

Professor Luisa Passerini: Affective Narratives for Europe

Lecture delivered on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the All European Academies at

the ALLEA General Assembly 2014

24 April 2014 | The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters | Oslo

First of all, I would like to thank warmly ALLEA, its jury and its President. I was 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".

This is why I would like to start from a significant narrative by Mme de Staël, the novel *Corinne ou l'Italie*, 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.

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 *Corinne ou l’Europe* rather than *Corinne ou l’Italie*.

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, but 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 d her heritage. This is one lesson of the novel: the transmission of values and culture from one generation to the other prefigures 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”, quoting President Barroso. We could also say that anybody has a right to love Europe as well as to love and be loved in Europe.

This trend of thought was present in the writings of various Europeanists. First of all among them, Denis de Rougemont, who in the 1920s created the expression ‘Europe du sentiment’, a Europe of sentiment understood as a sense of belonging both cultural and personal. In the period following the Second World War, during the construction of the European Community, Ursula Hirschmann, wife of Altiero Spinelli, developed further this concept, insisting on the link between the public and the private and 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.

I encounter this hope 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 to Europe from Africa and South America, as well as their drawings or photographs of their traveling towards Europe. In their testimonies we find a sense of potential belonging to Europe. Their oral and visual memories express emotions which include the hope of bringing to and finding in Europe “life, love and peace”, as one of them told me recently, thus concurring to enrich European values connected with daily culture. I do not want in the least to reduce the dramatic aspect of the 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.