

**Josef Šafařík**

**Seven  
Letters  
to Melin**

Essays on the Soul,  
Science,  
Art and Mortality

# SEVEN LETTERS TO MELIN

ESSAYS ON THE SOUL, SCIENCE, ART AND MORTALITY

**Josef Šafařík**

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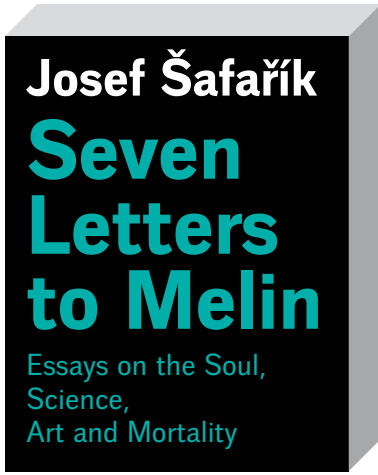
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# **1**

# **SUICIDE**



MY DEAR MELIN, – Well, well. Just look what has slipped off my pen! Melin, a name forgotten and left behind in some high school class, a nickname. God knows where it came from. I only know that you did not regard it as offensive; rather the opposite. You only used to frown when addressed in this way by someone from whom you would rather have kept as much distance as possible. This nickname was rather a sign of trust and intimacy, and it seems to me that it was exactly some such kind of feeling that guided my hand to write it and not cross it out.

Of course it is to you that I am indebted for this feeling. You would like us to discuss the case of Robert in the same unbiased and unconstrained frame of mind that, as young lads, we were once capable of talking about anything. You write that the more you think about the unfortunate end of our kinsman, the less certain you are about the ‘true causes’ of his ‘injudicious act’. Oh truly, these our certitudes! For everyone whom it concerned and did not concern, Robert’s death came as ‘logically’ and ‘inevitably’ as one and one equals two.

Our worthy aunt has decided that Robert was bound to come to such a bad end because he had forsaken God. Apparently Havlíček Borovský<sup>1</sup> also came to a bad end for the same reason. On the other hand, in the case of John of Nepomuk,<sup>2</sup> she claims that he came to a bad end because he did not forsake God. It was clear to our equally worthy uncle that Robert was spoiled by money. Indeed, money – the key to everything! As soon as money gets mixed up in human affairs, then all other reasons seem groundless and spurious alongside it. For you Robert was simply a creature without discipline and orderliness. ‘Asocial inclinations’ led him to run away from work in

**1** Czech writer and journalist, important figure in the Czech National Revival, expelled from theology studies (1821–1856).

**2** Also known as Jan Nepomuk, Czech saint (c. 1335–1393): according to some sources, drowned at the behest of Wenceslaus, King of Bohemia, for refusing to divulge secrets of confessional.

his father's factory – and in the end also from his home – to eke out a miserable existence as a vagabond.

However, Robert's deed has started to grow between us and has now even attracted your attention. You tell me that recently you have read a lot of specialist books and that as a result you are well on the way to understanding Robert not as a wicked person, but rather as a sick one. You divine 'demonic complexes' in his soul and restraints that human society placed on him. You want to rid yourself of all moral and conventional preconceptions and to examine his case as a scientist, unbiased by anything other than the will to understand and discover the truth. You admit that the term 'wicked' has no place in a scientist's terminology. But do you think that the term 'sick' has a place there? This is also something we will have to talk about.

And those demonic complexes! Society recognizes no other complexes than demonic ones. What is more disturbing is that neither does Freud recognize any others. At Calvary, society crucified three scoundrels. If you protest and claim that there were only two scoundrels and one saint, then you raise the question of what exactly a society is that does not distinguish between scoundrels and saints; that, among those who cannot get along with it, does not differentiate those who suffer demonic complexes from those who suffer angelic complexes. If it was difficult to answer this question truthfully in the past, then it is all the more difficult today, when society has become the ultimate authority and the final criterion not only in praxis, but also in theory. Nevertheless, in spite of this it will be necessary for us to reply to this question also.

There is one circumstance, I would say, that distorts your view of Robert and also of yourself. Your fortune, and also your misfortune, is that you are paid by society for your research activity regardless of whether you manage to find something out or not. I do not underestimate this material security, but neither do I overlook how, as over time your scepticism has been growing, you are becoming

accustomed to stabilize your life more from the outside than from the inside. Service stripes on your sleeve, social and professional position, material security, a wife, children, and so on: all these are keeping you above water more than you are willing to admit. But I have a question for you: The less your life is driven from within, are not the truths that you produce thereby the less worthy of attention? In this way, do you not scoop water more shallowly from the pool of life? If you use scaffolding from outside as a support for your life, you can then of course permit yourself a descent into the lowest depths of scepticism without harming yourself greatly. But where, then, is this dreadful reality that is reflected in your scepticism?

None of us is in any doubt what to think about, for instance, the ‘abysses of life and the rages of the soul’ in the verses of a teenager who lives in affluence at his mother’s, diligently attends the corso and visits the local cafe, and occasionally emboldened by alcohol sneaks through the red-light district. But what to think about this? Your searching and researching have led you to the conclusion that, for instance, ‘Life is nothing other than a whirl of electrons’ or that ‘Life is nothing other than mutual devouring and being devoured’. And I ask: What now? What follows from this? And you: nothing. Your conscience has not moved an inch to the right or to the left. Your morals have remained exactly the same. Your everyday routine has not changed in the slightest. And I ask in amazement: Where is the reality of these newly found and hard-won truths? How can one believe in them if their black hopelessness has neither crushed you nor galvanized you? Has neither frozen you into a sacrificial animal nor transformed you into a wild predator? In what way is your pessimism less merely formal than the pessimism of the teenage poet?

Where exactly is reality in the flood of what is spoken, lectured, written, and thought? Take, for example, books. A book that I have not yet read haunts me as a reproach of an unfulfilled duty. And when I get hold of it and read it, I close the book – even if the author has excellently answered all the questions that I posed to him – with

the feeling that the main thing, the final thing, the conclusive thing is still missing. This is not a rebuke to the author. It is a rebuke to books, to words, to ideas. An idea is evidently capable of accommodating more than it can bear, more than it is capable of delivering, of guaranteeing.

Professor Vladimír Úlehla<sup>3</sup> contemptuously assigns the moniker of ‘Platonists’ to those who lament over the successes of reason, while for him those who rejoice in the success of reason are ‘Aristotelians’. If we call a success of reason the conclusion that life is nothing more than a conglomerate of physical-chemical reactions, then an Aristotelian has precisely as many reasons to rejoice over this as a Platonist. One thing is certain: if it was feeling or some other irrational thing that led me as a Platonist to this dismal conception of life and the world, then I would lament over this success of feeling in precisely the same way that I lament over this success of reason. As Pascal says: ‘Do they profess to have delighted us by telling us that they hold our soul to be only a little wind and smoke, especially by telling us this in a haughty and self-satisfied tone of voice? Is this a thing to say gaily? Is it not, on the contrary, a thing to say sadly, as the saddest thing in the world?’<sup>4</sup>

Rarely elsewhere than precisely here are we confronted more forcefully by the question of whether this victorious cry about truth, about a truth so saddening and mournful for human beings, does not have its origin somewhere other than in this truth. If a person exults and rejoices over the discovery of a truth which – if it were to penetrate his heart and really become a truth for him – would necessarily paralyse him and suffocate every spark of joy and appetite for living in him, this cannot, I think, be explained in any other way than that this process of searching for and discovering truth has

<sup>3</sup> Czech botanist and ecologist (1888–1947).

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, trans. by W. F. Trotter (New York: P. F. Collier 1910), para. 194.

some other sense than truth itself. We can observe how, while this new truth depresses us and fills us with hopelessness and emptiness, on the other hand it gives its discoverer a feeling of self-realization, a feeling that from someone anonymous, from a nobody, he has become someone. The discoverer of this devastating truth draws from it the precise opposite of what this truth contains and of what he announces to us, the others. It is worthy of note that a person can acquire significance by proclaiming human beings an insignificant occurrence of the universe. Preaching about the insignificance of a person in the universe evidently does not have the purpose of renouncing a significant social standing among people. We should keep this in mind during the following deliberations.

It is possible to ask whether a person does not renounce one existence (a metaphysical one, for instance) only on the condition that he receives full compensation in another existence (a social one, for example). Or, to put the question in another way: whether, if he becomes at home in one existence, he does not die away in another existence; and whether, if he lives one existence, then he does not experience the other one only abstractly, in mere thought. Then we would understand how he can very easily allow himself the darkest scepticism in that existence that he experiences merely as abstract thought, given that the existence that he actually lives remains untouched by this scepticism.

Have you never paused to think sometimes, my dear friend, that among scientists, even though they are today the main producers of scepticism and pessimism, suicide 'for scientific reasons' is an unknown phenomenon, while for instance among artists, where the combination of words 'creation and doubting' results in a complete contradiction in terms, suicide is, so to speak, the order of the day? Is this not because, while the scientist thinks in a world in which he does not live, the artist thinks in the same world in which he lives? And, while therefore the former can permit himself as much scepticism in his thoughts as he pleases, the latter cannot do so with impunity?

It might seem that by this I am intending to show the falseness of the path that you are taking. In no way am I doing so. I know it is precisely this path that you have marked out as the only true path – as the objective path, as you say. One of the main principles of the scientific search for truth is that we cut ourselves off from our entire lived experience and put our trust only in what we think and observe, or today even only in what we can measure and calculate. This maximum curtailment of the human being as a condition for finding truth will demand a lot of our attention here. For the moment let us merely affirm that the more ground is gained by this method of searching for truth, the more a person's internal and metaphysical existence is cut down to zero, and therefore a person tries all the more to catch hold of an external existence, a physical and social one. Internal props collapse; external props are sought. The emptiness that is left over after the disappearance of the soul is best suppressed when this emptiness puts on a uniform. A uniform is a magical means which compensates for the loss of internal reality with external reality. But one uniform alone is no uniform. A million uniforms increases the weight of each one of them tenfold compared to one hundred thousand uniforms. There is an instinctive enmity between a uniform and a personality. There is an essential dispute between convention and social morality on the one side, and a free and creative being on the other. Because – and let us make no mistake about it – freedom is merely another word for internal reality. We can observe the strange effort of modern science, which – while destroying our internal reality – proclaims the promise of freedom for us. It liberates us, but at what cost? Precisely at the cost of freedom.

In this bleak situation we place our hopes in the master builder's recipe: more shovels and less Latin! However, the question concerning whether there should be more shovels or more Latin entirely misses the point. The entire difficulty is concealed in the fact that it is only the attainment of freedom that leads most of us to



a realization of what exactly it is that cannot live without freedom. The master builder's recipe – this is the redemptive slogan of all those who have been liberated without having 'internal reasons' for freedom. We expected freedom to tell us who we are and what we want, but freedom lets us run back and forth from Latin to shovels and from shovels to Latin, and thus shows us that it is a matter of complete indifference whether we do the one or the other. We do not feel in ourselves any urge to do primarily one, and not the other, and therefore we have elevated to a morality of life the opinion that the purpose of doing anything is making money. Profession – that is our uniform. Being a slave to money – that is the sense of our liberated life. We have convinced ourselves that we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders and that freedom is something like a well-deserved paradise. But, when we have acquired this freedom, we quickly renounce it again because we feel that there has never been a heavier burden on our shoulders.

No one personifies this strange state of affairs better than the so-called 'practical' person – that is, a moneymaking person. Without difficulty you can see that this person, who is today imposed on you as a model and an example – even a moral one – is without any shadow of a doubt a liberated person. What is more doubtful, however, is whether this person is also a free person in the true sense of the word. The ease with which such a person succumbs to despotism of all kinds (or even positively solicits such despotism) and the fact that the very word 'practical' in many cases means precisely this moral submissiveness – all this indicates a being who, even though he is begot by freedom, does not himself beget this freedom.

We are witnesses of the strange phenomenon that in the 'age of freedom' a truly free soul must try to win its freedom in a period under a commando of money-earning people with no less effort and sacrifices than was the case under the rule of despots. Indeed, in many ways the position of a truly free soul is even more problematical. In a state of political or clerical serfdom it is not easy to deny

that a free soul beats for something 'higher' – the conscience of the serfs is on its side. What to say, however, about a person who ardently strives for freedom in the 'age of freedom'? This is precisely what is ridiculous and senseless: that so-called 'decent' and 'conscientious' people do not greatly differentiate individuals of the type like Robert from subversives, layabouts, and parasites; apart, of course, from those rare exceptions when the activity or works of such an individual become in good time a source of regular income. We see a source of anarchy and subversion in everyone who does not drag the burden of a profession, the horse-gin of regular working hours, on the back of his neck. Do whatever you like, but do it from eight until noon, and then again from two until six, except Sundays, and make sure you are paid for it. Because the circumstance that you earn money in some way assuages in us every concern about your activity. The revolutionary, the prophet, the reformer: each of these becomes harmless as soon as we award him a certification to carry on a trade. Today we would not regard it as necessary to crucify Christ. We would let him eke out a living as an 'officially authorized clairvoyant' at fairs and festivals. By this I mean to say that we would not deny him any of that indulgent respect that we show to this woe-ful but proper livelihood.

'The main thing is to make an honest living,' your servant was wont to say, as in the mornings she cleared away the used cups and test tubes with the same gestures and in the same state of mind as when she cleared away the plates and pans in the kitchen after lunch. At the time the theme of 'Robert' was a topic of daily discussion. According to this uniformed morality, it does not depend on what you do; it depends only on how much of it you do. It does not matter what you discover by your efforts, what growth you achieve, what development you undergo; it depends only on how much money you receive for this on Saturday or on the first day of the month. If you intend to protest, then they smash you down with a trump card: family, children!

Indeed, for the most part we marry in time for us, at an age when we can no longer pretend that life has not defeated us, to have something with which to reassure ourselves that life has not actually defeated us. Because a child is an acknowledged argument making sense of life. In addition, it is an animated and moving argument. In the warm glow of a family hearth and among the golden rays of children's smiles even an empty cellophane balloon shines like a mature and rich product. Robert could never understand why people who live only for their children are born as human beings, and not as rabbits or partridges.

Family and children do not support you in the slightest in your internal impulse to live and work as a researcher, and not for instance as a stockbroker, an advocate or a businessman. It can even be said that, although your feeling tells you that the activity that you pursue is 'more valuable' than other activities, morality tells you that, in the interest of your family and children, you should pursue something more lucrative. Family and children cannot serve you as a basis for evaluating what you do out of internal necessity, because their existence depends on your profession and not on your internal reasons. For your family, just as for your servant, the only important thing is that you are a state employee with a retirement pension; that you are a scientific researcher is a matter of complete indifference to them. Nevertheless, you find the entire value and worth of your life in the fact that you are a researcher, not in the fact that you are a wage earner. I am sure that, if it was to occur to the state, as the decision of some godlike or infernal conference, to pay a salary for instance to artists instead of scientists, then you would not veer from your path one iota, even if your researching was to bring you so little that you would have to live with the lot of – well, let us say Robert. However, even if this fate were a matter of indifference to you, it would not be a matter of indifference to your family, to your children, to your servants. And so, you see that family, children, and servants, and indeed all decent and proper people, do not deny respect to you

as a soulless robot, but they do deny you this respect as a free and creative being.

We live in an era in which every activity that is carried out for money, career, and social success is regarded as excellent and sensible, while every activity for which a person has his 'internal reasons' is regarded as incomprehensible and suspicious. To perform any kind of activity as a gainful means of employment – whether it be science, art, or philosophy, or whether it means collecting mushrooms or bird eggs, reading cards, or performing somersaults on the horizontal bar – all this seems appropriate and reasonable to the human mind. However, to be an engineer and to simultaneously cultivate chamber music, or to be an officer with the dragoons and also be incapable of living without philosophy – this provokes amazement, indignation, sympathy, laughter. People have arrived at the conviction that the only activities that make sense are those that you do for money. You are troubled by the mystery of perception and truth? So, go and become a professor and earn some money with this. Your heart yearns for God? Then, become a vicar and collect a tithe for that. You love books? Then set up a bookshop or become a librarian – with a state pension of course!

And thus, disconnecting truth from the way in which we live leads us to a strange piece of wisdom: that only a madman does something really and truly. If we wanted to augment the number of definitions of a human being as a creature distinct from animals, then we could say that a human being is a creature in need of salvation – whatever meaning each of us imbues this term with. Every one of us wants to be saved in his own way and according to his own taste, and all his efforts, desires, and thoughts are directed toward this end. Or rather – were directed towards it, until modern science opened up in front of him an abyss that earlier ages did not know to such an extent: an abyss between desire and thought, between salvation and truth. Neither antiquity, in which philosophy played the leading role, nor the medieval age, in which theology played this role, knew