

ANTINOUS had been born in 1551 at Ardo, a small mountain town in the far north of Italy, where in all likelihood he remained until he began to study in 1565. Apart from one particular event, to which he was to return time after time for the rest of his life, little is known about his early years. The names of his parents and native town do not figure anywhere in Antinous's writings, and, as they are otherwise characterized by a large amount of biographical detail, this early obscurity has aroused the curiosity of many readers. But if one is to attempt to understand Antinous, it isn't to the inner man one must turn. For even if one succeeded in charting his inner landscape as it actually *was*, right down to the smallest fissure and groove in the massif of his character, imperceptibly shaped by the slow erosion of events, and traced the course of the flood of feelings back to their source, one would end up no wiser and the meaning of what was being charted would remain obscure. Even if the events and relationships of his life were to correspond exactly with a life in our own time, one that we could understand and recognize, we would still come no closer to him. Antinous was, first and foremost, of his time, and to understand who he was, *that* is what must be mapped. The minimal emphasis we place on this difference is due perhaps in particular to the lasting influence of Freud, that speculative genius of the twentieth century, whose fatal confusing of culture with nature, combined with his equally fatal insistence on the external event's inner consequences, has influenced our self-understanding more than anything else, and lured us so far away from our ancestors that we believe they were like us. But our world is only one of many possible worlds, something of which the writings of Antinous and his contemporaries serve to remind us in no small measure.

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The decisive event in Antinous's life occurred when he was eleven years old. Where he'd come from, we're not told, nor where he went afterward, and the fact that the incident is surrounded by obscurity makes each detail in his narrative stand out with unprecedented clarity. The red tinge of the earth he walks on, the green leaves of the riverside trees he's approaching, the yellow sun, the blue sky, the shimmering dragonfly that hovers for an instant in the air in front of him, before it breaks free and next moment is flying away to the trees. The fishing rod he's carrying over his shoulder, his dusty feet, his brow glistening with sweat. The way the shadows from the trees are splintered by sunbeams into small, quivering lattices of light as the wind takes hold of the boughs and gently rocks them up and down. The moss on the stones by the river's edge, the distortions of the current on the black surface, trouser legs that darken with water when he steps into the water, eyes that close in rapture.

All that long Sunday he's been looking forward to this. Coming here, to this shady pool in the river, his regular spot, to fish.

After a while he gets up, pulls out a worm he's been carrying in his pocket, and threads it on the hook. Even with half its body impaled, it tries to wriggle free. Its pale pink color and the small grooves on its skin make it look a bit like a finger, he thinks, as he studies it for a moment before clasping the writhing end and impaling that on the hook as well. Then he casts it out onto the water.

When, half an hour later, he hasn't had a single bite, he walks a few hundred yards upriver to the next fishing place. But there are no bites here, either. Feeling restless, he decides to hide his rod and go exploring up the valley instead. He stands a while above the rapids and stares down into the sparkling water, fascinated by how all its various movements always occur in one place, from the swelling current at the top, where the water looks as if it's flowing inside a membrane, to the roaring fall below the ledges, which almost seems to be *plowed* into the waiting mass of water below, there to create innumerable small eddies on the surface.

The eddies are made up of water, he thinks. So why don't they flow away when the water flows away?

He chucks a stick into the river above the rapids and follows it, running down faster and faster, until it goes over the edge and disappears into the foam. When,

a little while later, it comes gliding into the backwater, he's there ready to pick it up. He repeats this game a couple of times before he tires of it and continues his journey. He follows a path up the rough mountainside and halts, damp with sweat, at the summit to look out across the plain. The town he comes from, lying in shadow under the mountains on the other side, is hard to see with the bright light in his eyes. The thought that a stranger probably wouldn't have spotted it fills him with pride, for *he* knows, *he* sees. For a while he amuses himself pointing out various houses and places to the stranger, who's just as amazed each time. Is that a *house*, you say? Who would have thought it? It looks just like part of the mountain! Then he turns and gazes down at the forest in the valley on the other side. Dark green and dense it lies, ringed by mountains, as if in a crater. There are tales told about this forest, but now, highlighted here and there by clearings, meadows, and small, glittering lakes, it doesn't seem the least threatening, and without giving it a second thought he carries on down the path.

When he gets into the valley, he's struck by how silent it is. The air is quite stagnant between the trees, as if exhausted by the heat. The shade beneath the treetops is scaled by shafts of light, filled in places by small pockets of swarming insects. There is the scent of resin, dry pine needles, warm earth. The water in the stream he's following is greenish black in the gloom beneath the great conifers, blue and sparkling where the sky opens up above it, shiny white and frothing in the terrace-like falls leading to the little lake in the middle of the valley. Full of adventure, he runs this way and that and, completely impervious to the approach of evening, moves ever deeper into the valley. He sees a wasps' nest under a branch, he sees a meadow filled with butterflies, he sees a dead cow in a ditch, and the disgusting stink that emerges when he finally manages to push a stick into its rotting belly almost makes him sick. He sees a dried snakeskin in some scree, he sees a cherry tree in full bloom, he sees a hare bound past him in the grass only a few yards away, and as the sun goes down, he's lying on his stomach in front of a huge anthill studying the strange life going on there. He doesn't notice that the sun's rays are moving higher and higher up the mountainsides and that the valley around him is gradually filling with darkness. Nor does he register that the birds have stopped singing, or that the constant hum of insects gradually decreases. He is watching the workers marching in long lines with their small loads of organic material on

their backs, pine needles, pieces of leaf, blades of grass, or bits of dead insect they have come across on their journey, and the posted sentries that constantly go up to the lines of ants and sniff them, like dogs, and occasionally raise themselves up and gesticulate with their forelegs, at which the alien ant, having perhaps believed that its identity was a well-kept secret in the throng, rushes off and disappears into the undergrowth.

After a while he takes a twig and pokes it gingerly into the anthill, curious to see the chaos this causes, the furious concentration of thin legs and chubby bodies as the ants come streaming up from all directions. At the same time he finds it repulsive, he doesn't really want to destroy their work, but there is something almost magical about being able to influence a chain of events in this way, and he's not really *ruining* their anthill, is he? They're so hardworking, they'll soon have it mended again.

He pokes the stick into the other side of the anthill, keen to see how they will rise to the challenge. A new wave of ants pours out, while the first ones, certain that the danger is now past, have already set about repairing the damage he's just caused. For a time he switches between them, enjoying seeing how quickly they switch from attack to defense, until without giving it a thought he thrusts the stick into the anthill as hard as he can and starts wiggling it around. The way the porous mixture of earth, pine needles, and twigs yields to his movements gives him a strangely satisfying feeling. And as parts of the anthill have already fallen in, he may as well continue, he thinks. At the same time he begins to despise what he's doing. But in a strange way, it's precisely this disgust that causes him to carry on. He knows just how strong his remorse will be when it's over, and he wants to put that moment off for as long as possible, while his despair at what he's doing creates a kind of fury within him. He begins to kick at the anthill, more and more wildly, not stopping until it has collapsed completely and the ground around him is dark with crawling ants. Then he throws down his stick and hurries away.

Even though dusk is dimming everything he sees, and great sails of darkness have lapped up some places entirely, he still doesn't think about how late it is. He only wants to put as many yards and as much time between him and his crime as possible. *What have I done*, he thinks, *what have I done, what have I done?*

Only when the path he is following enters a meadow he can't remember seeing

before does the seriousness of the situation dawn on him. Soon it will be completely dark. And not only is he several miles from home, he is also well off the track that leads there.

For a long time he stands motionless on the forest brow looking across the meadow. The summit of the dark mountain behind it shows clearly against the inky blue sky, where the moon, which all day long has floated pale and ghostly above the horizon, has now appeared. He can see the shadows thrown on the mountains, the luminous plateaus.

It's as if it's moving toward him, he thinks. As if it's gliding in from space like a ship from the sea.

Suddenly he shivers: there's a rustling noise in the undergrowth nearby. The sound moves quickly away over the forest floor, but when it stops it isn't replaced by silence, as he's unconsciously been anticipating; quite the contrary, it opens the way to a host of other small sounds. A twig cracks here, a bush rustles there, somewhere in the distance an owl hoots. Then, with a sigh, the wind rises in the valley and the branches of the trees behind him begin to sway. He thinks that they're like blind people grasping at something. Or the dead waking. He imagines how their shadows float unseen through the darkness about him. But if he stays still, he thinks, perhaps nothing will notice he's there. No wild beasts, no evil spirits, no dead souls . . . At the same time he's itching to get away from the place. It won't be long before the darkness is total, and if he's not out of the forest by then, he'll never find the way home.

He steels himself several times, thinking, *Now I'll run*, but each time fear prevents him from putting the thought into action. Only when the owl hoots again and he hears that it has come closer are his thoughts matched by movement. He begins to run, and he runs as fast as he can, because owls are creatures of the devil, they have human eyes and birds' bodies, and hearing one so soon after what he's done must be an omen. Perhaps more than an omen, too. Perhaps they're flying through the black treetops at this very moment searching for him. Perhaps they've just caught sight of him. Perhaps they're stooping through the darkness above him right now . . .

At that moment he realizes that he's approaching the scene of his crime. He never wants to set eyes on that ruined anthill again, the mere thought of it fills

him with desperation, and, as he doesn't dare stop either, he runs into the forest in what he thinks is a gently curving detour that will bring him back onto the path again after a few hundred yards.

Like a frightened animal he crashes through the thick undergrowth. He aims for a tree about fifty yards in front of him; when he gets to it, he turns to the left and goes on another fifty yards before he begins to look out for the path. It should be about there, he thinks. Behind the tree trunk *there*. When he gets to it, he realizes that it's behind the other tree trunk *there*. Provided he hasn't crossed it without noticing?

No, not a chance!

But when it's not there either, a little shadow of doubt enters his mind. He halts and leans against a tree to catch his breath while he stares into the darkness in front of him. Could he have run too far? Could it be in the forest higher up?

Then he understands. Of course, the path has turned! That's why he hasn't found it yet. It's just a matter of keeping on, he thinks, glancing up for a moment at the sky, where darkness is just about to extinguish the last remnants of blue. Then he starts running again. This time he runs several hundred yards before doubt again gets the upper hand. There is no path here. He must have run the wrong way. The path is in the other direction, he thinks, and begins to run back in the direction he's come from. Now he can barely see his hand in front of his face. He stumbles, gets to his feet, stumbles again. The thought that he's got himself lost is so awful that he pushes it away by giving himself small encouragements each time it surfaces. He thinks constantly that he can recognize formations in the landscape about him. That toppled tree, this moss-grown rock face, that bit of bog. Even when these signs turn out not to fit, he refuses to make any concession to doubt, provided he keeps straight on, he thinks, he must eventually come to the path or the mountainside. He strays into a thicket of thorns, one cheek and the backs of both hands get scratched, but he doesn't notice, he's going to find the path, it's somewhere close by, he knows it is. Behind that rise there, perhaps, he thinks, but it isn't there, nor behind the next rise either . . .

Finally he can't run any farther, and the fear, which during the past half hour has drifted about within him on its own, shut in behind the hammering heart and furious panting, can once again connect with its source. Even the smallest sound

strikes him like a stone and spreads its unchecked ripples of anxiety when it touches bottom. *If only I hadn't destroyed that anthill*, he thinks.

In the pale moonlight the shadows around him have formed themselves into figures. He can see them clearly, they stand in huddles under the trees and watch him, and when they whisper to each other, it's his name they're whispering. *Antinous*, they whisper. *Antinous*.

Without taking his eyes off them he stops, clasps his hands, and begins to pray. *Our Father, who art in heaven.*

A sigh passes through the figures in the forest around him.

*This evening I destroyed an anthill. But I didn't mean to. I don't know why I did it. It was a sin and I repent. Please forgive me.*

Are they retreating?

*Help me get out of here. Please, help me get out of here.*

Yes, they are moving away. At first he hardly dares believe it, and peers suspiciously into the gloom. But when they remain motionless, even when he takes a few steps into them, he realizes they've gone.

It's just a matter of finding the path, he thinks. He can't remember which way he came from anymore, and he starts walking in the direction where the trees seem to be least thick. He imagines God is directing his footsteps. Around him the forest becomes sparser and sparser until, after a few hundred yards, it opens into a clearing. And there is the ridge.

There is the ridge!

The fact that he can't see the path he descended earlier in the day doesn't concern him in the least, because the ridge's side isn't steep and is easy to force, even in the dark. And on the other side will be the plain. Once he gets there, he'll be able to find his way to town as easily as anything.

But when, a quarter of an hour later, he halts at the summit, it's only to discover that instead of sloping down into the plain as he'd imagined, it plunges straight into a ravine, from which another mountainside rises.

This can only mean that he's on the *other* side of the valley. That the entire forest is between him and the plain.

This time he can't hold back the tears. A sob racks him, and the stream of feelings that follow no longer meets any resistance but wells up unchecked inside

him, until it fills him entirely and he throws himself weeping to the ground. His thoughts, too, dissolve and merge into the spasms. He lies there without noticing anything apart from his own despair, locked within his own darkness, and where no time exists, for when his tears subside and his breathing at last returns to its normal rhythm, he has no idea how long he's been gone.

It's as if he's slept, he thinks, and then woken up in a different place.

Totally relaxed in body, he sits up and dries his eyes on his sleeve. At least he's gotten out of the forest! The treeless darkness up here seems purer somehow, he thinks, and decides to endure whatever lies in store for him.

The first thing he must do is find a safe place to sleep.

He gets to his feet and begins to walk along the ridge while inspecting the terrain in front of him. After a few minutes he catches sight of a ledge protruding a little way down the mountainside. When he clammers down to it, he finds to his joy that it forms the roof of a deep, narrow cave, which actually widens out at the back, where it almost becomes like a small room. Here he can sleep securely. But not comfortably: the ground is hard and uneven, and after trying various positions, he crawls out again to collect some conifer branches from the trees he saw growing on the mountainside below the mouth of the cave.

It is then he makes the discovery. Some five hundred yards farther down, at the end of the ravine, a small prick of light floats in the darkness. His first impulse is to hurry toward it, and he actually begins to clamber downward, but stops after only a few yards, for who could be out at this time of night? It might be shepherds, but it could also be bandits . . .

Or perhaps it's people from the town searching for him?

There is only one thing children find harder to hold back than tears, and that is joy. Antinous is no exception. The odds against anyone searching for him just *here* isn't something that crosses his mind. Nor yet the unreasonableness of doing so in such utter darkness as this. One does not argue with joy, one surrenders to it, and after his first instant of doubt, he begins the steep descent into the ravine. If he were certain they were well-disposed, he might have called down to them, but this he doesn't do; on the contrary, he's careful to make as little noise as possible. Whenever he dislodges a stone and it begins to roll down, he stays still for a while before continuing.



The upper reaches of the slope are steep, in several places he has to search for hand- or footholds on the mountain, but on the last bit the gradient relents, and soon he's standing down by the riverbank, surrounded by the noise of the waterfall, whose white curtains he can just glimpse in the darkness to his right. To the left the river cuts in behind a shoulder of rock. It is perhaps fifty feet high and hides the light completely. As he doesn't know what awaits him there, he decides to go up the slope a bit again, so as to close in on them as unnoticed as possible, whoever they are.

Although the light is hidden behind the projection, the darkness up toward the top of it is less intense, like the sky the moment before the sun peeps over the horizon, and he can see the outline of each tree in the stunted forest around him. He thinks that perhaps his father is sitting on the far side along with other men from the town. A pulse of joy courses through him as he imagines how happy they will be when he walks down to them from out of nowhere. But if it is them, he thinks, he ought to hear them soon. They've no reason to be quiet. Or could they have lain down to sleep?

He stops and listens. But the only thing he hears is his own heart. Worried by the silence, he places each foot carefully before transferring his weight over to it as he moves on, and when he comes to the highest point of the shoulder, which is bare, he gets down on his stomach and wriggles forward. Just before he reaches the lip, he stops and listens.

Nothing.

Cautiously he raises his head and looks over the edge. The sight that meets his eyes petrifies him. Two cloaked men are standing motionless on the riverbank staring up at him. Quick as lightning he ducks and presses his face to the ground. Did they see him? Or was it just a noise that made them look up? He shuts his eyes and tries to make out if they're on their way up toward him. If he hears so much as a twig snap, he'll take to his heels and run away from them as fast as he can. But the silence is unbroken, and a few seconds later, when he's convinced himself that they couldn't have seen anything, blinded by their own light as they must have been, he again lifts his head above the lip.

The two figures stand as immobile as before. But now they're looking at the water in front of them. One holds a torch in his hand, the other a spear. Both wear chain

mail under their cloaks and each has a sword hanging at his side. The glare from the torch encircles them and makes it look as if they're standing in a cave of light.

Slowly they begin to wade out into the river. They stop roughly in the middle, and one lowers his torch toward the water's surface as the other raises his spear to throw. The quivering light of the flame leaves their faces and the uppermost parts of their bodies in shadow. Even so, it's impossible to take one's eyes off them. In some strange way, Antinous's gaze seems to meet no resistance, it's as if it vanishes into them. He looks at the deep red color of their cloaks, enhanced by the light from the torch, he looks at the black metal of the mail and the shining silver scabbards, he looks at the lowered arm and the reflection of the fire in the water. He looks at their mysterious faces, half hidden by the dark, he looks at the small eddies round their boots, the long, narrow fingers curled around the spear, the turned wrist, and all he wants is to be in their presence. Without giving a thought to what he's doing, he gets up and begins to walk slowly down, all the time concealed by the trees and with his eyes fixed on the two figures, who display no sign of having heard him, but stand there still as ever. Halfway down he notices their wings and thinks what has until then been just a vague inkling: there are two angels standing in the river. The rush of fear and happiness that this sends coursing through him is almost unendurable. Despite it, he ventures right down to a small hummock on the mountain only ten yards away from them, behind which he can hide. But he isn't able to look at them, even though he wants to, his closeness to them overwhelms him, and for a long time he lies quite still with his eyes closed and his face pressed to the ground.

When the residual image of the angels has cleared from his retina, the blackness in his head is filled with the rush of the waterfall, the almost imperceptible ripple of water along the bank, his own thudding pulse. But although he tries as hard as he can, he hears not a sound from them, and little by little the desire to see them overcomes his fear.

He opens his eyes and is just about to lift his head when there is a kind of hissing from their direction. Appalled, he lies still.

Have they noticed him?

One of them takes a few steps through the water, he hears how it splashes against the angel's feet, but then it goes quiet again, and slowly he raises his head

above his cover. This time it is only with the greatest caution that he allows his gaze to close in on them. Slowly he lets it sweep across the water's black surface, into the glare of the torch, at first visible only as a glossier texture of blackness, then lighter and lighter, until it reaches the very reflection where the water flames up yellow and orange.

Then he sits up and takes in everything in one single glance.

Their faces are white and skull-like, their eye sockets deep, cheekbones high, lips bloodless. They have long, fair hair, thin necks, slender wrists, clawlike fingers. And they're shaking. One of them has hands that shake.

Just then the other one tilts its head back, opens its mouth, and lets out a scream. Wild and lamenting it reverberates up the walls of the ravine. No human being is meant to hear that cry. An angel's despair is unbearable, and almost crushed by terror and compassion, Antinous presses his face into the earth once more. He wants to help them, but he can't, he wants to be something to them, but he can't be, he wants to run away from that place, but he can't run.

Again he hears the hissing. This time it's followed by a splash, and when he looks in their direction again, one of them is just lifting the spear from the water. The fish it has impaled thrashes its tail a few times, twinkling in the light from the torch, before the angel pulls it off the point and breaks its neck.

The other one comes a few steps closer. Antinous now sees that its jaw, too, is shaking. But its expression is firm, its eyes cold and clear. The first one bites into the fish and pulls off a piece with a jerk. Then it takes the torch for the other, which grips the fish in both hands and bends its head slowly forward. It is as if the effort increases the shaking, and the first one places a supporting hand on its arm. And so, standing close together, the light flickering across their faces and the bottom of their cloaks trailing in the water, they stand eating the fish. Antinous stares at them, spellbound. The teeth that sink into the fish's flesh, the scales that cling to their chins, the eyeballs that now and then turn up and make them look white and blind. Then they look like statues standing there, for without the life of the eyes, the deadness of their faces is emphasized. Each time he sees it, Antinous recoils in fear. *They're dead*, he thinks. *They're dead*. But then the eyeballs correct themselves, the faces again fill with life, and what a moment before was loathsome in them is now beautiful again.