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[VIENNA]

On January 26, the Day of Remembrance, a few thousand people gathered in front of the Austrian Parliament in Vienna. The demonstration was focused on anti-fascism and the danger of the rise of the far right. In Europe, and in particular in Austria, where the far-right party FPÖ is leading in the polls and is clawing at the threshold of power. On this occasion, **Elfriede Jelinek**, a Nobel Prize winner for literature and chastiser, since her awakening, of an extreme right with neo-Nazi overtones as interpreted by Jörg Haider, broadcasted a very dark text, which was read to the public by an actress from the Burgtheater, and later published in the liberal newspaper *Der Standard*. The title is unequivocal: *Ich höre ein Ungeheuer atmen* - I hear a monster breathing. Obviously, everyone has in mind Brecht's famous disgusting beast, denounced in his *Arturo Ui*. It is as if times were repeating themselves, without memory, nearly eighty years later. The recent secret meeting of the far right in Potsdam, which is uncomfortably reminiscent of the famous Wannsee Conference, was not intended to reassure, something that Jelinek does not fail to denounce.



The Day of Remembrance at the Quirinale

On the same day, Italian President Mattarella gave **a speech that was certainly more measured**, but equally clear on the dangers of the extremist thinking which led to Italian fascism. The current representatives of government power who were formally present for the speech, most of whom

belong to the Italian neo-fascist movement or are collectors of Mussolini busts, such as the president of the Senate, were said to appear rather grim. Recalling the absolute horror of the Shoah, and the heroism of the partisans and those who rightly opposed Nazi barbarism, he also unequivocally condemned the action of Hamas on October 7. However, thinking of Gaza, he allowed himself to pronounce an adage with the overtones of a vaguely biblical sermon: “Those who have suffered the vile attempt to erase their own people from the earth know that another people cannot be denied the right to a state”. Mattarella, like Solomon, is therefore balanced between the extremism of all parties, in a time in which political objectivity truly has no force of law, between the drive for power and the drive for war. Although he concluded his speech on a more optimistic note, rejecting intolerance and fanaticism in human thought, with a vibrant anthem to youth and citizens eager for solidarity, milestones were set as a warning of a potential future drift of our democracies. A sort of preventive prophecy.



January 26, demonstration in Vienna in front of the Austrian parliament

Robert Menasse is an Austrian novelist who has just received the European Book Prize. A few days ago he sent an article to the newspaper *Le Monde*, extraordinarily translated by one of the best French translators of the German language, Pierre Deshusses, in which he recalls with humor the developments, turpitudes and weaknesses of democracy, from its invention in Greece at the end of the VI century BC, by a certain Cleisthenes. Which Cleisthenes, according to him, would certainly have burst out laughing at the thought that a democratic society could do without slaves or be led by women. As we know, it took several centuries for the very idea or substance of this democracy to change. It lives in our Europe according to completely disparate political and legal regimes,

ranging, as Menasse observes, from constitutional monarchy to the multiplicity of realms of parliamentarism, not to mention equally different electoral systems in each country. Which, if we applied the electoral rules of another country in such a country, would lead to a different parliamentary or governmental result. However, Menasse does not seem to see this multiplicity of democratic variants as an advantage, but as an admission of weakness, since the main obstacle to the transparent evolution of democracy is nationalism, the nationalisms which lobotomize democratic thought. And Menasse recalls Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of Europe, who described nationalism as the enemy of democracy, De Gaulle who spoke of the “Europe of homelands” and not of nations, or François Mitterrand who stated before the European Parliament in 1995: “Nationalism is war”.

Menasse therefore calls for what he defines as a “post-national European democracy”, against the threat of the progressive collapse of the already faltering European democracies in the event of a generalized victory of nationalism. Jelinek felt the breathing of the monster, she said in her speech on January 26, and immediately added: “I feel the breathing of democracy weakening.” As if the monster’s breath was gradually suffocating that of democracy. So, the Menasse remedy: a viable prospect or just yet another utopia? In fact, he seems to be short of breath.

Words in the desert? Obsolete? Words that have only historians or those already convinced as listeners? Between anathemas that have not followed and a world in need of explanations, where to look for the right new tone? It would seem that our times are becoming increasingly dark, subject to multiple egocentrisms of identity that no longer know where the path to a pacified world lies, but which still need prophets – or at least constructive agitators of thought. Even if we fear that they will end up suffering the fate of Cassandra. May their word remain unheard, since History enjoys repeating its most horrible scenarios.

Some choose instead to slide towards dystopia. Like Emmanuel Todd, who once “prophesied” the fall of the USSR on the basis of controversial analyses of demographic statistics, and who today, with a similar method, announces the end of the West. The race for prophecy is a sport that Todd, a self-styled prophet, seems to enjoy, and his latest work *La Défaite de l'Occident* is far from being unanimously appreciated. For example, Le Monde recently declared itself unconvinced by his considerations, even calling Todd a “prophet with his eyes closed”. Offering a problematic vision, therefore, “without real arguments and without worrying about coherence”. It’s not Tiresias he wants. Of course, catastrophism is a good theme for selling, for positioning oneself on the intellectual scene, but as Andrea Camilleri recalls, Tiresias himself complained to Zeus about the gift granted: “This prophetic art of mine, you Zeus, which you granted to me as a privilege, is not

a gift, but the most terrible of condemnations.” (*Conversazione su Tiresia* Sellerio editore Palermo, 2018).



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More convincing, for example, is the so-called dystopian, but literary, fictionalized vision of Michel Houellebecq. Someone who senses the buried earthquakes of our contemporary societies, of the loss of meaning that serves daily survival, Houellebecq seems to speak to each of us, with Schopenhauer as a distant master. And sometimes the writer's intuition acts like a prophecy. In his novel *Submission* (2015), Houellebecq describes Islam's takeover in France, in what is definitely a soft, apparently democratic seizure of power through the simple conquest of minds. However, the novel appeared on the day of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. And overnight Houellebecq seemed like a prophet. It is no surprise then, while these last few weeks have been massively occupied by the farmer revolt in Europe and in particular in France, that commentators are highlighting the renewed gift of prophecy of the author of the novel *Serotonin*, published in 2019. The narrator, an agricultural engineer who is slowly being consumed by an existential disaster in which serotonin pills, the happiness hormone, seem to have little effect, meets a classmate who has become a breeder there. And at the end of a long sequence of farmers' desperation in the face of the absurdity of European agricultural policy, of inevitable demonstrations and armed clashes with the police, the friend ended up committing suicide. The beautiful moment of listening to Pink Floyd's *Ummagumma* or Deep Purple's *Child in Time* together ends with a bullet in the head. It goes without saying that Houellebecq's fiction, a de facto prophet, found wide resonance among observers, recalling among other things this slogan

brandished today by some demonstrators: “young people dream of agriculture, adults die of it”.



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The status of prophet therefore appears once again in the spirit of the age, and with it the doubts one might have about the potential audience of the so-called prophetic word. Thomas Bernhard, who excelled in representing the failure of the great messianic charlatans, from the theatrical to the reformers, had already clearly discussed the theme with his circus director Caribaldi, in one of his first plays *The Force of Habit* (1974). He had taken care to quote a passage from Diderot on the one hand: “I myself, as a young man, commuted between the Sorbonne and the Comédie” and then, to follow, Artaud: “...but the race of prophets has become extinct...”. The clarifying thought of the Enlightenment, masterful or cathartic, on the pulpit or on the stage, would be only nostalgia, the prophetic capacity having dried up today. Caribaldi was therefore unable, despite the obsessive repetition of the exercises, to get his circus artists to play Schubert’s Trout Quintet correctly.

With Jelinek, Mattarella, Menasse, Houellebecq and others, we see that this drying up is not absolutely inexorable, and that far from any messianism, it has become urgent to at least take stock of the situation. To know where we are going and how to live. And who knows, Caribaldi

might have a chance with his Quintet. Therefore, if out of prudence we stop believing in prophets with eyes open or closed, all we have to do is listen to these trailblazers of conscience, who speak or write to compensate for the blindness of the world.

Translation by Paul Rosenberg

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