

## **Luisa Passerini: Affective Narratives for Europe**

*Speech held on the occasion of the award ceremony for the All European Academies  
Madame de Staël prize for cultural values 2014*

*Academy Palace, Brussels | 9 April 2014*

I am moved and honored to receive a prize entitled to a great European like Madame de Staël, whose work has inspired my research for many years. I do believe that her writings and her life indicate the way towards the type of cultural engagement that President Barroso has called "New Narrative for Europe". I have been convinced for many years that our intellectual work should go exactly in this direction.

This is why I would like to start from a very significant narrative by Mme de Staël, the novel *Corinne ou l'Italie*, originally published in 1807, but still of great relevance today.

Indeed, while the exploration of the intellectual and political roots of European identity has received wide attention from scholars and politicians, the affective aspects of European identity have been much less present in the public debate. I take "affect" to involve not only passions and sentiments, but also the intelligence of emotions and the capacity for judgment, and eventually to include also negative feelings such as sorrow and fear. Affective narratives of and for Europe require that we imagine a continent in which the rights of affectivity can be considered a fundamental part of democracy, democracy understood as a daily cultural dimension that connects the public and the private, with an affirmation of rights in the private sphere and their reverberations in the public one. Paying attention to emotional aspects does not in any way contradict the intellectual and political construction necessary for a European identity.

In Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne ou l'Italie*, the central figure, Corinne, is portrayed as an artist of great versatility, who excels in many intellectual and artistic fields, enjoying honestly her success in the city of Rome where she lives. At the same time Corinne, born of a British nobleman and an Italian lady, is a cosmopolitan woman, who bears in herself the multiplicity of Europe: two nationalities, the

cultural heritage of various countries and regions, the knowledge of different languages.

Corinne prefigures a cultured and liberated woman who could live only in a free and united Europe, the dream that Madame de Staël nourished with her group of friends from various European countries at her castle at Coppet, in Switzerland. The liberal ideas of the author and the references to her own experience - public and private - are transparent in the novel. For Corinne, the attitudes of her epoch are too narrow and reductive especially in the field of affective relationships. She is loved by various men from different European countries, Italy, France, Germany, and Britain, all of them described by Mme de Staël as limited in their views by narrowly national outlooks. My interpretation of Corinne is that she is too “European” for her times. A better title for the novel would be, in my fantasy, *Corinne ou l’Europe* rather than *Corinne ou l’Italie*.

In fact Corinne falls in love, reciprocated, with a British nobleman, Lord Nelvil, who is endowed with many positive qualities, such as the belief in liberal values and physical courage, but he is afraid of marrying such an independent woman, and chooses instead Corinne’s stepsister, Lucile, grown up strictly as a wife and a mother. In the course of this dramatic experience, Corinne ends up losing her creativity and lets herself die, after having taught music to her niece Juliette, Lucile’s and Nelvil’s daughter. The young niece, very similar to Corinne, will take up and continue her art and her heritage. This is the first lesson of the novel: the transmission of values and culture from one generation to the other provides the auspice that future generations will be able to live up to the potentialities denied to the previous ones, thus prefiguring a genealogy of hope for a new Europe.

Let me, at this point, go beyond the gender dimension. I considered it appropriate to start from there, but we cannot stop at it. Corinne’s story is such that it can concern anybody, of any gender, race and culture, beyond the limits of differences and nationalities. It concerns anybody who can nourish a sense of belonging to “a community of values and culture”, to quote President Barroso’s words a few minutes ago. I would like to add that it is in the nature of cultural values not to be fixed, but enrichable and updatable through exchanges between different cultures, as the history of Europe shows. We could also say that anybody has a right to love Europe as well as to love and be loved in Europe.

Such Europe has contradictory roots: on the one hand the promise of equal rights and on the other a legacy of oppression and repression, of the exclusion of many from the enjoyment of rights in both the public and the private spheres. These “negative” roots represent a memory of repression of civil rights by authoritarian regimes, but often, for what concerns certain social groups and certain fields, also by democratic regimes. The Enlightenment’s promise of the recognition of universal rights, implicit in an equal education like the one that Corinne received, could not be kept in Madame de Staël’s novel, because fulfilling it would have meant putting in danger the social and moral order of the existing society. Corinne can be taken to represent all of us, in spite of our differences. Her story calls for attention to the sphere of sentiments, and pleads for a memory of affect, as a basis for a fair connection between the public and the private sphere.

This trend of thought was present in the writings of various Europeanists. First among them, Denis de Rougemont, who in the 1920s created the term: ‘Europe du sentiment’, a Europe of sentiment understood as a sense of belonging both cultural and personal. For Rougemont, Europe means connectedness, established through the intense relationships between various cultures and countries. In his thought there were elements of Eurocentrism, but at the same time expressions of global solidarity; and he fully recognised the value of Arabs’ contribution to European culture, particularly for what concerns the history of love.

In the period following the Second World War, during the construction of the European Community and then Union, Ursula Hirschmann, wife of Altiero Spinelli, developed further the concept of a Europe of sentiment, insisting on the link between the public and the private and on the possibility of feeling at the same time a subject of Europeanness and of love.

But the trend of thought giving value to the link between Europe, democracy and sentiments, is present not only in the legacy of great and well known Europeans. It comes to us also from unknown potential new Europeans, such as migrants from inside and outside Europe.

A first example comes to me from my previous research, sponsored by a European Project within the Fifth Framework some years ago, which studied the oral memories of women migrants from the Central-Eastern to the Western part of Europe. In those migrants’ narratives, the sphere of affectivity was always present as part of the motivations for moving (they did not like the term “migrant”), in connection with the idea of being a mobile European. Thus the discourse on love

emerged as a constant element of their memories even when they revealed a discrepancy between imagination and experience, as if the imaginary around migration necessarily included love in one way or another, an imaginary often frustrated and deceived.

Indeed, the destiny of Corinne cannot be forgotten, and stays as a reminder of the political and affective difficulties of any form of Europeanness, but at the same time it stands as a promise for a Europe of affect, that gives space to positive emotions across differences.

It is the same promise that I encounter in the research project I am directing now, supported by the European Research Council and being done at the European University Institute in Florence: “Bodies Across Border: oral and visual memory across Europe and beyond”. This project collects the narratives of migrants who come to Europe from Africa and South America, as well as their drawings or photographs of their traveling towards Europe. In this project we find inspiration from the work of artists, especially visual artists working on the representations of Europe and its borders, who are contributing to construct a visual memory of Europe.

But we especially find – not always, but often – a sense of potential belonging to Europe in the testimonies of the migrants themselves. Their oral and visual memories express emotions which include the hope of bringing to and finding in Europe “life, love and peace” (I quote these words from the narrative of an Egyptian migrant, Magdy Yussef, which I recently collected), thus concurring to enrich European values connected with daily culture. I do not want in the least to reduce the dramatic aspect of migration for both the migrants and the recipients, but just to remind us that new narratives of and for Europe are in the process of being constructed, in stories which can at times express rage and resentment but which often claim the right of participation and of affective relations with Europe, for Europe and in Europe. Altogether, these narratives confirm that tentative new ways of feeling European are possible, linked with new developments in emotional life, and capable of bringing the contribution of the private into the public.

I would like to conclude by saying that I feel it is our task as European intellectuals – and citizens – to recognize the new affective narrations that are being created, at whatever level they appear, and to contribute to make them part of our new shareable narrative.