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ATHENS, OR THE FATE OF EUROPE

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ABSTRACT: In his essay 'The Idea of Europe' George Steiner claims that European culture derives from "a primordial duality, the twofold inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem." For Steiner, the relationship between Greek rationalism and Jewish religion, which is at once conflictual and syncretic, has engaged the entire history of European philosophy, morality, and politics. However, given this definition, at present the United States of America seem to be more European than 'the old Europe' itself. Against Steiner, it will be argued that in order to fathom the distinctive characteristic of European culture, we have to take a third European tradition into account, which is inextricably bound up with Athens: the tradition of Greek tragedy. If we may call Europe a tragic continent, it is not only because its history is characterised by an abundance of real political tragedies, but also because it embodies, as an idea and an ideal, a tragic awareness of the fragility of human life. Instead of reducing the 'idea of Europe' to a financial and economic issue, Europe should remain faithful to this idea and ideal.

FIRST of all I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation to join this symposium on Art and Cultures. As a tribute to the magnificent city of Athens and its inhabitants, I will talk about the relationship between European culture and the art form that is inextricably tied to the city of Athens: Greek tragedy. The thesis I will defend is that European culture distinguishes itself from other world cultures, and in particular from North American culture, with which it shares both its Christian and its scientific worldview, by its deeply tragic character. This claim, I will argue, is neither a pessimistic nor an optimistic one, because tragedy is beyond this simple dichotomy. If I claim that Europe is a tragic continent, I refer both to its grandeur and pitfalls.

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My talk consists of two parts. First, in a critical discussion with George Steiner, I will address the question of the identity of European culture. In the second part I will relate this identity to Greek tragedy.

THE IDEA OF EUROPE

When one starts to think about Europe, a series of intriguing questions come to mind. Seemingly simple, they are very hard to answer. The first two of these questions deal with the location of Europe in space and time: '*Where* is Europe?' (Where exactly should we locate its geographical borders?), and '*When* is Europe?' (Is it a thing of the past, an existing reality, an idea yet to be realized?). Since the failure of the new European Constitution in 2005 and the Euro-crisis that haunts Europe since 2008 a third question started to dominate the discussion: '*Why* is Europe?' Today I will not deal directly with these three questions, but focus on a fourth one, as simple as the other three and as difficult to answer. This question is: '*What* exactly is Europe?' In a sense, this fourth question is the primordial one, as we can start our search for Europe in time and space only when we at least have a slight idea of *what* we are actually looking for. And the same goes for the question why we should care for Europe. So the question I will address is: What is it that makes Europe European?

George Steiner's essay *The Idea of Europe* (2004), written in the context of the Intellectual Summit which was held during the Dutch Presidency of the European Union in 2004, provides a good starting point for my quest for the artistic core of European culture.

In his lecture, Steiner argued that Europe can be defined by 'five axioms.' The first three of these axioms—the coffee house, in which intellectual and political debate took place, the landscape on a traversable and human scale, and the streets and squares named after statesmen, scientists, artists, and writers of the past—mainly refer to the material infrastructure in which the European culture could emerge, flourish and be passed on across generations. As important as this infrastructure may be, I will focus on the fourth axiom, which refers to what Steiner calls "the substance" of the idea of Europe. This substance "derives from a primordial duality, . . . the twofold inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem." "This relationship, at once conflictual and syncretic, has engaged European theological, philosophical and political argument from the Church fathers to Leon Chestov, from Pascal to Leo Strauss. To be a European is to attempt to negotiate, morally, intellectually and existentially the rival ideals, claims, *praxis*, of the city of Socrates and that of Isaiah" (Steiner 2004, p. 24).

Steiner's claim that the substance of the European worldview is rooted in Greek rationalism, on the one hand, and the Jewish-Christian tradition, on the other, is not particularly surprising. In fact, the claim is rather obvious and Steiner certainly is not the first to make it. However, Steiner also points to the fact—following Leo Strauss (Strauss 1997, pp. 377–405)—that the two traditions on which the idea of Europe rests, are "at once conflictual and syncretic" (Steiner 2004, p. 24). That Steiner mentions the conflictual nature of this relationship first, is not without reason. From the very beginning this relationship has been full of tensions. The time that their mutual struggle was settled on the stake fortunately lies behind us. Given the fundamental secularization of Europe over the past two centuries, Christianity and rationality live in a relatively peaceful coexistence. However, their principles are still diametrically opposed. We only have to think, for example, of the recent debate between evolutionists and defenders of intelligent design.

Moreover, during recent decades Europe has begun to face a new, and since 9/11, an increasingly violent confrontation with Islam. This seems to have started a new chapter in the tense relationship between rationality and religion. Old and new Europeans seem to be forced to make a choice between the two conflictual principles again. However, this time the choice is not between Athens and Jerusalem, but between Athens and Mecca.

THE TRAGIC CONTINENT

If we want to understand the tension between religion and rationality, which characterizes the discordant Idea of Europe, we have to take a third European tradition into account, a tradition that in my view—even more than religion and rationalism—characterizes the 'idea of Europe.' I refer to the tragic sensibility, as it found its classical expression in the fifth century B.C. in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and its modern expression in the works of Shakespeare, Lessing, Ibsen and Sartre, in the tradition of the European novel and film, but also in the very idea of solidarity with those who suffer and the welfare state (De Mul 2014).

Tragedies are stories that deal with fateful events. Fate has many faces: accidents, natural disasters, war, addictions, illness, the loss of our loved ones and our own death. Fate hounds us all and sooner or later we all have to face it. In ordinary language the word 'tragic' is often used to refer to fateful events. However, not all fateful events are tragic. An event becomes tragic when the actor himself, against his own will, causes the fateful event. When somebody suffers fatal illness, that is terrible, but it is not a tragedy. The life of a slave may be miserable, but it is not tragic. Tragedies occur when a person executes his own fate in freedom. In William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* we find a shocking example of a tragic event. In the story a sadistic doctor in a Nazi concentration camp forces Sophie to make a choice which of her two children is to die and which one is to survive. Losing a child is a terrible fate; to be forced to make this impossible choice turns it into an unbearable tragedy. As Steiner expresses it in *The Death of Tragedy*: "The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence" (Steiner 1961, p. 8).

Calling Europe the tragic continent is not the same, of course, as claiming that tragic events are restricted to Europe. Such events occur everywhere on earth. However, since the birth of the classical tragedy Europe has been characterized by a specific *awareness* of and *attitude* towards the tragic dimension of human life, as well by a sublime aesthetic *expression* of this tragic dimension. Steiner repeatedly emphasizes that the literary genre of the tragedy is a uniquely European phenomenon: “All men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal. Oriental art knows violence, grief, and the stroke of natural or contrived disaster; the Japanese theatre is full of ferocity and ceremonial death. But that representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western tradition. . . . This idea and the vision of man which it implies are Greek” (Steiner 1961, p. 3).

In this light it is quite surprising that in his 2004 essay “The Idea of Europe,” Steiner does not include tragedy as one of the pillars on which Europe rests. However, he seems to allude to it, when stating that the fifth and last of the axioms that define Europe consists of “an eschatological self-awareness” (Steiner 2004, p. 27). In that context he even speaks about “a more or less tragic finality” and at the very end of his lecture the word ‘tragic’ appears once more. After having criticized the growing Americanization of European culture, he expresses his hope that ‘the European dream’ can be dreamed again, and he continues: “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” (ibid., p. 35).

The use of the word ‘perhaps’ indicates that Steiner is not fully convinced that the European dream can be dreamed again. This might not only have been motivated by the overwhelming power of the process of Americanization, but also by the development of European culture itself, as he describes it in his aforementioned book, *The Death of Tragedy*. According to Steiner, the tragic worldview could only arise in a culture that was inhabited by gods and which was ruled by “an aristocracy of suffering” that revolted against these gods. According to Steiner, in modern, secularized Europe there is no longer a place for tragedy. Hence the melancholic title and tone of his book.

However, tragedies do not necessary presuppose a religious worldview and an aristocratic elite. I am almost inclined to say: on the contrary. The emergence of tragedy in the fifth century before Christ in Athens reflects two important cultural transformations. Greek tragedy emerged in an era, in which the fatalistic worldview in which everything was determined by the will of the gods, was replaced by a more rational worldview. Especially in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the conflict between the old *mythos* and the new *logos* is constantly present. However, already in Euripides’ tragedies the conflict is no longer between men and the gods, but rather between human beings (among whom many are women and foreigners!), or between conflicting desires and principles within a single individual. Seen from this perspective it seems no coincidence that the second Golden Age of tragedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth century took place in an age in which again there was a transformation from mythos (this time in the form of Christianity) to logos (the secular, scientific worldview).

The second transformation that accompanied the birth of tragedy in Athens is closely connected with the transformation from mythos to logos. It is the transformation from aristocracy to democracy. As I already mentioned, tragedies occur when fateful events are the result of free action. In this sense the genre of tragedy can be regarded as a reflection on the consequences of the democratization of the Greek polis. Greek tragedies represent nature and the limits of human freedom in imaginary form. It seems, therefore, no coincidence that tragedy and democracy were born at the same time, at the same place.

Steiner mistakenly supposes that the end of mythology and aristocracy demarcates the death of tragedy. Whereas in theocracy only a king in revolt could be tragic, in liberal societies we witness a democratization of tragedy. The secularization and democratization of tragedy undoubtedly have had their impact on the contents, the characters and the style of tragedy. However, though tragedy has undergone important changes in the course of its long history, the basic structure of the tragic conflict has remained the same. Tragedies depict persons who wrestle with a fundamental problem. They are torn apart between contradictory circumstances, motives and/or principles. They do not lack drive or dedication. If they do not survive their tragic struggle, it's not because they lack determination, but rather because of their almost superhuman dedication. What makes these heroes tragic is that they, despite their freedom and responsibility, become part of a fateful chain of events. Because of miscalculation (*hamartia*), blindness (*atē*) or overconfidence (*hubris*) the tragic hero puts an unbearable guilt on his shoulders, as unintended as inevitable.

The fateful adventures of tragic heroes in Greek tragedies often are remarkably topical. In her stubborn struggle against Islam radicalism, the Somali-Dutch-American feminist and atheist Ayan Hirsi Ali resembles Sophocles' Antigone in many respects; George W. Bush's attempts to finish the job of his father and 'bring democracy to Iraq' immediately reminds us of Xerxes' attempts to bring "tyranny to Greece" in Aeschylus's *The Persians* and the "Oedipus complexity" of the sovereign debt crisis and the Euro crisis that have haunted and divided Europe since 2008 repeat the fate of King Oedipus, whose ignorance prevented him from conquering the plagues of his time and led him to blind and ban himself in order to purify the polluted situation (De Mul and Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011; De Mul 2014).

These examples make clear that tragedy is the opposite of Christianity and Islam, which are grand narratives that are based on clear distinctions between truth and falsehood, and good and bad, and that promise their believers a happy end, and that, for that reason, rather belong to the genre of melodrama or comedy. However, tragedy no less opposes the secular optimism that characterizes the Enlightenment. Tragedy claims that the best of possible worlds is out of our reach. However, tragic wisdom can help us to avoid producing more suffering than is inevitable.

If there is something Europe could learn from its long and tragic history, it is that there is something like a *tragic humanism*. The awareness that sometimes we have to take responsibility for the fate that overcomes us. And that we, for that reason, must have compassion for those who are being pursued by fate. And it is precisely this tragic humanism that distinguishes Europe from the United States. This brave new world has surpassed Europe both in religious fundamentalism and in the rationalistic faith that the world is makeable thanks to our technologies.

Let me be clear at this point. I am not claiming that Europe is morally superior to the US. For several reasons, the situation is more complex and less flattering for Europe. The first and most obvious reason is that the history of Europe until now has been characterized by real tragedies rather than by tragic wisdom. We only have to think of the wars of conquest fought by Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, of the crusades in the middle ages, the religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the history of European colonization, or the First and Second World Wars in the twentieth century, which not without reason have been called European Civil Wars and which produced the concentration camps after which, according to the famous words of Adorno, the writing of poetry is no longer possible.

The distinguishing point between the USA and Europe is not so much the level of miscalculation, blindness and hubris, but rather the difference in tragic awareness that accompanies the self-inflicted catastrophes. If we may call the USA a tragic country, this is not because of its tragic awareness, but rather because of the very lack of such awareness (De Mul 2008).

Let me conclude. If we may call Europe a tragic continent, it is not only because its history is characterised by an abundance of real political tragedies, but also because it embodies, as an idea and an ideal, a tragic awareness of the fragility of human life, which found its sublime expression in its literature, visual arts, music and speculative thinking. Instead of reducing the 'idea of Europe' to a financial and economic issue, Europe should remain faithful to its idea. However, this Europe is not so much a reality, but rather a regulative ideal that still has to be realized. This implies that we should cultivate compassion and solidarity (also in times of economic crises), and enhance our moral sensibility and ability to take the perspective of those who do not share our truths, values and deepest beliefs.

Finally, we should not forget tragic irony. The irony of tragic heroes is that they often bring forth the opposite of what they intend. Tragic irony not only evokes fear and pity in the spectators, but can also help us to ridicule conflicts. Tragic humour evokes laughter in the face of fate. Few things are as de-escalating as the ability to laugh together about the prejudices of the other and ourselves. It was not without reason that in ancient Athens after the performance of a trilogy of tragedies the festival concluded with the performance of a comedy, which often dealt with the same type of conflict depicted in the tragedy. Long before Marx the tragedians already understood that history always repeats itself, first as tragedy, and then as farce (Marx 1971).

We may comfort ourselves with the knowledge that not all tragedies end badly. Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, in which it is demonstrated how honour killing can be transformed into mercy, shows that sometimes tragic wisdom comes just in time. Perhaps nobody was more aware of this than the sixteenth-century humanist Michel de Montaigne, when he wrote: "I will follow the good side right to the fire; but not into it if I can help it!" (Montaigne 1958, 605).

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