

Andenken an Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

Eckart Goebel, New York University

Ladies and Gentlemen, Madame,

The German Department at NYU has been frequently described as having a kind of Heidegger-obsession on the one hand, and, even more so, has been criticized for cultivating an obsession with so called French Theory from Sartre to Derrida, on the other. In favor of French theory, this is the critique, the department neglects the sustenance of the German literary heritage. This observation is correct insofar as it refers to the fact that the German Department is not “deutsch”, in a specific sense. This observation is flawed; however, in the very moment one overlooks that the cut of the department is based on a very strong argument formulated by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his book on *Heidegger, Art and Politics*. This argument can be summarized in its shortest version: “Germany still does not exist. Except in the distress of not existing.”¹ – I would like to develop briefly the background of this notion.

Theodor W. Adorno once wrote an essay on the question „Was ist Deutsch?“ At that time he was still under the impression of his cooperation with Thomas Mann in California. Since Lacoue-Labarthe lets us know that “for the essential thrust” of his remarks on the “spiritual-historical illness”, which led to Nazism, he is following the “insights offered by Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*”,² it might make sense to begin with Adorno’s point. Adorno argued, and this observation indeed could be found in *Doktor Faustus*, that an appalling mixture of grandeur and monstrosity were characteristic of a great deal of the German cultural heritage. Martin Heidegger is exemplary for this uncanny mixture. So are Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, and, well, Martin Luther, the oversensitive monster of political theology. What is the reason for this entanglement of grandeur and monstrosity?

As far as I can see no scholar has formulated a more convincing explanation for this phenomenon than Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his Heidegger book which is in fact so much more than a mere Heidegger book. It is Lacoue-Labarthe’s book on Germany - one of the best books on Germany I know. Since I have just 8 minutes I only can give a very preliminary reconstruction of his argument here:

Lacoue-Labarthe illustrates in great detail that the European modernity is constituted through a struggle with the Greek and Roman antiquity. This struggle leads to an aggressive competition amongst the modern states about the authenticity of their approach to antiquity. Lacoue-Labarthe makes evident that the German identification with ancient Greece is in fact an agon with France. Rome was already a bad imitation of Greece, and insofar as France imitates Rome, French culture is merely the bad imitation of bad imitation. Conversely, the Germans have privileged access to the authentic Greek heritage. The suppression of the fact that the identification with Greece roots in the competition with France leads to an overidentification of Germany with Greece. The compensation of the inferiority complex towards France turns into “a sort of psychosis or historico-spiritual schizophrenia”.³ Why is that so?

Martin Luther’s reformation is the refusal of Rome’s influence on Germany. Through the German Idealism this refusal, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, proceeds to the core of German Culture which reinvents itself as a kind of super-Greece. Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us that for an understanding of German

¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 80.

² Ibid., 90.

³ Ibid., 80.

modernity a return to Luther is unavoidable. The turning away from Rome and the agon with France are suppressed. This loss of the defining Other leads Germany to the necessity to split itself. Greece shall not simply be imitated, the Germans are supposed to learn from the Greeks how one can become oneself without a defining Other, how one becomes truly absolute. At the beginning of the modern German identity stands, as Lacoue-Labarthe observes, a “pure double bind”.⁴ This double bind was formulated in its classical form by Johann Joachim Winckelmann: “The only way for us [the Germans], to become great, or even, if this is possible, to become inimitable, is the imitation of the ancient Greeks.” This means that the German modeling of a modern identity without France strives towards the concept of genius. Germany becomes the country of geniuses giving itself the rule:

“But genius is by definition inimitable. And it is therefore in the impossibility of this imitation of genius that Germany literally exhausted itself, succumbing to a sort of psychosis or historico-spiritual schizophrenia, of which certain of its most highly regarded geniuses, from Hölderlin to Nietzsche, were the heralds (and premonitory victims). And besides, only a schizophrenic logic was capable of allowing that unthinkable event, the Extermination; and the present division of Germany is virtually a symbolic outcome of that process. Germany still does not exist. Except in the distress of not existing.”⁵

Again: The suppression of the Other leads to the compulsion to define German identity as an absolute what necessarily leads to the recourse on Myth, which is, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, the only option to allegedly escape the logic of difference: “The myth (of the race) is the myth of the myth, or the myth of the formative power of myths.”⁶ It is evident; however, that the myth in fact requires an Other, that the myth produces its enemy, in other races, in the Jews especially who are, according to the Nazi ideology the uprooted people without a myth: “The myth of the Jew is precisely man liberated from myths.”⁷

I hope I could demonstrate with this irresponsibly short draft why the reception of so called French theory does not turn us away from the German heritage from Luther and Winckelmann to Heidegger, Thomas Mann and beyond. Lacoue-Labarthe rather shows us a way how to deal with this heritage without falling victim to the double bind outlined above.

The books of Jacques Derrida’s and then especially of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s made clear that Martin Heidegger who finishes the unholy Greek-German-symbiosis, contradicts himself radically. Heidegger shows us that we exist as an undefined *Dasein*, radically exposed to finitude. This exemplification of our existence cannot be brought together with the surrender to a movement based on mythological “thinking”, celebrating the alleged immortality of a people, of a race.

By saving the theoretician of *Dasein* from the *Rektor* of the Freiburg University in 1933 Lacoue-Labarthe works through the material suppressed by the German ideology. Approaching the German cultural heritage via the books written by Lacoue-Labarthe does not mean a disregard of this heritage. On the contrary, it makes a productive reception possible in the first place.

⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷ Ibid., 96. Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Maurice Blanchot here.

Reading Lacoue-Labarthe means, however, not only the reconstruction of a schizophrenic past but also a sharpening of our awareness for what is going on today. The division of Germany was overcome in 1989. But does this mean that the “historico-spiritual schizophrenia” has disappeared from Germany, from Europe, from, if I am allowed to ask this, from the U.S.A.? Working on the German illness Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has developed new tools and concepts to analyze cultural identity finding its dangerous way between Mythology, Enlightenment, and the double-binds of imitation. Lacoue-Labarthe’s books are therefore groundbreaking for the essential study of the political Theology of the 21st century. The reception of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has just begun.