

Europe's Sickness

Filberto Ruiz de Samaniego

A B S T R A C T

Is Europe sick? Has it always been sick? More than a hundred years ago, Nietzsche wrote: "Europe is a sick man, and an incurable sick one." If so, we would like to diagnose what such a disease consisted of and still consists, and if there is a cure.

Facultad de Belas Artes de Pontevedra – Universidade de Vigo
Fine Arts School of Pontevedra – University of Vigo, Pontevedra, Spain

"A decline which is not understood loses its poetry in the ridiculous."

(Emil Cioran)

More than a century ago, Nietzsche wrote that Europe was a sick man, and an incurable patient. That disease that affected Europe, as is known, was nihilism; the *most unsettling host*. The values that had sustained civilization were exhausted and, now, the continent lacked tragic culture, and it had plenty of... reason. A reason that, furthermore, was less itself than its cult. But, even a century and a half after, Europe is not yet able to think about its fatality. It has not been able to think, affirmatively, about its own lack of values, so that, from that point, is able to generate new ones. Thus, it has not been able to surpass itself. That is why it is an incurable patient.

Europe, therefore, has been unable to plunge itself, with tragic Nietzschean joy, into the unknown. The torment of the unknown, the a-rational or the radically random facet that always governs becoming. It has always wanted to reflect itself in a false Greece that stood for its harmony and serenity, but from which all the abysmal potency, whose tumult and passion were setting fire to the Greek garden, was hidden.

Europe, so to speak, has lived happily amidst its abstract intelligence, its maxims, its notes and paradoxes. That is why its world is only assumed as the world of the understandable, the rejection of mystery.

The greatest mystery, as Nietzsche noted, is precisely that God has died... killed by us. Here is one of Nietzsche's substantial concerns, especially in the last years of lucidity, when he could, nevertheless, disguise under the figure of the mad speaker who seeks God in the midst of men's misunderstanding, urged only by necessity, with their backs turned to everything divine: Where has God gone? - he exclaimed -, I will tell you. We have killed him: you and I! "We are all his murderers. But how could we have done it? How could we have drunk the sea? Who lent us the sponge to blur the horizon? What have we done, when we unleashed the earth from its sun? What path will it follow now? Where will we go? Away from all the suns? Will we not continuously fall? Forward, backward, sideways, everywhere? Is there, by any chance, an up and a down nevertheless? Do we not err through an infinite nothing? Doesn't the breath of the empty space rub against us? Isn't it colder? Isn't there always night and night again? Do we not have to light up beacons at midday? Do we not still hear the noise of the gravediggers who bury God? Do we not feel, however, any odor from divine rot? Gods also decompose!" (*La Gaya ciencia*, § 125).¹ In this passage, Nietzsche nevertheless contemplates the death of God as the dramatic overthrow of traditional metaphysics. There is no possibility of revitalizing categories and values that nowadays are only ruins: there are no hopes. It corresponds to the decline of the world of god, but also to that of man's domain (equivalent to the downfall of truth and, with it, also the downfall of appearances). This black point of infinite nothingness or void, an authentic terminal episode, can only be assumed as the necessary prologue to the culmination of nihilism, the possibility of not only overcoming god, but – beyond that – man himself.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *El gay saber o la gaya ciencia*, ed. and trans. Luis Jiménez Moreno, Madrid, Espasa, 2000.

Hence, further on, in the *fifth book*, at the sight of God's throne vacancy and in the text with which precisely this begins (entitled "We, the Fearless"), he addresses this important subject again – he even calls it 'spectacle' – as "The greatest of last events - that 'God is dead', that the faith in the Christian God has become untenable."

What Nietzsche will be unfolding, now without any ambiguity, is an idea that works in the manner of a crucial caesura between the past and his time, which is ours. “The new - he will write in a posthumous text in the spring of 1880 - in our current position on philosophy is a conviction that no era has had yet: *that we don't hold the truth*. All men in past times ‘had the truth’: even the skeptics. But now Nietzsche does not fall into despair and, even referring perhaps to the plastic Jean Paul-like descriptions of an abysmal world, an orb taken by the most absolute devastation and the black sun of melancholy, he uses them as a pathetic scenario on which to operate his radical transformation of everything, an exercise of *disorder* embodied first of all in himself: “This wide plenitude with its rupturing, destructive, collapsing, overthrowing consequences that we now have before us: who would be able to guess enough of all this today, to become the master and preacher of this enormous logic of horror, the prophet of deep darkness and eclipse of the sun, the like of which has probably never before existed on earth? [...] We ourselves, riddle diviners by birth, who wait, so to speak, on the mountains, located between today and tomorrow and lying in the contradiction between today and tomorrow. [...] We, too, may still be under the immediate consequences of this event, and these immediate consequences, its consequences, are not sad and dark for us at all, contrary to what we would expect, but are rather as a new kind of light, difficult to discover, as happiness, a relief, a recreation, a sustenance, an aurora [...] Indeed we, philosophers and ‘free spirits’, before the news that the ‘old God has died’, feel as if enlightened by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, admiration, premonition and hope”.

There was a good reason for that. After the eclipse, the existential horizon presented itself without any obscurity, finally free, open to start a new journey. Soon Heidegger, precisely in his writings on Nietzsche, will be very clear about this: nihilism “begins to take the ‘occurrence’ that ‘God is dead’ seriously”. So that the lack does not bring with it the lament, “but is, instead, greeted as a liberation, touted as a definitive conquest and perceived as fulfillment.” (*Nietzsche II*).

This is similar to the hope of someone like Hölderlin, for whom, although Christ had died, at least endured, until the day of his return, through the gifts of the earth in the kinds of bread and wine. That is precisely why we had to remain faithful to the earth. But these verses on the impetus that Nietzsche puts in Zarathustra's mouth are placed even further, in his speech about the donkey's feast. Let us remind: “While you don't become as little children, you will not enter that kingdom of heaven. (And Zarathustra pointed it with his hands up). But we do not want to enter the kingdom of heaven in any way at all: we have become men - *and that is why we want the kingdom of the earth*.” The will to fulfill this purely earthly desire can easily lead to a process of self-divination of the individual self, as expressed, with gloomy resonances, by Müller/Schubert's *Winter Journey Lied*:

*Let us enter the world happily
against all odds!
Since there is no god in heaven,
we ourselves will be gods!*

If - as *The Gay Science* states (§ 125) - we are the murderers of “the holiest and most powerful that the world has hitherto possessed”, if “he has bled out under our knives”, then, before such an enormous fact - “too big for us” -, there is no alternative but to “become gods ourselves” to “appear worthy of it”. That is why this event is truly supreme, a caesura that will mark a new cycle in the history of men: “There has never

been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us, for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher
 2 Ibid. history than all history hitherto.”²

Unfortunately, this Nietzsche was not heard, and the decline of Europe has been manifested in the obvious inability to recreate new values that drive precisely the will of creation itself, even the will of existence. We Europeans have lost vital contacts with the world, we have sunk for more than a century in a fatal absence. Our time is that of extreme lucidity... an absolutely boring time. Tired people living in inert clarity. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, makes a truly distressed diagnosis of our contemporary West, albeit difficult to refute: “The West is no longer recognized as having a worldview or a sense of the world that would follow its globalization [...]. Globalization seems to be reduced, essentially, to what Marx had already perfectly discerned as the production of the world market, and the meaning of that world seems to consist only in the accumulation and circulation of capital, followed by a clear worsening of the distance between rich dominators and the dominated poor, as well as an indefinite technical expansion that only occurs very modestly, and with disquiet as well as anguish, purposes of ‘progress’ and improvement of the human condition. Humanism leads to inhumanity that can be – according to Nancy - the brutal summary of the situation. And the West does not understand how it came to this point.”³

But Europe was not this. The active Europe that emerges from the maritime polis, from the thalassocracy of Asia Minor, was a thought that was driven by the constant desire for material conquest and spiritual time, by the novelty of an intelligence that continually exceeded itself. It developed century after century, and reached a good part of the rest of the globe, because it circulated some stories and attitudes in which it believed. No continent but Europe has been so present in the construction of the modern era. We would say that it now pays that presence with its decline.

We are, to a large extent, atoning our triumph. Those values dried or dead, we live more or less comfortably in intellectual desiccation. Reduced to triviality, to risklessness. We are paralysed by any thought that tries to remove the functions from the possible; that is to say, to penetrate into a truly dynamic, disturbing reality, with the ability to remove the categories of its pale stupor.

Our time is that of the triumph of narrow thinking and mediocrity. Mediocrity has reached its continental, European, dominating style. The average European - it is difficult not to find anything other than this *mediocratized* individual - lives happily surrounded by *insignificant things*. Cioran has sometimes talked about the refinement of triviality. Of the polishing of tiny things and the maintenance of a little intelligence in everyday accidents. That is, making natural nonsense as bearable as possible, by wrapping it in grace and giving it the luster of finesse.

The decline began when we stopped believing in our stories and were unable to replace them with new beliefs. The lucidity of nihilism has led us to abulia. But, in fact, the whole history of Europe is nothing more than its ideals, or its values. Europe believed, successively, in classicism, the Enlightenment, the Revolution, the Empire, the Republic. It had the ideals of the aristocracy, of the Church, of the bourgeoisie, of the proletariat, and suffered for each one of them. It proposed efforts, transformed into formulas, to the continent and, as such, to the world; which imitated them, perfected them, committed to them.

Europe, then, created ideals and wore them out, experienced them until the end, *ad nauseum*. And, now, the sources of the European spirit have been exhausted. And now, indeed, we wake up facing the desert, arms crossed, terrified before the future.

Europeans could still be moved in the name of what? What to propose to our community? Even Europe's own idea, as an aspiration, seems old and anachronistic, bland, not producing even the slightest chill or emotion. We lack fictions powerful enough for us to believe in them again. Cerebral skepticism has become organic. *No future*. The lack of future is the essence of the present. Nietzsche - let's go back to Nietzsche, although we never abandoned him- argued that a nation was creative as long as life was not its only value. For its values are its criteria. For example, to believe in the fiction of freedom and to fight and dance for it. The crucial question now is this: What belief is to be invented that can sustain life again?

I would like to believe that it is up to art to open this possibility. "A work of art is one capable of facing danger," Rilke said. What often seems to be forgotten today is that the truth of a work of art must be interpreted and valued according to the forces or power that determine it to exist and that lead to doing one thing instead of another. Robert Musil argued that one of the basic characteristics of the artist is the smell of the possible. This could be understood as the way in which he is capable of tracking the multiparametric and complex, his competence to raise other possibilities, other connections and journeys within the affective and cognitive map. Therefore, when we are told about the work of art in the abstract, or of the artistic as it is in itself, or for itself, we must always ask what forces are hidden in the thought of the work, i.e.: what is its meaning and what is its value for a subject, or for a given community. One must, therefore, face the complexity of the piece of art, so that it is capable of reconnecting with the multiple contents of vital reference. It would mean, then, generating organs of perception/action that illuminate new sensorial fields of the real, that would allow us, experientially, to extract evidence from new statements, symbols and stories. The artist must therefore be required to create new life possibilities.

But, unfortunately, it is true, as Deleuze also thought, that the image does not cease today to fall into an unfortunate state, which is that of the topic. The image is inserted into absolutely predictable chains, or inclusively generates, organizes, or, at least, induces them. But in reality, we never perceive what is in an image, perhaps because it is precisely made for that: so that we do not perceive everything, so that the topic hides the image itself [...] the strength or power of the image. More than a civilization of the image we should then speak, truly, of a civilization of the topic or cliché, precisely in a world where all powers have an interest in hiding the image from us. Or better: in *hiding something* from us through or in the image.

That is why, at the same time, art has the very precise function of tackling the topic through the image itself, of getting out of that narcotic, stupefying inertia. It is not known - Deleuze also wrote - how far a true image can lead us to: the importance, for example, of becoming a visionary or a seer. However, it is also very clear that an awareness or fraternal affection towards the disadvantaged one(s) is no longer enough. Sometimes you need to restore the lost parts, find everything that is not seen in the image, everything that was stolen from it, to make it, for example, *fashionable* or "interesting." And sometimes, on the contrary, it is convenient to make holes, create gaps and interruptions in that perversely accessible and maternal *techno-imaginal* circuit. The image would have to be rarefied, suppressed from many things that had been added, to make us believe that *we saw everything*. The hard part is also knowing in what way an image is no

longer a topic itself. To fight especially with oneself so as not to collaborate in this epidemic of amnesia and insignificance. And, of course, to win, it is not enough to *make a parody the topic* itself, as many today might think or seem to usually think. It is not even enough to make holes in it or empty it. It is not enough to disturb it or simply break organizations and chains. One must rather unite to the specific image one creates immense forces that surpass mere subjective or personal singularity. Immense forces, panoramic ones, as onslaughts that arrive in block, co-rhythmic, we would say, and that are not of course those of a simple cultural, intellectual, or even social, conscience, but rather those of a deep *vital intuition* that relocates us in the immemorial rest of the species. There is a very interesting confidence that Mozart made to Röchlitz. He said: everything comes in block, at once, without unfolding. All this greatly fatigues both the brain and the body of the composer, who then must have the courage to write it down. If not, he is not at all a composer, just a harassed man.

To suffer the onslaughts of vision, its violence. But even that would not be the essential thing in art. It would take the additional courage to return from that transport and write it down. But, for now, we lack the unconscious, and power, and risk, and the ability to jump, to ignite oneself dionisiacally. A land without myths is in the process of depopulation. The desert of Europe's fields is the overwhelming sign of the lack of everyday mythology. We feel burdened by the total lack of life, rhythm, children, future. That emptiness is evidenced in the desperate search for *distraction* at all costs. But neither can we content ourselves with being melancholic, leaning on the threshold of our definitive absence. Our past - or even our soporific opulence - cannot be our excuse. It is, then, about being able again to transform concepts into myths, into stories, into living substance. Being able to pour vitality into fictions.

"For the past year I have never been awake more than five minutes in a row," Kafka wrote in his 1911 diary. We must also read this as a password, a symbol of our own precarious and always strange condition. Spectral time in which the apparitions are not installed in the past, but in the present, forming the closest test of a future in suspense. Perhaps because of this, contemporary art seems so many times reduced to pathetic confessions of sad pretended personal stories. Too often it has practiced a poetic of self-condescension and banal transgressive literalism that has not really done more than deepen the stupor's paralysis (i.e.: the passivity of a conscience that believes it sees everything but can no longer do nothing) and the nostalgia of a presence as hysterical - and unlikely - as supposedly decisive. Likewise, let us note the insignificance of its ridiculous or precarious events; there, where sense plunges into stupidity, the overdose of terror or the traumatic syncopation of fear. It would be necessary to separate all this preaching of disenchantment and *victimhood*. Rather, we need to turn this desert into the joy of what is to happen, while restoring at the same time the vitality of vertigo and the unprecedented. To reinvent the real. As one who raises a fundamental fiction, a supreme fiction, a new cartography through which a powerful enough imaginary circulates.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "El imaginario postmoderno y la cuestión del otro en el pensamiento y la arquitectura", en *Pensar-Componer/Construir-Habitar*, San Sebastián, Ed. Arteleku, 1994, p. 36.

"We call imaginary - wrote Lyotard - to every procedure that tends to make bearable what is not bearable. Desire is unbearable. Giving courage to endure the unbearable is imaginary."⁴

I.e.: to transform success, however small it might be, into the most delicate thing in the world. To try to keep the promise, after all. This also means: not even seeking the substance of our absence, but the fringe where that absence is linked to *what it is*. It is urgent to incorporate - even more, to support, install - the energy of intermittence, the search for routes without guarantees, crossings between images that trigger all the

resources of estrangement. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche already provided a way out for Kafka's collapse: "Either you don't dream, or you dream in an interesting way. You have to learn to be awake in the same way: either not being at all, or doing it in an interesting way."

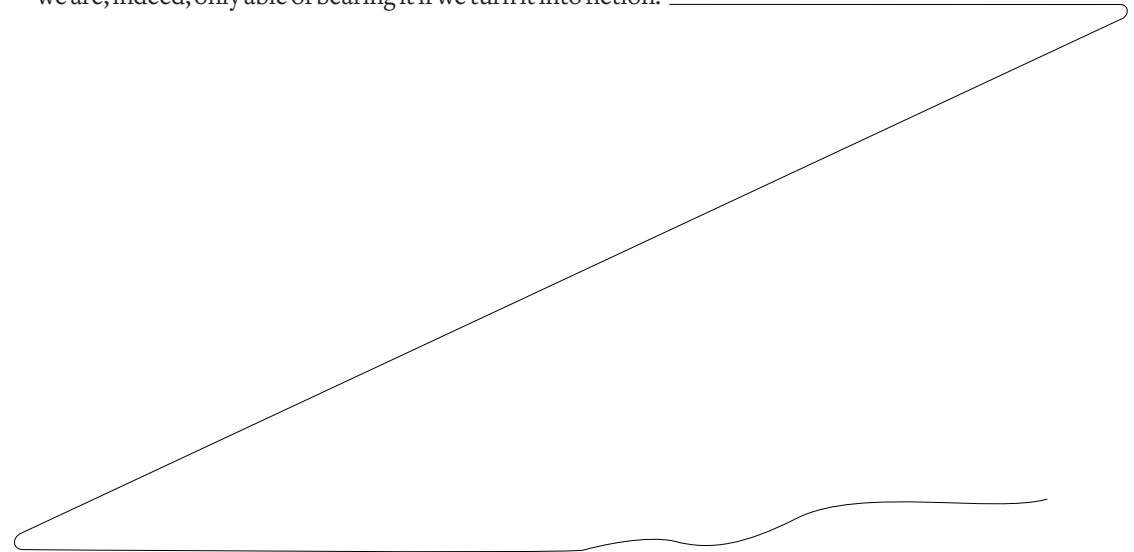
Finally, it would be worthwhile to meditate on the idea of *Being and Time* of the daily authenticity of our life.

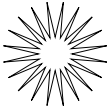
We are all as we are and nobody is himself, Heidegger argued. This existence of *nobody* or *as nobody* also represents a somewhat ghostly role. It is a mask behind which there is really nothing; nothing is there. To the extent, precisely, in which there is no *it-self*. And, for that reason, it would no longer be a question of searching for it or of searching after its realization, as if someone were looking for a lost jewel. No. *Inauthenticity is the original form of our existence*, not the mark of an alienation or its decline. The *Dasein*,

⁵ Here, I am following R. Safranski, *Heidegger y el comenzar*, Madrid, Circulo de Bellas Artes, trans. Joaquín Chamorro, pp. 17-18.

the *being-there* is therefore not immediately and regularly with himself, but outside, *out there*, with his affairs and with the others⁵. Always with another and the other. Never *at home*, *not at his home: Unzuhause*.

Nothing would be worse than trying to compensate for this fundamental dispossession of individuals with the abnormal proliferation of representations, without this implying, of course, the stupid condemnation - so current - of fiction as a mere detestable simulacrum, or the fall in the typical deconstructivist critique, determined to show that what we experience as reality is always a construction of symbolic procedures. In this way the only outrageous conclusion reached is that there is no reality, everything is text or - a misfortune that cannot get worse - fiction. There is nothing that can be done about it. This criticism will never allow you to *experience the real*. It always ends up unmasking it as a mere falsified projection. We believe - precisely with Zizek - that we must choose just the other way around: always trying to recognize - to riskily restore - the Real in what - never as simply as you think - appears as a mere symbolic fiction. Let us remember: a work of art is one capable of facing a danger. It consists of a cut and transversal operation that penetrates beyond, deeper into the background of the fantasy of reality, the ghost that *is* reality. To open a domain where the subject can externalize and stage that unbearable, unobjectifiable Real. Due to the hard core of the Real, that rest, we are, indeed, only able of bearing it if we turn it into fiction.





Professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory at Vigo University. He was director of Fundación Luis Seoane, La Coruña. Cultural critic and curator, he has published the books Maurice Blanchot: una estética de lo neutro (2001), La inflexión posmoderna: los márgenes de la modernidad (2004), Belleza de otro mundo. Apuntes sobre algunas poéticas del inmovilismo (2005), Ser y no ser. Figuras en el dominio de lo espectral (2013), Negro teatro de Jorge Molder (2015), Las horas bellas. Escritos sobre cine (2015), Cuerpos a la deriva (2017), Alegrías de Nada (2018) y La ciudad desnuda. Variaciones en torno a 'Un hombre que duerme', de Georges Perec (2019). He was also co-director of the film Pessoa/Lisboa (2016).

