

Europe through the Eyes of Writers

Hilde Keteleer

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Greek culture is widely regarded as one of the pillars of European civilisation. If this assumption is right we have to admit that one of our pillars is tumbling down or, at least, threatens to plunge. I will now try to establish a link between the Greek tragedy, a great German philosopher, an American economist and a Dutch writer.

In the 19th century Friedrich Nietzsche accused the Germans of having prevented a political and economic unity of Europe to occur. Waging war, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, led to nationalism which had a tremendous effect on culture. According to Nietzsche, Germany “brought Europe to a dead end.” A 140 year later Nietzsche’s remarks have proven to be true. Europe seems to have come to a dead end, politicians are caught in “tiny policy making” instead of approaching “the big picture”.

I’m a poet, not a philosopher and therefore hardly quote great philosophers for fear of misinterpreting them. However, today I would like to quote Nietzsche, the introduction “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” to his book “The Birth of Tragedy”. Nietzsche wrote the book back in 1872, at that time a 28 year old professor at the University of Basel. He added the introduction some 14 years later, in 1886. The book in which Nietzsche tries to explain Greek culture in general and tragedy in particular is considered one of the pillars of modern western history. Upfront, I would like to point out, as opposed to everyday use, that the expression “tragic” does not mean something very sad but actually “guiltless guilt” as in the Greek tragedies “Oedipus” and “Orestes” or the Shakespearean “Hamlet”. Equally important is to note that conflicts in tragedies are not between good and bad but between unilateral positions, each containing something good.

What does Nietzsche, this very bright German spirit, say about the Greek tragedy? “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” begins as follows:

“Whatever might have been the basis for this dubious book, it must have been a question of the utmost importance and charm, as well as a deeply personal one. Testimony to that effect is the time in which it arose (in spite of which it arose), that disturbing era of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. While the thunderclap of the Battle of Wörth was reverberating across Europe, the meditative lover of enigmas whose lot it was to father this book sat somewhere in a corner of the Alps, extremely reflective and perplexed (thus simultaneously very distressed and carefree) and wrote down his thoughts concerning the Greeks, the kernel of that odd and difficult book to which this later preface (or postscript) should be dedicated. A few weeks after that, he found himself under the walls of Metz, still not yet free of the question mark which he had set down beside the alleged “serenity” of the Greeks and of Greek culture, until, in that month of the deepest tension, as peace was being negotiated in Versailles, he finally came to peace with himself and, while slowly recovering from an illness he'd brought back home with him from the field, finished composing the Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music.”

Nietzsche is quoting himself and continues: “From music? Music and tragedy? The Greeks and the music of tragedy? The Greeks and the art work of pessimism? The most successful, most beautiful, most envied people, those with the most encouraging style of life—the

Greeks? How can this be? Did they really need tragedy? Even more to the point, did they really need art? And Greek art, what is that, and how did it come about?

(...)

What does the tragic myth mean precisely for the Greeks of the best, strongest, and bravest age? What about that tremendous phenomenon of the Dionysian? And what about what was born out of the Dionysian—the tragedy? By contrast, what are we to make of what killed tragedy—Socratic morality, dialectic, the satisfaction and serenity of the theoretical man? Could not this very Socratic way be a sign of collapse, exhaustion, sickness, and the dissolution of the anarchic instinct? And could the "Greek serenity" of later Greek periods be only a red sunset?

And even scientific enquiry itself, our science—indeed, what does all scientific enquiry in general mean considered as a symptom of life? What is the point of all that science and, even more serious, where did it come from? What about that? Is scientific scholarship perhaps only a fear and an excuse in the face of pessimism, a delicate self-defence against—the Truth? And speaking morally, something like cowardice and falsehood?" Nietzsche asserts: "Today I would state that it was the problem of scholarship itself, scholarly research for the first time grasped as problematic, as dubious."

Nietzsche concludes to have written a book for initiated people: "Here spoke (so people told themselves suspiciously) something like a mystic and an almost maenad-like soul, which stammered with difficulty and arbitrarily, as if talking a foreign language, almost uncertain whether it wanted to communicate something or remain silent. This "new soul" should have sung, not spoken! What a shame that I did not dare to utter as a poet what I had to say at that time. Perhaps I might have been able to do that!"

The fight between art and science has always been the centre of Nietzsche's work. His ambition was to connect art and science in harmony.

Economists see themselves as scientists. They are consulted by politicians when decisions are to be taken. Economists are seen to give political decisions an aura of scientific foundation with scientific proof and analyzable facts and figures. It is believed that they can even predict the future. However, economists' scientific analyses lead to very different conclusions and approaches and can be used and misused by politicians, depending on one's view of the world. As Nobel prize laureate Joseph Stiglitz puts it: "So many economies are vulnerable to natural disasters that adding a man-made disaster is all the more tragic. But that is what Europe is doing. Indeed, its leaders' willful ignorance of the lessons of the past is criminal."

Stiglitz and others want that Europe's investments are not susceptible to fear. He writes: "There are alternative strategies. Some countries, like Germany, have room for fiscal maneuver. Using it for investment would enhance long-term growth, with positive spillovers to the rest of Europe."

Investments may take the form of railway constructions, green energy or other tangible assets. However, they also may take the form intangible assets such as education and cultural exchange. Our rich cultural traditions are an essential basis for European history, the foundation of the current European Union.

It is precisely this type of investment that European artists are asking for, already in 2004 in their so-called “Call of the Thousands, signed among others by Nobel prize for Literature laureate Wislawa Szymborska, our Hugo Claus, Ivan Klima, Antonio Munoz Molina. It reads as follows: “If the Europe of production and consumption were to dominate Europe as a civilization, if Europe as a common market were to replace Europe as a political and cultural project, the present global crisis might culminate in a clash between the forces of fundamentalisms and those of materialism. This clash would be as traumatic and devastating as the worst scourges that have hit humanity during the last century.”

An almost apocalyptic warning. The artists call upon the heads of state and of governments of the (then) 25 Member States to adopt a European constitution that is a genuine civilisation project, founded on our cultural heritage and on our shared values of democracy, liberty, respect of human rights and for human dignity. Economic targets should in this respect be regarded as means and not as ends in themselves.

The Greek tragedy is according to Nietzsche the interaction of two opposing traits of mankind, the apollonian and the dionysian. Apollonian stands for order, dionysian stands for instinct. Nietzsche laments the impoverishment of the Occident by its purely scientific view of the world:

“But now science, incited by its powerful delusion, speeds on inexorably right to its limits, at which point the optimism hidden in the essence of logic breaks down. For the circumference of the circle of science has an infinity of points, and while it is still impossible to see how that circumference could ever be completely measured, nevertheless the noble, talented man, before the middle of his life, inevitably comes up against such a border point on that circumference, where he stares out into something which cannot be illuminated. When, at this point, he sees to his horror how at these limits logic turns around on itself and finally bites its own tail—then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic insight*, which, in order merely to be endured, requires art as a protector and healer.”

Therefore: let us invest in culture to endure the limits of logic. However, let us regard this as a goal, not as a means! When I see how eager my 6 year old granddaughter and my 8 year old grandson are discovering the culture of their Moroccan, Chinese and African peers and how easy it is for them to acquire other languages, I can only conclude that it is very enriching to learn foreign languages at a very early stage. This should actually be imposed in schools all over Europe, to offer younger generations as much culture as science, in order to develop the apollonian and the dionysian to a harmonious whole in them. So our children learn that firstly Greece is not just a problem but a pillar of Europe and secondly that Greek AND German philosophers have taught us on how our European identity looks like: varied, in equilibrium between individual and society.

To conclude I allow myself to quote from the collection of essays “Het geluk van de kunst”, written 2008 by Gouden Uil laureate Marc Reugenbrink, a Dutchman living in Flanders. Reugenbrink expresses his fury over humans seen only as “economic units”. His fury reflects two seemingly contradictory phenomena, firstly the experience of lacking standards and boundaries and secondly that only one standard is applied, namely economic efficiency.

We writers are the one defending the values long discarded by society. We should denounce the “sense of loyalty towards the dictatorship of the markets”. Reugenbrink suggests that if literature wants to take a leading role in our society, we writers are supposed to come up with own values and propositions. In order to remain pillars of our society we should talk to the

public and present alternatives to the one sided neoliberal approach. We need to tell politicians time and time again that Europe is much more than a mere economic entity. And politicians should be glad that there are people who consider it their task to keep reminding them of this fact.

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