



Existenz

Volume 20, No 2, Fall 2025

ISSN 1932-1066

Europe Beyond the Wrecking

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Abstract: In this essay, I propose an idea of how to conceive Europe that takes into account the failure of a model of Promethean expansion which led to the historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. Moreover, just as the flourishing civilizations of the Druids and of Troy disappeared, so too new values may emerge starting from the disquieting perspective of the end of the actual civilization. Paradoxically, instead of recreating bunkers or time shelters, as the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov calls them, this very constitutive situation, on the contrary, proposes by way of integrating the "myth of the Minotaur" – who is the abandoned and expelled one – "catalogs of the perishable" (Gospodinov), "life on the edge" (Tetyana Ogarkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko), "ethics of the passerby" (Achille Mbembe), and "intellectual nomadism" (Elif Shafak). By opening dialogues with writers and thinkers such as Amin Maalouf, Milan Kundera, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Jan Patočka, the essay proposes an idea of homeland – not in the form of identity politics, but of fictional politics capable of leaving behind more enduring traces than the specters of contemporary wars.

Keywords: Greek *polis*; intellectual nomadism; political failure; need for roots; life on the edge; histories of the Unhappened; the Minotaur myth.

Europe and Its Ghosts

In *Sirât* (2025), the film by Óliver Laxe – winner of the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival 2025, a particular kind of specter appears: one endowed with a subtle sense of menace, precisely because it has long been kept at a distance, domesticated, and expelled from the collective imagination. In the midst of a rave party in the Moroccan desert, an armored convoy suddenly arrives and orders all citizens of the European Union to board their vehicles and evacuate the area, as the outbreak of a global war has placed them in immediate danger.

The word *Širât* signifies, in Arabic, a path or a way, and is understood in Islamic eschatology as narrow bridge – thinner and sharper than a knife

blade – that stretches over the fires of hell and will be crossed by all people on the Day of Resurrection.

Three cars desert the convoy. Inside them, there are a handful of flower-power wanderers intoxicated by music blasting at full volume in the desert, along with a father searching for his daughter, convinced he will find her at this psychedelic gathering. As the three vehicles move farther away from the danger of war – but also from any form of human community – events increasingly spiral out of control. The travelers lose themselves in a mined landscape where explosions occur one after another. In the end, only three of them manage to reach a train that carries them back toward civilization, alongside the lost figures in the desert, their gazes fixed on a future that promises nothing reassuring.

The questions that arise in this context are: how, then, does Europe look when seen from the Moroccan desert? How does the idea of Europe appear after the major desertification processes of the last twenty years? How does this turn of the millennium look from within a geopolitical and cultural structure that integrates, to an equal extent, the traumas of the twentieth century and the more recent ones—those of a renewed Cold War dynamic; but also, the effort, sometimes bordering on the absurd, to avoid the familiar traps of escalating force?

Europe's predicament may be approached from multiple angles. One might adopt a postcolonial perspective, examining the efforts invested in integrating diverse populations into the project of modernity, coloniality, and Western imperial expansion. One might also view it through the lens of collective traumas generated by the two world wars of the twentieth century—traumas accompanied by a sense of collective guilt and by the blind spot that led prominent intellectual figures to be attracted to a doctrine that normalized the banalization of evil.

Another perspective concerns the revolutions that brought an end to the failed communist experiment, followed by the liberalization that ensued: the flower-power movements and the many forms of emancipation that gradually gave way to the weariness and complacency of Western democracies. One might also recall the ethos expressed in Charter 77 and signed by Jan Patočka—the idea of responsibility of the self as a heretical act, as the condition for the emergence of "the new" in history, preserving, what I have discussed elsewhere,

the fundamental dimension of the care of the soul, fully assuming the [problematic] of history, restoring the sense of community and redefining political action under extreme crisis situations.¹

One might ask, together with Alain Badiou, where a century begins and where it ends, and what its dominant tendencies are.² Badiou places on the same plane two apparently contradictory impulses: the drive toward the radical renewal of humanity—visible in science, in non-figurative art, and in

philosophical thought—and the political tendency toward a radical rebuilding of the human species in the spirit of *tabula rasa*. The same tendency, influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, to reshape the human being from the ground up manifests itself both in the radical artistic and scientific movements of the twentieth-century avant-garde, such as non-figurative art, Dadaism, non-Euclidean geometry, and the theory of extended relativity, further in the utopian currents aimed at renewing the very substance of humanity, such as the communist revolutions, whose failure was recorded—dramatically and at times bloodily—in 1989.

From all these vantage points, one may attempt to articulate a unitary European perspective. Yet one crucial fact should not be overlooked—an achievement which is very rare in history and usually non-lasting: the last eighty years of relative peace on the continent. If one considers the bellicose inclinations of the human species, these eighty years appear almost anomalous—an exception rather than the rule.

The current destabilization of this European vision may stem partly from the fact that many of the leading autocrats and billionaires are now imagining Borgian solutions, as they no longer retain in their immediate intergenerational memory the specter of war. Giuliano da Empoli convincingly describes the new models of authority emerging globally as taking their inspiration from the Renaissance figure of Cesare Borgia,³ who influenced Niccolò Machiavelli in writing *The Prince*. Moreover, apocalyptic extinction remains largely imagined in cinematic terms—Hollywood-like, theatrical, detached from any concrete representation. The "indescribable misery of war," as it is recounted by the journalist Martha Gellhorn,⁴ which makes human beings feel deeply ashamed of the human race, seems to have disappeared from the common imagination, and most likely it is cinematically integrated by large parts of the population, attracted by the ghost of different facets of extremism.

¹ Laura Tuşa-Ilea, "The 'New' after Historical Catastrophes, (Jan Patočka)," *Hermeneia*, 12 (2012), 124-140, p. 124. [Henceforth cited as HC]

² Alain Badiou, *The Century*, transl. Alberto Toscano, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007.

³ Giuliano da Empoli, *The Hour of the Predator. Encounters with the Autocrats and Tech Billionaires Taking Over the World*, transl. Sam Taylor, London, UK: Pushkin Press 2025, p. 51. [Henceforth cited as HP]

⁴ Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War*, New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press 1988, p. 86.

In the aforementioned unsettling book published by da Empoli, the author opens his argument with the initial example of Hernán Cortés. Upon reaching the capital of the Aztec Empire, Cortés could easily have been defeated by a vastly larger population (HP 1). Yet that population—including Moctezuma II—was subdued by a form of dazzling magic that continues to blind human societies repeatedly. This magic bears no relation to the principles of equity, order, justice, persuasion, or to the ideals of the *polis*.

In contrast to this historical decision that proved fatal for the Aztecs, I have discussed elsewhere how Patočka addresses two European wreckages, namely, the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire (HC 136). Something essential seems to have occurred during the period of Greek democracy, when chaos was domesticated into order. This order—the maintenance of social agitation and competing claims below the boiling point—rests upon a political logic capable, at least in principle and for a certain amount of time, of preventing war in a world marked by generalized unrest.

The logic of great predators, by contrast, is the logic of surprise, that is, the deliberate creation of chaos. As da Empoli observes, the apex of power is reached not through calculated action but through recklessness—for only then does one produce the astonishment upon which random and unrestricted power depends. He writes:

The apogee of power coincides not so much with action as with reckless action, which is the only kind that will shock people. And shock is the foundation of the prince's power. [HP 53]

Da Empoli returns to the figure of Cesare Borgia, emblematic of a world governed by immediacy, by actions aligned with the spirit of the moment—a world without stable political rules, driven by forces nourished by "instability, unpredictability, aggression" (HP 45), a world of action that does not overlap with the world of knowledge. In a chaotic environment, bold decisions both captivate the public and paralyze adversaries.

For a time, however, political action unfolded within the domain of justified action—action that acknowledged human plurality, as Hannah Arendt described it in *The Human Condition*. Such action drew upon an ethos already present in ancient epic, namely, the pursuit of immortality rather than eternity. Arendt describes the experience of eternity as akin to a kind of death, more closely

related to *vita contemplativa* than to the impulse for action, which arises from striving for an earthly immortality. She affirms:

One thing is certain: it is only in Plato that concern with the eternal and the life of the philosopher are seen as inherently contradictory and in conflict with the striving for immortality, the way of life of the citizen, the *bios politikos*.⁵

Yet it may be that this domain of justified action—bounded by the principles of the rule of law—could flourish only as long as the specters of war and its ultimate catastrophes have remained alive in Europe's collective memory. Once those specters faded from the intergenerational imagination, political action reverted to its Borgia-like prototype. As da Empoli notes, the Borgians focus on substance rather than form. They promise to solve the people's real problems: crime, immigration, and the cost of living. Their opponents—liberals, progressives, the well-meaning defenders of democracy—respond with appeals to rules, institutional norms, and minority rights. Meanwhile, the Kafkaesque castle expands ever further—not in the form of bureaucratic administration, but in a more insidious guise: artificial-intelligence algorithms that increasingly shape political, economic, medical, and environmental decisions.

Understanding the Future as Something that has Already Occurred

As yet, the question remains unanswered whether this mechanism can be disrupted. One could rightly affirm that humans understand the past—and the range of what may become possible in the future—mainly through what has already occurred. One could further affirm, in the footsteps of Arendt's analysis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,⁶ that the difference between the agents of evil and ordinary individuals is disturbingly small. Under conditions of power, fear, deprivation, group pressure, and obedience to authority, one's conscience can adjust itself within a matter of months.

Democracy, too, has its freezing point. Athenian

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 20.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press, 1963.

democracy itself condemned Socrates to death. Even the charismatic figure of Mahatma Gandhi, who practiced *satyagraha*, could, under certain historical circumstances, lead to tragic outcomes. This is the fine exercise of thought that Costica Bradatan deploys in his magisterial work, *In Praise of Failure: Four Lessons in Humility*,⁷ in which he affirms that the seemingly flawless procedure by which the Athenians condemned Socrates to death is profoundly democratic, insofar as the jury that deliberated in this case comprised five hundred and one members. The trial itself was procedurally impeccable; yet its failure lays in the fact that, although democratic norms had by then been incorporated into the legal framework of the *polis*, the spirit of democracy had not engendered an inner transformation—of the kind implied by *paideia*—within the Athenian citizens.

Bradatan identifies four fundamental forms of failure: the metaphysical (which might be described as Pascalian), the political, the social, and the biological. For each one of these, he offers compelling examples, including works by Emil Cioran, Simone Weil, Ingmar Bergman, and Yukio Mishima. In the present context, however, the most destabilizing appears to be the political failure, grounded in what Bradatan terms the "fragility of democracy" (PF 65), insofar as democracy neither advances grand promises nor exerts a seductive or enchanting appeal. He writes:

Democracy is not erotic; compared to what happens in populist-authoritarian regimes, it is a rather frigid affair. Who in his right mind would choose the dull responsibilities of democracy over the instant gratification of a demagogue? Frigidity over boundless ecstasy? [PF 67]

Gandhi's utopian vision, to which the author devotes extensive analysis (and justifiably so, as it significantly reshapes conventional perceptions of Gandhi's personality), serves to illustrate the extent to which the risk of extremism—that is, binary or black-and-white thinking—exposes even, or perhaps especially, the most intellectually sophisticated individuals to profound and unforeseen distortions. As Eugène Ionesco observed in a 1961 interview with Judith Jasmin (now preserved in the Radio Canada Archives):

if Nazism was possible, it is the fault of the intellectuals—not of the great intellectuals, but the professional intellectuals.⁸

Bradatan examines Gandhi's case in detail in his discussion of political failure. Gandhi is thus reconsidered in a new light, namely, as a figure that is seemingly detached from historical realities—one who, in the context of the Armenian genocide, sided with the Ottomans; who urged the Chinese not to resist Japanese aggression through armed struggle; who similarly advised Jews in Nazi Germany to adopt *satyagraha*, or passive political resistance, under the most adverse conditions; who maintained that the loss of one million lives in the course of nonviolent resistance would be entirely acceptable; and who appeared willing to sanction the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands if necessary. Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Gandhi, succinctly characterized him as

a violent pacifist who brought great misfortune upon the country in the name of truth and nonviolence. [PF 84]⁹

This detailed characterization of the political animal underscores the broader claim that political projects are, in general, structurally prone to failure, and that endeavors grounded in gradual transformation through patience and moral elevation (commonly subsumed under the notion of *paideia*) are liable to succumb to the temptations of power and charisma, ultimately dismantling existing structures through revolutionary rupture, only to begin anew to build such structures.

In order to counteract such charismatic models—predicated upon the abrupt imposition of the ego—it may be necessary to resist the allure of univocal solutions, and to acknowledge that humans inhabit, for the most part, political fictions destined to fail precisely because they remain disconnected from lived reality. To recover the firm ground of reality entails a profound recognition of our simultaneous states of health and affliction, of humankind's

⁸ "Entrevue avec le dramaturge Eugène Ionesco en 1961," *Radio-Canada Archives*, 9 January 1961. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEpjlqOeMg>, 17:53–18:03. "Si le nazisme a été possible, c'est la faute des intellectuels—non pas des grands intellectuels, mais des intellectuels professionnels." My translation.

⁹ Nathuram Godse, Gopal Godse, *Why I Assassinated Gandhi*, ed. Virenda Mehra, Delhi, IN: Farsight Publishers And Distributors 2015, p. 51.

⁷ Costica Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure. Four Lessons in Humility*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023. [Henceforth cited as PF]

persistent striving for utopia, purity, and algorithmic perfection, even as human beings inevitably lapse into confusion and disorder.

It is precisely such an era that humankind seems to inhabit today.

What openings, then, remain in this besieged epoch? Where might the reconstruction of this lost terrain begin?

Is the emergence of something genuinely new in history still possible—as Arendt and Patočka hoped, although they were faced with what they believed to be exceptional totalitarian episodes? Our own epoch as Europeans, however, is confronted with something even more unsettling: the very idea of Europe is being jeopardized. What if the wrecking has already occurred? What, then, remains possible beyond it?

No easy answers can be given to these questions, as, for example, the Greek *polis* cannot simply be scaled up to the level of a planetary community, especially in the aftermath of globalization. Yet new perspectives emerge. For example, an "ethics of the passerby," as addressed by Achille Mbembe in his book *Necropolitics*, in which the author envisions strategies that move beyond colonial frameworks. Mbembe explains:

Let us be content to observe that future thinking will necessarily be about passage, crossing, and movement. This thinking will be about flowing life, about passing life, which we strive to translate as an event. This thinking will not be about excess but about surplus, that is to say, about that which, as it has no price, must escape sacrifice, expenditure, loss.¹⁰

Being able to sojourn and move around freely may address one aspect of life, and yet, Mbembe does not emphasize the categories of perpetual migrants, exile, or flight, nor the celebration of a bohemian, rootless world, but rather "the ethics of the passerby": that of human beings who have departed from their country, lived abroad, in places where they forge an authentic home, thus linking their destiny to those who recognize the face of a humanity to come. Another example would be the imaginative time shelters described by Gospodinov, whose imaginative spaces, originally designed to treat people with Alzheimer's disease, have now gradually become a metaphor

for memory, identity, and the dangers of nostalgia.¹¹ And a third example is the concept of intellectual nomadism, as explored by Elif Shafak, namely, as a way of thinking and being that resists ideologies and mental borders, by overcoming internal ghettos built by echo chambers of belief or by mistrust of difference.¹²

Is present-day humanity the witness to a civilization drifting apart, as suggested by Amin Maalouf in *Adrift. How our World Lost Its Way?* A Europe that drags behind it the wreckage of another civilization, unable to renew itself, one that has remained rigid within forms that ultimately proved fragile?¹³

Also, the current proxy-war in Ukraine that is waged with blatant disrespect for life and nature, constitutes a test Europe must undergo beyond the wrecking—both to prevent a return to an imperialist past and to avoid perpetuating the old models of military might that have so often reproduced the long, repetitive history of the predators' triumph and eventual collapse.

Simone Weil and *The Need for Roots*

One of the seminal contributions to the idea of Europe is Simone Weil's meditation on the condition of Europe, or more precisely of France, at a moment of indecision, as to the question of what could still be built departing from France's claim to greatness, if Germany were to lose the Second World War. This condition of indecision seems extremely important to me, for upon it depend the directions in which the new face of Europe at that historical moment—as it is also occurring now, in the present times, in which Europe repositions itself in the international world order—will be defined.

The new is slow to appear, while the old is in its final throes. This is what Weil expressed at that moment, and it is also what Europeans feel today. In 1943, the last year of her life, Weil was unable to participate in the French Resistance and instead

¹¹ Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter: A Novel*, transl. Angela Rodel, New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2022.

¹² Elif Shafak, *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*, London, UK: Profile Books, 2020. [Henceforth cited as *AD*]

¹³ Amin Maalouf, *Adrift. How our World Lost its Way*, transl. Frank Wynne, New York, NY: World Editions, 2020. [Henceforth cited as *WLW*]

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, transl. Steven Corcoran, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2019, p. 188.

worked in London for the Free French government-in-exile. During this time, she was tasked with developing a vision for rebuilding Europe after the devastation of Nazism, which led directly to writing her book, *The Need for Roots*.¹⁴

Weil speaks in very precise terms about at least two essential matters that might concern one in the present context, beyond geopolitical adjustments, beyond policies that may prove more or less disastrous, and beyond the renegotiations of the world map that might or might not take Europe as a political ally. The discussion moves beyond the values of democracy – which Europe would like to promote further (one should not forget that democratic values have always coexisted with relentless colonial forces) – and toward another perspective, as Weil considers the possibility that certain forms of civilization, which once seemed self-evident and flourishing, might disappear altogether.

This is also the perspective suggested by Tetyana Ogarkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko in *Life on the Edge*.¹⁵ Instead of returning to time shelters, in which Europe might seek anti-atomic bunkers in the past – as happens in Gospodinov's novel – it might be more fruitful to imagine paradigms in which a certain sense of living on the edge forms the background of one's thinking.

If this sense of the end must counteract an entire machinery that produces the illusion of greatness precisely at that juncture where it generates historical catastrophes, then the process must begin here. Weil elaborates:

People talk about punishing Hitler. But he cannot be punished. He desired one thing alone, and he has it: to play a part in History. He can be killed, tortured, imprisoned, humiliated, History will always be there to shield his spirit from all the ravages of suffering and death. What we inflict on him will be, inevitably, an historical death, an historical suffering – in fact, History. [NR 221]

One way of countering historical catastrophes would therefore be to look at history from another perspective – to reinterpret historical achievements from a different

angle. Weil expresses this with remarkable clarity:

The only punishment capable of punishing Hitler, and deterring little boys thirsting for greatness in coming centuries from following his example, is such a total transformation of the meaning attached to greatness that he should thereby be excluded from it. [NR 221-2]

If one wished to embrace a radical image, one might say that Europe must begin to think of itself beyond wrecking, with the idea of the end constantly in mind – perhaps pulled in opposite directions by several simultaneous shipwrecks. Every civilizational shipwreck draws others in its wake; they are interconnected. In a world increasingly organized around clusters, this interrelation may be more necessary than ever.

Instead of imagining that one civilization can impose itself upon another and displace it entirely, a different, agonistic model should perhaps be reinstated – one in which the enrichment brought by strangers benefits the receiving civilization far more than the rigid drawing of borders between them.

Weil also reminds her readers that there existed civilizations prior to the Greek or Roman ones that may well have surpassed them. Yet those civilizations disappeared and are now described simply as barbarian. To think from a post-wrecking perspective, therefore, means to accept the possibility of remaining in history as barbarians. In a 2018 production, the Romanian director Radu Jude explores precisely this perspective in the film *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, which thematizes Romania's participation in the Holocaust.

Weil refers to the Druids and to the level of wisdom they had achieved – something that could only be understood when compared with the works of Plato. Exterminated by the Romans "for the crime of patriotism" (NR 217), she notes, they were accused by the Romans of practicing human sacrifice. Yet we do not know whether this meant the execution of criminals or the sacrifice of innocents, and Roman testimony itself is questionable, considering that one of Rome's most characteristic institutions was the killing of human beings for the amusement of crowds.

And yet, Europeans still view the Romans as civilizers.

Weil's conclusion is striking, as it concerns any civilization that might face being wrecked. If its achievements are not recorded, if its model of greatness does not survive, it will most likely be

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, transl. Arthur Wills, London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2001. [Henceforth cited as NR]

¹⁵ Tetyana Ogarkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko, *La vie à la lisière. Être ukrainien aujourd'hui*, transl. Louise Henry, Paris, FR: Gallimard, 2026.

labeled barbarian. Imagining the Druids as being superior regarding the level of their civilization to the Romans sounds absurd—yet that absurdity might very well be true. Weil concludes:

Nevertheless, if one were to state publicly that pre-Roman Gaul was much more civilized than Rome, it would sound like an absurdity. [NR 218]

A similar argument could be made about the civilization of Troy, which was another decisive moment in human history. Since that civilization was completely eradicated, its greatness remains inaccessible to historians. Weil reasons:

Trojan territory having never again served as the abode of a nation, who has ever gone to the trouble to discern the truth which blazes forth in the clearest possible fashion in the Iliad, in Herodotus and in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus—namely, that Troy possessed a level of civilization, culture and spiritual development far superior to that of those by whom it was unjustly attacked and destroyed, and that its disappearance was a disaster in the history of humanity? [NR 218]

Thus, according to Weil—and I share this view—there is only one way forward, namely, to dismantle these historical models. Any other solution preserves the same sequential logic in history. Generally speaking, sooner or later, destructive models of greatness assert themselves across the globe and inaugurate long eras of war. The dismantling must therefore begin—and continue—with the undoing of the very model of greatness humanity upholds by changing our perception of what greatness means.

Weil adds an observation that is equally unsettling:

This is far from being an easy matter, for a social pressure as heavy and enveloping as the surrounding atmosphere stands opposed thereto. So as to be able to carry it out, one has to exclude oneself spiritually from the rest of society. Which is why Plato said that the ability to discern the good only exists in predestined souls that have been directly trained by God. [NR 222]

This likely refers to the same guardians of the city described by Plato, whom Patočka later recalled as the shaken but undaunted ones. Guardians safeguard what has been, while figures such as Gaustine, Gospodinov's apocryphal character, which is mentioned further below, evoke histories that never took place—counterfactual, or at least

highly plausible, "histories of the unhappened."

Histories of the Unhappened—Georgi Gospodinov

Georgi Gospodinov, born in 1968 in what he calls a "timeshelter" (which testifies to his recurring obsession as an author with a history of the "unhappened"), spoke in his novel *The Physics of Sorrow* about his homeland, Bulgaria, as follows:

The saddest place in the world, as the *Economist* called it in 2010...as if there is truly a geography of happiness. I wrote about this for a newspaper...more ironic than anything else...About how we don't exist, how we're so nonexistent that we have to do something really over-the-top to be noticed, like Georgi Markov being jabbed with a poisoned umbrella on a bridge in London. To get mixed up in hazy dealings with Turkish terrorists, an assassination attempt on the Pope that later, proof or no proof, will be called "the Bulgarian connection."¹⁶

I decided to drop everything, take my daughter and leave. Somewhere else, somewhere else. [PS 212]

In the following lines, I shall explore a Bulgarian perspective on nonexistence—guided by Gospodinov's use of the myth of the Minotaur, when he affirms:

The history of the family can be described through the abandonment of several children. The history of the world, too. [PS 43]

Gospodinov tells the story of children transforming into monsters because of abandonment. He includes traditions from Antiquity to the present that depict the figure of the Minotaur. In all of them, the same pattern manifests: the child is torn from his mother, betrayed by his sister, who is herself betrayed by the hero (Theseus), who will end the beast's life. There is no compassion; no insistence that monstrosity may stem from the stigma cast upon the creature through abandonment. Ovid, Virgil, Dante—all label the Minotaur a stigma of shame. Only one exception: Ovid's *Heroides*, where Ariadne begins to doubt her betrayal and thinks of the Minotaur as being her brother.

Gospodinov alludes in his story to basements, air-raid shelters, and parallel corridors where history complicates itself or becomes irrelevant—because it is about how time shelters are built, starting from

¹⁶ Georgi Gospodinov, *The Physics of Sorrow*, transl. Angela Rodel, Rochester, NY: Open Letter 2015, p. 211. [Henceforth cited as PS]

successive abandonments. He tells the story of a woman who sold her newborn children one after another to raise money for the four children waiting for her at home. It was merely business until a buyer of stories listened to her. Then she wept, as if stepping out of time, into the light:

I thought to myself that only now had she begun to sell her children. When she started telling about them. Without a story, it was all nothing but business.

Telling stories is part of Judgment Day, because it makes people understand. But what the point of understanding is remains unclear. I put these stories in the box, too. [PS 180]

Thus operate the great predations of history: the victim is blamed, narrowed in perspective, unable to see the exit from the labyrinth, ashamed, memory erased, unable to recognize oneself in the others' eyes. The child becomes a Minotaur – repudiated, silenced, the voice rusted. This is the mechanism of civilizing narratives, in which consensus cancels out disparate voices, reducing them to a cow's moo.

If the storyteller's homeland is the saddest place in the world, as he writes ironically, it must somehow make itself visible. Yet Gospodinov also constructs an apocryphal mechanism of history through the invented character Gaustine (short for Garibaldi-Augustine), a contemporary of Shakespeare and Homer, set in the present, who views history from outside time and thereby invalidates it. Between the lines, the motto of the novel shows itself:

There is only childhood and death. And nothing in between. [PS 3]

How can one represent history when humans are cast as Minotaurs – expelled, abandoned, shamed? The melancholic author is advised to travel abroad, but the cities are filled with melancholy, too. Europe becomes a flood of sadness.

Gospodinov develops a non-anthropocentric perspective rooted in animal melancholy. "No animal would do that," he writes (PS 155). In the ancient world, Achilles must drag Hector's corpse – the killer and the victim face each other, and from that embrace, an epic is born. Modern slaughter is faceless, unspeakable. Seen from this animal sorrow, he writes,

I can attest that this sorrow is far denser than human sorrow, it's wild, unfiltered by language, inexpressible and unexpressed, since language nevertheless soothes

and calms sorrow. [PS 164]

Words tame sadness, diminish its force.

Gospodinov proposes the following solution: compiling catalogs of the perishable rather than establishing monuments to the perennial. Furthermore, he advocates writing a history of the unhappened, based on the paradox that

the perishable is more enduring, precisely because of its death, than that which is imperishable and cannot reproduce itself. [PS 171]

Identity, as previously understood, has given to humankind

blood and wars, busted butts, suicide bombers – there's your inheritance. There's only one true identity – to be a living creature among living creatures. To be ephemeral and to value the Other, because he is ephemeral as well. [PS 172]

If history's march toward permanence and rigid identities is bankrupt, perhaps the trace of the ephemeral – the hidden heredity of the Minotaur, animal melancholy, minor history – may now take its revenge. In this respect, Gospodinov recalls a unique image in *The Physics of Sorrow*, namely, the Madonna with the Minotaur, discovered near the Etruscan city of Vulci in Tuscany, now in the collection of the National Library of Paris. The only image that shows not a monster but a baby in the mother's arms:

A child, who will soon be abandoned (sent to the basement)... Later the myth will transform the child into a monster, so as to justify the sin of his abandonment, the sin against all children, whom we will abandon in the future. [PS 67]

Perhaps there is solace in familiarizing oneself with the Minotaur's perspective, with a certain ephemerality – with what the 2009 Nobel Laureate author Herta Müller calls *das Herztier* (heart-beast).¹⁷

Intellectual Nomadism – Maalouf, Kundera, Shafak

Amin Maalouf reflects on this same idea of greatness in his highly provocative book *Adrift*, in which the author asserts – both boldly and cautiously – that

¹⁷ Herta Müller, *The Land of Green Plums*, transl. by Michael Hofmann, New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 1993. The original German book title is *Herztier*.

the wrecking of the Levantine model has rendered coexistence between two civilizations impossible and, in principle, may even foreshadow the wrecking of the European model itself. He asks himself:

Was I right when I said that shadows spread over the globe when the Enlightenment of the Levant guttered out? Is it not incongruous for me to speak of shadows when I and my contemporaries have witnessed the most spectacular technological advances of all time...? [WLW 19]

The image that comes to the author's mind is that of a Titanic—a modern, gleaming ocean liner, self-assured and reputed to be unsinkable, carrying passengers from all countries and all social classes, yet hurtling at full speed toward disaster (WLW 20).

Addressing the challenges of minority communities face in exercising their civic rights and obligations, Maalouf draws on a lecture by William James. Maalouf writes:

In a lecture to his students, the American philosopher William James posed a pertinent question: since wartime mobilizes people and elicits what is best in human beings—*esprit de corps*, mutual aid, passion, self-sacrifice—should we, as others do, hope for a "good war" to put an end to idleness and laxity? His response was that societies needed to create a "moral equivalent of war," that is to say peaceful struggles that would appeal to the same virtues, mobilize as much energy, without tending towards the atrocities that trigger wars. [WLW 72-3]

One might ask whether such values remain operative today, or whether they continue to perpetuate—through the same mechanisms—the logic of a world that is exhausting its own resources. As I have argued elsewhere, Europe may currently serve as a barometer for a planetary paradigm shift; yet it is equally possible that such a reset will emerge elsewhere, as Achille Mbembe suggests in *Necropolitics*, a framework rooted in the terrain of brutalism and necropolitics, yet situated within a constellation of concepts such as universal hospitality, the era of the earth, and the politics of a planetary age.¹⁸

Discourses of exhaustion, of necropolitics, and of the somber realization that the political DNA of

the human species may be depleted risk generating a bleak horizon—one of a shipwreck already consummated, at least in political terms—and make it evident that the model of the Greek *polis*, structured around justice and a balance of political forces, cannot be extended beyond the boundaries of the European Union; it is simply countered and invalidated by globalist models promoting an authoritarian feudalist governance.

The current condition of Ukraine—described by Ogarkova and Yermolenko as "life on the edge"—may well become an unexpected litmus test for a form of democracy under siege, yet still capable of offering models of integrity for the future, provided that the proxy war between an expansionist West and an expansionist East will not erode Ukrainian autonomy.

Rather than viewing the future as poised on a knife's edge, one might instead conceive of the present era as a vast post-shipwreck masquerade—a deranged fireworks display in which the ocean liner inevitably sinks; yet the lifeboats deliver a transfigured humanity to shore. Paradoxically, a return to foundational principles—to the very possibility of coexistence—goes hand in hand with the opening up of culturally closed circles, of indoctrinated mental ghettos.

For this reason, I will conclude these reflections on the idea of Europe beyond the wrecking by returning to the point of departure, where European ideas are diffused in the sense of a form of knowledge capable of transforming the world—a knowledge that, despite the fragmentation of Europe's inner homelands and the erosion of its cultural heritage, still recognizes itself in these seemingly unrelated shards.

Next, I return to the figure of Odysseus, as interpreted by Milan Kundera and integrated into the concept of *Métaspora* by Joël DesRosiers, and to the image of thresholds that are slow to appear, in *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* by Elif Shafak—thresholds of homelands that preserve Europe's cultural traces. In his novel *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera characterizes Homer's *The Odyssey* as the founding epic of nostalgia, and Odysseus as the great nostalgic, who chooses the predictable Penelope (symbolizing return, the apotheosis of the familiar, the end, the finitude of life) over the nymph Calypso (symbolizing ecstasy, sensual pleasure, love, endless adventure, immortality). Kundera laments

¹⁸ Laura T. Ilea, "Algorithms, Necropolitics, and the Ethics of the Passerby. With Achille Mbembe after the Exit from Democracy," *Echinex Journal* 49 (2025), 356-370.

this predictable ending, this Odysseus of forgetting and resignation – who refuses love and immortality and rids himself of the conscious responsibility that comes with them. He elaborates:

Calypso, ah Calypso! I often think about her. She loved Odysseus. They lived together for seven years. We do not know how long Odysseus shared Penelope's bed, but certainly not so long as that. And yet we extol Penelope's pain and sneer at Calypso's tears.¹⁹

It is what Elif Shafak calls "opening circles": instead of embracing the circles that confine humans to redundant identities, she proposes the idea of intellectual nomadism when she writes:

We must strive to become intellectual nomads, keep moving, keep learning, resist confining ourselves in any cultural or mental ghetto, and spend more time not in select centres but at the margins, which is where real change always comes from. [AD 12]

This, ultimately, is how I perceive the idea of Europe: a sense of adventure and openness. If this impulse has been appropriated by colonial expansion and implicated in the wounds of exploitative systems, it is because the desire for a homeland has often meant a desire for closure. If, however, the desire for a homeland becomes a desire for openness – not in the form of identity politics, but in the form of imaginative or fictional politics

capable of retelling the story of human adventure – then perhaps humankind's passage will leave behind more enduring traces than the disasters of past and contemporary wars.

Hence, I conclude with the figures I have traced throughout this text who are monuments of the perishable: the reintegration of the Minotaur as one's obscure face (by Georgi Gospodinov); the rethinking of greatness (by Simone Weil); intellectual nomadism (by Elif Shafak), and the figure of an Odysseus who does not vanish into amnesia within a homeland he has not seen since youth. The *Odyssey* need not end in forgetting and closure; it may instead be a journey beyond the wrecking, one that enables humans to live freely.

The upshot of these figures is a message against exhaustion, against the mines that explode in the desert (as in the film *Sirât*) or in suburbs, against the backdrop of rave music; through characters who rewrite history, capable of emerging from hidden time shelters and confronting the Minotaur directly, this message is manifested.

For war is precisely the face of the Minotaur, hidden within the labyrinth of one's own progress. Perhaps humans must remain on the edge, confronting this monstrous visage, and traversing devastated territories, in order to reflect upon what has already taken place – a future which is already occurring.

¹⁹ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, transl. Linda Asher, New York, NY: HarperCollins 2002, p. 9.