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# Korean Literature Now

## EDUCATION, THE STAIRWAY OF THE PROFANE

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**Julia Kristeva**  
*on European Identity*

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# Homo Europaeus: Does European Culture Exist?<sup>1</sup>

by Julia Kristeva

**Is Europe dead? On the contrary: Without Europe chaos would reign. Why? Which identity?**

European culture never ceases to unveil a paradox: there exists an identity, mine, ours, but it is infinitely constructible and de-constructible. To the question “Who am I?” the best European response is obviously not certitude but a love of the question mark. After having succumbed to identity-focused dogmas, to the point of criminality, a European “we” is now emerging. Though Europe resorted to barbaric behavior—something to remember and examine incessantly—the fact that it has analyzed this behavior better than others perhaps allows it to bring to the world a conception and practice of identity as a questioning inquietude.

It is possible to rethink European heritage as an antidote to tensions of identity, both ours and others. Without enumerating all the sources of this questioning identity, let us remember that ongoing interrogation can

turn to corrosive doubt and self-hate: a self-destruction that Europe is far from being spared. We often reduce this heritage of identity to a permissive “tolerance” of others. But tolerance is only the zero degree of questioning; when not reduced to simply “welcoming” others, it invites them to question themselves and to carry the culture of questioning and dialogue into encounters that problematize all participants. This reciprocating questioning produces an endless lucidity that provides the sole condition for “living together.” Identity thus understood can move us toward a plural identity and the multilingualism of the new European citizen.

## **Diversity and its languages**

“Diversity is my motto,” said Jean de La Fontaine in his “Pâté d’anguille.”<sup>2</sup> Europe is a political entity that speaks as many languages as it has countries, if not more. This multilingualism is the basis of cultural diversity and it

must be saved and respected along with national character. Moreover, it must also be open to exchange, mixing, and cross-pollination. This is a novelty for Europeans that merits reflection.

After the horror of the Shoah, the bourgeois of the nineteenth century as well as the rebels of the twentieth century are now confronting a new era. Europe's linguistic diversity is creating kaleidoscopic individuals capable of challenging the bilingualism of "global" English. A new species is emerging little by little: a polyphonic subject and polyglot citizen of a plurinational Europe. Will the future European be a singular subject, with an intrinsically plural—trilingual, quadrilingual, multilingual—psyche? Or will she be reduced to "global speak"?

More than ever, Europe's plurilinguistic space calls upon the French to become polyglot, explore the diversity of the world, and bring their specificity to the understanding of Europe and the world. What I say for the French holds for the other twenty-eight languages of the European polyphony. It is by making incursions into other languages that a new passion for each language will arise (Bulgarian, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese, and so on). This passion will not look like a shooting star, nostalgic folklore or vestiges of academia, but will function as the index of a resurgent diversity.

### Getting out of national depression<sup>3</sup>

Whether lasting or not, the national character can experience real depression just as individuals do. Europe is losing its image as a world power and the financial, political, and existential crises are palpable. But this is also

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true of its constituent nations, including France, one of the most prominent, historically.

When a psychoanalyst treats a depressed patient, she begins by shoring up her self-confidence. This establishes a relationship between the two protagonists of the cure in which the spoken word becomes fecund once again, enabling a critical analysis of the suffering. Similarly, the depressed nation requires an optimal image of itself before being able to take on, for example, industrial expansion or a better reception of immigrants. "Nations, like men, die of imperceptible impoliteness," wrote Giraudoux. A poorly understood universalism and colonial guilt have led politicians and ideologues to behave with "imperceptible impoliteness," often disguised as cosmopolitanism. They act with arrogant spite towards the nation. They aggravate the national depression and infuse it with a maniacal exaltation, both nationalistic and xenophobic.

Europe needs national cultures that feel pride in themselves to bring to the world the cultural diversity we have mandated UNESCO to protect. A national cultural diversity is the only antidote to the evil of banality, or this new version of the banality of evil. "Federal" Europe, thus comprised can play an important role in the search for global balance.

### The need to believe, the desire to know

Among the multiple causes of the current crisis is one that politicians overlook: the denial of what I call the pre-religious, pre-political "need to believe" inherent to speaking subjects which expresses itself as an "ideality illness" specific to the adolescent (whether native or of

<sup>1</sup> This text is largely taken from a talk given at the international symposium "Europe or Chaos," at the Théâtre du Rond-point des Champs Élysées, January 28, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Diversity is my motto," in J. Kristeva, *Pulsions du temps*, Fayard, 2013, p. 601.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Existe-t-il une culture européenne?" ("Does a European Culture Exist?") and "Le message culturel français" ("The French Cultural Message"), in J. Kristeva, *Pulsions du temps*, Fayard 2013, p. 635 sq., 601 sq.

immigrant origin).

Contrary to the curious, playful, pleasure-seeking child who wants to know where he comes from, the adolescent is less a researcher than a believer: she needs to believe in ideals to move beyond her parents, separate from them and surpass herself (I've named the adolescent a troubadour, romantic, revolutionary, extremist, fundamentalist, third-world defender). But disappointment leans this malady of ideality towards destruction and self-destruction, by way of exaltation: drug abuse, anorexia, vandalism, and attraction to fundamentalist dogmas. Idealism and nihilism, in the form of empty drunkenness and martyrdom rewarded by the absolute paradise, walk hand in hand in this illness affecting adolescents that explodes under certain conditions in the most susceptible among them. We see the current manifestation of this in the media: the cohabitation of Mafia traffic and the jihadist exaltation raging at our doors in Africa and Syria.

If a "malady of ideality" is shaking up our youth and with it, the world, can Europe possibly offer a remedy? What ideas can it offer? Any religious treatment of this malaise, anguish, and revolt proves ineffective before the paradisiacal aspiration of this paradoxical, nihilistic belief held by the de-socialized, disintegrated teen in the unforgiving globalized migration. This rejected, indignant fanatic can also threaten us from the inside. This is the image we have of the "Jasmine Revolution," brought about by youth avid for freedom and the recognition of its singular dignity, but that another fanatic need to believe is snuffing out.

Europe finds itself confronted by a historic challenge. Is it able to confront this crisis of belief that the religious lid can no longer hold down? The terrible chaos of the tandem nihilism-fanaticism, linked to the destruction of the capacity to think and associate, takes root in different parts of the world and touches the very foundation of the bond between humans. It's the conception of the human forged at the Greek-Jewish-Christian crossroads, with its graft of Islam, this unsteady universality both singular and shareable which seems threatened. The anguish paralyzing Europe in these decisive times expresses doubt before these stakes. Are we capable of mobilizing all our means—judicial, economic, educational, therapeutic—to accompany with a fine-tuned ear and the necessary

training and generosity, the malady of ideality which disenfranchised adolescents, even in Europe, express so dramatically?

At the crossroads of Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), Judaism, and Islam, Europe is called to establish pathways between the three monotheisms—beginning with meetings and reciprocating interpretations, but also with elucidations and transvaluations inspired by the Human Sciences. A bastion of secularism for two centuries, Europe is the place par excellence to elucidate a need to believe, which Enlightenment, in its rush to combat obscurantism, greatly underestimated.

Countering the two monsters, the political lockdown by the economy and the threat of ecological destruction, the European cultural space can offer an audacious response. And perhaps the sole response that takes the complexity of the human condition seriously, including the lessons of its history and the risks of its freedom. ○

by Julia Kristeva

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Photo by Sophie Zhang