WE ARE NOT SILKWORMS

by Robert Menasse

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues!

How are you?
For some time now, I have been feeling something like this:
A sparrow lies on the ground – and you know: Sparrows are seen as very cheeky, insolent birds – and this cheeky sparrow is lying on its back with its little legs stretched upwards. A tomcat comes by, a black dreaded hunter, and is amazed that such easy prey lies before him, almost as if it has been set out for him. But instead of eating the bird immediately, he maliciously asks: Say, little sparrow, you're a creature of the air, why are you lying on the ground with your legs stretched upward?
And the sparrow replies: You may not notice it with your downward hunting instinct, focussing only on what is right in front of you, but I can really feel it: the sky is threatening to fall on the world.
The tomcat laughs hysterically – the picture would have gotten millions of likes on Facebook – and when he calms down, he asks: And you seriously believe that if you stretch your legs upward, you can hold up the sky?
The sparrow replies: No, I don't believe that. But I'm doing the best I can.

What does this picture show us? The ridiculousness of such a big claim? The ridiculousness of an apparently impossible endeavour? The ridiculousness of a commitment that does not fall within one's natural abilities, so to speak? No. It shows the sadness of loneliness when it comes to responding to great danger, a threat that concerns everyone. Even the tomcat, who makes his profit beforehand by eating the sparrow.
Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the ground on which we live is shifting and the roof is threatening to collapse. And I am amazed at how few legs I see stretched upward, and how few are checking the rafters to see what is rotten or are even prepared to call what is rotten rotten. We can all fly high, but what can we do on the common ground of the facts? We can hold learned discussions at our academies on how people here and there are being robbed of this opportunity, but what are we doing

about it? Signing petitions? But does a signature really fulfil our responsibility? We are creative and innovative to the point of giving form to vanity and melancholy. But what about our sensitivity to general threats and danger?

We have been living with multiple crises for the longest time now and can see the frightening consequences of this. Can we not imagine what the resurgence of nationalism and xenophobic ideologies means, just 75 years after the end of the Second World War? The renationalisation of Europe is not a way out of the crises but rather their cause and accelerant. Think of the financial crisis. We have a common currency in Europe. But EU Member States prevented the single currency from being backed by common fiscal and budgetary policy. That is, of course, absurd. But the reason was that the Member States wanted to retain sovereign control of their fiscal policy, regardless of how helpless they would prove to be in a single market with a single currency. There was not even a European Banking Authority. That was a dangerous situation for everyone. The financial crisis began in 2007, Lehmann Brothers crashed in 2008, and the international financial crisis finally became the Euro crisis in 2009. And we have only had a European Banking Authority since 2011. Because of Brexit, which was brought about wilfully and irresponsibly by London nationalists, the Banking Authority that had finally been established was mainly preoccupied with its move from London to Paris. But a large number of people still believed that, in crisis situations, the nation state in particular must be defended; and what was especially sordid was the politicians jumping on stages everywhere to win the votes of precisely these people, bolstering them in their national furore.

Then came the so-called refugee crisis. The astonishment that people from countries to which weapons are sold were coming here to flee those weapons was immense! And what did Europe have? Values. In every soapbox speech. But what about the rest of the time? No common migration and refugee policy. The nation states prevented it. Because elections are national and you win votes by promising not to allow too many foreigners into the country. Especially in countries that do not have any external EU borders. But suddenly they were there, the refugees who wanted to come to Europe. If, however, there is no common policy, no common legal status on this issue, every country will do as it pleases. It was anarchy. And that was the whole crisis. And even more people believed that only the nation state could protect them against crises and anarchy.

The climate crisis! I will never understand people seriously believing that global warming can be prevented from entering a country at national borders. At least, that is what so many national heads of government promise. It's the same problem once again: There is no common European climate and energy policy. The national leaders have faithfully prevented this. A multitude of obstinate national policies cannot become a sustainable climate policy like this. Some countries are phasing out nuclear power, others are building new nuclear power stations, CO_2 emissions from fossil fuels are to be reduced but Polish coal mines continue to be subsidised, every little country wants its own "energy mix", but no EU member has agreed to what is literally an essential big solution.
And now the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Commission has no health policy powers. So far, the Member States have prevented this. Health policy is also supposed to remain under national sovereignty. Unfortunately, a virus does not care about national borders or the possibilities of national sovereignty. Of course, chaos is inevitable again in a community where every member is doing something different, reacting differently to this threatening pandemic and in part against each other as we have seen, for example, with regard to the purchasing and distribution of masks. The threat is growing – and the nation states are increasingly competing for better statistics and greater national solidarity. And with a particular perfidiousness, national politicians drone on about how "the EU" has "failed completely" during the coronavirus crisis.
In short, whenever a problem arises, it becomes immeasurably greater and a threat because of this very contradiction. No nation state can solve the major problems and conflicts of our time on its own, but at the same time the nation states are preventing common policies that would be able to deal with transnational and global problems. And as if that were not enough, nationalists are gaining more and more support as a result.

Have the crimes, disasters, misery and suffering nationalism caused in Europe and throughout the world really been forgotten? And even if they really have been forgotten and suppressed, is it not obvious where it is heading today?
Is it really so difficult to point out that nationalism is not an ontological yearning of humankind and can therefore never satisfy a basic human need. Because if it were

an ontological yearning, there would have been nations since the Neolithic period, which is demonstrably not the case.

The project of European unification that led to today's EU was the logical and enlightened consequence of the experience of nationalist ideologies, of competition between nation states and the resulting wars. The idea of a post-national Europe is the vision of our future – or we will have none.

And despite all of the disruptions, the intermediate stage of European development is – still – quite impressive: Europe is freer than China and more social than the US, making it the most attractive place in the world today.

So where does the anger of so many come from, the hatred of others, the aggression and fears? And why do so many people feel betrayed? All I can say about this right here and now is: They really have been.

But what are they hearing? What are they hearing from you?

The voice of reason is quiet, as Sigmund Freud once said. But does it have to be so quiet?

In all the loneliness, isolation even, that our work demands of every individual, with all the necessary fixation on one's own work, we do not produce our work as the silkworm spins its silk, because it can do only that and nothing else, merely confirming its nature. We are social and political beings, and we have a corresponding mission and responsibility. We can only realise these if we work together, network, exchange ideas, amplifying the voice of each individual with our multitude of voices.

Haven't the arts and sciences always demonstrated this? Can we not learn, for example, from narrative literature or the study of history that everything that had a beginning also has an end when it has become historically exhausted or has failed? Why, for the first time in human history, should this not apply to nationalism? And do we not know from the history of art and literature that during the era of radical nationalism, when hostility between the nation states was increasingly stirred up, artists from different countries continued to meet, even more than ever, and exchanged ideas in European cities, in Paris, Berlin and Vienna. Writers who, like Robert Musil, described themselves as “entirely non-political”, determined that they were not silkworms in the face of increasing nationalism and gave speeches at the International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture in Paris in 1935.

And has it not become completely clear since then that scientific progress would no longer be conceivable without international networking and exchange?
You cannot be an artist or scientist and at the same time a nationalist. For example, I do not know of any author who seriously claims to write national literature. Do you know any? Anyone who attempted this balancing act in the 20th century is now forgotten, and anyone who would try it now will be forgotten tomorrow.
The new nationalism is putting the autonomy of academies, museums and cultural institutions at risk and poisoning an enlightened social discourse. Freedom of the arts and the independence of cultural institutions must also be defended in solidarity as a non-negotiable value, even where this affects the so-called sovereignty of a European Member State. The defence of human rights, the visions of a post-national Europe, art, culture and research cannot remain mere national matters and must not be misused for national identity politics. What we have to give Europe must be louder. Louder in every sense of the word.
I am delighted to be involved in establishing an Alliance of Academies, in setting up a network of European cultural institutions.
The little sparrow I told you about at the beginning flutters up before the cat can eat it. And soon there will be whistling and singing from every rooftop.

Berlin, Akademie der Künste, opening event of the “European Alliance of Academies” conference on 8 October 2020.