From Summer's Idle Talk to Winter's Earnest Toil

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We idled away the summer, so let us now be earnest through the winter — and what, after all, kept us from idling in summer? In summer life grows still, and sloth takes hold of it from every side until it all but sleeps, moving only at a languid pace that resembles standstill, in a patience the soul can hardly bear. Every occasion for activity is postponed to some later hour; the reception rooms are shut, the theatres are closed or as good as closed, and no one so much as mentions music or song — for who has time for musicians and singers in this vigorous, living air that stirs vitality, lightness, and mirth in souls and hearts, on tongues and in hands? A heavy air breeds a heavy languor, forcing people to go to their work listless and return to their homes laden, scarcely glancing at the table before rising from it, their souls pulling them toward sleep and their bodies toward their mother earth; they can hardly look at a bed, or anything resembling a bed, before hurrying to it and flinging themselves upon it, and then they cling to it and it clings to them, they merge into it and it merges into them, until they become, like it, something inert and lifeless, without motion or vitality — save for that languid, sluggish, heavy, graceless waking that visits them now and again, when the heat grows oppressive and the swelter intensifies, so that they rouse themselves, or all but rouse themselves, only to sink back into sleep and wake, and sink once more into its depths.

Then the day withdraws from the earth with its scorching, blazing sun, and night comes on yawning, breathing into the air hot breaths like those of a lovesick, deprived lover who has kindled in his heart, out of thwarted love, a fire fierce and blazing; and no sooner do the fringes of this indolent night touch the earth than they stir in people a listless energy that drives them to half-hearted motion, so that they leave their houses heavy with weariness, having grown weary of the world as the world has grown weary of them. They wander wherever their feet carry them, seeking some green and pleasant place where they might find a trace of a breeze that has brushed the water and lingered there awhile, so that it might carry to their faces and their hearts something of that light, gentle coolness that restores in them a measure of ease and calm. There they wish to step outside themselves and forget who they are, and so they turn to idle talk, taking it up as a sick man takes up food — hardly

tasting it except with reluctance and distaste — hoping the weather might grow milder, hoping it might soften, hoping these iced cold drinks might cool something of the fire they feel within, in soul and body alike, so that their tongues might loosen a little from their restraint, their souls might stir their wings a little and rise somewhat into the air, and quiet mirth might stir in their hearts something of ease and delight. Then night advances, and people remember that dawn will soon break, bringing with it work and burdens, obligations, heat, and constraint, and they find themselves compelled to return, unwillingly, to their houses and their beds.

Thus we spend the summer in our country, unless we belong to those fortunate few who no sooner feel the summer coming than they cross the sea to live another life elsewhere, or no sooner reckon its arrival than they hasten to the seashore, to live a life better than this sloth and languor, this falling short and failing, in which we find ourselves. The idle talk of summer is, then, something entirely natural, perfectly suited to the life of summer.

Winter, though, is another matter entirely — all joy and gaiety, all motion and vigor, all rich, sweet, productive life; in it souls find their utmost pleasure, and bodies their utmost capacity for enjoyment. Much eating, much drinking, much bustling about the earth, an eagerness for work, a forgetting of sloth, and a life filled to its very brim, overflowing or all but overflowing with the hopes and undertakings that crowd it. And then a constriction of life itself — for life grows too narrow for what we want, too small to hold all that our hopes, our desires, and our appetites would have it hold, and I very nearly forgot our duties. And is there any place for duties in this winter existence brimming with madness? Poor duties! Chased by the languor of summer and chased by the vigor of winter, their share of our attention remains forever meagre.

By my life, we are excused indeed. As for our excuse in summer, it admits neither dispute nor argument — for who could ask people to work when they are incapable of working, or to labor when they are turned away from labor? God — glorious and exalted is He — burdens no soul beyond its capacity, nor does He lay upon men what they have no strength to bear. But in winter our excuse is more eloquent still than in summer; for how could you ask us to make ourselves free for work, devote ourselves wholly to production, and discharge our duties with ardor and eagerness, when around us are temptations that nothing could resist save the soul of Socrates, or the soul of one like him? And who

knows — perhaps Socrates himself, had he lived in our days and moved in our world, would have been a man like us, turned aside by these temptations from knowing himself, from drawing out the souls of those he questioned and bringing forth from them all the truths of knowledge and wisdom, and every art of learning and every shade of good they held.

It is said that Socrates' wife held him utterly in her power, that he feared her greatly, and dreaded her beyond all measure; and had Socrates' wife lived in the city of Cairo, in the twentieth century, she would surely have set aside one day each week to receive her visitors, men and women alike. No sooner would the sun rise than she would set about preparing, and compel her husband to help her prepare, the rooms of the house to receive them, and she would hurry off, compelling him to hurry along with her, to where they might buy every kind of sweet, every sort of flower, every variety of fruit. Then, as the day advanced and four o'clock drew near, she would rise, compelling her husband to rise with her, to receive their friends and those who were not their friends — all those who frequented her reception room, whether because they were enamored of frequenting it or because they detested doing so, for Socrates' wife and women like her compel people to it regardless. Socrates' wife could never forgive this or that scholar, man of letters, or artist who neglected her, or stayed away from her reception room; she insisted, with the utmost insistence, that they appear at her house once a week, lest her friends say that her salon was not crowded with luminaries of art, giants of literature, and men of finance and business.

But when Socrates' wife and her husband had finished with the reception and all its talk — mixed and harmonious, crooked and straight, clear and obscure, fertile and barren, perilous and innocent — neither Socrates' wife nor Socrates had finished with everything; they had merely begun something with no way of ever ending. For these visitors, men and women, must have their visits returned, since they, like Socrates and his wife, are compelled to receive precisely as they were once compelled to visit. And so Socrates' wife spends, and Socrates spends with her, every evening moving from house to house and from one reception room to another, speaking words and hearing words, believing some and disbelieving others. And woe to Socrates should sloth overtake him, or boredom afflict him, or philosophy so absorb him, or should any conversation — however weighty, and whoever his interlocutors — draw him away from one of these visits; for Plato and Xenophon, Phaedo and Phaedrus, all of them can find him at home on his reception day, or in one

of those houses that receive between four and eight o'clock each day. And if there is no avoiding some discourse on nature, or on any of those things that spring up from the earth or descend from the sky, then let Socrates arrange for them one of those hours when a meeting is possible without drawing him from his social duties and exposing him to wrath — and what wrath! The wrath of the ladies!

When Socrates' wife and Socrates have finished with receptions and visits, and night has fallen, then woe, utter woe, to the great philosopher should his soul urge him to know itself, or to fulfill what was inscribed on the temple at Delphi — 'Know thyself.' Where is Socrates to find the time to be alone with himself once night has taken hold? For night does not cast its dark veils over the earth so that people may shelter in their houses, but so that they may go out from them. How, then, could you expect Socrates to shelter in his house, or to be alone with himself, when the opera house has thrown open its doors and made ready all its means, and actors and singers have flocked to it, displaying their marvels of drama and their wonders of song?

And here are the cinemas showing something new every day, and here is the Turf Club hall where so-and-so is giving a recital, and the Lycée hall where another is doing the same; and Socrates may gather all his courage and say, with a hesitant heart and a stammering tongue, that he has no liking for what is being performed tonight, or played, or sung, and that he would prefer to rest, or to withdraw for some work — but woe to Socrates for such a remark! Who told him that he attends the theatre or listens to music because he likes it or dislikes it, because he is tired or rested? He attends the theatre, listens to the music, and frequents the cinemas because people must see him at all these occasions — or else he is no true Cairene, nor a man of any standing in the city.

You may imagine that when Socrates goes to the theatre, or to one of the cinemas, or to one of the concert halls, he is free to give himself to the art, or to enjoy it — but banish that thought at once, and remember that there is the intermission, and the encounters of the intermission, and the talk of onlookers and listeners about what they have seen and heard. And what talk it is — talk that would make even the most devoted lover of art despise it! Every one of these onlookers and listeners must have an opinion to voice, a word to say about what he has seen and heard, and that opinion may well be foolish, and that word may well be ignorant — and indeed, more often than not, they are — yet Socrates is obliged to listen to them and to concede them, or to argue against them as one who

concedes and does not deny. And there is something heavier still: Socrates must have an opinion to give and a word to say, even if he has seen nothing, even if he has nothing he wishes to say — for if he fails to speak his word, he is accused of ignorance, or charged with arrogance, and neither befits the social animal of whom Aristotle spoke in his Politics, of whom, and of his like, the people of Cairo are made, just as the people of Paris are made of him and his like.

When night has advanced, Socrates returns home weary and worn, takes to his bed, and sleep soon overtakes him. You might suppose that Socrates' obligations end there — how deeply lost you are in illusion! What do you know of the lectures? And what could make you understand what the lectures are? Lectures of the Geographical Society, and others of the Economic Society, and others still in the Turf Club Memorial Hall, and others at Groppi's, and others at the Continental. Socrates' household must attend all these lectures, so as to appear pleasant and gracious, obliging toward the lecturers, male and female — and, above all, so as to be seen.

Lecturers are a hard-hearted people, caring nothing for others and nothing for themselves, but caring only for their lectures; they lecture without mercy, and they lecture without reckoning, competing with one another over their lectures and their worth and their measure of excellence — or rather, over the number of their lectures, the number of their listeners, and the space given them in the newspapers. And it may happen, unfortunately, that two lecturers deliver their lectures at the very same hour, in two different places, of course, and Socrates then finds himself obliged to attend the one, while his wife is obliged to attend the other; so that Socrates' household must be seen at both lectures at once. And when each lecturer has finished, half the household comes forward to congratulate him and greet him, and to apologize on behalf of the other half, who were occupied with the lecture of so-and-so.

What a season this is — the season of winter! It devours time, and turns people away even from life itself. The circumstances may sometimes take pity on Socrates, and the days favor him with the best of their pleasures and delights, so that he finds himself obliged, despite himself, to enjoy taking tea at so-and-so's house, then to listen to a lecture delivered by so-and-so at six o'clock, and another delivered by another at seven, and then to snatch his dinner in haste, cast off his daytime clothes, and put on his evening dress to hurry to the opera. Woe to Socrates if he owns no motorcar! And woe to the motorcar and its

driver, if Socrates does own one, in these deceitful, agonizing days of winter!

Then tell me, after all this, how Socrates could possibly find himself free for his philosophy, for knowing himself, and for conversing with his disciples once morning comes? Where would he find the strength that might allow him to philosophize, or search for himself, or converse with his friends, after this violent exertion he has spent, or endured, from the fall of evening until the night has passed, or all but passed? And yet Socrates must still attend to his philosophy, still search for himself, still converse with his friends — for it is by this that he lives, and for this that he lives, and for the sake of this that he lives.

Do you see now that the ages did Socrates no injustice when they set his life in the fifth century before Christ, in that time when salons had not yet arisen, when lectures had not yet multiplied, when theatres and concert halls had not yet proliferated, and cinemas had not yet appeared? Socrates was truly happy; he attended the theatre only a few days each year — once in spring, in the season of tragedy, and once in autumn, in the season of comedy. He would frequent certain houses — the house of Pericles, for instance, to hear some sophist speak, or to converse, or simply to enjoy the company of that beautiful woman, the wife of Pericles. And he spent what remained of his time — the greater part of it, without doubt — wandering with his philosophy through the streets of Athens, or seeking himself in the baths of Athens and its gymnasiums. And I am certain that had Socrates been given the choice between this sweet, pleasant life of ours and his heavy prison cell, with the hemlock he drank there, he would have chosen the prison and the poison over these long, oppressive pleasures that we endure in the season of winter.

Do you see now that summer is the season in which idle talk is fitting, and winter the season in which nothing is fitting, nothing possible, but earnestness? And you may suppose that what I have told you is the whole of winter's earnestness — but banish that illusion from yourself; for winter holds another earnestness still, wholly bitter, without a trace of sweetness in it. You will agree with me that visiting and receiving, attending lectures, watching plays, and listening to singers and musicians, all of it requires expense — for the clothes one wears to tea are not the clothes one wears to the theatre.

But what is it I mean to say? And why do I draw you into this talk, in which there is neither wit nor pleasure? Is this all the earnestness that

winter brings us? No — for winter holds yet another earnestness, an earnestness truly fruitful, truly useful, an earnestness by which we live and with which we amuse ourselves, though its own people reap from it nothing but a life of hardship, privation, and want. It is the earnestness of those peasants who labor in the earth, heedless of the cold, as the cold is heedless of them.

And winter holds yet another earnestness — an earnestness that rends the heart, torments the soul, and stirs anguish and sorrow in the breasts of those who know mercy and tenderness, who remember, even in their amusements, that there are others upon this earth tormented by hunger, pressed hard by cold, who pass nights better exchanged for the darkness of the grave. In this dark, somber, oppressive, burning air of winter — an air portrayed most beautifully and most eloquently in that famous song, the Song of Charity, which I have never been able to greet a winter, since I first came to know it, without hearing it again and again:

‘Here comes this winter, and with it its mournful retinue; how greatly the wretched suffer in winter; it is our duty to shelter them from this misery; how bitter is the cold in their bare, deserted dwellings!’