

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS POST. REVISITING THE TRAUMA OF COMMUNISM IN STYLE¹

Keywords: *national identity construction, discourse types, master tropes, Pray for Brother Alexandru, Constantin Noica, memoirs of communist imprisonment, irony, paradox, communism as colonial trauma, postcommunism and postcolonialism.*

Abstract: *This article is part of a larger effort to explain national identity construction as any of four available discourse types informed by as many master tropes. I am looking at Pray for Brother Alexandru, Constantin Noica's memoirs of communist imprisonment in order to show that rhetorical irony and logical/philosophical paradox are the tropological mechanism of coping with the colonial trauma of both Western and Soviet modernization. My discourse-oriented approach (a subjective variant of constructivist theories of nationalism) rests on the premise that (post)communism has been for the Soviet republics and satellite states a "softer" and more complicated form of colonization than that of Third World countries. Noica's use of paradox is complicated by the internal dialogism of his narrative in such a way that it can be made to voice both a radical opposition to communism, capitalism, modern civilization and all received opinion, and also a philosophical contradiction or irony which he uses in order to convert defeat into victory and passivity into action, turning colonial history's victims into victors. Paradox is, therefore, the rhetorical tactic of withstanding the effects of cultural colonization by total acquiescence, of adopting the vocabulary and stance of the colonial oppressor only to undermine and alter its very essence.*

This presentation is part of a larger effort to explain national identity as one of several available types of discourse formatted by means of a few tropological and ideological templates – very much like Hayden White has explained nineteenth-century historiographic discourse in *Metahistory*. This critical arsenal helps me identify the post-traumatic modalities in which literary memory reconstructs national identities shattered

* University of Bucharest; Romania

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by both capitalist and communist hegemonies. My discourse-oriented approach rests on the premises of a subjective variant of constructivism (Ștefănescu 82–98).

I am also preceding this particular analysis with the more general claim that (post)communism is for the Soviet republics and satellite states a form of colonization that is at the same time “softer” and more “complicated” than what received opinion takes to be the typical (or even the only) colonial situation, that of Third World countries. Whether the colonizing empire was capitalist or communist, it disrupted and disfigured its victim-cultures. Former Western colonies and former Soviet countries (satellites and republics alike) are all post-traumatic cultures inevitably engaged with the anguish of their coloniality. The aim of this article is to explain and illustrate one of the most interesting ways in which the strenuous relation with a traumatic past is dealt with through recuperative discourse.

I will be looking here at *Pray for Brother Alexandru*, the post-traumatic memoirs of Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica concerning the 6 years he spent in a communist jail (Dec. 1958–Aug. 1964). Although Noica is not alone in proposing the theme of forgiveness for the communist executioners and tormentors – a commonplace in the literature of several intellectuals who were victims of communism, such as N. Steinhart, M. Vulcănescu, C. Pillat or N. Balotă – he is the only one to articulate this topos by means of philosophical paradox and rhetorical irony. In that, Noica’s text is a very interesting example of an all but unique compensatory rhetoric.

Pray for Brother Alexander is Noica’s aestheticized reconstruction of his incarceration by the communist authorities as a result of his carelessly circulating a book that was banned by the communist regime. Noica seems to be writing a cautionary tale in the didactic mode. He is trying to be a mentor to his cell mate, the young and hot-blooded Alex (a son figure for Noica) and teach him – and his readers – to disregard the hardships and tragedies of life. In his account, Noica carefully edits out all the sordid and horrendous details of prison life under communism and tries to minimize the import of this traumatic experience, even to turn it into a beneficial stage in one’s spiritual progress. But he often allows his lessons to misfire through situational irony and self-ridicule.

This literary memoir was mailed as a handwritten manuscript by Noica to his first wife and translator, Katherine Muston, one chapter at a time, during the 1970s. The book’s foreword begins with a colonizing anecdote that provided Noica with the title and with a paradigm for his moralizing tale:

Towards the end of the Second World War a convent in one of the countries of Eastern Europe was occupied by the victorious Soviet troops. The nuns had sought refuge somewhere else. On their return they found a note on the altar, which read: “The commander of the troops which occupied this convent and left it unharmed, (sic!) requests you to pray for him.” Since that day the name Alexander is remembered at every service. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 41)

The rest of the foreword explains that this is an emblematic stance for all “uncertain conquerors” for whom we are called upon to pray. Noica starts his list with hypostases that do not immediately strike us as those of conquerors, but which

perfectly describe his own experience during the Stalin and Khrushchev stages of communism:

Pray for brother Alexander. You, too, may pray for him, dear reader, for the name does not concern only the commander of the victorious troops. By the way, what became of you in the meantime, brother Alexander? Did you spend the rest of your days in seclusion, or did you turn informer? Did you simply go to work, or write books and smuggle them out of the country? (41)

During communism, Noica lived in relative seclusion, first confined to a compulsory residence in a provincial town, then in a kind of internal self-exile in a small mountain resort where he died in 1987. He signed an agreement with the secret police to inform them about the Romanian exiles in the West whom he set out to sway to a more forgiving attitude towards the communist regime in Romania. On his release from prison, he was given a modest job as a researcher in the Romanian Academy's Center for the Study of Logic until his retirement in 1975. He did "smuggle" his manuscript out of the country, although his post was closely monitored and censored by the communist authorities.

To be sure, Noica's list of doubtful victors also includes the Chinese and the Americans, and most importantly the European modern man, whom he constantly portrayed as estranged from culture, Nature and God. Interestingly, however, in this singular text, Noica turns his criticism not only against the constant targets of his nationalist denunciations, but also against himself, against his own intellectual vanity and moral frailty. In *Pray for Brother Alexander*, Noica is asking his readers for forgiveness not just for his enemies, but also for his troubled and insecure self.

Though this book is overtly about communist detention and persecution, I will treat it as a piece of "(post)colonial" writing.² The arrival of Soviet communism to Romania shattered Noica's private, as well as his national self. Personally, he lost his family (Katherine Muston, his first wife and the English translator of these memoirs, talks of their agreeing to divorce to spare the mother and two children from persecution and allow them to leave Romania) and he lost his friends whom he naïvely delivered to the Securitate (communist Romania's secret police) in a tragically miscalculated attempt to save them. As a Romanian, he was also on the losing side. He had already deplored the

² The Soviet Union and its army colonized Romania in 1944 and put in place a puppet-regime, whose people were trained in the USSR and would only answer to Soviet military chiefs and commissars. The first stage of Soviet colonization ended in 1958 when the Soviet Army withdrew from Romania. The second stage meant the victory of home-bred communists who mimicked the colonizer's discourse and social practice in order to be trusted by the Soviet leaders to rule Romania on their own, but gradually pursued autonomy from the former colonist, while still mimicking the Soviet model. This is, after all, a perfect example of colonization furthered by local *comprador* elites. Noica was condemned to "compulsory residence" during the first phase of Soviet colonization and sent to prison in the second *comprador* stage. He was amnestied at the height of the battle for autonomy from the Soviet Union and at the beginning of an interval of ideological and social relaxation ("liberalization").

secondary and underdeveloped status of his nation by Western standards (in 1943 he grumbled that Romanians were “tired of being the eternal villagers of history”). Now, with the advent of communist dictatorship, an additional shame was coming from having been colonized by an Eastern civilization. In *Pray for Brother Alexandru*, Noica makes it clear that the Soviet model was a form of colonial imposition on a par with capitalist colonialism. The text starts with the image of the invading Soviet troops and ends with Noica breaking down at the realization that the communists left in place by the Soviets had deprived him of a motherland. On several occasions he couples communism and capitalism as siblings of the colonizing modernity with its “unleashing of reason, that plans and orders, under whose hysteria we also find ourselves now, Alex and I” (64). Noica despised the overbearing attitude of modernization:

... Europe together with America and Russia were destined to awaken Asia out of sleep and Africa out of her animality. This peninsula of Asia through her civilisation – the first civilisation in history to be founded on exclusively rational values, and thus perfectly transmissible to any human mind – was preparing to awaken the whole Earth to life. In any case, it had been on the point of doing so through colonialism, but in a more abusive manner and too slowly. Events were precipitated, and now everything seems to be happening too fast, unfortunately. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 55)

Communism complicates the colonial situation and Noica feels that as a Romanian he is subdued by two colonists, the capitalist Western Europe and Soviet Asia. How, then, does Noica cope with the multiple traumas caused by the East-European type of double colonization and by the private and national sense of loss? He generates a complicated and aestheticized discourse on his battered self, a rhetoric which is structured by an internal dialogism. At least two different narrative voices collide and coexist in his retrospective fictionalization of prison life.³ One is meant to unleash his revolt and nurture his hurt ego, the other is the detached philosophical signature of most of his writing. One promotes action (or reaction) to humiliation, the other cultivates endless (self-)reflection. However, both these opposed strategies that Noica uses in his narrative discourse go by the same name and are the two faces of a spectacular discourse strategy – paradox.

There are at least two faces of paradox that I would approach in connection with Noica. The first version of paradox is the rhetorical device of shocking your audience

³ I use “fictionalization” along the lines of Hayden White’s description of the fictional character of historiographic discourse to indicate that in recreating the past, Noica resorts to strategies and techniques that are typical of fictional discourse: selecting a plot pattern, managing the story line, staging and timing the significant moments in the development of character interaction. Apart from such formal elements of fictionalization, Noica may also have fiddled with the truth content of his reconstruction in order to better serve a narrative agenda: some episodes might have been left out, those that were selected might have been touched up, there could be anachronisms in his account, names may have been changed (his cell mate’s, Alex, fits almost too nicely the Brother Alexander theme), words and actions redistributed to other persons etc. Also, Noica’s narrative persona in this text, does not resemble the portrait provided in his own prison-time memoir by his friend Nicolae Steinhardt (12–13).

with a pronouncement that reverses the received opinion (doxa). The initial surprise at the apparently illogical truth is followed by clarifications and qualifications. This technique is meant to capture the public's attention and to allow the speaker to show off his rhetorical skills. This discursive move is purely negational, it serves an oppositional attitude that rejects and challenges standardized views. Its purpose is to voice antagonism and to allow for a proud and voluntaristic self-assertion. It is a form of exaggerating difference by saying "I have an entirely opposed view that may seem absurd to you, but I have the means to convince you that I am right, too! By the time I am finished arguing, you will accept that it was really your own position which was absurd."

Noica often proposes such paradoxes in order to directly oppose communism, capitalism, or, indeed, both of them as variants of colonialism. In fact, shocking reversal might be seen as the rhetorical move behind the central theme of the book. Instead of hating those who are victorious against you personally or against the human race (Marxist communism and the Soviets, Western capitalism and the modern civilization, Goethe's Faust, the exact sciences, Alex, even Noica himself etc.), Noica invites us to pray for them to be forgiven and delivered.

What a typical "brother Alexander" Faust is: he is a conqueror whom one must pity, although he is a very real, complete victor. For he has triumphed over ignorance, over human weakness and impotence, having eventually defeated every kind of religious feeling or illusionism and, finally, even quite fearlessly allied himself with the Devil. He is in the situation of being able to do absolutely anything, thanks to the means and allies at his service, but he does not know what to do. One must pray not only for his soul, as Gretchen does in the end, but even for his deeds, for the risk of doing the wrong thing – like modern man does. How could anyone say – and it has been said – that Faust is a good representation of modern man because of his aspirations or his creativity and that our world is "Faustian" because it wants something and knows what it wants?! On the contrary, ours is "Faustian", because it does not know what it wants, just like Goethe's hero, because it has prepared for itself the means and victories and now has no use for them. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 62)

But then Noica does something quite perplexing. Taking the cue from his title story of the invading Russian commander who asked the vanquished nuns to pray for him, Noica prompts his readers to forgive Marx, the sacred authority of communist ideology, and he does it from the very communist dungeon where he was abusively incarcerated in the name of the Leninist-Stalinist version of Marxism:

And then, there is something else. The fact that I see in him, in this conqueror for a short while, another Brother Alexander. "Pitié pour les forts!" I feel again like exclaiming from this place, where I now am: Take pity on this great thinker, who in certain parts of the world, where he is too often and quite wrongly quoted and invoked, has become an object of ridicule and irony. Be merciful for the way in which his triumph has turned against him. Stop mocking him with jokes, those of you who think you are his victims: give up describing him as a poor nobody, according to the reports of his London neighbours, and being ironical of him because his wife was of noble descent: stop your sarcasm, because he grew a beard in his old age, since, in a letter to Engels, he made fun of those exiled German prophets, who after 1848 had let their beards grow. Pity him for all the curses that, one fine day will rain down upon this unhappy conqueror's head!

The Russians will curse him because for so many decades he obstructed their historical testimony, as no tsarist absolutism ever managed to do in the 19th century. His co-religionists, the Jews, about whom he said more infernal things than any known anti-Semite had done, will curse him. The workers, whom, for a short while he deluded by telling them that they were a supernatural unitary class, that they had a full human identity, and that they, and they alone, could be the salt of the earth and of history, will also curse him. The communists themselves will curse him, because in his obsessive way of talking “scientifically” he forbade them the freedom of active idealism, the power of creation, and access to new ideas. He will also be cursed by matter, which he laid waste, because of his craze for industrialisation during the first stage of clumsy machinery. The machines, too, will curse him in their later refinements, when they will adorn themselves, like brides, in order to be wedded to the human being, instead of being handled by the rough hands of the workers. He will be cursed by the gods and their religions, because he mocked them as being nothing but opium for the people, whereas they attempted, and sometimes succeeded, in giving the world all that he himself wanted to give it, plus that extra something of which he no longer knew, or did not want to know. Then someone will come and say: “Forgive him, for he too was one who stood under the spell of the Supreme God. Pray for the soul of brother Karl...”
Pray for the Big Brother... (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 128–9)

Many uncompromising anticommunists were so deeply shocked that they refused his argument entirely. Even Noica’s friends, like Monica Lovinescu,⁴ resolved that he was taking a morally indefensible position. And, yet, it may well have been a devious manner in which Noica was dealing a final blow at communism and at his tormentors, as Marta Petreu has suggested:

It is quite possible that the forgiveness invoked by so many former convicts should come from a self-defense impulse. The inmates were humiliated in prison to such an extent, that some of them, in order to preserve their moral superiority over their tormentors (and over the system), had to give up their resentment and their urge for revenge in order to exercise their freedom as a moral leap: they chose to forgive as the only way to conserve their self-respect and position themselves as superior to the tormentor.⁵ (Petreu 8)

By responding to cruelty and insensitivity with generosity and human understanding, Noica may desire in fact to demonstrate his superiority and to turn the

⁴ Monica Lovinescu (1923–2008), daughter of the canonical Europeanist literary critic Eugen Lovinescu, was a literary and radio personality whose success came especially while living in France as an exile since 1948. Lovinescu and her husband, Virgil Ierunca, received Noica on his visits to France and befriended him. She was a stout anti-communist and most of her constant broadcasts on Radio Free Europe and her other collaborations with Radiodiffusion Française were meant to denounce the grim and cynical realities behind communist propaganda. Consequently, she was appalled by Noica’s plea for forgiveness for the communist perpetrators and found this sophistry to be a form of complicity (qtd. in Petreu).

⁵ *Este foarte posibil ca reacția de iertare despre care vorbesc foștii deținuți să vină dintr-un resort de autoapărare: cei închiși au fost atât de umiliți în închisoare, încât unii dintre ei, pentru a-și salva superioritatea morală asupra tortionarului (și asupra sistemului), au fost nevoiți să renunțe la resentiment, la ideea răzbunării, și să aleagă, într-un act liber, saltul moral: iertarea ca unică modalitate de conservare a respectului de sine și ca atitudine de superioritate față de torționar. Ceea ce ar da o răzbunare în bunătate, manifestată prin iertarea deplină.* (Rom. original)

tables on his prison-time enemies. Indeed, on many occasions, Noica is no longer so compassionate in this journal and, leaving aside all rhetorical subtleties, charges directly against his oppressors. In this text, he openly criticizes communism in a way that is entirely unlike the cautious and conciliatory tone of the books he published under the communist regime, when censorship was internalized by most authors. Yet over and over, Noica prefers to voice his opposition in this paradoxical manner.

Interestingly, Alex, his unsophisticated younger cell mate and substitute for a disciple/son, soon defuses and dismisses Noica's rhetorical trick: "How can you utter such cheap paradoxes?" (54) In fact, Alex might very well be the dialogical manifestation of Noica's own doubts and self-loathing. Noica was tormented with a sense of guilt for having brought communist persecution upon his close friends and often confesses his shame at this faux pas. His major regret relates to the folly of imagining himself a victorious wit against the communist authorities and thus having destroyed the lives of many of his friends. Consequently, he turns against himself as one more instance of a foolish "brother Alexander", and inflicts the most ruthless sarcasm on himself as soon as he makes a claim for intellectual authority. Although he tries to teach Alex many a philosophical lesson by using rhetorical paradox, he usually fails in a ridiculous way, as when Noica returns from an interrogation where he had been severely beaten, but he tries to convince Alex that having been thrashed by the communist jailors is entirely inconsequential:

[Noica:] "It's very serious, but it is not important."

[Alex:] "Look here, sir, you're a bore!" (Pray for Brother Alexander 44)

In a different cell, he tries to pass another paradox in front of a group of other inmates led by a theologian who had been an overt anticommunist fighter:

The theologian's remark interested me. I endeavoured to give an explanation. "In a war one becomes a super-citizen whereas at the tax-office one is just an ordinary citizen. The State ought to create super-citizens also in times of peace. Or, let me put it this way: the State is obliged to restrict the individual but it should release the person."

"These are just more words," said the theologian. "It's as Nietzsche said, that the State ought to be a breeding-ground for geniuses. All right, but how is it to be done? Let us talk about something concrete, not just in a general way, what ought to be." (Pray for Brother Alexander 109)

Noica seems to take pleasure in self-abasement and throughout the text he repeatedly punishes himself for the evil that he brought upon himself and, more seriously, on his friends. He admits to his shame on more than one occasion and relishes the episodes when his guards and the interrogating officer put him to shame. On such occasions, Noica is turning his narrative irony of shocking reversal on himself, as when he remembers getting out of the official jeep that is taking him to a different prison:

And we, who are thirsting for all the good things of the earth, from our daily cigarette to the freedom of taking a stroll without a warder, we call out to that humanity living in so idyllic an hour: "Be careful what you do, for you are the ones who, with your joy or your disgust, are answerable for European Man, and indeed for Man himself."

While the jeep now finally came to a stop, and I was ordered to get out, I addressed myself once more in thought to humanity with an uneasy: "Be careful!", and stepped onto the running-board.

"Be careful, you idiot!" shouted the warder, seeing me tripping and falling over. "We don't want any broken necks here!" (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 81)

While ironically turning the rhetorical paradox on himself and on each of us, Noica was paving the way for a different kind of paradox, the philosophical one, which voices an inherent and unavoidable logical antinomy. If the first face of paradox was a form of counterdiction in the antagonistic mode, now we are dealing with contradiction. The logical paradoxes of Hegelian dialectic are Noica's pet approach to all things philosophical. He uses them in practically all his writings, both before and during communism, be they a treatise on ontology, a logical system, a classification of cultural styles or an essay on the linguistic particularities of Romanian cultural identity.

Since this discursive maneuver is not the necessary requirement of any particular field or textual species and since it is omnipresent in practically all of Noica's texts, it is safe to assume that it is rather Noica's typical passive-aggressive tactics of responding to the challenges of his generic status as a marginal European who was subjected to a double colonization by both the Soviet and the Western conquerors. The philosophical irony whereby something is converted into its opposite helped Noica define himself as an individual and as a Romanian in a manner that psychologists might identify as that of a circuitous-dependent type of negativism (Millon 287–329, 545 and *passim*). Noica designed his own existential attitude in the paradoxical form of turning defeat into victory and passivity into a form of action. But he also reasserted his nation, a traditional loser in history in the eyes of the more radical writers of his generation such as Emil Cioran, and turned it into a champion of wisdom. He found Romanian culture to be best described by what he called "ahoretia".

Noica devised a typology of cultural styles which he named "spiritual maladies", various forms of tipping the balance of the Hegelian triad consisting of the General, the Individual, and the Determinations. For Noica, the typically Romanian creative malady is the "ahoretia", the deliberate dismissal of all existential determinations (Gk. *horoi*). He describes it as:

... a sudden illumination or lucidity of conscience which forces the subject to reject participation, to dominate his determinations, to perceive the positive in non-action and negativity, accepting defeat, assimilating it, and entering indifference, placing life and history under the order of reason, which annihilates novelty and proclaims the fruitfulness of non-travel. (*Spiritul românesc* 103; translation mine)

The "apparent detachment" from everything historical and from political action really means "a superior form of engaging" history and of responding to political urgencies. (Lavastine 293).

This was Noica's discursive response to colonial trauma to the very last. In what is taken to be his last interview, Noica was still obsessed with his subaltern status and called the last work that he published during his lifetime, *De dignitate Europae* (1988),

“the protest of a marginal European against true Europe which has stopped recognizing itself as such” (Cardu 14).

Noica's dialectical account of philosophical contradiction is wielded as irony, a peculiar discursive mode best described by Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon. For White, irony is “sentimental” (in Schiller's sense of the term as self-conscious) as opposed to the “naïve” master tropes he invokes as figurative modes of historiographic discourse.

‘It has been suggested that Irony is dialectical, inasmuch as it represents a self-conscious use of Metaphor in the interests of self-negation. The basic figurative tactic of Irony is catachresis (literally “misuse”), the manifestly absurd Metaphor designed to inspire Ironic second thoughts about the nature of the thing characterized or the inadequacy of the characterization itself. (37)

Hutcheon describes Irony along similar lines and dismisses the traditional description of irony as saying one thing and meaning another:

[I]rony “happens” – and that is the verb I think best describes the process. It happens in the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. What I want to call the “ironic” meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally “interact” (Burke 1969a: 512) to create the real “ironic” meaning. The “ironic” meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said (Amante 1981:81; Eco 1990: 210): it is always different – other than and more than the said. This is why irony cannot be trusted (Kenner 1986: 1152): it undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of “one signifier: one signified” and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning. . . (12)

Irony is an internally dialogized mode of discourse where two or more voices and views coexist. Noica carries this discourse template, paradoxical irony, into his detention narrative to deal with a new colonist, the Soviet. Most of the time, ironic dialogism is achieved by having different characters contradict Noica the protagonist-narrator and voice his own doubts. But occasionally, Noica radicalizes the dialogism by generating single utterances where the two voices clash in an undecided struggle only to yield a more complex version of the truth.

Anyone who has kept an open mind and, above all has remained uninvolved under a communist regime, will have realized that the results of such a regime are strange. The revolution is eventually in favour of the rich, not the poor, because the rich have been deprived of their wealth, which means little, whereas the poor are deprived of their idealised objective of becoming rich. A man deprived of his ideal – which, at this level gives a meaning to life – is, in a certain way, annihilated. On the other hand, he who once had possessions and through them became alienated, could find himself rehabilitated, or even reinvested as a human being. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 42–3)

In such passages as this, Noica is speaking in two dialectical voices at the same time. He is simultaneously impersonating Marx and Hegel. Marx retained the Hegelian dialectic and forced a reversal on it, jeering that it was “standing on its head” and it

needed to be “turned right side up again” (the Afterword to *Capital*). The Hegelian Noica is returning the favor by preserving the vocabulary of Marxist dialectic only to reverse Marx’s own prophetic revolutionarism. But this is not mere payback. As is always the case with irony, it is a self-reflective form of victory by self-abasement. Noica is obviously alluding to his own status as a former aristocrat from a wealthy family, now debased by the new communist order, and, yet, not entirely a loser for that. But most intriguing of all, Noica is talking both about/as a trauma-inflicting oppressor (the Soviet or the vain trickster) and as the traumatized victim. The book entreats us in the same breath to pray for the insensitive communists, the insensitive capitalists and for the foolish Noica himself as manifestations of victorious pride that deeply hurt the others.

This paradoxical logic of ironic discourse may explain why Noica, a victim and a philosophical opponent of communism, only produced a few subdued remarks about communism in his books where he never directly counters Marxism and the totalitarian regime. His disciples, like Gabriel Liiceanu, praise this as a superior alternative to the communist jargon. Paraphrasing Noica, Liiceanu talks of his master’s “will to culture” with no indication that he is sensing that Noica was probably offering a parodic response to unreflexive attitudes driven by the “will to live” or the “will to power” when he advocated, in Liiceanu’s account:

... a lateral, discreet and unspectacular liberation, maybe even guilty in its intellectual egotism, but which always has been the form in which the best of Romanian spirit survived to the present day... If by history we understand the series of events happening to us, but also without and beyond us, then culture for Noica meant, no doubt, a withdrawal from history... (Liiceanu 1991: 271)

For many of Noica’s critics, this was no more than cowardice and complicity. They accused Noica of having relinquished his moral authority by paying his dues to the communist regime (among others, Sanda Stolojan and Monica Lovinescu qtd. in Petreu *passim*, Al. George in George *passim*, Gabriel Andreescu in Andreescu 78–93, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi in Mungiu-Pippidi 135). There might, however, be another way of looking at Noica’s discursive strategy. What makes his strategy interesting is his ability to conceal his public sedition even from the sharpest censor, an art practiced, after all, by many Romanians. Both common perception and scholarly research meet in the common-sensical belief that the oppressed can speak in one of two ways: in the presence of power their language is subdued and conventional, while in private they burst into virulent contestation. The layman and the expert alike take the truths of these two types of discourse, “the onstage/partial/public transcript” vs. “the backstage/full/hidden transcript” in James C. Scott’s terminology (4–5 and *passim*), to be contrary to one another, since the way subordinates speak in public is a mere mask behind which they can hide the grimace of their true feelings. Scott uses an Ethiopian proverb as a motto for one of his books on resistance to illustrate his theory of the simple binary opposition between authentic and assumed stances of the subordinate classes: ‘When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.’

I will invoke a rather different lore to explain a more complicated interplay of public and hidden discourse. In Ceaușescu's Romania, a widely circulated joke addressed the duplicity of the oppressed. A Western journalist arrives to document life under communist rule. He goes to interview people on the street. The man he stops to ask a few questions is obviously aware that they must be under surveillance from the Securitate (secret police) so he is very careful about his answers. The reporter asks him what he thinks about the country's financial situation, industry, agriculture, social institutions, leisure time and arts. Each time, the interviewee retorts with quotations from official documents on the various subjects. Exasperated, the Western journalist exclaims: 'Listen, don't you have your own opinion about all of this?' 'Of course I have an opinion of my own—' the man protests, then he quickly adds '—but I strongly disagree with it!'

The joke suggests a subtler mechanism of simultaneously internalizing two mutually exclusive attitudes. External impositions become self-censorship and merge with the suppressed representations resulting in a hybrid where the former opposites coincide: appearance and reality, consenting and contesting, humility and vanity, rebellion and resignation. As a consequence, public consent is riddled with subversive allusions while private protests are now phrased in the newspeak of the official idiom. This paradoxical negotiation of oppression may be seen at work in Noica's text as well.

To Noica, even the domestic variety of communism was a form of violence against Romanian identity and he treated it as he treated all forms of alienation forced upon his culture by the colonizing modernity. Noica employed paradoxical irony and brilliant repartee in response to the capitalist and communist attacks against his national identity which pushed him into a subordinate stance, a "mimic man", inauthentic, less than civilized, less than modern, not entirely European.⁶ Caught between two bullying civilizational models, Noica strives to find a discreet "third way" that is not entirely discrete from the two.

If communism, which is concentrated on one sole objective, has every chance of attaining something different, how much truer can this be of capitalism, which can hardly be said to have any objective at all. There really is something else beyond the two worlds that are opposed to each other today. They are now no longer of interest, for there is another more subtle thing, the third human condition facing the two existing ones. The child from a certain moment in life, becomes a third person: what the parents want from him and what they have invested in him does not matter. It is of no consequence at all what the tree wants after it has shed its seed. From a certain moment onwards, it matters no longer what the states or governments want, in the face of the human person whom they have directly or indirectly favoured: this person has by now entered another kind of evolution under another kind of law. (*Pray for Brother Alexander* 43)

⁶ In *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, Noica professes that his people is "tired of being the eternal villagers of history" and protests that "we can no longer live in a patriarchal, rural, a-historical Romania. We are no longer satisfied with an eternal Romania; we desire a present-day [actuală] Romania." (qtd. in Lavastine 93)

As in other passages, this is not just a meditation on the largest social order, it is also a reflection on his own personal destiny. The child analogy is meant to offer indirect relief for his own loss: his two estranged children had to leave the country with their mother and his son strayed from Noica's example – instead of walking his father's philosophical path towards the spirit, he chose to take the cloth. Noica's ruminations on the independent paths taken by children spill into the scene where his young cell mate Alex, a would-be pupil and the symbolic substitute for the lost son, dismisses Noica's protestations that the beatings they were taking and their imprisonment are inconsequential from a spiritual perspective and he calls the wise man "a bore".

More than a literary style, the ironic mode structured Noica's real life as well. In his undistinguished abode at the heart of the Carpathians and of the country, Noica received his few followers and many other aspiring young intellectuals much like an Oriental master, kind and composed, offering paradoxical morsels of sibylline wit and selflessly taking time to draw roadmaps for developing young minds. He was living the last years of his life as a perfect embodiment of the Ironic mode as Hayden White describes it:

In its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the "madness" of civilization itself and to inspire a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art. (White 38)

Noica lived as he wrote, an uncertain conqueror, both a social pauper and a literary prince, both uncivilized and highly cultivated, both mimicking the language of his assailants and discrediting it, both a dissident and a collaborationist. The only way in which he could win a victory was by humbly admitting his defeat. The only time when he felt himself to be a failure was when he was most certain of his superiority. And then he would beg us to pray for him and grant him our forgiveness.

But should he be absolved of his imperfections and inadequacies? The quotation from William Blake that Noica chose as the ending for the memoir of his detention years might be the perfect illustration of a moral dilemma that is both his and ours:

There is a smile of love,
And there is a smile of deceit,
And there is a smile of smiles
In which these two smiles meet.
("The Smile". The Pickering Manuscript)

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