George Steiner

# The Idea of Europe

An Essay

OVERLOOK DUCKWORTH

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## George Steiner

In this remarkable work, a brilliant, cosmopolitan intellectual brings a lifetime of erudition to bear on a subject he has grappled with for decades and whose future is profoundly uncertain. “Europe,” George Steiner writes, “is the place where Goethe’s garden almost borders on Buchenwald, where the house of Corneille abuts on the marketplace in which Joan of Arc was hideously done to death.” It is, in other words, a continent rich with contradiction, whose many tensions—cultural, social, political, economic, and religious—have for centuries conspired to pull it apart, even as it has become more and more unified.

George Steiner is at home in European culture, perhaps more so than anyone else. He thrives among the cafés and salons that hosted some of Europe’s greatest thinkers. *The Idea of Europe* uniquely reflects on the history of the continent and questions the future of its intellectual and moral code.

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# I

WHEN THOMAS MANN LEFT EUROPE IN 1938 TO SETTLE IN the United States, he made the remark, in all seriousness, at a press conference upon his arrival in New York: 'Wo ich bin, ist die deutsche Kultur.' For many people, this statement was proof, yet again, of the world-famous author's arrogance. His brother Heinrich Mann, however, knew better. In his memoirs, *Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt*, he begins the chapter 'Mein Bruder' with the aforementioned anecdote, and then adds: 'Now we know what Goethe's Faust meant when he said: "Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast/ Erwirb es um es zu besitzen."' Thomas Mann's words, according to his older brother, were not an expression of arrogance, but of a deep sense of responsibility.

If there is anyone who, in Thomas Mann's footsteps, has earned the right to say: 'Wherever I am, there is European culture,' it is George Steiner. And if he were to make this statement, it would be, once again, not an expression of arrogance, but of a sense of responsibility.

* * *

The tenth Nexus Lecture is the prelude to a series of gatherings organized by the Nexus Institute, on the eve of the Intellectual Summit during the Dutch Presidency EU 2004, which will focus on the question of whether or not Europe is still such a good idea, and what the significance and political relevance of the European ideal of civilization actually is. The fact that George Steiner, more than anyone else, is at home in European culture—which spans centuries, and is essentially cosmopolitan—was reason enough to invite him to give this lecture.

But there is another reason, one which is closely intertwined with the history of the Nexus Institute itself. The publication of the tenth Nexus Lecture would seem the perfect opportunity to tell the reader more about it.

# II

PRIOR TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEXUS INSTITUTE IN 1994, the first issue of the journal *Nexus* had appeared in 1991. This journal would never have existed if it hadn't been for a friendship: the friendship between the renowned Amsterdam publisher Johan Polak and myself. Our innumerable conversations and letters about the necessity of founding a new journal always centered on *one* man, *one* book, and *one* other journal. That man was George Steiner, the book, his *Language and Silence*, and the journal, *European Judaism*. Johan was co-publisher of that journal, which was founded in the late sixties. Every now and then the international editorial board of *European Judaism* organized a conference. In 1969, a conference was organized in the city of Amsterdam, and Johan was the host. It was a memorable occasion, namely because of the unforgettable appearance by a forty-year-old, much-talked-about cultural philosopher: George Steiner. The position he took that day was as simple as it was horrifyingly true: 'Europe committed suicide by killing its Jews.' The destruction of six million European Jews, the destruction of the world of Mahler, Alban Berg, Hofmannsthal, Broch, Kafka, Celan, Karl Kraus, Walter Benjamin—the list is endless—was also the destruction of *l'esprit européen*, the idea of Europe. With the loss of this idea, nothing remained of Europe but a cultureless, soulless, purely geographic and economic entity. However, the George Steiner who made this observation was also the man who had passed up an illustrious career in the United States. After the war and after completing his studies, he returned to Europe. So as *not* to allow Hitler and his sympathizers the last word; out of loyalty to an idea that must never die.

Johan Polak never forgot what George Steiner told us that day in Amsterdam. I must've heard him say it a hundred times: 'George Steiner is right. Culturally, twentieth-century Europe is back in the Middle Ages. And just like the monasteries of that time, we've got to preserve our cultural

legacy and hand it down through whatever channels we have.' That explains Johan's formidable private library, his publishing house, and his bookshop: Athenaeum, on the Spui in Amsterdam. That is also why our journal *Nexus* had to be created: to serve European culture, the European ideal of civilization—although for the handing down of a cultural legacy *Nexus* could never be more than a very small channel.

# III

In 1934, Thomas Mann had to write an obituary for a man who had always been like a father to him: Sammi Fischer, his Hungarian Jewish publisher in Berlin, the man who, to a considerable extent, had made his authorship possible. Mann recalled the following exchange, during his last meeting with the old man—who was already very ill—several months before. Fischer expressed his opinion about a mutual acquaintance:

— Kein Europäer, sagte er kopfschüttelnd.

— Kein Europäer, Herr Fischer, wieso denn nichts?

— Von großen humanen Ideen versteht er nichts.

The great humane ideas. *That* is European culture. That is what Mann had learned from his teacher, Goethe. And Goethe himself, in his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, indicates as a date of birth of this European humanism: October 25, 1518. On that day the scholar and humanist Ulrich von Hutten wrote a letter to his friend Willibald Pirckheimer, in which he explained that although he was of noble birth, he didn't wish to be a nobleman without having earned it: 'Nobility by birth is purely accidental, and therefore meaningless to me. I seek the wellsprings of nobility elsewhere, and I drink from that source.' Here, once again, we can witness the birth of *nobilitas literaria*: true nobility is the nobility of the spirit. The arts, the humanities, philosophy and theology, beauty; each exists to ennoble the spirit, to enable mankind to discover and claim ownership of its highest form of dignity. It is the cultural legacy, the major works by poets and thinkers, artists and prophets, which a person must make use of for *cultura animi* (the phrase is Cicero's), the cultivation of the human soul and mind—so that he can be more than what he also is: an animal. On the last

page of his *Lessons of the Masters*, George Steiner sums up the essence of culture and liberal education in a single sentence: ‘Liberal education directs us to the *dignitas* in the human person, to its homecoming to its better self.’ This is the tradition of European humanism in which he, from an early age, was taught by his father. In which he himself became a teacher, when he realized he had a gift: ‘To invite others into meaning.’ This last phrase, ‘to invite others into meaning’, is George Steiner’s own, and it is the most profound description I know of what it means to be a *Lecturer in the Humanities*.

# IV

THE WORK OF GEORGE STEINER CAN BE READ, AMONG OTHER things, as an intellectual moral code:

The heart of a culture is the classic—that is to say, timeless, works. They are timeless and imperishable because their meaning transcends death. In the words of Hölderlin: ‘Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter.’

Characteristic of the great works is that they question *us*, they demand a reaction. The archaic torso of Apollo in Rilke’s famous poem tells us, in no uncertain terms: ‘Du sollst dein Leben ändern.’

Do not shy away from that which is difficult. Spinoza: ‘All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.’

Only fools ignore the significance of tradition, fact, and knowledge. Hölderlin: ‘Wir sind nur Original, weil wir nichts wissen.’

Being a critic means: being able to make distinctions.

Being at home in the world of culture means being at home in many worlds, many languages: being at home in the history of ideas, in literature, music, art. It requires erudition and the ability to see the connections between the various worlds: the nexus.

There is a connection between language and politics, between culture and society. In order to understand cultural developments, to see which ideas prevail and what their consequences will be, cultural-philosophical reflection is indispensable.

It is essential to be elitist—but in the original sense of the word: to take responsibility for ‘the best’ of the human mind. A cultural elite must bear the responsibility for the knowledge and preservation of the most important ideas and values, for the classics, for the meaning of words, the nobility of our spirit. Being elitist, as Goethe explained, means being respectful: respectful of the divine, of nature, of our fellow human beings, and so, of our own human dignity.

To sum up in a single sentence what we have learned from the intellectual tradition to which George Steiner belongs: the world of culture is of vital importance to the quality of human life. But: culture is also vulnerable. Not for nothing does a dictatorship silence its poets and thinkers and impose censorship. And in this period of the fascism of vulgarity (Steiner’s own term), of censorship of the market and of the ‘knowledge economy’, cultural knowledge and cultural-philosophical reflection are being undermined, or even made impossible, more often than we may realize.

# V

THE FACT THAT THOMAS MANN COULD SAY: 'WO ICH BIN, ist die deutsche Kultur', was the very reason he *had* to write *Doktor Faustus*, the novel in which he tried to show how fascism was linked to his beloved German culture. For George Steiner, the same is true. Since he, as no one else, is at home in European culture, a large portion of his work, beginning with *Language and Silence*, is characterized by such questions as: Why the treason of the clerks? Why the undeniable link between aestheticism and barbarism? Why is it that liberal education could not stop torture, death camps, the Holocaust?

There is no need for us to discuss, yet again, Heidegger and his fascist tendencies, or the SS-officer who would come home and play Schubert after another day of butchery. Again and again we see that neither intellectual knowledge or liberal education offer any guarantee whatsoever for sound moral judgement, let alone better ethics. Erudite minds can cultivate nihilism, and there are numerous intellectuals who, obsessed with such abstract concepts as 'globalism' and 'capitalism', have no hesitation about legitimizing terrorist violence. Again: it's nothing new. Dostoevsky described it in *The Possessed*: hypocrisy, intellectual corruption, fascination with violence, addiction to power, and endless conformism typify far too many intellectuals.

That is all true. But equally true is the long list of poets and thinkers who have *not* fallen prey to this intellectual corruption, and who have remained loyal to their moral obligations to the world of the mind. To name just a few: Thomas Mann, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, Arnold Schönberg, Dietrich Bonhoefer, Iosif Brodsky, Hermann Brach, Albert Camus, Paul Celan, René Char, Andrei Tarkovski, Václav Havel, and George Steiner himself. Steiner, against the current, has remained true to his

own intellectual moral code, his vocation to 'invite others into meaning', without giving in to nihilism, populism, or politicization.

Moreover, the masterpieces of the European cultural legacy themselves bear witness to their significance to human life. Anyone who hasn't yet experienced the power of art can read, in the book of Primo Levi, of how he summoned up the courage to want to survive Auschwitz, when he remembered the Canto of Ulysses from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Aleksander Wat writes in *My Century* that he suddenly felt he could endure Stalin's Lubyanka Prison in Moscow when, one morning in early spring, he heard, in the distance, a fragment of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. These two well-known examples illustrate that if there is anything—other than love and friendship—that can give meaning to life, it is the beauty of art.

Culture is no more than an invitation, an invitation to cultivate the nobility of the spirit. Culture speaks softly: 'Du sollst dein Leben ändern.' The wisdom it offers is revealed not in words, but in deeds. Being 'cultured' requires much more than erudition and eloquence. More than anything else, it means courtesy and respect. Culture, like love, does not possess a capacity to compel. It offers no guarantees. And yet, the only chance of attaining and protecting our human dignity is offered to us by culture, by liberal education.

Artists and intellectuals shouldn't be king, shouldn't even strive to be king or part of a power elite. But a society that ignores the ennoblement of the spirit, a society that does not cultivate the great humane ideas, will end, once again, in violence and self-destruction.

# VI

BERNARD OF CHARTRES, A TWELFTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER and monk, has left us one of the most beautiful descriptions of the relationship between pupils and their masters: ‘Dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.’

Standing on the shoulders of the giants of the European humanist tradition, the Nexus Institute strives to look ahead, and beyond, and to be as elitist as the giants upon which it stands. That is: to bear the responsibility for the continued existence of the best of European culture, to respect its intellectual moral code, to preserve an ideal of civilization: the Idea of Europe.

*Rob Riemen*
*Founding director of the Nexus Institute*

# THE IDEA OF EUROPE

IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE FOR ME TO BE BACK WITH THE NEXUS Institute; it is not my first visit. That institute has become one of the centers of European and transatlantic European exchange of dialogue, of discussion, of issues far beyond the political. It embraces philosophic, aesthetic, musical, artistic issues. This institute now has a unique place on the map of European awareness and has made of Tilburg, what the current very powerful French phrase calls a *lieu de la mémoire*, but much more a place of the future, a *lieu de l'avenir*. It is truly a privilege to give the 10th Nexus Lecture.

* * *

Lightning-rods have to be grounded. Even the most abstract, speculative of ideas must be anchored in reality, in the substance of things. What, then, of 'the idea of Europe'?

Europe is made up of coffeehouses, of *cafés*. These extend from Pessoa's favourite coffeehouse in Lisbon to the Odessa *cafés* haunted by Isaac Babel's gangsters. They stretch from the Copenhagen *cafés* which Kierkegaard passed on his concentrated walks to the counters of Palermo. No early or defining *cafés* in Moscow which is already a suburb of Asia. Very few in England after a brief fashion in the eighteenth century. None in North America outside the gallican outpost of New Orleans. Draw the coffeehouse map and you have one of the essential markers of the 'idea of Europe'.

The *café* is a place for assignation and conspiracy, for intellectual debate and gossip, for the *flâneur* and the poet or metaphysician at his notebook. It is open to all, yet it is also a club, a freemasonry of political or artistic-literary recognition and programmatic presence. A cup of coffee, a glass of wine, a tea with rhum secures a locale in which to work, to dream, to play chess or simply keep warm the whole day. It is the club of the spirit and the *posterestante* of the homeless. In the Milan of Stendhal, in the Venice of Casanova, in the Paris of Baudelaire, the *café* housed what there was of political opposition, of clandestine liberalism. Three principal *cafés* in imperial and interwar Vienna provided the *agora*, the locus of eloquence and rivalry, for competing schools of aesthetics and political economy, of psychoanalysis and philosophy. Those wishing to meet Freud or Karl

Kraus, Musil or Carnap, knew precisely in which *café* to look, at which *Stammtisch* to take their place. Danton and Robespierre meet one last time at the Procope. When the lights go out in Europe, in August 1914, Jaurès is assassinated in a *café*. In a Geneva *café*, Lenin writes his treatise on empirio-criticism and plays chess with Trotsky.

Note the ontological differences. An English pub, an Irish bar have their own aura and mythologies. What would Irish literature be without the bars of Dublin? Where, if there had not been the Museum Tavern, would Dr. Watson have run into Sherlock Holmes? But these are not *cafés*. They have no chess-tables, no newspapers freely available to clients on their hangers. It is only very recently that coffee itself has become a public habit in Britain, and it retains its Italian halo. The American bar plays a vital role in American literature and Eros, in the iconic charisma of Scott Fitzgerald and Humphrey Bogart. The history of jazz is inseparable from it. But the American bar is a sanctuary of dim lightning, often of darkness. It throbs with music, often deafening. Its sociology, its psychological fabric are permeated by sexuality, by the presence, hoped for, dreamt of, or actual, of women. No one writes phenomenological tomes at the table of an American bar (cf. Sartre). Drinks have to be renewed if the client is to remain welcome. There are 'bouncers' to expel the unwanted. Each of these features defines an ethos radically different from that of the *Café Central* or the *Deux Magots* or *Florian*. 'There will be mythology so long as there are beggars,' said Walter Benjamin, a passionate connoisseur of and pilgrim among *cafés*. So long as there are coffeehouses, the 'idea of Europe' will have content.

Europe has been, is *walked*. This is capital. The cartography of Europe arises from the capacities, the perceived horizons of human feet. European men and women have walked their maps, from hamlet to hamlet, from village to village, from city to city. More often than not, distances are on a human scale, they can be mastered by the traveller on foot, by the pilgrim to Compostela, by the *promeneur*, be he *solitaire* or gregarious. There are stretches of arid, forbidding terrain; there are marshes; alps tower. But none of these constitute a terminal obstacle. There are no Saharas, no Badlands, no impassable tundras. Mountain passes have their shelters as parks have their benches. Heidegger's *Holzwege* lead through the darkest of woods. Europe has no Death Valley, no Amazonia, no 'outback' intractable to the traveller.

This fact determines a seminal relationship between European humanity and its landscape. Metaphorically, but materially also, that landscape has been moulded, humanized by feet and hands. As in no other part of the globe the shores, fields, forests, hills of Europe, from La Coruña to Saint Petersburg, from Stockholm to Messina, have been shaped not so much by geological as by human-historical time. At the glacier's edge sits Manfred. Chateaubriand declaims on the rocky headlands. Our acres, be they under snow or in the yellow noon of summer, are those experienced by Bruegel or Monet or Van Gogh. The darkest woods have nymphs or fairies, literate ogres or picturesque hermits in them. The voyager seems never to be altogether out of reach of the church bell in the next village. From time immemorial, rivers have had fords, fords also for oxen, 'Oxfords', and bridges to dance on as at Avignon. The beauties of Europe are wholly inseparable from the patina of humanized time.

Again, the difference from North America, let alone so much of Africa and Australia, is radical. One does not go on foot from one American town to the next. The deserts of the Australian interior, of the American Southwest, the 'great woods' of the Pacific states or of Alaska, are virtually impassable. The magnificence of the Grand Canyon, of the Florida swamps, of Ayer's Rock in the Australian vastness, is that of tectonic, geological dynamics almost menacingly irrelevant to man. Hence the feeling, often voiced by tourists to Europe from the New World or 'down under' that European landscapes are manicured, that their horizons suffocate. Hence the feeling that the American, the South African, the Australian 'big skies' are unknown to Europe. To an American eye, even European clouds can seem domesticated. They are so crowded with ancient deities in Tiepolo costumes.

Integral components of European thought and sensibility are, in the root sense of the word, *pedestrian*. Their cadence and sequence are those of the walker. In Greek philosophy and rhetoric, the peripatetics are, literally, those who travel on foot from *polis* to *polis*, whose teachings are itinerant. In western metrics and poetic conventions, the 'foot', the 'beat', the *enjambement* between verses or stanzas remind us of the close intimacies between the human body as it paces the earth and the arts of imagining. Much of the most incisive theorizing is generated by the act of walking. Immanuel Kant's daily *Fußgang*, his chronometrically precise traverse of Königsberg, became legend. The meditations, the rhythms of perception in

Rousseau are those of the *promeneur*. The extensive rambles of Kierkegaard through Copenhagen and its suburbs proved to be a public spectacle and the object of caricature. But it is these rambles, with their diversions, their abrupt changes of itinerary and gait which are reflected in the syncopations of his prose. That of Charles Péguy is probably the most pulsating, drum-beaten in modern literature. Sentences march inexorably forward; their conclusions are hammered home by the down-beat of these heavy walking-shoes and infantryman's boots emblematic of Péguy's vision. Hence the incomparable 'marching-hymn' of his pilgrimage to Chartres and of the ode which celebrates it.

In an American age, which is that of the automobile and the jet, we can scarcely imagine the distances covered and put to intellectual and poetic purpose by European masters. Hölderlin goes on foot from Westphalia to Bordeaux and back. The young Wordsworth walks from Calais to the Berner Oberland and back. Coleridge, a portly individual, with various physical afflictions, routinely covers twenty to thirty miles *per diem* across difficult, mountainous ground, composing poetry or intricate theological arguments as he does so. And think of the rôle of the wanderer in some of the greatest of our music: in Schubert's fantasies and songs, in Mahler. Again Benjamin's enigmatic prophecy comes to mind: throughout European allegory and legend, the beggar who comes to the door, the beggar who may be a divine or daemonic agent in disguise, has come on foot.

European history has been one of long marches. Alexander's troopers marched, which is to say 'walked', from mainland Greece to the frontiers of India and the Lybian desert. Xenophon's *Anabasis* remains the classic of the foot-soldier's despair, exhaustion and resilience on a forced march to survival. The mileage walked by the Napoleonic legions, from Portugal to Moscow, defies belief, as does Stendhal's capacity to survive the retreat from Russia, tramping interminable distances. The *Wehrmacht*, during the second world war, counted infantry units which proceeded on foot from the western-most Atlantic reaches of France to the Caucasus. Eloquently, Julien Benda entitles his memoirs *Un Régulier dans le siècle*, a foot-soldier striding across the tragic atlas of modern European history, a *mappa mundi* which is also that of European time.

The streets, the squares walked by European men, women and children are named a hundredfold after statesmen, military figures, poets, artists,

composers, scientists and philosophers. This is my third parameter. My own childhood in Paris found me taking, on numberless occasions, the Rue Lafontaine, the Place Victor Hugo, the Pont Henri IV, the Rue Théophile Gauthier. The streets around the Sorbonne are named after the high masters of medieval scholasticism. They celebrate Descartes and Auguste Comte. If Racine has his street, so do Corneille, Molière, Boileau. The same is true of the German-speaking world, of the myriad *Goetheplätze* and *Schillerstrassen*, of the squares named after Mozart or Beethoven. The European schoolchild, urban men and women, inhabit literal echo-chambers of historical, intellectual, artistic and scientific achievements. Very often, the street-sign will carry not only the illustrious or specialised name, but the relevant dates and a summary description. Cities such as Paris, Milan, Florence, Frankfurt, Weimar, Vienna, Prague or Saint Petersburg are living chronicles. To read their street-signs is to leaf through a present past. Nor has this *pietas* in any way ceased. The Place Saint-Germain has become the Place Sartre-Beauvoir. Frankfurt has just named an Adornoplatz. In London, a prodigality of blue plaques identifies the houses in which not only medieval, renaissance or Victorian writers, artists, natural scientists are thought to have lived, but those associated with Bloomsbury and the moderns.

Observe the almost dramatic difference. In the United States such *memoranda* are few. Endlessly, streets are named ‘Pine’, ‘Maple’, ‘Oak’ or ‘Willow’. Boulevards are entitled ‘Sunset’, the noblest of Boston streets is known as ‘Beacon’. Even these are concessions to the humane. American avenues, roads, streets are simply *numbered* or, at best, as in Washington, known by their orientation, their number being followed by ‘North’ or ‘West’. Automobiles just do not have the time to ponder a Rue Nerval or a Copernicus concourse.

There is a dark side to this sovereignty of remembrance, to Europe’s self-definition as a *lieu de la mémoire*. The shields affixed to so many European houses tell not only of artistic, literary, philosophic or statesman-like eminence. They commemorate centuries of massacre and of suffering, of hatred and of human sacrifice. In one French town, a commemorative plaque to Lamartine, most idyllic of poets, faces, on the opposite side of the street an inscription which records the torture and execution of resistance fighters in 1944. Europe is the place where Goethe’s garden almost borders on Buchenwald, where the house of Corneille abuts on the marketplace in

which Joan of Arc was hideously done to death. Memorials to murder, individual and collective, are everywhere. The marbled roll-call of the dead often seems to outnumber the living. Most problematic have been the decisions made, the methods employed, in reference to the reconstruction of the destroyed cities and artistic heritage. Doubtless, the millimeter by millimeter restoration of the old quarters of Warsaw according to eighteenth century topographical paintings, is a wonder of craftsmanship and of willed recollection. As is the restitution of Dresden to much of its past radiance, or the facsimile-rebirth of many of the splendours of what was Leningrad. But as one walks amid these solid spectres, a sense of the uncanny, of utter sadness obtrudes. There is something wrong in all the rightness. As if even the perspectives of depth were only a façade. It is very difficult to put into words the warmth, the aura which authentic time, time as lived process, gives to the play of light on stone, on courtyards, on rooftops. In the artifice of the reconstructed, the light has the taste of neon.

The issue is, of course, a deeper one. Even a child in Europe bends under the weight of the past as he so often does under that of schoolbags far too crammed. How often, when plodding the Rue Descartes or crossing the Ponte Vecchio or passing Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam, have I not been overwhelmed, in even a bodily sense, by the question: 'What is the use? What can anyone of us add to the immensities of the European past?' When Paul Celan enters the Seine to commit suicide, he chooses the exact point celebrated in Apollinaire's great ballad, a point situated below the windows of the room in which Tsvetayeva spent her last night before returning to desolation and death in the Soviet Union. A literate European is caught in the spiderweb of an *in memoriam* at once luminous and suffocating.

It is precisely this weave which North America repudiates. Its ideology has been that of sunrise and futurity. When Henry Ford declared that 'history is bunk', he was giving a password to creative amnesia, to a power of forgetting which underwrites the pragmatic pursuit of utopia. The most elegant of new buildings has an obsolescence factor of some forty years. The Vietnam war did cast an almost old-world shadow; the eleventh of September did send a tremour, a *memento mori* through the American psyche. But these are exceptional and most likely transitory motifs. The strongest memories in American sensibility and idiom are these of promise, of that contract with open horizons which have made of westward motion

and, soon, planetary travel, a new Eden. Hence the growing malaise at the very thought of memorializing the destruction (it will be short-lived) of the World Trade Center. Meanwhile a deliberately brutal and, in my view, misguided symbolic mausoleum will entomb a central space in Berlin. How much truer to Jesus's manifesto 'let the dead bury their dead' are the men and women of the New World.

The ambiguous weight of the past tense in the idea and substance of Europe derives from a primordial duality. Which is my fourth axiom. It is that of the twofold inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem. This relationship, at once conflictual and syncretic, has engaged European theological, philosophic and political argument from the Church Fathers to Leon Chestov, from Pascal to Leo Strauss. The *topos* is as rich and urgent today as it ever was. To be a European is to attempt to negotiate, morally, intellectually and existentially the rival ideals, claims, *praxis* of the city of Socrates and of that of Isaiah.

We are a biped capable of unspeakable sadism, territorial ferocity, greed, vulgarity and abjection of every kind. Our inclination to massacre, to superstition, to materialism and carnivorous egotism has hardly changed over the brief history of our stay on earth. Yet this wretched and dangerous mammal has generated three pursuits or addictions or games of a wholly transcendent dignity. These are music, mathematics and speculative thought (in which I include poetry which can best be defined as the music of thought). Radiantly useless, often profoundly counterintuitive, these three activities are unique to men and women and come as near as anything can to the metaphoric intuition that we have indeed been created in the image of God.

Undoubtedly, music is planetary. We know of no ethnic community, however rudimentary, which does not practise some mode of music. What is worth pondering is the question of whether any of these manifold musical constructs or executive forms entail the miracles of the meanings of meaning which are conveyed to us by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or Schubert. A small number of non-European centres have contributed vitally to mathematics, notably India and, for a spell, Islam. But the epic of mathematical conjecture and proof, of hypotheses radically beyond material representation or common understanding is, in essence, that of Europe and, by direct transfer, of North America. It may well be that the pursuit of pure mathematics, from the axiomatic insights of Euclid to the Riemann

Hypothesis, from the Pythagorean theorem to the recent proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, is the single highest chapter, the long noon hour, in the being of man. It relates to the immateriality, to the playful gravity of metaphysical inquiry. Again, there are philosophic moments and systems extraterritorial to Europe. But the sovereign stream of supposition and argument, notably in logic and epistemology, flows, as if by mysterious compulsion, from the pre-Socratics to Wittgenstein, Bergson and Heidegger, from Plotinus to Spinoza and Kant. Our ontological legacy is, as Heidegger insisted, that of questioning. And at times as enigmatic as prime numbers reaching into the unknown, the three cardinal *acta* conjoin. Mathematics inhabits music, there is a magic of both cadence and axiomatic sequence in major philosophy. As certain mystics and logicians such as Leibniz have intuited, when God speaks to himself He sings algebra.

Already, the seminal rôle of Hellas is manifest. Three myths, which are among the most ancient in our culture, tell of the origins and mystery of music. What is arresting is the perception in archaic Greece, via the tales of Orpheus, of the Sirens and of the murderous contest between Apollo and Marsyas, of the elements in music beyond rational humanity, of the power of music to madden and destroy. Our mathematics have been 'Greek' at least until the proposal of non-Euclidean geometries and the crisis of the axiomatic implicit in Gödel's Proof of non-consistency. To think, to dream mathematically is to follow on Euclid and Archimedes, on the first conjectures as to paradoxical insolubility in Zeno. Plato bade no man enter his academy who was not a geometer. He himself, however, directed the western intellect towards universal questions of meaning, of morality, of law and of politics. As A.N. Whitehead famously put it, western philosophy is a footnote to Plato and, one would add, to Aristotle and Plotinus, to Parmenides and Heraclitus. The Socratic ideal of the examined life, the Platonic search for transcendent certitudes, the Aristotelian investigations into the problematic relations between word and world, have set out the road taken by Aquinas and Descartes, by Kant and by Heidegger. Thus these three pre-eminent dignities of the human intellect and of shaping sensibility—music, mathematics, metaphysics—underwrite Shelley's statement that 'we are all Greeks'.

But the inheritance of Athens extends much further. The vocabulary of our political and social theories and conflicts, of our athletics and architecture, of our aesthetic models and natural sciences remains saturated

with Greek roots in both senses of the word. ‘Physics’, ‘genetics’, ‘biology’, ‘astronomy’, ‘geology’, ‘zoology’, ‘anthropology’ are terms derived immediately from classical Greek. In turn, the names carry with them, as does ‘logic’ itself, a specific vision, a particular mapping of reality and its open horizons. It is an exaggeration, but a suggestive exaggeration, on Heidegger’s part to affirm that a false translation of Greek ‘being’ or ‘to be’ into Ciceronian Latin determined the destiny of Europe.

It is no exaggeration whatever to add that this destiny springs no less from the legacy of Jerusalem. There is scarcely a vital node in the texture of western existence, of the consciousness and self-consciousness of western (and, thereafter, American) men and women which has not been touched by the heritage of the Hebraic. This is as true of the positivist, of the theist, of the agnostic as it is of the believer. The monotheistic challenge, the definition of our humanity as in dialogue with the transcendent, the concept of a supreme Book, the notion of law as inextricable from moral commandments, our very sense of history as purposeful time, have their origin in the enigmatic singularity and dispersal of Israel. It is a cliché to cite Marx, Freud and Einstein (I would add Proust) as the begetters of modernity, as the artisans of our current condition. But underneath the cliché lies a formidably complex situation: that of secular Judaism and of the translation into secular terms and values of profoundly Judaic antecedents. Marx’s rage for social justice and messianic historicism are directly concordant with those of Amos or Jeremiah. Freud’s strange assumption of an original crime—the killing of the father—mirrors, graphically, the scenario of the Adamic fall. There is much that is wonderfully close to the promise of the psalms and of Maimonides in Einstein’s trust in cosmic order, in his tenacious refusal of chaos. Judaism and its two principal footnotes, Christianity and utopian socialism, are descendants of Sinaï, even where Jews themselves were nothing but a despised, hunted handful.[1]

Relations have never been easy. The tension between Jew and Greek obsesses the Pauline invention of Christianity. The Church Fathers are anxiously alert to the dual magnetism of pagan Athens and Hebrew Jerusalem. How is the truth of Jesus to incorporate the indispensable legacy of classical Greece? A legacy made the more troubling by its transmission via the Arab and Moslem world. Time and again, the polarities sharpen. There is a conscious neo-paganism in the philosophy and aesthetics of the

Florentine renaissance. Seventeenth-century Puritanism can very nearly be defined as an attempted recuperation of Zion. Romantic Hellenism is often articulated in terms of a bitter critique of Hebraic-Nazarene values. More often, European humanism from Erasmus to Hegel seeks diverse forms of compromise between Attic and Hebraic ideals. But after a lifetime of scrupulous inquiry, Leo Strauss, equally steeped in Talmud and Aristotle, in Socrates and Maimonides, concluded that no satisfactory understanding could be negotiated between the ultimate imperatives of philosophic-scientific reason as set out in our Greek heritage and the imperatives of faith and revelation proclaimed in the Torah. Syncretism, however ingenious, would always be flawed. Thus, the 'idea of Europe' is indeed a 'tale of two cities'.

My fifth criterion is an eschatological self-awareness which, I believe, may well be unique to European consciousness. Long before Valéry's recognition of the 'mortality of civilizations' or Spengler's apocalyptic diagnosis, European thought and sensibility had envisaged a more or less tragic finality. Christendom never relinquished completely that expectation of an end to our world which had so deeply marked its early, synoptic days. Long after what historians have called 'the panic of the year one thousand', prophecies of eschatological doom, numerologies which seek to fix its date, throng the European popular imagination. But such expectations were rife not only among the less educated. They busied no less a mind than Newton's. In a secular, intellectualized format, a 'sense of an ending' is explicit in Hegel's theory of history as it had been in Carnot's momentous formulation of entropy, of the inevitable extinction of all energy. Or think of the panoramic paintings of European cities in flame or under raging floods which are so curious an aspect of romantic art. It is as if Europe, unlike other civilizations, had intuited that it would one day collapse under the paradoxical weight of its achievements and the unparalleled wealth and complication of its history.[2]

Two world wars, which were in actual fact European civil wars, brought this intimation to fever pitch. Hence the modern Apocalypse of Karl Kraus's *Last Days of Humanity*. Between August 1914 and May 1945, from Madrid to the Volga, from the arctic circle to Sicily, an estimated hundred million men, women and children perished by war, famine, deportation, ethnic slaughter. Western Europe and western Russia became the house of death, the scene of unprecedented bestiality be it that of Auschwitz or of the

Gulag. More recently, genocide and torture have returned to the Balkans. In the light—should one say 'in the dark'?—of these facts, a belief in the termination of the European idea and of its habitations is almost a moral obligation. By what right ought we to survive our suicidal inhumanity?

Five axioms to define Europe: the coffeehouse, the landscape on a traversable and human scale, these streets and squares named after the statesmen, scientists, artists, writers of the past (in Dublin even the bus-stations direct one to the houses of poets), our twofold descent from Athens and Jerusalem and, lastly, that apprehension of a closing chapter, of that famous Hegelian sunset, which shadowed the idea and substance of Europe even in their noon hours.

What next?

* * *

Two voices may help us on our way.

In Munich, in the desperate winter of 1918-1919, Max Weber delivered his lecture on learning and science *(Wissenschaft)* as a vocation. Though incompletely taken down, his address soon became a classic. Europe lay in ruins. Its civilization, its intellectual eminence of which German higher education had been the emblematic insurance, had proved impotent in the face of political madness. How could one restore the prestige, the integrity of the calling of the scholar, thinker and teacher? Prophetically, Weber foresaw the Americanization, the reduction to managerial bureaucracy of the life of the mind in Europe. How could teaching be re-united with scholarly-scientific research, with speculative intellect of the first order? The abject rubric of 'political correctness' had not yet been contrived. But Weber saw and stated the essential: 'Democracy should be practised where it is appropriate. Scientific training, however […] implies the existence of a certain type of intellectual aristocracy.' Prior to Benda, Weber stated the austere ideal of a true clerisy: 'Whoever lacks the ability to put blinders on himself […] and to convince himself that the fate of his soul depends on whether his particular interpretation of a certain passage in a manuscript is correct, will always be alien to science and scholarship.' Those insensible to what Plato called 'mania', to the possession of their being by the pursuit of often arduously abstract, non-utilitarian truths, should go elsewhere.

Scientists, scholars, artists are, as Weber urges, committed to a sacrificial ideal, old as the pre-Socratics and distinctive of Europe's genius.

At a no less tragic moment, not long before his lonely death, Edmund Husserl gave his famous lecture on 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man'. Europe, proclaims Husserl, 'designates the unity of a spiritual life and a creative activity.' This creative spirituality has its birthplace. 'Philosophy-science', as Husserl awkwardly entitles it, originates in ancient Greece. It is the Attic miracle to have understood that ideas 'in a wonderfully new manner secrete within themselves intentional infinities'. These horizons entail a new and shaping historicity. Other cultures and communities have made scientific and intellectual discoveries. But only in ancient Greece there evolves the pursuit of *theory*, of disinterested speculative thought in the light of infinite possibilities. Only, moreover, in classical Greece and its European legacy, is the theoretical applied to the practical in the guise of a universal critique of all life and of its goals. There is a sharp distinction to be drawn between this phenomenology and the 'mythicopractical' fabric of Far Eastern or Indian models. The seminal act of wonder, *thaumazein*, and of theoretical-logical development is Platonic and Aristotelian to the core. Hence, ultimately, the advance of European and, thereafter, American science and technology over all other cultures. The overall process is one of idealization in which even the notion of God 'is, so to speak, logicized and becomes even the bearer of the absolute logos'. Europe forgets itself when it forgets that it was born from the idea of reason and the spirit of philosophy. The danger, concludes Husserl, is 'a great weariness'.[3]

Even as Husserl spoke, barbarism was once again engulfing Europe, as it has continued to do so from Sarajevo to Sarajevo. Even to cite Weber's and Husserl's proud hopes is to invite irony. Does this mean that the 'idea of Europe' has run its course, that it has no substantive future? This is, assuredly, a distinct possibility. It corresponds to that logic of mortality in civilizations and ideologies which I have already pointed to. Or are there avenues of hope still worth exploring?

Not only are the relevant factors of a complexity and diversity which very nearly defies responsible analysis. Not only is foresight almost ludicrously myopic (we always construe it in a rear-view mirror). But the competence required in such fields as economics and monetary policy, demography, law, industrial relations and information theory, all of which

interact in manifold ways, lies outside my reach. For someone thus limited to address the agenda of a possible European renascence borders on impertinence. At very best, it will yield impressionistic intuitions; at worst, these clichés of rhetoric and pathos with which innumerable colloquia, lectures, publications, manifestos on *la question d'Europe* have made us wearily familiar. At which point, I ought of course to sit down.

What very little I can propose is the notion that we may have been asking some of the wrong questions. That the apparently commanding factors I have alluded to are not, in the final analysis, wholly or even principally determinant. It may be that the future of the 'idea of Europe', if it has one, depends less on central banking and agricultural subsidies, on investment in technology or common tariffs, than we are instructed to believe. It may be that the OECD or NATO, the further extension of the Euro or of parliamentary bureaucracies on the model of Luxembourg are not the primary dynamics of the European vision. Or if, indeed, they are, that vision is hardly one to rouse the human soul. So allow me to point, in a manner unavoidably amateurish and provisional, to a very few possibilities or *desiderata* worth pursuing if the 'idea of Europe' is not to subside into that great museum of past dreams which we call history.

* * *

Ethnic hatreds, chauvinistic nationalism, regional claims have been Europe's nightmare. The ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide in the Balkans are only the most recent example of a plague which extends to northern Ireland, to the Basque country, to the divisions between Fleming and Walloon. Legitimately, the global spread of the Anglo-American language, the technological standardization of daily life, the universality of the internet, are taken to be great steps towards an abrogation of frontiers and ancient hatreds. Innumerable organisations, legal, economic, military and scientific, strive towards an ever-increasing degree of European collaboration and, ultimately, union. The fantastic success of the American model, of its federalism across immense distances and differing climates, calls for imitation. Never again must Europe succumb to internecine warfare.

This ideal of unison is undeniable. It inspires important elements of European thought and statesmanship since Charlemagne. But it is, I believe,

only one side of the picture.

The genius of Europe is what William Blake would have called ‘the holiness of the minute particular’. It is that of linguistic, cultural, social diversity, of a prodigal mosaic which often makes a trivial distance, twenty kilometers apart, a division between worlds. In contrast to the awesome monotony which extends from western New Jersey to the mountains of California, in contrast to that lust for sameness which is both the strength and vacancy of so much of American existence, the splintered, often absurdly divisive map of the European spirit and its inheritance, has been inexhaustibly fertile. Shakespeare’s ringing phrase ‘a local habitation and a name’ identifies a defining character. There are no ‘small languages’. Every language contains, articulates and transmits not only a unique charge of lived remembrance, but an evolving energy of its future tenses, a potentiality for tomorrow. The death of a language is irreparable, it diminishes the possibilities of man. Nothing threatens Europe more radically—‘at the roots’—than the detergent, exponential tide of Anglo-American, and of the uniform values and world-image which that devouring *Esperanto* brings with it. The computer, the culture of populism and the mass-market, speak Anglo-American from the night-clubs of Portugal to the fast-food emporia of Vladivostok. Europe will indeed perish if it does not fight for its languages, local traditions and social autonomies. If it forgets that ‘God lies in the detail’.

But how is one to balance the contradictory claims of political-economic unification against those of creative particularity? How can we dissociate a saving wealth of difference from the long chronicle of mutual detestations? I do not know the answer. Only that those wiser than myself must find it, and that the hour is late.

The ‘idea of Europe’ is inwoven with the doctrines and the history of western Christianity. Our architecture, art, music, literature and philosophic thought are saturated by Christian values and reference. European literacy grew out of Christian schooling. Religious wars between Catholics and Protestants have shaped European destiny and the political map of the continent. Other factors doubtless played their part, but absolutely inseparable from Europe’s collapse into inhumanity, from the Shoah, is the Christian designation of the Jew as deicide, as direct heir to Judas. It is in the name of sacred vengeance for Golgotha that the first pogroms blaze across the Rhineland in the early Middle Ages. From these massacres to the

Holocaust the line of descent is assuredly complex and at times subterranean, but it is also unmistakable. The isolation, the hounding, the social and political humiliation of the Jew has been integral to the Christian presence, which has been axiomatic, in Europe's grandeur and abjection. The death-camps are European phenomena located, by monstrous intuition, in the most Catholic of European nations. Again, crucifixes deride the perimeter of Auschwitz.

There have been valiant protests against Jew-hatred from within both Roman Catholicism and diverse branches of Protestantism. More recently, cosmetic apologies have been voiced and amendments offered to some of the more hateful liturgical texts. But these amount to very little. The brutal truth is that Europe has, till now, refused to recognise, to analyse, let alone retract, the manifold rôle of Christianity in the midnight of history. It has simply ignored or conventionally effaced the rootedness of its anti-semitism in the Gospels, in the Pauline repudiation of his people, in innumerable theological and ideological texts since (in the early 1520s Luther bellows for the burning of all Jews). Until Europe confronts the venom of Jew-hatred within its own bloodstream, until it comes to explicit terms with the long prehistory of the gas-ovens, many of the stars in our European firmament will continue to be yellow.

Today, Christianity is a fading force. In numerous parts of Europe, churches are emptying. In the very heartland of Papal Europe, in Italy, the birthrate is plunging. Some sixteen-hundred Anglican churches have been classified as redundant. What great theological-Christian voice now speaks for educated Europe? The tidal wave of agnosticism, if not atheism, is initiating a profound change in Europe's millennial evolution. This transmutation, gradual as it may be, implies the possibilities of unprecedented tolerance, of ironic indifference to archaic myths of retribution. A post-Christian Europe may emerge, though slowly and in ways difficult to predict, from the shadows of religious persecution. In a world now in the grip of murderous fundamentalism, be it that of the American south or Midwest, be it that of Islam, western Europe may have the imperative privilege of hammering out, of enacting a secular humanism. If it can purge itself of its own dark heritage, by confronting that heritage unflinchingly, the Europe of Montaigne and Erasmus, of Voltaire and of Immanuel Kant may, once again, give guidance.

This assignment is one of the spirit and of the intellect. It is nonsense to suppose that Europe will rival the economy, military and technological might of the United States.[4] Already Asia, China in particular, are set to surpass Europe in demographic, industrial and, ultimately, geopolitical significance. The days of European imperialism and diplomatic hegemony are as far gone as the worlds of Richelieu, of Palmerston, and of Bismarck. The tasks, the opportunities now before us are precisely those which witnessed the high morning light of Europe in Greek thought and Judaic morality. It is vital that Europe reaffirm certain convictions and audacities of soul which the Americanization of the planet—with all its benefits and generosities—has obscured. Let me formulate these all too briefly.

The dignity of *homo sapiens* is exactly that: the realisation of wisdom, the pursuit of disinterested knowledge, the creation of beauty. Making money and flooding our lives with increasingly trivialized material goods is a profoundly vulgar, emptying passion. It may be that in ways as yet very difficult to make out, Europe will generate a counter-industrial revolution even as it generated the industrial revolution itself. Certain ideals of leisure, of privacy, of anarchic individualism, ideals almost stifled in the conspicuous consumption and uniformities of the American and Asian-American models, may have their natural function in a European context, even if that context entails a measure of material retrenchment. Those who knew eastern Europe during the bleak decades, or Britain in austerity, will know what human solidarities and creativities can derive from relative poverty. It is not political censorship that kills: it is the despotism of the mass-market and the rewards of commercialized stardom.

These are dreams, perhaps unforgivably naive. But there are practical ends worth aiming for. It is desperately urgent that we arrest, so far as is possible, the drain of our best young scientific (but also humanistic) talent from Europe to the edenic offers of the United States. If our best scientists, our finest young architects, our musicians and scholars abandon Europe, if the gap between American and European salaries, career opportunities, resources for research and collaborative discovery is not bridged, we are indeed doomed to sterility or the second-hand. Already, in key domains, the situation is almost desperate. Yet correction, of this I am convinced, both economic and psychological is not beyond our means. If young Englishmen choose to rank David Beckham high above Shakespeare and Darwin in their list of national treasures, if learned institutions, bookstores, concert-halls

and theatres are struggling for survival in a Europe which is fundamentally prosperous and where wealth has never spoken more loudly, the fault is very simply ours. As could be the reorientation of secondary education and the media which would amend that fault. With the collapse of Marxism into barbaric tyranny and economic nullity, a great dream, that, as Trotsky proclaimed, of common man following in the wake of Aristotle and Goethe, went lost. Free of a bankrupt ideology, it can, it must be dreamt again. It is only in Europe, perhaps, that the requisite foundations of literacy, that the sense of the tragic vulnerability of the *condition humaine*, could provide a basis. It is among the often weary, divided, confused children of Athens and of Jerusalem that we could return to the persuasion that 'the unexamined life' is indeed not worth living.

It may well be that these are foolish words, that it is too late. I hope not, just because I am saying these words in Holland. Where Baruch Spinoza lived and thought.

# Notes

1. My wife and I had the great privilege of being invited to dinner by Nadine Gordimer in her beautiful home in Capetown during the bad moments, the pre-liberation moments. She invited the leaders of the ANC, the National Resistance Movement, including the military leaders, for dinner. The police cars were parked outside and wrote down all the guests, but they did not touch Nadine. One was completely safe. They simply wrote down who was coming for dinner. In my whole life my main gift has been a cosmic tactlessness—I plead guilty. So I finally asked these three great leaders: 'Look, occupation by the Waffen SS was very bad, they were very good in occupying. But from time to time one killed one of the bastards. You have not touched a white man. Not one. In Johannesburg the figures are 13 to 1. On the street all you have to do is close your arms and you suffocate the white person. You don't even need weapons. 13 to 1. What the hell goes on?' One of the leaders of the ANC said, 'I can answer. The Christians have the gospels, you Jews have the Talmud, the Old Testament, the Mishna, my communist comrades at this table have *Das Kapital*. We blacks have no book.'

   It was an enormous moment for me. The heritage of Athens to Jerusalem, which is that we have a book, we have several books. This was an overpoweringly sad and persuasive answer: 'We have no book.'

2. German has a word we cannot translate, as so often: *Geschichtsmüde*—tired of history. It is a very odd and haunting word.

3. You have to remember there is so much to remember. Herodotus asked the following question: 'Every year we send our ships at the risk of life and very expensively to Africa to ask: "Who are you? What are your laws? What is your language? They never sent one ship to ask us."' No amount of political correctness of fashionable liberalism can destroy that question.

4. This week the figures came out. Between 75 and 80 percent of all Europeans who take PhD's in America do not return. We have nothing to offer them, of course they don't return. We could pay them decently for one: in that sense I am a real materialist!

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