

Complaints of a Reader, Freezing for the First Time in the West

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(Text published in the first *NEC Yearbook* of 1994)

It's not a pleasure for me to write this article. As far as I can recall it is the first paper I have written in an overcoat. The city of Berlin is changing our heating system this morning — we are close to the Ides of March — and we all must freeze until the natural gas will arrive around 1 p.m. Now it's only 9.40 a.m. and I have put on my warmest overcoat and with clammy fingers I am trying to sort out the notes I made after having read the articles of the New Europe College Fellows published in this brochure.

The natural gas will come from Russia. Twenty or even ten years ago, this would have been inconceivable. West Berlin's business with Russia and the other Communist countries was negligible and strictly limited for political reasons. Therefore, we were heated by the West. We never froze — at least not in our offices. And never did I write an article in an overcoat. Now I *am* freezing. Will people in the East ever realize the enormous sacrifices we in the West have to make after the fall of the Berlin wall?

I wouldn't mind if the papers I just read would have given me some warmth and pleasure. But they didn't. They have left me puzzled and embarrassed instead. Mentally, I am shivering now as well. I shall try to explain why —until the natural gas arrives.

I was in a similar mood after I had visited Rumania, i.e. Bucharest, for the first time. I had expected nothing but misery and I was prepared to deplore a city that the imperial madness of a dictator must have destroyed once and for all. I found misery alright, but I also found pride and promises (and if I am not adding sense and sensibility it's only because I surmise that some Rumanians might even have read Jane Austen and know that these beautiful alliterations are not mine.) I had found a city that was not beautiful — but Berlin isn't beautiful either and we certainly don't have as many areas as Bucharest that look like Neuilly-sur-Seine around 1900. All my prejudices had been shaken and who is grateful for that?

The same has now happened to me after having read the articles in this brochure. First of all, I want to complain about their diversity. I think it is just not fair. After decades of dictatorship it should have been possible to develop a more unified mental outlook in a country like Rumania. The word 'totalitarianism' must lose all its connotations if it is possible, under a totalitarian regime, to preserve such a variety of voices and such a difference of perspectives. Rumanian intellectuals must have given up all national pride if they are courageous enough to present intellectual positions in public that are so diverse that their 'politique de l'esprit', to use Paul Valéry's expression, loses all national flavour. Being myself a Western intellectual who, like hundreds of his colleagues, is proud of his uniqueness and individuality, I deplore the obvious lack of a collective spirit among Rumanian intellectuals.

On the one hand, there are articles — I will not discuss the articles individually and will therefore use the plural even when referring to a single paper — that could have been written in the 'West' *tout court*. The tone, if not the jargon of these papers, is familiar; a personal computer must have been used to write them. These are nothing but contributions to international scholarship and they could have been written in Edinburgh or Bordeaux or Los Angeles as well. So what?

On the other hand, there are articles in which the authors obviously couldn't care less about their readers in the West. They must have been written with the help of an instrument that was once called, if I am not mistaken, a typewriter and the authors have even been bold enough to insert some corrections from hand. It is too bad that the preposterous appearance of such a manuscript could not be preserved in this brochure. But the worst is still to come: there is no clear correlation between

technology and scholarly temperament here. This means that the Western reader cannot trust his eyes: some really old-fashioned ideas have been written with the help of all the gadgets Bill Gates can offer whereas some modern thought is hidden in barely readable handwriting. At least this deplorable lack of correlation between material and mentality should be expunged in the next issue of this brochure.

There is the familiar — and there is the unfamiliar as well in these articles. There is modernity of tone and argument and vocabulary — and there is an old-fashioned scholarship and an unabashed love of classical learning. There is the awkward presence of the non-communist world and there is, almost as a matter of fact, the contemporaneity of Rome and Athens and Byzantium. What puzzles me most about all this is that the unfamiliar in these papers has a certain disturbing quality. It is as if the tribe of Rumanian intellectuals had been able to escape ethnological scrutiny. What I mean is the following: ethnology is a discipline that turns the unfamiliar into a matter of no consequence. How else would the Western Empires have been able to survive? They were, after all, confronted, on a large scale, with an unheard-of otherness. Ethnology was the discipline that taught the West how to see without looking and how to hear without listening — for quite some time.

The authors in this volume, even those who don't write in the voice of 'normal' international scholarship, refuse to be read as 'natives'. They present unfamiliar rooms to us — but these are 'rooms with a view' for us as well. The papers I have just read don't give us the benefit of inconsequence.

There is much irony in these papers and they are not free, here and there, of a certain *souçon* towards institutions and ideas we habitually regard as sacrosanct. Some of these papers try to teach and others are examples of the fine aphorism that there are things that cannot be taught but that can only be learned. We are confronted with unfamiliar paintings and all of a sudden we realize that the most unfamiliar ones are nothing but mirrors. For someone who is used to reading and to writing in a warm room, these papers don't offer much intellectual comfort. They are a challenge for a freezing reader. I wonder if the natural gas will arrive at all.

Berlin, March 12, 1996