

THE SEASONS OF LIFE AND THE PRACTICE OF WISDOM¹

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“... Andrei Pleșu, dieser Spezialist für Zwischentöne
und Zwischenwesen, dieser Möglichkeitsmensch
mit ausgeprägtem Wirklichkeitssinn...”

Wolf Lepenies²

A Festal Time

A *Festschrift* for Andrei Pleșu? Isn't it a bit early? Are we somehow rushing prematurely into autumnal celebrations? Can we be accused perhaps of provoking untimely vesperal reflections? The answer is no, since this volume brings together, in terms of age, at least three generations of colleagues, admirers and disciples of the man who has so uniquely refashioned our cultural landscape by continuously inhabiting the Romanian debates between 1968 and 2008; and since 1989, the international scene as well.

Andrei Pleșu has redefined the horizon and the themes of our post-communist culture: his *Curriculum vitae* includes not only rich scholarly references, but also political episodes that are unusual for Western intellectuals — the exile

¹ In writing this text, I have benefited from the generous assistance of several discreet readers. The English translation was authored by Fr. David Hudson and Oana Mateescu. I have also used notes and recordings made on the occasion of some dialogues with Professor Andrei Pleșu in 2006–2008. Finally, I am grateful for Google services, the virtues of globalization, and the impeccable U.S. system for Interlibrary Loan that I used in the summer of 2008, courtesy of the University of Michigan.

² Wolf Lepenies, “Einleitung zur 5. Ernst Reuter-Vorlesung,” in Andrei Pleșu, *Eliten — Ost und West* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 7–8. A free translation of the German text would go like this: “Andrei Pleșu, this specialist of intermediary tones and essences, this man of possibilities, endowed with an acute sense of reality...”

at Tescani (1989) and two executive assignments (1989–1991: Minister of Culture; 1997–1999: Minister of Foreign Affairs). An eminent representative of several research fields in the humanities — most importantly art theory and the philosophy of religion —, Professor Andrei Pleșu has not limited his interests to merely enhancing his own scholarly biography. The proof lies in the great number of participants — from Romania and abroad — that have come together to celebrate a personality guided by the vocation of completeness.

If we were to identify the dominant vector of the papers included in this volume, we would first have to mention the gratitude of the young generation that was privileged enough to meet the celebrated author *de visu*.³ Andrei Pleșu has left a lasting impression in the memory of his community, not only through his writings, but also by taking on the role of mentor for all those who asked for his advice: colleagues at the Institute of Art History, students in the Philosophy Department of the University of Bucharest, directors of institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Culture, members of the diplomatic corps of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and — right up to today — the young researchers at New Europe College.⁴ Only this can explain the diversity of contributions to the *Festschrift* and, more generally, the abundance of commentaries that are always stimulated by Professor Andrei Pleșu's contributions to the public discourse. The contributors to this volume do not even come close to exhausting the list of those whose professional or private lives have been inspired by the encounter with Andrei Pleșu. Due to constraints related to the tight schedule imposed by the editing of a *Festschrift*, we have had to postpone the publication of several valuable papers.

A tribute such as this one is first of all an act of reverence, but it also constitutes itself as a remedy against forgetting. Though the following text can hardly provide more than a biographic sketch, it aims, nonetheless, to remind us of the most important dates of an intellectual trajectory that is relevant for all those who look back and allow themselves to be captivated by the passion for *paideia* and the ideal of beauty.

Early Signposts

Born in Bucharest on August 23, 1948 into the family of Radu Pleșu (surgeon) and Zoe Pleșu (née Rădulescu), Andrei Gabriel Pleșu is situated under “the sign of Virgo with an ascendant in Scorpio — an impossible marriage.”⁵ In

³ Andrei Pleșu, *Jurnalul de la Tescani* [Tescani Diary] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993), p. 91: “The gravest thing that can happen to a young man is to lack the capacity to admire.”

⁴ Equally notable are also his more recent public engagements: the brief involvement in Romanian foreign politics as counselor to president Traian Băsescu (December 20, 2004 — May 3, 2005) and the interim directorship at the Romanian Academy's Institute for the History of Religion (June 2008–).

⁵ Iosif Sava, *Invitații Euterpei* [The Guests of Euterpe] (Jassy: Polirom, 1997), p. 267.

1955 he first stepped into a primary school in Sinaia. In 1955–1957 he went to school in the village Pârscov, in the Nehoi valley, the place where the poet Vasile Voiculescu was born in 1887. He spent many childhood summers in this mountainous area, a highland that had once been covered by “centuries-old forests, excellent pastures, orchards, even crops, and mountains that were rocky, clayey, and totally bare.”⁶ Over the years, the experience of rurality will prove to be decisive. The spontaneous, natural character of a world that was later disfigured by collectivization has always represented a benchmark of integrity. Without necessarily stimulating “structural nostalgia”⁷ for an agrarian utopia, the memory of the village prevented the urban alienation that comes with the uncritical acceptance of modernity.⁸ In the late 1950s, the countryside could still reveal a pre-modern age, buried deep in the strata of everyday Romanian life. The village was a mirror of durable values, building character, while at the same time allowing room for inertias that do not usually exist in an urban civilization.

After primary and secondary school, Andrei Pleșu graduated at the top of his class from the humanities section of the lycée “Spiru Haret” in Bucharest. Dating from this period, his friendship with Floriana Avramescu, an intimate of the Antim Monastery, would have strong spiritual echoes throughout the following decades. Between 1966 and 1971 he distinguished himself as a brilliant student in the Department of Art History at the University of Bucharest. Among his various interests at that time were the landscapes of the Low Countries, with special reference to the paintings exhibited at the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu. His B.A. thesis, titled “An Essay on the Experiential Values of Forms,”⁹ was written under the guidance of Professor Ion Frunzetti (1918–1985).

In 1972 he married Catrinel Maria, daughter of the professor and Academy member Nicolae Petruțian (1902–1983), and author of several translations of

⁶ In 1901, this region was thusly described in *Marele dicționar geografic al României* [The Great Geographic Dictionary of Romania], vol. IV (compiled and edited after the partial county-dictionaries by George Ioan Lahovari, General C. I. Brătianu and Grigore G. Tocilescu) (Bucharest: Socecu, 1901), pp. 756–757: “There are numerous sources of mineral waters, but they are not used, except those at Nifon. From a geological point of view, the valleys are also significant, especially those at Sărățelul-Bercii and Sărățelul-Bălăneștilor... The region is rich in wild game: bears, deer and even stags, and then wolves, foxes and wildcats, etc.” On the village of Pîrscov: “four churches, served by five priests, four cantors and four sacristans. Peter and Paul are the patron saints of the cathedral. There are 12 taverns. The village is old; it is attested to since 1500.”

⁷ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 22 sq.

⁸ In a recent interview, Andrei Pleșu commented on the encounter between village culture and old age, especially death: “I may seem *passé*, but nowhere have I seen people age better than in the countryside. The city is a medium that indicates one’s growing age minute by minute. The urban structure is based on an extraordinary temporal erosion. In rural areas — for my part, I lived in an emblematic village — aging is organic, it has a note of fulfilment” (interview with Marius Chivu, “Dilemateca,” March 2007, available also online at www.atelier.liternet.ro).

⁹ This research was revisited under the title “Notes for an essay on the experiential value of forms” in the volume *Călătorie în lumea formelor* [Voyage to the World of Forms], preface by Ion Frunzetti (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1974), pp. 12–97.

modern classics (Eric Robertson Dodds, Walter Benjamin, Alisdair MacIntyre, Hannah Arendt, etc.). He has two sons, Matei and Mihai.¹⁰ What was the cultural milieu in which the young Andrei Pleșu developed intellectually and came into his own? He made his debut in 1968, the summer unsettled by the “cultural revolution” at the Sorbonne in Paris and brutalized by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. As he would later confess, Andrei Pleșu was not impressed by the leftist hysteria embraced by so many Western intellectuals:

May 68–August 68. Paris and Prague. Two poles of a world turned upside down, and, ultimately, two of Brezhnev’s victories: France without de Gaulle and Czechoslovakia without Dubček. The first case employed the procedure of “democratic barricade”; the second, that of “brotherly help”. *Students* manipulated (if only by their own rhetoric, their own ideological smugness) and *soldiers* manipulated (if only by their own ignorance or the political barbarism of their “superiors”). The former as well as the latter exercised to the benefit of future generations the technique of innocent assassination.¹¹

Such an evaluation helps us better understand his affinities with the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) and Raymond Aron (1905–1983). In December 1996, Iosif Sava (1933–1998) questioned him — “since when have you been an anticommunist?” and Andrei Pleșu replied promptly: “ever since I can remember.” The explanation follows:

I grew up surrounded by a family that, just like many other Romanian families, suffered greatly as a result of the communist regime... When I myself became aware of the things that were happening, the things that were being said and written, I quickly understood that I was living in a phony world, an aggressively phony world.¹²

In 1971 he was appointed researcher at the Institute of Art History of the Romanian Academy. The beginning of Andrei Pleșu’s professional career coincided with the proclamation of the July Theses, through which Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989) banned “the manifestations of cosmopolitanism” and “artistic models borrowed from the capitalist world.” It was a period marked by institutional constraints hardly imaginable now, at least from a Western academic perspective. Purchases of foreign books declined, debates among specialists were relegated to peripheral areas, while freedom of expression and access to information were heavily censored by “the organs of the Party and the State.” How could one escape, even if fleetingly, the blind contingency of history? How

¹⁰ The essay “Cele două chipuri ale Faptei” [Two Aspects of Action] is dedicated to them, *op. cit.*, pp. 242–245. Matei Pleșu translated into Romanian R.M. Hare’s monograph, *Platon* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997).

¹¹ Andrei Pleșu, *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției* [Faces and Masks of Transition] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), p. 329.

¹² Iosif Sava, *Invitații Euterpei*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

could one trigger the theoretical detente that had been secretly nourished by a perfectly legitimate precocity? The external framework of this evolution had already become stagnant: the official regime had lapsed into dogmatism, demanding “the extension and intensification of atheistic propaganda” on the level of the masses with the aim of “combating mysticism and retrograde ideas, to further the process of educating the youth in the spirit of materialist-dialectical philosophy.”¹³ Anticipating the program of rural and urban systematization, the regime also launched the project of ideological-cultural engineering, which seems to be only vaguely understood by the youth of today.

In such an age, tormented as it was by the litanies of the inverted religion of communism, the chances for the survival of a passion for the sublime in nature and the beautiful in art were anything but assured. The young Andrei Pleșu benefited from the guidance of mentors such as the erudite Eugen Schileru (1916–1968)¹⁴, the contemplative Ștefan Nenițescu (1897–1979) and the protean Dan Hăulică, but was encouraged also by the affectionate intelligence of many friends — from scholars of his generation like Gabriel Liiceanu (philosopher), Marin Tarangul (poet and essayist), Ioan Petru Culianu (historian of religions, 1950–1991) and Sorin Vieru, to a varied collection of seniors such as Petru Creția (classicist, 1927–1997), Alexandru Paleologu (essayist, 1919–2005), Theodor Enescu (art critic, 1926–1998), Radu Bogdan, Dinu Pillat (poet, 1921–1975), Petre Țuțea (philosopher, 1902–1991) and Benedict Ghiuș (monk, 1904–1990). Under their tutelage he managed to explore inaccessible libraries, open locked doors, and read prohibited books, always trying to probe forbidden subjects. Andrei Pleșu could defy the suspicions of professional censors by constantly returning to the *Great Books* tradition and the invisible springs of Western civilization — comprising in a generous geographical formulation Constantinople, Rome, Moscow, Berlin, Paris and London.

The Aesthetic Step

This febrile commerce of ideas gave birth to the articles published in the journals *Amfiteatru*, *Contemporanul*, *România literară*, *Lucefărul* and *Secolul*

¹³ “Propunerile de măsuri [Proposals for action]” adopted at the Session of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party on July 6, 1971, and directly inspired by N. Ceaușescu’s visit to China and North Korea. The project of a “cultural revolution” was thus launched, putting a stop to the brief liberalization of 1968–1970. This was also the debut year of two poets: Laurențiu Ulici (*Recurs*) and Mircea Dinescu (*Invocație nimănui*), as well as the date of some important literary publications: Valeriu Anania, *Steaua zimbrului*; Petre Pandrea, *Eseuri. Portrete și controverse*; Nicolae Balotă, *Lupia cu absurdul*; Radu Petrescu, *Proze*; Gellu Naum, *Copacul animal*; Ileana Mălăncioiu, *Inima reginei*. On the atmosphere of this epoch, see Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte. Jurnal indirect* [Short Waves. Indirect Diary] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), pp. 459–556.

¹⁴ See Eugen Schileru, *Preludii critice* [Critical Preludes], edited and prefaced by Andrei Pleșu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1975).

XX, as well as the prefaces or postfaces to several important translations in the area of art history. In 1971, Andrei Pleșu introduced the Romanian public to the work of Camille Jean Baptiste Corot (1796–1875)¹⁵ — the French landscape painter who became a master of painting *en plein air*. This was followed by the volume *Călătorie în lumea formelor* (*Journey in the World of Forms*, 1974), the doctoral thesis on *Pitoresc și melancolie* (*Melancholy and the Picturesque*, 1980), the essay on *Francesco Guardi* (1981), and the rich collection of articles in *Ochiul și lucrurile* (*The Eye and Things*, 1986). Professor Ion Frunzetti prefaced Andrei Pleșu's first book — published when he was only 26 — with some phrases of prophetic inspiration:

The author is a young man. To the public, however, he has been long known and he needs almost no introduction, as he has already made a name for himself. Romanian lovers of the beaux arts have accepted Andrei Pleșu as a new *gift* for our culture from the providential randomness of genes, which transmit, over the generations, the inborn potential for art, for literature, for creative thought in those domains, so well suited to profound meditation, in a world where the therapeutic need for depth is increasingly visible. Whether in his television shows, his public conferences at the Peoples University of Bucharest, where he enthusiastically shares his talent, heuristic insights, and wealth of knowledge, his capacity to connect ideas and to spontaneously formulate thoughts gilded in gold after long meditation in the seclusion and solitude of the studios, this young man has captivated the public, just as he also does in writing, in cultural periodicals, in the press, or in specialized publications....

What struck me from the very first moments of my intellectual exchanges, first as a teacher and later as an older friend, with the student Andrei Pleșu, was not only his great capacity to articulate precisely, clearly and, at the same time, subtly what he had to say and especially what he chose to share of his thoughts on the cultural facts he studied.... There was also a sense, in addition to the usual senses that people have variously and unequally developed, which led him with unerring certitude to the essence of visual facts and their expression. Where many of the senior professionals of the guild get lost in perorations about secondary matters (mistaken for the essential), he, the junior, the student, ingeniously solves everything with grace.¹⁶

This first volume is centered around several defining notions — “categories of life,” “experimentation with happiness” —, which circumscribe his forays into the history of art (medieval painters, Van Gogh, Klee, Petrașcu), the morphology of the sublime, and postwar existentialism. This period was dominated by some recurrent motifs: the encounter of the soul with the mystery of being; the melancholy of the creator and the precarity of authorial hubris; the crushing power of the feminine and the discreet stirring of nature.

¹⁵ *Corot* [album], edited and translated by Andrei Pleșu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1971).

¹⁶ Ion Frunzetti, “Prefață,” in Andrei Pleșu, *Călătorie în lumea formelor*, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 8.

When he redefines the state of “spleen” and indeterminate anxiety in *Melancholy and the Picturesque*, Andrei Pleșu writes also of himself to some extent: “melancholy is the purely visual encounter between two solitudes: the solitude of the one who contemplates and that of the spectacle being contemplated. Melancholy is the *affective space* born between these two: it is the only way that they can relate to each other.”¹⁷ Engaging and expansive, Andrei Pleșu has always admired the reflux of interiority, lively silences, and sober introspection. This understanding of the virtues of solitude has led to many pages of unequalled candor or participatory exultation.

The footnotes to his doctoral study make reference to “bourgeois authors” accustomed to the tranquility of libraries — from John Ruskin (1819–1900) and Ernst H. Gombrich (1909–2001) to Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943) and Karl Kerényi (1897–1973) — or downright “subversive” writers: beginning with Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) and Paul Evdokimov (1901–1970), going on to Bonaventura (1221–1274) or Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and ending with Basil the Great (330–379), Plotinus (205–270) and Plato (427–347 B.C.). Andrei Pleșu uses these resources in order to study attentively the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (1453–1516), Joachim Patenier (1480–1524), Bruegel the Young (1564–1638), Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), John Constable (1776–1840) and William Turner (1775–1851). He detects the evolutionary trajectory of a fundamental feeling. The sense of enthrallment with creation was felt equally profoundly and experienced in similar fashion by the ancients, those of medieval times, and modern man — a feeling at the same time of an alienating sense of discontinuity and an intimate encounter with nature. Professor Pleșu takes into account both the world of modern man, where nature has been stripped of superstition and enchantment (but remains seductive), and the idealized (and yet terrifying) image of nature in older cosmologies. Nature is a goddess, but also a terrain of the transformative imagination, which can be conquered through various ocular strategies and manual reflexes. This primacy of the contemplative instinct — which the Alexandrinians called *theoria physike* — will prove to be decidedly non-accidental.

In a world impoverished by the nationalist-communist parody and fatigued by the paranoid-grandiloquent spectacle staged around “the Great Leader,” Andrei Pleșu, together with other colleagues — Horia Bernea (1938–2002), Andrei Cornea, Mihai and Anca Oroveanu, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță and Sorin Dumitrescu — took refuge in the school of the great masters, locked in their studios or discreetly affirmed in museums, catalogs and art albums.¹⁸ Loving European painting with pathos and discernment, Andrei Pleșu gradu-

¹⁷ Andrei Pleșu, *Pitoresc și melancolie* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), p. 65.

¹⁸ Corneliu Baba (1906–1997) was one of the greatest Romanian painters during the 20th century who triggered Andrei Pleșu’s enthusiasm. For more on Baba, see Pavel Susara, *Corneliu Baba* (London: Parkstone, 2001).

ally acquired the grasp of minute details, the pleasure of stylization, and the irresistible inclination toward formal perfection. In this manner he earned his outstanding reputation from the very beginning.¹⁹

With the enthusiastic recommendation of Nicolae Steinhardt (1912–1989), he was received very early into the Writers Union. Thus, he became intimate with the literary world and its distinct voices: Nicolae Manolescu, Nichita Stănescu (1933–1983), Mircea Dinescu, Gabriela Melinescu, Dan C. Mihăilescu. At the same time, he privately met with the Indologist Sergiu Al-George (1922–1981) and the Orthodox priest Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993).²⁰ Having great support for his young colleagues, Andrei Pleșu circumvented the tutelage of lukewarm spirits who were always ready to applaud the verdict of mediocrity and the art of compromise.

His insights into the atemporality of artistic inspiration did not lead him to evade the rhythm of history. Andrei Pleșu read methodically the classics of philosophy, knowing also how “to skim” — with selectivity and penetration — the instances of truth in the present day affairs of the world. The young aesthete could eulogize tradition without avoiding the critical illustrations of a plural modernity. There are many alternative verbs that enter the semantic sphere of the Greek *paradosis*: “to hand over”, “to entrust”, “to transmit”, “to surrender”, “to relinquish”, “to restore”, “to reflect”, “to present”, “to recommend”, “to teach”, “to give lessons” (*traditio* = teaching).²¹ Andrei Pleșu sought for T.S. Eliot’s *permanent things* — but in a way that neither conceals the present nor screens out the future.

Tradition is a form of continuity. From its perspective, the present is neither a heresy nor the sum of successive oblivions: it is rather the totality of accumulations, rediscoveries and adaptations by means of which nothing of that which constitutes the spiritual ‘heritage’ of the human species is ever lost.²²

¹⁹ Proofs of this recognition are the Artists Union’s Prize for Art Criticism (1980) and the Essay Prize from the Writers Union of Romania (1980).

²⁰ Andrei Pleșu, “Hai să vorbim [Let’s talk],” *Ziua*, no. 2867 (November 15, 2003): “Father Stăniloae proves that one can be a theologian without exclusivisms and without concessions. [...] For his entire life, and especially in the last decades, he has been an extraordinary bridge between worlds. He was surrounded by numerous laymen, painters, writers, people who felt the need to visit him and to look for his advice; I have also frequented him for a while, through some artist friends. Through his discreetly radiant presence, as well as his translations in the *Philokalia*, he helped us all to survive the times we experienced. Reading the *Philokalia* helped me to get through the difficult years of dictatorship. I survived spiritually and intellectually by talking to others who were also reading the *Philokalia*.” This text was first delivered as a presentation on the occasion of Dumitru Stăniloae’s centenary at the Romanian Academy.

²¹ Andrei Pleșu, *Ochiul și lucrurile* [The Eye and Things] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1986), pp. 112–118.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

It is only with this understanding that one can admire both Roman frescoes and the sculpture of Dimitrie Paciurea (1873–1932), both Byzantine icons and the canvases of Paul Gherasim. Paraphrasing Augustine’s celebrated formula, the author gives us below an impassioned exhortation: “Respect tradition and then do what you will!”

Paideian Intermezzo

This is the vision that allowed Andrei Pleșu to weave Romanian threads into the tissue of European culture.²³ From 1975–1977 (and later from 1983–1984), a surprising university offer opened, for Andrei Pleșu — together with his good friend Gabriel Liiceanu, the way towards several research fellowships in Bonn, Dortmund, Heidelberg and Freiburg. His two visits to the free territory of the Federal Republic of Germany prepared the ethical stage, representing a decisive experience not only for the purpose of refining the tools of academic research (familiarization with Heidegger’s language, reading Jung in the original, and acquiring the bibliography for the Romanian edition of Plato), but also for his entrance into the domain of international political debate. These were the years in which the protest movements in Czechoslovakia — the Charter 77 manifesto conceived by Václav Havel — began to reverberate across the borders of the socialist bloc.²⁴ In Bucharest, the personality cult of Nicolae Ceausescu was growing stronger, while material penury cast its long shadow over every day. The condition of scholars worsened in equal measure with the life of the peasants, dispossessed of land, dignity, and hope. The Ministry of Internal Affairs strictly forbade the borrowing or renting of typewriters outside the homes of their owners. On March 6, 1983, President Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) proposed the suspension of the “most favored nation status” which had been previously applied to socialist Romania.

By means of Radio Free Europe, the diaspora discovered with optimism and enchantment the new direction of the Romanian philosophical essayists, developed under the guidance and inspiration of a great interwar thinker: Constantin Noica (1909–1987).²⁵ Foreign reviews of the *Păltiniș Diary* were

²³ Andrei Pleșu, “Rigorile ideii naționale și legitimitatea universalului [The Rigors of the National Idea and the Legitimacy of the Universal],” *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției*, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–226.

²⁴ See Václav Havel, *Viața în adevăr*, translation and postface by Jean Grosu, preface by Andrei Pleșu (Bucharest: Univers, 1997). Later, some proposed a comparison between Václav Havel and Andrei Pleșu. See Willem Johan Lamfers, *Drie dissidente denkers: Bonhoeffer, Havel en Pleșu over vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid* (Boekencentrum, 2002), especially chapters five and six (on Andrei Pleșu’s ethical reflections, respectively, on moral theology in the Orthodox tradition).

²⁵ Constantin Noica was arguably the greatest Romanian philosopher of the 20th century. A prodigy attracted first by poetry and literary writings, in 1931 he had received his major from the University of Bucharest (thesis: “The Thing-in-Itself in Kant’s Philosophy”). During his youth, he

overwhelming, triggering rebuttals from the representatives of the Proletkult subordinated to the Romanian Communist Party. To the surprise of many friends in exile — including Monica Lovinescu (1923–2008) and Ioan P. Culianu — neither Andrei Pleșu nor Gabriel Liiceanu chose the path of exile, emulating indirectly the stoicism of their mentor from Păltiniș. Noica had always argued for a different type of resistance against the aggressions of political history; instead of mere journalistic outcries, the author of the *Treatise on Ontology* sought the solution in an ethereal idealism. The acquisition of this paradise of secular culture presupposed a continual deepening of the conversation with the geniuses of metaphysics: Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel (with an aleatoric preference for “secondary” authors such as Cervantes, Goethe, and Nietzsche).²⁶

Inspired by his warm and generous humanity, Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu saw Constantin Noica *neither* as a grey eminence beset by far-right nostalgia, *nor* as a naive partisan of national-communism. Noica was a unique, perhaps

spent long research terms in Paris and Berlin, while writing different scholarly studies on Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant. For only a very brief period of time (from the summer of 1940 to the following winter), the young Noica expressed publicly his sympathies with the far-right Legionary Movement. Later, he repudiated this traumatic episode, for which he also paid dearly during his time under house arrest (1949–1958) and, later, during his imprisonment under the Communist regime (1958–1964). After his release, Constantin Noica worked intensely on some major topics of Continental philosophy. He wrote on Hegel’s logic and phenomenology, while also translating from, and commenting on Plato’s dialogues, musing on the status of language, privately training young scholars in the field of classical languages. Gabriel Liiceanu has captured the essence of Noica’s pedagogy in his famous *The Păltiniș Diary. A Paideic Model in Humanist Culture* (1983, English translation by James Christian Brown, preface by Sorin Antohi, Budapest: CEU Press, 2000). An English monograph on Constantin Noica’s life and work has not been produced as yet.

²⁶ For a sociological analysis of the Păltiniș phenomenon, see Katherine Verdery, *National Identity Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu’s Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 256–301 and Sorin Antohi, “Navetiști în Castalia. Școala lui Noica: cultură și putere în România comunistă [Commuters to Castalia. Noica’s school: culture and power in communist Romania],” in *Războaie culturale. Idei, intelectuali, spirit public* (Jassy: Polirom, 2007), pp. 41–82. Verdery does not discuss the content of the debates between Noica and his disciples, she downplays the universalism of his perspective, and offers an imperfect assessment of the impact of the intellectual model of Păltiniș. In my view, the studies and books written in 1980–1995 by Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu, Sorin Vieru, Andrei Cornea, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, and Ioan I. Ică Jr. deserve by far more critical attention than the commentaries of Arthur Silvestri. Noica’s tradition — expressed by the long series of translations from Plato, Aristotle, Porphyry, Ammonius, Augustine, and Descartes —, was then taken up by the young post-1990 generation of classical scholars and historians of ancient philosophy, which represent today a second legacy of the Păltiniș school. Finally, Noica’s passion for the philosophical resources of the Romanian language has little to do with communist nationalism and is directly inspired by the German tradition of Herder, Hegel, and Heidegger. The epistemological difference between the context of discovery and the context of justification allows such nuances. In Sorin Antohi’s opinion, the Păltiniș odyssey represents a genuine example of intellectual utopia in times of hardship. After the experiences of war and prison, Noica showed an understandable lack of curiosity for the historical-political dimension of any cultural construction — obvious even in the case of theological-metaphysical systems —, a fact that may explain the later trajectory of his disciples, who after 1989 favored a strong and ongoing civic engagement.

even unclassifiable, character — in that he defied both academic rigidity and bohemian philosophizing — who witnessed a century suffocated by fanaticism. For Andrei Pleșu, Constantin Noica was the catalyst of a *principium individuationis*. The disciple was transported from the arena of cultural journalism and circumstantial reflection into the olympic stadium of the great confrontations, not only between immortal authors and perennial ideas, but between systems and attitudes about life. Noica represents the link to the interwar tradition and its standards, often forgotten or despised: the systematic mastery of research instruments, the reading of sources in the original, an intimate familiarity with *bibliotheca universalis*, the art of narrating the unseen dialogue between categories of thought, the cultivation of multiple literary genres (book review, journal articles, essays, scholarly studies, monographs and treatises).

At the beginning of the 1980s, Andrei Pleșu became increasingly aware of the limits of esthetic reflection in the absence of a larger European cultural architecture for which the history of philosophy was undoubtedly the cornerstone. To achieve refinement of vision the discipline of an extended stay in the labyrinth of Greek categories would be necessary. His encyclopedic ideal was refreshed, if only temporarily, by the classic notion of *paideia*. Constantin Noica observed, in fact, that at the age of 30 Andrei Pleșu already had the necessary but also dangerous quantum of knowledge to perpetrate “cultural hooliganism.”²⁷ The antidote for this polytropic but undisciplined brilliance came through the test of “10 hours of Classical Greek per day,” of readings from Aristotelian commentators, Leibniz, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Schelling, and Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The trips from Bucharest to Păltiniș were the equivalent of an informal postdoctoral program, under the guidance of a brilliant mind, of a spirit at once tenacious and harmonious. Guiding the thought of the disciples was akin to the daily gardening of a promising landscape.

Pleșu’s closeness to Noica was not to be without internal struggles. In a letter from 1984 to Sorin Vieru, “the rebel disciple” confessed:

This is where the fracture, and from my perspective, the *drama* of my encounter with Noica comes in: I keep asking him, to the point of exasperation, about barley, and he calmly responds about oats. But when he tells me about oats, he does it in the only way (I refer to the articulation and the substance of the ideas) that I would dream of learning about barley.²⁸

Despite this inability to come together on the same level, the example of Constantin Noica’s life contains elements of universal pedagogy (even though his oeuvre is even today accessible to only a handful of specialists). The protection of the European cultural canon, the calm of wisdom, the joy of altruistic

²⁷ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniș* [The Păltiniș Diary] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), p. 80 (Thursday, December 28th, 1978).

²⁸ Andrei Pleșu, *Limba păsărilor* [The Language of Birds] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), p. 221. From a different perspective, Gabriel Liiceanu also articulated his own “quarrel with philosophy,” under the sign of a new historic moment (post-1989).

dedication, the generous recognition of any genuine talent, the safeguarding of pure curiosity, the Socratic art of spiritual midwifery, and the power to remain focused, decade after decade, on the crucial moments in speculative thought — all these virtues taught generically by the philosopher from Păltiniș reappear in the projects undertaken by Andrei Pleșu, from the private seminars conducted among friends or the summer schools organized at Tescani in the late 1990s, to the institutionalized program of New Europe College. Constantin Noica always remained an ineffable, luminous presence in the memory of the disciple, who later assumed responsibility for the unique trajectory of his own destiny.

In the wake of this voyage some rather grotesque and absurd moments have occurred. In 1982, Andrei Pleșu was barred for political reasons from university teaching (he had been a lecturer at the Faculty of History and Theory of Art, University of Bucharest, since 1980). The stupid and artificial scandal around “transcendental meditation”²⁹ had multiple repercussions.³⁰ He was accused, along with many other Romanian scholars, of having merely attended a wacky conference on alternative therapies in the field of psychology. That act of passive participation had made Andrei Pleșu redundant. His friends from Western Europe intervened to help him obtain an extension of the Humboldt fellowship for 1983–1984. It may be that this encounter with the brutality of life under communism deepened Andrei Pleșu’s estrangement from the seductions of abstract philosophy and rekindled his interest in the political condition of mankind. The gradual distancing from the vision of the Platonic One made room for the Many of ethical and political commitments. This transition can also be understood as an appropriation of the therapeutic dimension of philosophy, which the ancients appreciated much better than the moderns.³¹ However, the problem of ethical decision is never taken up as a display of bravado. As Professor Pleșu confessed much later: “I don’t consider myself a very courageous person; I don’t have the pure ethical impulse. The abstract, theoretical idea of ‘attitude’ does not challenge me. I need palpable causes.”

Ethical-political engagement

Between 1982 and 1983, Andrei Pleșu was a consultant at the Artists Union. After 1983 he was demoted to the position of documentalist at the

²⁹ Doina Jelea, Cătălin Strat și Mihai Albu, *Afacerea „Meditația transcendențială”* [The Affair of “Transcendental Meditation”] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), pp. 212–230. Andrei Pleșu recalls the unmasking session organized by the party organization at the suggestion of comrade Clățici: “Three people had the courage to abstain from a punishing vote: Anca Oroveanu, Magda Cârnelci and a student. The problem was that the order had been for a unanimous vote.”

³⁰ In a similar vein, the Party and the *Securitate* exercised pressures on, and applied financial sanctions to, Catrinel Pleșu, “guilty” of having participated to the same public manifestation organized in 1982 by the Institute for Pedagogical Research.

³¹ Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

Institute of Art History in Bucharest. Working conditions can be easily imagined, with every possible humiliation and frustration. Cold, hunger, and fear of denunciation — these were all the ingredients of a lifestyle of cultural survival. On May 1st (“Workers Day”) and August 23rd (“Liberation Day”), nobody was exempt from the obligation of a personal “sacrifice” — the columns of resigned bodies and red banners — on the altar of the Great Leader’s madness. As a gesture of protest and perhaps as a form of internal exile, Horia Bernea painted the “*Banners*” series (*Prapori*), while a whole army of architects designed the details of “The House of the People.” Year after year, hopes for an awakening of *glasnost* were dashed to the ground.

Sometime after 1985, he had met, together with Gabriel Liiceanu, the legendary student of Martin Heidegger: the thinker Alexandru Dragomir (1916–2002), a freelance philosopher and incomparable expert on Plato.³² The trips to Păltiniș continued until the death of the master, Constantin Noica (December 4, 1987). This inevitable separation generated the vibrations of some latent moral reflections, published in the 1988 volume, “*Minima moralia* (elements for an ethics of the interval)” which includes the famous texts on “culture and wisdom,” tears, the solitude of Robinson Crusoe, and the unhappiness of Falstaff the buffoon. The book contains not only memorable formulations on the relationship between the soul and the ethical absolute, but also frequently touches on the moral condition of Romanian intellectuals. In contrast to many of the Poles gathered in the movement *Solidarność* or mobilized by the Roman Catholic Church, Romanian scholars had, by and large, abdicated from the duty of civic rectitude. In a community profoundly altered by the imperatives of “the multilaterally developed society,” the writings of Andrei Pleșu articulated the unthinkable and thus disturbed the somnolence of the majority.³³

We can say, and even accept to be told, if we must, that we are not industrious enough, ingenious enough, knowledgeable enough, skillful enough. What we cannot stand to say, and especially to be told, is that we are morally precarious, corrupt, dishonest, ethically questionable.³⁴

The theory of “adaptation to the times” was based on the following argument: considering that communism “was modernizing” the life of Romanians

³² Alexandru Dragomir, *Crise banalități metafizice* [Crass Metaphysical Banalities] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004); *Cinci plecări din prezent. Exerciții fenomenologice* [Five Exits from the Present. Phenomenological Exercises] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005); *Caielele timpului* [Notebooks of Time] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006); *Semințe* [Seeds] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).

³³ A Marxist philosopher sensed this subversive dimension of the book at that time. See Ion Ianoși, *Opțiuni* [Options] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească Press, 1989), p. 205: “... [Andrei Pleșu] has written a treatise in which his «minimalism» reflects also a hidden «maximalism».”

³⁴ Andrei Pleșu, *Minima moralia* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1988), p. 12. The volume was translated into German with the title *Reflexion und Leidenschaft. Elemente einer Ethik des Intervalls*, trans. G. Gutt (Vienna: Deuticke Verlag, 1992).

— proved by the number of “patriotic construction sites” — and since serving others meant adopting the mantra of technical progress, the decline into cowardice and subservience seemed necessary. Allegiance to the system became rather unproblematic.³⁵ In a country full of the engineers and technicians born of the five-year plans — from “the second cabinet” (of Elena Ceaușescu) to the last agricultural farm in the hills of Dobrogea —, the idea of moral fallibility was overshadowed by the pursuit of physical survival. The opinion leaders of Romanian society justified their moral resignation through a pathetic involvement in “comradely” competitions meant to create yet another school, agricultural cooperative, factory or even a “leading ecclesiastical jurisdiction.”³⁶ A clear index of the totalitarian malformation was the disappearance of a sense of the ridiculous, the gradual loss of humor — in short, the abolition of the capacity to distance oneself from the minor or major problems of everyday life. Percival’s question about the Grail had become unconceivable even in religious circles, acquainted as they were only bibliographically with the prophetic function and the virtues of lucidity.

The educated public read *Minima moralia* at a moment of lethal moral drift for socialist Romania. The *Securitate* (former Romanian Secret Service) had ruthlessly crushed the dissidence of emblematic figures such as Doina Cornea, Dorin Tudoran, and Dan Petrescu. In an interview for Radio Moscow in August 1988, Mircea Dinescu bravely praised Gorbachev’s reforms. On March 17, 1989, the author of “a drinking bout with Marx” declared in the French journal *Libération* that human rights were systematically being violated. Along with Geo Bogza (1908–1993), Ștefan Augustin Doinaș (1922–2002), Mihai Șora, Octavian Paler (1926–2007), Alexandru Paleologu and Dan Hăulică, Andrei Pleșu signed a letter of support for Mircea Dinescu.³⁷ He commented later, in retrospect, on this gesture of solidarity:

I’ve never had the impulse to simply make a gesture. I’ve never had this urge to say “I’ve just got to do something” — I mean, a pure instinct that would precede a concrete purpose. I did have a clear reaction to concrete things. The moment I was forbidden from interacting with my friends abroad, I felt that a hyper-sensitive chord somewhere in me had been touched and that I could not abstain from reaction. One could not forbid me to see a friend. Thus, when [Mircea] Dinescu was subjected to a form of house arrest, and I knew that he

³⁵ On May 31st, 1982, the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party traces new directives for the education of youth, changing the profile of most colleges from a specialization in the humanities to one in agriculture and industry. See Dinu G. Giurescu (coord.), *Istoria României în date* [Chronological history of Romania] (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2003), p. 694.

³⁶ Justinian [Marina], *Apostolatul social* [The Social Apostolate], vol. 12 (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1976), p. 50.

³⁷ Denis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (New York: Armonk, 1995), pp. 279–84.

and his two children had barely anything to live on, that he was being followed on the street, isolated, and so forth — an internal spring was naturally triggered: “This is something I cannot allow”.³⁸

The official reactions to this gesture of solidarity were merciless. All the signatories — except the anti-fascist veteran Geo Bogza, a writer for *România literară* — were prohibited from publishing. Andrei Pleșu lost his position as documentalist at the Institute of Art History and on April 5th, after being illegally put on unemployment, began his exile at Tescani for an indeterminate period. Later, he obtained the position of museographer and librarian at the “George Enescu” Memorial House in the same village. The family of Professor Pleșu was under strict surveillance until the end of May, while the chicaneries of the *Securitate* continued until December 1989, browbeating any friend, relative or acquaintance who desired to express their loyalty.

Tescani is the place where Andrei Pleșu prepared, in precarious material conditions, to move on from the sphere of ethical reflection towards that of theological meditation. His references to art and painting became secondary. He re-read the Bible and its patristic commentators (from Dionysius the Areopagite to Anselm of Canterbury), spent time reflecting upon the relation between faith, reason, and symbolic knowledge (whence the references to Lev Shestov) — experiencing also the joy of some new encounters animated by *philia*, including his friendship with the jazz pianist and composer Johnny Răducanu.³⁹ The nine months of exile at Tescani were spent in the company of various kinds of immateriality: music, poetry, and the charm of nature. The days slipped by without melodrama, but also without hope.

To us, all obstacles appear as walls. The trick is to treat them as *mirrors*, or *windows*: to allow them to reflect us, analytically, or to see *through* them a transcendent horizon. But it is not only obstacles that appear as walls. *Anything* can become a wall if it functions as a blockage: the good opportunity, success, and even happiness. Good and evil are, without discrimination, potential walls. One must polish them until they become reflexive and transparent.⁴⁰

Civic, Pedagogical, and Cultural Involvement

Finally, the iron curtain turned into a velvet glove and the wall became a window, though not without the price of blood. The Romanian revolution on December 16–22, 1989 — presaged indistinctly by the ideological

³⁸ *apud* Doina Jelea, Cătălin Strat și Mihai Albu, *Afacerea „Meditația transcendențială“* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), p. 228.

³⁹ Andrei Pleșu, *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției*, *op. cit.*, pp. 297–298.

⁴⁰ Andrei Pleșu, *Jurnalul de la Tescani*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

relaxation in the neighboring countries — caught Andrei Pleșu with his eyes on the television in a village in Buzău County, some 300 kilometers away from Bucharest. Mircea Dinescu's prominence and his initial influence in the Committee of the Front for National Salvation (and, later, in the Provisory Council for National Union) contributed to Andrei Pleșu's swift nomination for the position of Minister of Culture in the first cabinet headed by Petre Roman. Together with Mihai Șora, who was appointed Minister of Education, Andrei Pleșu represented the reformist wing within an institution that was later taken over by ex-Communist opportunists.⁴¹

In fact, the whole episode of his political involvement in the provisional government (December 1989–June 1990) and later in the executive branch legitimized by the first free elections in post-communist Romania (June 1990–October 1991), remained controversial for a long time even among Andrei Pleșu's friends. Certainly the effectiveness of his ministerial tenure was never questioned. His institutional decentralization, the privatization of a former communist publishing house (Politica Press turned into Humanitas Press), and the creation of several new cultural establishments which served to strengthen the dignity of a country whose values had been devastated — all these required a turning away from the fever of contestation and a commitment to serving the common good in concrete ways. The logic of realism and moderation led to the founding of the *Museum of the Romanian Peasant*, which was immediately placed under the directorship of Horia Bernea. In an interview with Anca Manolescu, Professor Andrei Pleșu confessed that the MRP “was the result not so much of an effort of the imagination as of the memory” — which later was rewarded with numerous international prizes.

In spite of financial penury, the Minister of Culture helped create an Institute for Oriental Studies (named after Sergiu Al-George, the celebrated Romanian Indologist). This was the fulfillment of a dream cultivated for decades by internationally renowned Romanian scholars, ranging from Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) to Arion Roșu (1924–2007). Also in 1990, the Ministry of Culture contributed financially to the production of Lucian Pintilie's films, as well as of the documentary “University Square” (1991), directed by Stere Gulea. The Ministry's exhibition office acquired a new structure

⁴¹ Catherine Durandin, “À la poursuite de l'histoire en Roumanie depuis 1989,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 36 (Oct.–Dec., 1992), pp. 61–70, here p. 66: “Ces intellectuels, un Mihai Șora philosophe et Andrei Pleșu, qui conservera pendant plus de deux ans le ministère de la Culture, commentent, critiquent et vont jusqu'à condamner certains comportements du Front : en juin 1990, Andrei Pleșu menace de démissionner.” See also Tom Gallagher, *Romania after Ceaușescu* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 220: “The state's need to monitor the cultural world was not as urgent but, presumably as a result of pressure from nationalist intellectuals, the ministry of culture swung from being one of the most refreshingly open governments during the ministerial tenure of philosopher Andrei Pleșu in 1990-1 to one where nationalist hardliners enjoyed mounting influence.”

and architecture. Furthermore, during Pleșu's tenure the Commission for Historical Monuments was reformed and put to work on a new law on national patrimony — a document that obtained parliamentary approval only in 2000.⁴²

Neither these achievements, nor his position as founding member of the *Group for Social Dialogue* (constituted in January 1990) counted much for those who were unsettled by Professor Pleșu's absence from the anti-presidential pressure group.⁴³ Many former dissidents, such as Virgil Ierunca (1920–2006) and Ana Blandiana, perceived his reservations regarding the 1990 manifestations in University Square as a betrayal of the anti-communist cause. However, very little was and is known about the Culture Ministry's explicit condemnation of the violent Miners' Demonstrations in Bucharest on June 13–15, 1990. At that time, this was the only governmental voice to speak out against the new form of class warfare, exemplified by the barbaric attack of “the workers” on the students and faculty of the University of Bucharest.⁴⁴ Andrei Pleșu offers the following comments on this experience:

For me it was a very harsh experience to have to go through: all my affective commitments, all my human relationships were in effect suspended, being cast in a questionable light. At first the pain this caused was on the level of personal disillusionment; after all, I had shared many hard years with these people and it seemed to me that they should have been able to vouch for my good faith. But I found out that this was not the case; overnight I could be suspected of the most terrible things, despite all those long years of common life, which had provided endless opportunities for one's character to be put to the test... Intellectuals who had never challenged Tamara Dobrin or Suzana Gâdea (how about a footnote here about these individuals?) were now my vehement accusers. All of a sudden, I had become a disappointment to everyone — and it is difficult to live as someone who has nothing better to do for a year than to disappoint all his friends... I don't know about my other colleagues, but, for my part, when I left my cabinet post in 1991 I was euphoric.⁴⁵

⁴² Andrei Pleșu and Petre Roman in dialogue with Elena Ștefoi, *Transformări, inerții, dezordini. 22 de luni după 22 decembrie 1989* [Transformations, inertias, disorders. 22 months after December 22nd, 1989] (Jassy: Polirom, 2002), p. 166 sq.

⁴³ Explicitly referring to Ion Iliescu, Andrei Pleșu wrote the following (initially published in *Dilema Veche* March 14–20, 1997): “Communism was a cult of irreality, doubled by a superstitious refusal of any kind of transcendence. In other words, it is a type of nihilism — offensive, mobilizing, a tonic disguise of nothingness. We all know how frightening it is to be the victim of such an elemental force. But it is probably as frightening to have the misfortune of actually embodying it.”

⁴⁴ Andrei Pleșu, *Transformări, inerții, dezordini, op. cit.*, pp. 217–218.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 189–190. Suzana Gâdea (1919–1996) was the Minister of Education between 1976 and 1979 and head of the Committee for Socialist Culture and Education (from 1979 to 1989). During the same time, Tamara Dobrin functioned as ideological censor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest.

His retreat from politics proved to be salutary, even though it was temporary. For the next several years, he lectured at the newly regenerated Department of Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. Andrei Pleșu taught classes on the philosophy of religion, having Teodor Baconsky as Assistant between 1994 and 1996. Witnesses from this period describe lecture halls filled to capacity, evoke memorable discourses — a lively atmosphere in which the students were transfixed by the magnetism of ideas, the goodwill of the speaker, and the cleverness of his answers to their questions. Professor Andrei Pleșu stimulated new cognitive interests beyond the canonical boundaries of positivism, coordinated doctoral theses, and encouraged several young people who were clearly gifted for the study of the history of religion, comparative theology or the phenomenology of religion; he often traveled abroad as the guest of various Western academic institutions, such as *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* (1992) and the University of Berkeley (1994). Thus were born, and later consolidated, his friendships with the Polish essayist Adam Michnik and the eminent German sociologist of culture Wolf Lepenies. Later, his familiarity with the German cultural milieu would be consecrated through honorary doctorates from the *Albert-Ludwig University* in Freiburg-im-Breisgau (2000) and Humboldt University in Berlin (2001).⁴⁶

In 1993 Andrei Pleșu founded the journal *Dilema* with the explicit aim of bringing a spirit of reflection and moderation into the world of Romanian journalism, beset as it was by the pathos of ubiquitous factionalism. As he put it, “*Dilema* does not wish to relativize values or to muffle the truth. However it seeks to eliminate *the man without dilemmas*, with his (vulgar or fanatical) certainties and immovable narrow-mindedness.”⁴⁷ The weekly journal became a touchstone in our cultural debates, generously hosting electoral commentaries, book reviews, photo documentaries, incisive interviews, as well as more ethereal meditations (“on the plus side”) or discussions devoted to making sense of the past, or dealing with issues of conscience. The essays published by Andrei Pleșu in *Dilema* (later, *Dilema Veche*) and several other journals (“22,” “Plai cu boi,” “Foreign Policy,” “Idei în dialog”) or newspapers (“Jurnalul național,” “Adevărul,” “Die Zeit,” “Tagesspiegel,” “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,” “Süddeutsche Zeitung,” etc.) — covered the entire spectrum, sober and caricatural, of the evolution of public life in Romania and Europe. I. L. Caragiale (1852–1912), the literary giant of 19th century Romanian literature, was the secret inspiration for many of these bittersweet essays. Grave without being harsh, capable of loosening up even the witnesses of social di-

⁴⁶ Other distinctions include membership in the *World Academy of Art and Science* (1997) and *Académie Internationale de Philosophie de l'Art*, Geneva (1999) and honors such as *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*, Paris (2001) ; *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur* with the title of Grand Officier (1999).

⁴⁷ Andrei Pleșu, *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

sasters by use of an expiatory anecdote, Andrei Pleșu became one of the most read and sought-out contemporary essayists.

The halls where he lectured, from the National Theater in Bucharest to the Great Hall of the University of the West in Timișoara, were always packed out. He was instrumental in setting up new places of encounter between the world of business and academia. Two of these initiatives were the Microsoft Conferences series and the educational roundtable discussions and seminars of the “Life for Life” Foundation. Andrei Pleșu pleaded for a stronger relationship of trust and cooperation between the business world (always in need of a qualified local labor force) and the educational bodies (which are indispensable if more societal reforms are to be successfully implemented). This improvement of communication requires an endorsement of classical liberalism in the field of economics, and a more sophisticated notion of charity and philanthropy, in support of individual freedom, religious values, academic excellence, ecological responsibility, and the protection of national heritage.

Andrei Pleșu has often called for the rekindling of the traditions of meritocracy which foster a competitive medium for the selection and promotion of a new elite. After almost two decades of “brain drain” and mass immigration to the West, Andrei Pleșu has repeatedly defended the establishment of programs designed to facilitate the return of the most outstanding talent of Romania. While a large number of media tycoons were willing to support televised garbage, Professor Pleșu called for the tightening of the standards of higher education. When the shortcomings of the post-communist transition seemed ubiquitous, leading to widespread nepotism and rampant corruption, he did his best to connect the Romanian academic scene to the intense and valuable debates being carried out in the outstanding universities overseas.

As the author of several collections of essays which enjoyed great success on the literary market — such as *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției* (*Faces and Masks of Transition*, 1996), *Obscenitatea publică* (*Public Obscenity*, 2004) and *Despre bucurie în est și vest* (*On Joy in East and West*, 2006) — Andrei Pleșu has made the most, in a therapeutic sense, of the right to free expression. His texts illustrate, with enormous literary expressivity, two important gifts of practical wisdom: discernment and prudence. These are virtues that had withered away under the exasperations of transition, but which remain indispensable for a just evaluation of the past and a reasonable assessment of current challenges — among writers, factions, parties, ideologies or different philosophical schools gathered at the table of common decency.

In 1994, Andrei Pleșu founded the New Europe College in Bucharest, being the recipient of an important award (the *New Europe Prize for Higher Education and Research*), granted in 1993 by six institutions for advanced studies (*The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences*, Stanford; *The Institute for Advanced Study*, Princeton; *The National Humanities Center*, Research Triangle Park; *The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Wassenaar; *The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social*

Sciences, Uppsala; and the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*).⁴⁸ Through a mobilization of almost exclusively private resources, a center of excellence was created for young scholars, primarily trained abroad after 1989, who often lacked access to institutional opportunities after their return to Romania.

Over ten academic programs (of which five are still active) have facilitated, for more than five hundred Romanian and foreign researchers, an opportunity for direct involvement in the current topics of debate in the humanities and social sciences. A substantial annual yearbook gives ample evidence of the fact that, at NEC, local research is being conducted by Western academic standards. The monthly conferences — most boasting of international participation — continue to draw a large number of students and professors. Many are the young people who have stepped into Professor Pleșu's office at NEC only to leave overwhelmed by the inexhaustible resources of his Abrahamic hospitality. Andrei Pleșu always offered them not only intellectual stimulation, but also — whether through pert humor or concentrated attention — the extra element necessary for the regeneration of the soul's affective capacities. Though such a confession may run the risk of appearing maudlin, many young people whose dreams had been shattered have relearned to love Romania after meeting Andrei Pleșu.

In a world of suffocating egocentrisms and the verbal censorship of the politically correct, Andrei Pleșu invites you to breathe freely, to think for yourself, to courageously take the risk to make a mistake. No matter how heavy the subject of a meeting might be, Andrei Pleșu puts his interlocutor at ease. His words can bring optimism even where an emotional breakdown seems imminent. When he senses the patina of neurosis, Professor Pleșu proposes to slow down, if not to stop. When confronted with balkanic lethargy, however, he takes up pragmatism and efficiency. The intensification of the tone of the conversation never degenerates into either a relaxation lacking intentionality or an activism without purpose. Even while celebrating the moment of meeting with another, Andrei Pleșu captures the essence of the occasion, always proposing unexpected parallelisms of analysis and judgment, preparing the way for the idea to be re-launched in the form of a project of lasting duration. Only the verb “to inspire” can describe it.

The house at 21 Strada Plantelor has proved how relevant elegance, knowledge, and generosity are, in a world plagued by the shadow of the old turpitudes and the impotence of post-revolutionary resentments. Having at its foundation the “great entente” between the unconventional pragmatism of Anglo-Saxon culture, the Francophone suppleness of expression of ideas, and the Teutonic insistence on seriousness, NEC has become a brand of European

⁴⁸ Lord Dahrendorf, “Laudatio”, ms., p. 2: “it was Pleșu's incorruptibility in all regards, his persistence, and his genial and wise presence which made all the difference” (document available online at <http://www.nec.ro/10years/evaluations.htm>, accessed on 22.09.2008). The speech was made in 2004, on the occasion of the “Hannah Arendt” Prize for New Europe College.

Romania. An excellent library, devoted personnel, and an atmosphere of freedom — all of these have made the New Europe College a point of attraction for hundreds of young researchers.⁴⁹ At the college's Tenth Anniversary, Rector Andrei Pleșu made the following comments about an institution which still lasts today: "NEC's role is to create the necessary environment for intellectual research and debate, at the same time encouraging active involvement not only in politics, but also in academic circles."⁵⁰

From December 29, 1997, until December 2, 1999, Andrei Pleșu accepted the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the first cabinet organized by the opposition parties. He practiced this new type of leadership with discernment and grace, and especially so in circumstances that were difficult for the whole region of the Balkans as well as for Romania, which was struggling to meet the requirements for admission into NATO. The exercise of political power was systematically tempered by the sentiment of responsibility, an incisiveness without stridency, and, in particular, an awareness of his own impermanence. Gabriel Liiceanu recalls him in this novel position:

In the international diplomatic atmosphere, asphyxiated by its own routine, codes, protocols, and often by programmed mediocrity, Andrei Pleșu brought the verve of someone who could act freely even when required to perform according to the script.⁵¹

This was an intense period, marked by the aerial war in the former Yugoslavia, but also the process of renewal of the Romanian diplomatic corps, with the aim of total recognition on the part of the European and North Atlantic bodies. Andrei Pleșu gambled at that time on the talent of several promising young diplomats, many of which proved to be remarkable players in the regional geopolitical reconstruction of their country. Externally, his two year term confirmed Romania's firm choice in favor of NATO, but also the refusal of the dictatorship of collective rights in the Balkans (the latter best indicated by his opposition to the ground invasion of Kosovo). In 1999, Andrei Pleșu refused the "hamletian dilemma" or the ostrich's position which,

⁴⁹ Among the people who are directly responsible for the good functioning of this institution are: architect Marina Hasnaș (executive director); Dr. Anca Oroveanu (scientific director); Irina Vainovski-Mihai (program coordinator); Lelia Ciubotariu (rector's assistant); Alina Hera (assistant to the executive director); Cornelia Dobrotă (librarian); Maria Anghelescu (librarian); Dragoș Julea (IT coordinator).

⁵⁰ Transcription of a tape recording, which I have obtained courtesy of Cristian Preda. Among the NEC alumni who have held important diplomatic or ministerial positions are: Vlad Alexandrescu, Cătălin Avramescu, Teodor Baconsky, Adrian Cioroianu, Marius Lazurca, Mircea Miclea, Horia-Roman Patapievi, Cristian Preda, Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, Mihai Șora (senior fellow) and Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu. Other diplomats recommended by professor Pleșu are Toader Paleologu jr., Elena Ștefoi or Sever Voinescu.

⁵¹ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Declarație de iubire* [Declaration of Love] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2001), p. 144.

in conditions requiring willpower and decision, discovers the hidden values of autism. A private admirer of Winston Churchill, Andrei Pleșu made the effort to communicate transparently with the press and civil society in matters of popular mythology, like the Serbian story, sandwiched between the American and Slavophile narratives, respectively. Through the pragmatics of open and stylized communication, the public discourse of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became, *pour une fois*, free of wooden language and hazy rhetoric. An intellect capable of alternating between a voluntary reading of “The Way of the Pilgrim” and the required dialogues with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright or General Wesley Clarke — commander of American troops in Europe in 1999 — could not help but become famous in the anthology of Romanian diplomatic excellence. In the words of Gabriel Liiceanu,

A vast character, with multiple resources, endowed with a velvet aloofness and amiably outclassing all the rest, effortlessly achieving high performance and brilliance in everything he happens to do, modulating within any human register (devastating in derision and adorable in banter), capable of adapting to any setting (from parties with fiddlers to meetings with old men and queens), viscerally incapable of tolerating an affront, passionate and unwilling to recognize a mistake, endowed with a good faith that sometimes verges on credulity, becoming relativist and indulgent when confronted with categorical judgments, but grave and pathetically serving the truth when principles are violated, distant and engaged, drawn to monastic rigors and voluptuously melting in the vanities of the world, Andrei Pleșu easily evokes, with his stature, the collective phantasm of the Romanian intellectual who, from the revolution on, feeling himself free, has decided to abolish hierarchies. Not a few times has he become the victim of those who, seeing their littleness in front of him, while they could have admired him, have chosen to detest him—and be tormented.⁵²

Finally, after this last ministerial tenure, we must mention the presence of Mr. Pleșu in the *National Commission for the Study of the Archives of the Former Securitate* (2000–2004). This experience was marked more by failures than successes, including the contestations of the purists and the calumny of the professional antagonizers. As a citizen who had been under the surveillance of the former political police of the Romanian Communist Party, Andrei Pleșu decried the delays in the implementation of the law granting access to files, as well as the questionable culling out that preceded the opening of the archives. Here is a warning from October 1997: “If we do not have the courage to confront the reality of the toxin, we will be condemned to live with its mythology. We will avoid the disagreeable moments of unmasking, but we will have to go on breathing toxic air.”⁵³ After more than a decade, the results of this process

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159.

⁵³ Andrei Pleșu, “Access to files,” *Obscenitatea publică* [Public Obscenity] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), p. 94.

of plastic surgery on the purulent tissue of Romanian society have been less than convincing. The cynical executants of orders from the RCP, former high-ranking officers and countless other informers of maximum impenitence, are still in positions of power (political, economic, educational or ecclesiastical), and remain immune to the appeal for decency. In the absence of a clear legal framework or an impartial justice system which would facilitate the moral cleansing of the society, the utopia of moral reform has been suspended. A partial unveiling of the intricacies of the communist apparatus could not trigger a real transformation of the criteria of historical or journalistic analysis, managing only to offer the spectacle of the lynching of a few scapegoats.

Religious Synthesis

For Andrei Pleșu, the pronounced ethical and political activism of 1988–2005 was always balanced by a religious counterpoint. The roots of his spiritual quest go back to the depths of his first ‘seeker period’, during his high school years. This primordial enthusiasm also resurfaced in his dialogues with the philosopher Constantin Noica. On a Sunday in October 1977, while at Păltiniș together with Gabriel Liiceanu, “Andrei [Pleșu] made a short introduction, stuttered briefly and then asked Noica how he related to Jesus.” (The answer, somewhat evasive, sounded thus: “I have never dared to culturally appropriate the book of Jesus Christ, and I feel I would never have the right to turn it into a hermeneutical object; I cannot give it my name”).⁵⁴ A similar instance was the 1982 conference at Lugoj on the limits of academic culture and the need to fulfill the nature-culture-spirit triangle by taking a leap beyond erudition, philology or analytical taxonomy. A well-lived life requires more than subservience to the Enlightenment superstition of pure objectivity. To love purely, to give selflessly, to die peacefully — all these involve the rigors of the upward spiritual journey.

In search of a theo-poetics to which he refused to give a name, Andrei Pleșu wrote in 1990 the preface to the volume “The Heavens of the Olt” by Valeriu Anania (who in 1993 became Archbishop Bartolomeu of Cluj). Two years later, he wrote to Eugen Ionescu on “the central problem of my life right up until yesterday: to find in the implacable fluency of the intellect the fracture,

⁵⁴ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniș*, *op. cit.*, p. 36; on June 12th, 1984, Andrei Pleșu wrote from Germany to the master Constantin Noica: “starting from several forgotten German romantics, I try to reposition the human in the real hierarchy of Being; thus, I have embarked upon some intense readings about the animal kingdom on the one hand, and the «angelic» kingdom, on the other hand. «Angelology» is the missing chapter of contemporary theological dogma.” Constantin Noica replies: “your intermediary worlds converse with my invisible principles (*arheii*). We will also have things to talk about.” See *Epistolar* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1987), pp. 227–228.

the discontinuity, the void through which I could glimpse the unintelligible gesticulations of God.”⁵⁵ This invisible passage between the coherence of discursive reason and the “super-luminous darkness” of God cannot be crossed over except through a courage of the inner being. In fact, this leap has a name: *fides*. In contrast to *ratio*, faith

[does not] lapse — like positive knowledge — into the mechanical exchange of questions and answers; faith comes as the *fulfillment* of a *quest*. The difference is that the question puts the questioner in the position of one who waits. This is a common way of missing out on faith. In contrast, the quest is an offensive action; it is a way of undertaking something. I have always been troubled by my own and others’ inertia when it came to the problem of faith: this is the inertia of those who claim they *want* to believe but they *cannot*. Usually, this is where we stop: we *want* to believe; we do not try to experience *any* of the presuppositions of faith, we do not read the sacred texts, we do not read the texts of the patristic tradition, we do not pray, we do not go to church. We simply *want* to believe. Because, if we do not believe, then how can we do these things that make no sense to us? This is yet another proof that, in fact, we want to know. We conceive religious life as the *practice* of a certitude, when it is only a *canonized quest*. A quest, not a possession.⁵⁶

Professor Andrei Pleșu expressed similar opinions in his evening dialogues with Father Constantin Galeriu (1918–2003) in the company of Gabriel Liiceanu and Sorin Dumitrescu.⁵⁷ Without searching for consensus, the encounter between a servant of the Church, a Christian artist and two secular philosophers revealed a less known facet of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Voiced by Father Galeriu, the teachings of the Church are seen as compatible with the heights of metaphysical speculation — to which St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Maximos the Confessor, and St. John of Damascus were already familiar —, but also attentive to “the place of the heart,”⁵⁸ a fundamental pre-condition of theological knowledge. Quotations from the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) were placed in a natural way alongside fragments from the work of Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), the founder of logotherapy — everything being orchestrated in a propaedeutic sense so as to demonstrate that faith fully assumed does not sterilize intelligence, nor does it condemn pure curiosity to a premature euthanasia. Instead of the sort of facile exposition of the antitheses which characterizes both the position of the skeptical thinker and the enthusiasm of the neophyte, these dialogues produced

⁵⁵ Andrei Pleșu, *Limba păsărilor*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵⁷ Părintele Galeriu, Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Sorin Dumitrescu, *Dialoguri de seară* [Evening Dialogues] (Bucharest: Harisma, 1991).

⁵⁸ Andrei Pleșu, “Despre inimă [About the heart],” *Orizont*, nr. 3 (23 martie 2007).

a reciprocal adjustment of language, a movement toward the mystery of the other person, and a correct appreciation of the difficulties of comprehension.

In 1992–1999, Andrei Pleșu taught philosophy of religion in the Department of Philosophy of the University of Bucharest, discussing topics that are generally unaccepted in a postmodern, relativist context: the relationship between master and disciple, angelology, the symbolism of the Cross, and the Book of Genesis are just a few of the subjects tackled in his courses and seminars. The bibliography of his courses includes frequent references to Asian religious traditions, also delving into the wisdom literature of Hassidic Judaism and making forays into Sufi writings. Just as Pavel Florensky in *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth* (1914), Andrei Pleșu was always looking everywhere for convergent intuitions, without negating historical differences, conflicting morphologies, the risk of “nebulous mystagogies,” theosophical drift, or anthroposophic deviations. His lectures on the philosophy of religion delivered no final answers, clear-cut systems, or presumptuous syntheses; rather they offered holographic suggestions, open-ended proposals, and theologumena. In regard to his relationship with Church doctrine, Andrei Pleșu’s texts do not contradict the conciliar decisions or the famous *consensus patrum*, but rather propose a new stylistic approach to the interpretation of the unity of the human “image” (separated, but not completely estranged from the “divine likeness”).

In the institutional realm, in addition to his university activities there were also his important seminars on the art of reading, held at the Tescani School (2000), where he coached dozens of students together with Horia-Roman Patapievi and Sorin Vieru. Starting in 2001, the *Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft* financed a research program at *New Europe College* on the topic of religious studies in Romania.⁵⁹ Its focus was on the relationship between political ideas and the rhetoric of the sacred in the light of the most recent international geopolitical developments (with inevitable reference to the events of September 11, 2001). Between 2002 and 2008, NEC has also supported financially and logistically — with help from the Foundation *Anonimul* — a team of talented classicists devoted to the Romanian translation of the *Septuagint* (the Old Testament text upon which the canon of patristic exegesis was eventually based). The results have already been made available to the greater public in the form of six volumes published by Editura Polirom.

Finally, on September 20, 2006, in the auditorium of the Romanian Athenaeum, Andrei Pleșu gave the opening lecture for the Sixth European Congress on the History of Religions, entitled “The Religious History of Europe and Asia”, which was organized by the Romanian Association for the History of Religions together with the *International Association for the History of Religions*

⁵⁹ A first volume, Anca Manolescu, Andrei Pleșu, Horia-Roman Patapievi, Gabriel Licăianu, *Sensuri metafizice ale crucii* [Metaphysical Meanings of the Cross], vol. 1 (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007).

and the *European Association for the Study of Religions*, under the prestigious patronage of President Traian Bănescu. His presentation highlighted the paradox of the encounter between the Eastern European perspective (much more attentive to the living dimension of religion but also too impatient to discard reason) and recent tendencies in Western academia, where the demystifying impulse (with its unmistakable scent of pedantry) has supplanted empathy for the object of research, as well as respect for the world from which the sacred draws its lifeblood. Dry historicism, insolent deconstruction, and cut-rate apologetics are all ways of missing out on the encounter with the authentic *homo religiosus*. On the basis of this shared vision, Andrei Pleșu accepted the directorship of the Romanian Academy's Institute for the History of Religions — a new research center open for the study of the monotheistic religions, Indo-Iranian traditions, Mediterranean polytheisms, and especially the long-awaited inquiry into the phenomenon of secularization (specifically, the political, social, and cultural contacts between the old religions and modernity).

All these successes — obtained through many battles and in spite of great obstacles — were prefaced in an important way by pilgrimages of a personal nature. The year 1991, for example, was the moment of the unexpected and “insufficiently consummated encounter” with Father Andrei Scrima (1925–2000).⁶⁰ Together with other close friends — Virgil Ciomoș, Anca Manolescu and H. R. Patapieviçi —, Andrei Pleșu took part in some lengthy private seminars on the great questions of the dialogue between science and religion, between Orthodox Christian spirituality and Western intellectual and religious traditions.⁶¹ Regarding Father Andrei Scrima — a character who was at once totally unique, providential, and disturbing — Andrei Pleșu wrote several memorable pages in the summer of 1996:

His discourse is immensely rewarding, but at the same time gives birth to frustration. His phrases suffer from endless parentheses and baroque contortions, so that the revelation, “the point,” the main idea is divulged late and often finds the reader exhausted. His introductions are ample and convoluted while

⁶⁰ Known for volumes such as *Timpul rugului aprins* [Time of the Burning Bush], Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996; *Despre isihasm* [On Hesychasm] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003); *Duhul Sfânt și unitatea Bisericii* [The Holy Spirit and the Church Unity] (Bucharest: Anastasia, 2004); *Teme ecumenice* [Ecumenical Themes] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004); *Biserica liturgică* [The Liturgical Church] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005); *Antropologie apofatică* [Apophatic Anthropology] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005); *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei* [Spiritual Experience and its Languages], 2006; *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului* [Eastern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Communism] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008); *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan* [A Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).

⁶¹ In fact, this interest was indicated by the authors and titles that Andrei Pleșu submitted to Humanitas Press — the *Terra lucida* collection of the history and philosophy of religion (including Lao Zi, Julius Evola, Frithjof Schuon, Giuseppe Tucci, Alan Watts, Heinrich Zimmer, C. S. Lewis, Jan van Ruusbroeck, Gerschom Scholem, René Guénon, Anagarika Govinda, etc.).

his capacity to postpone the clarifying statement is practically infinite. However, through its entire duration this uncomfortable rhetoric is accompanied by charming erudition and unequalled intuition, refinement and spiritual voluptuousness. His scholarly competence is unexpectedly doubled by an existential sensitivity rarely encountered, by discerning insights which run the gamut from simple candor to a dizzying penetration into the soul of his interlocutor. This is, in short, the portrait of someone who can provoke, line by line or all of a sudden, admiration, curiosity, perplexity, irritation, and love.⁶²

The encounter with Archimandrite Andrei Scrima can be read metonymically as a rediscovery of the spirit that had inspired the meetings at the Antim Monastery in Bucharest in 1945–1948. Disapproving of the haughtiness of the Cartesian intellect which, armed with the rules of geometry, attempts to barge into sacred space — cleansed by the gift of tears, noetic sensitivity, and a watchful heart —, Andrei Pleșu did not adhere either to notions of popular piety, dogma turned into slogan, or to credo put to use in the service of ideology.⁶³ An intimate of the Stavropoleos community in Bucharest — for many years under the care of hieromonk Iustin Marchiș —, Professor Andrei Pleșu also maintained a discreet relationship with some representatives of the world of Orthodox monasticism. Along with other scholars, he always sought “the path toward the center” through discourse that was articulated theologically, but unwilling to treat schematically the possibility of reflection upon reality, *sub speciaie aeternitatis*. The divine ineffability cannot be reduced to a militaristic sermon — just as critical intelligence and speculative tribulations can never take the place of the need for spiritual simplicity and humble thinking.

One cannot mimic illiterate candor after devouring a whole library. It is an illusion — and intellectual perfidy — to imagine that one can go out into the world with an innocent smile, like that of an idyllic stable hand, after years of insomnia and mental extravagance. It is inevitable — as well as *honest* — to appear before God just as you are, with the bags under your eyes, in your muddled-ness, in the splotchiness and insignificance of your nature. The rest is just a rococo script that brings to mind the 18th century aristocrats who disguised themselves as shepherds. Faith cannot be a form of disguise. Being “poor in spirit” cannot be “imitated” and refers, anyway, to something totally different from the universal solidarity of the lowest common denominator. But to take upon oneself “the sacrifice of the intellect” means also to assume *its limits* and to never pretend to be a fool in the atmosphere of a rural pastel landscape painting.⁶⁴

⁶² André Scrima, *Timpul Rugului aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), p. 6.

⁶³ Andrei Pleșu: “ideologies are the result of a contemplative need shared by simple people or a need for action shared by the sophisticated” (interview with Marius Chivu, *loc. cit.*, 2007).

⁶⁴ Andrei Pleșu, “Biserica și intelectualii [The Church and the Intellectuals],” *Chipuri și măști ale tranziției*, *op. cit.*, pp. 433–434.

This capacity to combine the insight of the heart with the vastness of intellectual inquiry has come to fruition in the superb meditation *On Angels*. Andrei Pleșu has succeeded in the unique task of transforming a subject of interest for patristic experts, medievalists and historians of religion — the role of God’s messengers in the sub-lunar world — into an immensely attractive topic. Under the pen of Andre Pleșu, angelology has become the stuff of a best-seller. Speaking about “the delightfulness of the intermediary worlds,” the difference between divine imagination and human fantasy, the guiding and guarding role of angels, the emulation of the angelic model in monastic life, about the music of the heavens and the vocation of the nations, the author rediscovers the ethics of admiration. The paradise of the angelic hierarchies moves according to the rhythm of doxology, in a meter measured by the systole and diastole of each outpouring of praise. Angels cherish each other and together they adore God — just as their demonic counterparts inspire blasphemy, degradation through hatred (of class or race), hardening of the heart, betrayal of one’s brother, the burying of one’s talents, and the homogeneity of the herd instinct. When the maximalism of the Law becomes burdensome, the guardian angel intervenes with pedagogical discretion:

That which our humanness separates, our angelic-ness brings together. You cannot love the grimace of the enemy. But you can begin to love the angelic image which protects him and, unlike you, cannot keep from loving him. Each angel loves his “client”, however feeble he or she may be. And in this unconditional angelic devotion we can glimpse once more the inexpressible quality of “the other” love, impossible and inarguable. “Love your enemy” means “remember that his angel loves him; learn to love like the angels.”⁶⁵

The book *On Angels* has enjoyed several reprints, as well as reviews that are, almost without exception, enthusiastic. In this wise the author has proved his vocation as a mediator between worlds which, when they are not ignoring one another, are prone to hurling mutual anathemas. Finally, Andrei Pleșu has announced several forthcoming volumes on religious themes, among which will be an exegesis of the New Testament parables and a commentary on the Book of Genesis. Search for serenity thus coincides with the logic of the deepening inquiry into the meaning of human existence, of the miracle of generosity, of duty towards tradition, and of the principle of continuity.

Epilogue

The lines above do not attempt to portray a triumphal march toward posterity, understood, eventually, as an aspiration to infallibility. Andrei Pleșu has

⁶⁵ Andrei Pleșu, *Despre îngerii* [On Angels] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003), p. 196.

said, regarding many of the achievements mentioned here, that they represented “a *collateral* benefit, in no way related to my own merits.” This remark is part of a broader set of convictions about the iconic nature of pedagogy and public service. In this case, iconicity can be understood as the alloy between transparency and referentiality, between the invisible and the material. The trajectory of Andrei Pleșu’s life has frustrated at every point the temptation to turn his projects into monuments. Wisdom and freedom are won when we find the courage to assume finitude, transitoriness, and our fundamental limits.⁶⁶ The final step is the one which gives voice to humility — *miserere mei Domine quoniam infirmus sum*.

The dialectic of the stages of life shows Andrei Pleșu as a solitary researcher, a public intellectual of unequalled success, and especially as a restless scholar seeking infinity. The coming decade may intensify the contemplative pathos of his works, revisiting however the fundamental themes of his previous writings. We can expect yet other publications — biblical commentaries, evocative memoirs, an impressive collection of “notes, moods, days.” There will always be a plurality of voices meeting together under the same signature, sometimes disputing their relative supremacy. In a similar vein, many minds, many languages, and many cultures meet now at this anniversary milestone to celebrate the teacher, the mentor, the *spiritus rector*, the colleague, and the friend Andrei Pleșu. The expression of gratitude for the accomplishments of the past blends naturally into a warm wish for the present and the future:

La mulți ani!

Χρόνια πολλά!

Joyeux anniversaire!

⁶⁶ Andrei Pleșu, *Minima moralia*, *op. cit.*, p. 92: “Wisdom is, therefore, a virtue of integrality: it is the spirit’s capacity to always inhabit each part of the body as well as the body’s willingness to let itself be always inhabited by a superior principle. The perfect coherence and hierarchy of the distinct registers of being — this is the healthy state we call wisdom.”