Europe

An Unfinished Adventure

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1

An Adventure called ‘Europe’

When Princess Europa was kidnapped by Zeus in bull’s disguise, her father, Agenor, King of Tyre, sent his sons in search of his lost daughter. One of them, Cadmon, sailed to Rhodes, landed in Thrace, and set out to explore the lands destined to assume later the name of his hapless sister. In Delphi he asked the Oracle about his sister’s whereabouts. On that specific point Pythia, true to her habit, was evasive – but she obliged Cadmon with practical advice: ‘You won’t find her. Better get yourself a cow, follow it and push it forward, don’t allow it to rest; at the spot where it falls from exhaustion, build a town.’ This is, so the story goes, how Thebes was founded (and so – let us, wise after the fact, observe – a chain of events was started that served Euripides and Sophocles as the yarn out of which they wove the European idea of law, enabling Oedipus to practise what was to become the common frame for the character, torments and life dramas of the Europeans). ‘To seek Europe’, comments Denis de Rougemont on Cadmon’s lesson, ‘is to make it!’ ‘Europe exists through its search for the infinite – and this is what I call adventure.’[1]

Adventure? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in Middle English that word meant anything that happened without design – a chance, hap, luck. It also meant a happening pregnant with danger or a threat of loss: risk, jeopardy; a hazardous enterprise or hapless performance. Later, closer to our own modern times, ‘adventure’ came to mean putting one’s chances to the test: a venture, or

experiment – a novel or exciting endeavour as yet untried. At the same time, a derivative was born: the adventurer – a highly ambivalent noun, whispering in one breath of blind fate and cunning, of craftiness and prudence, of aimlessness and determination. We may surmise that the shifts of meaning followed the maturation of the European spirit: its coming to terms with its own ‘essence’.

The saga of Cadmon’s travels, let us note, was not the only ancient story that sent such a message; far from it. In another tale, Phoenicians set sail to find the mythical continent and took possession of a geographic reality that was to become Europe. According to yet another story, after the deluge, when he divided the world between his three sons, Noah sent Japheth (‘beauty’ in Hebrew, by the way) to Europe, to follow there God’s promise/command to be ‘fruitful, and multiply: to bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein’ (Genesis 9: 7). He equipped him with arms and emboldened him with a promise of infinite expansion: ‘God shall enlarge Japheth’ (Genesis 9: 27), ‘dilatatio’ according to the Vulgate and Fathers of the Church. The commentators of the biblical message point out that when instructing his sons Noah must have counted solely on Japheth’s prowess and industry, since he equipped him with no other tool of success.

There is a common thread running through all the stories: Europe is not something you discover; Europe is a mission – something to be made, created, built. And it takes a lot of ingenuity, sense of purpose and hard labour to accomplish that mission. Perhaps a labour that never ends, a challenge always still to be met in full, a prospect forever outstanding.

Tales differed, but in all such tales Europe was invariably a site of adventure. Adventures like the interminable travels undertaken to discover it, invent it or conjure it up; travels like those which filled the life of Odysseus, who was

reluctant to return to the dull safety of his native Ithaca since he was drawn by the excitement of untasted hazards more than by the comforts of familiar routine, and who was acclaimed (perhaps for that reason) as the precursor, or the forefather, or the prototype, of the European. Europeans were the adventurers among the lovers of peace and quiet: compulsive and indefatigable wanderers among the shy and sedentary, ramblers and roamers among those who would rather live their lives in a world ending at the outermost village fence.

There is an old debate, as yet unresolved: was H. G. Wells, inquisitive and insightful observer as he was, right when he averred that ‘in the country of the blind the oneeyed man is king’? Or is it rather the case that in a country of the blind a one-eyed man can only be a monster, a sinister creature feared by all ‘normal’ countrymen?

In all probability, the debate will stay unresolved, since the arguments on both sides are weighty and each is in its own way persuasive. It needs to be pointed out, however, that both antagonists in the debate assume an ‘either-or’ where there is none. One possibility lost in their verbal duel is an ‘and-and’ situation: the one-eyed man being a king as well as an ogre (not a rare occurrence in past and present history, to be sure). Loved and hated. Desired and resented. Respected and reviled. An idol to be revered and a fiend to be fought to the last ditch – on some occasions simultaneously, at other times in quick succession. There are situations in which the self-confident one-eyed king may ignore or dismiss, unperturbed, the few monsterbaiting and busy detractors and prophets of doom crying from wilderness. There are other times, however, when the one-eyed monster would gladly abdicate his royal pretensions together with royal perks and duties, run for shelter and shut the door behind him. But it may not be in the one-eyed man’s power, and surely not in his power only, to choose

between royalty and monstrosity – as the European adventurer has learned, and is still learning to his bafflement or despair, from his own stormy adventures.

More than two millennia have passed since Europe's tales of origin, the Europe-originating tales, were composed. The journey that started and went on as an adventure has left a thick and heavy deposit of pride and shame, achievement and guilt; and it has lasted long enough for the dreams and ambitions to gel into stereotypes, for the stereotypes to freeze into 'essences', and for the essences to ossify into 'facts of the matter' as hard as all facts of all matters are assumed to be. Like all facts of the matter, Europe is expected, in defiance of everything that made it what it has become, to be a reality that could (should?) be located, taken stock of and filed. In an age of territoriality and territorial sovereignty, all realities are presumed to be spatially defined and territorially fixed – and Europe is no exception. Neither is the 'European character', nor the 'Europeans' themsełves.

Alexander Wat, a notable avant-garde Polish poet who was shuffled between the revolutionary barricades and the gulags that spattered the continent of Europe in his lifetime and had ample opportunity to taste in full the sweet dreams and the bitter awakenings of the past century – notorious for its abundance of hopes and wretchedness of frustrations – scanned the treasure boxes and rubbish bins of his memory to crack the mystery of the 'European character'. What would a 'typical European' be like? And he answered: 'Delicate, sensitive, educated, one who won't break his word, won't steal the last piece of bread from the hungry and won't report on his inmates to the prison guard …' And then added, on reflection, 'I met one such man. He was an Armenian.'

You can quarrel with Wat's definition of 'the European' (after all, it is in the character of Europeans to be unsure of

their true character, to disagree and endlessly quarrel about it), but you would hardly dispute, I suppose and hope, the two propositions implied by Wat's moral tale. First, the 'essence of Europe' tends to run ahead of the 'really existing Europe': it is the essence of 'being a European' to have an essence that always stays ahead of reality, and it is the essence of European realities to always lag behind the essence of Europe. Second, while the 'really existing Europe', that Europe of politicians, cartographers and all its appointed or self-appointed spokespeople, may be a geographical notion and a spatially confined entity, the 'essence' of Europe is neither the first nor the second. You are not necessarily a European just because you happen to be born or to live in a city marked on the political map of Europe. But you may be European even if you've never been to any of those cities.

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the most eminent among the great Europeans in any except the geographical sense, wrote of the 'perplexity' that cannot but arise whenever the 'absurd accidentality' of an identity tied down to a particular space and time is pondered, and so its closeness to a fiction rather than to anything we think of as 'reality' is inevitably revealed.[2] This may well be a universal feature of all identities traced down to the fact of heredity and belonging, but in the case of 'European identity' that feature, that 'absurd accidentality', is perhaps more blatant and perplexing than in most. Summing up the present-day confusion that haunts all attempts to pin down European identity, Alex Warleigh observed recently that the Europeans (in the sense of 'EU member-state nationals') 'tend to emphasize their diversity rather than what they have in common', whereas 'when talking of a "European" identity it is no longer possible to restrain its scope to EU member states in any analytically sound way.'[3] And as Norman Davies, a formidable historian, insists, it has been

difficult at all times to decide where Europe begins and where it ends – geographically, culturally or ethnically. Nothing has changed in this respect now. The sole novelty is the fast rising number of standing and ad hoc committees, academic congresses and other public gatherings dedicated exclusively or almost to the squaring of this particular circle.

Whenever we hear the word ‘Europe’ spoken, it is not immediately clear to us whether it refers to the confined territorial reality, tied to the ground, within the borders fixed and meticulously drawn by as yet unrevoked political treaties and legal documents, or to the free-floating essence that knows no bounds and defies all spatial bonds and limits. And it is this difficulty, nay impossibility of speaking of Europe while separating clearly and neatly the issue of the essence and the facts of reality that sets the talk of Europe apart from most ordinary talk about entities with geographic references.

The vexing ethereality and stubborn extraterritoriality of the ‘essence’ saps and erodes the solid territoriality of European realities. Geographical Europe never had fixed borders, and is unlikely ever to acquire them as long as the ‘essence’ goes on being, as it has been thus far ‘freefloating’ and only loosely, if at all, tied to any particular plot in space. And whenever the states of Europe try to put their common ‘continental’ borders in place and hire heavily armed border guards and immigration and customs officers to keep them there, they can never manage to seal them, make them tight and impermeable. Any line circumscribing Europe will remain a challenge for the rest of the planet and a standing invitation to transgression.

Europe as an ideal (let us call it ‘Europeanism’) defies monopolistic ownership. It cannot be denied to the ‘other’, since it incorporates the phenomenon of ‘otherness’: in the practice of Europeanism, the perpetual effort to separate,

expel and externalize is constantly thwarted by the drawing in, admission, accommodation and assimilation of the ‘external’. Hans-Georg Gadamer considered it the ‘particular advantage’ of Europe: its ability ‘to live with the others, to live as the other of the other’, the capacity and necessity of ‘learning to live with others even if the others were not like that’. ‘We are all others, and we are all ourselves.’ The European life is conducted in the constant presence and in the company of the others and the different, and the European way of life is a continuous negotiation that goes on despite the otherness and the difference dividing those engaged in, and by, the negotiation.[4]

It is perhaps because of such internalization of difference that marks Europe’s condition that (as Krzysztof Pomian memorably put it) Europe came to be the birthplace of a transgressive civilization – a civilization of transgression (and vice versa!)[5] We may say that if it is measured by its horizons and ambitions (though not always by its deeds), this civilization, or this culture, was and remains a mode of life that is allergic to borders – indeed to all fixity and finitude. It suffers limits badly; it is as if it drew borders solely to target its intractable urge to trespass. It is an intrinsically expansive culture – a feature closely intertwined with the fact that Europe was a site of the sole social entity that in addition to being a civilization also called itself ‘civilization’ and looked at itself as civilization, that is as a product of choice, design and management – thereby recasting the totality of things, including itself, as an in-principle-unfinished object, an object of scrutiny, critique, and possibly remedial action. In its European rendition, ‘civilization’ (or ‘culture’, a concept difficult to separate from that of ‘civilization’ despite the philosophers’ subtle arguments and the less subtle efforts of nationalist politicians) is a continuous process – forever imperfect yet obstinately struggling for perfection – of remaking the world.

Even when the process is performed in the name of conservation, the hopeless inability of things to stay as they are, and their habit of successfully defying all undue tinkering unless they are duly tinkered with, is the common assumption of all conservation. It is viewed, including the conservatives, as a job to be done, and indeed that assumption is the prime reason to view that job as a job that needs doing.

Paraphrasing Hector Hugh Munro's (Saki's) witticism, we could say that the people of Europe made more history than they could consume locally. As far as history was concerned, Europe was definitely an exporting country, with (until quite recently) a consistently positive foreign trade balance ...

To say that each human group has 'a culture' is banal, but it would not be banal to say it if it were not for Europe's discovery of culture as an activity performed by humans on the human world. It was that discovery which (to deploy Martin Heidegger's memorable terms) pulled the totality of the human world out of the dark expanses of zuhanden (that is 'given to hand' and given to hand matter-of-factly, routinely, and therefore 'unproblematically'), and transplanted it on to the brightly lit stage of vorhanden (that is, the realm of things that, in order to fit the hand, need to be watched, handled, tackled, kneaded, moulded, made different than they are). Unlike the universe of zuhanden, the world as vorhanden forbids standing still; it is a standing invitation, even a command, to act.

Once that discovery of the world-as-culture was made, it did not take long for it to become common knowledge. It was, we may say, a kind of knowledge singularly unfit for private ownership, let alone a monopoly, however hard the advocates and guardians of 'intellectual property rights' might try. The idea of culture stood after all for the discovery that all things human are human-made and that

they would not be human things otherwise. This shared knowledge notwithstanding, the relations between European culture, the sole culture of self-discovery, and all the other cultures of the planet have been anything but symmetrical.

As Denis de Rougemont crisply put it,[6] Europe discovered all the lands of the earth, but no one ever discovered Europe. It dominated every continent in succession, but was never dominated by any. And it invented a civilization which the rest of the world tried to imitate or was forcefully compelled to replicate, but a reverse process never (thus far, at any rate) happened. These are all 'hard facts' of a history that has brought us, and the rest of the planet with us, to the place we all now share. One can define Europe, de Rougemont suggests, by its 'globalizing function'. Europe might have been, consistently and for a long time, an uncharacteristically adventurous corner of the globe – but the adventures on which it embarked in more than two millennia of its history 'proved to be decisive for the whole of humanity'. Indeed, just try to imagine the world with Europe absent from its history.

Goethe described the European culture as Promethean. Prometheus stole the fire of the gods and so betrayed the gods' secret to humans. Once wrenched from the hands of gods, fire was to be avidly sought by all and any human household and triumphantly kindled and kept aflame by those whose search was successful. Would it, however, have happened if not for Prometheus' cunning, arrogance and daring?

These crucial facts of history tend to be shamefacedly concealed nowadays, and recalling them is often attacked point blank in the name of the current version of 'political correctness'. What motivates the attackers?

Sometimes, undoubtedly, it is a sense of uneasiness caused by the facility with which any talk of Europe's unique qualities and historical role can be charged with the sin of