

**Péter Farkas**  
**European Soft Porn, Grieg's Swan and Free Will**

This is how I like to imagine Europe: stirred from slumber by her peculiar dream, sitting on the edge of her bed all dishevelled and ashen, trying to unravel the mystery of the mirage. Or: frolicking on the seashore with her royal buddies, chuckling, pearly drops of water rolling down her skin, oblivious to the fact that she is soon to be kidnapped by a mythological weinstein, thereby becoming one of the most famous metoo cases in intellectual history. Then again, perhaps it all went down quite differently. It's all just fake news.

The dream, by the way, was that two continents in the image of women were competing for Europe. One was Asia, the other was yet to be named. I wonder how history would have turned out if Asia had won? For nomen est omen.

The year started off with the death of my mother. She was ninety-eight. Those who knew her age liked to say it was a decent age to live. It was a terrible age. They obviously didn't know what they were talking about. Understandably, for how could they have known? None of them were ninety-eight. By the way, my mother was in perfect health. It's possible to die healthy at ninety-eight. On the day her only living friend, just a few months her senior, had died on the other side of Europe, in Oxford, my mother fell asleep in her armchair and refused to wake up. Everyone thought she never would. She didn't know Kató had died that day, and we never told her. But when she did wake up, she refused to eat or drink anymore. One week later she really did fall asleep for good. The story of my mother and Kató embraced all of Europe. From Kézdivásárhely in Transylvania to Oxford, from Budapest to Auschwitz. Today, Kézdivásárhely is called Târgu Secuiesc and Auschwitz is Oswiecim. For, as I've just written: nomen est omen. By the way, the name change took two world wars and seventeen + sixty-five million corpses. At the very least.

My mother's wish was for her ashes to be washed away at a so-called scattering garden. We had to wait for the frozen ground to thaw so it could receive my mother. At the end of February I took a

flight to Budapest for the funeral. It was a brilliant, sunny morning, perhaps just like when Europe and the frolicking nymphs ran down to the seashore, only somewhat cooler, obviously. And every two minutes a plane flew over the scattering garden because the airport was close by. The progress of civilisation was manifested, after all, not only in how there had been seventeen million at first and then not so much later already sixty-five million.

After the funeral, the family gathered in Kertész Street, where I'd grown up and where my mother had died. My mother's wish was for us to eat and drink, have fun and tell happy stories about her. So we did. In the evening, I was listlessly changing channels on the TV. It was pointless. To change channels, I mean, because it was the same thing everywhere. The auto-da-fé of the mind. No, I hadn't thought back then that this fascist soft porn would prevail thirty years later.

A year or two before that, I was riding the Budapest metro with a Turkish acquaintance living in the States. We were ascending the endless escalator, flanked on either side by those horrendously grinning posters of George Soros. Endless copies of the Judensau. Even the editor of Der Stürmer would have been content with this arrangement. Shame and revulsion. By the way, my acquaintance thought, as he'd later tell me, that the posters were advertising the concert of some over-the-hill folk singer. A strange association. In any case, I think that those who had these posters designed and installed with a delighted grin on their faces will always be up for relaunching the cattle wagons filled with biomass that fits the particular zeitgeist.

By the way, there's another image that is dear to me, which I like to recall with regard to Europe. I believe I heard it on the radio once that in the last years of his life, Edward Grieg rarely left his house, the famous Troidhaugen in Bergen. He would sit by the window and watch the swans gliding along in the lake below the house. According to an Indian legend, swans are capable of separating milk from water. Reality from illusion.

Only my two sons came along with me to Budapest, and of course my wife, but not my daughters-in-law, as one of them had given birth shortly before the funeral and the other one was also due any day. A few months later, though, I really wanted them to join me in Düsseldorf to see the Ai Weiwei exhibition. I don't know why, but I wanted my grandchildren, already a few months old at the time, to be with me. Then, in one of the halls, as I was secretly pondering which piece of clothing would fit me or my grandchildren, I understood why their presence was important to me. The title of the installation was Laundromat. 2046 cleaned and ironed garments. Different sizes for women, men, and children. Ordinary clothes, nothing for special occasions. That they ended up worn for a special occasion was not a matter of their wearers' will, but in fact a matter of fate. I myself could have worn some of them, my wife, my children or my grandchildren could have worn some of them, or you could have worn them, or your wife, your husband, your children, your grandchildren. But I did not wear any of them, nor did my wife, my children or my grandchildren. And you did not wear any of them, either, nor did your wife, your husband, your children or grandchildren. That neither I, nor my wife, nor my children, nor my grandchildren, nor you, nor your wife, nor your husband, nor your children, nor your grandchildren wore any of these pieces of clothing is not something either of us deserves any credit for. It is a fatal coincidence, neither of us has anything to do with it. It is something one has to be born to, a particular place, a particular time, a particular constellation. Just as one had to be born to end up at Idomeni, one of the most recent apocalyptic scenes. For these pieces of clothing came from there. They had been collected in 2016, after the camp was liquidated. Ai Weiwei had them cleaned, mended, ironed and catalogued, and they were hanging in one of the exhibition halls of the castle building that used to house the former Landtag and is today called K21, neatly hung on coat hangers, as if they were on sale at the clearance section of a cheap department store.

Soon afterwards on a train to Hamburg. For Christmas we got a concert ticket to the (in)famous Elbphilharmonie. I can neither sleep nor stay awake on trains. I generally slip into a peculiar jelly-like state of bardo after about a quarter of an hour, which is ideally neither pleasant nor unpleasant. In

any case, I had brought a palm-sized slim little book with me, perfect for travelling. I believe I would have had a more peaceful journey in my usual jelly-like bardo. “Sie haben die unglaubliche Kühnheit,” I read, “sich mit Deutschland zu verwechseln! You have incredible audacity to confuse yourself with Germany! Whereas perhaps the moment is not so far off when the last thing the German people will want is to be confused with you.” These two sentences were written by Thomas Mann in 1936, after the University of Bonn had deprived the writer, already living in exile in Switzerland, of his title as honorary doctor. Thomas Mann was responding to the university’s ostracism in a public letter addressed to the Dean of the university. Heinrich Detering chose these two sentences as the motto of his study *What do we mean by “we”? – On the rhetoric of the parliamentary right*. This is the book I’d brought with me in case I should stay awake during the train ride. I did stay awake.

The truth is that I no longer like to travel. But this year I definitely wanted to go to Paris at last. We’d been going over there every year since 1981, but we had to skip the last two years. Paris is my second home after Cologne. It was to there that I’d first defected, it was there that I realised that I truly couldn’t, and wouldn’t want to, live without my future wife, and it is there that my most personal writing takes place. One day I’d left the apartment with an exceptionally determined purpose, and perhaps that’s why I missed the underground stop and got off a few blocks early. But I only noticed it when I’d already reached the surface. I looked up at the street sign, 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, Rue la Boétie. Curiously, if I read 8<sup>th</sup> district on a street sign, to this very day I still think of District VIII in Budapest. I wonder how the fate of the country would have developed if there had been a street named after a Boétie in District VIII? Étienne de La Boétie, a friend of Montaigne, wrote this in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century about tyranny and voluntary servitude: “This does not seem credible on first thought, but it is nevertheless true that there are only four or five who maintain the dictator... Five or six have always had access to his ear, and have either gone to him of their own accord, or else have been summoned by him... The six have six hundred who profit under them, and with the six hundred they do what they have accomplished with their tyrant. The six hundred

maintain under them six thousand, whom they promote in rank, upon whom they confer the government of provinces or the direction of finances... And whoever is pleased to unwind the skein will observe that not the six thousand but a hundred thousand, and even millions, cling to the tyrant by this cord to which they are tied..." These words have been persistently quoted for almost half of a millennium, because only time moves, but man in it, albeit with a changing set of costumes and props, keeps revolving in circles around himself and his compulsive neuroses, continuously reproducing political zombies. "Soyez résolu de ne servir plus, et vous voilà libres", says La Boétie, with seemingly naïve, adolescent fervour. "Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed." For he knows: it is only possible to resist reasonably until the zombie starts walking. The rest is Russian roulette.

Then back to Cologne. A few weeks later, the German fascist party got almost twenty-four percent of the votes in Thuringia. I'm not saying that everyone who supports the AfD (Alternative for Germany) is a fascist, but each and every one of them must have known that they were voting for a fascist party. The next day, the movie *The People vs. Fritz Bauer* was shown on television. The meaning of "the people" is clear, and Fritz Bauer can be found on Wikipedia.

There is a photo from thirties Germany. It shows a crowd of people standing in horizontal rows, looking forward. Men, women, young and old, mostly in plain clothes, some in uniform. All of them are enthusiastically raising their right arm in Nazi salute. There is only one man in the upper right section of the photo who stands with his arms folded across his chest, squinting as if blinded by something. I remember exactly when I first saw this photo. It was 1991 and we were inclined to believe that Europe had arrived at a turning point. The photo appeared in *Die Zeit* and at the time nobody knew who that man was. To be honest, I never really believed in free will. All we need to do is rewind our lives just one day, take stock of our actions and inactions, and free will already seems like a ridiculous concept. Even in a society where intellectual, social and material conditions are all in favour of relative personal autonomy. Perhaps even the dumbest and most malevolent mind can

grasp what ridiculous cynicism it is to talk about free will in extreme conditions. Nor do I have much faith in man's ability to change the millennia-old constraints that have set the course of universal human existence, regulated from who knows what kinds of control panels. We have known just about since the first articulate human word was uttered that war and warmongering are utterly wrong, whereas peace and peacefulness are supreme values. And yet, no sooner was the very first articulate word uttered than one man declared war on another, and his behaviour has only changed as much over the millennia that now he prefers cutlery and flushing toilets. Is he that stupid? Is he so not in control of his own actions, his own destiny, his own thoughts? Why, then, should I believe in free will or in changing our cursed and constrained course of existence? There must still be something that is contingent on us. Otherwise, there would indeed be no sense in morality, in the delicate mechanics of human coexistence. And I can't stop myself from thinking that after all, it is man himself who tunes this incredibly fine instrument. Instinctively as well as consciously. Thus, he can never in his life run away from the shadow of responsibility. Because responsibility is his own shadow. Whether he believes in free will or not.

Translated by Dániel Sipos

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