

Octavian Gabor. Book Review. Noica, Constantin. *Pray for Brother Alexander*. Translated by Octavian Gabor. Punctum Books, 2018, 150p.

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the western world received more and more testimonies about the persecutions the communist regimes inflicted on their own citizens whenever people dared to think freely. Constantin Noica's *Pray for Brother Alexander*, which recently came out at Punctum Books, adds to this prison literature. The volume is a meditation of the highest caliber on the notions of freedom, responsibility, and, perhaps most of all, forgiveness in the framework of an absurd world. *Pray for Brother Alexander*, the philosopher's diary in prison, recounts sessions of torture, even if it gives no details of the horrors, days of solitary confinement, or discussions with scholars from different disciplines, since communist prisons were filled in those days with the leaders of their respective fields.

Constantin Noica (1909 – 1987) is one of the most important Romanian philosophers of the 20th century. After the fall of communism, his work came to be known to the English-speaking world as an original philosophy that finds its inspiration in Heideggerian approaches to language. *Pray for Brother Alexander* is the third volume translated in English, after *Becoming within Being* (Marquette University Press, 2009) and *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit* (University of Plymouth Press, 2009), both delivered into English by Alistair Ian Blyth.

Noica's life may be described as *the autobiography of an idea*. In fact, during the last years of his life, he planned on writing a book with this name, which would "tell the gradual embodiment of his own thought during a life lived... 'within an idea, without holding back.'"¹ The plan to write this book did not come to fruition; perhaps it was already fulfilled, as Noica may have said, in the sense that his entire life seems to have been absorbed *întru*² an idea. For him, philosophizing is not a profession, but something without which he could not be himself.

Noica published his first book, *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple (Mathesis or the Simple joys)* when he was 25. Before WWII, he published three more books, in which one can see his preoccupation with the history of philosophy. This approach culminated in the *Schita pentru istoria lui Cum e cu putinta ceva nou* (1940), his doctorate dissertation, in which he rebuilds the history of philosophy from a fresh perspective.

The changes brought by the end of the war in his native Romania affected the life of Constantin Noica as well. Considered an "anti-revolutionary" thinker (the files of his trial reveal that his writings on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* are considered anti-revolutionary!³), Noica had a forced residence in Câmpulung-Muscel between 1949 and 1958. In 1958, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

In 1964, he came out of prison after a general amnesty, and he returned to his work in philosophy. He published several works and, concomitantly, he brought around him a group of young scholars who discovered in his personality the possibility of doing philosophy in a free world. He encouraged them to study philosophy by appropriating first its tools, classical languages and German, and involved them in large projects of translation or publishing original

¹ Thomas Kleininger et al. "Nota introductivă," in *Jurnal de idei*, Constantin Noica (București: Humanitas, 1991), 5.

² The Romanian preposition "întru" has a special meaning for Noica, and so I left it in the original. In his *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, Noica says this about "întru": it "came to express being as if from within (*dinauntru*), suggesting that *to be* means "to be *întru* something," so to be in and not fully in something, to rest but also to aspire, to close but also to open." Constantin Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* (București: Humanitas, 1996), 5.

³ See *Prigoana: Documente ale procesului C. Noica, C. Pillat, S. Lazarescu, A. Acterian, Vl. Streinu, Al. Paleologu, N. Steinhardt, T. Enescu, S. Al-George, Al. O. Teodoreanu și alții*, București: Vremea, 2010.

works. A large part of his contribution to the Romanian culture is his ability to become a beacon for the young generation of philosophers,⁴ who, after being fed with Marx and Lenin, could discover in Noica the freshness of Platonic or Kantian ideas.

He spent the last 12 years of his life in Paltinis, a mountain town where he separated himself from the tumultuousness of the world to study and write philosophy. His closest disciples, among whom Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Plesu, and Sorin Vieru are the most notable, visited him often. He continued to be followed by the Securitate, the secret police of the communist regime, until the end of his life, 1987.

In *Pray for Brother Alexander*, Noica takes his reader on a journey through the empire of the absurd. It is a world where people whose only virtue is to follow blindly the commandments of the communist party decide the fate of others. It is a world in which human dignity disappears. Is it possible in such a world to continue to perceive the humanity of your own persecutor? Noica does not give an answer. In fact, his book resembles a Platonic dialogue because it allows readers to experience the answer by working through the text. Noica achieves this by facing his audience with the same absurdity that he was faced.

I recount here only one such irrational moment. Noica was around 50 years old, sharing the cell with a young man, Alec, an athlete, who was part of the national volleyball team. While Alec was in East Berlin for a tournament, a friend told him to go West Berlin. He didn't like it, so he came back. In the beginning, he was received well by authorities, but he finally ended up in prison, and the young man could not make sense of it. He did not desert to the West, but he came back. Why would he be imprisoned because of that? "It is of no importance,"⁵ Noica says. The conversation ends between them because Noica is taken to interrogations. He returns to the cell obviously beaten. The young man asks him, "They have beaten you, haven't they?" Noica confirms, and the young man says, "But it is of no importance, I know." "That's what I wanted to say: they beat me without a reason."⁶

The idea of being beaten without reason is scary. It goes against any notion of justice we may have, but it also places you at the mercy of forces over which you have no control, and this must produce fear. Indeed, the young man in the cell gets worried—perhaps his pride of a sportsman, as Noica suggests, is offended by the idea of being hit without being able to react. It may also be a natural reaction when faced with the irrationality of beings who have power over you. Noica tries to clarify the situation and he says, "I was beaten because I did not want to take a cigarette."⁷

Of course, there is nothing logical about this either, and the young man responds naturally, "are you mocking me?" In fact, Noica was not mocking him. The interrogators wanted to know to whom he gave a book he received from the West—Emil Cioran's *Histoire et Utopie* (*History and Utopia*). Believing that if he gives them "a cloud of names,"⁸ as he says, he would confuse them, he writes down on paper 80-100 names. Noica then realizes his mistake: he assumed rationality from the part of his interrogators. Who would pay attention to so many names of people who have seen a book, he asked? The communists, apparently, would, and his interrogator writes down carefully all the names he had mentioned. And then he offers Noica a

⁴ See Octavian Gabor, "Noica's Becoming within Being and Meno's Paradox," in *A Handbook to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe*, ed. Zara Martirosova Torlone, Dana LaCourse Munteanu, and Dorota Dutsch (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 300-311.

⁵ Constantin Noica, *Pray for Brother Alexander* (Punctum Books, 2018), 23.

⁶ *Idem*, 24.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

cigarette. Perhaps out of self-disappointment, perhaps because he wanted to show to himself and to the investigator that he is not completely defeated and that he is not someone who just gives up his friends because of pressure, he refuses the cigarette.

“Take it or I dislocate your jaw,”⁹ the officer yells at him. Noica refuses, and the blow comes into his jaw. To the young man’s surprise, this is when Noica took the cigarette. “But I would have never done this... After he hit me? Never...”¹⁰

The young man does not accept giving in when faced with lack of rationality. Any kind of craziness in the world must be rejected, he seems to believe, because it is just subhuman to accept it—one would give up one’s own moral dignity. This attitude is shared by many at the beginning of their incarceration. They keep themselves proud before their accusers. They find in this whatever remained of their human dignity. However, with time, many came to believe that this attitude is childish, stemming from innocence. We may liken this difference to the one between the attitudes young and older people have toward morality. For the young, things are often black and white. The old see this as resulting from their innocence: when you are young, untried by the sufferings of life, and unconnected with people for whom you feel responsible, you afford to be an idealist. Slowly, you start asking yourself whether your actions make sense in a world in which the suffering of those close to you makes no sense.

Coming back to Alec, the young man in the cell, he changes his tone, perhaps wanting to avoid offending Noica: “You know why you took the cigarette? Because you felt like smoking.”¹¹

And Noica says, “My young sportsman is not stupid at all. In a way, he was right. The slaps I god had brought me to reality: nothing made any sense in that moment. I could smoke a cigarette.¹²” Nothing has any importance in an absurd story. As Samuel Beckett may say, there is no point to wait for Godot. Within an absurd story, the question whether it is rational or not to oppose communism does no longer make sense. Should one then be pragmatic and follow one’s own interest, giving up one’s ideals? If we answer this way, we reject the line of dissidents who, often sacrificing their lives, opposed the regime. If we go the other way, we claim that we somehow can fix the world, and that there is an importance in refusing an absurd world. Giving up fight, we lose, because we become like “them.” Picking up the fight, we may also lose, because we think we can impose our idea of the good over the other. We also think of ourselves as being superior to them. But how can we be superior to absurdity? Is it possible to have degree of comparison about it, as if we said, “more absurd” or “less absurd”?

Noica’s book suggests that this attitude may be absurd itself. Perhaps the answer is already comprised in the title: forgive brother Alexander, the one who, while torturing you, remains, in a way, your brother.

⁹ *Idem*, 25.

¹⁰ *Idem*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.