphere of the capital in order to take measures for the present state, but also to determine where to place future industries.

“To be brief, the leadership became convinced that the problem was extremely serious — especially because it was also unclear — and I was assigned to recruit qualified personnel to begin the investigation. Later, I showed that there was need for other specialists as well — geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists — and when I made a new report, which I began with long quotes from the early writings of Engels about the pollution of Manchester around 1840, due to the establishment of the first textile factories, all were convinced of the Marxist character of the problem. The CDPCC was created, and I was named director.”

“I actually wanted to ask you: what is this, CDPCC?”

“It is the Center for the Detection of Pollution and the Control of its Causes.”

“Impressive,” I say. “And do you believe in its efficacy?”

“My dear,” Ernest answers, “I have no choice, I must believe. I set in motion so many people — around twenty collaborators, plus the external ones, plus the relationships with diverse re-
search institutes — and I awoke so many hopes in the leaders that I have to take things seriously. You know, after all, if it is taken seriously by others, even a joke becomes serious. Why wouldn’t we find something if we look for it like this?”

“But there are devices to detect pollution, I suppose, aren’t there?”

“Of course there are,” Ernest responds promptly, knowing the lesson well. “For the air pollutants, you use ‘chromatography in gaseous stage’; for the diverse pollutants, you use an electronic detector, the ‘mass spectroscope’; to detect substances in general, based on fluorescence, the so-called ‘spectrofluorimeter’ was invented, which does spectrofluorescent analyses.”

“That’s enough,” I say, having a beginning of dizziness, faced with this technical ecstasy.

“You can also use scintigraphy,” Ernest continues mercilessly, “for which some devices with radioactive isotopes were invented. They indicate the number of alpha, beta, and gamma pulsations on the second, respectively the quantity of radioactivity…”

I take out a soft groan and I rush to stop him, asking:

“But have you bought all of these machines and devices?”

“No,” Ernest replies, “this is where I had the brilliant inspiration. If we bought them, these and others that I won’t mention to spare you, it would have meant cutting my own carcass: our department would have been cut down to two–three technicians, and I would not have counted anymore. I proceeded differently. At a meeting with my superiors, I enumerated all of these technical means of detecting pollution, but I added: they impose great expenses, ultra-specialized people, which means other expenses, and they lead to incomplete or inconclusive results. Every city, I added, has specific conditions: certain currants, a special regime of rains, a proper ecological system, etc., etc. The devices can indicate no more than the actual situation of pollution, but a city in development requires information about its atmospheric, urban, economic, and human environment. If it could be said that there are no diseases, but rather sick people, I added during the meeting, that much more it must be said that there are no pollutions, but polluted things. Just like every
human breaks his shoe in a certain way, a city breaks its air in a specific way. We should not spend large sums to make general investigations, but rather to get the complete picture of the situation of our patient, which would allow us to make him well and also to prescribe him the regime for his future life.

“I was congratulated,” Ernest continues, “for the savings I so obtained and they also gave me, of course, the credits to put together the scientific group which, from meteorologists to psychologists, would study the special conditions here.”

“Don’t you think it would be more expensive?” I ask.

“At the end, yes, but this is how they like it, to do things indirectly, not directly. After all, I also like it this way, not because I have a good position, but rather because I do something out of the ordinary and which gives me, I don’t hide it from you, some power over people. I told you ‘there’ that I liked to make people laugh. I evolved: now I like to make them be afraid. In this case, I bring upon them possible dangers. You should see them come timidly to consult me: should we plant a factory? Should we make a residential neighborhood?

“Just like an ancient soothsayer, who told the army commander whether to begin the battle or not, I keep some square-heads and their decisions in suspension. In this world, the one who counts is the one who knows or seems to know what others ignore. I would never exchange this life here for the one from the ‘free’ world. This is not because imposture would not be possible there — in fact, I don’t feel at all that I’m an impostor; I’m telling you again: I may accomplish something. But I say this because there, with their system of measuring everything in terms of ‘advantageousness,’ there is no longer place for a sweet irresponsibility, like here. I am grateful to these regimes for making gratuity possible for man.”

“I understand what you’re saying. The game counts, not the problem. When I listened to you speaking, I was thinking about the story with the French bishop who, when he was asked whether God exists, replied, He exists since I am a bishop.”

“I see you got it,” Ernest says. “And since you got into the problem, I will ask you to tell me once what philosophy is. I
know that you also are involved in very vague things. We may hire you here.”
[1965]
Noica, Constantin

*Pray for Brother Alexander*

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