

**Zsuzsa Selyem**

***Himmler's Trick***

Today Europe reminds me of the packed refugee boats, the image of frightened children and distraught adults haunts me. Today Europe is a privileged place where chances of survival are incomparably higher than in the cities of the Middle East turned into death camps, or in the sere, depleted, war-torn African regions. If we take a look at an updated map of conflict zones, we can see that Europe's borders are the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, wars and famine.

But this is not the map that Europeans see. On the Europeans' map Europe is not surrounded by tangible poverty, families drowned on their flight, children shivering in carpet-bombed cities, but by dark, hostile forces approaching out of the void to force on us their religious bigotries. On the Europeans' map the non-European rapist looms large, magnified one thousand times, while not even a microscope shows you the European theatre director or CEO who sexually harass their subordinates for decades.

On the Europeans' map hardly any poor Europeans show.

On the map of Europe only Europe's privileged show. And this is something unfathomable. Theoretically the privileged have received the best available education and have the highest life standards, thus they hardly ever need to make haphazard decisions and form judgements on instinct and gut feeling: on the contrary, they have all the means to gather adequate information and check its accuracy. In their elite schools and colleges their emotional intelligence has also been taken care of, they have studied music, literature, art history; they cannot be manipulated, being well aware of the mechanisms of achieving impact. Yet how is it possible that these cultivated humans, the finest specimens of our species, are taking turns to vote into their parliaments the parties propagating anti-immigrant gut feeling? How is it possible that, in the name of humanism, the majority of Europeans would not only refuse to help victims according to their means, but downright hate them and expect their politicians to erect walls out of their taxes, and – by some truly unaccountable mental regression – expect their media to paint a black picture of the poor and precarious?

First as tragedy, then as comedy, then as tragedy again, and so it could go on for all eternity, but will not, because at a certain point we, that is, humanity will go extinct, after having exterminated the better part of the world around us: whenever I think about Europe, this is what I end up thinking, and this is no thought, no place and no solution, but - since I haven't yet found a way to adopt an orphaned refugee child - for better or for worse I will try to be articulate.

The values of the cultivated, civilized Europe *versus* cruelty, victim-blaming, bigotry, over-generalization, labelling. Indignation at the sight of glaring self-contradiction, atrocious meaninglessness is no better than epigonism today: all this has been amply dissected in articles starting with the 1930s when the task would have been to somehow prevent the hate-mongering, supremacy-propagating Nazi machinery from seizing power and exterminating one part of mankind. Under the title *Europe, Beware*, Thomas Mann has written about the "children of this world" who have gone on an indeterminate vacation from the school of the / to take up their comfortable places in collectivity, who whole-heartedly believe in violence and mendacity alone. They have exempted themselves from individual responsibility, from work on themselves, by the easiest road - intoxication, the simple-minded aggression of editorials, mystagogy and sentimentalism, spiritual constructions where the difference between truth and sham

becomes unimportant. They use the jargon forged by the Romantics: nation, soil, blood, equally sheathed in some kind of obscure concept of community, peremptory because not grounded in rationality and not conceptual in nature. Propaganda takes the place of education, for this makes overruling much easier: "The principle of violence greatly simplifies things, no wonder that the masses hark to it."

Thus Thomas Mann so far. Let us not sigh that what's going on right now is the same old tune, for on the one hand it is indeed the same (one tiny little example: we discuss the meaning of the word *paradigm* with freshman students of letters, I ask what they believe to be the most actual question of our age, one of them answers: Do I look good?) - on the other hand, even back then it had been merely a symptom, of a system that naturalizes injustice and inequality, blaming the outcasts for the consequences of being cast out, the uncultivated masses for their susceptibility to manipulation - the outcome of a discriminative education system -, for their aggression arising from helplessness. One century earlier, in the nineteenth, the electorate (the elite) had still entertained itself with bucolic works in which poverty was painted in the hues of idyll, while a century on, in our own times (in the age of universal suffrage) pop cultural products are designed on the basis of surveys, to which those whose opinion is asked can give no other answer but the ones to which they have access. We hardly ever see advertisements for anything else than the grotesquely simplified, bogus produce of the entertainment industry, grounded in polar opposites (in which self-exculpation and hate-mongering walk hand in glove) and with less than bowing acquaintance with reality.

It takes no serious exertions to grasp why the majority chooses the films, books, political parties built on opposites: what in fact it would truly need it has next to no chance of coming in contact with. The little happiness which would belong to life against all odds, allowing people to turn towards the unknown, the stranger, with intelligent benevolence, intelligent curiosity, intelligent helpfulness instead of poking at it with a long stick, all mistrust, is barred from us. I have read it with delight in Michael Lebowitz, for it made me finally understand the process: in the course of human work what changes is not only the object of work and the work environment, but the person working as well. The work you do with the sole purpose of earning your livelihood is like manufacturing the weapon with which you will be eventually killed.

This is how I would rephrase one of the actual questions of our age: what shall I do in order to revert the European majority's total estrangement from their true interests - their own joy?

At the beginning of the last century Brecht considered that the solution was to raise awareness of the estrangement. And indeed it is, but not only does the estranged multitude never get inside a theatre, to congregate in a little restaurant after performance for discussing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – there are few better things in life! –, but even cinemas keep closing down. The utmost enjoyment shopping malls offer is the impersonality, relaxation, the slow, aimless ambling in front of ever-changing shop windows; money becomes the sole catalyst of interaction between people. A comfortable relation, free from risk and emotions: any eventual hitches will be discretely dealt with by the security guards.

Hate propaganda converts precisely this emotional aridity, alienation into anti-refugee sentiment and fabricates some kind of community out of it. For one cannot build a community on the never internalized critique of pure reason – a critique of pure reason preserved in a rational limbo: we are more or less qualified in diverging domains, working with different types of information. There is no rational common language. Expertise allows for nice individual careers, but these will hardly become universal without the search for what is common. Until the work of millions became superfluous due to technological advancement, we never as much as noticed how much our individualism stinks. I know

that tomorrow it might be my turn to be made redundant and this fills me with anxiety on a daily basis, but I have never experienced that which used to be possible in Brecht's time, that I might become stronger by solidarity with others, that we might protect one another. All this is very much absent today; what we have is entrenchment, and yet again the good old sloppy, sentimental nation, soil and blood.

Watching closely the behavior of a mass murderer bureaucrat together with the reactions of the distressed witnesses and the inflamed audience of the trial, and meticulously reading the documents of the Nazi machinery, Hannah Arendt comes to formulate one precise question: though it is certainly imaginable that the mass murderers and silent fellow travelers were not much bothered by conscience, yet what did they do with that profoundly human instinct, compassion, that overcomes even animals if they should see their companion in pain? Himmler, who was himself sickened at the sight of the beastly tortures and killings, came upon the solution of turning this irrepressible, instinctive, primal compassion upside down: pity not the victim, my kin, but yourselves who are constrained to watch such abhorrent things for the sake of the fatherland.

Himmler's trick has worked splendidly ever since. Europe is fearful and apprehensive for its own sake and busy pitying itself. It will organize its life in such a manner that it needn't see the victims of wars and famines which it had a hand in creating. Cynicism has become the generalized disposition: Why should it be my business? This, too, is one of the symptoms of the actual questions of our age. The entertainment industry (which has become one of the key industries of party politics) thrives on covering up emotional aridity with sentimentalism, and/or aggression. As Romeo Castellucci somewhere said, sentimentalism is the other side of cynicism.

Towards the end of his life Jacques Derrida wrote that standing naked in front of his cat he felt ashamed. Facing the animal's gaze, it is not my nakedness I am ashamed of, but my human morals.

Where is Kant now with his starry heavens and moral law? Millions starve to death while others are throwing out millions of tons of food, we are murdering our environment by building further power stations and nuclear plants, animals go extinct (so they wouldn't remind us of the compassion we owe the other), the air of our cities is poisonous, the children of depressed parents challenge one another at Blue Whale, but we are staunchly defending Europe against migrants.

The cold indifference toward the other and inside me, smarmy self-pity.

*Translated from the Hungarian by Erika Mihálycsa*