

*A Soul for Europe*

I would like to begin with three quotes: three fragments of an essay that I discovered recently. I would like to invite you, as a frivolous experiment, to try to imagine the identity of the author.

The first quote reads:

Interruption, incoherence, surprise are ordinary conditions of our lives. They have even become real needs for many individuals whose spirit, in a certain sense, is nourished only by abrupt variations and renewed excitations.

In the second fragment, the author speaks of a “device”...

whose use is today familiar to many men, and which has become, in addition, an indispensable part of our social life. In short, we have the privilege – or the very interesting misfortune – to witness a profound, rapid, irresistible transformation of all the conditions of human action.

The third fragment reveals a concern that is typically ours, unmistakably contemporary:

Everywhere, more and more problems have appeared every day, perfectly new and unexpected problems, whether in politics, in the arts or in the sciences; man is besieged by a number of questions that nobody, until today, had imagined.

Perhaps it will amaze you as much as it did me to know that these words were not written yesterday, or last week, or even last year. They are part of a lecture given by Paul Valéry in January 1935. I think you would have to be very thick-skinned not to feel a chill of recognition, the whisper of relevance with which they also seem to discuss, more than eighty years later, our convulsive times.

The lecture is a declaration of anxiety at a world in intense crisis: a world where the great technological progress of the previous thirty years – radio, television, air travel – has strongly disrupted our perception of facts, creating a situation that we could not have foreseen and, above all, that we

cannot master. The main consequence, for the purposes of this lecture, is the crisis of a system of democratic values embodied in those populist movements that had been on the rise since the 1920s and that – we now know this – would also be the cause of the disaster that would begin the following year, in Spain, and would only end in 1945, more than a decade and many millions of deaths later.

Today I suggest that we look at the uncomfortable coincidence between that moment and ours, where a technological revolution that we can't control joined forces with new populisms to throw our strongest democracies off balance. I expect I do not have to prove the close relationship existing between populisms and social media; nor am I the first to notice that those crises – from Brexit, to the ineffable Donald Trump, to the defeat of the Colombian peace agreements in a referendum – are intimately related to the ubiquity of social media in our lives as citizens. Social media have changed our way of exercising citizenship, of participating in the great story of our political life. And, despite the wonderful advantages that they have brought us, changing the balance of power in the most unequal societies and denouncing authoritarianism in the less free, they have also become an efficient ally of the worst angels of our political nature. And so, we can echo Valéry and argue that interruption, incoherence and surprise have become ordinary conditions of our lives; that a device – I will not tell you which one, but it begins with an *i* – has become an indispensable part of our social life and an agent of a profound, rapid and irresistible transformation of human action; finally, that we are besieged by new and unexpected problems.

The success of populism and demagoguery depends on the construction of alternative narratives capable of imposing themselves on our common story; and those narratives, built on paranoia, conspiracy theories, distortions and outright lies, have found their dwelling place and their propagation mechanisms in social media. Somewhere during this process, we realized that our common version of reality, that series of events we all interpret in our own way but always standing on an essential agreement about what is real, has ceased to exist. How do we deal with this? My answer is as simple as it is vague: we must take control of the story again. Of our own story as individuals: not the one being imposed on us by forces we can't control. In other words, we must put what we may call the literary word back in the centre of our lives.

This is where culture and politics touch each other. The best fictions and the best journalism share the notion that stories, those stories we tell

ourselves to know who we are, are of the utmost importance. Our societies are a fabric of stories. An Argentinian novelist, Ricardo Piglia, recalls in one of his books Jorge Luis Borges's story, "Shakespeare's Memory", in which a man is actually offered the memory of Shakespeare; to receive it, he just has to say, "I accept it". Piglia says that if, through such a simple trick, one could have all the stories circulating in a city during a given day, one would know "much more about the reality of that place than all the scientific reports and all the statistics and all the speeches of economists or sociologists. One would have, in the multitude of stories that circulate in a day and a place, a very clear perception of the daily life of that place". That multitude of stories is what fiction and the best journalism are all about. In them, in their precise and vivid language, in their generous and open gaze, lives a human truth that today is besieged by that other kind of language: the language of post-truth, of fake news, of alternative facts.

Of course this is just a small act of rebellion: the realization that there is a place in human experience from which digital life is not seen with enthusiasm, but with scepticism and even concern: from this vantage point, digital life looks fragmented and scattered, the reverse of the possibilities literature offers. The written word offers a particular kind of communion: it is based on sustained attention, on that particular kind of concentration that comes from intense contact with another voice and another consciousness and these values are helplessly opposed to those of the social media, which relies on distraction and exploits narcissism. The digital era, we may remember, is also the era of attention deficit disorder.

I hope these words don't come across as the sterile lament of a technophobe. They are, rather, a meditation on the domain of literature, which may be the place that literature occupies, but also the place that literature builds or opens: that place of slowness where we escape from the tyranny of speed; that place of privacy where we escape from overexposure and exhibitionism; that place of memory and exploration of the past where we escape from the amnesia and the despotism of the present; that place of independence where we escape from gregariousness. This place is a form of resistance: it believes in the particular knowledge of stories against profuse but inconclusive information; it asks us to consider the consequences of accepting the incomplete and fragmentary vision of a digital world instead of the totalizing vision of a real world: the world of humanism.

That humanist culture, cornered in recent years by budget cuts all across Western Europe, is the only answer. J.K. Galbraith said some 30 years ago that contemporary democracies live in perpetual fear of the

ignorant. He was referring to that strange vulnerability of societies whose members –whose voters, whose citizens – are unable to distinguish the truth from lies, or who throw themselves enthusiastically into the arms of whatever falsehood best reflects their own prejudices or manages to give a varnish of respectability to their hatred and resentments. Europe today has many faces: one of them has elevated xenophobia to the rank of State policy and thus prepared the ground for fanaticism and fundamentalism; but there's another Europe, secular and tolerant, liberal and open. It is the Europe of empathy, the Europe that lives in our stories: the stories of Cervantes and Diderot, of Goethe and the Brontë sisters, of Proust and Musil. It is the Europe I call humanist, but I sometimes think I should simply call it Europe on a human scale.

It is our duty to protect it.